The inverted commas in the title of this article are crucial to the sort of line I want to pursue when considering film adaptations of Jane Austen novels. I’m interested in what can and can’t be filmed. Whatever a filmmaker tackling *Pride and Prejudice*, for instance, comes up with, it won’t be ‘Jane Austen’, and the attempts that interest me most are those that seem to have accepted this notion and show a filmmaker with a point of view about certain elements in the novel that bears Austen’s name. I even begin to question the use of the term ‘adaptation.’

I know that nothing can stop people who know/love the books from making comparisons and having opinions. But I don’t think this is a productive way of approaching the films that have been derived from Austen’s novels. Because such comparisons are almost invariably based on a sense of the primacy of the novel, inevitably the films are found wanting. I mean, you wouldn’t dare say, ‘I think Joe Wright’s film of *Pride and Prejudice* is ever so much better than the novel,’ would you? And who would be interested if you did? When I say ‘derived from Austen’s novels’, I mean that the filmmaker has seized upon certain elements of the novel in question, and if he/she is likely to make a compelling film it will come from the focus on those elements, not from a conscientious, faithful trudge through the novel, as if terrified of the Jane Austen Society breathing down their necks.

I think I’ve heard more foolish comments from otherwise intelligent people about the adaptations of Austen novels than about any other filmed author. ‘She’s far too modern to play Elizabeth’ or ‘The costumes are all wrong, at least ten years too early – or late’ or ‘Imagine giving Lady Catherine a change of heart’. Comments like these seem to grow out of a sense of the novel’s inviolability or from a limited notion of historical authenticity – or from a failure to take into account what a novel can do that film can’t or vice versa. Particularly vice versa: it has always seemed to me that literary-trained people are much readier to express strong views on film than those with a film background are to sound off knowledgeably about literature.

**Austen’s voice**

When I write of the impossibility of filming ‘Jane Austen’, I mean that there are crucial aspects of that totality that belong intransigently to her and to the literary mode. Some simple examples of what I mean are found in *Pride and Prejudice*. In Chapter 8 of Volume 1, there is a discussion of what constitutes an accomplished woman. Darcy agrees that he does ‘comprehend a great deal’ in the term, to which Miss Bingley, anxious to score against Elizabeth, chimes in. ‘Oh! Certainly,’ cried his faithful assistant, ‘no one can be really esteemed accomplished, who does not greatly surpass what is usually met with.’ A screenwriter may decide to give Miss Bingley those exact words to say, but what the filmmaker cannot film is the distinctive ironic tone of voice in ‘cried his faithful assistant’. That belongs to Jane Austen alone. It is an entirely literary effect, a literary means employed to a satirical purpose, a phrase intended to influence our judgement of Miss Bingley’s motives. Or in Chapter 15 of Volume 1, Mrs Bennet having told Mr Collins that Jane is spoken for, ‘Mr Collins had only to change from Jane to Elizabeth – and it was soon done – done while Mrs Bennet was stirring the fire.’ We might watch Mrs Bennet stir the fire on film, but the reductive juxtaposition of Collins’ adjusting his matrimonial intentions with the instant of the fire-stirring is again an effect for the page rather than the screen.

**BRIAN McFARLANE**
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Austen’s voice is in those comments and they account for a lot of the pleasure we take in reading her; they may influence how we perceive a particular character but don’t belong to such a character. Austen’s voice, along with other attributes such as her grasp of her period, with its constraints, is not available to filmmakers. At best you’d hope that filmmakers had their own voices, bearing in mind Orson Welles’ comment that if a filmmaker has nothing new to say about a literary text he’d best leave it alone.

The 1980 BBC television version of Pride and Prejudice tried in its opening sequence to reproduce this voice – Jane Austen’s or her implied narrator’s – by dividing up the famous opening sentence about ‘a truth universally acknowledged’ between Elizabeth Bennet and Charlotte Lucas, in an explicit attempt to catch the tone of voice of the original. But that wonderfully ironic sentence is a wholly literary achievement, dependent for its effect on our sense of a narrator who is simply not a character and therefore not present in the novel in the way that the characters are. To divide the sentence between two speakers is to draw attention to the crucial absence of the novel’s narrative voice – not to replace it.

The semi-facetious subtitle to this article, about six degrees of separation from Jane Austen, is intended to draw attention to some of the other reasons militating against the filming of ‘Jane Austen’ or indeed of any novelist. Dissatisfied customers who complain about the ways in which novels have been turned into something different – and, as most often the complaint would imply, ‘inferior’ – might consider some of the following. What should be most obvious is the question of semiotic differences between a mode that makes its meanings through requiring readers to follow words in straight lines on a page and one that goes in for moving images and audio.

All I’ve said about tone of voice
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exemplifies this matter of media specificity, a basic separating function. One also needs to consider the degree and kind of auteurship that may attach to the director: what are his or her proclivities? What kind of difference of emphases might ensue from a male director turning to a story originally told by a female author? In this respect, it to somewhat different purpose, one thinks of Anne Elliot’s words to Captain Harville in Persuasion, ‘Men have had every advantage of us in telling their own story.’ Third, what kinds of commercial considerations ought to be taken into account (is this a lavish international co-production aimed at multiplexes or has it more modest arthouse aspirations?), and we should never forget that film is an industry on a scale well beyond that of book publishing. A film is as much an industrial product as all those other Austen-derived artefacts to be found in tourist shops in Bath, for instance. Fourth, has the filmmaker remoulded what he has ‘borrowed’ by taking account of genre conventions, as the old MGM version of Pride and Prejudice so clearly did? Fifth, public taste at the time of adaptation and what has shaped this may well actuate a tonally very different experience. And sixth, if the film has traded on popular star personae it may well put before us, say, in Keira Knightley, an Elizabeth Bennet at odds with our reading-fuelled expectations.

Shaping, not shaving

The adaptations I value most, whether of Jane Austen or any other novelist I know, are those that go in for shaping rather than shaving: those that take a bold line in making something new as distinct from those that try to include as many events and characters as possible so that one ends up with not enough of anything. Douglas McGrath’s 1996 film of Emma seemed to me a case in point: the background to the material relating to Frank Churchill and Jane Fairfax was so sketchy that I suspect their function was obscure to anyone unfamiliar with the book. I think of how boldly Iain Softley’s 1998 version of Henry James’ The Wings of the Dove hacked away enormous chunks of the novel, thereby fastening to passionate effect on the situation involving the central trio. The popularity of television serialisation with its more luxurious running times, as compared with the average feature-film length, seems to incline filmmakers to the shaving rather than the shaping approach – and these miniseries can get away with this, whereas the closer shaving demanded by film’s running time can leave it looking skimmed.

If Austen is still to be seriously relevant in 2010, the filmmaker will need to find not just a focus for his or her take on the novel, but a way into audience response to what has turned the filmmaker on. The modernness of what makes men and women attractive or not to each other, what constitutes friendship, what makes for decent behaviour: issues that exist independent of changing mores and which perhaps help to explain the popularity of the novels. Can we draw clear of the period specificities of the novels and think of the author, to borrow from Jan Kott, as ‘Jane Austen our Contemporary’?

I want to draw very brief attention to one old and three comparatively recent films derived from Austen’s novels, and to suggest why I value them, albeit not equally. They are Robert Z. Leonard’s 1940 Hollywood version of Pride and Prejudice; Roger Michell’s 1995 Persuasion, made for television but widely shown in cinemas; Patricia Rozema’s Mansfield Park (1999); and Joe Wright’s Pride and Prejudice (2005). Essentially my point is that none of these is ‘Jane Austen’s Pride and Prejudice … or whatever’.

The old Hollywood film needs to be seen in contexts quite other than ‘adaptation of a famous work of literature’. It now seems to me a perfectly legitimate response to the central narrative thrust of the novel – the articulation of the ‘truth universally acknowledged etc.’ – in the light of several filmmaking determinants. First, in terms of genre, it succeeds as a sprightly enough romantic comedy, the outcome of which is never in doubt. Like
so many others of the genre, it sets up a situation, introduces newcomers who create complications that the rest of the film must solve – and in doing just this it clearly takes its overarching narrative pattern from the novel. Romantic comedy has been a staple of cinema since its very early days, and it had reached a peak of accomplishment in the late 1930s and early 1940s in such films as George Cukor’s Holiday (1938) and The Philadelphia Story (1940). Unsurprising, then, that Pride and Prejudice, though not in their class, was at least partly sold in terms of its generic affiliation.

The film was also marketed as an MGM quality production, and in 1940 that carried several informing characteristics. The MGM house style involved handsome décor and much attention to costume (though not necessarily to historical accuracy in this respect), a pervasive sense of high gloss in all the physical aspects of production, the whole sumptuously lit. As well, of course, the studio had built a reputation for lavishly mounted literary adaptations, especially of European novels. It also went in for potent star protagonists and partnerships, supported by hordes of expatriate English character actors for a touch of class. All these determinants are announced in the film’s opening credits. This is not ‘Jane Austen’s Pride and Prejudice’; it is MGM’s.

Similarly, or dissimilarly, the 2005 version is ‘Joe Wright’s Pride and Prejudice’, not Jane Austen’s. What gives Wright’s film its distinctiveness is his concern to offer a realist approach to Austen: realist, that is, in terms of physical and social setting as well as the psychological realism of which Austen may be seen as the great pioneer and exemplar in English literature. In physical terms, this is the first version of the novel where I’ve ever had the slightest sense of Longbourn as a working farm. In the novel, when Mrs Bennet sends Jane off to Netherfield on horseback, confident that it will rain and that Jane will have to stay the night, Jane says she’d rather go by coach, but her mother says the horses can’t be spared: ‘They are wanted on the farm, Mr Bennet, are they not?’ He replies, ‘They are wanted on the farm much oftener than I can get them.’ I quote this here not to draw attention to Mrs Bennet’s ingenuity but to the word ‘farm’. As far as I recall, the word is not used in the film, but Wright and his production designer have established at the outset that this is a farm that provides the means of support for the Bennet family. Elizabeth is first seen making her way through flapping laundry at the back of the sturdy farmhouse, and the untidy remains of breakfast are still on the table. When we finally see the façade of the house, it is revealed as pleasant and well-proportioned but not at all grand, and there is throughout the film the suggestion that the farming activities are never far away.

The physical realism, at work in production and costume design, is matched too by the sort of truthful feeling at work in Elizabeth’s longing for somewhere quiet to escape to in this crowded household, in Mrs Bennet’s (Brenda Blethyn) reproving Elizabeth by saying, ‘When you have five daughters you’ll understand.’ Wright and screenwriter Deborah Moggach here arrive at a legitimate extension of what Austen suggests about this woman. Mrs Bennet knows, in her muddle-brained way, that her daughters must marry, that they need to find husbands who can support them since they have no hope of fortunes of their own. The filmmakers are on record, as filmmakers so often are, of saying how they aimed to be ‘faithful’; in my view, they have made a much more stimulating and flavoursome film, a film that stylistically and as a star vehicle makes ready contact with 2005 audiences.

In terms of stylistic inflections, the Persuasion film makes an interesting comparison with Wright’s Pride and Prejudice. In some ways it anticipates the kind of realism Wright’s film would embrace in terms of physical production: this is a world in which people’s clothes
get dirty when they walk in muddy fields and cramped interiors are allowed to look messy. However, the film begins and ends on romantic vistas at sea, picking up and elaborating on Austen’s own bias in favour of the navy. But it’s not wholly a clear-cut way of bookending an essentially realist film. At the outset there is an extended alternation of the sea, with mariners straining at oars, and the progress of the carriage wheels bearing the agent Shepherd (David Collings) and his daughter to Kellynch Hall. Both of these sets of images constitute proleptic announcements of disruption in the life of Anne Elliot (Amanda Root). And one last image also points to director Roger Michell’s own imaginative engagement with his material: when Anne and Wentworth (Ciarán Hinds) have declared their love, all obstacles surmounted, they are suddenly surrounded in the street by a circus procession, perhaps emblematic in its carnivalesque way of the liberation of the central pair from the frustrations of the past.

Patricia Rozema’s feminist and postcolonial preoccupations make sure that her 1999 film derived from Mansfield Park (and other related sources) is her film, not Jane Austen’s Mansfield Park. I want only to draw attention to two matters that mark the film’s individuality. One is the opening sequence in which young Fanny (Hannah Taylor Gordon) is taken from her home in Portsmouth to live with her wealthy relations, and during the carriage journey a slave-ship is sighted in the harbour. This is an opening that stays in the mind for two reasons. Perhaps most obviously it represents Rozema’s determination to show the source of Sir Thomas’ (Harold Pinter) West Indian wealth, and secondly, in thematic terms more importantly perhaps, it underlines the way in which Fanny has been wrenched from the life she knew, however slovenly her home, by the implicit comparison with those others who have been, much more cruelly, of course, torn from their natural habitats. The other point I make has to do with Rozema’s feminist vision. She stresses the lottery aspect of marriage for women, at whatever level of financial security, by having the same actress (Lindsay Duncan) play both the prematurely aged, careworn drudge, Fanny’s mother, and the indolent Lady Bertram, away with opium for much of the time. In this matter, Rozema is perhaps picking up on a couple of references in the novel to physical similarities between the two women and, in Austen’s words, ‘to think that where nature had made so little difference, circumstances should have made so much’.

This sampling of symptomatic moments and concepts from four films is meant merely to suggest some of the ways in which the filmmakers have created their own degrees of separation from the original, as if they were all intelligently aware of the impossibility of filming ‘Jane Austen’ and the importance of stamping the films with a new impress of their own, whether of studio or of individual.