Some film versions of Jane Austen's novels are amazingly free adaptations (notably the 1940 MGM*Pride and Prejudice* with Greer Garson and Laurence Olivier and the 1985 BBC *Sense and Sensibility*). Although more recent productions also introduce scenes and dialogue not to be found in the novels, most of the newer film versions stay close to the plot and original dialogue: they thus provide an opportunity for isolating those distinctive qualities of an Austen novel that cannot easily be translated into the medium of film. There are of course a number of practical considerations in adapting a novel for film: reducing the number of characters may make staging more manageable; simplifying the plot may be justified out of consideration for the viewing audience; and cutting some elements is unavoidable even when the performance is allowed to go to the six hours of the Davies-Langton *Pride and Prejudice* starring Jennifer Ehle and Colin Firth (1995). Most interesting, however, are those invented scenes and bits of dialogue not found in the novels.

It is in such marked departures from the novels that we can detect filmmakers struggling with the differences in the two media—and in particular, with the lack of a narrator—and can determine as well how mindful they are of a modern audience's need to be educated in terms of the social customs and class values of Austen's time. My goal is not to critique the film versions so much as to learn more about Austen's narrative technique from a comparison of the novels with their film versions. Although I will begin with a few key scenes from adaptations of other Austen novels, my primary focus will be upon *Emma* and three film versions of that novel: the 1972 Constanduros-Glenister BBC production; the 1996 Davies-Lawrence Meridian and A&E version starring Kate Beckinsale; and the 1996 McGrath Miramax *Emma* with Gwyneth Paltrow.

Film and literary critics recognize that "certain kinds of novels are . . . more adaptable to film than others; and this 'adaptability' is generally" seen as "a function of the extent to which the novel presents the interior worlds of its characters" (Huselberg 61). The novel of manners as it emphasizes manners and social settings seems ideally suited to film adaptation. Certainly, critics have long been fond of observing Austen's novels' affinity with dramatic representation. Some scenes come all but ready-made from the novels, consisting almost entirely of dialogue with interspersed narrative commentary that is little more than stage direction. (The conversation between Mr. and Mrs. Bennet in the opening chapter of *Pride and Prejudice* is a prime example.) The novel of manners, however, "examines the psyche of the individual" as well as "the social world in which the individual lives" (Brothers and Bowers 4). Austen's novels place the heroine's subjective experience center-stage. Thus, even as the novels translate smoothly into film in certain respects, their emphasis upon "the interior worlds" of the heroines poses a challenge to filmmakers. In particular, film versions of Austen's novels must somehow compensate for the absence of the witty and intrusive narrator who negotiates the space between the heroine's subjective experience, other characters' perspectives, and something that may be called "objective" reality.²

None of the film versions I know of makes extensive use of a narrator, though the McGrath*Emma* does begin with stage-setting commentary (interestingly not taken from the novel) delivered by a disembodied voice, and this voice returns at the close of the film to offer lines recognizable from the concluding chapter of the novel. (In this version also, Mrs. Elton addresses her criticisms of Emma's and Mr. Knightley's wedding directly to the camera.) By framing the "narrative" of the film in this fashion, the filmmakers are acknowledging the need for (or at least the desirability of having) some overarching authoritative consciousness that complicates point of view from the outset, sending an early signal to the audience to restrain its sympathetic involvement in the characters', and especially the heroine's, lives. More typically filmmakers create scenes and add dialogue to fill in gaps in the narrative that result from the excision of a narrator and assign essential bits of exposition and narrative commentary to characters—often somewhat awkwardly and implausibly and sometimes with actual impropriety. A character can never possess the kind of authority belonging to an omniscient narrator, of course, and a witty or profound generalization delivered by the narrator may come across as pert or pompous when pronounced by a character. The famous opening of *Pride and Prejudice*, for example, (omitted from the 1940 film version) is preserved in clumsy fashion in both the Davies-Langton and the Weldon-Coke (1978) versions of *Pride and Prejudice*. The Davies-Langton version shows the just-introduced Bennet family leaving church and has Elizabeth rather
cheekily interpose the shortened observation that "a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife" as Mrs. Bennet exults to Mr. Bennet over Mr. Bingley's arrival in the neighborhood. An early scene in the Weldon-Coke version divides the full passage (including the qualifier "However little known the feelings or views of such a man may be . . .") between Elizabeth and Charlotte Lucas as rather "stagey" dialogue. The scriptwriter takes advantage of the opportunity to work in material from Elizabeth and Charlotte's later conversation about the progress of Jane and Bingley's romance and "Happiness in marriage," with some references to the incompatibility of Mr. and Mrs. Bennet also thrown in (PP 3 and 23).

In addition to placing essential narrative commentary in the mouth of a character, most often the heroine, filmmakers regularly transfer one character's speeches to another character in the interests of consolidating material and reducing the number of scenes. Often dialogue from several different scenes is combined and delivered in a larger social grouping rather than tête-à-tête. In the Davies-Lawrence Emma, for example, Mr. Knightley's criticisms of Frank Churchill, expressed privately to Emma in the novel, are in the interests of economy mixed in with a discussion of Frank's postponed visit before a full company assembled at the Westons'. The film has Mr. Knightley within hearing of the entire group collected at table state flatly, "He should have come before this," and then direct to Mrs. Weston the comment, "To speak bluntly, mum, it is his plain duty to his father and to you." At this same dinner party, Emma openly speculates upon Frank Churchill as a possible mate. When she says that "By all accounts, he seems to be the very epitome of manly excellence" (a sentence that sounds distressingly more as if it had come from one of the Misses Steele than Emma Woodhouse), Mr. Knightley sourly responds, "Apart from his disinclination to exert himself and do what he knows to be right." Likewise, in this film version, Mr. Knightley's muttered comment "to himself" — ""Hum! just the trifling, silly fellow I took him for!" (E 206) — is overheard not just by Emma, as in the novel, but by Mr. and Mrs. Weston, Mr. Woodhouse, Harriet Smith and Emma, all assembled at Hartfield, along with the added loud exclamations, "To get his hair cut!" and "Foppery and nonsense!" In so shifting speeches, filmmakers are not always sensitive to the difference between a confidential disclosure and a public pronouncement. These seemingly slight alterations make this Mr. Knightley less courteous and less sensitive to others' feelings than he appears in the novel, where, critics generally agree, he functions as a moral authority and model. The Constanduros-Glenister Emma, which runs to 257 minutes, in general resists cutting or combining scenes. Although it leaves out the brief discussion with Mrs. Weston in which Emma criticizes Frank for failing to pay the long-awaited visit, this version retains the intense private conversation in which Emma defends Frank's conduct to Mr. Knightley, pleading the young man's unusual circumstances. The McGrath adaptation simply sidesteps the entire issue.

The above difficulties are compounded by the need to have characters give direct expression (if only in a voice-over) to feelings left unexpressed in the novels, to thoughts never shared with another, and sometimes never even privately acknowledged at a conscious level. Filmmakers, not always sensitive to notions of decorum, often merely convert such half-thoughts to speech. At its worst, this tactic results in "totally unconvincing dialogue" used "to express what [the film] cannot easily visualize," with "Characters baldly tell[ing] each other what their spiritual states are" (Leavis and Bolton 46). Only a few such "adjustments" are jarring, but collectively they too may alter tone and emphasis as well as affect characterization, redefining the heroine and her dilemma, and thus similarly undermine overt themes of the novel concerning decorum and social forms. Austen marks all her characters by their awareness of social forms as well as by the motives behind their observance of—or violation of—rules of decorum. The public expression of thoughts that can be shared only in intimate conversation (and sometimes not with propriety even then) can mimic this tactic and work against the larger tendency of the film which strives to embody the spirit of the novel. Persuasion, with its isolated and repressed heroine, is as Nancy Hendrickson observes extremely "problematic for the dramatist" (64). Hendrickson faults the Mitchell-Baker Persuasion (1971), for instance, where "Anne is forced to confide her secrets in Lady Russell . . . in order to make her feelings clear to the audience" (64). Similarly, the Emma of the McGrath adaptation confines not only the secrets of her own heart to Mrs. Weston but, quite ungenerously, those of Harriet Smith as well. The Dear-Michell film version of Persuasion (1995) offers another striking example of a character's private reflections inappropriately converted to dialogue. In one scene, Sir Walter objects in strong language to Anne keeping a prior engagement with Mrs. Smith, instead of accompanying her father and sister to Lady Dalrymple's. In the novel, we are merely told, Mrs. Clay, who had been present while all this passed, now thought it advisable to leave the room, and Anne could have said much and did long to say a little, in defence of her friend's not very dissimilar claims to theirs, but her sense of personal respect to her father prevented her. She made no reply. She left it to himself to recollect, that Mrs. Smith was not the only widow in Bath between thirty and forty, with little to live on, and no sirname of dignity. (P 158)

The Dear-Michell film version has Anne retort in anger to Sir Walter, whereas Austen's narrator makes it abundantly clear that Anne would never presume to dispute with her father upon such terms of absolute equality.

Even a sotto voce comment or a thought delivered in a voice-over can be problematic. Austen has been criticized for "render[ing] mental life only in grammatical sentences" and not representing "the pre-conscious stages of thought" (Dussinger 104). Yet Austen's narrative techniques, though far removed from stream of consciousness, reach beneath the surface not merely to portray concealed meanings and motivation but to suggest repressed feelings and unacknowledged impulses. Interior views of characters that subtly suggest psychological depths below or beyond the level of conscious thought are routinely filtered through the narrator. A false note enters the film versions of the novels when these are converted to dialogue and characters boldly deliver speeches containing sentiments that in the novels they are struggling to suppress. The voice-over works well only for well-articulated thoughts at a quite conscious level. The Weldon-Coke...
version of *Pride and Prejudice* assigns many essential bits of narrative commentary to characters to aid with exposition, but this version, like the McGrath *Emma*, also makes fairly extensive use of voice-overs to convey the heroine's thoughts. When Elizabeth reads Darcy's letter, when she looks at his portrait at Pemberley, and when she wonders whether she is "still dear to him" (PP 253) and concludes (too late, she thinks) that he is "exactly the man, who, in disposition and talents, would most suit her" (PP 312), voice-overs accurately convey her state of mind. The voice-over is quite inappropriately used, however, in a scene that derives from the narrative commentary that opens chapter 19 of volume 2 of *Pride and Prejudice*. Here the narrator observes that Elizabeth "had never been blind to the improbity of her father's behaviour as a husband" and notes that "she had never felt so strongly as now, the disadvantages which must attend the children of so unsuitable a marriage" (PP 236). In the Weldon-Coke film, Elizabeth, sitting in a chair sewing, rather coolly observes her parents as her father seeks solace in a book and her mother frolics and giggles in the background with Kitty. The film transforms Elizabeth's repressed thoughts into judgmental reflections upon her father and mother's deficiencies, and Elizabeth's unbidden and painful perceptions become freely indulged censoriousness. By contrast, Austen filters Elizabeth's painful awareness of her parents' unsuitability as husband and wife through the narrator, and this tactic both validates the correctness of Elizabeth's understanding and underscores her quite proper reluctance to indulge in such thoughts.

Invented action is also used by filmmakers (often effectively but not always appropriately) to convey characters' emotional states when the novel relies primarily on passages of free indirect thought or narrative commentary. Hendrickson, who believes that in the Dear-Michell *Persuasion* "Austen's characters are entirely stripped of gentility" (65), focuses on the concert scene, where Anne, "feel[ing] she is stretching the limits of decorum . . . maneuvers herself into an aisle seat where she will be accessible to Captain Wentworth should he choose to approach her" (65-66). Hendrickson complains that

Michell's Anne is plagued by no such scruples. She chases Captain Wentworth up the aisle of the concert hall and, when he tries to keep going, she actually jumps in front of him, blocking his path.

An Anne capable of such bold behavior loses her rationale for having suffered in silence seven long years. (66)

Similarly, in fashioning a scene at Hartfield in which Emma breaks the news of her engagement to Mr. Knightley to Harriet in person, the McGrath *Emma* seeks a visual equivalent to Emma's painful reflections. In the film, after Harriet rushes in tears from the room, Mr. Knightley enters to comfort Emma. The viewer is placed outside the window and hears nothing of what has been said. But in the novel, when a joyful Emma first realizes that Mr. Knightley is declaring his love for her, not Harriet, we are told by the narrator

And not only was there time for these convictions, with all their glow of attendant happiness; there was time also to rejoice that Harriet's secret had not escaped her, and to resolve that it need not and should not. —It was all the service she could now render her poor friend. (E 431)

And in the novel, Emma deliberately chooses to communicate the unwelcome news to Harriet by letter, sparing Harriet as well as herself an emotional scene. The filmmakers here sacrifice Emma's delicate attention to her friend's feelings and instead operate according to the principle (everywhere mocked by Austen) that a display of feeling is the more convincing evidence of deeply felt emotion. The difference in medium often makes the filmmakers' choices understandable, but these scenes are nonetheless jarring, for they violate the novels' insistent emphasis upon the spirit which rules of decorum ideally embody.

Not only do filmmakers inadvertently introduce violations of decorum that run counter to characterization and theme in the novels, but they deliberately and consistently undermine notions of decorum grounded in class distinctions which the novels in fact support. In adapting any Austen novel, filmmakers are faced with the difficult choice of either educating a modern, democratic audience in the social rules of the day and accustoming them to a rigid class system they will almost assuredly find distasteful, or ahistorically adjusting these rules and making what Austen presents as a reasonable degree of respect for the class structure an automatic flaw in a character and evidence of snobbery; often we find an uneasy compromise between these two solutions. Film versions of *Emma* especially wrestle with this problem. As Carol M. Dole observes, "On its most obvious level, Austen's *Emma* is a witty satire whose chief target is snobbery . . . Accompanying the novel's attack on snobbery, however, is an underlying attitude that class distinctions are proper and even beneficial" (67). Certainly, it is easy for a modern audience to recognize Emma's snobishness, but it is very difficult for filmmakers to convey the precise terms of Emma's error and subsequent self-recriminations and reformation without substituting more democratic notions of social equality for the class distinctions that Austen accepts as appropriate if not positively desirable. As Dole points out, the "solidly British" film adaptations of Austen's novels "take the hardest look at class, while the mainstream American films tend on the surface to ridicule class snobbery but on a deeper level to ratify class divisions" (60). Emma's consciousness of her superior social position is made to appear laughably "silly" in the McGrath *Emma* (Dole 69), which reflects American discomfort in dealing with the issue of class at all. But even the British Davies-Lawrence *Emma* treats the heroine's "value for rank distinctions" as a serious moral "flaw" (71). Both versions present her revolution of thought as total.

Adaptations of *Emma* regularly introduce more democratically conceived scenes and lines not found in the novel. In altering the lesson that Emma learns and substituting more democratic notions, film versions of *Emma* pander to viewers' fantasies of a classless society and distort not only the novel but social reality. One slight example of the complicated nature of the problem can be found in attempts to film the scene in which Harriet and Emma encounter Robert Martin on a concert platform. In the novel, Harriet is reduced to tears from the room, Mr. Knightley enters to comfort Emma. The viewer is placed outside the window and hears nothing of what has been said. But in the novel, when a joyful Emma first realizes that Mr. Knightley is declaring his love for her, not Harriet, we are told by the narrator

And not only was there time for these convictions, with all their glow of attendant happiness; there was time also to rejoice that Harriet's secret had not escaped her, and to resolve that it need not and should not. —It was all the service she could now render her poor friend. (E 431)
Dole notes the particular difficulty filmmakers' experience in dealing with "Emma's final disposal of Harriet as a friend" (69). The Constanduros-Glenister version preserves the scene in which Mr. Knightley informs Emma of Harriet's engagement to Robert Martin; the Davies-Lawrence and the McGrath versions allow Harriet herself to tell Emma the news. But the Constanduros-Glenister version has Harriet subsequently call at Hartfield in the company of Robert Martin to make a formal introduction to Emma, thus equally suggesting the continuation of their intimacy. The Davies-Lawrence version of Emma goes yet further and in so doing provides another excellent example of the problem and one questionable solution. The "invented scene that closes the film, the harvest supper" for Mr. Knightley's tenants and friends —useful because it plausibly brings together people of all ranks—"presents a fantasy of genial class intermingling that has no precedent in Austen's novels" (Dole 71-72). Here we see a reformed Emma seek out the acquaintance of Robert Martin and invite him and Harriet to "visit." The foundation for this scene can perhaps be found in the line in the final chapter that speaks of "Emma bec[oming] acquainted with Robert Martin, who was now introduced at Hartfield" (E 482). Yet this passage follows:

Harriet, necessarily drawn away by her engagements with the Martins, was less and less at Hartfield; which was not to be regretted.—The intimacy between her and Emma must sink; their friendship must change into a calmer sort of goodwill; and, fortunately, what ought to be, and must be, seemed already beginning, and in the most gradual, natural manner. (482)

This "necessity" will not be apparent to a modern reader. Yet Austen not only makes it clear that Emma and Harriet will not continue to move in the same circle but expects her readers to see the divergence of their paths as inevitable. We are not that far from the Emma who announced to Harriet, "I could not have visited Mrs. Robert Martin, of Abbey-Mill Farm" (E 53). Now, when Emma utters comments such as this one, she is to be faulted, but the fault lies not in Emma's class consciousness so much as in the smug complacency behind it, the low motive of influencing Harriet against the impulses of her own heart, and the insensitivity that does not check the open expression of such a view to Harriet, whose social standing is far from secure. The above elegiac passage, coming late in the novel and dressed in the narrator's voice, seems to express Emma's understanding of the truth it contains, but Austen very carefully does not have Emma say as much even to Mr. Knightley, nor does she make it a conscious reflection on Emma's part. It is a "truth" presently as tacitly recognized by all, including the heroine.

The novel relies heavily upon interior views of Emma, initially to emphasize the gulf between Emma's words and actions and the sentiments she conceals, but later (as in her penitential visit to Miss Bates after the Box Hill episode) to underscore her greater sincerity. These interior views shade from interior monologues to unembellished free indirect thought (i.e., the equivalent of a monologue cast in the third person) to passages of what J. F. Burrows terms "character narrative" (87) which blend in a variety of creative ways the represented thoughts or emotions of a character with the interpreting consciousness of the narrator. In Emma as in the other novels, the narrator frequently serves as a buffer that allows Austen to convey subconscious or pre-conscious motives and states of knowing and thereby to separate even a heroine in error from the crassly and consciously manipulative characters in the novels. Film cannot easily duplicate such a complicated and subtle effect.

Interestingly, the difficulty of "translating" the social milieu of the novels into terms understandable and palatable to a twentieth-century audience also stems, at least in part, from the lack of a narrator. All the novels demonstrate that the specific social context and the relative social standing of characters may considerably alter the import of an action or utterance. Austen discriminates clearly between opinions or sentiments that may be publicly expressed with propriety, those that should be shared only in private conversation with intimates, and those that ought to remain unexpressed to others. Further, Austen's narrative technique recognizes a difference between conscious thought revealed in and a more generalized kind of knowledge or awareness. It is the first that often carries imputations of moral weakness. (Emma is not to be blamed, for instance, for noticing the deficiencies of a range of characters from Miss Bates to Mr. and Mrs. Elton to the up-and-coming Coles, but she fuels her sense of superiority by dwelling upon them.) Filmmakers too casually transfer what is a confidential statement in the novel to a more public setting. And understandably, without the luxury of a narrator, they often feel compelled to convert characters' private reflection and less-than-conscious impressions and impulses to open expression. In so doing, they disrupt the fine gradations on Austen's moral scale. Allowances must be made for the differences in the two media. Nonetheless, the adaptations of Austen's novels can, in general, be faulted for not considering more carefully the effects Austen achieves by deploying interior monologue, free indirect thought, and narrative commentary and summary in place of dramatic representation in the proportions and precise locations she does, particularly as these relate to themes of decorum in the novels.

Notes

1The 1940 MGM Pride and Prejudice starring Greer Garson and Laurence Olivier eliminates Mrs. Hurst and, more...
surprisingly, does away with Elizabeth's visit to Pemberley and makes Lady Catherine a matchmaker conniving at Darcy's and Elizabeth's marriage (Lawson-Peebles 10-12). So many new scenes are added to the 1985 BBC Sense and Sensibility and so much dialogue tampered with that it is hard even to hazard a guess about the reasons behind this or that particular departure from the novel. The more recent (and commercially successful) Emma Thompson and Ang Lee Sense and Sensibility (1995) also takes liberties with the novel's plot and dialogue and greatly amplifies the characterization of key male figures. Nonetheless, it is much easier to connect the adjustments in the Thompson-Lee film adaptation to specific scenes and passages in the novel.

Nora Nachumi's "As If! Translating Austen's Ironic Narrator to Film" does not directly consider the function of the narrator in the novels. Rather, her starting point is the assumption that much of the ironic perspective of the novels is due to Austen's narrator. Nachumi then focuses on the dialogue, staging, etc., in the screenplays to see how the filmmakers infuse irony into the film versions of the novels.

Works Cited


role in the novel is to reinforce our inside view of Emma’s worth and our objective view of her great faults, as well as to direct our intellectual, moral, and emotional progress through the novel (Booth 111).