



Incarnating Jane Austen: The Role of Sound in the Recent Film Adaptations

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ONE OF THE MAIN CHARACTERISTICS of the recent spate of Austen adaptations in the 1990s seems to be their emphasis on the body, through the attention to sensuous period details or to the desire relationships between the characters. This aspect becomes paradoxical if one takes into account the common idea that there is a general “lack of body” in the novels themselves. This paper concentrates on the treatment of sound in the recent films as a way to recreate in a properly cinematic way—that is, actually relying on audio-visual expression—a specific type of pleasure created by the novels.

Concentrating on a series of parallels between some of Austen's strategies in her written dialogues and the performances given, I focus first on the question of acting, and on the ways actors and filmmakers try to integrate the dialogues into a properly audio-visual texture. Sometimes the rhythm and the tone of voice become more important than the simple message of the words, and these moments enable a cinematic irony or emotion that evokes the type of pleasure given by the textual strategies.

But the actors' voices are only raw material within the final soundtrack, and it is essential to consider the technical choices that were made during production and postproduction—to enhance or lessen bodily noises, for instance—choices that influence the type of presence characters have in the films. These choices illustrate very different approaches—some tend to create ethereal, abstract bodies while others stress the physicality of the charac-

ters. I suggest here that the use of sound definition is a way for some directors to subtly recreate a type of expressiveness and indirect communication that, in the novels, relies essentially and implicitly on the body.

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The starting point of this reflection came from an apparent paradox, centered on the notion of the body in the recent film adaptations of Jane Austen's novels. Most articles, essays, or books about this spate of films between 1995 and 2000 point out the development of the bodily presence of the characters, the sensual dimension of the relationships between them, or the sexual desire that underlies the stories. The titles of the press articles devoted to the films are quite revealing in this respect: "ITV charged with boddice snatching" (1996 *Sunday Times*), "Sense and Sensations" (*Daily Mail*) or "Hot under the collar for men in breeches" (*The Evening Standard*).¹ The novels, on the contrary, have long been reputed for their apparent "lack of body," as John Wiltshire himself admitted in his introduction to *Jane Austen and the Body*: "Jane Austen's novels [. . .] seem among the least likely texts on which to found a discussion on the body" (1). There are few precise descriptions of the appearance of the characters, the stories do not abound in physical action or movement, and the organic body is mentioned mainly when it is affected by some kind of disorder, emotion, or sickness.

This discrepancy has been approached from various angles in recent analyses, notably the embodiment of the characters; the choice of actors; the different aesthetics created by the types of costumes, makeup, lighting, sets, and landscapes; and how all this revealed distinct—and somewhat divergent—ideological stances.² These films have also provided the occasion to reflect upon the complex and intricate relationships that inhabit the imaginary space linking the four cardinal points of adaptation: text, film, reader, and spectator. Beyond the traditional and slippery questions of fidelity or authenticity, attempts have been made to comprehend the specific type of pleasure provided by these films, and the more psychological dimensions of the reception and creation of an adaptation. Critics have explored the questions of identification and projection, and the specific kind of absorption that these stories, written or filmed, seem to create.³

The visual dimension of this "incarnation" having been already much studied, I will concentrate here on another aspect which also plays a major role in the quality of identification and recognition that is felt by the audience when seeing those films, and in the construction of a cinematic pleasure, instead of the attempted reproduction of a literary one which would be

doomed to failure. I will focus on the question of sound, a dimension that has long been neglected in film studies, even though for over seven decades film has been an audio-visual medium. I would like to suggest that some of the most successful passages in the recent films correspond to moments when the pleasure procured by Austen's words is integrated in a properly cinematic audiovisual texture, in which verbal language is treated not just as a code that conveys a message, but also as a sound among others, a texture in which sound is a material used creatively by the filmmaker to modify our reception of the images and vice versa.

It can be somewhat tricky to concentrate on sound when talking about film adaptations of novels such as Jane Austen's, which are famous for their abundant and wonderful dialogues. The danger that seems to be lurking for films ever since they became "talkies" is to rely too much on speech and to forget the essentially visual dimension of the medium, and to tell rather than show. When a scriptwriter adapts a novel with such splendid dialogues as Jane Austen's, the most obvious problem is in the decision of what has to be kept, what has to be cut out, and what has to be changed. The real problem, I think, is to make these dialogues cinematic, integrated into a lively audiovisual creation, and not just lines pronounced reverently by actors as if they were on a stage, as in the worst kind of "filmed theatre." The difficulty in adapting Jane Austen has probably had a lot to do with the absolute reverence for the dialogue found in some of the pre-1990s BBC adaptations for instance.

In the novels, the vividness of the characters is notably achieved through these dialogues. We get to know the characters directly, through their voices, or through this sort of internalized voice which is free indirect style. This "aural" dimension of the story contributes to the mental image of the characters we gradually build. We feel we know them because these voices are so well-defined in the novel, even though the image remains indistinct and unspecific: the text seldom insists on the "physical" or organic dimension of language. We do not know if the voices of Emma Woodhouse or Fanny Price are rather high- or low-pitched, nor do we know their precise physical features. Phonetic transcriptions of accents or linguistic peculiarities are practically nonexistent, and yet one can discern a special rhythm beyond the messages that these dialogues deliver, which gives us a very physical perception of speech.

This insistence on the bodily aspect of language (present in the text through the accumulation of dashes, pauses, repetitions, or syntactic breaks) is essentially linked with two types of characters: those who are subject to Austen's irony because they are intellectually or morally deficient (*e.g.*, Miss

Bates, Mrs. Elton, or Mrs. Bennet), and those who undergo a strong emotion or distress, which is expressed indirectly through the physical “feel” of the dialogue rather than through the actual words themselves. In the first category, Miss Bates’s very long speeches are felt physically by the reader as a sort of humdrum, rambling stream of words that the reader undergoes as a bored listener would. In the second group, we could quote Colonel Brandon’s speech to Elinor about his own and Eliza’s story after Willoughby’s abandonment of Marianne, or passages in free indirect style, in which the text itself seems to embody the physical manifestations of emotion that unsettle the flow of the character’s thoughts, as when Anne Elliot has just seen Wentworth again for the first time after ten years. In such passages, the language becomes affected in its own texture by the inner turmoil of the characters—in John Wiltshire’s words, “the disordered, bumpy rhythms mimicking quick breathing and pounding heart” (89). These disruptions in the rhythm allow the reader to feel more directly, and grasp, the emotion that the text does not describe or explain but includes in its own texture.

The first element that comes to mind when we think about the incarnation of the voices is, of course, the interpretation of the actors, their tone of voice, accent, and modulations. Although most performances are still based on the rendition of the text above all, some of them also try to work on the materiality of the voice, and it seems to me that these attempts manage to recreate both angles which I have just mentioned: Austen’s irony towards deficient characters, and her indirect way of dealing with emotion and feeling.

The reverence for her dialogues appears mainly through the perfect intelligibility of most dialogues and through the rather uniform kind of accent that one finds in most films.⁴ But Roger Michell, the director of *Persuasion*, resents this forced uniformity; he declared in the *Daily Telegraph*, “I was repulsed by the idea of people in Jane Austen speaking in the same voice. It seemed absolutely absurd so I’ve tried to get as many varieties as possible” (Davies 12). Accompanying this attempt at variety is also a desire to transform these words into lively, spoken English, which at times requires an abandonment of the absolute intelligibility that is generally the rule. In *Persuasion*, dialogue is used, spoken, and staged in order to create certain effects, sometimes before preserving the precise message. Language is then treated as a sound as well as a code. In the first scenes of the film, the character of Sir Walter is quickly delineated thanks to Corin Redgrave’s posh accent. His words sound as if they were modeled by the contemptuous expression of his curled lips, so that they are not always easy to understand at first.

Another example can be found in the ITV televised version of *Emma*,

where Prunella Scales as Miss Bates constantly speaks with the same tone and rhythm, so that her words often disappear behind the continuous sound of her voice. In some scenes, her words seem more like a background hum (*e.g.*, at the Crown Inn ball or the Box Hill picnic). The editing contributes to this effect. In the Box Hill episode, Miss Bates starts a sentence in a shot showing the characters beginning to ascend the hill, and she finishes the same sentence in the next shot, which shows the party already settled at the top of the hill for the picnic (logically, several minutes later, whereas the sound is continuous). The time gap between sound and image is here a filmic echo to the ceaseless and uniform flow of Miss Bates's words. In both text and film, this speech is a familiar rumor that the inhabitants of Highbury (and the readers/spectators) feel physically rather than analyze intellectually.

The diminution of intelligibility is also an apt way to convey distress or emotion without making it too clear or too openly sentimental, and therefore particularly adequate to the feeling of restraint and understatement that accompanies the expression of sentiment in the novels. One of the best examples is Colin Firth's interpretation of Mr. Darcy. Firth's way of delivering the lines often emphasizes the triviality of the words as opposed to the real message that is contained by the expressive voicing. Firth can vary the intensity of his voice in one sentence, starting in a rather loud tone and finishing it so quickly and in such a hurried and hushed voice that it almost becomes inaudible. At Netherfield, for example, he answers Miss Bingley's praise as to his being without fault: "that is not possible for anyone . . . but it has been my study to avoid these weaknesses which expose strong understanding to ridicule." His polite inquiries when he finds himself in Elizabeth's presence are another good example: on several occasions, he repeats, "I hope that your family is in good health" (at Rosings, then at Pemberley⁵), speaking so fast that we guess the words more than we hear them. Of course, the purpose here is to establish contact with Elizabeth (a contact that Elizabeth refuses at Rosings Park, when she mentions Jane's presence in London, thereby turning the conversation into a disagreement), and to illustrate his inner turmoil when he is near her.

The opposite technique is used by Alan Rickman as Colonel Brandon in the scene I mentioned earlier, which in the film relies almost exclusively on the power of Rickman's voice. In the novel, his speech was marked first by hesitation and confusion, but here his emotion is conveyed through very slow speech and what could be called over-intelligibility, the precise articulations of most syllables, although he almost speaks in a hushed voice. The character in the novel did not seem comfortable with verbal expression while Alan

Rickman's phrasing shows his oratory talent. His exceptionally deep voice, the rhythm of his delivery, and the precisely staged silences endow the character with a poetic and mysterious dimension that does not exist in the novel.

Nevertheless, in the final soundtrack, the actor's voice is only one element among others, an element moreover which is only raw material, and which depends on the technical processes used during production and post-production to record and reproduce the sound. The choice of direct recording or post-synchronization, the different levels of definition, the relationship between the voices, and the other sounds and music will also influence the type of bodily presence of the characters for the spectator.

The films of Austen's novels have benefited from considerable budgets, and from recent quality sound techniques such as dolby. Whether the characters shout or whisper, the sound can follow the tiniest variation without distortion. One can distinguish two approaches, one which tries to suppress the traces of materiality, of physicality, in the voices and in the soundtrack at large, in order to construct an abstract, idealized, and disembodied world, and one which emphasizes them in order to include the characters in a concrete, specific sensorial world. This is achieved through what Michel Chion, a French critic specializing on sound, calls "materializing sound clues," elements that give us information on the material origin of the sound and on the way the sound emission is prolonged.⁶

Here the question is no longer what the actors express but rather what we are made to hear: when people speak, can we hear their breathing, the noises made by the movements of their lips or their body, or, on the contrary, does the film give us clear-cut, neat voices that are devoid of all these bodily traces? The vividness of the characters, the intense physical presence that many viewers felt in front of these films, and which was also a reason for their success with a wide audience, was, I suggest, also the result of this specific treatment of sound: they made us hear these stories as vividly as they made us see them.

Persuasion and *Pride and Prejudice* make a precise use of these sound clues. We can hear mouth noises, sighs, the breaths that the actors take before speaking, and different types of breathing according to the emotions; we can hear Elizabeth's deep breaths of anger after Mr. Collins has proposed to her (his own noisy breath is more supposed to arouse disgust), but the same phenomenon is imbued with a different kind of distress after her unexpected encounter with wet Mr. Darcy at Pemberley. In *Persuasion*, characters sometimes speak with their mouths full during meals, and we can hear them chew or swallow; Sir Walter Elliot often clears his throat before speaking. In both

films, the characters are presented as material bodies which live, move, exhale, ingest.

Doug McGrath's *Emma*, on the other hand, gives us very round, dry voices, with regular, imperceptible breathing, voices that deliver speeches at a rather slow and sedate pace, with clear utterances. The movements of the bodies through space also seem to produce very little noise; they become almost ethereal entities, devoid of actual weight. In *Pride and Prejudice* or *Persuasion*, materializing sound clues contribute to the building of a specific, physical space in which sounds, such as the rustle of clothes, or footsteps on a gravel path or on a hardwood floor, can create effects of intimacy or uneasiness, which the spectator will then project on the situation. In *Pride and Prejudice*, for instance, the intimacy between Jane and Elizabeth is enhanced in bedroom scenes by the soft sound of Jane brushing her hair, by the creaking of the bedsprings or the crackling of the fire. Characters are given substantial bodies notably through the specific noises they make: for instance, the sucking noise that accompanies Elizabeth's jump in the mud on her way to Netherfield, the thumps of the bouncing dancers during balls, the creaking of the floorboards when bodies move, sit, or lean on an element of the set.

This materiality of sound provides an effective cinematic recreation of a type of expression beyond verbal communication that one finds in the novels, and to some aspects of the novels which contribute to the particular kind of pleasure felt by the reader: a sort of realism and vividness without precision or the presence of emotion, and with humor or feeling always expressed indirectly and without ostentation. In the novels, the dialogues are interspersed with many indications of tone, attitude, expression, or movement, which influence our reception of them just as stage-directions subtly guide the reading or interpretation of a play. Such expressions as "with an expressive smile," "with an expressive look," or "her eyes full of meaning"⁷ often remain very vague and do not seem to give much more information about what is being said, but they are mostly used to give a more concrete image of feeling, and to delineate the unaccountable dimension that gives the body and the words a power of seduction distinct from the beauty of the features or the interest of what is being said. So, verbal expression is constantly influenced, modified, and complemented by non-verbal communication, based on unobtrusive remarks, that one reads and takes in almost without realising they are there. Their style is so simple and unelaborated that we read them quickly and unconsciously, but they still influence our reception of the dialogues and of the scenes at large.

The attention to tenuous sound expressiveness in film allows this sort

of inconspicuous orientation of a scene. The spectator may not consciously remark that the floorboards in the Hunsford drawing room creak under Mr. Darcy's footsteps, but these sounds give material and emotional value to the uneasy silence that lasts for long seconds before he starts declaring himself. The text insists on the silence that preceded the verbal exchange, "a silence of several minutes" (189), which cannot be reproduced in a film, where the spectator has to undergo the same duration physically. Yet, in these several seconds that elapse between Darcy's entering and his first sentence, the choice of background noises instead of music allows for a multiplicity of effects: the materialization of his uneasiness (also felt physically by the spectator thanks to his panting breathing), but also the adoption of Elizabeth's point of view and what we could call point of hearing. They are alone in a small room and the precise sound also represents the intimacy that is forced onto Elizabeth when she least wishes it.

Another good example is provided by the ballroom scenes, and by the degree of intensity given to voices, noises, and music in each one. In McGrath's *Emma* or in *Mansfield Park*, the bodies seem to have no weight; the scenes are treated essentially for their dream-like dimension and give an impression of lightness and aesthetic excitement. In *Persuasion*, and even more in *Pride and Prejudice*, the music produced by the instruments is less round, less perfect, and the noises made by the dancers' steps occupy a much larger portion of the soundtrack. This dance is not given only as a show to be watched, as the aesthetic motions of delicate forms; it is also felt—thanks to the sound—as an exercise that implies mass, balance, control. The mixing of these sounds with the conversations also contributes to our feeling that this balance is not always easily kept, that this harmony, figured here by the association of the movement of the bodies, the rhythm of the music, and the conversations between the dancers, is not something easy and immutable but an unstable ensemble which requires some effort to preserve.

The treatment of sound in the construction of a properly audio-visual recreation of the novels may be one of the most successful ways to capture the specific charm of the stories and the characters. Sound makes the novels so vivid, so lively and absorbing, to the viewer. Expressiveness is presented unobtrusively in the novels, for the imagination fills the gaps that are opened (voluntarily) to the reader by the specific rhythm, or the subtle stage-directions. The impression of proximity or intimacy created by the sound can allow the visual representation to be kept at a distance from the characters. You do not need to stare at a character from up close: hearing the tiny variations of

the character's voice is sufficient. By working on the nuances in the rendition of sound, some passages in *Persuasion* or *Pride and Prejudice* do not attempt to be only realistic; in a film, sound works to recreate the type of expressiveness found in the novel, a punctual expressiveness not obvious or conspicuous in any way, but where each hesitation, each sigh, can become loaded with meaning according to the context where it takes place.

The pleasure we take in watching these films is not only to see but also to hear these stories and these characters take shape and life. Cinematic realism requires that Austen's dialogues undergo treatment so that too much talking ceases to be a danger. One needs just think of comedies by Woody Allen or Howard Hawkes to realize that talking a lot does not necessarily slow down the rhythm of a film or make it boring. Some irreverence for the dialogues and the presentation of lively, concrete bodies are two elements that contribute to making passages in these films as seductive to our ears as the written dialogues were to our imagination.

NOTES

1. Respectively: Nicholas Hellen, *Sunday Times* (14 July 1996): 8; Peter Paterson, *Daily Mail* (17 April 1995): 35; and Mimi Spencer, *The Evening Standard* (21 February 1996): 19.

2. Notably in Linda Troost and Sayre Greenfield's *Jane Austen in Hollywood*.

3. See for instance: John Wiltshire, *Recreating Jane Austen*, and Suzanne Pucci and James Thompson, eds., *Jane Austen and Co.*

4. American actors such as Gwyneth Paltrow or Alessandro Nivola, for instance, have changed their accent to conform to standard British English.

5. In *Pemberley* this exchange is pursued in the same mode, with a comic effect when Darcy repeats the same question after she has already answered it: "Excuse me. . . . Your parents are in good health?" Then, when he asks her "where are you staying?", both his question and his subsequent reaction ("oh yes, of course") are uttered as if they consisted of one single syllable. In *Sense and Sensibility*, Hugh Grant also borders on unintelligibility, notably in the way he pronounces "Miss Dashwood", almost completely erasing the final syllable.

6. "Materializing sound clues [. . .] draw us back to the materiality of the source and to the concrete process of sound emission. They are susceptible, among other things, to give us information about the material (wood, metal, paper, cloth) which produces the sound and about the way the sound is prolonged. [. . .] The presence of [of MSC] in high or low quantity always exerts an influence on the very perception of the scene and on its meaning, whether it draws it towards the material and concrete, or whether, by its unobtrusive quality, it favors an ethereal, abstract, fluid perception of the characters and the story." Translated from Michel Chion, *L'Audiovision* 98.

7. For instance, Wentworth: "his half averted eyes, and more than half expressive glance" (*P* 185); Miss Bingley: "His sister was less delicate, and directed her eye towards Mr. Darcy with a very expressive smile" (*P&P* 43); or Willoughby: "'I understand you', he replied, with an expressive smile, and a voice perfectly calm" (*S&S* 318).

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