

Austen Gone Global?

The Cinematic Jane Austen: Essays on the Filmic Sensibility of the Novels

By David Monaghan, Ariane Hudelet, and John Wiltshire.
McFarland & Co., 2009. 170 pages. No illustrations.
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Review by Andrew and Gina Macdonald.

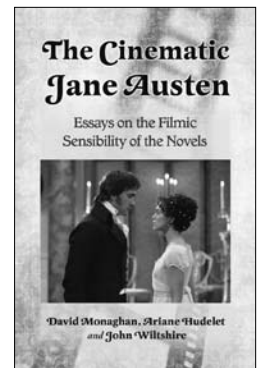
With its intriguing title, *The Cinematic Jane Austen* promises readers the point of view of film-makers over that of scholars, a promise kept by including film terminology like "close-up," "long-shot," "tracking," "panning," "crosscutting," "montage," "sound track modulations," and "shots-reverse shots" to describe either what occurs in various Austen films or what the authors believe should occur in a particular scene. Taking Kamilla Elliott's analyses as his model, David Monaghan dismisses the contentions of "semiotic" purists like George Bluestone, Seymour Chatman, and Roger Gard that the spare quality of Austen's descriptions of time, place, and characters, her use of a pervasive, ironic narrative voice, and her focus on her characters' inner lives are difficult to adapt to a visual/auditory film medium. Dismissing Penny Gay's assertion in *Jane Austen and the Theater* (Cambridge University Press [CUP], 2002) that Austen's love of the theater influenced her plot structures and her fidelity to conversational modes, he focuses instead on the visual/auditory qualities in Austen

reflective of cinematic strategies. Thus, Chapter 1 explores overhearing as an effective Austen tool that meshes well with the cinema, Chapter 2, difficult-to-film candlelight intimacy changing to industrialized gaslight, Chapters 3 and 4, Austen's mise en scène (redefined as body language, facial expression, and non-verbal sound), Chapter 5, body language and ambiguities, Chapters 6 and 7, patterns of movement and stillness, and Chapter 8, narratological issues and the mythological structures underpinning Austen's "socially specific plots." Chapter 9, an "Afterword," redefines "fidelity" and considers what readers can learn and question upon viewing Austen film adaptations. Of these, Chapters 3, 6, and 7 were published in *Persuasions*, *Mosaic*, and *Otago Studies in English*, respectively, in earlier forms.

Ironically, each author begins with the fact that Austen's novels in general exclude details of scenery or personal appearance that would ground them in the outward world, as in the absence of details about the Box Hill picnic, the hill, the vistas, or the explorations. Ironically too, each provides the copious footnotes a scholarly literary study entails. John Wiltshire and Ariane Hudelet find the influence of the theater on Austen's imagination visible throughout her canon, and Wiltshire even notes that modern readers accustomed to the cinema might picture a camera "dolly back" from Austen's phrase "The scene enlarged," when, in fact, her contemporaries would have taken "scene" to simply mark, as in the theater, a new character entering. Furthermore, all three authors assert the standard cliché that a major value of films of Austen's novels is that they return viewers to the novels, where they will discover that changing who says what in the novel versus the film or deciding on a particular tone of voice or place for a conversation loses ambiguities Austen valued. In other words, as sometimes happens with multiple authors, the introduction and title at times create contradictions at odds with the text.

However, there is much of value in this book. Wiltshire suggests beginning with the film and then exploring what insights it offers into Austen's vision and strategies instead of the reverse. His section on lighting in *Persuasion* is particularly insightful, as is his contrast of the ambiguity of Mr. Darcy's smile in Austen's book with its limited or non-appearance in cinematic versions. Hudelet, who agrees with cineaste John Mosier that there has still been no masterpiece among the Austen film adaptations and that Austen's main method of character revelation is dramatic, not cinematic, provides an interesting discussion of Austen's use of punctuation/typography and micro-movements to define character and relationships, the staginess of televised adaptations, and the effectiveness of non-verbal sounds in film, such as crackling fires, chiming clocks, and creaking doors. Monaghan's discussion of movement versus stillness in *Persuasion* is equally engaging.

Yet, for all the interesting and detailed scholarly analysis, the promise of a cinematic Austen does not appear until Chapter 8, which argues that no matter what Austen's fans think of the films derived from her novels, she has become a cross-cultural icon, exploited in multiple ways at odds with any question of textual fidelity, serving to meet the needs of a Tamil director in *I Have Found It* (loosely based on *Sense and Sensibility*) or to promote a pseudo-Austen approach to modern romance in *The Jane Austen Book Club*. If Austen is so appropriated, then in the face of *Jane Austen's Mafia* or *Miss Austen Regrets*, the question of fidelity to text, biography, and eighteenth-century values and perceptions becomes moot.



Andrew Macdonald, full professor at Loyola University New Orleans, and Gina Macdonald, retired full professor from Nicholls State University, co-edited *Jane Austen on Screen* (CUP, 2003). Before passing away in September 2010, Gina contributed a chapter, "Visualizing Empire in Domestic Settings: Costuming *Persuasion*" to *Eighteenth-Century Women of Fashion*, edited by Dr. Tiffany Potter for University of Toronto Press. Her book on E. X. Ferrars will be published by McFarland this Fall.