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**BITS OF IVORY ON THE SILVER SCREEN:
AUSTEN IN MULTIMODAL QUOTATION AND
TRANSLATION**

1. Austen on film and multimodal stylistics

Studying the Austen film industry through the lens of multimodal stylistics means applying new analytical tools to a well-known phenomenon. Since a rather mysterious 1938 “teleplay” of *Pride and Prejudice*,¹ there have been numerous cinematic and TV adaptations of Austen’s novels. These adaptations, in turn, have prompted academic examination from such different fields as cinema studies, literary criticism, and cultural studies.² More generally, the adaptations have played a

¹ P. H. Bolton, *Women Writers Dramatized: A Calendar of Performances from Narrative Works Published in English to 1900*, London, Mansell, p. 16.

² See *Jane Austen Goes to the Movies*, editor L. V. Troost, Special issue of “Topic”, XLVIII, 1997; B. T. Lupack, *Nineteenth-Century Women at the Movies: Adapting Classic Women’s Fiction to Film*, Bowling Green (Ohio), Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1999; D. Monaghan, A. Hudelet and J. Wiltshire, *The*

significant role in a thriving “Austen industry”³ which involves literary societies in English-speaking countries and elsewhere, literary clubs, facebook pages, twitter accounts and sites dedicated to everything Austen. Therefore, it is hardly surprising that the two films discussed below have already been subjected to critical scrutiny.⁴

Multimodal stylistics, on the other hand, is a very recent sub-discipline of scientific enquiry which stems from the realization that much of the relevant writing that makes a real impact on worldwide audiences today is of a multimodal nature; and a lot of this multimodal material has so far been subjected, particularly by stylisticians, to analyses of an essentially linguistic kind.⁵ So far, a more complete stylistic appreciation of multimodal art has been attempted for dramatic writing,⁶ pop-rock music,⁷ television,⁸ illustrated or typographically deviant literature,⁹ and, most relevantly for our present purposes, film.¹⁰

Cinematic Jane Austen: Essays on the Filmic Sensibility of the Novels, Jefferson (North Carolina), McFarland, 2009.

³ R. Sales, *Jane Austen and Representations of Regency England*, London, Routledge, 1994, p. 25.

⁴ See D. Cartmell, *Screen Adaptations. Jane Austen’s “Pride and Prejudice”: A Close Study of the Relationship Between Text and Film*, London, Bloomsbury, 2010; S. Parrill, *Jane Austen on Film and Television: A Critical Study of the Adaptations*, Jefferson (North Carolina), McFarland, 2002, pp. 16-44.

⁵ See for instance M. Short, *Exploring the Language of Poems, Plays and Prose*, London, Longman, 1996, pp. 168-254.

⁶ See D. McIntyre, *Integrating multimodal analysis and the stylistics of drama: a multimodal perspective on Ian McKellen’s “Richard III”*, in “Language and Literature”, XVII, 4, 2008, pp. 309-334.

⁷ See M. Morini, *Towards a musical stylistics: Movement in Kate Bush’s “Running Up That Hill”*, *ibidem*, XXII, 4, 2013, pp. 283-297.

⁸ See K. Richardson, *Multimodality and the study of popular drama*, *ibidem*, XIX, 4, 2010, pp. 378-395.

⁹ See N. Nørgaard, *Multimodality and the literary text: Making sense of Safran Foer’s “Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close”*, in *New Perspectives on Narrative and Multimodality*, edited by R. Page, London, Routledge, 2010, pp. 115-126; A. Gibbons, *Multimodality, Cognition, and Experimental Literature*, London, Routledge, 2012.

¹⁰ See R. Montoro, *A multimodal approach to mind style: Semiotic metaphor vs. multimodal conceptual metaphor*, in *New Perspectives on Narrative and Multimodality*,

In this essay, I selected two cinematic works, which are based on literary models. This has the obvious advantage of allowing a comparison between novel and film – through which the filmmakers' choices can be pinpointed and clarified, either by contrast or by analogy. Obviously, the technical means available to directors, scriptwriters and cinematographers are far different from those at the novelist's disposal: but this very difference may be turned into a possibility, if the analyst looks at how similar effects are striven for in different media. Thus, each medium can be considered for what it offers or lacks in terms of modality and narrative devices: modern cinema normally, though not universally, having to dispense with the narrative voice that is more at home in the written mode; literature lacking the visual and aural dimensions that are cinema's natural elements.

Given these differences, the two Austen adaptations discussed below will be studied for the way their moving images, dialogue and soundtrack reconfigure the narrative structures of, respectively, *Pride and Prejudice* and *Sense and Sensibility*. In particular, the openings of both films will be analysed in all their modal dimensions for the way they orient their audiences' appreciation of the stories they tell. Arguably, in the openings of Austen's novels the narrator guides the reader's judgment by providing orientation and evaluation, although the very fact that the narrator is mostly conspicuous by her absence at the beginning of *Pride and Prejudice* also influences the reader's perception of that work as a lighter-spirited affair. Apart from the general mood of the narrative, however, the *incipit* of a novel normally identifies heroes and villains, and provides a lot of general

cit., pp. 31-49; Id., *Multimodal realisations of mind style in "Enduring Love"*, in *Telecinematic Discourse: Approaches to the Language of Films and Television Series*, editors R. Piazza, M. Bednarek and F. Rossi, Amsterdam, John Benjamins, 2011, pp. 69-83.

information as to the social and financial situation in which the plot is going to unfold. A film that dispenses with voice-over will normally do the same by means of moving images, diegetic and extra-diegetic sounds and dialogue (despite the inevitable cuts due to the transition from a three-hundred-page book to a two-hour movie). Sounds and images being generally less explicit than language, it follows that every choice in these departments may be regarded as significant in terms of orientation and evaluation. A mood can be defined by the prevalence of light or darkness and/or by the use of music in the major-minor key; a character can be marked out as good or evil according to the way he/she looks, sits or smiles, or depending on how the camera decides to frame him/her.

While briefly touching on Austen's source novels, the following analysis concentrates on the two cinematic openings under discussion, with special emphasis on four related aspects: 1) the selection or exclusion of narrative or dialogic elements in the transition from novel to film; 2) the textual organization of the cinematic sequences, or, reflecting the viewer's experience, "the *textual* logic of understanding a film's narrative";¹¹ 3) the creation of cinematic viewpoint; 4) the presence of significantly foregrounded or salient elements,¹² and more generally, of any significant distinction between what occupies the audiovisual "figure", what belongs to the "ground", and what is relegated to a barely discernible "field" of perception.¹³

¹¹ J. A. Bateman – K.-H. Schmidt, *Multimodal Film Analysis: How Films Mean*, London, Routledge, 2012, p. 5.

¹² See G. Kress and T. van Leeuwen, *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design*, London, Routledge, 1996, pp. 212-214.

¹³ T. van Leeuwen, *Speech, Music, Sound*, Basingstoke, Macmillan, 1999, p. 23.

2. *Two Austen novels*

In a sense, Ang Lee's 1995 *Sense and Sensibility* and Joe Wright's 2005 *Pride and Prejudice*¹⁴ represent polar opposites in the range of audiovisual possibilities opened up by Austen's novels. Even superficially, Ang Lee's film is a rather sombre affair, exhibiting a very strong emphasis on unpleasant feelings, dark colours and stark visuals, and the hard economic facts of social life in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Joe Wright's movie, by contrast, is lighter in hue and relatively light on social realism, concentrating as it does on the central sentimental plot involving Elizabeth Bennet and rich, initially class-conscious but ultimately repentant Darcy.

This difference in tone also reflects a disparity between one of the darkest works in Austen's oeuvre and the novel that the author herself thought "rather too light & bright & sparkling".¹⁵ A comparison between the opening chapters of these two works of fiction is enough to illustrate the difference. In *Sense and Sensibility* (1811), only after pages of fact-laden information are the main characters allowed speaking for themselves:

"The family of Dashwood had long been settled in Sussex. Their estate was large [...] The late owner of this estate was a single man, who lived to a very advanced age, and who for many years of his life, had a constant companion and housekeeper in his sister. But her death [...] produced a great alteration in his home; for to supply her loss, he invited and received in his house the family of his nephew Mr. Henry Dashwood, the legal inheritor of the Norland estate [...]"

By a former marriage, Mr. Henry Dashwood had one son: by his present lady, three daughters. The son, a steady respectable young man, was amply provided for by the fortune of his mother [...] To him therefore the succession to the Norland estate was not so really important as to his sisters [...] Their mother had nothing, and their father

¹⁴ See Ang Lee, *Sense and Sensibility*, Columbia Pictures Corporation – Mirage, USA – UK, 1995 and J. Wright, *Pride and Prejudice*, StudioCanal – Working Title Films – Focus Features, France – UK – USA, 2005.

¹⁵ J. Austen, *Letters*, Collected and Edited by D. Le Faye, Oxford – New York, Oxford University Press, 2011⁴, p. 212 (letter to Cassandra Austen, 4 February 1813).

only seven thousand pounds in his own disposal [...]

The old Gentleman died [...] He was neither so unjust, nor so ungrateful, as to leave his estate from his nephew; —but he left it to him on such terms as destroyed half the value of the bequest. [...]

Mr. Dashwood's disappointment was, at first, severe; [...] the fortune, which had been so tardy in coming, was his only one twelvemonth. He survived his uncle no longer [...]

His son was sent for as soon as his danger was known, and to him Mr. Dashwood recommended [...] the interest of his mother-in-law and sisters";¹⁶

whereas in *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) it is the bickering Mr and Mrs Bennet who take centre-stage after two short paragraphs which include the narrator's very famous, and presumably tongue-in-cheek, opening:

"It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife.

[...]

'My dear Mr. Bennet,' said his lady to him one day, 'have you heard that Netherfield Park is let at last?'

Mr. Bennet replied that he had not.

'But it is,' returned she; 'for Mrs. Long has just been here, and she told me all about it.'

Mr. Bennet made no answer.

'Do you not want to know who has taken it?' cried his wife impatiently.

'You want to tell me, and I have no objection to hearing it.'

This was invitation enough."¹⁷

Both novels, of course, belong in 'Austenland',¹⁸ in economic as well as ideological terms. Though *Pride and Prejudice* has a livelier *incipit*, the lives of its characters are governed by the same socio-economic laws whose workings are so starkly exhibited in the three opening chapters of *Sense and Sensibility*. The two families at the centre of the novels – the Bennets and the Dashwoods – are left by different circumstances in very

¹⁶ Id., *Sense and Sensibility*, edited by E. Copeland, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2006, pp. 3-4 (I, 1).

¹⁷ Id., *Pride and Prejudice*, edited by P. Rogers, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2006, p. 3 (I, 1).

¹⁸ See M. Morini, *Jane Austen's Narrative Techniques. A Stylistic and Pragmatic Analysis*, Farnham, Ashgate, 2009, p. 79.

similar plights, i.e., in the rather pressing need to find suitable husbands for all the marriageable girls in each household. And in the course of the long exchange between Mr and Mrs Bennet which forms most of the first chapter of *Pride and Prejudice*, readers are informed about such crucial socio-economic details as Mr Bingley being “A single man of large fortune; four of five thousand a year” – which, as Mrs Bennet immediately hastens to add, is such “a fine things for our girls!”¹⁹

The different narrative processes through which all of this socio-economic information is conveyed, however, make for very different reading experiences. The two novels differ in their distribution of “orientation”, i.e., in how they provide the necessary details on the “who, what, where, when” of the story.²⁰ The disparity in mood at the beginning of the novels is accounted for by these differences in evaluation at least as much as by the different dispositions of the characters. In *Pride and Prejudice*, everything is filtered through the contrasting comic personalities of Mr and Mrs Bennet, and what orientation the reader is given is allowed to slip through their exchanges, rather than presented in any explicit manner. In *Sense and Sensibility*, the narrator herself describes and summarizes the characters’ speech and thought acts for the best part of three chapters. Furthermore, while in *Pride and Prejudice* the narrator forbears from giving straightforward judgments until the end of chapter one (“Mr. Bennet was so odd a mixture of quick parts, sarcastic humour, reserve, caprice”),²¹ in *Sense and Sensibility* readers are immediately and explicitly invited to take sides:

¹⁹ J. Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, cit., p. 4 (I, 1).

²⁰ W. Labov, *Language in the Inner City*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1972, p. 363.

²¹ J. Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, cit., p. 5 (I, 1).

“Mr. John Dashwood had not the strong feelings of the rest of the family; but he was affected [...] and he promised to do every thing in his power to make them comfortable. [...]

He was not an ill-disposed young man, unless to be rather cold hearted and rather selfish is to be ill-disposed: [...] Had he married a more amiable woman, he might have been made still more respectable than he was [...] But Mrs. John Dashwood was a strong caricature of himself;—more narrow-minded and selfish.”²²

3. Joe Wright’s “*Pride and Prejudice*”

The openings of the two films under discussion certainly reflect, and perhaps exacerbate, this disparity. In Wright’s *Pride and Prejudice*, a prevailing mood of lightness and playfulness is established in the course of a very few shots, and arguably maintained for most of the action. In the opening scene, the cinema-goer is first presented with a view on a heath with woodland in the background; the sun rises on this country scenery, and then the camera finds a young woman (Elizabeth, played by Keira Knightley) walking in the same landscape shortly after daybreak, book in hand. Within a few seconds of cinematic time, Elizabeth closes the book, crosses a narrow arched bridge and approaches her home, outside which sheets are hung up to dry and servants are performing menial tasks. After that, the audience is given a glimpse of the interiors of the Bennet household – one young woman playing the piano, another walking, two more young women running down a staircase and around, shrieking excitedly. Outside with the camera again, the audience is offered a view of Mr and Mrs Bennet talking inside the house, across a window, as seen from Elizabeth’s perspective. Then Elizabeth and the camera get into the house, and the rest of Mr and Mrs Bennets’ discussion is overheard by four of the five sisters (Elizabeth included), who are eavesdropping on their parents from behind the door.

²² Id., *Sense and Sensibility*, cit., pp. 5-6 (I, 1).



J. Wright – *Pride and Prejudice* (2005)

Linguistically, the inevitable condensation needed to turn a novel into a two-hour movie leads the filmmakers to make some interesting choices. One is the extreme compression of the exchange between Mr and Mrs Bennet, which is reduced from a few pages to a few lines – some of which arguably serve the purpose of delineating the different dispositions of the spouses:

Mrs Bennet: My dear Mr Bennet – have you heard? Netherfield Park is let at last! [pause] Do you not want to know who has taken it?

Mr Bennet: As you wish to tell me, my dear, I doubt I have any choice in the matter.”

Another interesting choice can be described taking into account the distribution of turns at talk. The socio-economic orientation which is mainly apportioned to Mrs Bennet in the novel is here neatly divided between mother and daughters, who inform the audience by repeating what

they overhear (“There’s a Mr Bingley arrived from the north”, “Five thousand a year!”, “He’s single!”). In combination, this different apportionment of lines and the extreme compression of the opening dialogue (in contrast, for instance, with later sections which feature verbal sparring between Elizabeth and Darcy – an example of this being the collective exchange at Bingley’s place in chapter 8, much expanded in the film) suggest that Mr and Mrs Bennet, or rather the financial hopes and worries voiced in their first exchange, may be more central in the novel than in the film. Here, the love-hate relationship between Elizabeth Bennet and Darcy takes up much more space.

These linguistic choices, however, are a small part of the complex decision-making process involved in turning a novel into a feature film, and only become fully significant in their audiovisual context. A neat example of this, very early on, is the series of shots alternating between Mr and Mrs Bennet as seen by their daughters from behind a half-closed door, and a medium close up of the young ladies themselves, seen giggling as they repeat what they overhear of their parents’ exchange.

While the gist of what is being communicated to the viewers is a reduced version of the Bennets’ exchange in chapter 1 of the novel – a well-to-do single man worth five thousand a year has just turned up, or is going to turn up, in the neighbourhood – the context in which that information is given is far different. In the book, an uncooperative Mr Bennet is trying to stave off his wife’s verbal attacks. In the film, all this is shown, and indeed heard, from the perspective of the girls – who are repeating what the viewer is unable to hear and, in the case of Kitty and Lydia, tittering and squealing excitedly as they do so. For the occasion, even clever Elizabeth allows herself a laugh, and sedate Jane is smiling: by

means of a viewpoint shift, the “complicating event”²³ that triggers all the other events in the story is presented as a joke to be shared among sisters.

More generally, the whole opening sequence demonstrates that this film is, in keeping with Deborah Moggach’s view of the novel on which she worked to produce the script, “the ultimate romance about two people who think they hate each other but are really passionately in love”²⁴ – a light-hearted romantic comedy, rather than a full-blown treatment of Austen’s lights, shadows and ironies. The first shot, for instance, establishes the world of *Pride and Prejudice* as a place in which everything is harmonious and on the rise. The opening credits begin to roll on the beautiful natural backdrop of a heath with trees in the background. The landscape composition is roughly symmetrical yet also capable of accommodating unevenness (clumps of weeds, the unequal silhouettes of the trees), like an English garden. The reassuring effect of this rural scene is heightened by the rising sun, which after a few seconds floods the whole shot with warm, diffused light, more orange than yellow (the same warm light illuminates most of the film: it is there, for instance, in the ‘overhearing’ sequence discussed above). Any remaining doubts as to the positive value of this opening are dispelled by the soundtrack: harmonious birdsong followed by, and combining with, a romantic-sounding piano piece in the major key, written by contemporary composer Dario Marianelli.

²³ W. Labov, *Language in the Inner City*, cit., p. 363.

²⁴ Focus Features, *Pride & Prejudice: The Production*, web address http://www.focusfeatures.com/article/pride_prejudice_the_production?film=pride_and_prejudice.



J. Wright – *Pride and Prejudice* (2005)

If the first shot creates a positive, bucolic effect that sets the mood for the rest of the film, the second immediately establishes Elizabeth as the romantic heroine. Though Elizabeth is also the heroine of *Pride and Prejudice* the novel, and functions as the narrator's reflector for most of the action, it is worth bearing in mind that she does not occupy that exalted position until the end of chapter 3, and that Austen chose to point her narrative camera at Elizabeth's parents at the beginning of the novel. In Joe Wright's film, no uncertainty is allowed to arise as to Elizabeth's "salience".²⁵ Here the viewer sees her in frontal close up – a pretty young lady, simply but elegantly dressed, reading a book as she walks. As the romantic piano piece continues to unfold, this pretty young lady smiles and covers her mouth with her left hand – a complex gesture, at once expressing bookishness, cleverness and modesty. Then, in the third shot, her head is seen in extreme close up, from behind – a kind of arrangement, which encourages viewers to identify with the character, because they have

²⁵ G. Kress and T. van Leeuwen, *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design*, cit., p. 212.

to share her field of vision (this is roughly the same result that is obtained in literary fiction through the use of a reflector – a technique Austen knew well).²⁶ However, with a double-perspective effect, which would not be possible or advisable in fiction, the viewer sees not only what Elizabeth sees, but also her slender neck and rebellious wisps of hair – more distinctive traits of a romantic heroine. Elizabeth's long, delicate fingers close the book and stroke its back cover, as if to visually underline, once again, her love for books.



J. Wright – *Pride and Prejudice* (2005)

In the next few shots, viewers are offered a quick visual and aural insight to the world inhabited by Elizabeth and the Bennets. On her way home, the protagonist is seen crossing a footbridge in a rural setting, featuring ducks, cattle and a young shepherd; and walking through rows of sheets hung out to dry, with servants working in the background. The camera then leaves her for a few seconds as it enters the house and

²⁶ See M. Morini, *Austen's Narrative Techniques. A Stylistic and Pragmatic Analysis*, cit., p. 24 and p. 31.

introduces the viewer to the other sisters, a dog, and a cheerful clutter of mostly womanly objects. Finally, the camera goes out and finds Elizabeth again, as she stops to watch her parents through a windowpane and from the foot of an external staircase.



J. Wright – *Pride and Prejudice* (2005)

What is particularly interesting about this whole sequence is its structure in terms both of visual foregrounding and point of view. As to the former, viewers are left in no doubt that Elizabeth is central, the “figure” against her bucolic, domestic and mostly still “ground” and “field”: she is present in most of the shots, in a central or generally foregrounded position, and quite often seen moving and/or in close up. As regards perspective, viewers are invited to share a sight line with the ostensible protagonist, who is therefore also assumed as a sort of reflector. These two structural facts, with attendant visual and aural elements such as Elizabeth’s physical appearance and the soundtrack, invite the audience to see the young woman as the protagonist of what is probably going to unfold as a romantic story. Viewers are invited to share this view not only through the concentration of

“textual focus” (the camera mostly follows Elizabeth, and puts her at the geometrical or notional centre of shots), but also by such “ideational” means as having the Bennets’ opening exchange observed and overheard by their daughter across a windowpane (rather than seeing the Bennets, viewers see Elizabeth watching the Bennets).²⁷

4. Ang Lee’s “*Sense and Sensibility*”

In contrast with this view of Austen’s world as dominated by light-hearted romanticism, Ang Lee’s *Sense and Sensibility* paints a darker picture (again, visually and metaphorically), and delineates a world in which money is the centre around which individual lives revolve. This is shown neatly in the opening sequence, where the financial preoccupations discussed at length by the narrator in the novel are presented both verbally and by other cinematic means. A mere textual reading of this sequence is enough to appreciate the distance between Lee’s and Wright’s intersemiotic translations: while the 2005 *Pride and Prejudice* opens on a pretty young woman walking in the fields at dawn, the 1995 *Sense and Sensibility* invites its viewers to penetrate a dying man’s bedroom. And while Wright’s romantic comedy seems to confine the necessary socio-economic information to an audiovisual footnote, Ang Lee’s film puts it at the centre of the exchange between the dying man and his son and sole inheritor. The elder Mr Dashwood makes it perfectly clear that the prime mover of events in this world is money, and his main preoccupation the status, lifestyle and alliances that money can bring:

“*Father*: John – John – you will find out soon enough from my will that the

²⁷ J. A. Bateman – K.-H. Schmidt, *Multimodal Film Analysis: How Films Mean*, cit., p. 11.

estate of Norland was left to me in such a way as prevents me from dividing it between my two families [...] Norland in its entirety is therefore yours by law [...] but your stepmother – my wife and daughters – are left only five hundred pounds a year – barely enough to live on – nothing for the girls’ dowries! You must help them! You must promise to do this.”

In very few lines of dialogue (John mainly assents in this exchange), the screenwriter, Emma Thompson (playing Elinor in the film), has managed to concentrate a lot of the orientation provided by Austen’s narrator in two chapters and a half. The language used by the dying father is legal and financial, rather than psychological, religious or moral: Mr Dashwood makes it very clear that the sum of money referred to, at least in the polite society to which the main characters belong to, is “barely enough to live on” (further sequences in the film will elaborate on what this means in terms of carriage and servants, thus contextualizing the expression). The reference to “the girls’ dowries” presupposes a world in which young women must count on marrying well to maintain their place in society and John is enrolled in the cause of financial assistance for his half-sisters – as the following scene, featuring John Dashwood and his wife, is going to confirm.

Thus, while Wright’s *Pride and Prejudice* mostly dispenses with dialogue in its early shots, to concentrate instead on the audiovisual presentation of Elizabeth as its romantic heroine, Ang Lee’s *Sense and Sensibility* uses dialogue to highlight the socio-economic motives that drive the story: the fact that neither John Dashwood nor his father are going to be the protagonists of that story – and the elder Mr Dashwood, of course, will disappear altogether – emphasizes the importance of what they say. Again, however, the effect created for the viewer in this opening scene is not merely linguistic, but multimodal: various visual and aural details

contribute to the creation of a film-world that is much more ambiguous, and perhaps more disquieting, than the one the audience is asked to experience in the 2005 *Pride and Prejudice*. Visually, for one thing, this is a world with little light and no colours: the scene opens in complete darkness, and its main part is then shot in a darkened room lit only by a few slender tapers.²⁸ As for the soundtrack, the opening piece for piano, strings and recorder is not dissimilar in effect from the one heard in Wright's film: but in this case the music ends when the action starts, to be replaced by footsteps, the creaking of the bed, and the subdued voices of the characters.

Sombre is the adjective that comes most readily to mind for a general description of this sequence – and the mood it describes is perfectly in keeping with the audio-visual representation of a man's death. The effect, however, is not limited to the opening sequence: the following shots, which dramatize John Dashwood's change of mind about helping his half-sisters financially, as brought about by his wife, are bathed in light; yet it is a cold, white kind of light with very few splashes of colour. In general, this is the dominant palette in the film – and when Marianne falls dangerously ill near the end, many visual details are reprised from the opening scene, down to the six yellow streaks against a dark background that are probably produced by the fire in both sickrooms.

²⁸ See T. van Leeuwen, *The Language of Colour*, Abingdon, Routledge, 2011, p. 20.



A. Lee – *Sense and Sensibility* (1995)

Apart from the general darkness shrouding the opening scene, much of its significance is – as happens in Wright’s *Pride and Prejudice*, but with predictably different results – conveyed by modes other than the linguistic. The body language and facial expressions of the two characters, in particular, can be said to represent their mental states, and the way these develop in the course of their exchange. After John’s entrance, the scene is realized as a conventional series of medium close-ups alternating between father and son. The contrast between the two actors is marked: the father is lying in his bed, but as tensely as his state allows, his eyes bulging when he repeatedly bids John “help them”; John himself is sitting upright, almost motionless, his mouth twitching occasionally in his faltering reassurances to his father. Their voices form a similar kind of contrast – the father’s being strong and determined, though relatively hushed, while his son’s is almost a whisper. When he is asked to do something for his stepmother and half-sisters, John either stammers or mouths several mute syllables before he recovers his voice.



A. Lee – *Sense and Sensibility* (1995)

As seen before, the three opening chapters of *Sense and Sensibility* offer the orientation the readers need to find their way in the narrative: some of that orientation, however, is value-laden. Thus, readers are told that Mr and Mrs John Dashwood are mean-spirited before they get a chance to see or hear their actual words. In Ang Lee's film, much of this evaluative work is done by visual rather than linguistic means, or by visual and linguistic means combined. The second scene, in which Mrs John Dashwood talks her husband into giving nothing to their needy relatives, is a visual confirmation that the body language and facial signals exhibited by John Dashwood in his final interview with his father are not to be taken as symptoms of a generous disposition. His wife, in fact, is only slightly more upright and expressionless than he is, her voice as cold as her demeanour. Her first words, heard before her figure is seen, while the camera is shooting a street in a wealthy neighbourhood, provide a cohesive connection to the previous scene ("Help them? What do you mean, help

them?") – and the icily indignant tone in which these words are spoken leave one in little doubt as to the real chances of her father-in-law's last wish being fulfilled.

Diametrically opposed as they are in execution and effect, Wright's and Lee's opening scenes neatly demonstrate the vast and varied resources available to film-makers for orienting and influencing their audiences. While both films dispense with a narrative voice, and therefore lose the complexity created by the fine dialogic interplay between narrators and characters in Austen's novels, they make up for this loss through the deployment of audio-visual means that provide information and evaluation, much in the manner of a fictional narrator. In a sense, this kind of multimodal narrative can be even heavier-handed than Austen's most decisive narrative interventions: the light of dawn stands for high hopes and the prime of life, while deep darkness stands for sadness and death; a slow, expanding piano piece in the major key creates an atmosphere of romantic serenity; a smiling, book-stroking actress must surely be the romantic heroine, whereas two uptight, unsmiling actors are probably to be identified with the villains. In both cases, even before a single word is spoken by the actual protagonists (Elizabeth Bennet and Elinor Dashwood), the viewer has already been introduced to the main moral, aesthetic and ideological motives of these two contrasting adaptations.

5. An attempt at narrative irony?

Another relevant, but technically different example of how the function of a fictional narrator can be multimodally replicated is Ang Lee's recreation of Willoughby's definitive parting with Marianne and the rest of

the Dashwood family. In chapter 15 of *Sense and Sensibility*, Marianne runs upstairs “in violent affliction”²⁹ when her mother and sisters come back from Lady Middleton’s; the rest of the family confront Willoughby over this, only to learn that he must go immediately and that he too is violently upset; then Mrs Dashwood quits the parlour “to give way in solitude to the concern and alarm which this sudden departure occasioned”;³⁰ in about half an hour she comes back and has a long chat with Elinor, in which she tries to defend Willoughby’s behaviour against her daughter’s sounder judgment; Marianne appears at lunchtime, unforthcoming, her eyes “red and swollen [...] her tears [...] restrained with difficulty”.³¹ Austen’s narrator opens chapter 16 ironically, noting that “Marianne would have thought herself very inexcusable had she been able to sleep at all the first night after parting from Willoughby”³² – while also admitting that this time her real feelings are much stronger than her ‘literary’ ones, and leave “her in no danger” of having any rest.³³

While not necessarily replicating this exact chain of events or this rather explicit ironic swipe, Ang Lee’s rendition of this scene is arguably ironic in ways that Austen might have recognized. In the film, everything is necessarily more succinct: Marianne, in tears, repairs to a drawing room as Willoughby talks to her family (who have been to church, not on a visit to their neighbours); Mrs Dashwood joins her when Willoughby goes; Elinor watches from the threshold; Marianne runs upstairs, still crying uncontrollably; her mother and Elinor sit down to discuss the thing; Mrs Dashwood grows angry at Elinor’s apparent scepticism and storms upstairs too, followed by Elinor who is crying “Mama! I am very fond of

²⁹ J. Austen, *Sense and Sensibility*, cit., p. 87 (I, 15).

³⁰ Ibidem, p. 89 (I, 15).

³¹ Ibidem, p. 95 (I, 15).

³² Ibidem, p. 96 (I, 16).

³³ Ibidem.

Willoughby. Mama!"; upstairs, all the other members of the family shut or lock themselves in their rooms, and Elinor is left alone on the landing with a cup of tea. All this – the cinematic recreation of a crucial chapter of the book – lasts a mere three minutes in a 135-minute film.

What is most striking about this scene, however, is not so much its duration or its textual organization as its visual presentation – particularly at the end, when Elinor is left alone on the first-floor landing. In narratological terms, Elinor has already been established for most of the film as the director's reflector, and this particular sequence is no exception. When she follows her mother upstairs, for instance, the camera follows her before changing its position to a point above the first-floor landing. On the landing, Elinor also finds Margaret, who has apparently been trying to get into Marianne's room, but to no avail ("She will not let me in", she says as she hands Elinor the teacup).



A. Lee – *Sense and Sensibility* (1995)

When Margaret also disappears into the central door in a row of three (Marianne, Margaret, Mrs Dashwood), Elinor looks at her, then at the teacup, at Marianne's door, at Margaret's closing door, at her mother's locked door and again at the teacup, before she sits down on the steps of the staircase leading above and sips the tea. The audience is mostly unable to see her face, as it is mostly turned towards the doors and hidden by a cap – but they can see the little head-twitches that reflect her divided, shifting attention. Again, one is invited to look at the scene as if from her point of view, though Elinor herself is shot from above by a camera that can be said to be in the position of a heterodiegetic narrator (because it is out of frame, self-evidently, but also because its distance from the protagonist – this is a rather wide shot – reminds one that one is also watching Elinor from the outside). And though there is no explicit commentary in the ending of the scene, point of view can be grasped in its ideological as well as its physical sense, because Elinor's body language and her subtle gestures will be taken by most viewers as a commentary on her family's behaviour, or as an evaluation of the situation as a whole.



A. Lee – *Sense and Sensibility* (1995)

In conclusion, while too much cannot be made of the parallel between two arts whose modes and techniques are largely different, one may feel that the realization of the final shot in this sequence is an attempt at reproducing Austen's wry, terse narrative descriptions. On occasion, these descriptions appear to make statements that are either unrelated or under-informative with regard to the state of affairs that is being described.³⁴ In *Sense and Sensibility*, for instance, when Lucy Steele complains that she rarely sees Edward Ferrars (she is actually trying to impress Elinor with the idea that she has a prior claim on him), the narrator merely reports: "she took out her handkerchief; but Elinor did not feel very compassionate".³⁵ Rather than explicitly stating that this is all a pretence on Lucy Steele's part, or that Elinor thought so, at any rate, the narrator merely describes Elinor's state of mind in rather general terms, leaving the reader to understand the implicature created by her reticence. The effect, for many readers, may be one of ironic communion with the narrator's and/or reflector's evaluation of the rapacious Lucy Steele.

In the scene described above, Elinor's physical reactions can be read in much the same manner. Since no explicit commentary is offered at this stage by the narrator or by any of the characters, the protagonist's demeanour and gestures can be interpreted by the audience in terms of fuzzy evaluation. And if one had to back-translate the final shot into narrative discourse, one could come up with a factual description which invites the reader to look for more in the protagonist's attitude:

³⁴ See P. Grice, *Studies in the Way of Words*, Cambridge (Mass.), Harvard University Press, 1991, pp. 22-57 and M. Morini, *Austen's Narrative Techniques. A Stylistic and Pragmatic Analysis*, cit., p. 42.

³⁵ J. Austen, *Sense and Sensibility*, cit., p. 153 (I, 22).

“Elinor took the teacup and watched Margaret as she opened the door in front of her, and immediately closed it behind her back. Then she looked at Marianne’s locked door on the left, and at her mother’s locked door on the right. Finally, she sat down on the steps of the staircase leading up, and sipped her tea.”

That conclusive “sipped her tea” sounds like the narrator of *Sense and Sensibility* at her most wryly uncooperative – and it is a measure of Lee’s ability as a director, rather than of the present writer’s mimetic talents, that this cinematic scene translates so smoothly into something that might, if taken in isolation, sound just like Austen.

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