

Austen and Adaptation

A Question of Worthiness

The film world still awaits a cinematic recreation of Austen that translates her satiric perceptions of society into cinematic terms a modern audience can respond to, yet without losing the heart of what has made her works endure. No film has yet been made worthy of Austen.

—John Mosier, “Clues for the Clueless” (251).

What does it mean for a motion picture adaptation of a classic work of literature to be “worthy” of its source? Since Jane Austen has become my favorite author, I must confess to nurturing certain feelings of protectiveness towards her when viewing adaptations of her work, and I have wondered to what extent they have committed a form of literary “crime” by meddling with her original. For example, while I very much enjoy the film as a whole, I am practically offended by the fact that the *Pride and Prejudice* film with Greer Garson and Laurence Olivier alters the ending of the novel to rob Elizabeth Bennett of her victory over the villainous, upper-class Lady Catherine De Bourgh. In making Lady Catherine into a benign figure who approves of the union between her rich, landed nephew and the socially inferior Elizabeth, the film considerably undercuts Elizabeth’s heroism.

To that extent, I view this movie, and many other adaptations, with a divided consciousness. There is the part of me that watches the film as one who will always be loyal, first and foremost, to the “mother” text, and there is the part of me that wishes to view the film in its own right, and see what it is trying to achieve, artistically and socially, by retelling an established narrative. Although few of the

Austen devotees who have written about the film adaptations have acknowledged a similar mental divide, Rebecca Dixon is the one who appears to be the most frank and unapologetic about it. The title of her 1998 essay, "Mis-Representing Jane Austen's Ladies," seems to speak for itself, since its primary concern is indicating all the ways in which the 1990s crop of Austen films incorrectly portray their female leads. And yet, Dixon begins with the following disclaimer:

[I]n spite of the dismayed nature of this article, please understand just how much I enjoyed each of the recent Austen-based productions. *Persuasion*, *Pride and Prejudice*, *Sense and Sensibility*, and *Emma* are all delightful visual and audio experiences. Beautiful settings, witty and lively dialogue, lovely costumes, clever irony, and more—overall, they're all well done....If an Austen-based film appeared in theaters, I saw it at least once and later purchased it on video....I like these films. Allow me to articulate my fervent desire that movie makers will continue to make such fine films.... (44)

Of course, many literary critics are not as conflicted as Dixon concerning the artistic merit of Austen adaptations. Naturally, for those who see the Jane Austen films (or any other adapted films for that matter) as generally poor in quality, there is no conflict to resolve—the films are terrible, need to be renounced, and that is final. But a conflict is created when, on some level, the literary critic recognizes some artistic merit in the film. Then the question remains, what kind of relationship does the adaptation have to the source novel? Could that relationship be viewed as anything but parasitic if the eventual determination is that the original is "better" after all? Interestingly, despite his conclusion that the Austen film adaptations are failures from a purist perspective, Mosier offers some intriguing meditations on these very questions:

Besides providing a certain level of intellectual entertainment, the primary objective of good adaptation, like that of any good interpretive reading of a text, is to make viewers return to the text and reconsider it anew. Probably the most successful adaptations of literature to film are those which cause the viewer to conclude, after having returned to the text and evaluated the reading that the film has delivered, that the filmmakers have a point, an interpretation which deserves a hearing. This interpretation need not be all-inclusive for the compressed length of a film does not permit comprehensive coverage, nor does the nature of the medium. However, it must carry insights that together provide a valid understanding of the original text. (228)

The working premise that Mosier outlines above is quite valuable as a starting point for this discussion of adaptations of *Emma*, although I would maintain that the individual *Emma* films meet Mosier's own criteria more successfully than he allows that they do. Nevertheless, Mosier makes several insightful criticisms of the 1990s films that are important to take into account. For example, he is particularly critical of the casting of the films, especially of Mr. Knightley, who is usually too young, and of Emma, who is often played by a slim, fair-haired actress when the book describes her as "handsome"—a word that signifies a voluptuous figure and suggests darker hair.¹ Mosier is also correct in observing that the films do not go far enough in recreating the specific 18th century context of the original story, in which the rising middle-class challenged the sovereignty of the landed establishment forces of the time. These legitimate complaints concerning the films are difficult to challenge, and similar objections to the fidelity of the movies may be found in the writings of other Austen devotees.

Although not a literary scholar, *New Yorker* film critic Anthony Lane based his poor review of Douglas McGrath's lush, fairy-tale-style adaptation of *Emma* on an intriguing scholarly premise—film versions of Jane Austen novels consistently fail to capture the right dramatic tone precisely because even the most learned readers of the original novel have difficulty identifying Austen's tone themselves:

In a way, you feel sorry for McGrath and his designers; they have to decide on a tone and stick with it, whereas the atmosphere of the original resists any such definition. You can spend a lifetime reading Austen and still be unable to place her: Is she affectionate or flinty? Does her tolerance float free, or does it exist to peg back her anger? McGrath turns her into a proto-Dickensian—Emma's infuriating father, in particular, becomes a Mr. Bumble figure, all plaintiveness melted into joviality—but there is an equally strong case for revering her as the last of the Johnsonians. No burden weighs more heavily on a writer's shoulders than that of being much loved, but something unreachable in Austen shrugs off the weight. Only a fraction of this ambivalence is available to a film like "Emma"; McGrath has opted to make things nice and snug, but in so doing he dooms us to sit through the movie sighing for the lost astringency of the book. (76)

Here again, an insightful criticism leveled at an *Emma* adaptation seems truly damning. Similar objections were raised by other Austen scholars, both to the fidelity of the 1996 McGrath film as well as to

textural and tonal liberties taken by other Jane Austen adaptations made around the same time. One of the foremost evaluators of the Hollywood dramatizations of the 1990s, Carol M. Dole, suggests that the films as a whole cater too much to the American myth of “classlessness” to deal seriously with the class issues that concern Austen.

Whether the objection is to casting, to tone, or to dramatic representations of class issues, essentially, the critical consensus is that the films romanticize and misrepresent the original texts.² For example, they emphasize the marriage-plots at the script level, make the male love-objects more appealing than they are in the novel, eliminate the most liberal and feminist-oriented dialogue from the text, and they misrepresent the social context of the Regency period in which they were written by depicting the society as more democratic than it actually was.

A great many of the criticisms included in the writings mentioned above are valid from the perspective of an Austen scholar who is interested in making sure that the version of the text that the public is most familiar with through the film medium is an accurate reflection of the original. To the extent that I agree with these criticisms, and that I believe they are important to keep in mind, I will be preserving many of these arguments in my discussions of the various film adaptations of *Emma* by quoting extensively from critics who view the films as fundamentally unfaithful, commercial piratings of Austen. However, I will try to qualify these complaints as often as I can by judging the films on their own terms, as readings of the novel rather than as complete recreations of the novel. As Derek Paget writes in his essay comparing the Jane Austen film adaptations to the movie adaptation of the contemporary novel *Trainspotting*:

Discussion of film/TV adaptation of novels is often troubled by the vexed question of fidelity to ‘prior texts’ deemed to have inherently greater cultural standing. Inevitably, the ‘not a bit like the novel’ argument is often heard (along with its extension—‘not as good as the novel’). Such arguments are more stridently heard when the work of classic authors is at issue. It almost seems to constitute a kind of perverse pleasure for those jealous of canonical literature’s supposed superiority to continue to argue for the primacy of print. (131)

Perhaps the best solution to the “vexed” questions of fidelity and artistic merit is provided by a decision, made at the outset, to avoid

thinking of the films in such starkly evaluative terms. Austen scholar and adaptation theorist John Wiltshire has advanced one such alternative way of looking at film adaptations and their architects. In *Recreating Jane Austen* (2001), Wiltshire suggests that, in the case of each individual adaptation, the “scriptwriter and filmmakers be understood as readers, and that one advantage of all such revisions is that they make public and manifest what their reading of the precursor text is, that they bring out into the discussably open the choices, acceptances, assumptions and distortions that are commonly undisclosed within the private reader’s own imaginative reading process” (5).

Wiltshire’s philosophical approach will prove especially useful to this discussion as it will enable me to examine the films as readings of the source novel, and not as pale reflections of it. Although Wiltshire is not the only scholar who is attempting to change the parameters of the discussion of adaptation, there is a sense in which the debate concerning adaptation has yet to be resolved, and there are still a great many critics who find this widespread process a highly questionable popular phenomenon. Assuming, for the moment, that the prevailing view of adaptation is skeptical, I would like to begin my discussion of the Jane Austen adaptations in particular by offering an overview of the traditional objections to the feasibility of the adaptation process in general.

The Problem of Adaptation

Until relatively recently, the weight of scholarly opinion has been against the feasibility of film adaptation, and the objections to the enterprise have been particularly convincing because of the stature and eloquence of the skeptics. Virginia Woolf famously balked at a movie version of *Anna Karenina* because it merely showed Karenina as a plastic image on silent film and utterly failed to make manifest her thoughts and feelings. As Woolf observed, “the brain knows Anna almost entirely by the inside of the mind—her charm, her passion, her despair” (Geduld, 88–90). Therefore, the portrait of “Anna Karenina” being projected onto the screen before her evoked no recognition whatsoever from Woolf. Indeed, in so failing to capture the spirit of the novel, this film version of *Anna Karenina* seemed too far removed

from the original to warrant calling itself by the same title. Many adaptations, before and since, have fallen just as disastrously short, calling into question the validity of the entire project of adaptation.

In *Aesthetics and Psychology of the Cinema* (1963) Jean Mitry convincingly framed the argument against Hollywood film adaptations of classics in this fashion:

Adaptation to begin with (whether of plays or novels) was no more than a guarantee of quality which the reputation of the work adapted was supposed to lend the film. The cinema's claim to be art depended on the amount of art injected into it. Though distorted by translation, the original work retained its potential power even when it was being caricatured, impressing the stamp of its quality on the film it inspired, giving it the necessary aesthetic warranty but inevitably pointing up the congenital inferiority of an art totally dependent on it. (326)

Later on in the chapter, Mitry made a grudging concession that David Lean seemed to be one of the few filmmakers who could prove him wrong, since that particular auteur had demonstrated unique artistic skill in transforming some of the novels of Charles Dickens into legitimately great motion pictures. Therefore, while Mitry seemed, on balance, to be skeptical of the feasibility of a film being crafted that does justice to its literary predecessor, he posited that it was at least possible for a filmmaker to craft an adaptation that

through an art of effacement, renunciation, scrupulous fidelity to the original work and, though incapable of translating the deeper meanings and providing aesthetic equivalences...[is] at least capable of producing a worthy reflection.

The most notable successes in this genre have been David Lean's films adapted from *Great Expectations* and *Oliver Twist*. The images seem to jump right out of the pages of the novel and, here and there, it is possible to recognize little flashes of Dickens' style and manner. (329)

Mitry is not alone in identifying these films as worthy of Dickens' original novels, but they appeared to be (to him, at least,) the exceptions that prove the rule, since Mitry alluded to few, if any, other directors who were as successful as Lean at adapting films.³ Writing more specifically and less generally, Mitry's primary objection to a film's ability to transpose a complex novel to the screen is his sense that films have a narrative structure to them (and a sense of narrative time) that bear a closer resemblance to a short story than to a novel.

Films seemed to demand, by their nature, that every single scene advance the plot, that every object on screen have a clear-cut function in the story, and that archetypal characters played by “stereotyped” actors would advance the simple narrative to a logical conclusion. Thought could not be effectively conveyed, nor could emotion, stream-of-consciousness, or abstract principles.

Although himself kinder to film adaptations than most, Seymour Chatman has correctly identified what is possibly the greatest obstacle to transplanting a classic story successfully to the screen. Texts enable readers to mentally visualize the physical details of the story in any manner that they wish. Readers are limited only by their imaginations when they conjure mental images of the setting and the physical appearances of the characters. However, in watching a film, audience members are limited to visualizing what the casting director, the set designer, the costume designer, the director, and the director of photography have chosen for them. Therefore, anyone who sees a film version of a book after reading it finds that their visualization of the story, and their power to make the story their own, has been challenged and limited by what plays out on screen.

In verbal narrative, story-space is doubly removed from the reader, since there is not the icon or analogy provided by photographed images on a screen. Existents and their space, if ‘seen’ at all, are seen in the imagination, transformed from words into mental projections. There is no ‘standard vision’ of existents as there is in the movies. While reading the book, each person creates his own image of *Wuthering Heights*. But in William Wyler’s screen adaptation, its appearance is determined for all of us. (101)

The irritation created by the cinematic visualizing of the world of the novel is even more greatly enhanced by the casting of specific actors to play beloved literary characters. In many cases, the fame and performance style of a given actor further interferes with a reader’s personal vision of how a particular character should look or behave:

Some characters in sophisticated narratives remain open constructs, just as some people in the real world stay mysteries no matter how well we know them. Therein perhaps lies the annoyance of enforced visualization of well-known characters in film. The all too visible player—Jennifer Jones as Emma Bovary, Greer Garson as Elizabeth Bennet, even a superb actor like Laurence Olivier as Heathcliff—seems unduly to circumscribe the character despite the brilliance of the performance. Where the character is simpler, ‘flatter,’ the problem is less acute: Basil Rathbone is easier to accept as Sherlock

Holmes because Conan Doyle's character is more limited to begin with. The predictability of Holmes' behavior (his power to collect clues, his teasing of Watson) is agreeably matched by the predictable appearance of the actor. (Chatman 118–119)

Traditionally, scholars who have examined film adaptations have seen such problems as insurmountable and have sided with Mitry's assessment that filmmakers should make movies from whole cloth rather than adapt them from other sources. For example, George Bluestone, author of the landmark 1957 work *Novels into Film*, concluded that film adaptations are formalistically and fundamentally different from the novels they are adapting and are inferior art. Contending that novels are more about an exploration of the thoughts and emotions and films are more of an exploration of observed reality, Bluestone writes that:

[t]he film and the novel remain separate institutions, each achieving its best results by exploring unique and specific properties. At times, the differences tempt one to argue that filmmakers ought to abandon adaptations entirely in favor of writing directly for the screen. More often than not, the very prestige and literary charm of the classic has an inhibiting effect, shriveling up the plastic imagination. Like Lot's wife, the film-maker is frequently immobilized in the very act of looking over his shoulder. (218)

And yet, even Bluestone, whose tone was strongly skeptical, expressed hopes that someday the adaptation process might be better understood, and that some great motion pictures might one day be inspired from written material:

As long as the cinema remains as omnivorous as it is for story material, its dependence on literature will continue. The best one can hope for, then, is a minimal awareness of that metamorphic process which transforms pieces of fiction into new artistic entities. Once that process is understood, the alchemist's firing pit will surely yield less disappointing lead; it may even yield surprising deposits of gold (219).

Notably, Bluestone wrote this passage in 1957, and there was a sense at the time he was writing that motion pictures were still largely looked down upon by the academe. Despite the fact that marvelous and innovative films were produced each year by Kurosawa, Fellini, Hitchcock, Bergman, and numerous others, there was a popular assumption at the time that films could not be considered "art." Fortunately, that assumption is more and more being called into question,

especially as independent and mainstream films continue to be released that redefine the boundaries of cinema and what audiences expect from it. Ever since its initial release, film critics have argued that *Citizen Kane* proves that movies have the potential to be as rich and as complex as novels. Therefore, I would argue that Bluestone failed to anticipate the potential of the filmic medium, and did not anticipate that a motion picture such as *Lost in Translation* (2003) would be capable of achieving the kind of psychological subtleties of characterization and non-traditional modes of storytelling that it does. And, once it is possible to assume that a film can have artistic merit, and that it can have a “novelistic structure” instead of a “short story structure,” it becomes less absurd to assume that a film can—at least in some manner—be “worthy” of the culturally treasured source novel that it is based on.

In the years since the publication of Bluestone’s book, an array of adaptations has been produced that strive to achieve greater fidelity to the source material through longer running time (the three-hundred-minute television miniseries *Pride and Prejudice*), more extensive use of voice-over (the Douglas McGrath *Emma*), race-appropriate casting (Laurence Fishburne played cinema’s first black *Othello* in the 1995 film), and greater attention to historical accuracy in set-design and costuming (the Lawrence *Emma*). In the face of these excellent films, Mitry’s objections on the basis of abstract principle and essentialism don’t appear wholly credible. Indeed, as Morris Beja, author of *Film and Literature: An Introduction* (1979), indicates, “When we place less emphasis on some abstract sense of theoretical properties and consider the real world, we cannot avoid the recognition that important filmmakers have in fact adapted novels into films which are themselves valuable and distinguished, and occasionally masterpieces” (79).

And Beja is only one of many voices that runs counter to Bluestone’s. In fact, in recent years a growing number of critics have appeared who have defended film adaptations. They have asserted that, despite the differences in storytelling modes between a film and its written source, one must not always conclude that the novel is superior because it came first and because film, by its very nature, is a lesser medium intended for the uneducated masses (Beja 34). In addition to Beja, some of the writers who have written in support of the

project of film adaptation, both recently and in the past, are V.F. Perkins, F.E. Sparshott, Joy Gould Boym, Andre Bazin, and James Griffith. Griffith, for example, explains in *Adaptations as Imitations: Films from Novels* (1997):

if we allow that viewing a film usually does not permit the full representation of a novel's events, we acknowledge a phenomenological difference as fact; such acknowledgement does not then force us to conclude that adaptations are also always simpler, for we cannot assume shorter is simpler. The actual difference in this instance leads to no deductive judgments for all adaptations. Individual adaptations may actually be simpler, but others may be as complex as the original novel or more complex (35).

In the introduction to his book *Film Adaptation* (2000), James Naremore posited that most of the writing done on the subject of literary adaptation "tends to valorize the literary canon and essentialize the nature of cinema" (8) while it should be more eager to "ask more interesting questions" (9). For example, Naremore observes that:

We now live in a media-saturated environment dense with cross-references and filled with borrowings from movies, books, and every other form of representation. Books can become movies, but movies themselves can also become novels, published screenplays, Broadway musicals, television shows, remakes, and so on...and, on a theoretical level, the problem of sequels and remakes, like the even broader problem of parody and pastiche, is quite similar to the problem of adaptation....

Notice, moreover, that all the "imitative" types of films are in danger of being assigned a low cultural status, or even of eliciting critical opprobrium, because they are copies of "culturally treasured" originals. (13)

Despite the dubious reception that these films still garner from certain quarters, they remain a Hollywood constant, especially in the past several years where all of the innovation in the industry appears to come from the independent film community and the mainstream pictures rely conservatively on proven markets—which means audiences have been inundated with sequels, remakes, movies based on video games and old television shows, and adaptations of recent and classic novels. Fortunately, although the reasons for the recent wave of adaptations may have more to do with profit margins and bottom lines than art, many of these films that are commissioned by the studios are helmed by artists with a genuine respect for the source mate-

rial and a desire to create the best possible film adaptations.⁴ As Mosier suggests, the most successful of these film adaptations not only stand on their own as great works of art, but inspire us to return to their source and read it again with a fresh insight into the story and its characters. I feel safe in singling out for praise the stunning 1997 A&E production of *Jane Eyre* featuring Samantha Morton and Ciaran Hinds, and—more importantly, since it is the central subject of this book—the excellent adaptations of *Persuasion* (1995), *Mansfield Park* (1999), and *Emma* (1996).

This line of argument may seem too evaluative in nature, but it is in the tradition of adaptation theory to select particularly successful film renderings of classics for distinction. The individual films that are chosen sometimes vary from critic to critic, but it seems reasonable to suggest that the general quality of film adaptations has improved in recent years, especially when one compares the films listed above to the kinds of loose adaptations which were filmed in the early days of cinema, which included a poorly conceived *and* unfaithful version of *Moby Dick* (1930, dir. Lloyd Bacon) in which Ahab, played by John Barrymore, slays the white whale at the end and goes home to his true love.

Generally speaking, the pioneers of serious adaptations of classic literature over the past few decades have been Masterpiece Theater, Merchant and Ivory, A&E, and Miramax. These films have received their share of criticism over the years, but Griffith offers a strong defense on their behalf in *Adaptations as Imitations* (1997). Griffith notes that some critics use the terms “Ivoryesque” and “Masterpiece-Theater treatment” to “demonstrate that films, which supposedly cannot be faithful to novels, fail when they nevertheless remain faithful to the novel” (229). He counters this attack on “‘slavish’ fidelity” by noting that, given the excellence of *Brideshead Revisited*, *Howard’s End*, and other works produced by these companies, he “cannot see how these terms can stand as insults” (229). While there may never be a consensus about the merits of the E. M. Forster adaptations produced by Merchant and Ivory, or of the various Miramax adaptations of Jane Austen and Oscar Wilde, or the numerous Masterpiece Theater retellings of the works of Charles Dickens and Henry James, there has been a general movement towards greater fidelity and dramatic excellence seldom seen in the past.

Also, in these days of multiple film versions of single texts, filmmakers making movie adaptations often have to carry less of a burden of responsibility to the source novel than they did before, since the weight of responsibility is shared by other, parallel, literary adaptations. For example, if there were only one film version of *Moby Dick*, then the literate members of the film audience would put extraordinary pressure on the film to be as perfect and as complete an adaptation as possible. Since there are, in actuality, numerous adaptations of *Moby Dick*, literary critics and lay moviegoers have less of a sense of expectation that each individual adaptation will be perfectly faithful and wholly complete. That is to say, even members of the moviegoing lay public are beginning to realize that an individual movie adaptation should not be judged as a complete recreation of the original work, but as a reading of the original work. Anyone who has seen all three of the recent *Emma* adaptations—*Clueless* (1995), Douglas McGrath's *Emma* (1996), and the Diarmuid Lawrence *Emma* (1996)—should understand, at least on an intuitive level, that the differences in the films can be accounted for by the different visions of the original text they represent. Once this realization concerning the nature of adaptation sinks in, there will be less expectation that future film adaptations will present definitive film renderings of novels and more expectation that they will provide intriguing readings and reinterpretations of the source.

Additionally, in watching older film adaptations, contemporary film viewers are provided with an experience akin to reading literary criticism written in previous eras. These films give the contemporary person the opportunity of observing how filmmakers from a different time interpreted a given classic work and presented it as popular entertainment. Basically, the experience of studying past readings of a classic work is a valuable one, whether that window into past readings is provided by a book of post-World War-II-era criticism or by a lush MGM film version from the 1940s. As Italo Calvino observed in "Why Read the Classics?" (1981), "classics are the books that come down to us bearing the traces of readings previous to ours, and bringing in their wake the traces they themselves have left on culture or cultures they passed through (or, more simply, on language and customs)" (128).

Furthermore, the multiplicity of the *Emma* adaptations, new and old, provides certain intriguing possibilities for lovers of the original novel who share a love of film. As Timothy Corrigan, author of *Film and Literature* (Prentice Hall, 1998) writes:

...there is another attraction and activity imbedded in the numerous classics offered up on the contemporary screens and monitors and in the numerous versions of the same work of literature that audiences can now watch. Today, literary classics on film are multiple and redundant in two ways. Not only are different versions of a novel or film sometimes produced by different filmmakers within a few years of each other (including several Emmas in the nineties or almost simultaneous versions of Laclos's *Dangerous Liaisons* by Stephen Frears [1988] and Milos Foreman [the 1989 *Valmont*]) but home video and computer technologies have made it possible for viewers to watch and compare even more versions of an adaptation from other periods of film history. After seeing those different contemporary versions of Austen's and Laclos's novels audiences today have the option of watching on video Clarence Brown's 1932 *Emma* [sic] or Roger Vadim's 1960 *Dangerous Liaisons*, and these, of course, could be sampled next to the original novels and, in the case of *Dangerous Liaisons*, next to Christopher Hampton's play.⁵ Contemporary film culture offers more versions and more opportunities to see and compare the relationships between film and literature as historical practices and textual performances, and one consequence of this redistribution of literature through the media may be that questions of fidelity or authenticity may be less and less a concern for both filmmakers and their audiences. As Scorsese's *Age of Innocence* seems to suggest in its almost fetishistic obsession with the surface of gowns, wall coverings, and dinner table settings, audiences today may be more interested in the different textures of adaptation than in the textual accuracy of any one adaptation. (73–74)

But what might viewers who see all three of the filmic versions of *Emma* that appeared on the scene in 1995 and 1996 make of them? What can one glean from examining their similarities and differences? While all three films were ostensibly from the same source material, they differ drastically from one another in tone, visual style, reading of the original text, and moral message. The differences between the three are stark and help to demonstrate how rich the original novel is and how well it supports such vastly differing interpretations. While almost any work of fiction may be read differently depending on the personality of the reader, or the methodology which provides the critical lens through which the reader studies the source text, *Emma* appears to be a particularly rich text that is both morally and artistically complex enough that it begins to resemble a crystal that, held

one way up to the light seems to cast some colors, and held another, projects other colors.

As for the various film adaptations, there are several ways of understanding the differences between the films, but I will begin by suggesting that the basic structural differences between the adaptations may be examined from a film theory perspective by using the writings of Geoffrey Wagner. A film theorist, Wagner identifies three categories of film adaptation in his 1975 work *The Novel and the Cinema*: the *transposition*, “in which a novel is given directly on the screen, with the minimum of apparent interference” (222), the *commentary*, in which the original is “either purposely or inadvertently altered in some respect” causing “a re-emphasis or re-structure” (223) and the *analogy*, in which an original tale is modernized and the action is shifted “forward to the present, and make[s] a duplicate story” (226). Though loosely defined, these are useful categories of distinction, and each one describes a corresponding *Emma* adaptation.

The most philosophically problematic of Wagner’s categories is the transposition, which many would argue is an impossible goal to achieve. Certainly, the production team behind the 1972 BBC adaptation of *Emma* intended to make their miniseries a transposition of Jane Austen’s novel to the television screen. The stated goal was “total fidelity” (Lauritzen 112). As a general rule, however, most adaptation theorists are skeptical of any claims that individual film adaptations stake to being transpositions. Adjusting Wagner’s category slightly, perhaps it would be more accurate to say that a transposition is most likely a film adaptation that brings a traditional, conservative reading of the novel to the screen that does little to clash with the lay public’s vision of the work, creating an illusion that it is a complete and wholly faithful retelling. In these projects, radical readings of the work that are popular in university classrooms are often not even consulted by the director/screenwriter, or are willfully ignored.

Of the adaptations that might fairly be deemed successful transpositions are *Jane Eyre* (1997) and the version of *Emma* written and directed by Douglas McGrath and starring Gwyneth Paltrow that was released by Miramax in 1995. Although McGrath claimed in an interview in *Screenwriter* magazine that he did not write the film using any source along with the original novel, his transposition of the book to the screen unfolds much like a reading of the book by Denise Kohn,

who interprets the story as a domestic Bildungsroman and a “Lesson On Ladyhood,” or by Reginald Farrer, who offers a fair evaluation of Emma’s moral worth as well as her moral failings.

Nineteen-ninety-six’s *Jane Austen’s “Emma”* (produced for British television and A&E by screenwriter Andrew Davies and director Diarmuid Lawrence, and starring Kate Beckinsale as the title character) can be safely categorized as a commentary since the creative team is clearly looking back upon the original text with a modern eye that condemns the class structure of the period and, consequently, judges the title character even more harshly than Austen did. Traditionally, commentary adaptations inspire strong reactions from audience members—often disappointing those who would have preferred a translation while delighting those who find that a fresh and intelligent look at an old work helps to breathe new life into readings of the original. A commentary adaptation, then, is a reading of the novel that consciously eschews any attempt at self-negation and “total fidelity” in favor of a re-envisioning of the original work. Such an adaptation is more likely to draw upon radical or progressive critical literary readings of the text that are often ignored by more politically conservative transposition adaptations.

Finally, *Clueless*, a 1995 Paramount film written and directed by Amy Heckerling and starring Alicia Silverstone, is clearly an analogy of the original novel, since it sets the story in a high school in modern-day Los Angeles.

Three other *Emma* adaptations—from 1948, 1954, and 1960—could also be classified using Wagner’s schematic, and each appears to fit most comfortably in the category of transposition discussed earlier.

Of course, other classic novels have produced numerous film and television adaptations that are different enough to be classified using all of Wagner’s categories. However, few sources have proven rich and complex enough to inspire interpretive cinematic works as noticeably divergent as those films that are based upon *Emma*. It is precisely because the novel has generated so many vastly different scholarly interpretations over the years that it has proven capable of inspiring so many vastly different films. That is why, before moving on to an examination of each individual adaptation, it will be important to first explore the rich heritage of literary criticism that has been written about the source novel. For only in understanding the various

readings of Jane Austen's original text can one hope to understand the films as similar, dramatized readings of the novel.

A discussion of many of these key works of literary criticism will begin in the following chapter.