

Persuasion on Screen: an Authentic Aural Evocation of Jane Austen's Early 19th Century England?

Keywords

Jane Austen, *Persuasion*, *Persuasion* (1995), film adaptation, aural, sound

This paper discusses the 1995 film adaptation of Jane Austen's *Persuasion* (1817/18). *Persuasion* was Austen's last completed novel and, according to Nicola Humble, her most 19th century work, and it is closest to Victorian values and way of thinking (ix). Amanda Collins also emphasizes the nineteenth century aspects of the novel by stating that "the novel *Persuasion* was written nearly fifteen years after the turn of the nineteenth century, near the height of the Romantic movement, which took as one of its goals [...] the depiction of the *real* lives of common people" (2001, 83). Collins also adds that while the use of Chopin's music in this film adaptation has been criticised for being anachronistic, the creators probably wanted to "ground the film in some sort of historical place, in this case the nineteenth century" (2001, 84). *Persuasion* (1995), in its time strived to provide authenticity and (re)present Austen's world as it was in its most realist ways that the creators could conceive (which critics mostly acknowledged and praised), yet, it failed miserably at the box office since audiences were still not ready for realist Austenian film adaptations (this 'realist trend' became acceptable for general audiences only after *Pride and Prejudice* (2005)), hence *Persuasion* (1995) was way ahead of its time, yet, could not compete with the spectacular and star-studded adaptations of the era such as *Sense and Sensibility* (1995) (written by and starring Emma Thompson etc.) or *Emma* (1996) (starring Gwyneth Paltrow etc.) – as only two examples.

Amanda Collins argues that the film was criticized for not being "adapted enough," meaning being refined and removed from reality as much as possible, being too real. She writes that the general reaction considered it to be not an "accurate portrayal" because audiences preferred the "hyperreal" and their postmodern nostalgic imaginations of what history is/was as opposed to Austen's original text and time. It was due to, as Collins also points out, "the public privileging of the romantic over the realistic" (81–83). In Collins' opinion, what "doomed *Persuasion* [...] was Nick Dear's failure to rewrite the past in the way that Emma Thompson did [...] and [he] did not" shroud his version of *Persuasion* "in the rose-colored sheen of nostalgia. Dear's adaptation of *Persuasion* [...] is unstinting in its depiction of both the beautiful and the bleak aspects of life in the nineteenth century. This realism, however, was not met with approbation [...]" and was called too naturalist (2001, 85). Paulette Richards even adds that modern viewers expect the filmmakers to satisfy their "'imperial nostalgia' fantasies even while purporting to offer a 'high culture' aesthetic experience" (2003, 112). About *Persuasion* (1995) Richards declares that the film pays "scrupulous attention to historical accuracy" (2003, 115) and "faithfulness" (2003, 117), additionally, this film is socially more aware than any other Austen adaptation (2003, 117) while being "a well-crafted, entertaining copy" of Austen's original (2003, 126). Tara Ghoshal Wallace similarly opines that "Michell's *Persuasion* deploys highly intelligent if intelligible filmic language" by presenting class relations and social problems more effectively (for us, modern viewers) than Austen's novel (2003, 129) while achieving "both a gratifying degree of fidelity and its very own authenticity as text" (2003, 141). Rebecca Dickson, even though being critical about

the representation of women's history in the film, claims that "Dear's screenplay is considerably more subtle than Emma Thompson's version of *Sense and Sensibility*" (2001, 50). According to Carol M. Dole, *Persuasion* (1995) is the only adaptation up to the end of the 20th century that openly discusses class issues while also exposing "the raw edges of everyday life in Regency England" (2001, 60). Dole also opines that the 1995 version of *Persuasion* failed with audiences because they expected "from costume dramas a prettification that *Persuasion* lacks" (2001, 62).

However, to support how much critics usually acknowledged this film adaptation, I would like to quote some parts from Kathi L. Groenendyk's article on the film where she cites supportive opinions extensively: "*Persuasion* gained acclaim as being unique and innovative. Bill Gallo of *Denver Westward* argues, '[a] major Jane Austen revival seems to be underway these days, but it's difficult to imagine any greater honor to her spirit than this timely and inventive version of *Persuasion*' (53)" (2000, 9). Gallo highlighted that within the Jane Austen revival of the 1990s, this film stands out as being imaginative and "true to" Austen by not beautifying the story. "*Chicago Tribune*'s Michael Wilmington asserts that '[u]sually, Austen is done in a brittle, lacquered style – all plush decor and arch elocution – [...]. By contrast, this version is gritty, dramatic, emotional and bristling with social satire and psychological undercurrents' (H)." (Ibid) Wilmington points out that this film does not use the typical high elocution that was in vogue in such film adaptations because the actors speak in a more natural way and the setting also lacks the plush and artificial décor style while real emotions are expressed in very tense situations.

[...] Beth Pinsker of the *Dallas Morning News* observes: [...] Michell avoids the traps of modernizing or glamorizing the setting, which gives it a very un-Merchant-Ivory feel. When the characters go outside to tramp through the forest, they get dirty, sweaty and out of breath.... There is likewise no glorious sunshine illuminating lush green fields. Mr. Michell's sky is a bone-chilling gray, and there's an atmosphere of mist and rain. (Ibid)

Pinsker names precisely the 'Merchant-Ivory School of Adaptation' as a standard, which this film does not adapt itself to. The Merchant-Ivory-type of adaptations really set the standard for the beautiful film versions that were not primarily about realism. Here, however, we can observe how dirty the coats become after a walk in the field while these walks take place in the misty, chilly, cloudy weather that is more typical in England and not the sunny and warm weather that is often used in the adaptations that are not so frequent occurrences concerning the English weather. Additionally, probably it takes longer to shoot those films because the crew has to wait for the nice weather a lot, here, however, they could probably shoot any time because they just depicted the English weather as it is. "*The New York Times*' Caryn James claims that Michell and [...] Dear's "*Persuasion* is profoundly truthful [...]" (C 18). [...] the natural appearance of the film contributes to *Persuasion*'s rhetoric. [...]" (C 18)." (2000, 10) James asserts that this film is truthful and natural in its depiction of Austen's original concerning the visual as well as aural aspects.

In this paper, I present how much *Persuasion* (1995) was a great attempt at realizing in both visual and aural ways the realities of early 19th century England (e.g.: with greasy hair, bad teeth, dirty clothes, as well as the screeching of seagulls, the splashing of water against the oars of the boat, the murmur of the ocean etc.). Concerning voices and sounds, this film is especially realistic since (apart from the sounds mentioned above) the sense of felt life is evoked to the point of the clanking of the cutlery on the plates while eating and talking (and the actors really eat while they talk), to the clapping of hoofs of the approaching horses when waiting for news and the silence is almost deafening or the crackling of the fire that can be so shooting when somebody is cold and tired after a walk, the creaking of the floor under the footsteps of people even in a ballroom making the viewer/listener feel the dance and the movement of the dancers etc. Thus,

I would like to argue how authentic the aural representation of Austen's England was in this film despite its 'quixotic destiny' at its time of production.

David Monaghan discussed the importance of sound in films. He also pointed out how "very little critical attention has been paid to the aural dimensions of film" (2009, 10) and claimed that it "includes not only diegetic and nondiegetic music and noise, but also non-conceptual aspects of spoken narrative commentary and dialogue such as volume, tone, and pitch" – all of which have a fundamental role within the storytelling (2009, 8). In *Persuasion* (1995), all of these aural aspects give us a sense of real life and enhance how we understand the characters' feelings. In this film, the creators made very effective use of these specific sounds, noises and aural signs thus making the storytelling real since we hear the actors' breathing or their steps while walking/running or the clanking and rattling of carriages and carts while travelling in/on them (this is combined with a shaking vision as if we were sitting in/on these carriages/carts too) or the baaing of sheep in the meadows or the chirping of the birds in the trees etc. John Wiltshire, relying on Southam and Lewes, emphasizes that Austen herself was a "dramatic" novelist while being rather "unvisual" (2009, 17). She greatly relied on what the characters say as well as how they say it in addition to what they do and how they behave and re/act in interaction or what they express, rather than showing them in action or describing them and their surroundings in detail (ibid).

Silence, as non-sound or an apparent negation of the aural aspects, also plays an important role in this film in line with the original novel. Wiltshire also mentions how wonderfully silence is realized in this film adaptation, which has a "rigorous deployment of the aural sense" (2009, 30). Anne is a listener primarily and she is silent or rather silenced most of the time or, at least, unattended to (ibid). Anne's silence is central in the original story as well as the film since Anne is treated by her family and surroundings as somebody insignificant and of secondary value, who comes always after everybody else, and she is there to serve others and cater to the others' needs. Yet, it is rather contradictory that she has the strongest identity matched with a reliable and powerful agency that eventually come to the surface in the story. People rely on her and she actually can and does help. Paulette Richards and Tara Ghoshal Wallace both state that Anne is generally silenced in this film adaptation (2003, 120 and 2003, 134). There are a lot of silences in this film, and silences actually are statements in themselves likewise. Anne is usually silenced but she is also often silent out of her own choice, she also consciously does that, because she places others before, above and ahead of herself, which is quite much felt and understood but when she speaks it always matters, her utterances do not contain anything superfluous as it is often the case with all the others she listens to – this is Austen's tactic to show how failed or ridiculous these other characters often are. Wiltshire also adds that Anne is a "listener, confidante, silent observer," whose "presence as actor is minimized" (2009, 31) together with her vocal expressions while she often also overhears the others' talk just by being around or nearby even if what is said is not intended to be heard by her – yet this way she gains important pieces of information. Ariane Hudelet also emphasizes the importance of silence, which is a "form of expression" and not simply "an absence of words [... or] communication" while "physical language" can complement, counterpoint or substitute spoken words (2009, 62). These silent or much rather non-verbal, non-vocal modes of communication are also important tools of conveying information, and exactly because of the silence, they gain more importance in the interpretation of events and characters – in this film likewise similarly to the novel.

As it has already been stated, the film is enriched by various and numerous external noises and sounds that are generally viewed as disturbing in a highly-controlled film, here, however, filmmakers do not strive for studio quality but they want to provide us with actual life. This is also very expressive in *Persuasion* (1995), so sometimes what is uttered matters less than the sur-

rounding noises of the utterance. These noises can really modify what is said not simply by counterpointing it as an example but by the interruption or interference that they cause within the conversation or the dialogue thus contributing to the communication in very effective ways. As Hudelet also states: "[t]his use of noises as punctuation of dialogue or movement is also frequent in *Persuasion*: the sound of a cup put down a little brutally manifests Anne's emotion when Wentworth's name is mentioned for the first time" (2009, 74). This scene is especially telling because Anne never burdens anybody with her emotions, yet here, everybody stops talking and looks at her when she makes such a noise with the clanking of the cup (because her hand starts to shake) and how forcefully she almost smashes it down the table. Additionally, "[w]ords can remain trivial, but the look and the tone can make the addressee receptive to the implicit message, and therefore materialize an unspoken understanding" (Hudelet 2009, 65). These unspoken or non-verbal aural dimensions speak volumes in the film.

This is especially the case in the scene when Wentworth is talking about Fanny/Phoebe Harville and Captain Benwick's relationship. Here, he is actually talking about his enduring love for Anne, and how against all odds, he still wants her – all of which Anne understands from his averted looks, his hesitation, slight gasping, quick changes of the volume and pitch of his voice, and a little rasping that comes into his voice etc. So, here the unspoken understanding and the implicit message are more important than what happened to Fanny/Phoebe and Benwick – which both Anne and Wentworth as well as we, the audience, understand based on body language that involves a lot of involuntary sounds and noises. Hudelet also suggests that this "secondary language" of simple signs such as gesture, tone and other nonverbal aural markers while being "largely inconspicuous" are still constantly present while influencing, sometimes changing or even substituting meaning in the original texts as well as in the adaptations (2009, 59). Thus the "phonic quality of language seems to overcome its semantic value" and the "feeling" of what is said overwrites the actual meaning of the words (Hudelet 2009, 59).

When a film is made, the actors and actresses inevitably give corporeality to the Austenian characters and start to produce sounds and noises. *Persuasion* (1995) is very realistic from this point of view, too, because the soundtrack is not done in a sense that the voices would be perfected, equalized and all background noise would be cancelled. When the characters are walking on the seashore the wind blows and we hear their talk through the wind, there are also the seagulls that interrupt the flow of the discussion as well as the murmur and splashing of the ocean. Or when there is a dinner party and Wentworth is talking about his experiences and adventures at sea, other people are talking and laughing continually or even butting in or asking questions or reacting with little screams or puffing noises etc. In the meantime, they are also eating and drinking thus making us hear chewing and gulping sounds as well as the clanking of the cutlery etc. It is as if we were there, really part of the dinner party, it is realistic and not so remote and idealized as the other adaptations are usually where the sounds and noises are heavily controlled and the actors are not actually eating and drinking at the table.

Another important addition is that very elevated and emotional music is rarely added to this film. The soundtrack is also very minimal and when the filmmakers want to achieve an emotional moment, they do not add to the scenes some intense music produced by a symphonic orchestra in a studio but they often leave simply the sounds and voices of the actors with specific intonation or a raspy voice or unequal breathing and there is no background music. A wonderful example for this is the scene I have already mentioned when Wentworth and Anne meet before the concert and they are talking to each other while we almost witness an open revelation of sentiments marking a crucial step in the development of their relationship both of them realizing without actually admitting their love that they still feel for each other, yet, all this is communicated through broken words and sentences, a raspy voice, heavy breathing, deep silences

and intonation – not through the exact words themselves, and little happens visually, too. There is no great and intense background music in studio quality with a whole orchestra to express their emotional intensity, the two actors manage to express this feeling with the use of or the withholding of their voices and bodily sounds.

What is more, the floors are creaking almost every time when people are walking or couples are dancing etc. be it a concert hall or a family home, and in communal places, other people are talking too, and we can hear that as well, not only those on whom we focus. The crackling of the fire or the beating of the rain against the window pane are also so wonderfully used because they seem to be so insignificant and monotonous noises but they are part of life and when you are tired and wet and cold it can be so imperial juts to sit next to a fire and listen to it – it is also reproduced in the film. Or when Anne is waiting for the news whether Louisa gets better or not and whether Wentworth marries her or not, Anne is just waiting in silence sometimes listening to the rain, then, the hoofs of a horse are heard and the news arrive that Louisa got better. Until the moment of the approaching of the horse and Charles' shouting the silence is almost deafening while being only mixed with the dull beating of the rain which are, by the way, very expressive of how Anne probably feels at that moment. These sounds all make the whole film much more realistic and it really feels like as if we were there participating in the events, experiencing early 19th century England – you can almost also smell the drying clothes next to the fire or the salty water on the sea shore or the wet grass after the rain etc. The strong aural evocation of possibly real life sounds of this era makes the viewer's other senses experience it too as you almost start to taste, smell and touch the life on screen and not simply see it.

Hudelet also points out how talking itself and the conversations are also delivered in a way that makes them real for the viewer/listener as opposed to other film adaptations:

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. (Hudelet 2005, 178)

One of the best examples for this is the scene I mentioned above when Wentworth almost confesses his love to Anne before the concert, he speaks in a way that makes it alive since it is uneven, sometimes inaudible and unintelligible, the pitch and the volume of his voice changes quickly because of the emotions, hence, we hardly hear what he says but it does not matter because what matters is conveyed through his manner of speech and the other sounds that he produces, not the exact words. These various sounds express more than a simple 'I still love you, Anne, no matter what; please, marry me' would, these aural markers express everything that he feels at the moment and have felt in the last 8 years.

Additionally, it is rather fascinating vocally and aurally when Anne and Wentworth eventually find each other and have an agreement. They do not say anything anymore because everything has been said in Wentworth's letter, that is conveyed in a way that Anne is shown reading it while his voiceover is narrating it aloud to us. Then their unity is expressed by Anne's voice joining that of Wentworth, and even further we switch back to his voice only while Anne can hardly breathe because of her emotional turmoil. She becomes very agitated and leaves, outside she meets Wentworth, they only look into each other's eyes and she gives him her hand, they kiss (which would not have happened in Regency England but it is a late 20th century adaptation

and they still tried to appeal a little to viewer expectations). It is so expressive and captivating that one of the most intense and important moments in their lives can be carried out only in the street and not in the intimacy of a room because the anonymous, impersonal, indifferent and populated street full of voices and noises turns out to be a much better and convenient space for it, where, in fact, they are not disturbed.

It is especially effective to 'hear' their silence amid the noises of the outside world. In this adaptation, there is a carnival going on in the street and the carnival troop and the masses pass them by with an evidently loud noise, yet, they look as if they did not even hear it. The silence between them almost shouts and is in contrast with the outside noises entirely. Their absolute as well as intense understanding and unity is highlighted by their total silence that almost encapsulates them into a closed sphere, their (now united) inner world, while the 'outside' turmoil cannot reach them because now they are absolutely calm and happy. In the novel, they talk throughout the streets agreeing upon everything but in this adaptation, they just walk away in silence ignoring the cavalcade of the carnival going on in the streets of Bath.

The Austen adaptations usually have an idealized, charmed and dream-like quality with beautiful background music going on almost all the time so that 'we know' (we are trained to know according to the indoctrination of the cultural literacy of our times) what we should feel at the moment, the voices almost speak with studio quality all the time and there is never a 'disturbing or uncontrolled' extra sound or noise whatsoever, however, *Persuasion* (1995) is not like that, it is full of real life voices and noises, and this film really makes a difference (in every way). As Hudelet also opines:

[t]he films of Austen's novels have benefited from considerable budgets, and from recent quality sound techniques such as dolby. [...] One can distinguish two approaches, one which tries to suppress the traces of materiality [...] 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. [...] The vividness of the characters, the intense physical presence that many viewers felt in front of these films [...] was [...] also the result of this specific treatment of sound: they made us hear these stories as vividly as they made us see them. [...] 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. [...], the characters are presented as material bodies which live, move, exhale, ingest. (Hudelet 2005, 180–181)

This film is not disembodied and aerial like what Austen adaptations often are greatly because the sounds and the noises really fill up the bodies and make us sense them as whole and real. This adaptation is really material and you feel as if you could touch life on screen exactly because you hear it as life usually sounds and not in a sterile, abstract way as in distant fairy tales, consequently the story's as well as the characters' existence is vivid as a result.

In conclusion, *Persuasion* (1995) manages to achieve a realist approach to the depiction of Austen's early 19th century novel and we get to feel as if we were part of the life in Regency England and the characters were alive. The 1995 adaptation of *Persuasion* is almost an experimental film from the point of view of sound because no real life sounds and noises are excluded and nothing is silenced that sounds real, but among the Austen adaptations stands out with this attempt till the moment when, in *Pride and Prejudice* (2005), the pig starts to snort while Mrs. Bennet looks at it as if she is about to bite it, anticipating a delicious ham. Since that time, real sounds and noises are more and more allowed into the Austen adaptations and the representation of early 19th century England, but still not to the level of *Persuasion* (1995) which was and still is ahead of its time and the Austen adaptations considering realism.

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