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Girls on Film: Postmodern Renderings of Jane Austen and Henry James

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In the last thirty years, feminist film theory has been striving to theorize the position of woman in film: that is, both the representation of woman in films and the reaction of the female spectator. Many critics, such as Laura Mulvey, Ann Kaplan, Mary Ann Doane, and Teresa de Lauretis, have concentrated on the gaze, as this is the faculty that comes into play most crucially in our experience of the cinema. The difficulty of arriving at a satisfactory formulation concerning the female gaze rests in the primarily masculine nature of the gaze, deriving from patriarchal constructions of experience. As Mary Ann Doane acknowledges, 'even if it is admitted that the woman is frequently the object of the voyeuristic or fetishistic gaze in the cinema, what is there to prevent her from reversing the relation and appropriating the gaze for her own pleasure? Precisely the fact that the reversal itself remains locked within the same logic.'¹ If, therefore, the gaze is always masculine—even when it is taken up by women—then it is reasonably accepted that woman, whether subject or object of the gaze, is deprived of a subjectivity that transcends the confines of the patriarchal binary opposition between male domination and female passivity. The sociological and psychological complexity of the position of the female spectator has led to hypotheses which, as several critics have asserted, have created an artefact, a female spectator that does not exist.² Nevertheless, contemporary film with feminist concerns does seem to try hard to address the real woman spectator and, as I hope this paper will show, to provide us with an alternative version of female subjectivity. In this sense it is significant and paradoxical at the same time that the directors I shall look at have attempted to achieve this goal through the medium of nineteenth-century fiction. Novels by Jane Austen and Henry James do offer film opportunities for presenting women in cumbersome situations, striving to avoid the uniformity imposed by their domestication and indiscriminate objectification. These authors grant their heroines narrative space for exploring their perception, consciousness, and individuality—a subjectivity that is set against the entrapping and homogenizing female profile dictated by social convention. But they do not, according to traditional readings, make them transcend the patriarchal limitations. Austen's and James's heroines distinguish themselves by frequently challenging rigid male expectations of female excellence, but in the end cannot help acknowledg-

¹ 'Film and the Masquerade: Theorizing the Female Spectator', in *The Sexual Subject: A 'Screen' Reader in Sexuality*, ed. by Screen (London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 227–43 (p. 230).

² See, for example, Deborah Knight, 'Women, Subjectivity, and the Rhetoric of the Anti-Humanism in Feminist Film Theory', *New Literary History*, 26 (1995), 39–56, and Todd McGowan, 'Looking for the Gaze: Lacanian Film Theory and its Vicissitudes', *Cinema Journal*, 42.3 (2003), 27–47.

ing the marketability and objectification that they undergo. Since the social graces assigned to womanhood in Austen's time are definitely out of date in an age when women have dominantly established their voice in the social arena, it may initially seem surprising that eminent film directors continually turn their attention to such novels, which concentrate on the limitations of womanhood in the nineteenth century—limitations long forgotten and dated. We need, in other words, firstly to ask ourselves the reason behind this ongoing interest in the idea of woman escaping the confines of a rigid patriarchal society. After all, have we not already accomplished that?

The most thoughtful film adaptations attempt to address contemporary problematics concerning gender and sexuality, approaching the nineteenth-century novel as a source of issues with topical interest. Perhaps the lightest of all recent adaptations, *Clueless* (1995)³—a loose adaptation of *Emma*—a frivolous yet brightly satirical comedy about a young girl's myopia, though not a period piece, points best to the present relevance of Jane Austen's presentation of women. The preoccupation of Cher (the modern Emma) with matchmaking is as ironically treated by the female director as the 1800s heroine by her creator. Austen's novel presents gender issues as confused by the coexistence within women of both radical views related to their place in society (consider, for example, Jane Fairfax's equation of governessing and the slave trade) and a proneness to view themselves as dependent on male support. This inconsistent viewpoint, which is characteristic of female sensibility even in our time, was mirrored in later Victorian popular culture, which transcribed the conflict between revolution and sentimentality. As Margaret Beetham has shown in her study of nineteenth-century women's magazines, from as early as the 1850s women were concerned as much with gender politics as with fashion and sensational or over-sentimental fiction,⁴ a fact which complicated the depiction of female subjectivity. In Amy Heckerling's adaptation of Austen, despite the modernized setting, populated by fashionable teenagers occupied in endless cellphone conversations and effortless digital clothes consultations, rather than in paying polite visits to country houses and heeding sisterly advice on appropriate attire, the affinity implied between the superficial concerns appropriated by womanhood in Austen's time and the vacuousness of feminine preoccupations in our time is quite uncanny. Through her treatment of teenagers, the director suggests that the frivolity which Austen satirized in *Emma*—when, for example, her female characters are shown enthusiastically taking up shallow hobbies like collecting and solving riddles, a 'literary pursuit' which, as Austen implies, emphasized the limited participation women had in more serious literature—has endured all along. Pop art has successfully illustrated our century's obsession with commercial and technological products, which have created a culture of ease and shallowness often associated with womanhood, which has been made to appear more prone to its attractions.⁵ *Clueless* suggests that commodity culture has consumed the consciousness of teens,

³ Dir. and screenplay by Amy Heckerling, Paramount, 1995.

⁴ *A Magazine of her Own? Domesticity and Desire in the Woman's Magazine 1800–1914* (London: Routledge, 1996), pp. 71–73.

⁵ Consider, for example, the representation of femininity in contemporary popular magazines,

and especially teen girls, reifying their experience and eventually transforming them into women with little imagination and with tastes dictated by the idols of the fashion and music industries. Likewise, Jane Austen's novels satirized the superficiality with which some women approached those media of culture (music, reading, languages, etc.) which had only one purpose: to ensure their marketability in a marriage-oriented society. Nowadays, as in Austen's time, singularity is often suppressed, and female identity is represented, increasingly, as a commodity conditioned by the levelling force of the market. Austen's severe criticism of, for example, the Miss Bertrams in *Mansfield Park*, who 'with all their promising talents and early information [. . .] should be entirely deficient in the *less common* acquirements of self knowledge, generosity, and humility',⁶ may then be said to foreshadow the current cluelessness of our age and the commercialization and trivialization of cultural pursuits in Western societies.

Margaret Beetham's observations about the feminine ideals predominating in nineteenth-century England are strikingly akin to Susan Bordo's insights concerning the aesthetic models imposed on women through magazines and other media which influenced the female mind in the 1990s. To be more specific, Bordo's theorizing of pathological conditions which conventionally afflict the female body, such as anorexia and agoraphobia, relates to Beetham's interpretation of the nineteenth-century corset debate which dominated the columns of women's magazines. 'The corseted body', Beetham believes, 'was the social body, controlled and regulated [. . .]. Natural femininity *had* to be trained, and the trained figure was a symbol of the social restraint which marked off mature sexuality from girlhood' (pp. 85–86). If tight clothing was the means of controlling the female body in the mid to late nineteenth century, in the late twentieth anorexia, Bordo suggests, was the extreme outcome of women's tendency to control their appetite for food in order to match the standardized ideal of womanhood constructed by social and cultural contingencies.⁷ From this perspective, the images of slender women in the media perpetuate not just the idea of woman as object to be looked at but also the need to keep womanhood checked, in a metaphorical sense. As Bordo says, 'the general rule governing the construction of femininity' is that 'female hunger—for public power, for independence, for sexual gratification—be contained, and the public space that women be allowed to take up be circumscribed, limited' (p. 2368). Limiting one's food intake nowadays parallels the firm disciplining of the female body through corsets a hundred and fifty years ago. Both point at the diachronic tendency of society to view the female body as subject to homogenizing forces, forces which are, surprisingly, more often than not sanctioned by women themselves. In *Clueless* the main characters strive hard to look like each other—have the same body weight, wear similar designer clothes, and function identically as desirable young women. Likewise, the corset, as

which persistently portray women either as solely interested in trivial domestic matters or as compulsive shoppers.

⁶ Jane Austen, *Mansfield Park* (1814) (London: Dent, 1948), p. 16.

⁷ Susan Bordo, 'From *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body*', in *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, ed. by Vincent B. Leitch (New York: Norton, 2001), pp. 2362–76 (pp. 2367–68).

well as other fashion accessories, served to create women with similar, if not identical, figures. Therefore in both Beetham's and Bordo's discourse, social control is exerted through visual culture, which perpetuates images of male-constructed and desired beauty. As Bordo argues, these images, which usually prevail in teenage magazines, show women 'willingly contracting the space they occupy', precisely through their addictive dieting (pp. 2364–65), functioning, therefore, 'in collusion with the cultural conditions that produce them' (p. 2371).

This affinity in constructions of femininity between then and now is perhaps the underlying reason that in the last few years film and television adaptations of novels by Jane Austen and Henry James have been abundant, displaying an original approach to works of fiction which until now had been adapted in a conventional, purist way. Purist adaptations had concentrated on superficial thematic and character concerns of the novels, ignoring the more complex demands of literary theory, which, since the seventies, has attempted drastically to alter our perception of nineteenth-century fiction. Filmmakers are increasingly becoming aware of the fact that their subjective experience as readers of 'canonical' novels offers them an opportunity for original visual translation, especially at a time when a paucity of original scripts is being reported.⁸ The controversy about purist/non-purist film adaptations of literary texts mirrors to a certain extent debates within the discipline of translation studies, which have similarly questioned the translator's right to freedom from or fidelity to the source text. Theorists from Walter Benjamin to Lawrence Venuti have struggled to establish those elements of a text that lend themselves to transferral and those that elude it. Similarly, borrowing Barthes's classification of narrative functions, from the 'Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives' (1966), Brian McFarlane breaks down the written text into distributional and integrational functions in order to show how the former usually enjoy faithful transferral to the screen while the latter invite imaginary adaptation and even transformation.⁹ Nevertheless, the most interesting film adaptations seem to comply with the views of translation theorist Lawrence Venuti, who argues that no aspect of the source text is fixed or 'invariant'. On the contrary, even the basic elements of narrative form (dates, geographical or historical markers, names, etc.) may be 'reconstructed according to a different set of values and [are] always variable according to different languages and cultures'.¹⁰ Venuti, in a sense, agrees with Benjamin, who also felt that information as such is the least that a literary text offers its readers and, therefore, that a translator must

⁸ Recent studies of film adaptation have successfully demonstrated the futility or misguidedness of interrogating the relationship between a film adaptation and the original novel, emphasizing the difference in the narrative strategies of the two media, which constitutes their separateness in quality, achievement, and reception. This paper is based on the belief that film adaptation, at its best, deserves serious study, as it is capable of conveying/transferring/adapting form and theme by means of visual and audio registers. See *Adaptations: From Text to Screen, Screen to Text*, ed. by Deborah Cartmell and Imelda Whelehan (London: Routledge, 1999).

⁹ *Novel to Film: An Introduction to the Theory of Adaptation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

¹⁰ Lawrence Venuti, 'Translation, Community, Utopia', in *The Translation Studies Reader*, ed. by Lawrence Venuti (London: Routledge, 2000), pp. 468–88 (p. 470).

focus on what in the original cannot be fixed.¹¹ Moreover, both theorists stress the cross-fertilization between languages and cultures that takes place during the translating process. For Benjamin, a translator must allow 'his language to be powerfully affected by the foreign tongue' (p. 22), and for Venuti, 'the very impulse to seek a community abroad suggests that the translator wishes to extend or complete a particular domestic situation, to compensate for a defect in the translating language and literature, in the translating culture' (p. 469). While linguistic translation works mostly spatially (as Venuti's metaphor of domestic or foreign communities suggests)—from one language to the other, from one culture to the other, from one country to the other—film adaptation of novels from previous centuries is affected most by the time lapse, by periodicity. To account for the adapter's objective and desire inspiring the choice of period novels for film transferral, Venuti's words, cited just above, could be slightly altered to read as follows: the very impulse to seek a community in the past suggests that the film director or adapter wishes to extend or complete a particular situation in the present, to compensate for a defect in contemporary film and literature, in contemporary culture. This, it could be argued, is the project underlying the efforts of Patricia Rozema and Jane Campion, who enlist nineteenth-century novels in order to elucidate and even offer solutions to the limitations in contemporary culture. Their adaptations of Austen and James have brought to the surface not simply the information imparted by the authors (in any case, such information has been deemed 'inessential' by Benjamin (p. 14)), but those unfixed elements of the text, its internal contradictions, which have been the object of contemporary literary or interdisciplinary debates.

Striving to exert feminine control over the feminine perspective that their chosen novels explore, Jane Campion and Patricia Rozema in their respective adaptations of *The Portrait of a Lady* (1996)¹² and *Mansfield Park* (1999)¹³ tackle matters that readers until now considered peripheral, extraneous, or even immaterial. These adaptations blend feminist concerns with postcolonial and cultural insights, sometimes changing the focus of the works in their original form. As Linda Troost and Sayre Greenfield have argued, 'The unremitting images [. . .] provide far more than visual equivalents for Austen's text; the images inescapably change the emphasis [. . .]. The simplest visual choices for a film can easily remould the values of the novels.'¹⁴ In this sense, influenced by contemporary literary criticism, these films apply new moral and aesthetic standards to literature, subjecting fiction to non-canonical angles of interpretation. Moreover, the films pose a new challenge to feminist film theory, which from the 1970s onwards has been mainly preoccupied with demonstrating, in the words of Ann E. Kaplan, 'the ways in which patriarchal myths function to position women as silent, absent, and marginal'.¹⁵ These films take two novels

¹¹ Walter Benjamin, 'The Task of the Translator' (1923), in *The Translation Studies Reader* (see Venuti, above), pp. 15–23 (p. 15).

¹² Dir. by Jane Campion, screenplay by Laura Jones, Polygram, 1996.

¹³ Dir. and screenplay by Patricia Rozema, Miramax, 1999.

¹⁴ 'Introduction: Watching Ourselves Watching', in *Jane Austen in Hollywood*, ed. by Linda Troost and Sayre Greenfield (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1998), pp. 1–12 (p. 7).

¹⁵ *Women and Film: Both Sides of the Camera* (London: Routledge, 1983), p. 34.

rooted in conventional patriarchy and challenge our assumptions about the intentions of their authors, while at the same time reminding viewers of the texts' diachronic value. Furthermore, in addressing the female spectator in innovative ways, the films problematize psychoanalytic film theory, which limits the role of the woman in the audience to one of trying either to fit into or to reject the position of the male viewer.

The two films examined here in detail differ drastically from other recent adaptations of Austen and James, which merely lift a loosely accurate plot and embellish it with pleasing-to-the-eye outdoor scenes or sexual liaisons which have no purpose other than to attract the mass audience. Douglas McGrath's *Emma* (1996),¹⁶ to offer one example, is a highly beautified period comedy of nineteenth-century manners viewed from a twentieth-century angle. Gwyneth Paltrow, as a dazzling Emma, successfully embodies the heroine's refinement and meddlesomeness, which outline the characterization and propel the plot of the novel. Yet in Austen these are but Emma's peripheral traits; the novel centres on the heroine's emotional and intellectual growth, which seems secondary to McGrath. His Emma is the protagonist of a broadly amusing film which abounds in verbal and physical comedy arising from superficial conversation (e.g. the merits of celery root or the horrors of a sore throat), which is amusing only because it is dated. The director treats the novel as a series of slapstick-inspired gaffes which provide him with the facile opportunity of filming an entertaining comedy centred around the heroine's hilarious blunders. He accentuates the humour in a prosaic way, comfortably ignoring the more serious concerns of the novel. Addressed to the male gaze, McGrath's film treats female subjectivity as peripheral and even comic, confirming the superiority of the male point of view. Depicting Austen's heroine as a whimsical and spoilt girl (almost till the end), the film ignores the feminist force in Emma's resistance to marriage, giving precedence to Mr Knightley's principles, which predictably are instrumental in correcting his young friend's flaws. Moreover, the glittering presence of Gwyneth Paltrow and the associations that she carries as a 'star of showbiz' overshadow the character that she plays, commodifying the experience that she is meant to enact. Films like McGrath's do seem to comply with the belief expressed by Timothy Corrigan, that this 'return to the classics' through a presentation of an idyllic, uncomplicated past implies 'a therapeutic turn from cultural complexity' in our time,¹⁷ a postmodern cultural complexity caused, presumably, by feminist, postcolonial, or other concerns that problematize human subjectivity.

Rozema's *Mansfield Park*, on the other hand, centres on themes derived from the complexities of contemporary academic thought. Through its strongly emphasized criticism of British imperialism the director addresses recent critical concerns initiated by Edward Said and pursued by other critics who have tried to invalidate the prevalent view that situates Jane Austen in a strictly insular domestic setting. Like others after him, Said historicizes Austen and points our attention to the conflicts of morality over the slave trade with which *Mansfield*

¹⁶ Dir. and screenplay by Douglas McGrath, Miramax, 1996.

¹⁷ *Film and Literature: An Introduction and Reader* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1999), p. 72.

Park is tacitly saturated. In the novel, when Fanny, with naive enthusiasm, asks her uncle about his business in Antigua, she is faced with 'dead silence' (p. 171). 'In time', Said writes, 'there would no longer be a dead silence when slavery was spoken of, and the subject became central in a new understanding of what Europe was.'¹⁸ In Rozema's film Sir Thomas Bertram's slave-trading business and colonial exploitation are referred to, perhaps more often than necessary, and are treated as the cause of psychological trauma for more than one character in the film. Specifically, the slave trade is shown as having a defining effect on the development of the female consciousness. Fanny's repeated observation of slave-ships and her horror at the mention of slaves become for Rozema not only an opportunity for socio-historical contextualization but more profoundly a metaphor of Fanny's own imprisonment and domestic servitude within the rigid walls of her uncle's house. Throughout the novel, Fanny's experience at Mansfield Park is determined by the frequency with which she is needed to perform errands for her two aunts. Her self-fulfilment and pursuit of personal pleasure are subject to the approval of her elders, who firmly control her time. And yet Fanny's appeal lies in her resistance to the slavery imposed by her relatives. Her mindset is depicted as existing outside the conventional patriarchal framework of thought, free of its limitations. Interestingly, it is the men who are shown as mostly afflicted by the slavery of convention. Tom suffers psychosomatic effects from the treatment of his domineering (slave-owning) father and even Crawford, with his stylized speech and appearance, is depicted as unable to escape the stiff confines of social practice. In an invented scene, Rozema has *him* reading a passage from Sterne's *A Sentimental Journey*, where *he* has to repeat 'I can't get out'. Rather than signifying Fanny's restriction, this scene emphasizes her freedom, as she is filmed gazing at Crawford with erotic desire and offering essential comments on his reading abilities. Her gaze seems to have the power of possession, so often denied to women, as Crawford becomes a slave to her different kind of charm, while his gaze is treated as the product of humorous and superficial lust. In this respect, Rozema's adaptation attaches social and feminist value not only to the novel, but more significantly to the author herself, who, according to this interpretation, reflected on slavery, in its literal and metaphorical sense, in her novels as well as in her letters and diaries, from which this film is derived.

Rozema's most significant contribution to film of feminist interest, though, is her construction of a heroine with individual agency, thus challenging anti-humanist film theory, which has insisted on the fragmentation, incoherence, and dependence of the female subject. Recent debates within the framework of post-structuralist thought have struggled to interpret female subjectivity in film. The most (in)famous argument has centred around the figure of the female spectator, who as Mary Ann Doane, among others, has acceded, finds herself in the impossible position of either appropriating the male gaze and finding voyeuristic pleasure in the spectacle, or identifying with the passive figure of the female protagonist. Both alternatives are the result of the tendency among certain feminist film theorists to see the female subject as decentred. The inad-

¹⁸ *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Random House for Knopf, 1993), p. 96.

equacy of this position seems to have driven directors like Rozema to embrace a stance that withstands the humanist–antihumanist binary opposition, which, as Deborah Knight has argued, is the impasse at which feminist film theory has stumbled. As Knight acknowledges, ‘What is wanted [. . .] is a different, nonoppositional conception of the [female] subject’,¹⁹ one that, in the words of Patricia Waugh, ‘experience[s] oneself as a strong and coherent agent in the world, at the same time as understanding the extent to which identity and gender are socially constructed and represented’.²⁰ In her effort to construct and represent a more coherent model of female subjectivity, Rozema remodels the novel’s rather meek heroine, Fanny Price, transforming her into a high-spirited and dauntless character who recites directly to the camera fragments from Austen’s letters and diaries. The movie’s Fanny is an ambitious wilful writer with an unstoppable intellectual drive that distinguishes her from the other female characters. The film continuously emphasizes her towering intellect—the main source of her inner strength—juxtaposing it to shallow compliments about her external appearance. Both Sir Thomas and Fanny’s father are depicted admiring her physique, commenting on it, and even asking her to turn round so that they can gaze at her whole body, while Edmund, the man Fanny will eventually marry, in vain tries to call attention to her intellectual growth.

In emphasizing the overpowering effect of the male gaze, Rozema is demonstrating the continuing pertinence of 1970s psychoanalytic film theory on the gaze, whose main exponent, Laura Mulvey, first discussed the passive function of the female form as subject of the controlling male gaze: ‘Woman then stands in patriarchal culture as a signifier for the male other, bound by a symbolic order in which man can live out his fantasies and obsessions through linguistic command by imposing them on the silent image of woman still tied to her place as bearer of meaning, not maker of meaning.’²¹ In making her protagonist resist the gaze, Rozema raises questions about female identity in our time, when popular culture lays more emphasis on appearance than character. In her discussion of the film *Single White Female*, Stella Bruzzi has effectively shown that the ‘distinctly male understanding of women and clothes’ is ‘rooted in the assumption that women are readily decipherable through how they look’.²² Rozema interprets Fanny’s low profile in the novel as a stand against this arbitrary identification between appearance and personality, and thus makes her spend three-quarters of the film dressed in the same black frock, which, through its plainness, points to the heroine’s indifference to clothes and figure as producers of identity. Moreover, Rozema’s lack of interest in luscious period clothing challenges another patriarchal assumption inherent in women’s constantly changing fashions. In Kaja Silverman’s words:

The endless transformations within female clothing construct female sexuality and subjectivity in ways that are at least potentially disruptive, both of gender and of the

¹⁹ ‘Women, Subjectivity, and the Rhetoric of Anti-Humanism in Feminist Film Theory’, *New Literary History*, 26 (1995), 39–56 (p. 54).

²⁰ *Feminine Fictions: Revisiting the Postmodern* (London: Routledge, 1989), p. 13.

²¹ Laura Mulvey, ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’, in *The Sexual Subject* (see Doane, above), pp. 22–34 (p. 23).

²² *Undressing Cinema: Clothing and Identity in the Movies* (London: Routledge, 1997), p. 143.

symbolic order, which is predicated upon continuity and coherence. However, by freezing the male body into phallic rigidity, the uniform of orthodox male dress makes it a rock against which the waves of female fashion crash in vain.²³

Represented as free from the trappings of fashion, Fanny's subjectivity acquires coherence and agency, while denying the male gaze voyeuristic pleasure. Fanny constantly withstands the male gaze of the spectator both within and outside the film text in her refusal to take part in a theatrical performance which would require bodily display, and more significantly in her ambition to rewrite history (one of Jane Austen's own adolescent experiments), which essentially transforms her into a 'maker of meaning'. She aims at interfering with a primarily male field and questioning the monopoly of male authorship and the dominance of male subjects. Moreover, her categorical rejection of Henry Crawford, a wealthy but unreliable aristocratic admirer whom Sir Thomas insists she marry, consolidates her characterization as a proto-feminist heroine who bravely challenges male authority.

Rozema's original rendering of the text lays emphasis on two additional contemporary critical concerns: homosexuality and drug addiction. Fanny's friendship with Mary Crawford is infused with a mild lesbian undercurrent, as the two women's relationship is initially portrayed as crossing the border between intellectual and physical attraction, a viewpoint not untouched by recent Austen criticism.²⁴ The homosexual desire between the two women is meant to exemplify a sexuality independent of male participation and definition, an identity forged by women and for women. Moreover, Lady Bertram's opium addiction, perhaps overemphasized, points to the mental boredom women suffered within the confines of the rigid patriarchal society. Set against Fanny's vivacious mind, Lady Bertram's comatose condition reflects the effects of domestication and of the lack of initiative among women not resilient enough to withstand male authority even in the household. These modern messages are essential to the film's brilliant coherence and sharp satiric bite, which make it more relevant to today's concerns than the usual high-toned romantic costume drama. Stephen Holden notices that casting the same actress (Lindsay Duncan) 'in the dual role of Fanny's impoverished mother (who married for love and ended up in desperate straits) and her well-to-do but drug-addicted aunt, Lady Bertram, suggests the harsh choices forced on women in those days'.²⁵ Indeed, awake or comatose, both women are incapable of exercising any sort of control over their setting. Furthermore, in order to call attention to the character of Fanny through juxtaposition, Rozema has Maria Bertram repeat the phrase 'I can't get out', when discovered in bed with Crawford, as a justification for her adulterous actions. In the novel, repressed by Rushworth's territorial command over her, Maria boldly scrambles over the fence which walls in his mansion, in an effort to escape his authority; however, her later adultery is only reported,

²³ 'Fragments of a Fashionable Discourse', in *Studies in Entertainment*, ed. by Tania Modleski (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), p. 148.

²⁴ See, for example, Misty G. Anderson, "'The Different Sorts of Friendship': Desire in *Mansfield Park*", in *Jane Austen and Discourses of Feminism*, ed. by Devoney Looser (New York: St Martin's, 1995), pp. 167–83.

²⁵ 'Spicing Austen's 1806 With Dashes of 1999', *New York Times*, 18 November 1999, late edn, E1.

not depicted. Rozema's more explicit version highlights more poignantly the trap into which Maria has fallen. Her adultery, initially interpreted as a revolt against marital boredom, becomes in reality a submission to the controlling gaze of Crawford, who views her as a sex object, conveniently getting rid of her when she no longer excites him.

A further film adaptation that attempted to lend modern-day concerns a historical perspective is Jane Campion's *The Portrait of a Lady* (1996). As Priscilla L. Walton argues, Campion's postmodern handling of the Jamesian text 'highlights aspects of his text that render him both accessible and meaningful to contemporary audiences'.²⁶ The opening of the film, which features shots of contemporary Australian women in a garden setting, discussing love, with its sudden shift to Nicole Kidman as the nineteenth-century Isabel Archer at Gardencourt, serves to 'globalize' the plot and the plight of womanhood, conflating the experience of yesterday with that of today. For Isabel Archer, despite her presumed freedom, is thwarted in her efforts to forge her own subjectivity by male authority that tries to contain her. In the film, just as in the novel, this authority is conveyed through economic, physical, and emotional abuse of the female consciousness, which is transformed by Osmond into currency. As Walton maintains, the film addresses the theme of the male colonization of the female body, which comes to serve as commodity capital (p. 188). Indeed, it is only after Isabel becomes an heiress that her list of accomplishments becomes complete and her status is elevated to 'marriageable': 'She is beautiful, accomplished, generous [. . .] clever, and very amiable and she has a handsome fortune', claims Madame Merle at the moment she decides to 'put her in [Osmond's] way',²⁷ as if she were just another precious bibelot which would deserve his worthy exertion. James constantly suggests Isabel's objectification, by insisting on the 'decorative value' (p. 401) imposed on her after her marriage, a 'value' which essentially devalues womanhood by reducing her to a manifestation of male fantasy. The film, however, invents ways of subverting our expectations and proposing an alternative version of female subjectivity.

Campion confronts the theme of female victimization by including an inspired sequence of filmstrips depicting Isabel's travels before her marriage. The supposed freedom, suggested through the idea of travel, is thus juxtaposed to the constriction that Isabel encounters on her return; the constriction, filmed in normal colour, represents her current reality while the travels are shot in early twentieth-century newsreel fashion—they are short and fragmented—which stresses their temporariness and otherness, a life impossible for women to sustain. After all, the journey, initially sought as a means of self-reflection and development, is not untainted by the male presence. Throughout her travels Isabel imagines Osmond's arm encircling her, as if taking possession of her, colonizing her body with his arms and voice, which echoes distinctly and loudly in her head: 'I'm absolutely in love with you.' The word 'absolutely' implies his own totalitarian nature and foretells his authoritarian rule in their future household. The ominous repetition of the above phrase imposes a burden on

²⁶ 'Jane and James Go to the Movies: Post Colonial Portraits of a Lady', *Henry James Review*, 18 (1997), 187–90 (p. 187).

²⁷ Henry James, *The Portrait of a Lady* (1908) (London: Penguin, 1984), p. 291.

Isabel and forms a prison figuratively and literally (as Isabel is depicted in a cage setting later on) around her, denying her the ability to enjoy the liberation that was initially the object of her journey. At the end of the scene Isabel is heard blindly parroting the phrase, a transformation that stresses her impressionable nature, as well as her submission to Osmond's mesmerizing charms. This proliferation of signs of Isabel's victimization through excess, exaggeration, and comedy offers *Campion* the opportunity to challenge the assumptions of the cinema viewer, and especially the female spectator. The exaggeration helps create a distance between viewer and viewed, as it becomes impossible for the spectator to identify (masochistically, as feminist film theory contends) with Isabel, while at the same time the female spectator is offered a new role, not as appropriator of the masculinized gaze, but as re-evaluator of arbitrary patriarchal values. *Campion*, in other words, achieves what John Fiske has regarded as one possible effect of the device of excess: 'demystification of those norms of victimization which are usually naturalized and unnoticed, but which excess foregrounds, thus revealing their patriarchal arbitrariness'.²⁸ The comedy with which the travel scenes are also invested—Isabel imagines a plate of dancing beans—becomes a means of satirizing, again through exaggeration, patriarchal beliefs concerning women's thoughts and ideas. After all, Isabel's mind has been the target of ironic attack, not only by Osmond, whose first project after marrying her is to get rid of her ideas, of which she has too many, but also by James himself, who often suggests the contradictions in Isabel's immature way of thinking. The exaggeration, therefore, rather than complying with the male point of view, helps to subvert it.

Both *Campion* and *Rozema*, therefore, modernize the classic texts, not to secure mass audiences, but to address issues of womanhood which concern us today. In this sense they render the past topical and the films are saved from being mere anachronistic specimens of nostalgia. One focal point in contemporary mass culture is female portraiture, the driving force behind the existence of all-subject mainstream magazines and film. Both *Campion* and *Rozema* scour the nineteenth-century text for hints that prophesy this visual manipulation of the female body. As Nancy Bentley observes, even the title of James's 1881 masterpiece suggests that the novel lends itself to successful 'girl-watching'.²⁹ *Campion* and *Rozema* propose a more feminist meditation on women's sexuality. *Campion*, especially, uses one of the most marketable film conventions, the language of physicality, only to subvert its effect. The film's emphasis on human form is not a marketing strategy but serves to underline female repression under the definitive and oppressive power of the male gaze. Noticing the frequent focus on tight feminine attire, Virginia Wright Wexman argues that 'The cost of forcing women's bodies into constricting clothing is alluded to in the fainting spells to which more than one young girl falls prey at the ball as well as by the numerous close-ups of Isabel's cumbersome skirts, which repeatedly impede her progress.'³⁰ While other period films use costume as

²⁸ *Television Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1987), p. 193.

²⁹ 'Conscious Observation of a Lovely Woman': Jane *Campion's* Portrait in Film', *Henry James Review*, 18 (1997), 174–79 (p. 174).

³⁰ 'The Portrait of a Body', *Henry James Review*, 18 (1997), 184–86 (p. 185).

fetish, emphasizing its erotic suggestions, Campion denies her audience such voyeuristic pleasure by dressing Isabel in dark and dull clothes. She therefore de-eroticizes Isabel and consequently the spectator's view of her. Campion's original approach does not help to rescue woman from the passive function of showpiece, but it does cater for the female spectator, who is meant to ponder on the theme of female imprisonment within a society where appearances are dictated by men, a topic as relevant to nineteenth-century women's debates as to today's. As Bordo claims, 'female bodies become docile bodies—bodies whose forces and energies are habituated to external regulation, subjection, transformation, "improvement"' (p. 2363). Indeed, after her marriage Isabel is depicted as stripped of her individuality—a result of Osmond's aesthetic 'improvement'. Under his guidance she often strikes poses, together with his daughter, which are reminiscent of Renaissance and later paintings.

One additional modern interpolation aimed at juxtaposing the male and female gaze is Campion's inclusion of Isabel's sexual fantasy, which involves the two men that try to win her, Warburton and Goodwood, as well as her cousin, who is committed to watching her. Her fantasy, while originally implying the sexual liberation and openness of the female mind, becomes, in reality, a device disclosing female entrapment. The scene initially focuses on Isabel's eyes, which control the emergence and behaviour of her potential lovers, but quickly shifts to her cousin's eyes, which interrupt her private, inward gaze. The fantasy ends when Isabel realizes that she has become the object of the male look. The theme of the possessiveness of the male gaze is emphasized through Caspar, who, presumably, angry about having to share Isabel's body with two other men, grabs Warburton by the collar. Even Ralph Touchett, the most likeable male character in James's *Portrait*, throughout the novel reduces Isabel to a spectacle, a movie perhaps, as he sits back and watches her development:

He surveyed the edifice [*Isabel is likened to an edifice*] from the outside and admired it greatly; he looked in at the windows and received an impression of proportions equally fair [. . .] Isabel's originality was that she gave one an impression of having intentions of her own. 'Whenever she executes them,' said Ralph, 'may I be there to see!' (p. 116)

Ralph's more liberal gaze is juxtaposed to Osmond's definitive gaze, which turns Isabel into an object of aesthetic scrutiny, a mere portrait of herself. Such scenes in Campion's *Portrait* remind us that the female body and its clothes, the tight ones especially, serve as stimuli for male observation, thus objectifying woman, making her into a commodity. At the same time they underscore the difficulty with which women can sustain a sexuality which is not a male construct. Campion's fantasy scene suggests that while men's fantasies are always played out by women, who tend to define themselves according to the male gaze, a woman's erotic gaze and her fantasies are never fulfilled and produce only the delusion of freedom. The conflicting patriarchally imposed female archetypes of virgin or sex goddess result in the fragmentation of the female consciousness, which is depicted, in James's and Campion's *Portrait*, as confused, having ambiguous feelings about sex.

The theme of the female gaze (as opposed to girl-watching), an act initiated by women and much discussed in contemporary literary theory and criticism,

is imaginatively explored by Rozema in *Mansfield Park*, through her playful (and sometimes contradictory) treatment of the function of 'audience'. On the one hand, Fanny abhors being at the centre of attention and being looked at (and most of the male characters do nothing but examine her external features); on the other, she willingly engages in a central role which requires being looked at, when she addresses the cinematic audience, us, while reciting her narratives and reading out the letters to her sister. On the one hand, Fanny proclaims 'I live in dread of audiences', on the other, she is more than comfortable addressing her twenty-first-century viewers. This paradox, far from weakening the coherence of the script, serves further to emphasize Fanny's need for intellectual acceptance. The direct addresses, in the form of asides, are not meant to be viewed but to be heard. Or, to put it another way, while she despises physical visibility, she craves intellectual recognition. Fanny's gaze is shown as definitive as it controls the audience's impression of her—denying it the opportunity to project its signification on the viewed material, and ultimately destroying the spectator's voyeuristic pleasure. Theorizing the effect of the direct address, Teresa de Lauretis says that 'it demonstrates that no complicity, no shared discourse, can be established between the woman performer (positioned as image, representation, object) and the male audience (positioned as the controlling gaze); no complicity, that is, outside the codes and rules of the performance'.³¹ In the case of *Mansfield Park*, male spectators tend to feel uncomfortable during Fanny's speeches because their mind is directed away from the object of pleasure, the female body. Through the direct addresses and unusual camera angles, Rozema does not allow the spectator to step into the position of voyeur, which, whether appropriated by men or by women, tends to transform the subject into object of desire. In fact, the erotic gaze of the characters is often made to look comic, not allowing the spectator to identify with it. For example, in order to critique rather than endorse the male gaze, the director focuses on the male characters' desire for Mary Crawford, rather than the object of that desire. In the billiard-room scene she films the men looking at Mary longingly, through the juxtaposition of hilarious, dazed faces, while the spectator is denied the same pleasure since Mary has her back to the camera. By emphasizing looking, rather than the object of that look, Rozema challenges a cultural practice that thrived from the fifties onwards, which turned the female body into a spectacle, fetishized and appropriated by the audience.

Campion and Rozema explore the conflict between female subjectivity and the male gaze even further by creating settings and camera effects that help to accentuate it. In *Mansfield Park* Rozema portrays nineteenth-century affluence in a notably more austere and stark way than other film adaptations of Austen, which ultimately sacrifice character at the altar of luxurious—and hence eye-catching—costumes and settings. *Mansfield Park* is a dull and grim mansion whose overall bleakness, as Stephen Holden notes, 'mirrors the constricting puritanical morality of English society and Fanny's prisonlike confinement within social convention' (E1). The setting in Campion's *Portrait* similarly conveys female restriction. The film becomes progressively darker as Campion

³¹ *Technologies of Gender: Essays on Theory, Film, and Fiction* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1987), p. 143.

extinguishes the light from both interior and exterior settings in an attempt to portray James's vividly visual rendering of female entrapment. In her effort to translate the imagery of darkness that abounds in the novel's celebrated Chapter 42, Campion brilliantly films Isabel, in slow motion, crossing the threshold into her home from a bright exterior setting only to be enclosed by shade at first and, as the door shuts behind her, by blackness. James's words, which famously explore the sombre awakening of Isabel's consciousness, communicate exactly this sense of imprisonment within a dark setting:

She had suddenly found the infinite vista of a multiplied life to be a dark, narrow alley with a dead wall at the end. [. . .] The dusk at first was vague and thin, and she could still see her way in it. But it steadily deepened, and if now and again it had occasionally lifted there were certainly corners of her prospect that were impenetrably black. [. . .] It was the house of darkness, the house of dumbness, the house of suffocation. (pp. 474, 478)

The setting, in its form, atmosphere, and decoration, represents Osmond entirely. With his sterile tastes and 'genius for upholstery' (*Portrait*, p. 436), he deprives Isabel of every opportunity for agency and reduces her to a bearer of meaning, in both public and domestic spheres.

Campion's subversive treatment of the female form and her unwillingness to present the body as fetish may also be substantiated through a comparison with the most recent film adaptation of James's last and most complex novel, *The Golden Bowl* (2000).³² Adapted by James Ivory and Ruth Praver Jhabvala, this film abounds in visual opulence, rendered through luscious clothes and luxurious houses and objets d'art, to such an extent that these aspects of setting acquire a sensuality that overshadows any other themes that the filmmakers wish to convey. Bruzzi has argued that 'when costumes are looked at rather than through, the element conventionally prioritised is their eroticism' (p. 36), and indeed, by blurring the line between beautiful clothes and beautiful furniture fabrics, the film fetishizes both the costumes and the female bodies that model them. In one respect, the film successfully transfers to the screen the novel's underlying theme, the tendency of the American businessman, Adam Verver, to confuse people with commodities. For example, by the end of the film the viewer has grasped that his wife, Charlotte, has become part of his collection of choice objects: she is the result of successful trading, a controlled possession. James conveys Charlotte's submission by drawing a highly disturbing metaphor of a 'silken noose' tied around her neck which is controlled by her husband's dominating thumb.³³ In the film, while Charlotte is depicted rehearsing for her rather limited and limiting future role as a museum guide back in America, Adam is shown literally overseeing—from the top of the staircase—his puppet on a string, applying his male gaze and nodding his approval every now and then. However, by dwelling on the fetishistic pleasure aroused by the setting and costumes, the filmmakers seem to endorse rather than critique Adam Verver's materialistic take on women.³⁴ Leaving England against her will, Charlotte becomes an easy victim of Adam's strong will and Maggie's self-assurance

³² Dir. by James Ivory, screenplay by Ruth Praver Jhabvala, Merchant Ivory, 2000.

³³ Henry James, *The Golden Bowl* (1904), *The World's Classics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), p. 539.

³⁴ For a more extensive analysis of Merchant Ivory's *The Golden Bowl* from this perspective see

(Maggie is the daughter of Adam Verver, and the deceived wife of the plot). The contrast in temperament between the two women—Charlotte is remoulded into an oversentimental woman often seen crying with undying passion for her lover Amerigo, while Maggie is more silent, reflective, and ultimately pragmatic—emphasizes even more the impossible position of female subjectivity, without offering an alternative, as Rozema or Campion do. Merchant Ivory, instead, suggest that woman is either a passive victim of the male gaze or an appropriator of a masculinized position which grants her power patriarchally endorsed.

Nevertheless, despite the male perspective in the treatment of the female point of view of James's novel, Merchant Ivory successfully manage to transfer today's predominance of visual culture onto nineteenth-century aesthetics. The final scene of the film, where the plot is no longer conveyed through luscious colour but through black-and-white filmstrips, is a postmodern interpolation aimed at achieving a postmodern effect. Having already implanted the notion that Americans prefer street-cars to museums, the film, near its close, uses black-and-white strips featuring Adam and Charlotte in their new American setting, in order to emphasize that life, not only woman, has become reified, a commodity. The disruptive nature of the strips conveys the fragmentation and superficiality of our postmodern experience, an experience depicted as a series of endless car rides and visits to prestigious social gatherings. Moreover, by interpolating a movie within the movie, the filmmakers suggest that in our time the spectacle of reality has replaced the real; signification has replaced the sign. By rendering Adam's new life and his attempts to build a museum in America through a second cinematic medium, a second film, Merchant Ivory express the commodification of cultural activities *per se*; in the words of Fredric Jameson, 'culture itself has become a product in its own right'.³⁵ Both the museum and the Ververs' new experience have lost their essential value; by being the subject of film, they have become products easily accessible to a global audience. Thus, the film makes a connection between the potential spectators of Adam's life in the 1900s and us, today's viewers who commodify an icon of high culture, such as James's novel by globalizing it, making it accessible to the masses. This uncanny identification between the early twentieth-century viewer and us is meant to suggest that the Jamesian text predicted the objectification of consciousness that concerns us today.

To conclude, James's and Austen's stories seem especially relevant to today's audiences as they present a state of female–male relationships familiar to us through their proximity to our everyday experience: in *The Portrait*, for example, a mismatched but extremely civilized couple experiences a sado-masochistic partnership. Sam Mendes's *American Beauty* (1999)³⁶ explored a similar theme, that of dysfunction within a clean and seemingly uncontaminated setting. While James uses history-strewn palazzos to communicate ideas of constriction and insecurity, Alan Ball, the screenwriter of *American Beauty*, uses

Dianne F. Sadoff, 'Appeals to Incalculability: Sex, Costume Drama, and the Golden Bowl', *Henry James Review*, 23 (2002), 38–52.

³⁵ *Postmodernism; or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991), p. x.

³⁶ Dir. by Sam Mendes, screenplay by Alan Ball, Dreamworks, 1999.

the suburb as a symbol of false happiness, entrapment, and deceptive security. Both films, as well as James's novel, examine the peculiarly modern problem of marriage: the personal and social anxiety of women about the failure of the institutions of marriage and family. In this respect James's text, transported to the screen by Campion, foreshadows the lovelessness and insane cruelty of millennial life, portrayed in Mendes's film as horrible and funny at the same time. Isabel's concern about her stepdaughter Pansy's future mirrors an alarming social problem growing steadily in the past decades: who gets custody of the children? Osmond's comfortable consumption of his wife's finances anticipates modern economic anxieties following divorce, especially now that women are the breadwinners in many families. Finally, Isabel's commodification by her husband, who sees her as one of the artefacts in his collection, epitomizes the burden still borne by women who are caught in the snare of today's narcissistic tendencies.

In this sense, the most thoughtful and provocative adaptations render the novel invaluable as a source of inspiration which becomes the historical lens through which to gaze at the present. Such films by women directors acknowledge, in the vein of postmodern criticism, that the nineteenth-century novel had started to ponder on the marketability of womanhood, as it is clearly manifested today through forms of mass entertainment, from *Playboy* and questionnaires in *Cosmopolitan* to the (ab)use of the female body in car commercials—a theme explored in contemporary fiction, painting, and other forms of art. Rozema's and Campion's contribution lies in their innovative treatment of these themes, which allows female subjectivity space to develop outside and independent of the rigid patriarchal constructions of femininity that dominate mainstream cinema. The endings of both films, *Mansfield Park* and *The Portrait of a Lady*, forcefully demonstrate the unusual feminist outlook of their directors. Employing a filmic version of *écriture féminine*, both directors explode the conventional, 'male' endings of both novels, which confirm the centrality of marriage in a woman's experience. Campion ends by denying us closure, leaving Isabel on the doorstep unsure about her future, and Rozema, while not denying Fanny the marital union that she has always hoped for, playfully points at the importance of process rather than goal, a characteristic, as French feminist theory has proved, of feminine writing. With her ending, Rozema invites us to ponder the possibility of everything happening differently (expressed a few times through a female voice-over), emphasizing the tentative over the certain. The fact that it didn't happen differently (a phrase also uttered in the film) pays homage to Austen's plot, while at the same time challenging customary interpretations (even by feminists) of the author's conventional endings.