

## Jane Austen's Novel *Emma* in a Journey to Celluloid: A Cine-semiotic Investigation of Close-ups in Douglas McGrath's *Emma*

Hind HANAFI

University of Kasdi Merbah Ouargla

### Abstract:

Due to its multimodality, film has gained a prestigious place in narrative studies and has magnetically been attracted to linguistic inquiry, unavoidably, generating an aura of academic investigation around film and its industry in the field of Cine-semiotics. The present paper attempts to shed light on the effect of the cinematic technique of Close-up in *Emma*, a cinematic adaptation of Jane Austen's novel "Emma". Moreover, it is sought to approach some objectivity in explaining the effect of shot magnification on the reception of film codes by the viewer.

**Keywords:** Adaptation, Film, Cine-semiology, Close-up (CU), Magnification, Viewer

### Le Résumé :

Due à sa multi-modalité, le film a gagné une place prestigieuse dans le domaine des études narratives et a été attiré par la linguistique ce qui a généré un aura d'investigation académique autour du film et du cinéma entant qu'industrie du film dans le domaine de la sémiotique du cinéma. Cet article a pour but d'explorer l'effet de la technique cinématographique du "gros plans" dans *Emma*, une adaptation cinématographique du roman de Jane Austen "Emma". Cette étude tente aussi d'approcher une certaine objectivité afin d'expliquer l'effet de la magnification des plans cinématographiques sur la réception des codes filmiques par le spectateur.

**Mots Clés :** Adaptation, Film, Ciné-sémiologie, Gros plans, Magnification, Spectateur.

### الملخص

نظرا لكونه متعدد الوسائط، تمكن الفيلم من اعتلاء مكانة راقية في مجال الدراسات السردية، مما ولد هالة من البحوث الأكاديمية حول الفيلم و صناعته في مجال مستحدث هو السيميائية السينمائية. الدراسة الحالية تسعى إلى إلقاء الضوء على أثر التقنية السينمائية (الصورة المقربة) في (إيما) وهو الاقتباس السينمائي للرواية (إيما) للكاتبة الإنجليزية "جان أوستن". كما يهدف هذا البحث إلى تقديم مقارنة لأثر ظاهرة (التعظيم) على استقبال المتفرج للرموز السينمائية.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** الاقتباس - الفيلم - السيميائية السينمائية - الصورة المقربة - التعظيم - المتفرج.

### 1. Introduction

The symbiotic type of relationship between cinema and literature constitutes a subject of debate and controversy since the beginning of the art of cinema. Literature and mainly the classics have always been a source of inspiration for cinema; a nascent art, which actually becomes an independent complete discourse with all the parameters.

## 2. Cine-semiology

In a sublime combination of the visual, aural and kinesthetic, cinema could not escape the magnetic attraction of linguistic throne. Many studies were concerned by the film-language and camera-pen (*caméra-stylo*) metaphor<sup>1</sup> after the 1960's, when structuralism and semiotics were in the climax of their advent. Names like Umberto Eco, Pier Paolo Passolini, and Christian Metz were the pioneers to explore in depth some film language concepts. In *Language and Cinema* (1974b), Christian Metz argued that cinema is a form of textual *écriture* by making the analogy with literary writing. He added that the shot (a series of photographic images in motion that the camera captures in one uninterrupted take) is like the word while the sequence (a succession of scenes) is like the sentence. (See Figure 1)

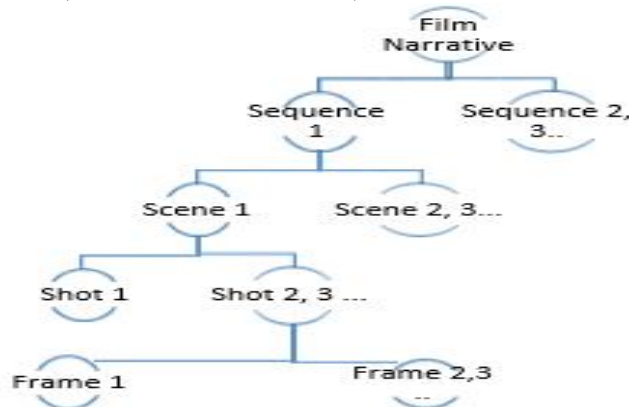


Figure 1: Film (Motion Picture) Structure

As illustrated in the above diagram, the frame is the smallest compositional unit of a film's structure, a still image that constitutes a shot in the state of motion, the reason for which film is also named motion picture.

## 3. Novel to Film: The Journey

Adapting novels to films is an interesting field of study to understand the relationship between the two media. The novel is a written discourse for story-telling while film raises the medium solutions to convey the same story through different narrative procedures from those of the original text.

**3.1 Adaptation :** From the beginning of cinema, film industry has sought to bring to the screen famous published novels. This phenomenon has two main reasons; purely commercial reasons and the noble respect for the classic literary works. Undoubtedly, there is the appeal for highly sold titles with the expectation to gain the same popularity and success of the original text (McFarlane, 1996:7).

Giddings et al (1990) believe that it is not possible to explain the phenomenon of adaptation and the effect this may have on the appreciation of the original novel. It is not possible to give definitive answers because adaptations are carried out for various reasons ranging from attempt to reproduce a novel as faithfully as possible to the use of the source simply as stimulus for the film production. Sometimes the aim behind adaptation is to present a literary work to a wider audience, or attempting to exploit the cultural respectability and popularity of the original. In other cases, the adaptation is intended to comment on or develop an aspect of the original text. Finally, the lack of good original scripts is one of the reasons why the filmmakers decided to carry out adaptations of literary works (Giddings et al, 1990:23-24).

**3.2 Narrative from Novel to Film :** The inclusive definition of narrative implies a new vision of the narrator and has put aside the tendency in narrative theory to treat it as a human personal agent. Seymour Chatman explains that the teller does not have to be an agent and human metaphor "voice that speaks" to refer to the narrator, a concept that appears in theories of Gerard Genette or W.C Booth and that proves not to be effective to describe the up-to-date narratives on screen or on stage, and can not even be applied to narratives narrated impersonally.

Chatman (1978) distinguished between narrated and non-narrated narratives, division subsequently discarded and replaced by a model in which the narrative includes both the representation and narration as illustrated in the following table:

Structure of the Verbal Narrative						
Story				Discourse		
Events		Existents		Mimesis	Diegesis	
Actions	Happenings	Characters	Setting	Story Representation	Hidden Storytellers	Manifested Story-tellers
				- Letters and diaries - Direct style - Monologues - Interior monologue.	- Indirect Style - Free indirect style.	- Descriptions - Summaries - Comments - Interpretations - Judgments - Generalizations - Conscious narrator

**Table 1 Structure of the Verbal Narrative (adapted from Chatman 1978)**

Chatman (1990) summarizes his position in the following words:

Thus, my position lies halfway between that of some poststructuralists, who would deny the existence of *any* agent –who would acknowledge only our encounter with *écriture*– and that of Booth, who has spoken of the implied author as “friend and guide”. For me the implied author is neither. It is nothing other than the text itself in its inventional aspect.

Chatman (1990:86)

This vision of the implied author helps to explain Chatman's definition of narrator in the film medium and how it differs from the verbal medium. Bordwell (1985) advocates a cognitive model of storytelling and perceptual film-based comprehension. A process that is based on the Russian formalists' distinction between *fabula* (the chronological order of the events contained in the story), *style*<sup>ii</sup> and *syuzhet*. (the narrative order of the events contained in the story). This distinction serves to define the film narrative:

*In the fiction film, narration is the process whereby the film's syuzhet and style interact in the course of cueing and channelling the spectator's construction of the fabula.* Thus it is not only when the syuzhet arranges *fabula* information that the film narrates. Narration also includes stylistic processes. (Bordwell, 1985:53)<sup>iii</sup>

Bordwell has been criticized on his denial of the existence of a narrator considering that the film narrative is an act of construction by the viewer, while Chatman's model weighs up the narrator's role in the film narrative be it a human or non-human agent. He also compared between his own theory and Bordwell's, explaining that both use a narratological framework to discuss films, the main difference between these two authors lies in the type of agent for transmission of the proposed narrative: "It comes down, as I say, to the difference between "-tion" and "-er". (Chatman, 1990:130). Chatman distinguished between two levels in the analysis of filmic texts: auditory channel (music, sound effects, dialogues, voice-over) and visual channel in which CU constitutes the cinematic technique par excellence due to its strong semiotic significance in the realm of film studies.

### 3.3 Film's Visual Channel

The image has always gained prestigious place in the semiotic sphere. The visual channel is generally considered as the center of film studies, in contrary to the auditory channel or the sound band that received less scholarly investigation. There are a number of factors that are taken into consideration in the production of filmic events: light (intensity, type, font), color (color spectrum vs. white and black), camera position, movement, angle and focus, and different methods for attaching a visual image to another within a text Film (editing). (Rifkin, 1994:37-38).

Each of the above listed factors can be considered a hallmark within the film text, but without having a fixed universal meaning applicable to all films. These features are interpreted by the receiver depending on the context and needs of each film; each film text teaches viewers how to be decoded. Factors influencing image production, editing and sounds can not usually be related to a stable universal semantic meaning for all film texts, but must be analyzed within the context according to paradigms established for each film text (Eisenstein, 1940:235-236; transl. 370). Although these factors do not have a universal meaning for all movies, the meaning associated with repeated use of some film elements in a large number of movies created conventions that film-makers adopt. Likewise, the word in verbal language can be attached to the memory of previous usage of language, film may also refer to previous meanings (Rifkin, 1994:39).

### 3.4 Camera Positions and Effect

Camera positions and movements are the most common way to present space in its phenomenal continuum. Instead of cutting to different shots to depict the space of a scene, camera movements are typically used to present space without any of the gaps that result from cutting. Before any camera movement, the director decides about a certain *significant*<sup>iv</sup> position depending on the narrative context and the sought effect (see Table 2).

Camera positions vary according to height, angle and distance of camera from the actor or the focal point that can also be non-human object. The following table (2) summarizes briefly the possible camera positions from David Bordwell's terminological framework which is adopted in the actual study.

Camera Positions and Effects				
Height In relation to the eye level	Angle / Effect		Distance / Effect	
Usually Eye level				
1. eye level shot : approximates the eye level view	1. high-angle shot (HAS): camera positioned above the character or action	The target is downward to minimize the subject, the character seems less powerful	1. Extreme long shot (ELS), the human subject is very small compared to the surrounding context.	Techniques used to distance the viewer emotionally from characters in the shot depending on the type of distance.
2. high vantage point: a view from above	2. low-angle shot (LAS): camera positioned below the subject or action	The target is upward often to exaggerate the size and volume of the subject. Characters often appear powerful as they physically dominate the shot.	2. Long shot (LS), a shot that captures the character in its entirety.	
3. low vantage point: a view from a low level	3. Canted or Dutch angle, leans to one side, the subject creates a diagonal line in the frame	A moment of imbalance or loss of control	3. medium long shot (MLS) captures the human figure from the knees up	
	4. Overhead shot /bird's eye shot/helicopter shot that gives a unique perspective on the action from above.	Gives a panoramic global view	4. Medium shot situates the body of the character in the frame from the waist up.	Close-ups tend to produce a greater sense of intimacy by giving the viewers an access to focus on actors' faces.
			5. Medium close-up (MCU): from the chest up.	
			6. close-up (CU): closes in on a section of the body such as face, legs, hands...etc.	
			7. Extreme close-up (ECU) depicts only a small body part like the eye, ear, finger, lips...etc.	

**Table 2 Camera Positions and Effects (Adapted from Bordwell (1985))**

As illustrated above, camera angle, height and distance are used less randomly than one might imagine, each and every film-maker's decision is a deliberate choice that itself communicates a certain meaning and signifies what film viewers might decode, mainly when this meaning has been conventionalized after a large number of films, unless the film in question relies on its own rules.

### 3.5 Close-ups (CU)

As close-up (CU) is the focus of the actual study, therefore, it is of paramount importance to discuss briefly this cinematic technique and its effect on the viewer. CUs indicate emotions, limits the attention of the viewer to the details of the foregrounded object or person and directs his attention to the overwhelming image occupying the full screen.

Moreover, "the enlargement of a snapshot does not simply render more precise what in any case was visible, though unclear; it reveals entirely new structural formations of the subject" (Walter Benjamin, 1935:36).

Camera lenses magnify objects or human parts in a CU to increase their importance and reveal realities that only minute details can unveil. For the French film-maker and theorist Jean Epstein (1977), the CU was an essential component of the concept of *Photogénie* or any aspect of things, beings or souls whose moral character is *enhanced*<sup>N</sup> by filmic reproduction.

CU has the effect of enhancing and magnifying "the close-up modifies the drama by the impact of proximity. Pain is within reach. If I stretch out my arm I touch you, and that is intimacy . . . it's not even true that there is air between us"(Ibid:3), Epstein also described the CU as the "soul of the cinema" (Ibid:9), while for the Hungarian director and script-writer Béla Balázs (1931:83), CU shows the "micro physiognomy"<sup>vi</sup> of the human face and generates a feeling of *intimacy*<sup>vii</sup> between the viewer and character as it reveals emotions and states of mind of characters. Linda Hutcheon (2006) states that CU is a cinematic technique that creates a psychological intimacy between character and viewer, giving as such the film the tools to delve in the character's consciousness. Thus, better than literature, film provides a mimetic more realistic recreation of consciousness by the amalgamation of both the aural and visual channels; a multidimensionality that characterizes the film medium.

#### 4. *Emma* Adapted to Cinema

Jane Austen's *Emma*, published in 1815 is considered by critics to be her best novel as it represents her literary maturity and the peak of her accomplishment . This unveils Emma's movement from an immature girl to a mature woman. Film is, after all, a medium quite different from the novel. George Bluestone explains that novel and film "belong to separate aesthetic genera," with "different origins, different audiences, different modes of production" (1957: viii)

##### 4.1 Jane Austen: a Cultural Phenomenon

The last hundred years witnessed a large appeal to Jane Austen's novels for adaptation to both large and small screen (TV and Cinema). This proliferation of adaptations was nurtured by some qualities in Austen's literary production that made it an appealing material for directors and film producers. Austen's characters display a good equilibrium between standard types of individuals and those with unconventional and idiosyncratic personalities. Although viewers identify with them, yet, they hardly can predict their stands and reactions. The cultural richness of Austen's attracted film directors to her novels; each one of her novels portrays faithfully the British society to the point that many social and historical studies were taking her novels as a corpus of inquiry.

##### 4.2 The Miramax *Emma*

Emma Woodhouse, the heroine in *Emma* goes to the end of character type scale by its idiosyncratic nature, the fact that widened the scope of Austenian canon, and therefore attracted the attention of directors to choose this novel for adaptation.

In 1996, Douglas McGrath's adaptation (Miramax)<sup>viii</sup> of Jane Austen's novel *Emma* brought new insights to the comprehension of the novel itself and delved in the consciousness of the protagonist in ways less complicated than the original literary text, and this was a motivating factor for the actual study. Some scholars went to consider Jane Austen a commercial phenomenon, a cultural fetish and an author who gained literary excellence due to her success in portraying self-definition of opposite and varied interests; realistic and escapist, defenders of social morality and exponents of an amoral theatrical playfulness. (Johnson, 1997:211)

##### 4.3 Close-ups in Douglas McGrath's *Emma*

The film frequently uses the close-ups of the protagonist to capture the gestures and reactions of characters. These CUs provide visual clues for viewers to infer the possible moods of the protagonist relying on facial expressions and gestures of the actors.

The actual approach to CU in *Emma* embraces a descriptive analytical approach together with a depiction of the rate of CU frequency in the whole film then discuss and interpret the results on the light of the adopted theoretical framework to reveal the semiotic potential of CU



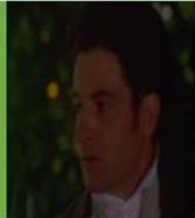


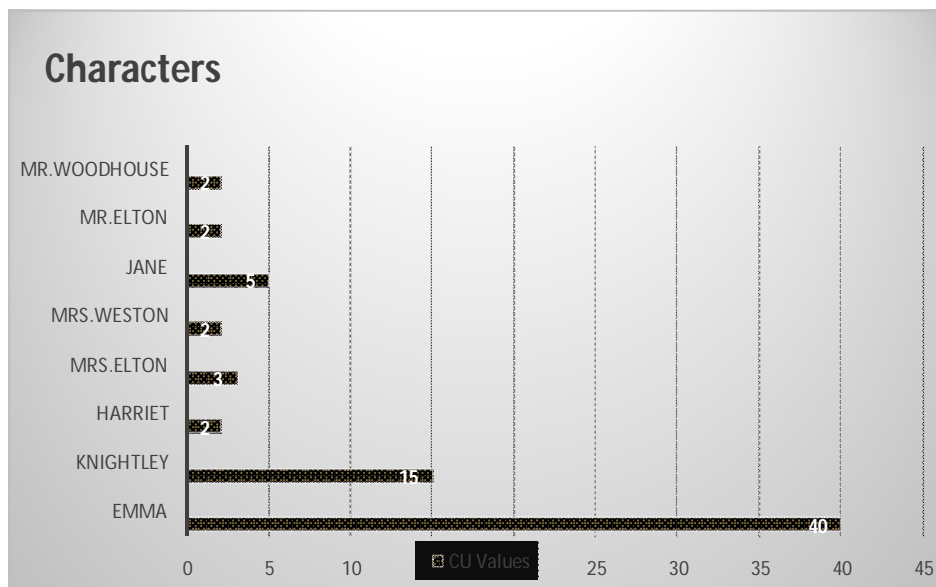
in this version of the novel's adaptation. As a sample of CU instances, we present the following table which provides some types of CU chosen chronologically accompanied by the narrative context of each instance (frame) to discuss its importance and effect on the viewer (Table 3).

CU Frame	Description and Narrative Context	Type of CU
 <p>Frame (00:23:06)</p>	Facial expressions of deception after Emma's failure with her arrow in the Archery scene, a cinematic metaphor for her actual failures in being a good matchmaker as she pretends is the case.	CU
 <p>Frame (01:08:54)</p>	The camera narrator showing Knightley and Mrs. Weston looking at each other in an ironic tone mocking Emma's ignorance though she always pretends the opposite.	MCU
 <p>Frame (01:10:44)</p>	Mr. Knightley was provoking Emma's jealousy and observing her reaction, the CU reveals his facial expressions of a teaser.	CU
 <p>Frame (01:10:45)</p>	close up and a zoom-in of Emma marking a process of thought and observation of Jane and Mr. Knightley (a double movement by the camera and the heroine both moving towards each other, a certain light was projected on the lower part of her face (frame 1) moving upward to the middle of her face (frame 2) till enlightening her eyes in the last frame of this shot (frame3), now things are clear for her and the process of self-consciousness and self-awareness is beginning. from darkness to light signifying that Emma was thinking and the movement from darkness to light implies a movement from ignorance to knowledge, another step towards self-discovery. A strong metaphorical representation by means of cinematic light and shot scale.	MCU
 <p>Frame (01:10:46)</p>		MCU
 <p>Frame (01:10:47)</p>		MCU

 <p>Frame (01:32:10)</p>	<p>A CU which is also a flashback in a voice-over scene. Emma remembers Mr. Knightley's kiss to her hand, the real shot was not close-up but in Emma's mind this event is foregrounded and given a special importance, this is the reason for such a transformation of the shot from a medium shot to a close-up (deliberate technique by the director Douglas McGrath). When she was writing in her diaries after Knightley's departure, the viewer observes how she stops from writing when she remembers the kiss; another sign in her journey of self-discovery (This is a characteristic of the genre of Bildungsroman in the novel of Jane Austen, and the director of the adaptation kept this characteristic of the novel <i>EMMA</i> when adapting to the screen</p> <p>ECU</p>
 <p>Frame (01:37:17)</p>	<p>Emma speaking with Mrs. Weston, declaring her profound love for Mr. Knightley while closing her eyes for two seconds, in a flashback that will follow this frame, she was remembering all what happened in her last meeting with Knightley</p> <p>CU</p>
 <p>Frame (01:37:44)</p>  <p>Frame (01:37:47)</p>  <p>Frame (01:37:48)</p>	<p>Another of Emma's flashbacks about Mr. Knightley when she remembers his words: "I have a delicate and perplexing matter to discuss with my brother". The director used a zoom-in in this shot to raise the suspense for the viewer, an effect that stems from the intrigue in the mind of the puzzled heroine Emma.</p> <p>CU</p> <p>ECU</p> <p>ECU</p>



 <p>Frame (01:41:43)</p>	<p>Emma stressed when she met Knightley after the church scene, emotions of anxiety and stress mixed with happiness to see him again.</p> <p>CU</p>
 <p>Frame (01:42:26)</p>	<p>Emma expressing her sadness for what she thought has happened, even light plays a role in revealing her state through the camera angle according to the sun that shed a shadow of obscurity on her face.</p> <p>CU</p>
 <p>Frame (01:42:29)</p>	<p>"Time will heal your wounds," said Knightley to Emma trying to change her mood after the Church scene.</p> <p>ECU</p>



**Table 3: Narrative Context of CU Instances in *Emma***

The above table aims to shed light on the narrative context of some sample instances of CU from many others in the film to provide a context for the discussion of the motives behind magnifying characters. The CU shots as illustrated in the table reflect the different psychological and mind states of the protagonists, feelings of pity, compassion, sadness, nostalgia, missing, deception, mockery, teasing, self-awareness, self-discovery, and self-consciousness. The following graphic presentation (Figure 1) shows the data for a comparative insight followed by a numerical presentation in which the number of CU shots for each character is converted into percentiles.

**Figure 1: Graphic Presentation of CU Frequency**

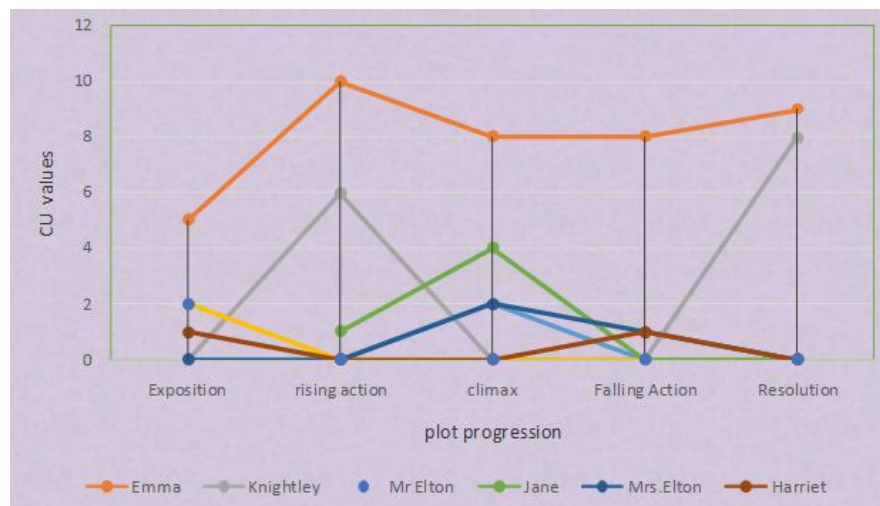
Character	CU Frequency	Percentage
Emma	40	56 %
Knightley	15	21%
Harriet	02	2.8%
Mr. Elton	02	2.8 %
Mrs. Elton	03	4.2 %
Mrs. Weston	02	2.8%
Mr. Woodhouse	02	2.8%
Jane	05	7 %

**Table 4: CU Frequency Percentiles of the Main Characters in *Emma***

#### 4.4 Discussion and Interpretation

As observed in the above table and from the rest of CU shots in the corpus, the lion's share of CU instances is devoted to the female protagonist Emma (40 CU shots/56%) followed by the male protagonist Mr. Knightley (15 CU shots/21%). The other characters in the film received less magnification by the director who used few CU instances that in fact are needed to introduce them to the viewer (first encounter between characters and viewers), the only slight difference was in the case of Jane Fairfax (5 CU shots/7%). Jane is the competitor of Emma to the heart of Mr. Knightley, her facial expressions of admiration to him were needed in the narrative to enhance and reveal Emma's emotions of jealousy. Jane's CU shots are in fact in the service of strengthening Emma's image of a lover, therefore, the aim of the director was foregrounding the inner feelings of a character to enhance those of another more important character in favor of whom all the necessary cinematic techniques are employed. The other characters were less magnified like Mr. Woodhouse (2 CU shots/2.8% ), Mr. Elton (2 CU shots/2.8% ), Mrs. Elton (3 CU shots/4.2%), Mrs. Weston (2 CU shots/2.8% ) and Harriet (2 CU shots/2.8% ).

It is observed that CU shots do not occur randomly in the course of plot. Applying Freytag's Pyramid for the presentation of plot, the next graph (Figure 2) depicts the positioning of character magnification throughout the conventional phases of plot in *Emma*.

**Figure 2: Graphic Presentation of CU Frequency through Plot Progression**

The use of CU is significant mainly with the two protagonists Emma and Knightley, for the other characters, the rate is low and the very few instances of CU are to introduce characters in the film. Plot emotions were magnified through the effect produced by CU (Epstein, 1977) as they reduce the distance between the viewer and the character by allowing

an access to his/ her state of mind, emotions and inner life as a whole. Nearly every shot helps to evoke a sense of photogénie, which in turn creates the mood of romance in this film.

The above graph reveals that CU in minor characters is generally at the beginning of the story (exposition phase) as it is the introductory part of the film except for Mrs. Elton (new bride) who appeared in the diegesis only at the end of the rising action phase. For the major characters of Emma and Knightley, the process of magnification is in different phases. The director shed light on Knightley's facial expressions and reactions mainly in the rising action phase in which the events were about Emma's misdeeds and flaws; he was the guide and corrector, always blaming her for her mischievous behaviors with others. The other phase in which he was a focus of the camera was the resolution, in which he confessed his love and devotion to Emma, ECU technique was prevailing in this stage of the story as to highlight the importance of the moment (Emma, 01:56:00). Emma, on the other hand, was magnified throughout all the plot progression, still, at some points, the magnification process was at its peak. In the rising action phase, Emma was practicing her favorite hobby of match-making, a lot of complication in the events mainly in her projects for Harriet each time failing and starting over again, the director gave access to Emma's facial expressions of regret, renewal of hope, and secret confessions. In the resolution phase, CU and ECU shots were multiplied as her worries and stress increased knowing that Harriet was in love with Knightley whom she loved unknowingly and this was the process of self-discovery and self-awareness of the character Emma in her journey to adulthood.

## Conclusion

The sensation of realism and vividness created by the moving picture and enhanced by CU has helped the director Douglas McGrath generate the feeling and reaction of sympathy in viewers creating as such a close relationship between viewer and protagonist (Emma). In the original literary text, Emma's personality is a departure from the conventional heroine character construction, an arrogant manipulative type of person who can never be appreciated by readers, the fact that was behind Jane Austen's use of free indirect thought (reported monologue) to give an access to the consciousness and thought of the heroine to defend her and create sympathy in the readers. Delving in the thought process of characters helps readers feel compassion while Emma is experiencing moments of regret, dreams, hopes, confessions and self-assessment. In the film medium, there are many ways by which the director can achieve the viewer-response of sympathy and highlight the importance of characters. The CU is a cinematic technique that generates a sense of profoundness, the whole world could be reduced to that magnified face or object, CU could guarantee the universality of the cinematic language and widen the perspective for more semiotic exploration of films.

## Notes

<sup>i</sup> "caméra-stylo" is a term that was introduced by the French theorist Christian Metz (1974b) who made an analogy between camera and pen, as he thinks that camera writes in a film as a pen writes in a text.

<sup>ii</sup> Bordwell (1985) explains how these three concepts are based on a fundamental distinction relating to Aristotle and was developed by the Russian formalists.

<sup>iii</sup> The emphasis in the original text belongs to Bordwell (1985).

<sup>iv</sup> Personal emphasis, the director's choice of the position of camera is not random, each type of position communicates a meaning and an effect on the viewer.

<sup>v</sup> Personal emphasis, enhancing in the sense of stressing the importance, foregrounding or highlighting.

<sup>vi</sup> By 'micro-physiognomics' Balázs means the subtle features, expressions and different dimensions of being (including unconscious reflex-like reactions) that a face or body can reveal when shot in particular ways i.e. framed through close-ups.

<sup>vii</sup> Personal emphasis, this aspect of intimacy between character and viewer created by CU is the effect that directors seek in certain narrative situations where the viewer's sympathy and empathy are both important.

<sup>viii</sup> Miramax is the American production company as there is another cinematic adaptation by Amy Heckerling (1995) for the Paramount company. TV adaptations ranging from films to mini-series are many but they differ in many aspects from cinema.

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