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James Dalrymple

▶ To cite this version:

James Dalrymple. Atonement by Joe Wright: (re)writing and adaptation. A diachronic approach to Ian McEwan's fiction: from sensationalism to ethical writing, Mar 2018, Caen, France. <hal-01885447>

HAL Id: hal-01885447
https://hal.archives-ouvertes.fr/hal-01885447

Submitted on 10 Oct 2018

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***Atonement* by Joe Wright: (re)writing and adaptation** by James Dalrymple

This chapter proposes an analysis of Joe Wright's 2007 film adaptation of Ian McEwan's *Atonement*. In particular it will look at how the novel's major themes of storytelling, and what Alistair Cormack identifies as a preoccupation with "the ethics of fiction" (Cormack 70), translate to the cinematic medium. How, we will ask, is Briony's problematic (re)writing of the past in *Atonement* conserved in the film and expressed in cinematic terms, focusing particularly on the use of music and intradiegetic sound? Special attention will be paid to how questions of predestination and anticipation in the first part of the novel are rendered cinematically, as well issues related to fiction and reality within the film world. We will also consider whether the film avoids the pitfalls of costume drama and the British heritage industry with an analysis of melodrama and nostalgia in the film. In this vein, we will also be asking how the film treats the novel's rewriting of the national myths of Dunkirk and the home front.

Adaptation, specificity and fidelity

First of all, we must address the film's status as adaptation. Much critical theory surrounding adaptation seems to gravitate around the twin notions of "specificity" and "fidelity". Specificity, as Timothy Corrigan explains, "assumes that different representational practices, such as literature and film, have individual material and formal structures that distinguish and differentiate them" (Corrigan 31) from each other. "Conversely," he continues, fidelity "purportedly measures the extent to which a work of literature has been accurately recreated (or not)" as cinema (31). As Corrigan goes on to explain, the fidelity and specificity models would seem to be incompatible, if not antithetical: after all, how can a film be faithful to its literary source material when its means of expression are largely very different?

Emphasizing specificity could, however, lead to a further dogma: that is to say, that the only useful way of analysing adaptation is through an analysis of those elements specific to its medium (i.e., editing, camerawork, sound etc.). As V.F. Perkins argued in 1972, "systematically emphasizing the cinema's properties as a visual medium […] neglects or denigrates the aspects which the movie shares with [other] narrative

forms" (Perkins 24). While Perkins was arguing against a tendency in film criticism at the time which was to champion cinematic specificity vis-à-vis other mediums, his argument has relevance to adaptation studies today. Film is a heterogeneous art form that has its unique forms of expression but also borrows and deploys techniques from other narrative media: to focus on editing and camerawork alone is to neglect other parts of a film's discourse.

Most critics in adaptation studies now prefer to talk in terms of intertextuality and the dialogic relationship between a film and other works, since the "way we respond to any film will be in part the result of those other texts and influences we inescapably bring to bear on our viewing" (McFarlane 26). This is certainly an appropriate approach to Joe Wright's *Atonement*, given that the source novel is itself so densely intertextual[1]. But Matthew Bolton takes the argument further, suggesting we must not nevertheless neglect the most important intertext of all, "the special relationship between an adaptation and its source material", which is, after all, "the one thing that distinguishes adaptation studies from textual study in general" (Bolton 24). We argue that it is therefore possible to assess the film's effects in terms of both specificity *and* fidelity, its uniquely cinematic solutions to foregrounding and, indeed, dialoguing with, many of the preoccupations of Ian McEwan's source novel.

Sound and vision

Much attention has been paid to the film's soundtrack and, in particular, the use of the typewriter in the score as a percussive element. Indeed, the film won an Oscar for its original soundtrack. Much of the praise has rightly focused on the way that this unconventional scoring enables the film to harness the novel's metafictional discourse on (re)writing; how the events of the past are subject to later narrativization by the elderly Bryony, looking back on the "crime" for which she is impelled to atone. Arguably less attention has been paid, however, to the effect this

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[1] See, for example: "While its story of the relationship between two sisters seems to draw on many texts, from Austen's *Sense and Sensibility* to George Eliot's *Middlemarch*, *Atonement* is a novel in the country-house tradition for its first section […]. Perhaps most of all, however, Atonement recalls the work of Henry James, whose *What Maisie Knew*, along with L.P. Hartley's *The Go-Between*, stands behind McEwan's story of an adult world seen through the eyes of a child." (Childs 172)

has on the film's narrative, and how it might serve the novel's ethical dimension on the rewriting of national myths.

The film's opening scene sets the tone. The words "Atonement" are typewritten in white block capitals onto a black screen; the keystrokes and carriage returns emphatically audible. This is followed by a shot of a doll's house, while the camera then pans back to show assorted toy animals and laid out across a child's bedroom floor. The speed of the pan seems to trace the increasingly rhythmic sound of the keys being struck. The typewriting continues as Briony is shown to be putting the finishing touches to her manuscript, which she completes with an emphatic "The End". Another repeated keystroke, this time that of a piano, joins the score and we sense that the typewriting has a rhythm to it to which other sonic elements are starting to coalesce. As Briony leaves the room the keystrokes have become a steady percussion, the progressive forward movement of which is matched by Briony's purposeful striding through the house.

What is key to these establishing shots is that the typewriter serves to accentuate and, moreover, to *accelerate* the action. Film music is most commonly and conventionally used to emphasize what we see on screen, often artificially guiding our responses; yet there is nothing innately naturalistic about it. After all, as Robert Stam explains, all film sound which is "not immediately "anchored" in the image […] is by definition anti-illusionistic," but its function in guiding viewer response and "oil[ing] the wheels of narrative continuity" (Stam 264) has become so conventional as to seem naturalistic. Joe Wright's *Atonement* seems to play with this very paradox. The use of the typewriter both underscores a sense of unease and suspense, as it might do in traditional scoring, while at the same time drawing attention to its unconventional components. The first typewriting we hear is, after all, "anchored" in the image. That is, of course, unless we assume that the rendering of the title, *Atonement*, before the opening scene, is actually attributable to the 77-year-old Briony, recounting events years after.

It is interesting to note that Christopher Hampton had originally envisaged a narrative "framed by the return" (Hampton vi) of the elderly Briony to Tallis House which has since been converted into a hotel. As he explains in his introduction to *The Shooting*

Script, Throughout the film "the voice of the old writer" was to be heard occasionally "reflecting on the implications of this or that event" and even "glimpsed occasionally like a ghost from the future" (vi). This reconfiguration of McEwan's narrative was jettisoned as Joe Wright insisted the original sequencing of events be restored[2]. For Yvonne Griggs, this "open declaration of a desire for fidelity to the source text" also "negates the […] tired debates usually engendered by studies of screen adaptations of literary classics", leaving us to examine instead the way the director and screenwriter "render the postmodern subtleties of the novel within the very different parameters of cinema" (Griggs 346). Furthermore, it could be argued that, as part of film's *paratext*[3], Hampton's *Shooting Script* remarks inform and enrich our understanding of the film's discourse. After all, the typewriter's intrusion in the score constitutes something of a "ghost from the future" with similar, if arguably subtler, implications for narrative discourse.

Curiously, however, it is not just the typewriter that is percussive. In these opening scenes a number of intradiegetic sounds also fall into the rhythm of the music, from Briony's removal of the paper from the typewriter and her placement of the manuscript on the table, to her footsteps in the corridors and the preparation of beds by domestic staff in the rooms past which she walks. Everything is in step, as if synchronized. One way of interpreting this oddly choreographed vision of the world is that we are being offered something of Briony's perspective, the love of order and "symmetry[4]" that derives from and informs her early literary efforts.

We could also call this a visual expression of Carl Jung's theory of synchronicity or "meaningful coincidence", where events are connected in the psyche by "simultaneity and meaning" (Jung 69). For Jung, such phenomena, often seemingly

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[2] See Hampton vi: "Joe [Wright] wasted no time in uttering one of those formulae that strike dread into a screenwriter's heart. […] He said: "I'd like to start from scratch." Furthermore, he meant it. But the good news was he knew what he wanted: to bring the screenplay back even closer to the form of the novel, and he had good, specific ideas of how this might be done."

[3] As Robert Stam explains, following Gérard Genette's conception of the term, a work's "paratext" consists in part of "all the accessory messages and commentaries that come to surround the text and which at times becomes virtually indistinguishable from it." (Stam 25)

[4] See in the novel, for example: "the affair was too consistent, too symmetrical to be anything other than what [Briony] said it was. […] Her eyes confirmed the sum of all she knew and had recently experienced. The truth was in the symmetry" (McEwan 168-169).

unaccounted for by the laws of cause and effect, “expresses itself in the arrangement of events and appears to us as meaning” (69). While Jung was trying to account for the human experience of supernatural or psychic phenomena, there is no suggestion that anything occurring in *Atonement*, either the novel or film, cannot be explained by rational or causal means. Nevertheless, the first part of the film is imbued with a kind of *clicking-into-gear* where the events around the characters seem to fall into a significant, synchronous, and seemingly synchronized pattern.

The film’s synchronicity is important for two reasons. Firstly, we later learn – as in the novel – that what we are seeing is an event in the distant past the significance of which has already been established. Almost all cinema offers “a sequence of privileged moments during which actions achieve a clarity and intensity seldom found in everyday life,” and which “are brought into a more immediate, dynamic and revealing relationship” (Perkins 69). But in Joe Wright’s *Atonement*, this relationship is particularly marked, in part due to the typewriting in the score. Of course, on one hand, the effect is self-reflexive: the film is not disguising the relationship between its own momentum and the written constructs of narrative. Moreover, this is the cinematic way that Joe Wright and Christopher Hampton chose to render one of the overlooked characteristics and effects of the novel, namely the proleptic allusions to the future throughout the first part. Some of these allude to the narrating instance of Briony’s final draft, some “six decades later” (McEwan 41), while elsewhere, when Briony refers *forward* to her “crime[5]”, it creates at once anticipation and a framing distance. We are alerted to the fact that something of import is going to happen, and simultaneously asked to consider it as something of a done deal, akin to predestination.

In terms of cinematic discourse, the accentuating and distancing effects of the music could be said to parallel the “posthumous ironies[6]” posited by Cecilia, and her curious sensation that the events of the day “had happened a long time ago, and

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[5] See, for example: “Within the half hour Briony would commit her crime” (McEwan 156).

[6] See, for example: “All day long, [Cecilia] realised, she had been feeling strange, and seeing strangely, as though everything was already long in the past, made more vivid by posthumous ironies she could not quite grasp” (McEwan 48).

[that] all outcomes, on all scales […] were already in place" (McEwan 53). Cecilia's overwhelming feeling of *déjà vu* is of course attributable to the hidden narrator within the novel that is Briony. Such authorial asides also produce an effect of fatedness and pre-destination on the characters, replicated in the film. But despite the distancing effect such self-reflexivity might produce, we are – as in the novel – enjoined to the story's suspense.

The film's synchronicity is also manifest in the scene where Robbie accidentally hands Briony the wrong letter, referred to in the novel as the "obscene draft" (McEwan 94). As Robbie puts on his dinner jacket and brushes his hair, we sense an odd clicking-into-gear. Three times he strikes his zippo lighter before putting the letter into an envelope. The intradiegetic sounds are conventionally accentuated, but curiously synchronous. The camera follows him leaving the room to audible footsteps, with the same forward drive as in the opening sequence, and he pats the envelope twice in quick succession against the edge of the open door. His footsteps continue as he makes his way along the path, perhaps thinking about "time". For in this same sequence of the novel, Robbie reflects: "his shoes rapped loudly on the […] road like a giant clock, and he made himself think about time […]. He had never before felt […] such impatience for the story to begin" (McEwan 92). Robbie's taking the wrong letter engages him into a pattern of events beyond his control, expressed cinematically through the rhythmic undercurrent of sound. To borrow a cliché, his fate, with the letter, is signed, sealed and delivered. Moreover, Robbie's nervous yet pleasurable anticipation of the evening ahead is underwritten with a cruel irony. In the novel this is expressed as Robbie's dreams for the future, in the film as an inexorable movement towards a series of fated events.

Like the giant clock of Robbie's imagination, the clock is ultimately ticking on his life. That he encounters Briony *en route* thrashing destructively at some shrubs to this same rhythm is no coincidence; it is, after all, the recklessness of her fabulations that will have such a detrimental effect on his life. Incidentally, when he hands Briony the letter, we hear the buzz of a fly or wasp, which echoes similar intrusions elsewhere, most overtly in the scene by the fountain as it is witnessed by Briony from the upstairs window. In this earlier scene, the wasp seems to signify different forms of

entrapment: firstly, that of Cecilia and Robbie, who are transformed in more ways than one into characters in another person's story. But also, Briony herself, who like a wasp struggling against a window is trapped by the illusion of an unmediated reality. While the wasp cannot fathom the surface that blocks its path, Briony cannot see the true nature of the "dumb show" (McEwan 41) in the garden below. Like a wasp again, and to borrow another cliché, there is a sting to Briony's tail/tale. Her fabulations have tremendous real-life consequences which we must not lose sight of when considering *Atonement*'s ethics, even in light of its play of realities.

Robbie's subsequent realization of the mistake is expressed visually by the intercutting of those synchronous earlier moments again: the striking of the lighter, the letter sliding into the envelope, the tap of the letter on the door. The music reaches a crescendo as Briony frantically opens the letter, the typewriter underscoring not only the mood of predestination but also the power of the written word, with Briony absorbing the contents of the "obscene draft" almost as an act of violence. The scene ends with her staring at the letter in the empty hallway, the only other sound, incidentally, coming from the grandfather clock, emphasizing once again the passage of time and the synchronous quality of what we see.

A modern heritage film?

Another important function of the music is the way it adds a modern *sensibility* to period drama. Joe Wright has established his career on the back of highbrow literary adaptation, with *Atonement* bracketed by his 2005 film version of *Pride & Prejudice* and, in 2012, *Ana Karenina*. There was a risk that the Working Title production would be heavy on period nostalgia and light on the source novel's more complex themes. For most first-time viewers, and certainly those unfamiliar with the novel, the "location shoot at Stokesay Court in Shropshire provid[es] the kind of visual splendor more readily associated with Heritage cinema" (Griggs 351). *Heritage cinema* has become a mostly pejorative byword for a nostalgic mode of filmmaking "suffused with the charm of manners and costume and basking in the warm glow of the past", which has made "adaptation central to the mythology of Britain in international cinema" (Caughie 208). Certainly, in Joe Wright's *Atonement*, we find ourselves a long way from the Tallis House of the novel, which McEwan was at pains to represent as "an

ugly place" with a "bright red façade" (McEwan 363) and a crumbling temple conceived to "enhance the pastoral ideal" but since given way to "a mottled, diseased appearance" (McEwan 72). That this is glossed over in the film alerts us to the commercial interest in shooting at grand heritage locations, which are "filmed with an eye to British and especially international markets" and "reiterate […] long-standing conventions of literary adaptation" (Pidduck 28).

Some critics have argued that Wright deliberately undermines these heritage signifiers by highlighting the "theatricality of the country house setting and the 1930s dialogue" (Geraghty 366). The opening shot of Briony's doll's house is echoed later with a similar shot of Tallis House, which reveals the toy to be a replica. Like the animals amassed on the bedroom floor, Briony and Cecilia are shown from above "as tiny figures lying on the lawn", one of a number of instances in the first part of the film where "actors are often posed picturesquely […] or set against a striking piece of furniture" (366). For those initiated to the narrative through the novel, we might grasp the insinuation: what we are seeing is the *mise en scène* of the day's events by Briony the narrator some six decades later. The visual echo also attests to the destructive power of the childhood Briony's fiction-making on the lives of others. As Christine Geraghty also observes, the shot of Briony's toy animals suggests a representation of "Noah's ark" (366), surely a veiled reference to the elderly Briony's ruminations on the God-like powers of authorship in the novel[7].

It is interesting to note that although Wright made his name with 2005's *Pride & Prejudice*, he in fact started in the filmmaking business having produced visuals for rave events. The synchronous character of the film and its sound design might owe a debt to this more contemporaneous interest in the interlockings of sound and image. The score's propulsive percussion, even if a typewriter in itself is hardly modern, infuses the film with a dynamism that serves as a counterpoint to the film's heritage conventions. Joe Wright's *Atonement* thus shares some DNA with Robert Altman's *Gosford Park* (2001), which also investigates heritage or costume cinema from the

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[7] See, for example: "… how can a novelist achieve atonement when, with her absolute power of deciding outcomes, she is also God? […] In her imagination she has set the limits and the terms." (*McEwan* 371)

inside out; that is to say, by playfully critiquing while not entirely disavowing the genre[8]. Such a self-reflexive subset of costume drama could be considered what Fredric Jameson refers to as a cinema of “postnostalgia”, in which a “properly allegorical processing of the past becomes possible” (Jameson 371). Much as in Altman’s film, Joe Wright’s metafictional strategies largely stop the film from wallowing in period nostalgia and also engage with the way in which we represent the past.

(Re)writing the past

The rhythmic or propulsive undercurrent to the film’s sound design also bookends the section depicting Briony’s experiences as a nurse in London. This sequence begins with the typewriter underscoring a shot of nurses being led through the corridors of a hospital, marching in unison behind the ward sister in quasi-military fashion, the clump-clump of their footsteps and the keystrokes virtually synchronous. In a subsequent scene, Briony is shown again walking down the hospital corridor while a radio broadcasting news of events in France is heard in the background. As she approaches, the lights above her are turned on one by one as if illuminating her entrance progressively, the sound of the switch redolent once again of a clock ticking or a typewriter keystroke. Here a new element of discourse is introduced, and an important one in the novel too. Part of Briony’s atonement consists of eschewing university to work as a nurse, and parallels are established between the dehumanizing discipline and impersonality of this work with that of the military[9].

The section ends with Briony returning from a visit to her sister and Robbie’s shabby post-war flat. As the camera pans towards Briony seated in an Underground train

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[8] For a more detailed analysis of self-reflexivity and costume drama in Robert Altman’s *Gosford Park*, see Dalrymple, James, “Jouer au detective chez Kazuo Ishiguro et dans le *whodunit* métafictionnel britannique”, PhD thesis, Université de Grenoble-Alpes, 2017. https://hal.archives-ouvertes.fr/ILCEA4/tel-01742516v1. Accessed 6 June 2018.

[9] See, for example: “The uniform, like all uniforms, eroded identity […]. By the time the girls were ready to start […] work in the wards […] under Sister Drummond, and to submit to the daily routine “from bedpan to Bovril,” their previous lives were becoming indistinct. Their minds had emptied to some extent […] so that they were easily persuaded of the absolute authority of the ward sister. There could be no resistance as she filled their vacated minds. […] It was never said, but the model behind this process was military.” (McEwan, 276)

carriage, that familiar hammering keystroke resumes. Even if we are alerted here to the act of writing, we are surely not to interpret this as some attempt to undermine the veracity of what we saw of hospital life in earlier scenes. Here, the emphasis is rather on Briony's need to relate not just her wartime experiences but the sacrifices and traumas of the home front in general, and particularly those of women. Just as the myths of Dunkirk need to be rewritten, the home front deserves greater attention in the popular imagination.

We could argue that the film thus retains something of the book's gradual distancing from the pastoral unworldliness of the country-house novel which, for Raymond Williams, came to signify "a narrowing of people and situations to those capable" of "an individual moral action", and a "class England in which only certain histories matter" (Williams 180). In McEwan's novel the "relative isolation" (McEwan 5) of Tallis House as described in the first part succumbs to the social transformations of the period, notably when working-class Londoners are evacuated there for their safety during the Blitz. Just as Briony's "individual moral action[s]" have consequences in the world beyond the home in which she was raised, Tallis House itself will soon no longer be the exclusive playground of "a class England in which only certain histories matter".

Although the lavishness of the location shoot in the first part could open it to accusations of nostalgia for a time of more settled class distinctions, the retention of the broader story of Briony's redemption, or lack thereof, is important. Briony's implication in Dunkirk through nursing and her rejection of Oxbridge in both novel and film represent not only a form of atonement for her crime, but penance for her privilege. The fact that Robbie and Cecilia die, respectively, at Dunkirk and in the Blitz, is significant. As historian David Kynaston argues, these two events above all led to "an impatient, almost aggressive mood decrying privilege and demanding 'fair shares' for all" and social reforms of "a universalist, egalitarian nature" (Kynaston 40), namely the post-war establishment of the National Health Service and modern welfare state.

The question of heritage nostalgia has implications for the war sequences. One could argue that the virtuoso Steadicam shot in the Dunkirk sequence is in itself

dishonest due to its dreamlike aesthetics, and therefore a repetition of Briony's own stylistic evasions in the novel. As Alistair Cormack argues, McEwan's *Atonement* criticizes both "the moralistic simplicity of melodrama in Briony's naïve *Trials of Arabella* and the amoralistic disengagement of modernism in her later work" (Cormack 77). This is particularly evident in the real-life publisher Cyril Connolly's fictional rejection of Briony's novella *Two Figures by a Fountain*, criticizing its dependence on "Bergsonian theories of consciousness" (McEwan 314) to the detriment of character and plot. As Cormack goes on to explain, "Connolly's reference is to Henri Bergson's theory, so influential on modernist aesthetics, that the consciousness […] is constantly changing due to present impressions integrating with past memories" (Cormack 75). Notably, it is the "sort of 'point of view' modernism" (77) that characterizes the work of Virginia Woolf, a writer whose influence on Briony her publisher is quick to identify.

Of the Dunkirk sequence, Laura Bulger suggests that the "epic tableau shown on the screen, brushed here and there with patriotic strokes, fails to convey the cynical embittered portrait" of the evacuation in the novel (Bulger 155). Bulger also points out that Franco-British relations are made "politically correct" (152) in the scenes of comradeship between the troops and the local men who come to bring them food, while the antipathy towards the perceived unwillingness of the French "to fight for their own country" (McEwan 234), depicted in the novel, is missing from the film. While we concur that the tone of the sequence is less embittered than that of the novel, in which the collapse of morale and authority is more pronounced, there is no doubt that the film retains the novel's broad aim to "challenge […] the national, still prevailing myth of Dunkirk" (Alden 57), by which a military catastrophe has somehow transformed, in the popular imagination, into a victory. There is no victory in the film, only a collapse into chaos that recalls similarly impressionistic war films such as *Apocalypse Now*. It is also evident that the surreal quality of these scenes reflects Robbie's delirious state of mind as he slowly dies from septicaemia. In the novel, Robbie also refers a number of times to the dreamlike and nightmarish character of

the evacuation[10]. The sequence also captures much of the chaos of Dunkirk as it is represented in the novel in which McEwan too focuses on the hellish carnival atmosphere of the beach resort as it is appropriated by a marauding and demoralized British Expeditionary Force[11].

Despite the dreamlike qualities of the sequence in the film, there is still a preoccupation with truth-telling the runs through the narrative. Just as Robbie ruminates in the novel on how Dunkirk would come to be explained in the future history books[12], in the imagined confrontation with Briony in London after the war he impels her to make a detailed, written and signed confession of what happened recovering everything that she remembered of the night of Lola's rape. As in the novel, and as Briony's final television confession underlines, the truth matters.

A cinema of melodrama

It is also worth pointing out that Joe Wright has expressed an affection for English melodrama of the kind typified by David Lean's *Brief Encounter* (1945)[13], as evidenced in scenes where the film does indeed flirt with mawkishness. The scene in which Robbie and Cecilia meet in London before his departure for combat, and particularly the parting shot of Cecilia driven away on the back of a Routemaster bus, is a case in point. An argument could be made that such moments somehow

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[10] See, for example: "The horizontal apparition hovered in the sky without growing larger, and though he was beginning to understand its meaning, it was, as in a dream, impossible to respond or move his limbs. […] Dreamlike too was the way he could not move his legs fast enough" (McEwan 221-222). And again: "The rich soil was clinging to his boots. Only in nightmares were feet so heavy" (237).

[11] The following description is matched quite closely in Joe Wright's representation: "To the left was the resort of Bray, a cheerful front of cafés and little shops that in a normal season would be renting out beach chairs and pedal bikes. […] Soldiers had opened up the cafés for themselves and were getting drunk at the tables outside, bawling and laughing. Men were larking about on the bikes along a pavement stained with vomit. […] A solitary sunbather in his underpants, face-down on a towel, had patches of uneven sunburn on his shoulders and legs—pink and white like a strawberry and vanilla ice cream" (McEwan 249).

[12] See, for example: "Who could ever describe this confusion, and come up with the village names and the dates for the history books? […] No one would ever know what it was like to be here. Without the details there could be no larger picture" (McEwan 227).

[13] See, for example: "I was brought up on films like Brief Encounter" (Gritten 2007)

constitute Briony's melodramatic reimagining of the moment, something that could also be made about the scene in which Briony visits Cecilia and Robbie in London after the war, an event we quickly learn never took place. As Briony leaves their home, the camera pans away from the building and the couple are seen through the window in a passionate embrace, the curtains billowing suggestively. If here the signifiers once again point to classic melodrama, the illusion is swiftly pierced. This, we learn from the elderly Briony minutes later, is the happy ending that Briony wanted for the couple, and we need not therefore take it at face value. This does not render the melodrama unproblematic, however, as it belies the elderly Briony's passage to more serious literary forms. Are we not supposed to believe, for instance, that Briony left behind such clichés, along with her childhood efforts such as *Trials of Arabella*, at Tallis House?

Others have linked these moments of melodrama to more overtly self-reflexive scenes in the film, such as when Robbie stumbles almost inexplicably into a cinema in the Dunkirk sequence. As Yvonne Griggs argues, Robbie's meandering across the screen showing a romantic scene from *Le Quai des Brumes* (1938) foregrounds "the constructed nature of the romantic "realities" presented in this film text" (Griggs 354). It is interesting to note that while one might attribute this filmic self-reflexivity to the need to substitute some of McEwan's dense web of literary allusion into cinematic terms, the novel itself features several similar motifs. Robbie, for example, "indulge[s] a cinema fantasy: [Cecilia] pounded against his lapels before yielding with a little sob to the safe enclosure of his arms" (McEwan 80). Similarly, when the sexual tension between Robbie and Cecilia is (partially) released in the library, Robbie reflects: "As their faces drew closer he was uncertain enough to think she might spring away, or hit him, movie-style, across the cheek with an open hand" (135).

Both in the novel and film the allusion to cinema is double-edged. It may certainly point to the constructiveness of what we see, but not self-referentiality for its own sake. The references to cinema are not without affect, they also allude to Robbie's youthful inexperience in matters of love. Like surely many of his generation, he was killed in combat before he could enjoy a fully physical relationship. His notions of

sexual contact are borrowed from film, just as in the novel he is reminded of more carnal passages from literature, notably *Lady Chatterley's Lover*[14].

These allusions also highlight the tragic consequences of Briony's lies in preventing the realization of Robbie and Cecilia's dreams. As Robbie reflects after his and Cecilia's interrupted tryst in the library, "this was no fantasy […], this was his near future", before quoting Shakespeare: "'nothing that can be can come between me and the full prospect of my hopes'" (McEwan 131). As Matthew Bolton argues, when Robbie meanders across the cinema screen in Dunkirk, the effect is not only self-reflexive: "Wright calls special attention to the gap between *Le Quai*'s fictional ontology, represented by a pair of lovers embracing, and the storyworld of Dunkirk, characterized by death and separation" (Bolton 42). We are alerted to the fact that while Robbie is separated from Cecilia by only a few dozen miles, the "full prospect of [his] hopes" will never be realized. Like the wasp struggling against the window, the screen is a dead-end for Robbie, signifying his own struggle against an illusion, namely that his life will simply "resume" after the war, a fantasy he refers to several times in the novel[15] and film.

A picture postcard England?

At the end of the film, Robbie and Cecilia are seen reunited at the cottage by the sea pictured in the postcard he carries with him in France. This seems to be the scene that has generated most controversy, for it follows Briony's televised confession that Robbie and Cecilia are in fact dead, and never did meet again after the war. This leads us to speculate as to what we are seeing in the final scenes: is this the happy ending that Briony wrote for the couple in her autobiographical novel but has since disavowed? For Yvonne Griggs, the final scene not only offers "two narrative possibilities from which to create our own final story design" (Griggs 349) but

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[14] "[Robbie] had been about to conjure for her […] a memory of reading the Orioli edition of *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, which he had bought under the counter in Soho" (McEwan 132)

[15] See, for example: "The prospect was of a rebirth, a triumphant return. He could become again the man who had once crossed a Surrey park at dusk in his best suit, swaggering on the promise of life […]. The story would resume, the one that he had been planning on that evening walk. […] He would simply resume …" (McEwan 227)

"encourages us to choose the anticipated Hollywood-style ending […] and in so doing asks us to acknowledge the power of genre cinema" (370). Christine Geraghty takes a similar position, arguing that the sequence reiterates the foregrounding of cinema throughout the wartime section and constitutes "a "happy ending" in which the mechanics of cinema are exposed" (Geraghty 370).

The problem with these interpretations is in the conception of the ending as a "happy" one. We argue that the manifest falseness of scene is not just to alert us to the manipulative power of cinema but to Robbie and Cecilia's pathos-ridden aspirations to simply "resume" their lives after the war. This falseness, we suggest, does not necessarily distance us from their tragedy and the terrible human cost of conflict. The postcard is a vital signifier in this respect, representing for Robbie an unattainable fantasy, just like *Le Quai des Brumes*. For while its white cliffs seem to symbolize a kind of anti-Dunkirk onto which he projects his future, the scene represented on the postcard is deliberately ambiguous. The white cliffs are not in fact those of Dover, but Cuckmere Haven on the East Sussex coast. As Laura Bulger reminds us, the Dunkirk sequence features soldiers' singing *The White Cliffs of Dover*, as popularized by Vera Lynn, even though it was written after the events described in the film (Bulger 154). Could this have in fact been a deliberate attempt to mislead the audience, as implied by the fact the location of the final sequence is not specified in the film, but hinted at indirectly? And could the ambiguity of the cottage's location in fact be telling us something? The fact that one, as Geraghty[16] and Matthew Bolton[17] do, assumes it is Dover, underlines the efficacy of the illusion. It is possible the deception is a sop thrown to heritage industry norms, to aestheticize Dover by making it more splendiferous than it really is. But reading the novel again suggests that the sequence's location has greater significance *vis-à-vis* the film's discourse. There we discover that the eponymous heroine of Briony's melodrama

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[16] "The white cliffs of Dover shine in the background […] and the house is perfectly positioned in its natural surroundings, far from the urban threat of bombed cities" (Geraghty 369).

[17] "The two climb up the dunes to a white house overlooking the ocean and the Dover cliffs; the film ends with this shot, the physical incarnation of the image on Cecilia's postcard" (Bolton 45).

The Trials of Arabella runs away with her lover to Eastbourne[18], just a few miles from Cuckmere Haven along the Sussex coast. The final sequence is not only a postcard image of England, but one that derives from Briony's early melodramatic fantasies.

Although we accept that Joe Wright might be asking us to question our *desire* to see the couple reunited, much as McEwan does, does the scene genuinely constitute an alternative reality the spectator is free to choose? It is very clear what Robbie and Cecilia's true fate is; the fact that the news of their actual, separate deaths is delivered in a television confessional, outside of the framing of the primary narrative, very starkly underlines this (as it does in the novel). Rather, the final sequence derives from a postcard image of a future that has to be pried from Robbie's lifeless hands by his comrade Nettle. Deliberately unworldly and detached from time, the sequence is a dream of a pastoral England that would not and could not return after the war, not only for Robbie and Cecilia but for countless others. Without the postcard we might be left to ponder the play of realities; hence its importance *vis-à-vis* the film's discourse.

The question of whether the viewer is offered a choice of realities in the final sequence is also vital to our understanding of the film's representation of the war. For Yvonne Griggs, the Dunkirk sequence is undermined by a later inclusion of newsreel footage of the soldiers' return from Dunkirk, arguing that it leads us to "question the veracity of historical constructions of "truth" and blurring the boundaries between fact and fiction" (Griggs 350). She goes on to conclude that both film and novel infer that "all truth is potentially a web of fictions sewn together" (350) by an unreliable author. Yet the novel does not relativize reality in this way. Briony's struggle to represent the past honestly and truthfully are a vital part of the novel's discourse, despite her attempts to give a happy ending to Robbie and Cecilia. One might consider that the radical undermining of the novel's ontology in the coda establishes a problematizing uncertainty regarding narrative in general that renders all realities ultimately equal. However, this would to be to underestimate the importance of Briony's lies in the novel, and its relationship to her attempts to

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[18] See the "Prologue" to *The Trials of Arabella*: "It grieved her parents to see their first born / Evanesce from her home to go to Eastbourne / Without permission … " (McEwan 16)

aestheticize the past through literary, and particularly *modernist* style. As Alistair McCormack argues, “If Briony must learn to rid herself of her literary imagination then British culture must, too, divest itself of its controlling myths”, namely “the notion of the ‘Dunkirk Spirit’[19]”. The use of period newsreel footage is not to suggest that all ‘truths’ are equal but rather to critique the propaganda effort. Although the footage shows largely cheerful soldiers being received with refreshments upon return, it is accompanied by unambiguously melancholy music, and is shown to be a screening in the hospital for an audience of much more demoralized-looking and injured soldiers, echoing similar sentiments in the novel.

Despite the artifice of the Dunkirk section, we are not led to question core truths about the scale of the military defeat in France and the chaos of the evacuation, any more than we are supposed to question the harsh sacrifices faced by people, and women in particular, on the home front. As Natasha Alden argued the novel explores what “fiction *can* do with history that history *cannot*” (Alden 59). The same is true of the film: the truth may be problematized, but not relativized. Despite the film’s melodramatic scenes and the glossy production values of costume drama, Joe Wright is careful to stay true to the discourse of the novel, replacing some of McEwan’s literary allusion with a focus on cinematic self-reflexivity. And in spite of this trickery, there is no waning of affect. While we might be invited to meditate on the power of cinema to create illusions, we are also brought to consider the power of those illusions on people. While Robbie and Cecilia’s fantasies of a future together might point to the constructedness of the medium, it does not make their delusion any less poignant.

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[19] Cormack, « Ethics of Fiction in *Atonement* », p. 80.

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