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Atonement in Adaptation
by
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Master of Arts

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Atonement in Adaptation

By

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B.A., Samford University, 2012

Advisor: Daniel Reynolds, Ph.D.

An abstract of
A thesis submitted to the Faculty of the
James T. Laney School of Graduate Studies of Emory University
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Abstract

Atonement in Adaptation
by Drew DeVine

Theorists of film adaptation have tended towards premature foreclosure regarding questions of fidelity, authorship, and evaluation. Assuming that advances in theory have settled such questions, they invoke the authority of poststructuralism to rid adaptation studies of moralistic and modernist traces which place the importance of literary values above engaging the full context of a given adaptation. This thesis suggests that a reopening of such questions is necessitated, in the spirit of poststructuralism's lessons, to do thorough contextual justice to certain adaptations.

Atonement (a novel [2001] by Ian McEwan and a film adaptation [2007] directed by Joe Wright) provides an especially ripe space for such a reopening, as both the novel and the film are read as interacting with the survival of the modernist goal to capture/adapt reality through the secular-mystical facility of the author. Taking novel and film together as what André Bazin called an "ideal construct" provides a context in which to analyze how a film's status as an adaptation both complicates and enhances its quality of prestige.

This, in turn, reveals complex relations of authority and evaluation which provoke questions about the limits of institutional film writing (whether journalistic or academic). These questions are responded to with a demonstration of a kind of academic film writing which seeks to limit the excesses of interpretation not through rationalistic skepticism, but with a sensuous attentiveness to the specifics of the filmic surface.

Further, the conventionalized advertising of prestigious film adaptations is shown, in the case of *Atonement*, to represent both the novel and the film in a way which threatens to erase, in the eyes of the public, some of the interesting "authorial" tensions elaborated here, while also potentially preserving and enhancing some of their strangest qualities.

By following up on provocative notion of the "ideal construct," this thesis arrives at new understandings of an important novel and film while occasioning a space for a different kind of film writing. Together, these gestures participate in broader debates concerning "rationality" in film studies, and how to ground the discipline, instead, in the search for productive disagreement.

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Preface

Argumentative Introduction

Adaptation theory is meant, among other things, to help us think about certain film adaptations. But *Atonement*'s attraction as a subject lies in its capacity to upset one's plans for it. It at once appears a typical adaptation—nothing like a Charlie Kaufman *Adaptation* (2001) or an *Apocalypse Now* (1979)—while also seeming *sui generis* upon all rigorous attempts to reduce it to a simple genre or mode. Its presentation of itself (in one of its versions) as a traditional heritage film allows its millennial strangeness to persist in surprising viewers.

In an equivalent gesture, the goal of this thesis is not only to put forward a line of argumentation about what is the case with *Atonement*. It is also a demonstration of how thinking *Atonement*-in-adaptation might act as a kind of Trojan horse within adaptation studies. In other words, it is a line of argumentation about some academic attitudes toward adapation, through the prism of a reading of *Atonement*. It shows how taking *Atonement* the novel and *Atonement* the film together as an "ideal construct"—following, in part, André Bazin and Colin MacCabe—gives us a lens with which to do a simultaneously wide-ranging, controlled, and thorough exploration of the structuring assumptions of key debates in adaptation studies.

Although the bulk of this thesis sees *Atonement* speaking to controversies in academic adaptation studies proper, I believe that these academic problems can themselves be taken as (also, but not simply) indicative of flexible attitudes towards adaptation which preceded academic intervention.

Presupposing *Atonement*

This thesis was written with the assumption that its readers had seen *Atonement* recently (a fresh viewing of its first 45 minutes especially), and ideally would have read the book as well. In a certain sense, *Atonement* could be said to be highly "true to the spirit" of the novel's *plot*, if not necessarily its cumulative feeling. In my mind the most significant difference between the two in the sense of *what happens* is that of the ending. Tasha Robinson's "Book vs. Film" article for the *The A.V. Club* does a good job of covering the essentials of this change:

> Finally, the film ends sparingly, with Briony's revelation—at the taping of a television talk show–that she's dying, that she wants to clear the air, and that what we saw earlier of Robbie and Cecilia was a fiction she wrote. And then Wright and Hampton show the lovers together, in an imagined—and, once again typically for the movie–dialogue-free, almost silent scene. The book, on the other hand, gives Briony a lengthy, detailed wrap-up, talking about her life as a senior citizen, how her career progressed during the time McEwan elided, and what happened to various family members, including Paul and Lola, who apparently had a happy marriage and went on to be fantastically rich, much-respected members of the community. Toward the end, Briony attends a birthday party at her childhood home, with some 50 relatives, and the children perform The Trials Of Arabella, the play she wrote as a child, in the opening scenes of the book and the film. When she makes her confession about what happened to Robbie and Cecilia, it's alone, at night, to her writing, though it's clear because of her fame that the story will eventually come out.

The Ideal Construct

In *True to the Spirit: Film Adaptation and the Question of Fidelity* (2011) Colin MacCabe unearths a single phrase from André Bazin in order to challenge current anti-fidelity trends in adaptation studies: the "ideal construct." Writing in 1948, before George Bluestone's influential text in adaptation theory almost a decade later (*Novels into Film* [1957]), Bazin muses:

> All things considered, it's possible to imagine that we are moving toward a reign of the adaptation in which the notion of the unity of the work of art, if not the very notion of the author himself, will be destroyed. If the film that was made of Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* (1940; dir Lewis Milestone) had been successful (it could have been so, and far more easily than the adaptation of the same author's *Grapes of Wrath*), the (literary?) critic of the year 2050 would find not a novel out of which a play and a film had been "made," but rather a single work reflected through three art forms, an artistic pyramid with three sides, all equal in the eyes of the critic. The "work" would then be only an ideal point at the top of this figure which itself is an ideal construct. The chronological precedence of one part over another would not be an aesthetic criterion any more than the chronological precedence of one twin over the other is a genealogical one ("Adaptation," 49-50).

MacCabe then turns over this passage and its key term to the various contributors to the volume, including voices as different as Dudley Andrew, Tom Gunning, James Naremore, Laura Mulvey, Rick Warner, and Fredric Jameson. These scholars, including MacCabe in his own introductory chapter, all use the concept of the "ideal construct" differently—it is not necessarily either "ideal" or a "construct" in the same way for each

scholar. This thesis will put the concept to use in various ways. As will become clear, this thesis is, in part, an exploration of the potential powers of the concept. At the same time, I claim that I am using the "ideal construct" of *Atonement* as a critical tool to make even larger critical interventions. But how can I rely upon a concept in order to ground an exploration of, in part, that same concept?

I want to appeal here to the most prosaic and relatable reading of the "ideal construct" concept, and insist that it is this reading of the concept which is, with regard to *Atonement*, the "grounding" of the thesis. Shortly before the film came out, I read the novel, uncontaminated—to my memory—by the promotional images of the film. Although the memory of this first reading is now hazy, I remember that when I saw the film in theaters, that experience was imbued with my understanding of the novel. As I returned to the novel in the following years, the images and sounds and cumulative feeling of the film invaded those reading experiences. Neither the novel or the film were simply themselves. Any watching of the film or reading of the novel became, therefore, not simply an experience of a film or a novel, but the experience of *Atonement* as an ideal construct. What grounds this thesis, then, is the desire to give voice to the types of complexities that occur within this kind of construct. Although I do offer a reading of the novel as a novel, and a reading of the film as a film, a conceptual resource is needed which recognizes the impossibility of my separating the one from the other, in their "actuality." The concept of the ideal construct allows the style of such readings—a style or coherence which risks totalizing—to be thrown into quotation marks without undercutting their pragmatic value and validity.

It is important to note, however, that this understanding of the ideal construct is a grounding and a tool with which to think through other problems. This thesis is not a polemic in support of my own understanding of the "ideal construct" alone. Instead, it takes this understanding for granted, in order to do all kinds of other things.

Approach, Style, and Structure

Using an adaptation to look at a line of theory rather than a line of theory to look at an adaptation is a risky tack for any scholarly demonstration to take (assuming that it wishes to come across intelligibly, as this one does). I thought the shape of my interest in *Atonement* would benefit from a kind of critical writing which used shifts in style and ironic structural juxtapositions. The gesture does not intend to be taken as either theoretically innocent or wildly performative, but to be understood as engaging in a practice of *artfully criticizing* swaths of film culture.

In the use of the word "artful," I invoke D.N. Rodowick's recent book, *Philosophy's Artful Conversation* (2015), where hope is held out for film studies to make room for an artful philosophizing around films, amid crises in theory. Though impressed by Bordwell's critique of the "contemporary interpretive project" (18), Rodowick nevertheless finds that Bordwell's solution insists too firmly on the notion that "causal accounts are the whole of reason or rationality" (33). Even the standards of rationality, though essential in many cases, are more appropriate to a search for "certainty" than for agreement or productive disagreement (which are the appropriate conditions of humanistic inquiry) (37-8). In response to this reopened territory of the "disagreeable," Rodowick favors the artfully philosophical (film as touchstone for epistemological and

ethical concerns—as in the cases of Deleuze and Cavell). I, on the other hand, favor the artfully critical (film as privileged site for asking aesthetic, ethical, and evaluative questions about culture).

Why then, the use of the word "artful"? Rodowick intended his book—and the earlier *Elegy for Theory* (2014)—to be "read and thought about as a whole composed of many interconnected parts and voicings, where a sympathetic ear attends to the unfolding of themes and variations, harmony and counterpoint, refrains, returns, and improvisations, as different lines of thought depart from and return to one another in new contexts" (x). This thesis composes itself along the same lines and asks for the same kind of sympathy. As I do not intend upon "losing" or "confusing" any reader or critic by this method, but aspire to persuasion, I wish to forestall potential confusion with this roadmap to the general structure of the thesis.

Chapter 1. Adapting To Other Voices: Opens up some of the concerns surrounding *Atonement* and makes my skepticism and my sympathies towards various trends in in adaptation theory clear.

> **a. Through *Atonement* and into Some Problems:** In a kind of literary-critical, literary nonfiction mode, the subject of *Atonement* is taken as an occasion to tease and to introduce, all at once, numerous unresolved questions which the rest of the thesis will more thoroughly examine.

> **b. Fidelity: "The Worst Word You Can Possibly Imagine":** This section provides a short critical review of major 21st century adaptation studies. The first change in voice of the thesis, meant to feel more self-consciously scholarly than

the last section, it aims to introduce some of the key trends in adaptation studies which this thesis will directly contest, support, and play against. The thesis is in part motivated by a belief in the value of playing with the issues brought out here.

c. *Discontents***: Literature and Literacy** A continuation of the previous section's mode, focusing in on a particular text. Thomas Leitch's introduction to his manifesto of adaptation studies is taken as the key encapsulation of the general attitudes of the Anti-Fidelity theories of the 21st century. Particular importance is placed on Leitch's insistence that we *be literate* in adaptation rather than study adaptations *under the sign of literature*. Here I attempt to bring out its limits of those attitudes more precisely (and in miniature) while also noting some of what should be preserved about that project.

d. Engaging the (In)dividual: Beginning with a closing out of the critical review, a return to the Drama-of-Ideas mode of the first subsection. Although problems about *Atonement* in particular either reappear or emerge for the first time, the section is an expansion beyond the concerns of *Atonement* and, more largely, a literary justification of the thesis's unfolding approach to *the individual* as a pragmatically appropriate figure with which to analyze adaptations (and texts generally). The move is not idiosyncratic as much as is the line of its justification as necessitated here by the challenge of Thomas Leitch and "poststructuralist" thought.

Chapter 2. Ideally Embracing Authorship (and A Practical Limit): This chapter begins with two long implicitly connected sections working out different problems in

Atonement as organized around two likely "author"-figures. The first section intends to consider the adaptation of *Atonement* in something approaching the sort of way that both a literary critic who appreciates McEwan might, and the second in the way an auterist admirer of Joe Wright might. Placing the two approaches next to each other seeks to demonstrate the limits of such approaches as *ultimate* explanatory models, while also drawing attention to what's essential about their pragmatic value as ways of thinking, when done with appropriately controlled flexibility. Though these sections are organized around a principle of authorship, I hope that the self-evident interest of the sections (both taken apart and taken together) might challenge foreclosures of authorship, fidelity, and evaluation-related questions in adaptation studies. However, a third section organized around the marketing of the film demonstrates the real-world limits of such interpretive idealisms, while also refusing to surrender to them.

a. Ian McEwan, *The Broken Estate*, and the Author as Suffering God: This section is, first, an explanation of why Ian McEwan's status as a public intellectual makes him a definite but limited "authority" over his texts, in a certain socially realistic sense (no matter how many polemics against the writer-as-author we read). More substantively, it explores McEwan's troubled relationship to literary modernism—by way of Virginia Woolf—and the metaphysical commitments revealed by his play with Jane Austen. Framing this in terms of James Wood's *The Broken Estate*—a consideration of English language literature as a kind of re-enchantment—a reading of *Atonement*'s use of the "writer as God" motif is given.

b. Joe Wright, Toward a Sensuous Film Criticism, and Authorship as Nightmare-Odyssey: While the previous section justified its "temporary embrace

of authorship" by arguing that McEwan is a practical authority, this section, oriented around Joe Wright, reckons with the threat to authorship posed by the empirical question of collaboration. It proceeds to ask why Joe Wright—the director of *Atonement*—does not have analogous authority in the world of auteur-embracing cinephiles as McEwan does in the world of literature. The section takes various of Joe Wright's preoccupations in interviews as a heuristic for engaging in a style of film writing appropriate to such preoccupations: a style which retains "interpretation" while being reigned in by close attention to the detailed, sensual immediacy of *Atonement*. Ultimately, the section argues for a new kind of film writing which is in a privileged position to raise questions around the value of Wright's directorial talent.

c. "A Forbidden Love!": Marketing as the Practical Limit of Meaning: A short exploration of how the marketing of *Atonement: the film*—specifically the trailer and promotional book covers—might limit interpretations of the novel and the film—specifically the Briony-centered interpretations offered in this thesis.

Conclusion: Film and the Scene of the Writing: How this reading of *Atonement* speaks to debates in adaptation theory, and how these debates might be important for larger conflicts within film studies.

1. Adapting To Other Voices

a. Through *Atonement* and into Some Problems

Of Joe Wright's six major feature films, four are literary adaptations. One—*Anna Karenina* (2012)—is nearly forgotten, with sharply divided reviews, and his latest—*Pan* (2015)—has received disastrously negative notices. But the first two major features—*Pride & Prejudice* (2005) and *Atonement*—were successes both critically and commercially. Taking into account the entry of 2011's generally liked non-adaptation *Hanna*[1], Wright had, until *Pan* at least, carved out a place for himself as a bankable, respectable director's director—though without necessarily being a celebrity among cinephiles either. He has managed to be associated with high literary culture without (necessarily or always), to those who have actually seen his films, signifying the pomp and stylistic traditionalism reminiscent of Merchant-Ivory adaptations.

Writer Ian McEwan was a producer for the adaptation of *Atonement*, and was often present on set to give his notes. In one of the DVD extras for the film, McEwan says he attempted not to be too much of an imposition on the filmmakers, although in the director's commentary Wright claims that when he first met McEwan he found him frightening: "I was scared by his intelligence." According to Wright, the author was sometimes insistent that the novel was "about the imagination of a writer"—in other words, about the imagination of Briony. Wright says that he went out of his way to honor this in the film. This, however, sits somewhat uncomfortably with screenwriter Christopher Hampton's claim that the novel's secondary characters, Robbie (James

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[1] Despite its status as an "original screenplay," in Academy terms, even this film is in keeping with his work as a "literary" director, given the density of its allusion to the long history of folk and fairy tales.

McAvoy) and Cecilia (Kiera Knightely), as the "heart" of the film—Briony the writer is the (mere) beginning and end.

Atonement has been successful with enough people in different ways that it could be said to allow room to please the often contradictory demands made of prestigious, big budget literary adaptations. Or, as Joe Wright has said, just as there are as many different versions of the book as there are readers of it, we might say there are as many different versions of the film as it has viewers. Depending on who you ask, *Atonement* (as a novel) might be primarily a romance, a family saga, a metanarrational trick, a parable of self-forgiveness, an attack on the sentimentalization of daydreaming, or a reflection on a particular stream of British storytelling culture (among other things). Wright and his fellow filmmakers tried to create a movie as thematically rich as its source novel, but no adaptation is pure translation, as all translations are (more or less delightfully) impure.

Atonement presents unique challenges to some of the most popular ways of thinking about adaptation within the academy, and indeed, in the general culture. Some of the key theoretical manifestos in adaptation studies wrestle with and try to overcome the troubles of fidelity, of the romantic notion of the individual creator's authoritative subjectivity, and of the modernist elitism at the foundations of the "English department." What makes *Atonement* such an interesting case study is how the novel itself, and the author's own public image, intersect with these same issues. Just as reading the novel asks us to examine the multiple grounds (particularly regarding the alleged moralistic tendencies of modernist high literature) upon which important arguments in adaptation theory are staked, so reflecting upon the novel's adaptation into film may open up new territory for considering how film adaptations do not just generate a new works moving

forward, but generate a new kind of work which also inflects our view of works in the past.

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One of the most beloved passages of McEwan's *Atonement* finds 13-year-old Briony Tallis musing upon the particular power she enjoys as a writer and creator of stories:

> It seemed so obvious now that it was too late: a story was a form of telepathy. By means of inking symbols onto a page, she was able to send thoughts and feelings from her mind to her reader's. It was a magical process, so commonplace that no one stopped to wonder at it. Reading a sentence and understanding it were the same thing; as with the crooking of a finger, nothing lay between them. There was no gap during which the symbols were unraveled. You saw the word *castle*, and it was there, seen from some distance, with woods in high summer spread before it, the air bluish and soft with smoke rising from the blacksmith's forge, and a cobbled road twisting away into the green shade (35).

In keeping with the novel's other strategies of piercing literary allusion, free indirect discourse, and epistolary form, the passage is characteristic of the novel's capacity to create a strong sense of a character's inner life. The way in which it tries to capture a familiar sensation through aggressive, Apollonian verbal containment gives it a palpable writerliness. As Suzanne Behrne has written for the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, in a review of a recently released meditation on Virginia Woolf, "We believe that the writers we love understand us more intimately than anyone else." A passage such as this seems primed to provoke such reverence.

However, the extent of one's identification with Briony as the avatar through which the reader might imagine themselves "understood" by McEwan is also the extent to which the novel can feel not just punishing, but also like an indictment of a particular kind of imagination and a particular form of literary practice. Ian McEwan, an ardent student as well as critic of literary modernism (a contradiction never more beautifully realized than in *Atonement*) has described the desire of readers to have books "return us to ourselves" in as unflattering language as "an affliction of our time."[2] As such, one can detect something brutal at work in the very structure of the novel. We could say *Atonement* seduces some of its readers by mirroring and flattering some of the most pronounced qualities of the archetypally precocious "person of letters," only to create the most catastrophic imaginative consequences out of those same characteristics.

But the final reveal of *Atonement*—the uncovering of Briony as the author of most of the very novel we are reading—troubles any clear sense in which it can be read as a straightforward attack on its readers. What a reader may experience as McEwan's punishment of themselves can also be read as Briony's fictional punishment of herself, novelizing a painful memory (as a kind of private penance) into a mis-en-abyme of moral masochism.[3]To what end the novel takes us through this, it leaves horrifyingly but tantalizingly open (I attempt a new reading of the novel which views it as a critique of the legacy of British literary modernism). The novel asks to be read and reread in light of its uncontained drama, the full extent of which can only be understood upon the rereadings it calls for. But this summons up more questions: where, precisely, does McEwan identify

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[2] See McEwan's interview "How We Read Each Other" with Synne Rifbjerg at The Louisiana Channel for McEwan speaking confidently on modernism (as a movement both of fiction writers, poets, and critics) as well as the affliction comment. More detail about McEwan's stance on modernism below.

[3] Gayln Studlar, in her critical summary of Freud's understanding of masochism, defines "moral" masochism as "desexualized but erotically gratifying to the libido" (13).

with Briony, and where does he find her excessive or disapprove of her? It is understandable if, even after multiple readings, a reader resorts to interviews with McEwan to have a better idea of what, precisely, they are meant to have taken away.

Atonement's seemingly *sui generis* structure and tone can be seen as in keeping with a set of curious stylistic trends in contemporary literature. Looking back on debates around English-language literature during the 1990s, one figure which may illuminate our understanding of the waters McEwan was swimming in during his composition of *Atonement* is David Foster Wallace. If Wallace (both as a writer, a public figure, and icon) had a signature, it was that he seemed to position himself as one who had learned the metafictional lessons of irony, deception, and trickery from so-called "postmodern" writers such as Donald Barthelme or John Barth, and yet sought to escape the sense of light academic insularity, lack of pathos, and sometimes crippling hopelessness and detachment which these writers gave to their readers. In one of his most cited essays, "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction," as well as in his interview with Charlie Rose, Wallace claimed that the formal distantiating techniques of postmodern writers have been reabsorbed by pop culture (and, crucially, television advertisements) to the point that the use of these techniques by contemporary writers no longer had any kind of subversive power—that they no longer shock or defamiliarize, but only create a sense of charming, smart-ass lightness (Wallace, 42-9).

The novels of this period which can be read as reactions against such "postmodernism for postmodernism's sake"—such as *Infinite Jest*, *Life of Pi*, and *Atonement*—tap powerfully into the emotionality and humanistic wonder of literature, without altogether discarding the tendency to take an attitude of cunning deception

towards the reader. It is hard to imagine someone credibly dismissing them as aspiring to be nothing more than emptily labyrinthine amusements. The emotional investment they seem to ask for takes them beyond the level of mere twists or tricks. It's an understandable impulse towards creative alchemy which characterized a significant portion of the cultural landscape throughout the 2000s, across media. In television, Greg Daniels' *The Office* (2005-2013) mixed pathos with cruelty. In cinema, Paul Thomas Anderson's *Punch Drunk Love* (2002) and *There Will Be Blood* (2007) gave us simultaneous Kubrickian detachment and traditional melodrama. In the realm of music, Regina Spektor's albums *Soviet Kitsch (2004)* and *Begin to Hope* (2004) disguise venemous character studies in twee, girly production values.

Part of the interest of viewing *Atonement* in adaptation—that is, not just to view *Atonement* as a film adaptation, but to view the novel in light of the adaptation—is how the increased marketing and public image of the novel, due to the film, has preserved or perhaps intensified the deceptive element of the novel (perhaps unintentionally). The first book jackets and paperback editions of *Atonement*, long before the film adaptation, presented it as a dark and almost typically mean British class novel. A young girl sits on a staircase in an opulent setting, pensive and spoiled. The graphic designers presented this image in either washed out sepia tones or the stark black and white of a killer whale. Those who bought the novel when it looked like this could perhaps suspect from the beginning that *Atonement* would end up taking the cynical turn it does. And yet, the marketing campaign for the film—with its posters and tie-in book covers with their bright pastels and moody, sumptuous photos—has perhaps altered the connotation of the name "Ian McEwan" to those who only know of him through those images (or even only this

film, or perhaps only this single book). Those who found the book through these newer images may be surprised to look back on a 1998 interview with McEwan in *Salon*, where Dwight Garner offers an altogether different (although not unpopular) portrait was offered than that of the gentle romanticist one might expect from these images:

> Ian McEwan is contemporary fiction's black magician. In novel after novel, beginning with "The Cement Garden" (1978), his crisp, almost clinically precise prose—part Kafka, part "Lord of the Flies"-era William Golding—sucks you into worlds that spin with violence, sexual aberration and paranoia. In the U.K., where he was among British fiction's angriest young men of the 1970s, he's long been dubbed Ian Macabre.

In the final pages of the novel, Briony's struggle as a moral being is framed in terms of her struggle as a novelist, which are framed in terms of God-like power (351). Here it seems as though McEwan directly addresses that perennial question of the humanities: the power of the author. But this power seems to only be a concern in terms of the problems this creates for the author-as-author-God (namely, the problems of guilt and shame).

How might we put *Atonement* into conversation with contemporary debates about authorship, which have a bearing on contemporary debates about adaptation? What if we were to find that *Atonement*—not just as a book, or a film, but as an ideal construct which is greater than either particular instantiation—can be made to speak as much to adaptation studies as adaptation study speaks to it? What if these potentials teased in this argumentative overture found friction in dominant discourses surrounding adaptation, and could contest them?

b. Fidelity: "The Worst Word You Can Possibly Imagine"

As Thomas Leitch points out, the study of literature into cinema has been around as long if not longer than film studies proper: "Its founding text, George Bluestone's *Novels into Film*, predates the rise of French-inspired poststructuralism and the American academic study of film" (1). Rather than attempting to sum up 70 years of adaptation study, this thesis positions its approach to adaptation among that field of major texts wrestling with the key problem which has preoccupied the discourse during the 21st century: the question of fidelity. Fidelity itself is in no sense the master word for the argument, or the skeleton key for unlocking *Atonement*, but it is a unifying concern which, when insisted upon, can make visible the potentials and limitations within the currently contested ground of the discipline. What is particularly interesting about the 21st century anti-fidelity critics is how they embolden their critiques with an appeal to poststructuralism, and present themselves as both non-evaluative and against the "authority" of any author (whether novelist or director or whomever.)

Much earlier than these trends, Bluestone himself began the attack on fidelity (insofar as it is the key evaluative principle in discussing film adaptation) in 1951, noting that "changes are inevitable the moment one abandons the linguistic for the visual medium" and concluding that "it is as fruitless to say that film A is better or worse than novel B as it is to pronounce Wright's Johnson's Wax Building better or worse than Tchiakowsky's Swan Lake" (5-6). However, as Leitch claims, the practice of adaptation studies has not truly absorbed Bluestone's critique in terms of its practice; scholars make

comments based in an evaluative principle of fidelity that they might not defend in the abstract.[4]

Robert Stam's series of books on film adaptation in the early-to-mid 2000s[5] began the most recent iteration of what Colin MacCabe is probably referring to when he speaks of adaptation studies' "endless attacks upon fidelity" (7). In an attempt to counter common claims that often times film adaptations are "bastardizations," "vulgarizations," or "betrayals" of their source texts (by the likes not just of journalists and academics but of modernist writers such as Virginia Woolf), Stam takes an Americanized poststructuralist approach which emphasizes the notion that all works or art or texts are "derivative" and therefore, in a sense, "adaptations" (Stam, 3). Under the influence of Gilles Deleuze in particular, Stam emphasizes how adaptations "redistribute energies and intensities, provoke flows and displacements," and constitute an "amorous exchange of textual fluids" (45-6). Arguing that a critical orientation around fidelity is necessarily moralistic and creates discourses around unquestioned hierarchies (usually that of literature being greater than film), Stam claims that he is engaging in a non-evaluative approach which places more attention on "transfers of creative energy" which has implications for the study of film (and presumably all artistic production) generally. But this reevaluation of "transfers of creative energy," acting as it does as a rhetorical standard for Leitch's explorations, turns Stam's project into an unwitting preservation (or perhaps poststructurally tinged update) of evaluative and aesthetic principles in adaptation studies, while attempting to rid those principles of their traditional or conservative trappings, following Bluestone's attacks upon fidelity.

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[4] For a list of examples, see Leitch (2).
[5] Comprising *Literature and Film*, *Literature Through Film*, and *A Companion to Literature and Film*.

In a similar but more muted vein, Thomas Leitch's *Film Adaptation and Its Discontents* makes another case against using fidelity and the presumed intentions of canonical authors as an evaluative criterion. For Leitch the problem originated in scholars who led the charge on bringing film studies into the university having little training in film studies proper, instead being English professors with English department aesthetic values and views of society. According to Leitch, these values are leftovers from Matthew Arnold's idea that the works/texts being studied are meant to edify those who engage/study them (3-4). With this move, Leitch distances himself even from Stam who allows postmodern literary aesthetic values into an area that, for Leitch, should have more emphasis on film and the conventions of film studies proper, and in a distinctly non-evaluative way. Indeed, the very title of Leitch's book—echoing that of Freud's famous text—announces itself as *the* brutal disenchantment of our received or sedimented notions of how to think about film adaptation.

Leitch claims that film studies-as-film studies has always concentrated more on provocative questions about society and culture; for him, there is no film studies without the "revolutionary intellectual ferment in France during the 1960s and 1970s," citing thinkers such as Foucault (4-5). However, this is somewhat misleading on Leitch's part, as it ignores the important work done in a more aesthetic and formal vein in American film studies by David Bordwell, Kristin Thompson, and Noël Carroll which have worked at odds with the poststructural influence on film studies, as well as earlier classical film theory such as that of Hugo Munsterburg or Jean Epstein. By ignoring these other notable strains of thinking in film studies, Leitch consistently argues as if there is a simple "proper" (poststructural) film studies on the one hand, and a literary (conservative)

adaptation studies on the other. His project is to bring the subject of the literary and conservative minded adaptation studies up to speed with what the "real" cinematic theoreticians have, in his view, been doing all along. Leitch introduces the caveat, however, that canonical directors such as Hitchcock or Kubrick hold higher aesthetic/*prestige value*—under traditional English department values of organic unity and controlled ambiguity—than does even the often unspoken criterion of fidelity (thus accounting for the fact that English professors gladly teach Kubrick's adaptation of *2001: A Space Odyssey* [1968] or Hitchcock's adaptation of *Psycho* [1960] without worrying about the fidelity of those films to their source texts). (5-6).

But arguments such as these ignore the much publicized influence that poststructuralism had not just on film studies departments, but upon English departments more generally, which are not wholly full of theorists unfamiliar or unsympathetic with essays as different—but as similarly problematic for Leitch's straw English professor—as Wimsatt and Beardsley's "The Intentional Fallacy," Foucault's "What is an Author" or Barthes' "The Death of the Author." Indeed, Leitch's polemic against "English department values" is written as if the second half of the *Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism* were somehow news, rather than a series of texts many of which have held more powerful academic status for longer than Matthew Arnold's work ever did. Moreover, despite citing him twice, Leitch writes *Adaptation and Its Discontents* as if Robert Stam's rather unique blend of creative evaluation and poststructural theory didn't exist, and so his argument comes across seeming less like a definitive manifesto of the Adaptation Studies of the Future than it presents itself as.

In a key scene in the film adaptation of *Atonement*, Briony Tallis comes across a vulgar anatomical word in a letter between adults that was not meant for her youthful young eyes. A few scenes later, gossiping about this to another older girl, Briony asks, rhetorically: "What's the worst word you can possibly imagine?" The two gasp about how only a psychopath and deviant could ever use the word. Although the reaction of adaptation theorists to the concepts of fidelity, authorship, and value have not been as catastrophic as what unfolds in part from Briony's inability to understand adult motives, it's possible that the theorists were also overzealous in shutting down particular ways of thinking which perhaps were not as cancerous as they might have thought.

In contrast to these trends, Colin MacCabe edited *True to the Spirit: Film Adaptation and the Question of Fidelity* in 2011—a volume of essays on adaptation theory including contributions from Dudley Andrew, Lara Mulvey, James Narramore, and Fredric Jameson, among others. In a move not always against but usually away from the types of critiques posed by Stam and Leitch, MacCabe and the other contributors question or operate under the implicit question of whether it is appropriate to foreclose questions of fidelity and of value with regards to the study of adaptation—whether or not these should be the implicitly agreed upon curse words of the discipline. Rather than being a simple return to an insistence on the primary value of literature, MacCabe makes the suggestion that both the source text and the film adaptation are valuable and, together, create what Andre Bazin called an "ideal construct" (6, 8).

For Bazin and MacCabe, film adaptation is not to be evaluated from the standard of pure preservation, but as an "expansion and development." The theories of Stam and Leitch, in foreclosing questions of fidelity, willfully blind themselves to the particulars of

how film adaptation often creates a "*unique* form of production" (and therefore not, as per

Stam, a form of production which can be generalized to all art)—it is a unique form

which "preserves identity in the same moments that it multiplies it" (6-7). In rejecting the

criterions of fidelity and value outright, MacCabe claims, the anti-fidelity models of

adaptation theory have closed themselves off from some of the most constituent features

of what makes film adaptations peculiarly interesting phenomena.

MacCabe further claims that a dismissal of questions of fidelity leads critics to

underestimate the sophistication of the general culture which bears the traces not just of

the modernist elitism, against film, of T.S. Eliot, but also the Bluestonian, pro-cinematic

traces against it:

> It is conventional wisdom within much adaptation studies that the question of the
>
> aesthetic primacy of literature or film is the key debate. This made sense in 1957
>
> when Bluestone wrote his book and when T.S. Eliot and I.A. Richards, among
>
> others, had constructed the university discipline of English as a valorization of
>
> literature against popular culture in general and film in particular (7).

But MacCabe goes on to point out the difference between these conservative sensibilities

and the more flexible sensibilities of the general culture of more recent decades. While

Stam places a misleading level of rhetorical weight on Virginia Woolf's disgust for a

single film adaptation[6], MacCabe reminds us that more recent and current writers have

been comfortable moving between the two mediums, often with positive evaluations of

films, respecting them in their own integrity: J.G. Ballard's belief that Cronenberg's

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[6] On pages 3-4 of *Literature and Film*, Stam takes Woolf to task for being "literal-minded" in her interpretation of a "hearse" representing "death" in an unnamed film adaptation, taking this as evidence that Woolf saw the cinema as inherently lesser than film. Since Stam does not cite Woolf directly, it is important to note that her essay, "The Cinema," is on the whole an enthusiastic assesment of the potentials of cinema within modernism, as Maggie Humm argues in "Virginia Woolf and Visual Culture" (222-3).

adaptation of *Crash* was superior to his novel, and Salman Rushdie calling *The Wizard of Oz* (1939) his "very first literary influence" (7-8). One could also make a case for the near universal popularity, among cinephiles, of extremely loose adaptations such as *Apocalypse Now* or most of the major films of Stanley Kubrick.

But an understanding of adaptation studies engaging the general culture should not just limit itself to authors or cinephiles. As Dudley Andrew writes in his own contribution to the volume, "ordinary viewers" often have fidelity in mind when they discuss and make sense of the film adaptations they have seen: "Fidelity is the umbilical cord that nourishes the judgments of ordinary viewers as they comment on what are effectively aesthetic and moral values after they emerge from [popular film adaptations]. If we tuned in on these discussions, we might find ourselves listening to a vernacular version of comparative media semiotics" (27-8). While Andrew's notion of an "ordinary viewer" may be problematic, he indicates how Leitch and Stam, in their refusal to engage fidelity as an evaluative principle, have created a theory of adaptation which closes them off from the way film adaptations are often experienced by spectators. MacCabe points out that thinking in terms of fidelity is crucial for engaging how the cast, crew, and producers of films discuss their work (7). If we were to wholly bracket questions of value and fidelity as a way to go against the alleged anti-cinematic elitism of certain modernists and the founders of the modern English department, we simply trade an crypto-political aesthetic exclusivity for a more explicitly politico-theoretical one.

The goal should rather be to locate the optimum mode of engaging each particular adaptation. But the way the anti-fidelity tendency in adaptation studies frames its claims risks distracting us from what we should consider when trying to find each unique

optimum balance. It encourages becoming more preoccupied with reproducing its theoretical commitments and presuppositions. Making these issues clear will provide a path to arriving at a closer understanding of what an "optimum engagement" with a particular adaptation (in this case, *Atonement*) might entail.

c. *Discontents*: Literature and Literacy

Of the various adaptation theories engaged above, it is Leitch's which has the most citations. Leitch's text is an impressive and useful one, and I have significant points of agreement with it. My attitude towards it is not that it was a mistake in adaptation studies, but that it was a necessary correction—in part, the appropriate antithesis to a problematic thesis—which nevertheless seems a bit like an *over*correction in light of what I take to be the appropriate synthesis evident in some of the essays in *True to the Spirit*. However, as Colin MacCabe writes, *True to the Spirit* does not seek to be a manifesto or a model of adaptation theory, but instead "a series of case studies that investigate, across a wide variety of material, films where source text and film enjoy that complicated relation peculiar to the cinema and which Bazin was the first to identify" (8). This thesis itself, for the most part, takes *Atonement* as an occasion to create an even larger example of such a case study, composed of multiple interlocking case studies in miniature. As such, the tension between what I see as the admirable synthetic elements in *True to the Spirit* as compared to the over-corrective excesses of *Film Adaptation and Its Discontents*—a tension which governs much of my case study/studies—requires some fleshing out.

It is important to recognize that although *Discontents* is most obviously a manifesto in adaptation theory, and has been popularly taken up as such, it chooses to justify itself mostly with respect to the political, pedagogical concerns relevant to the

professor teaching film adaptation at what seems to be the undergraduate level. This, in turn, is framed in the spirit of the culture wars or canon wars of the 1980s and 1990s. For Leitch, the anti-canon side of the argument is staked out by the usual choice of E.D. Hirsch's *Cultural Literacy*. On the other side, Leitch chooses Matthew Arnold's 19th century texts *Culture and Anarchy* and "The Study of Poetry" as emblematic of the supposed "common sense" justification the English department apparently takes in demanding that popular culture always be studied, in Leitch's terms, "under the sign of literature."

Within this structure, Leitch argues that Matthew Arnold embodies the English department's tendency to subordinate everything to the traditional, conservative, values of literature; this is an Arnoldian "triumph of an evaluative impulse to insist that originals are always touchstones of value for their adaptations, unless of course the adaptations are better" (in which case the adaptations are closer to the conservative canonical values than the originals, as in the case of Alfred Hitchcock) (6). On the other hand, Hirsch represents an alternative on the left, where instead of a promotion of "literature" and its traditional values, there is a more pragmatic canon consisting in necessary cultural touchstones which will allow students to be more literate; that is, "conversant with shared cultural markers that would allow them to grasp the meaning of what they read more precisely and effortlessly and to write with a surer sense of what their readers already know and believe" (7). Although Leitch is more sympathetic to Hirsch, he believes that even he "promulgates a strikingly passive ideal of literacy" and that it counter-intuitively relegates adaptation to an even worse position: we watch a film adaptation of *Hamlet*, supposedly,

with the cinema acting as "the spoonful sugar to help the Bard's medicine go down" (9-10).

Having heretofore divided his argument along explicitly binary political lines of the right and the left, having relegated Arnold to the right, Hirsch to the left, and the poststructuralist influence on film studies as a whole to the *optimum* position on the left,[7] Leitch invokes the Roland Barthes conception of the "work" vs. the "text" and the activity of reading (passivity) vs. writing/rewriting (activity) as the active solution to the problems with Hirsch's too passive solution of canonical literacy:

> Works are designed to be read, texts to be written—a distinction Barthes makes in somewhat different terms at the outset of *S/Z*, when he distinguishes "the readerly"—"a classic text" designed to be consumed by readers limited to "the poor freedom either to accept or reject the text"—from "the writerly"—"a perpetual present" that amounts simply to "ourselves writing," producing the texts we read (12).

From here, Leitch goes on to insist under the very clear implication that all of this is the appropriately leftist or non-conservative response, that adaptations are themselves rewritings rather than transcriptions, and that pedagogically, the approach to adaptation studies should stress the "writerly" over the "readerly" at all levels. This, then, is the ultimate way to be *literate* rather than simply have a slavish relation to *literature*; something which is apparently endemic to adaptation studies. Having sketched the broad outlines of Leitch's argument, we can now look more closely at the ways in which he is convincing, and the ways in which his project amounts to a kind of over-correction.

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[7] On page 5: "The further film studies drifted toward the left, mining film after film for political critique, the more firmly adaptation schoalrs dug in their heels on the right, championing the old-guard values of universalist humanism."

To begin with, there is a lot to agree with in Leitch's argument. Although it's dubious that *adaptation studies* as a whole was ever monolithically predicated on evaluating adaptations *only* by the degree to which they managed to completely recreate the sense of the "original," such attitudes themselves—regardless of how much they do or don't dominate adaptation studies—are ones that should probably be abandoned in academic study. Leitch addresses this problem with straightforward reasonableness; "No matter how clever or audacious an adaptation is, the book will always be better than any adaptation because it is always better at being itself" (16). This line of reasoning, if it has not already reached the status of a truism, is certainly deserving of it. Don't complain that the book did not give you the experience of reading the book: if you want the book, why are you watching the movie? Read the book!

Further, nothing could be more precious to the spirit of this thesis than the general principle that film adaptations are not pure translations of their source texts into another medium, but are negotiated transformations. While I am wary for reasons I will get into below, of embracing Barthes' terminology of text instead of work, and especially "writing" instead of "reading," in a sense I agree with Leitch that all texts are created (written) and that pedagogically, we should promote an active approach to engaging them, and creating on the basis of that engagement, rather than simply accepting or rejecting them (Leitch and Barthes' view of the canonical model). There is some similarity between what Leitch is pushing for and what this thesis actually does: to take *Atonement*, both as a film and as a novel—as an ideal construct—and on the basis of engaging it actively, to write.

But the way in which this is pitched by Leitch as a liberal vs. conservative question, with the liberal (good, "exciting") position being that of "writing or rewriting," and the conservative (bad, "servile") position being that of "reading," does not necessarily hold water. I have written about how Leitch positions Barthes, and his association with French poststructuralism, as the solution to Hirsch's unknowingly conservative problem. But Leitch is writing in 2007, and Barthes died in 1980. It's doubtful that "French poststructuralism" is, in itself, as coherent a counter-monolith to "reading" as Leitch makes it out to be, but let's just assume he is trying to do something in line with what can be recognized as the heterogeneous tradition of *continental philosophy* (as opposed to "French poststructuralism") which takes Ferdinand de Saussure as a point of departure. Supposedly, the pedagogical goal that drives Leitch's argument is a commitment to the set of practices common in this particular line of continental philosophy. And if any one institution carries the banner of this tradition today, it's the European Graduate School, where Slajov Žižek, Judith Butler, Alain Badiou, and other big names in this tradition teach. But—keeping in mind Leitch's valuation of left-oriented "exciting" *rewriting* over conservative, "servile" *reading*—look at what Avital Ronell says in a lecture to students working on their dissertations:

> First of all, it's very dignified... very hermeneutically, phenomenologically, deconstructively, *dignified*—and that's why I wanted to show you how we can practice that—to set up a track of commentary. Let's say, you might choose texts or exemplary instances that you really want to dwell with. [...] It can be highly distinguished to go slow, to unload the myth that you're gonna do something new. [...] So get rid of that burden immediately. That's a corpse like Zarathustra's trying

to carry, and junk it. Really, forget about the myth that you're going to do something new--and guess what? Something new will happen. You know, but if you try too hard, and you don't do the apprenticeship, which is an enslavement to the work, and snuff yourselves out—forget about your grandiose, ego-bloating fantasies. [...] Start small and start listening to your passion. [...] Say you're worried about this motif. Collect some texts or some exemplary passages, and go there. Then go in there and do a rhetorical reading as well. No one cares about your free associative fantasies and cloud formations. Go in there, and that's why we've been practicing together, seeing what's going on in the language. And throw yourself at its feet. Be subservient, compliant, allow yourself to be dominated, and allow yourself to be instructed and taught.

In light of this recent recuperation of subservience (spoken from the mouth of one of Derrida's most famous American students) it seems clear that Leitch has overdetermined one specific Barthesian position from the 1970s as emblematic of the kind of proper leftist, French-intellectual discourse that adaptation studies apparently needs to catch up with. For Leitch, deviation from Barthesian writing/rewriting risks being "passive" or "servile" or even the dreaded "conservative." This is the sort of thing I had in mind when I mentioned, in the previous section, the problem of "Americanized poststructuralism." The self-loathing American Intellectual-Francophile sees Barthes, Lacan, Foucault, Derrida as a kind of united front—walking down the streets of 1960s Paris, snapping their fingers in unison—against boring American and British stodginess and conservative literary passivity. The sexy "activity" and "creativity" of the "poststructuralists" is embraced before a proper acknowledgement of their rigor and discipline is made (let

alone a consideration of the extreme metaphysical, epistemological, and political differences among them and their followers).[8]

As for Leitch's approach to the problem of canonicity and tradition, even forgiving the dubious appeal to the political authority of some kind of monolithic poststructuralism, the basic formulation of stodgy, stable, traditional canons on the one side and exciting, politically engaged rewritings on the other is a gross oversimplification. Here it is possible that even Barthes is not innocent. To take canons as truly stable and traditional, as completely resistant to change, is to give in to a kind of idealist paranoia about one largely anachronistic line of their justification, in effect blurring out how canons actually function in the world: which is *through* change, *in* time. In fact, one way of looking at canonization is that it is itself a process of writing and rewriting aesthetic standards themselves (Kolbas 139-43). Just as a work can be placed into the canon for one reason, at a different moment in history it can be removed from it, for altogether unrelated (or symmetrically opposed!) reasons.

In a way it is understandable that Leitch would want to create an adaptation studies which "does not approach adaptations as [...] attempts to create new classics" and which "treats both adaptations and their originals as heteroglot texts rather than as canonical works" (16). This seems sound in principle, but it raises problems in practice which lead me to take it as a premature foreclosure of the issue. What would we do if a film *was* an attempt to create a "new classic," as many big budget films based on prestigious literary novels are? What if the "original" is a *canonical* work *as well as* a heteroglot text? What if part of what makes it so interesting as a heteroglot text is

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[8] The method of this thesis is inspired, in part, by Ronell's advice to take seriously a few limited problems and limited texts, to dwell in them, and to find creativity in the subservience to the problems which arise from that dwelling.

precisely the issue of *its canonicity*, and how this inflects its relation to its adaptation, to its rewriting? All of these questions will prove to be relevant when engaging the question of *Atonement*-in-adaptation.

Moreover, the same way that Leitch appeals to the authority of "poststructuralism" in its entirety through the mere invocation of isolated arguments from Barthes and Bakhtin, he also unduly caricaturizes the ethos of the contemporary English department, as I have mentioned in the previous section. The poststructuralists have had a considerable influence on English departments. Was this not a major point of the same culture wars which Hirsch was participating in? Though Leitch acknowledges Arnold's ideas as "quaintly anachronistic," what is even more anachronistic is his own persistence in using Arnold as the optimum representative of an institutional ethos which did not exist until the 20th century (4).

The limitation, as I see it, is not simply that Leitch creates a kind of false binary as a rhetorical tool. What I would hope for instead is, at the very least, a more apt or accurate binary, which more precisely helps us to demarcate this question of the English department ethos in tension with popular culture (if indeed there can still be said to be one). For this, we should consider the actual forces which created the demarcation. I have already mentioned in the previous section how Colin MacCabe attributes the perceived hostility between literature and film not to Matthew Arnold, but to literary modernism-- the likes of T.S. Eliot and I.A. Richards explicitly considered literature a safeguard against the vagaries of the popular (7), while F.R. Leavis imagined the English department as an opportunity to inflict "his own narrow judgments on generations of students" (9).

It is really this peculiarly *modernist* distaste for the popular that is the optimum point of reference for locating this enshrinement of literature against the popular.[9] Not only do we see a more modern form of Arnold's ethical task for poetry in some strands of modernism, but, this then allows—for the purposes of this thesis--a better entry point with which to put these questions of authority in conversation with literary modernism. This opens up, in turn, Ian McEwan's explicit references to literary modernism—primarily to Woolf—not just in *Atonement*, but also in interviews, where he often cites her as representative of broader trends in literary modernism that he—and we will consider, *Atonement* itself—is critical of.

This is not to say that I wish to create a better version of Leitch's framework—contrasting all of modernism and its institutional practices and ideological judgments against some current ideal of adaptation theory. Instead, it is an acknowledgement that when Leitch mentions these problems of the conditions and biases which factor into our notions of *prestige*—he really is on to something. He simply frames the problems in a way which is overly restricted and ultimately false in its generality. It leads his argument to, implicitly, discourage types of reading which are necessary to engage those same issues he wishes to pursue. This can be used to draw attention towards modernism—rather than Arnoldianism—as the optimum way to engage this particular ideal construct of *Atonement*, which I hope to demonstrate is itself concerned with and creatively interacting with some of these same problems of modernism, and its romanticist, anti-materialist strain in particular.

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[9] However, as I have already begun to show with the case of Virginia Woolf, modernism was not *monolithically* opposed to cinema or the popular. I do believe, however, that Eliot, Richards, and Leavis in particular did take a critical position towards these forces, and that their combined influence over the shaping of the modern English department can be reasonably referred to as the "modernist distaste for cinema" or the "modernist distaste for the popular."

d. Engaging the (In)dividual

The point of reclaiming questions of fidelity and value, of returning to the significance if not final authority of individual persons is not, in other words, an attempt to return to a kind of naive state which does away with certain of the insights of the poststructuralists or even the New Critics. The New Critics had a point when they asked us to not get so bogged down in biographical and historical detail that we fail to look attentively to the inner workings of the artwork itself. The archetypal critics and so-called "poststructuralists" were correct to see mythological forms and metaphysical discourses reinstantiate themselves through artworks and texts across time. But all of these methods, in their different ways (or at least the way they have calcified academically), too often resulted in a theoretical devaluation of the individual person and the individualist lens as an interpretive tool—whether that individual be a writer, director, actor, cinematographer, reviewer, or audience member.

This thesis is, among other things, an attempt to show how when it comes to certain forms of adaptation, engaging *individuals* such as these *as* individuals (or *personas* structured under a *logic* of individualism) is a crucial part of engaging the cultural spheres in which they are located, which is one of the most important ways to engage any given work (insofar as a work's *meanings* can be concerned). This is not to amount to a resuscitation of individual*ist* ideology. It is not necessarily to insist upon individuals as the purely originary sources behind the works we credit to them. It is only to give them an appropriate amount of contextualized, due authority and integrity. As Colin MacCabe writes, invoking Deleuze, "To forget that a text is based in an individual body or bodies with their specific historical trajectories is to engage in the worst kind of

academic idealism. However, those individual bodies need to be understood as dividual, divided by the multitude of dialogues, both past and present, which constitute them" (22).

One way of avoiding MacCabe's worst of academic idealisms would be to approa1ch the problems of these individuals in a more or less familiar historicist vein, starting with a broad characterization of the "context" and moving to the "individual." But sometimes historicism can risk overriding, overwhelming, or distracting from the personally inflected lines of thought which this project is interested in uncovering as the repressed contents of anti-"authorship" orthodoxies. In a Marxist sense of the individual, particular persons and their particular expressions or texts can reveal contexts in a way that is as reveling in its own way. As Slajov Žižek noted in the preface to a recent lecture in Portugal, "The Freedom of a Forced Choice":

> First of all I love Portugal because of its literature, cinema, and so on. I cannot imagine life without Pessoa, Saramago, and so on. And here I am anti-historicist. I don't believe that, you know, as vulgar Marxists say, pseudo-Marxists say, in order to understand a writer, you have to study the context, the country... maybe! But I think a much deeper truth is if you say the opposite: if I come here and just look around real Portugal: nothing. But if I look at real Portugal after reading Saramago and Pessoa then I will understand the country.

Žižek makes basically the identical point that he does about "writers" about artworks themselves, in this more refined version:

> One often hears that to understand a work of art one needs to know its historical context. Against this historicist commonplace, a Deleuzian counter-claim would be not only that too much of a historical context can blur the proper contact with a

work of art (i.e., that to enact this contact one should abstract from the work's context), but also that it is, rather, the work of art itself that provides a context enabling us to understand properly a given historical situation. (*Organs Without Bodies*, 13).

Though this study will finally provide enough historical context that it risks a blurring—by apparent Žižekian standards—I nevertheless follow this line of thinking in justifying my approach.

Atonement in adaptation presents an interesting case of where returning to certain persons and their texts as Exemplarily Expressive Yet Telling Divided is a particularly promising choice to make when seeking to examine their context. Names as big as Ian McEwan, Joe Wright, and Kiera Knightley all resonate with the spectral association of "*Atonement*" and the title "*Atonement*" is *mutatis mutandis* symmetrically associated. All of these names place weight upon each other in a mutually reinforcing web—the degree to which a specific viewer of the film *Atonement* feels the full weight of any particular element against another is determined to a large degree by what sorts of media they imbibe and what cultural spaces they find themselves in.

Yet, since each of those human names are human names, and names of humans we know completely within different kinds of cultural spaces, an understanding of those spaces benefits from a comfortability moving into and out of spaces of various partly-individualized ways of seeing. Celebrity culture, for one, is still individualist when it portrays (or perhaps ten years on, portrayed) Kiera Knightley as the completely-beautiful but-also-literate star of choice. Mainstream literary culture still operates under individualist ideology when it grants interview upon lengthy interview with Ian McEwan,

in which he attempts to place his novel into a kind of historicized context with undertones of self-canonization. Cinema culture still runs on an individualistically tinged idea of the auteur—and even in a sense, of collaboration—when it reviews Joe Wright's films as compared to each other, when it relies upon the strength of Wright's past adaptation of *Pride & Prejudice* in advertising, and when it foregrounds this new film as having been adapted from the work of a prestigious contemporary novelist. Individualism still has force over texts, and as such it would be improper to forswear individualist ways of seeing when examining those texts.

However, the mere listing of the immediately aforementioned individualist operations, especially the final one, show their limits as they show us their force: McEwan does not have full individual authority over his place in the canon just while he makes maneuvers and counter-maneuvers with exterior canonizing forces; Kiera Knightley does not have full individual authority over the way in which she is typecast and presented in posters (or in films!); and Wright may well feel that his public image as a "literary" director overshadows the ways in which he considers himself a devotee of more auterist-prestigious directors such as Lynch and Kieslowski. We cannot, then, when engaging these persons who live within individualized discourses, do away with either the individual or the subject as ways of viewing. To conjure up something approaching the essence of what makes *Atonement* a particularly fraught space of artistic struggle (among artists and the press and advertisers) will require occupying numerous liminal spaces regarding the person or persona of this or that public cultural creator.

What kind of space would this look like? When trying to understand what Ian McEwan or Joe Wright says about their own work, what is a good operating principle? It

would be helpful to aspire to a Warholian principle of "I usually accept people on the basis of their self-images, because their self-images have more to do with the way they think than their objective-images do" (69). The adage in its straightforward simplicity quite wonderfully both acknowledges the liminal space as liminal space, the persona as persona, the contingency as contingency, while also allowing for potentials of full occupation and engagement with the lived-in and affectively personal qualities of such immanence. Again, it is not a complete embrace, and for critical purposes we might re-render the adage, with a replacement and addition, like so: *"I can understand people on the basis of their self-images, because their self-images may well have as much significance in revealing the way they think as their objective images do."* A filmic analogue for this kind of critical practice might be seen in the films of David Lynch, where characters are often presented in ways which allow the audience the choice of either fully occupying the character's psychology, taking a more distanced and ironic position, or perhaps optimally, somewhere between the two.[10]

When Ian McEwan gives an interview, when Joe Wright records a director's commentary track, each individual—despite disclaimers of their understanding and appreciating the relativistic wonder of how different readers/viewers experience different things—jockeys for a particular amount of control over their public images, in what at least appears to be a move of realigning the self-image with the public image. They jockey, oh so politely, for authority over the texts with which they are associated. In being given access to this contested zone, we get an avenue into more intense ways of

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[10] Two particularly apt examples might be Laura Dern's speech about the birds of love in Blue Velvet and Leland Palmer crying over the discovery of his daughter's death in the pilot for Twin Peaks. Lynch gives the actors full emotional expressivity and room for articulation, but the excess of the non-diegetic music places this expressivity into an ambiguous zone.

experiencing these works—not only more intense as dreamworld escapes, but also their intensely fraught conditions as private/personal/public people. The claims made by the self-image against the fraught public image are not necessarily authoritative or even trustworthy, but in their having been articulated, they evidence peculiarities of revealing and crucial moving meanings.

To take a clear example of this somewhat tortuous general principle, removed from the specific case of *Atonement,* we can look to statements made by Helena Bonham Carter about the gap, at a particular point in her career, between her public image and her self-image. When asked about shifting from Merchant-Ivory sorts of roles to more daring roles such as those in *Fight Club* or Tim Burton films, Bonham Carter said (in an interview for Cinema.com):

> I have to struggle to change people's perceptions of me so that I can find those kinds of roles. They're not just out there pleading for me to take them, I have to fight to get them. I grew very frustrated with the perception that I'm this shy, retiring, inhibited aristocratic creature when I'm absolutely not like that at all. I think I'm much more outgoing and exuberant than my image. [...] you become very angry and depressed that you keep getting offered only these exceedingly demure and repressed roles. They're so not me. That's why films like *Fight Club* were so important to me because I think I confounded certain stereotypes and limited perceptions of what I could do as an actress. I also get fed up with the fact that casting agents and directors have this impression of me as being frail and petite. I find it very patronizing. I'm quite beefy and strong. I was a gymnast in school and I have lots of muscles. I drink booze, I smoke, and I'm hooked on

caffeine. I actually have been known to swear at times and belch and even raise

my voice when provoked. And I'm not physically repressed!

Although Bonham-Carter comments are not "authoritative" in the sense that they may not keep some people who only watch Merchant-Ivory films from proceeding to see her as a frail figure, and they may be exaggeration in order to pierce through layers of preconception solidifying around her public image, it is precisely in their non-authoritativeness and inbetweenness that they are worthy of consideration. As the interview is now more than a decade old, it can be contextualized as taking place at a moment of clear transition in Bonham-Carter's career and filmography. But turning to it does not entail necessarily a surrender to it and its terms. It asks us only for consideration. To think not just of Helena Bonham Carter as a powerful celebrity individual, but as a human individual who, despite her fame, is still subject to forces beyond her control. It asks us to reflect on how long she had been thinking along these lines, to ask if she would have had the opportunity to vent such frustration publicly if she had not had the sufficient celebrity power to fight for the kinds of roles which would allow her interviews where she *could* vent such frustration.[11] Interviews (as well as director's commentaries) can be mined for comments such as this, often operating less obviously, which in their *sense* of transgressing the norms created by various in-groups (whether of literary culture, cinephile culture, or whatever) guide us closer to precisely what the various unspoken "rules" of these in-groups, with their particular games, are, and what this means for the ideal of the free activity of the artist.

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[11] Kiera Knightley recently made a similar move of trying to regain control over her public image when she posed nude in Interview magazine as a way to counter the lack of control she has over the way studios choose to airbrush her image in movie posters.

This project, then, proceeds in its investigation of *Atonement* by taking the views of the two different people which most vie for their own authorial control over what *Atonement* is and isn't—Ian McEwan and Joe Wright—as a point of departure for interpretation and engagement. Taking seriously the way in which they present themselves as attempting authorial control, in their own contexts. By engaging Ian McEwan's interviews, we come to understand his own views about the place of the novelist is in the 21st century, as well as what he thinks about modernism. This in turn allows us to see not only some interesting motifs in the novel which may have well gone unseen, but goes some way towards revealing the problems they pose for cinematic adaptation. One section oriented around McEwan and his concerns in literary culture brings out peculiar aspects of not just the novel, but also the film, for how these aspects will frame another chapter oriented around Wright and his concerns in film culture. As with Helena Bonham Carter's comment, we should not necessarily embrace what she says completely. But we should thoughtfully consider it. These next two chapters, then, present themselves as speaking from within a consideration of taking these author figures at the optimum balance between "their word" and what simply cannot bear scholarly speculation. Far from an attempt to lock down "authoritative" meanings on the texts by consulting the "authors," I am trying to produce *my own* readings, by consulting the authors, and taking them seriously.

2. Ideally Embracing Authorship (and A Practical Limit)

a. Ian McEwan, *The Broken Estate*, and the Author as Suffering God

McEwan is one of those rare "literary" writers who, far from remaining too obscure for most readers of fiction to even be able to comment on him, is popular enough that he has—much like Jonathan Franzen in the United States—been in a position to receive a "popular backlash" on his native soil (see *Evening Standard*'s "Backlash against Ian McEwan.) As his wife, Annalena McFee, works for *The Guardian*, a quick search of his name there reveals an unusual number of reviews and interviews with the writer, sometimes when he is not necessarily promoting a new work. Even in the States he is consulted as being in that realm beyond mere writer of fiction and walks into another role; that of a public intellectual. He was, for example, part of a panel of interviewees moderated by Charlie Rose on the death of Christopher Hitchens—even taking the opportunity to defend his friend's support for the invasion of Iraq, and so butting heads a bit with Salman Rushdie (perhaps the only living Booker Prize winner with a higher profile than McEwan). He is respected not just as a man of letters, but as a public promoter of scientific understanding. In addition to sharing the stage with theoretical physicist Nima Arkani-Hamed at The Science Museum, his website has a whole page titled "Science and Science Related," including editorials written by McEwan critiquing creationism, on the ramifications of Barack Obama's election for the future of climate change, and interviews such as those with Steven Pinker considering overlap of brain science and good writing.

This is to say that Ian McEwan is a writer whose voice and public image carries beyond the usual realm of the literary author, where in the United States you can consider

yourself lucky if your favorite literary writer's voice happens to turn up on NPR. At the risk of falling into cliché, some of this may well be attributable to the different levels of publicity and respect that a successful writer can generally expect to get depending on whether they are based in America or Britain. American literary writers are generally held in more suspicious regard by the general public than in Britain, or at the very least, the popular press is less likely to take them seriously as a voice worth consulting on the big issues of the day. But what relevance does any of this have for a thesis on the adaptation of this author's novel?

Noting the popularity (or perhaps the simple availability) of McEwan's voice is to suggest that McEwan matters as a public figure, and since he matters as a public figure and not just as a name which appears on the cover of well received books, he has a greater amount of power to shape how those well received books are interpreted than is usual for many of his contemporaries--American, British, or otherwise. This is not to say that all or even the majority of McEwan's readers bother to seek out his public appearances, care about his views on neuroscience, or even about what he thinks his novels mean. But it is to say that he makes himself available as a major voice to be consulted on each of these things, and it is not unreasonable to think that he does hold some significant influence in these matters (especially on the meaning of his novels).

If we are to take seriously the idea that a proper understanding of a film adaptation would necessitate an understanding of the source novel in its context as well as the adaptation in its context, Ian McEwan is himself a crucial part of both of those contexts. And, happily for this project, he happens to have opinions on key issues surrounding authorship and adaptation, having been through both processes numerous

times. Though it is not as a rule true in all cases, this is an example of a case where an engagement with an understanding of the name Ian McEwan in the public realm is necessary to a realistic and rigorous understanding of the adaptation of his most popular and acclaimed novel.

According to his website, in the year 2000, Ian McEwan gave no interviews at all. If we want to pinpoint the moment when Ian McEwan went from being a celebrated public novelist who was finally seen as just a novelist (perhaps the Philip Roth of Britain) to being the national luminary described above, whose opinion was sought on larger political and public issues, we might say that it began with the success of *Atonement*. Between the publication of that novel in 2001 and this year of 2016, he has given multiple interviews every year despite publishing only five novels in that time. The longest break in interviews—at least according to the rather extensive official record curated on his website--was between *Atonement* and his next novel, *Saturday*, which was interestingly one of the most interview-dense periods, adding up to 20 interviews almost all of which directly concern *Atonement*. And, because the novel was so popularly adapted into a film two years after *Saturday*, many of the interviews from 2007 to now touch on this novel, how he feels about its adaptation, and where he fits it within his body of work.

As such, the notion that these interviews are worth taking seriously leave the critic with a lot of information to sort through and parse, but we can make several notes of what is relevant to this project. What was Ian McEwan saying about his novel, *Atonement,* during its publicity tour? If he doesn't exactly spell out the significance of *Atonement*, what can we infer from various interviews? What does McEwan say about the adaptation

of *Atonement* into film during its initial public relations blitz (which coincided with the public relations blitz of McEwan's then new novel, *On Chesil Beach*, which recieved middling reviews)? And then what did McEwan say about the film adaptation once the film's reputation had already somewhat solidified, feeling much freer to praise it only selectively?

I argue that an engagement with McEwan's interviews reveals not just McEwan's context, but that *Atonement* is, itself, a meditation on that context—in the sense of the long term historical sweep of British novel writing. We should linger upon McEwan's stated ideas of literature, with a particular eye towards their relation to the literary past. For instance, the epigraph to *Atonement* is a chillingly contextualized excerpt from Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey*, and the main character of the novel—who is also the fictional co-writer of the novel—receives a rejection letter from literary critic and editor Cyril Connolly, who advises her, among other things, not to try and imitate Virginia Woolf too closely. How should we see these moments in the text in relation to comments McEwan has made about Woolf, about Austen, about Briony, and about literary modernism? As I attempted to show in the previous chapter, modernism itself is a movement worth reckoning with when engaging debates about authorship. Here we have an opportunity to see how this is not just a historicized idealism of a particular literary movement, but something which, instead, shows real force—even today.

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"For a long time I have thought that the novel, not in its modernist form, but in its nineteenth-century form, is a popular art form, it's a demotic one. It should reach large numbers of people and there's nothing shameful about it," McEwan explains, upon being

asked to reconcile the seriousness of his novels with their wild popularity in an interview with David Lynn. He goes on:

> It was modernism that promoted the notion of the artist as a sort of severe high priest who belonged to a small elite and was not going to ever have his pages dirtied and grubbied by the hoi polloi. I think it was a nonsensical view. Writers like Virginia Woolf saying, 'character is now dead,' helped push the novel down some very fruitless impasses. And although I think in the United States, literature, fiction, largely bypassed all the problems posed for it by modernism, in continental Europe there was a long fading off through the fifties, sixties, and seventies of authors still writing novels that never really engaged the world in the way that, say, Saul Bellow could. [...] I remember asking among my German friends, 'Well, where are the good contemporary novels on the German wall, on the Berlin wall?' And they said, there's Peter Schneider's *The Wall Jumper*, but no, there's nothing, because it's not a subject for novelists, it's a subject for journalists. And you got a sense that they were still in this aesthetic, that the proper business of the novelist was to write about an alienated figure in a hotel room in an unnamed city staring at the wall, waiting for the appearance of another unnamed character in order to accomplish some unnamed pursuit.

But McEwan does not see himself as simply reacting against modernism in the wake of moribund existential tendencies in European fiction, another comment. Here, in an earlier interview to Jeff Gilles, following the success of the novel, McEwan speaks on the fiction which informed the darker, more iconoclastic work of his earlier days:

I started to read, quite intensively, a number of American writers: William Burroughs, Philip Roth, Henry Miller. [...] Also Bellow and Updike. And I was really struck by the sort of vigor and sexual expressiveness--even obscenity. So then I saw what I wanted. I wanted much more vivid colors. I wanted something savage. I always used to deny this, but I guess what I'm really saying is that I was writing to shock. I did feel impatient with the kind of fiction that was being written in England. It seemed to lack all ambition. All these freedoms won for fiction by people like Joyce and Lawrence and Virginia Woolf seemed to me forgotten. We were back with a rather unambitious kind of realism--sociology, almost. So I felt impatient. And I dug deep and dredged up all kinds of vile things which fascinated me at the time. They no longer do particularly, but they did then.

And, one final quote to consider, here from an interview to Isaac Chotiner in *The New Republic*, shortly after the release of the film adaptation:

The kind of fiction I like and the kind of fiction I most often want to write does have its feet on the ground of realism, certainly psychological realism. I have no interest in magical realism and the supernatural--that is really an extension, I guess, of my atheism. [...] I think that the world, as it is, is so difficult to capture that some kind of enactment of the plausibly shared reality that we inhabit is a very difficult task. But it is one that fascinates me. [...] I really get a thrill from [Saul Bellow]'s engagement with the momentous task of what it is like to be in the 20th century in Chicago or even Bucharest, what the condition is, what it's like, how it is now. This is something that modernism shied away from--the pace of

things, the solid achievement of weight in your hand. So I remain rather committed to that.

So modernism for McEwan is not just a bunch of pretentious blowhards, but also a high standard for what literature can acheive when it attempts to push the limits of artistic freedom; far from the "unambitious realism" of British fiction during the 1960s and 70s. Further, literary realism itself is not just a complacent and boring shackle on this freedom—as a particularly bad form of it appeared to young McEwan—but also, in a better form, the very grounding of his own psychological approach. But then he defines his commitment to realism against a "magical realism" he has no interest in, something he accredits to his professed atheism—which sits interestingly next to his notion of the modernist writer as a severe high priest (a post which McEwan implicitly sees himself as not holding). Taken together, these quotes hearken back to my criticisms of Thomas Leitch in the last chapter. For McEwan—an active writer obviously engaged in the history of English language literature—it is, as I argue, not Arnold, but the elitist strain of modernism which is often at issue when defining the current place of literature against its calcified norms.

Within this, there is a striking profusion of spiritually and metaphysically significant language in how McEwan stakes out his own place in the tradition of English literature. As I mention in the first section of the thesis (and which I will further explore in this section), Briony the aged writer is reckoning with her lack of any god to atone to—since she as an author *is* god, and so "sets the limits and the terms" (351). McEwan frequently invokes religious language in order to explore problems of creativity and power. He also takes care, though, to foreground himself as an atheist, and, even further,

as a kind of realist, as an enthusiast of *materiality*, and of the notion that just the idea of one human mind trying to get at the reality of the outside world is, as a process, wondrous enough in itself—religious and mystical trappings need not apply.

But how to put a limit on or a form to this pattern of connections between the pseudo-religious language as well as the positioning among literary periods and nationalities? Here, a turn to James Wood's *The Broken Estate* proves fruitful. Beyond the striking match between its title and the setting of *Atonement*'s first, perhaps most famous section, the book is Wood's attempt to rethink the creative impulse of various landmarks in English language literature in religious terms. Published right around the time McEwan had received the Booker for *Amsterdam* and was beginning work on *Atonement*, Wood's opening passage fits quite nicely with McEwan's aspiration to capture our "plausibly shared reality" rather than to indulge in magical realism:

> The real is the atlas of fiction, over which all novelists thirst. The real is contour, aspiration, tyrant. The novel covers reality, runs away with it, and, as travelers will yearn to dirty their geography, runs from it too. It is impossible to discuss the power of the novel without discussing the reality that fiction so powerfully discloses, which is why realism, in one form or another and often under different names, has been the novel's insistent preoccupation from the beginning of the form. Realism is a lenient tutor; it schools its own truants. Everything flows from the real, including the beautiful deformations of the real; it is realism that allows surrealism, magic realism, fantasy, dream, and so on (xi).

For Wood, the similarity between fiction and religion is that they play upon questions of belief. Here the distinction between religious belief and fictional belief is marked as such:

"Fiction asks us to judge its reality; religion asserts its reality. And this is all a way of saying that fiction is a special realm of freedom" (xiv). This is a freedom, then, in the sense of the freedom to *judge*, the *power* to judge being placed back into the hands of the individual consciousness—a dynamic which is itself often the subject of fiction, and certainly is in *Atonement*. Wood acknowledges this artistic belief as as a "not quite" belief, a believing "as if," but goes on to suggest that it is precisely this conditionality which made fiction—and the novel in particular—so appealing as a threat to religion in the realm of belief:

> It will become clear that I believe that distinctions between literary belief and religious belief are important, and it is because I believe in that importance that I am attracted to writers who struggle with those distinctions. Around the middle of the nineteenth century, those distinctions became much harder to maintain, and we have lived in the shadow of their blurring ever since. This was when the old estate broke. I would define the old estate as the supposition that religion was a set of divine truth-claims, and that the Gospel narratives were supernatural reports; fiction might be supernatural too, but fiction was always fictional, it was not in the same order of truth as the Gospel narratives. During the nineteenth century, these two positions began to soften and merge. At the high point of the novel's triumph, the Gospels began to be read, by both writers and theologians, as a set of fictional tales—as a kind of novel. Simultaneously, fiction became an almost religious activity (xiv-xv).

It is unlikely (but possible) that McEwan read Wood's text while composing *Atonement*, but a reading of *Atonement* which takes its cues from Wood need not justify itself along

such lines. Although Wood later wrote an essay on McEwan (which I will engage in the coming pages), *The Broken Estate* elects instead to present Julian Barnes as the representative contemporary British novelist, written as it was before McEwan's looming crossover success. In that chapter, McEwan does get one mention: "The cognitive neatness, the fondness for direct statement, the fat hand with theme and symbol, the knowingness—all can be found in the works of William Golding, of Ian McEwan, of Angela Carter" (224).

This, beyond being valuable simply as a fair assessment of McEwan's earlier work, placing it in the stylistic, sentence-level tradition of E.M. Forster, is essential to digest for those who have only read *Atonement*, of all McEwan's works. As a summation of the mid-period McEwan style, it puts the verbose, "palpable writerliness" present in the first part (and first half) of *Atonement*' into a different light. It reveals the attempt on McEwan's part to write significant sections of his novel in a voice that is somewhat other than what was once taken as his own, usual authorial voice. As the third section of the novel makes apparent—through Connolly's letter to Briony—this first section is in part a mimic of Virginia Woolf.

We must wonder as well, if the novel's *Northanger Abbey* epigraph is placed there simply by McEwan, or if it is placed there by McEwan *through* Briony, given her status as fictional co-author. Happily, *The Broken Estate*, in conjunction with McEwan's novel and interviews, can help us begin making sense of these references and allusions to Austen and Woolf. It provides a lens which can help us to stake out these areas in the same religious—or rather, *belief-oriented*—language which is so pronounced in McEwan's interviews.

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"Dear Miss Morland, consider the dreadful nature of the suspicions you have entertained. What have you been judging from? Remember the country and the age in which we live. Remember that we are English: that we are Christians. Consult your own understanding, your own sense of the probable, your own observation of what is passing around you. Does our education prepare us for such atrocities? Do our laws connive at them? Could they be perpetrated without being known in a country like this, where social and literary intercourse is on such a footing, where every man is surrounded by a neighbourhood of voluntary spies, and where roads and newspapers lay everything open? Dearest Miss Morland, what ideas have you been admitting?"

They had reached the end of the gallery; and with tears of shame she ran off to her own room.

--From *Northanger Abbey* (136) [Also the epigraph to McEwan's *Atonement*]

When explaining the composition of the first and longest part of *Atonement* to Kate Kellaway, McEwan says he says he had planned it as "my Jane Austen novel, my country house novel, my one-hot-day novel." Describing the development of Briony's character in another interview, he elaborates on the Austen connection: "I'd also, for many years, been very drawn to the underlying idea of Jane Austen's novel *Northanger Abbey* in which a young woman's reading of gothic novels causes her to misunderstand everything around her. And I've often thought that I would rather like someone with imagination to cause some sort of havoc."

The selection of the above passage from *Northanger Abbey* to open his novel is significant for how it may well encapsulate or at least introduce what for McEwan is the core issue of that novel, which in turn inspired his own: the reading of novels causing a misunderstanding when overinfluencing a sheltered young mind. But McEwan distinguishes himself from Austen, in the pressure his selection places on Catherine Morland running down the hall. McEwan emphasizes her *shame*. For Austen these moments of embarrassment are placed too lightly, satirically, and comically to overwhelm our total sense of the novel with any kind of unpleasant emotion—whereas

shame could well be mentioned as one of the unifying notes of McEwan's. *Atonement* can be read as a recounting of Briony's catastrophe of imagination—not just in ruining the lives of her sister and her lover, but in catastrophizing her own life; in making her own life into a constant "atonement" through the exercise of her imagination—an exercise which, despite its exhaustive repetition, is finally understood as unsuccessful on such terms: as the final page of the novel exhales, "The attempt was all," (351).

However, this Austen passage also touches upon, again, the religious ("we are Christians") and, again, this question of the individual apprehending the outside world ("your *own* sense of the probable, your *own* observation of what is passing around you" [italics mine]). This interplay between the literary striving after the real and its relation to the religious is the calling card of *The Broken Estate*. Wood acknowledges that the few letters we have from Austen leave barely a trace of "her idea of fiction, of aesthetics, or of religion"—especially, I will note, as compared to the treasure trove of such ideas we are lucky to have in the case of Woolf, or indeed McEwan (16). But Wood persists—in his chapter, "Jane Austen's Heroic Consciousness,"—to position Austen as being an actor, witting or not, in the literary reaction against the Broken Estate of Christendom.

I mention above that for Wood, fiction gives to the reader the sense of a freedom of consciousness with respect to reality, which religion, with its more demanding claim upon reality, in Wood's view, does not. How the novel gives us this sense of a freedom in the face of its claim to reality has, for Wood, its first substantial step forward in Austen's work. Here, the heroine is placed into a "rationally" constructed plot which leads to an exterior discovery, a closing of the gap between the subjective consciousness and Austen's compelling portrait of the "outside" world:

Austen's heroines do not change in the modern sense, because they do not really discover things about themselves. [...] As the novel moves forward, certain veils are pierced and obstacles removed, so that the heroine can see the world more clearly. In the course of that process, more and more of the heroine's stable essence is revealed to us. Thus plot is inherently rational and problem-solving in Austen ("rational" was one of Austen's favorite words, and is used often by her heroines) (17).

We love Austen's heroines, Wood claims, because we are on the same side as them: her heroines are also "reading" the problems in question that we are.[12]

Austen's particular contribution is in making not the "reality" which her heroines slowly uncover the main subject of interest for her novels, nor either the *attributes* of the heroines themselves: the center of attention and the richness of complexity is located at this point of a sense of the their interiority meeting the outside world.

Austen's heroines do not discover, then, what is best in themselves; they discover what is best *for* themselves and for others. Austen's work is not therapeutic but hermeneutic. [...] Someone who understood other people, who attended to their secret meanings, who read people properly, might be called hermeneutical. [...] This is what the Austen heroine does. Even the wild and undisciplined Emma is such a reader (18-9).

Wood acknowledges, however, that this "reading" is not completely outward-oriented. It is the interior location that gives their consciousness its heroic quality. Wood notes

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[12] For Wood, Elizabeth Bennet's revelation about Darcy is only a revelation about Darcy, not about herself. Wood grants that Emma learns something about herself, but as she only learns what the readers have already known about her, the appealing similarity between the reader's gap with Austen's reality and her heroine's is smaller, and so loses a kind of force.

Fanny's reply to Henry Crawford in *Mansfield Park*: "We all have a better guide in ourselves, if we would attend to it, than any other person can be." If Austen's heroines can be said to change at all, it is the degree to which they begin to attend this voice inside, which Wood sees as Austen's notion of the voice of God; her novels, then, are Evangelical tracts patterned so as to have the reader recognize this God (with its Protestant-flavored rationality) within (19).

Wood sees this crucial representation of inwardness as developing across Austen's oeuvre. He sees the will towards this style latent in *Sense & Sensibility*, but as yet unexpressed (20). By the point of *Pride & Prejudice*, Elizabeth Bennet's interior is slowly revealed to the reader, but in the form of what Wood calls a kind of "stage soliloquy" which over the course of *Mansfield Park* and *Emma* begins to "blend the heroine's soliloquy with [Austen]'s own third-person narration, so that she is able to move in and out of a character as she pleases."

This stream-of-consciousness and its development into Austen's signature free-indirect style—where third person is maintained but the protagonist "floods" the narration—was a significant influence on modernists such as Joyce and Woolf, who famously took the technique much further (21, 23). I will note this development, in light of Wood's analysis, below. McEwan, as well, draws upon these elements in his writing of *Atonement*. For example, the first two pages of the novel show the third person narration mostly flooded by Briony's nervous precocity, only to take a break in the refuge of her mother for its short, second paragraph.

However, as Wood notes that this heroic consciousness of Austen did not start developing until well into the composition of *Pride & Prejudice*, what do we make of

McEwan's epigraphic quote of her debut, *Northanger Abbey*? As a kind of play on the Don Quixote theme of a frail mind ruined by literature, the novella is not so much about a *heroism* of consciousness as it is a *failure* of consciousness. Its comedy is generated by the extent to which we can infer the "inner voice" of Catherine Morland—contaminated as it is been by the tightly paranoid ambiguities of gothic literature—leading her away from reality and into amusing humiliations. As I have discussed above, however, McEwan's placement of an instance of this Austenian comedy at the beginning of his dark novel gives this humiliation an altogether different character.

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[H]ow can a novelist achieve atonement when, with her absolute power of deciding outcomes, she is also God? There is no one, no entity or higher form that she can appeal to, or be reconciled with, or that can forgive her. There is nothing outside her. In her imagination she has set the limits and the terms. No atonement for God, or novelists, even if they are atheists.

-The final page of *Atonement*

My reading of *Atonement* is that it is in large part a literary Trojan horse reaction against the romantic, mystical strain in modernism as so thoroughly embodied by Virginia Woolf. Rather than a protagonist hilariously corrupted by pulpy gothic literature, McEwan takes the overly imaginative romantic instincts of a young girl and wreaks real havoc with them. In *Atonement*, the error of consciousness is not comic, but ruins lives in a way so severe that even "tragedy" seems inappropriate to the situation. Having realized her error, the young girl tries to atone for it through sublimating her potentially destructive imaginative instincts into a spiral of socially acceptable, modernist literary self-condemning re-apprehension. She relives and re-imagines her mistake from every savage angle she can, only to realize that—within this idiosyncratically self-concocted scheme of sin and punishment—there is ultimately no one to forgive her but herself. In

light of McEwan's critique of the modern (and contemporary) novel's "impasses" after high modernism, we may ask as well if the novel also amount to an implicit critique of those trends. His main character, Briony, an author having been born around 1922 and died presumably in 1999, may be read as a stand-in for McEwan's ideas of the British literature that was written during this period, where the romantic strain of modernism perhaps could not withstand the trauma of World War II and settled into either moribund existential themes or empty realisms. Her very name—Briony—may be a play on the romantic poet Lord Byron; but parasitic, and stripped of its loft, it is only Byron-y.

It is surprising that this same reading of the novel—positioned for its significance with regards to modernism and belief—has not yet been carried out by James Wood himself. His chapter, "Virginia Woolf's Mysticism," in *The Broken Estate*, gives us more than enough material to needle the relationship out of the authors. What makes the lack of commentary especially surprising is how Wood makes the point of emphasizing the importance of Woolf's childhood and its fixations over the much more discussed Bloomsbury period of her life, mythologized as it has been in the aura of Woolf's mental illness and illustrious connections. But a portrait of Woolf's childhood can put especially the first half of *Atonement* into revealing context. McEwan claims that the kernel of *Atonement* was someone with imagination wreaking some havoc. Why did he settle upon this (somewhat post-) Virginia Woolf imagination as the culprit of choice?

Drawing upon Woolf's memoir, "A Sketch of the Past," Wood emphasizes how the impression of her parents shaped what would become the fixations of her artistic and intellectual life. Particularly interesting is the way in which Woolf seems to regard her father, Leslie Stephen (who became Mr. Ramsay in *To the Lighthouse*). Her father was

"one of the most important agnostics of his generation, a literary critic, a Cambridge rationalist, the author of *The History of English Thought in the Eighteenth Century*" (Wood, 90). For Woolf, her father was the embodiment of what she saw as an institutional mediocrity, in her own words: "not a subtle mind; not an imaginative mind; not a suggesting mind. But a strong mind; a healthy out of door, moor stringing mind; an impatient, limited mind; a conventional mind entirely accepting his own standard of what is honest" (91). However, Wood notes how Woolf relished the sophisticated education her father bestowed upon her. She, like Briony, had the opportunity to indulge and develop "that deep, secretive relationship with language that often characterizes the solitary child (92).

Nevertheless, what she saw as the limitations of her father would be the way in which she would encapsulate the "limitations of a whole class of people"; she writes: "He had no feeling for pictures; no ear for music; no sense of the sound of words" (91). Though he clearly had a crucial impact upon what would turn out to be the riches of her development, Woolf is persistent in distinguishing her father from herself, even turning him into *To The Lighthouse*'s Mr. Ramsay—one of the most caricatured characters in a novel highly forgiving of and reverent towards the inner lives of its characters.

Like Woolf was hostile to the society which allowed her to have the genius she lambasted it for not properly recognizing, Briony broods at the slightest inconveniences against her own creative will. It is in fact, only through her own turning fantasies that it happens upon anything approaching authentic engagement with the minds of others. In one of her inner monologues:

For example, did her sister really matter to herself, was she as valuable to herself as Briony was? Was being Cecilia just as vivid an affair as being Briony? Did her sister also have a real self concealed behind a breaking wave, and did she spend time thinking about it, with a finger held up to her face? Did everybody, including her father, Betty, Hardman? If the answer was yes, then the world, the social world, was unbearably complicated, with two billion voices, and everyone's thoughts striving in equal importance and everyone's claim on life as intense, and everyone thinking they were unique, when no one was. One could drown in irrelevance. But if the answer was no, then Briony was surrounded by machines, intelligent and pleasant enough on the outside, but lacking the bright and private *inside* feeling she had. This was sinister and lonely, as well as unlikely. For, though it offended her sense of order, she knew it was overwhelmingly probable that everyone else had thoughts like hers. She knew this, but only in a rather arid way; she didn't really feel it (34).

This passage shows Briony musing, trying, as Wood characterizes Woolf's aim, to "sharpen character into the invisible" a struggle she described as a revolt against the aesthetic she associated with her father's generation (94). This was the generation of what Woolf called the Edwardians, whose reality Wood describes, on Woolf's behalf, as "a furniture sale, everything that could be seen, tagged, and marked. But Woolf wanted to break from what she called materialism, and to look for darker corridors. Reality is 'a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end" (95).

Woolf's reputation as a writer of fiction rests largely on her ability to give us the image of a reality as the luminous halo *behind* apparent material appearance. Though we can read her and marvel at a seemingly unrestricted imaginative empathy, this sense of the "insideness" of others, for Woolf, comes out of a the mystical obsession to find the deep "metaphysical reality," the "something more" that is not just constituted in aesthetic patterns, but behind the aesthetic patterns (100).

While Jane Austen's social, Protestant rationality finds her heroines undergoing lessons in attending to their perceptual activity or self-reflection, which in turn links them to the outside world, Woolf's secular mysticism attests to a sustained preoccupation with trying to completely map the outside world by a deep, repeated *plummeting* into the personal inside. Plummeting so far into it that even personality, even character might dissolve so that the invisible weave which may bind everything together could finally be grabbed up and captured in language.

Through Briony, McEwan characterizes the Woolfian stream-of-consciousness as a dark water indeed, which ultimately brings about a *Northanger Abbey*-esque failure of consciousness rather than a heroics of it. Briony—high on an overcharge of her own introverted intuition[13]—mistakes the *sense* of a concentrated knowingness for a truly adult understanding of sexual relationships, encouraging her to say she "knows it is him" when the police interrogate her about Robbie's alleged rape.

McEwan's bleak atheistic rationality makes for an interesting bedfellow with Austen's more forgivingly Protestant rationalism. While Austen evangelizes for the rationality of the inner voice through slowly allowing her heroines to train its capacity to

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[13] Here I have in mind Jung's cognitive function, as explained in his *Psychological Types*: "Introverted intuition is directed to the inner object [...] The relation of inner objects to consciousness is entirely analogous to that of outer objects, though their reality is not physical but psychic" (259).

unmask what is plainly true of social relations, McEwan instead provides a cautionary tale of plunging too thoroughly into oneself beyond the point of rationality. For McEwan, our strongest hope within is training our rational capacity to accurately map the world; there is only catastrophe waiting in turning it into a mystical indulgence.

But I think that *Atonement* is not simply a critique of the secular, modernist mysticism of the likes of Virginia Woolf, who hoped to find the soul of the world in the stream of synchronicities tying together seemingly unrestrained, unrelated individual consciousnesses. *Atonement* is also, especially upon re-reading, an empathetic portrait of a writer whose life has been an attempt to train herself out of these tendencies of seeing (after the trauma of Robbie and Cecilia's death—perhaps a metaphor for the collective trauma of World War II). This point is surprisingly absent in Wood's engagement with the novel, published in the *London Review of Books*, where I think he is slightly over-involved in the novel's play with "reality" in general:

> Plenty of readers are irritated by this conjuring trick. But if Briony made it all up, so did we. If the desperation of both her guilt and her wish fulfilment stirs us, it is because, by way of McEwan's delayed revelation, by way of his narrative secret, we have ourselves conspired in Briony's wish fulfilment, not just content but eager to believe, until the very last moment, that Cecilia and Robbie did not actually die. We wanted them to be alive, and the knowledge that we too wanted a 'happy ending' brings on a kind of atonement for the banality of our own literary impulses. Which is why the ending provokes interestingly divergent responses: it alienates some conventional readers, who dislike what they feel to be a trick, but it alienates some sophisticated readers, who also dislike what they feel to be a

trick; and I suspect that the estrangement of both camps has to do with their guilt at having been moved by the novel's conventional romantic power. It shouldn't be possible, but *Atonement* wants to have it both ways, and succeeds in having it both ways. It is Ian McEwan's best book because it successfully prosecutes and defends – as inevitable – the very impulses that make McEwan such a compellingly manipulative novelist; and because it makes us willing, guilty, and finally self-conscious co-conspirators in that machinery of manipulation.

This analysis, I claim, is unenagaged with the question of what the *will* to enact that trickery—as a kind of Woolfian therapeutic writing rather than Austenian hermeneutic writing—reveals about Briony's mature motives in writing, and reveals about how her own self-knowledge has changed. We must remember that as *Atonement* is written by Briony, the passages which are ostensibly from Cecilia's perspective, or—perhaps most notably—Robbie's, and which cast Briony as hopelessly naive, are her own, later, mature reflection.

Before her disastrous pubescent error, Briony is shown to recoil from the suggestion that her daydreaming is without validity, something brought on by "the hard mass of the actual":

> The cost of oblivious daydreaming was always this moment of return, the realignment with what had been before and now seemed a little worse. Her reverie, once rich in plausible details, had become a passing silliness before the hard mass of the actual. It was difficult to come back. Come back, her sister used to whisper when she woke her from a bad dream. Briony had lost her godly power

of creation, but it was only at this moment of return that the loss became evident (McEwan, 72).

The bulk of the second part of the novel, thoroughly from Robbie's perspective, takes on an added poignancy in how it shows an abandonment of the first section's frenzies of free indirect style—Briony's own natural voice. Instead we are confronted with a startlingly different voice, weighted down with a searing, blistering engagement with the horrible surfaces of Dunkirk where Briony acknowledges, through imagining Robbie's experience, the limitations of flowery, psychological streams-of-consciousness:

> From here it looked simple. They were passing more bodies in the road, in the gutters and on the pavement, dozens of them, soldiers and civilians. The stench was cruel, insinuating itself into the folds of his clothes. The convoy had entered a bombed village, or perhaps the suburb of a small town—the place was rubble and it was impossible to tell. Who could care? Who could ever describe this confusion, and come up with the village names and the dates for the history books? And take the reasonable view and begin to assign blame? No one would even know what it was like to be here. Without the details there could be no larger picture (214).

The tendency towards introspective psychological description which Briony embodies in the first chapter is here not only completely abandoned—itself an act of great artistic might and empathy on Briony's part—but also critiqued in its acknowledgement of the glossing over of the importance of attention to physical, material "detail" as it is, and the relation of *this* to blame, rather than the details of fantasy. Briony's incessant "tidiness" and easily offended "sense of order"—when compared to the horror of how she tries to

imagine war—are now acknowledged as the stable structure she requires in order to have the space she needed to pursue her psychologico-mystical indulgences.

As the novel progresses, though, Briony comes nearer and nearer to the abyss and horror of absolute materiality which both she and Virginia Woolf were in rebellion against. In the third section of the novel, Briony—having finally admitted to herself that it was Paul Marshall who raped Lola—takes a position as a war nurse, again as a kind of penance for the outcome of her crucial error, her half-innocent mistake. Here Briony apparently relives, rewrites her personal experience coming face to face with the most gruesome "materiality," tending the wounds of a mortally wounded French soldier:

> Using a pair of surgical tongs, she began carefully pulling away the sodden, congealed lengths of ribbon gauze from the cavity in the side of his face. When the last was out, the resemblance to the cutaway model they used in anatomy classes was only faint. This was all ruin, crimson and raw. She could see through his missing cheek to his upper and lower molars, and the tongue glistening, and hideously long. Further up, where she hardly dared look, were the exposed muscles around his eye socket. So intimate, and never intended to be seen. Private Latimer had become a monster, and he must have guessed this was so. Did a girl love him before? Could she continue to? (284).

In the epilogue, after the initials *B.T.* have confirmed that what we have been reading is in fact Briony's novel, there is this passage where she—finally in the first person—meditates upon the results of her scan, revealing vascular dementia:

> I was experiencing, he said, a series of tiny, nearly imperceptible strokes. The process will be slow, but my brain, my mind, is closing down. The little failures

of memory that dog us all beyond a certain point will become more noticeable, more debilitating, until the time will come when I won't notice them because I will have lost the ability to comprehend anything at all. The days of the week, the events of the morning, or even ten minutes ago, will be beyond my reach. My phone number, my address, my name and what I did with my life will be gone. In two, three or four years' time, I will not recognize my remaining oldest friends, and when I wake in the morning, I will not recognize that I am in my own room (334).

Insofar as the novel is, in the spirit of Austen, a rationally plotted sequence of "piercings" through misperception, which reveal reality to the heroine, it is not Austen's sensible social reality that is revealed, it is the material condition of reality seen as threat and decay. Although Briony entertains the notion—through an imagined memory of Robbie's—that perhaps her error can be accounted for through some kind of psychoanalytic jealousy, the layers of separation from her authorial voice make such explanations undecidable. Is this Briony's confession? Or is it simply McEwan showing us the depths to which Briony tried to imagine what it could have possibly been like to be the victim of her error? What the victims of her error could have possibly thought of something about her that even she—it is not clear—may never be able to understand.

McEwan has stated, in an interview to Romana Koval, that "You cannot be cruel to someone, I think, if you are fully aware of what it's like to be them. In other words, you could see cruelty as a failure of the imagination, as a failure of empathy. And to come back to the novel as a form, I think that's where it is supreme in giving us that sense of other minds." But the final paragraph of *Atonement*, quoted in part at the beginning of

this section, acknowledges that even this supremacy has its limits. The romantic strain still alive in literature—this preoccupation with creative, imaginative power's ability to do what only it can do—is understood, by McEwan, as a will to become a kind of god. But whereas we could imagine the early moderns worrying that perhaps they weren't gods after all, for McEwan, it is the recognition that artists in a sense are gods—that they set, as he writes, "the terms and the limits" in their imaginations—which is, in part, the tragedy.

In my own reading and rereading of the novel, I have often wondered just what McEwan is up to in placing, in a sense, this tragedy of writing, this apparent tragedy of and for the author, at the seeming motivational centre of the work. Is the point that the will to become a god through fiction writing perpetuates a narcissistic mindset, where disasters such as rape and WWII can only be digested in terms of their relevance to the author? I have often thought that the focalization around Briony firstly, Robbie secondarily, and Cecilia and everyone else last—particularly Lola who seems to undergo a rape-then-marry which is horrifically unexplored—is meant to drive home the point of the potential narcissism of the author. To suggest the same thing which produces the pathological need to assert creative empathy and imagination in fact creates a block from acknowledging the most troubling horrors that literature, under a religious ideal of it, should account for.

b. Joe Wright, Toward a Sensuous Film Criticism, and Authorship as Nightmare-Odyssey

Having, in the previous section, proposed a "reading" of the novel concerned chiefly with the relationship between McEwan's conception of the modernist writer and various religious themes, it seems necessary to remind my readers that this is all being done within a larger chapter oriented around two temporarily ideal embraces of authorship and a realistic challenge to them from the realm of marketing. Specifically, it is concerned with the appropriate relationship of the critic to figures of the author. Although my reading of the novel relied heavily on the belief-oriented theory of English literature proposed by James Wood, my analysis only got to that point through closely reading many interviews with McEwan, seeing how his comments on modernism and belief—in interviews—tie in with the language of the novel. In that section, I justify taking Ian McEwan as an interpretive starting point by arguing for his practical authority over his texts, arguing that this practical authority is unthreatened by the anti-authorship theories of literary academia. This practical authority demands examination (if not capitulation) on that basis. Although the theoretical challenges to the "authority" of writers from Foucault, Barthes, and others are still relevant to a film director, such as Joe Wright, I believe that my section "Engaging the (In)dividual" has made clear how I justify my approach in light of those questions.

But to posit the public persona of Joe Wright—the director of *Atonement*—as an appropriate heuristic device with which to read and watch this film is something different. Unlike with McEwan, I cannot make an appeal to Joe Wright's "practical authority," because—as I will go on to show—he doesn't think he has it and, furthermore, he's probably right. Moreover, there are some challenges specific to The Director as

Author within film studies which must be reckoned with. The most important of these is the question of collaboration.

It may be objected, for example, that screenwriter Christopher Hampton is more the "author" of the film than Joe Wright is. As I mention in the first page of the thesis, Hampton insists that Robbie and Cecilia are the heart of the film—a reading of *Atonement* which is quite different from McEwan's, who sees this as a story about the "imagination of a writer." For his own part, Joe Wright was at pains to be "true" to the novel, as he describes in the DVD commentary for the film. The first draft of the screenplay, focalized around Robbie and Cecilia, prompted Wright to restructure and rewrite it in a way which was more true to the structure of the novel (as indicated in the DVD extra, "Bringing the Past to Life: The Making of *Atonement*"). Here we can see that the writer of the film's source text (who is also a producer) is in interpretive conflict with the film's screenwriter over the most basic questions about *Atonement*, with Joe Wright acting as a kind of mediator.

In this section, I privilege Joe Wright's mediating directorial presence over Christopher Hampton's presence as a screenwriter. I want to make clear, however, that I am embracing Wright's persona, through interviews, as a way to give him a temporary amount of authority in my reading of the film, simply because his presence as a director of the film is most interesting to me for the purposes of this thesis. To put a finer point on it, I am interested in how Wright's seeming directorial orchestration of all of the different elements of the film—the writing, the acting, the editing—dovetail miraculously with a Briony-centric reading of the novel.

This is does not, however, amount to a claim that Wright is the ultimate "author" of the film. Especially not in the sense that he has final "authority" over the film's meaning. As I hope to show in third section of this chapter, which focuses on the film's marketing, it may well be the case that Hampton's presence as screenwriter is actually more present for the majority of the film's viewers, given as his emphasis on Cecilia and Robbie is bolstered both by the marketing of the film and the generic expectations of British literary adaptations.

It is also worth noting that we do not know, and may well never know, who originated or motivated each and every adaptive move—whether written, adapted, performed, directed, or edited. We do not know what was written by Christopher Hampton in the original screenplay, or which scenes are the result of a negotiation with Wright, or which are the result of changes asked for by the actors, or which cuts are the result of Wright's exhaustion during the shoot, or even which artistic decisions within the realms of writing, directing, or editing are the direct result of the notes McEwan gave on set and after having viewed a rough cut of the film. To resolve these questions we would have to ask empirical questions of the many different collaborators on this film and compare them exhaustively. Although I believe such a production history of this film is unlikely to be undertaken, it would certainly be interesting to see such a project in light of the interpretive conflicts I have already brought out.

I have, however, intentionally written this chapter focusing on the directorial presence of Joe Wright in order that it may still maintain its value as an examination of the film even if we were to discover that Wright's claims about demanding a restructuring

of the script—to be more in accord with the structure of McEwan's novel—turned out to be false.

I should say, though, that I find this doubtful. Unlike the relationship between Orson Welles and Herman J. Mankiewicz, with the case of Joe Wright there appears to be little danger of the conscious attempt to downplay the contributions of his fellow filmmakers. Listening to any one of his DVD commentaries reveals a director who is almost pathologically committed to downplaying or criticizing his own contributions, while consistently praising every element brought into the production by one of his collaborators. As we all know, too much self-deprecation can indicate a desire for more respect, and I have not let this go unconsidered. Indeed, Wright's "desire for respect" is crucial, as we will see, to his directorial persona.

In this section, I want to experiment with the risk of taking Joe Wright at his word, and, within reason, seeing what kind of a reading that risk could produce.

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Those various film people who see Joe Wright merely as the guy who can be relied upon to create yet another stuffy Anglophile-baiting literary adaptation every couple of years may be interested to know that he is dyslexic. In an interview with John Hissock, Wright tries to make sense of this strange state of affairs: "I think [my dyslexia]'s one of the reasons why I often make literary adaptations, because it's an opportunity for me to learn, and I see my career as a continuation of my education." Having dropped out of college due to his dyslexia, there's certainly more than a little bit of this motif, in Wright's self-explanation, of seeing filmmaking as a process of learning. To Robert Seigel for NPR, he commented:

I always used to be terribly worried when I was a kid. Because you'd hear these 60s kind of guys talking and say, well, you got to have something to say, man. And I'd worry that I didn't have anything to say, you know? What have I got to say, dad? What have I got to say? And then, and it was later that I realized that it was fine not to have anything to say as long as you realize you had everything to learn.

This understanding of filmmaking as a kind of continuing education is sometimes depressingly all too present in his DVD commentary tracks, where the dark side of creativity as a learning process—the side of failure—often seems to be most on Wright's mind. Very early on in the commentary track of *Hanna*, for example, Wright warns listeners early on that right after he's made a film he tends to only see their faults, and that this track is mostly going to consist in what he considers to be the film's failures and aspirations. While the commentary track for *Atonement* isn't quite so depressing, he does regret that he didn't do quite a good enough job signaling that the scene where Briony recklessly almost drowns herself in order to be saved by Robbie is not a god's eye perspective, or even Briony's perspective, but Briony's imagining of Robbie's perspective. Later, at the end of the commentary (as I mentioned earlier) Wright mentions that McEwan was often on set, and that he was at first intimidated by his intelligence. As I mention above, McEwan often had to remind Wright (and screenwriter Christopher Hamptom) that the story was about "the imagination of a writer."

In an interview with Nan A. Talese of Knopf, McEwan offers perhaps the most interesting anecdote for the sake of this study, when asked, four years on, what he thought of the film adaptation:

I love the first half of it. I think they did very well... I love that girl, Saoirse Ronan who played Briony. She's replaced Briony in my thoughts. I mean, people complain how movies do that to them as readers... she's somewhat invaded the novel, for me. I had various quarrels with bits and pieces and especially the very end, but on the whole... [Interviewer interrupts: that terrible sentimentality!... just *awful*!] Mm, it was terrible... it didn't work out... It was a mistake. The director apologized about the... He did shoot, you know, the Trials of Arabella, the little playlet... [Interviewer: ...but it couldn't work...] I think he was at a state of exhaustion by the end of it. Had run out of steam.

That an actress can retroactively recast a character in a book, even in the mind of its author, is a testament to the potential powers cinema has *over* literature. And it's says something that McEwan is more interested in the absence of the staging of the "Trials of Arabella" for the elder Briony's benefit, as in the end of the novel, than he is with the fact that the film did not make an equivalent gesture with regards to medium. A truly thorough adaptation, it might be argued, would feature the revelation of Briony as a filmmaker—perhaps even a screenwriter—rather than a novelist.

But the idea that Joe Wright would apologize to Ian McEwan about messing up the ending of a novel based on his book... is there a more loaded moment for talking about dynamics of prestige value in film adaptations? Does this reveal that the attempt to not study adaptations of literary works "under the sign of literature," as Leitch urges, is misguided in a case such as this, where the director has apparently made comments which suggest that his direction, in some certain sense, takes place thoroughly and willingly under the sign of literature? That if Wright is making himself subservient to the

work of literature as work of literature, to the point where he feels the need to apologize to its author, that we must continue to interpret certain works under the sign of literature as well, in an equivalent gesture?

This is tempting, but it is not quite my tack. Similarly, I think that a discussion of all the ways in which the film may have "failed" because it makes the filmic Briony a novelist rather than a filmmaker—and thus the film loses a certain kind of precise and detailed force in its recasting of scenes in light of its ending, as I show the book doing— would be unproductive. In fact, as I will argue in the third chapter of the thesis, I think that in some ways the merchandising of the film makes the "trick" of the final reveal much more potentially challenging than the end of the novel; that if the film can be seen as having its own narrative complexity and power absent in the novel, it could be said to have come about inadvertently, through the conventions of marketing, rather than any likely design.

Instead of these pursuing these routes in this chapter, I argue that Wright, precisely because of his professed sense of seeing literature as an intimidating challenge to be overcome, was in an optimum position to contribute to *Atonement* as an ideal construct. He ended up being the ideal artistic candidate to multiply *Atonement*'s identity. This is not to simply accept Wright's account of himself on its own terms. It's not necessarily as simple as his version, where, "because I think visually, not being able to read meant that other parts of my brain were pushed further. And when I read a book, I have to, kind of, see it." It's only to say that, because this notion of natural compensation for weakness does seem to play quite a bit into his explanation of himself, that it's worth considering his films in light of his own understanding of his art.

I want to be very attentive to the sensuous surface of key scenes in Wright's *Atonement*. McEwan claims in "Bringing the Past to Life" (a special feature on the DVD) that the trouble with adapting *Atonement* is that it's such an inner book, and indeed it is. It is also a highly allusive book, and also a book which gains much significance from *being* a book, giving its pronounced reflexive "about writing"-ness more force. In Wright's interviews about the films, though, there is the emphasis on the word *storytelling*. For Wright, we must consider that it is *not* necessarily the story of a writer, or writing, or the broken estate of British literature, as we well could for McEwan. Instead, the character of a writer is used and writing-as-act-of-body-and-mind is used in order for Wright to demonstrate the trouble and the *drama* of apprehending reality. For Wright—who describes reading as a difficulty which led him to develop his other faculties—the mystical escape is not—as it is for Woolf or Briony, into words, but into sensations. In the interview to John Hissock, Wright explains:

> I think my dyslexia was a vital part of my development because my inability to read and write meant that I had to find knowledge elsewhere so I looked to the cinema. [...] There I found patterns that made sense to me, unlike the written word, where the patterns made no sense whatever. [...David Lynch] changed my world when I was about 15 and I first saw *Blue Velvet*. [...] I've had a deep love for his kind of mysticism ever since. He felt like a very poetic director to me but with a completely new type of poetry.

It can be the sensation of sound or the sensation of image. It can be a dream image in a patina of light, or it can be the immediate tactility of an image. *Atonement* is a tour-de-force of sound and image both evanescent and sharply physical. But if we are primed to

think of it only as filmed literature, we may miss precisely the elements where Wright shines the brightest. We may risk seeing Wright as only a "hack," as claimed in one review which seems to have especially hurt him, as he recounts in an interview to Sarah Phillips: "I was called a hack once. When you put as much emotion into a piece of work as I do, that's heartbreaking." This is an experiment in looking and listening closely. As closely as we would to a David Lynch film, or a Krzysztof Kieślowski film.

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(00:16)[14] ... We can hear the feint chirping of birds. They are far away. The opening credits in a beige typescript bleed in and out of the black background like ink spilled in reverse. These images are accompanied by the noises of a typewriter, miked with intense closeness: the scrunch of the paper being rolled in, and then four short, hesitant keystrokes, then five more violently, are the sounds which accompany the "typing of" ATONEMENT, the title of our film, onto the screen. It disappears with the long zipsound for a new line, clack. And a clack on a cut to an imposing dollhouse—soon to be a visual echo of the house we are in. It seems commanding, uninviting. What should be fun seems to present itself all too seriously. A portrait of Pan and a yellowed teddy bear are relegated to the background. More clicks and clacks impose themselves in sync with type over the image to let us know we are somewhere in "England"... "1935."

The camera begins to gently pull back and we hear... more clacks from the typewriter. But now muted, emanating from the right channel in clacks and zips that grow more defined, move closer to our center of aural space as the camera moves gently in their direction, with the increasing sound of the maddened, agitated buzzing of an insect, tumbling now into the right channel, back into the left channel. The camera gliding over

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[14] These times correspond to the DVD timeline for *Atonement*, though they are also close to the Blu-Ray.

miniature toys which stand in a freakishly controlled line, as if awaiting Noah's ark, from the foot of the dollhouse leading, and shrinking progressively in stature, into a precisely organized trailing off which points to where the clacks, zips, and dings—even kabooms from the space bar— are coming from: the far side of the room. There we see the back of Briony (Saoirse Ronan)'s head, ensconced in a chair, jerking slightly back with a clack from her creating machine. Past a neatly made bed, with three pairs of shoes arranged in a tight row (fig. 1). The camera is still swinging to the right, and up, until we see her framed, still from the back, still jit-jolting away, framed between two tall windows out of which the bright, gauzy light of day shines. But above Briony's head there shines a different kind of light—a painting of a young girl in her nightgown, kneeling at her bed, from above which shines some bright, heavenly light (fig. 2). Is this inspiration, a vision, the voice of God which provokes her reverence? We get the sense that this, imposed over the floral wallpaper, is more the kind of light and reality that Briony is interested in than the light and reality we see from the sun, shining from the outdoors.

Figure 1: The control freak procession of animals leads up to Briony's desk, while we see her bed made with fastidious neatness, and tightly ordered rows of footwear.

Figure 2: Symmetrically framed, Briony is more interested in pursuing an inner light of inspiration than the light of the reality outside.

A clack on a cut-in to a close up of the back of Briony's head, centered on her neck, and a weaving around to a slight... glimpse of her profile when... Clack on another cut! to a close up of Briony's big blue eyes with their thick, deep limbal rings. These eyes blink as this note of a piano starts repeating itself gently on the soundtrack, amidst the clacks, and we get cut across to a close up of the browned white keys of her typewriter, moving up towards the page where—scrunch/zip--up is rolled the soft-felt texture of the paper to show: The End (fig. 3). And the page is ripped out with a cut to the desk beside the typewriter, where it is placed among other pages. The repeating note of the piano is louder now, closer in the mix—as we zoom in on these pages being loudly scrape-swished into a folder, which is turned over as we glide in on the neat, framed hole in its cover which reveals: "The Trials of Arabella," the keys of the piano now feverishly arpeggiating. And though we know our heroine's hands are holding this folder, we hear the strong crunch of a key, now singly amongst the scattered piano keys.
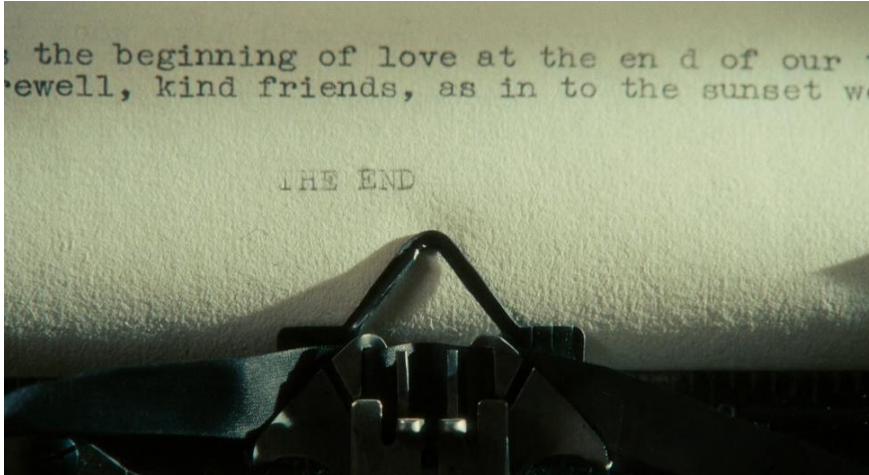
Figure 3: The film begins with an ending. Wright typically draws attention to the tactile surface of the paper through the combination of cinematography and sound design.

This strong, central click continues into the next shot—which features a cut on a loudly, stereo-separated whoosh of.. a cymbal? which plunges us into another shot framing Briony in the center, bouncing as straight as a pencil down through a doorway with a ferocity as ardent as Dr. David Bowman's interdimensional stargate plunge was horrifying (fig. 4). Down through the doorway, an anxious and sharp motif on the piano now accompanying her, she turns with a savage abruptness which seems almost monstrously fierce from such a pencil-thin body.

Figure 4: Briony plunges through a symetrically framed doorway, confident and controlling

A cut from the bright smallness of Briony's room, into the dark overbearing brown of the halls of the country estate, where Briony seems in comparison smaller now but somehow also not (fig. 5). The sheer force of how she marches right through its depths, accompanied now by all kinds of tempestuously controlled orchestrations of sound—the vibrations of her mind—overpowering and flooding anything that might intimidate about the bulky, sweating interior of this house. This is where Briony is from—she does not know the significance of where it all comes from or why, and so seems unaware of the carelessness her manner suggests she thinks of it, conditioned to take it for granted, perhaps even something that one day her noisy, symphonic imagination will help her to break out of. Though the booming bass notes from the orchestra mirror the tasteless neoclassical clunk of the wooden columns, Briony flies through them, her thoughtwaves more the shape of like the jagged scribbling of the violins, taking dominion everywhere, unintimidated and unthreatened. As she runs down a flight of stairs, bounding down to the rhythm of the music, the camera pans just a bit beyond her, to barely reveal a nameless maid through a doorway, bent over and throwing the comforter in a wave over a bed.

Figure 5: Though Briony is dwarfed by her surroundings, the soundtrack—which mirrors her mind—still overwhelms the scene with her presence.

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Now being a mere minute and fifty seconds into the film, including production logos and all, I want to step back for a second. Merchant Ivory films are well crafted. In my own view, they are nothing to condescend to, relative to more cinephile-prestigious films by the likes of Kubrick or Hitchcock. But really, what in any Merchant Ivory film can compare to an opening sequence such as this?

Perhaps in the end, the memorable tagline, "In place of a hermeneutics we need an erotics of art," proved too rigid and violent a demand; not only too rigid for film criticism as a whole, but even for Sontag herself, whose work thereafter is a testament to the power of a subtle hermeneutical mind ("Against Interpretation," 14). I think it's finally the "in place of" which was the extremity which led to dead ends. Sontag makes a compelling case, in her famous essay, for returning to the surface rather than being preoccupied with interpretive layers:

> Interpretation takes the sensory experience of the work of art for granted, and proceeds from there. This cannot be taken for granted, now. Think of the sheer multiplication of works of art available to every one of us, superadded to the conflicting tastes and odors and sights of the urban environment that bombard our senses. Ours is a culture based on excess, on overproduction; the result is a steady loss of sharpness in our sensory experience (13).

As should be apparent, in no way does this thesis embrace the closing off of interest in how a work may have multiple meanings—indeed it is interested in multiple meanings that both seem designed and those which seem accidental. But what is worth returning to in the early Sontag is this appreciation for the surfaces of cinema. We live in a world where people walk around with a talmudic knowledge of the different "levels" which

Simpsons episodes work on. There is nothing wrong with this in itself, but it is somewhat depressing that this is the condition of much encouragement in film appreciation, while a film which opens like this one can be accused, even by some random person on the internet, as "blandly directed and almost totally lifeless."[15]   The trouble is not that sensualist criticism is as a rule too reductive and cheap, or that impressionistic "interpretation" is as a rule too disembodied and arid. What needs to be reclaimed is the insistence upon a quality of attention which unites them. They want to be united. Whether it is the work of Susan Sontag, Ray Carney, or Camille Paglia, we see again and again that even the most strident of the anti-"interpretive" sensualist critics have a tendency towards finally resorting to some sort of humanistic justification or rationalistic overlay to unify or make sense of the splendid surfaces which are their subjects. My claim is that this is not, however, a failure. Or that if it is a failure by their own terms, the failure to avoid interpretation was more interesting than the promise of a wholly non-interpretive writing on art. How can we begin to make the interesting failures of Sontag and Carney into a new kind of film writing which intends and succeeds at being convincingly interpretive without also devaluing the film's surface?

Can Joe Wright's brooding need to remind us that he loves David Lynch films, indicating a move towards different aspects of his filmmaking, be chalked up to the absence of a living tradition of criticism which aims for this sort of synthesis? Much of the success of a great Lynch film such as *Mulholland Drive* (2001) is that it seems to be exemplary at both the immediate sensory level of its cinematic articulation—so that many people can say they enjoyed the film without knowing what it was about—while also

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[15]See "A ★★ Review of Atonement (2007)." 'Atonement' Review by Daniel Charchuk • Letterboxd. N.p., n.d. Web. 05 Apr. 2016. <http://letterboxd.com/charchuk/film/atonement/>.

providing some kind of poetic, between-the-scenes sense which makes possible almost endless "interpretations," fully supporting themselves with evidence. Wright's films tend not to call out for provoke these sorts of interpretations; if any of his films provides this kind of space for a freedom for the interpreting intellect, it is *Atonement*, and much of this is located at the level of basic plot summary itself, his inheritance from McEwan by way of Christopher Hampton. To really appreciate Wright's work as Wright's work, if we begin interpreting, that interpretation is most bound to find richness at the immediate sensory level. We must not, in other words, as Sontag warns, "take the sensory experience of the work of art for granted" only to proceed from there. Instead, we should revel in the sensory experience of the most exemplary moments of the work. And then proceed not from *there*, but *within* there.

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[Briony tries to compose her cousins up into an enthusiasm for her play. In one of the most memorable comic moments in the film, the young twins are scorned by their older sister Lola for not being sufficiently "a-menable," while Lola herself only attends to the letter of amenability, This is not lost on Briony. Ronan's acting gets across the dynamic complexity of how Briony's moments of gasping exasperation sit weirdly next to a heightened, feigned authoritative indifference. The chapter break on the DVD occurs after Lola leaves the room, apparently midscene.][16]

(6:20) ... Briony stands hopelessly and stares as Lola leaves the room, again a buzzing bee mirroring her frustrated, buzzing mind. We hear the voices of one of the twins, off-

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[16] In the context of these passages where I "read" the film, the bracketed sections are meant to signal more emphasis on summary and broad interpretation. These summaries and broad interpretations, in turn, help to contextualize the significance of the un-bracketed sections, which are not summaries so much as they are literary-styled responses to the surfaces of the film, imbued with interpretive moves. The gesture is to give Joe Wright's filmmaking back to the word. I am, in a sense, adapting film into literature.

screen, calling repeatedly for Cecilia—the pool outside sounds more fun than a stuffy play. Briony glances at the folder in her hand, holding her Trials of Arabella, and drops it onto her boosted chair, where it lands with a hard smack, as if it had a rock in it. Just then we hear the ongoing buzz of the bee smack against the hard surface of the window. Briony turns her head. Cut to a medium shot of Briony from the direction of the window. The sun shines on Briony's face—she's looking outside. The camera follows her as she moves towards the window and the bee, zzzing restlessly in the right channel. The orchestra, rather than producing the jagged, furiously decisive lines associated with her in the opening sequence, now swell curiously, coaxing her across the room toward another perspective. Frightened by but interested in the bee, she hesitates with a gulp, before moving onto the bed before the window.

A cut across to a close-up of the bee, in soft focus, buzzing furiously over the fountain outside, blurred out of focus. Initiating a shot-reverse-shot sequence, a close up of Briony's face as she moves her arm towards... cut(!) the bee buzzing furiously beneath the meeting rail, and... a cut(!) back, at Briony's gasp, withdrawing her hand and... the sound of the bee is gone, she closed her eyes, did she grab the bee? why would you want to grab a?... no... the sound of the bee is back... cut(!) to the window, with the bee writhing out of focus above Cecilia and Robbie having some kind of altercation... Robbie making some kind of controlling(?) signal to and shout at Cecilia to stop and... she does—we can't make out the conversation through the distance and through the glass, especially with this damn bee buzzing over everything. Cut back to the close-up of Briony watching, a blink and a soft gasp. Cut back to the fountain where Cecilia is... undressing... undressing... is she undressing angrily?!... CUT(!) back to a quick close-up

of Briony with wide frightened eyes, a loud gasp and a turn to a cut(!) of a medium shot of Briony, now sitting on the bed, her back to the window, as the camera glides in on her face, breathing heavily but composing herself back into her curiosity, underscored by the orchestra, as she turns her face and her hands back to the ledge of the window. [As the fight between Robbie and Cecilia unfolds, this shot-reverse-shot sequencing continues in a similar manner, with gasps from Briony and buzzings of the bee to quiet down as Cecilia storms off, away from the fountain...]

...only for the buzzing to start again as Robbie is the only one left in Briony's line of vision. A cut back to Briony, the buzz increasing (fig. 6), and a cut back to Robbie, louder, and a cut(!) back to Briony's close-up, her hand now lunging for the bee which gets a cut(!) to a closeup where it flies off screen (fig. 7) and the sound of a door closing but a cut not to a door whatsoever but to Cecilia running, panting, through some woods with the buzz of the bee, the return of the motif of the single note of the piano, and a cut(!) again on the sound of the door closing to a close-up of Briony's face in the dark, the camera shifting as if it is the doorknob being pulled and clicked, centering the close up on Briony's face. She is breathing with silent heaviness, looking down under the single, anxiously repeating note of the piano, until she turns her eyes to the camera and the piano begins to arpeggiate wildly again (fig. 8).

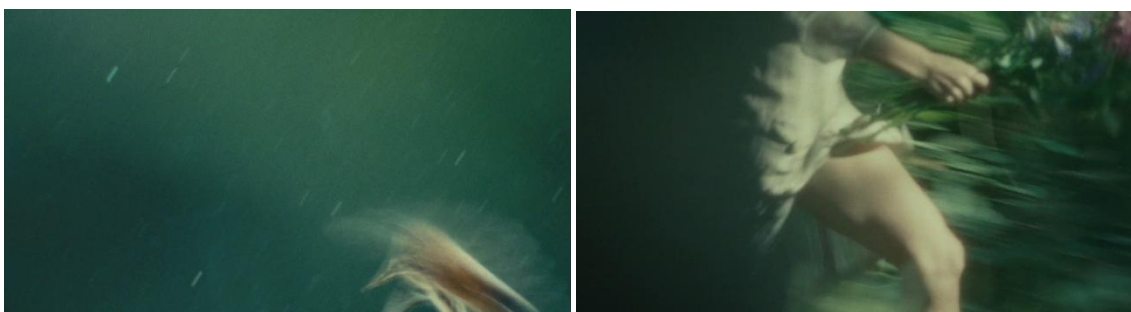**Figure 6: Grabbing the bee/Robbie as bee**

Figure 7: The bee becomes Cecilia's restlessness

Figure 8: Briony cuts her eyes to the camera. She is a god of the events she has seen, while also left in the dark.

[We then cut to Cecilia running through the woods again with the flowers in what we soon realize is a flashback to right before the events at the fountain are to occur. While

the buzzing sound of the bee in Briony's sequence—signifying her curiosity and imagination—eventually leads to the image of a bee, in this sequence from Cecilia it is only ever a sound (meant to indicate, we later realize—or know if we have read the novel—Cecilia's pent up sexual frustration). We progress through Cecilia's point of view, discovering that, rather than Robbie somehow forcing Cecilia to strip and soak herself for his benefit, as Briony seems to think, Robbie was actually yelling to stop Cecilia from stepping on broken glass, and that her angry expression has to do with a combination of anger with Robbie for breaking a vase and disavowed sexual desire for him. This sequence is then closed with the same shot described immediately above, with Briony in the dark and the sound of the closed door.]

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The device of the bee is not present in the novel, but one of Joe Wright's many inventions for capturing the "inner" feeling that McEwan says poses a challenge to film adaptation. In his commentary track for the DVD, Wright claims to be especially proud of the bee in particular. It might be tempting to say that it is laughable to be proud of such a thing. The simple substitution of the buzzing of a bee for thought is, in and of itself, not all that impressive. But this kind of attitude is a symptom of the type of mindset which, following Sontag, overvalues the most disembodied hermeneutical aspects of art to the detriment of their surface complexity.

This is not to argue that the bee is lacking any kind of hermeneutical, "interpretive" thoughtfulness. I believe it does have quite a bit. But in order to discover the riches of that interpretive significance, we must first have an attentiveness to the precise specifics of the film's sensory surface. In the above sections of close watching, I

have attempted to give a sharply impressionistic sense of the film's sensory surfaces. A "reading" watching of the film which is too quick to simply say "yeah, the bee = thought/anxiety etc. I get it" may well gloss over the strangeness of, for example, Briony's reaching out to grab the bee, as well as the inclusion of noises of a door being shut, which are key to the significance of the scenes and which are also—in their precise formal millisecond-by-millisecond deployment—which evidence Wright's intelligence as a craftsman, as an intelligent thinker through craft and within craft rather than simply before it.

Having first given an account of the complex surface of this sequence, it now seems appropriate to do a "reading" of it. Here, a turn to Ray Carney's "Two Kinds of Cinematic Modernism: Notes Towards a Pragmatist Aesthetic" may be helpful. Perhaps Carney's most detailed account of his aesthetic preferences distilled down into academic form, it is a description of what Carney sees as the dominant form of cinematic modernism (what he calls the idealist or visionary aesthetic) which is used as a kind of foil to explain the difference and significance of what he calls the pragmatist aesthetic, which he clearly prefers and sees as misunderstood and undervalued. Although a bit frustrating in its tendentiousness and rhetorically totalizing binarism, it is nevertheless a convincing account if we take it more as an observation on tendencies rather than the locked down totalization it somewhat abrasively presents itself as. Moreover, despite the essay being a crypto-rant against the dominance of the idealist aesthetic, my interest in it here is for how well the very core of what Carney marks as the defining traits of the idealist aesthetic are particularly pertinent to an interpretation of what this scene in *Atonement* is doing at the level of theme through the level of style. In a sense, I am using

a detailed denunciation of the visionary aesthetic in order to increase appreciation for an instance of the idealist aesthetic which is underappreciated for its subtle particularity.[17]

For my purposes, most of the the relevant points from Carney's argument are as follows:

> The idealist tradition takes its name from the importance it attaches to mental events—frequently represented as acts of seeing. [...] Visionary relations take the place of social interaction. [...] Seeing is a metaphor for thinking deeply, feeling intensely, or entering into an especially intimate relationship with something. [...In these works] there is no more important event than seeing or being seen. [...] To be seen, especially if one is unaware of it, is to be imaginatively or physically "possessed" by the gaze and to risk having your identity altered or destroyed. [...] Visionary relationships are not necessarily threatening, however. [...] In threatening works (*2001*, *Psycho*, *North by Northwest*), glances tend to be unreciprocated, whereas in socially supportive works, (like [*Casablanca*]) they tend to be reciprocated (375-8).

As Carney goes on to acknowledge, works are not simply either threatening or supportive in their use of the visionary mode, and *Atonement* is certainly an example of this. The glances between Cecilia and Robbie in their love scene in the library would be an example of a "supportive" use of the vision—until Briony walks in on them and her vision is, without her knowing it, a threat, and the refusal of the lovers to reciprocate her

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[17] It should be noted that *Atonement*—like many acclaimed films which have a felt sense of tactility—although primarily oriented around what Carney would consider idealist mechanics, nevertheless does not fall strictly into that category. Indeed, the distinction is so pure in Carney's mind that hardly any American films, at least after the *fall* of the classical Hollywood style, could really be said to be wholly idealist, under this model. Nevertheless, the extremity of the essay provides a fruitful language with which to interpret this scene in particular.

gaze (or even acknowledge her) as they exit the room threatens her. Indeed, most of the film does hinge around threatening forms of vision (whether the threat stems from openly hostile gazes or hidden, unreciprocated ones).

I bring up Carney's conception specifically, rather than some other conception of the functioning of the shot-reverse-shot (for Carney this is labeled the "look-see-feel" or "look-see-think" sequence) because its language is particularly apt in this case, and goes some way towards both explaining why Briony reaches out to grab the bee (which makes no sense in a pseudo-realistic or pragmatic sense) and part of the significance of the sound of the closing door.

Whether he is aware of it or not (and frankly, listening to the DVD commentary one suspects that he isn't consciously aware of it) Wright's addition of the "grabbing" action to the bee device/motif is a quite amazing literalist figuration in how it accompanies and comments on Briony's will to imaginatively "possess" through vision. The bee is a floating signifier of her primal creativity, her irritation, and her selfish need to understand herself *as* comprehending. The use of a bee suggests that these intertwined energies within Briony are irritating, powerful, and dangerous (among other things). The bee also suggests a difference between what is simply Briony's threatening gaze and these other elements, which are more connected to her view of herself. When she grabs at the bee, she is not only grabbing at her partial and disastrously incomplete understanding of the situation, but all of the things that the intensity of her overdetermined reading of that situation allow her to think about herself. Her obsession with (or possession by) this image of herself drives her to prematurely foreclose the question of what went on between Cecilia and Robbie. She would rather simply have the answer, and belief in the

validity of the intense intuitive—as Carney would say, "telepathic"--ways of knowing which led her to that "answer," than to actually investigate the matter. She would rather have the intense sense of knowing than really undertake the intense—and probably egoically threatening—process of *learning* to actually know.

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[At the end of the last section of close watching, I mentioned that the stirring shot (fig. 8) of Briony standing in the metaphorical darkness, figurally "closing the door" on the event she has just witnessed, ends both the sequence of Briony watching and misreading the fight between Cecilia and Robbie as well as, in a repetition, the sequence of what happened from Cecilia's perspective. It is an indication that Briony's faulty interpretation of the events will ultimately have an enclosure which extends beyond her own subjectivity and out into the objective realm. But I am also interested in what happens after this repetition.]

Figure 9: (compare to Figure 4), after feeling the violation of "knowledge," Briony does not move through doorways with quite as much force or symmetrical certainty

(13:20) ...and again Briony staring into the screen, breathing heavily (a repetition of the same shot in fig. 8). She turns away. A cut to her now in a medium long shot, she turns

and drifts away from the window in a bright room, the soundtrack once again highly active with the scattered arpegiations, her consciousness flooding the atmosphere. But unlike in the opening moments, this thoughtfulness expresses itself through her movements in a slowness, a kind of uncertain basking in the excitement of knowing. The camera pans with her as we see her walk again through a doorway, again with her back to us. But she is not plummeting through it now, yet. Her head is down, she steps quietly. The camera does not fix the other door we see through this first doorway in a symmetrical overlay (fig. 9)—the composition does not provide room for the force of that first sequence (fig. 4), when Briony shot right through its passageway like a demoniacal shark fin.

Cut to the other side of that far door, and we are facing Briony in a medium long shot which quickly becomes a medium shot as she approaches. Still looking down, now in medium long, we see her glance at something, and the camera tracks down. We see, shoved behind the typewriter, a notebook with her name and age inscribed on it, and a picture of two birds flying over a big cloud. She rips it into her hands and... Cut(!) to a shot of Briony outside, surrounded in green, marching decisively now down a tunnel of vegetation (fig. 10). Again she is plummeting, as if into another realm. The strings section more curious and adventurous than agitated.

Figure 10: Briony, plunging into her imagination, taking the outside world as its stage

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Another level of significance for the door sound is the sense it gives of outside and inside. And the hard surface of the window—slammed up against by the bee—indicates that Briony's imagination has wander over and fixed upon a vision of the outside. As we see in the opening sequence of the film, Briony is writing her play, *The Trials of Arabella*, with an image of light hanging above her that is strikingly not that of a window, but of some kind of celestial vision. The restlessness in the acting that is associated with this instance of her creative energy indicates its limitations, a lack of satisfaction. And this explains, by symmetrical comparison, the sense of triumph that Briony feels when stirred from her pallid indoors-contained insights to what she thinks is an engagement with the outside world. The outside—nature, vegetation—Briony seems to associate with experience, while the inside she associates with innocence. In these scenes, we see Joe Wright quite carefully moving us through Briony's journey through the felt sense of breaking out of innocence and into experience.

This association between the outside as experience and the inside as innocence are both undermined and backed up by other scenes in the film. While the first scene of Briony writing shows her cramped between windows, and governed by a painting of inner/celestial light, when Robbie begins to compose his letters to Cecilia, his typewriter sits at a desk that looks out unto the world through a window, the light of day shining onto him (fig. 11). On the wall beside this window is a picture of a lighthouse, indicating that his creativity here is an integrated and acknowledged erotic activity rather than either disembodied or a kind of dream activity. His imagination, though in part inspired by his record of *La Boheme*, is shown as visually grounded in images of Cecilia (fig. 12). When

he writes, his creative agitation does not express itself as a being in sync with the jolting, metric, machinic violence of the typewriter—as it does with Briony—but instead he bends and stretches, smokes, relaxes as he tries to compose an adequate draft (fig. 13). The imagery, though it is of Robbie inside, shows that his indoors is much more permeated by the outside and that the way he carries himself brings much more experience of the outside with him into this structured inside space where he transmutes passion into personal expression.

Figure 11: (compare to fig. 2): Robbie's writing space is open to the outside world, acknowledges itself as personal (though the desk mirror) as well as erotically motivated (the phallic lighthouse).

Figure 12: Robbie's imagination—unlike the verbal imagination of the young Briony—is highly visual

Figure 13: Robbie writes and imagines while smoking a cigarette, matched in his imagining of Cecilia, their cigarettes indicating an "telepathic" link (in the soft sense: that they are both thinking of each other).

Briony, on the other hand, takes a partial image seen of the outside from the inside as overstimulating her imagination wildly. Mistaking this new kind of inspiration for the one authentic inspiration, for a truly experienced inspiration she plunges through the green tunnel of vegetation, taking her inner inspiration (which has the quality of innocence betrayed by experience) into what she sees as where it's proper place must be: the outside world. The way in which all of this is structured, however, reveals this innocence/experience distinction as more a convention (whether conscious or not) of Briony's way of seeing than how things actually are. While she sits outside with her notebook, furiously writing of a villainous exploiter (something we know through a suspended voiceover that she associates with Robbie), she misses a key piece of information—experience—going on inside the house: Paul Marshall and his sexual overtures towards Lola.

I should say that on this basis, my understanding of this first section—the first 45 minutes or so of the film, which roughly corresponds to the first half and first section of the novel—is that it is optimally understood as setting up the film's sense of a devastation which occurs not because of a simple fall from innocence into experience, but because of

an overly-intense, inflexible (and paradoxically, half-innocent) *belief* in the stability of such structures of sense-making. It is a rigid kind of belief which the film acknowledges as supported by the extent to which Briony does not recognize this sense of inside/outside intrusion as a condition of her sheltered support through unacknowledged wealth. But the section's status as Briony's memory—or maybe even a film adaptation of the book Briony has written—indicates that all of these elements which seem critical of the young Briony—as well as all of the elements that might seem forgiving of her—are, within the logic of the film, recognized as her own acknowledgement of her past limitations and failures from the point of view of the elder Briony who closes out the film.

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Throughout this thesis, I have referred to a couple of directors and works which may seem to stretch beyond the bounds of this thesis. I have referred to Kubrick on numerous occasions, and in this chapter, to *2001: A Space Odyssey* in particular. In addition, I have cited David Lynch not just as an example of one of Joe Wright's surprising influences, but also cite scenes in *Twin Peaks* and *Blue Velvet* as illustrative of my theoretical approach to the individual persona. In this final section of viewing *Atonement*, I want to make good on introducing these names and titles into the thesis.

How can Joe Wright be seen under the influence of these directors? And how can highlighting that influence become an integral part of the evidence for a reading of *Atonement* which sees it as a testament to Wright's talent as a creative adapter? I am not claiming that the following similarities to Kubrick or Lynch are necessarily fully thought out or intentional. I am only suggesting that since Wright has claimed that he looked to cinema for a "different kind of knowledge," and cites Lynch in particular as major figure

in this regard, it is likely that he has seen his films (and the similarly mystical *2001: A Space Odyssey*), absorbing their cinematic techniques into his own visual vocabulary.

I want to start with a return to my description of Briony's "plunging" or "plummeting" (in fig. 4 and in fig. 10). Both of these shots show a character driving her body forcefully through the center of a more-or-less symmetrical frame, signifying—most probably—impatience and the control-freakish will to understand. Stanely Kubrick's love of the symmetrical frame is well-documented, and it is indeed such a consistent signature of his directorial style that it would be dangerous to insist that his use of the technique suggests only one kind of meaning. In comparing these shots of Briony to Dr. David Bowman's stargate plunge in the fantastic final sequence of *2001*, however, I have in mind a reading of these shots which ties the significance of Wright's visual grammar to what I have argued, in the previous section, is McEwan's take on Virginia Woolf: that her will to plummet into a dangerous kind of knowledge was ill-advised. The symmetrical framing of *2001*'s stargate sequence, in particular, provides a good example of how a character who—here, in the quest for scientific knowledge—can be seen as undergoing the experience of confronting unknown "knowledge" in visual terms (fig. 14).

Figure 14: David Bowman plunges into a symmetrical Gnostic explosion which is both gorgeous and terrifying.

I read the symmetry of this composition as indicating the presence of a total knowledge which is both exhilarating (for the viewer) and terrifying (for David Bowman, despite the goal of scientific knowledge which characterizes his whole odyssey).

David Lynch is fond of a similarly plummeting and symmetrical kind of composition, as we see in the threateningly spectacular way he shoots highways both in *Blue Velvet* (1986) (fig. 15) and *Lost Highway* (1997) (fig. 16). These sequences suggest—through their contexts—that these are not simply mundane highways, but indications of a shift into another kind of probably unseemly consciousness (1997) .

Figure 15: In his reckless search to reveal the dark side of Lumbertown, Jeffrey Beaumont (Kyle MacLachlan) is forced into a car with Frank Booth (Dennis Hopper) who drives him recklessly, but exhilaratingly, down a highway where he eventually reveals only pure, psychopathic terror.

Figure 16: The stirring titles of *Lost Highway* shoot similarly, with a frenzied shaky cam conveying the threat and danger lurking in the hidden, unspoken parts of the personality.

Similarly, figure 4 and figure 10, of Briony plummeting with a control-freakish symetricality around the grounds of her home, indicate exhilaration (for her) and terror (for the audience, which understands the danger of such energies). Even Briony's writing of the Trials of Arabella is framed symmetrically (fig. 2), as opposed to when Robbie composes his letter to Cecilia (fig. 11) where he is framed with a fastidious neatness, to

be sure, but to the right side of the frame, indicating partiality rather than god-like control. For Robbie, writing is an act of personality. For Briony, it is an act of expressing her will towards a total power over her creation (which ends up being not just her story, but the story of others).

At the close of the film's penultimate section, Briony (here played by Romola Garai, as the 18-year-old version of Briony) has failed to atone to Robbie and Cecilia (soon revealed only to be her imagining of them). After the meeting she is framed symmetrically against a backdrop of a brick wall (fig. 17). Given that what we are seeing here is in fact no actual reality, but Briony's own vision, this scene reminds me, upon rewatch, of *Eraserhead*'s (1977) similarly visionary-nightmarish use of bricks and their horrifying sense of enclosure (fig. 18).

Figure 17: Briony as a young adult (Romola Garai) after trying to atone to her images of Robbie & Cecilia
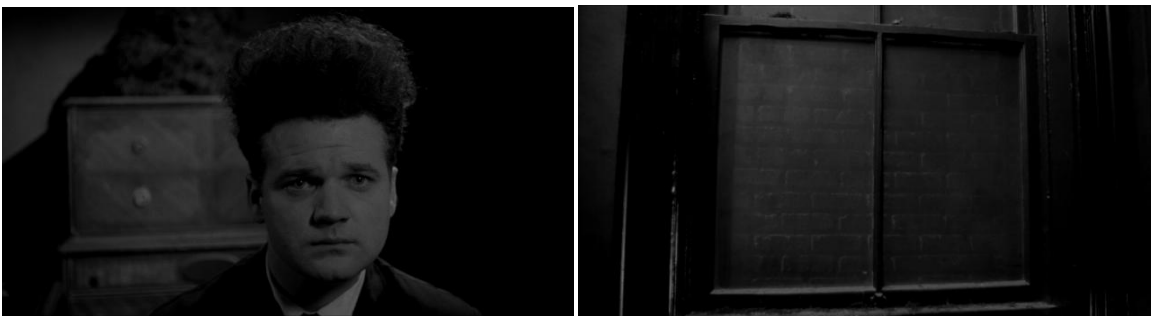

Figure 18: Henry (John Nance) imprisoned in a nightmare of shame in *Eraserhead*.

Both scenes indicate an entrapment within shame for past actions, although in Briony's case there is a hint of masochistic gratification in Garai's performance. If this seems like a bit of a stretch, I think the comparison can be strengthened by attention to the final shot of this third section where Briony is once again framed symmetrically as a passenger on a subway. The lights flicker on and off of her, underscored by the loud sound of a crackling light bulb (fig. 20), one of Lynch's favorite techniques for creating a sense of psychic disturbance (see, among many others, the elevator scene in *Eraserhead* [fig. 19] or any scene featuring the hallway to Dorothy Valens' apartment in *Blue Velvet*).
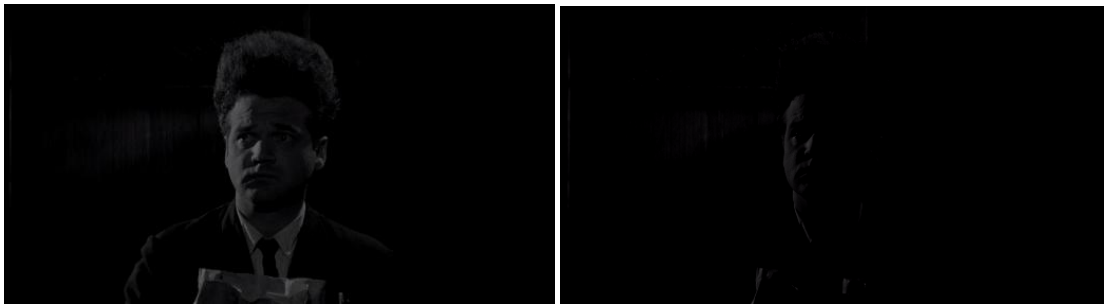
Figure 19: Henry, riding the elevator symmetrically framed beneath a loudly flickering light.
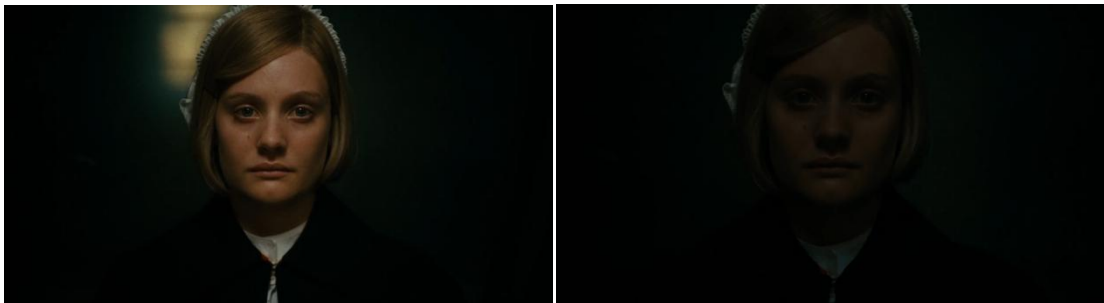
Figure 20: Briony, riding the subway is symmetrically framed beneath a loudly flickering light.

This shot, with its sense of time rushing forward (the lights moving behind Briony's head, the rushing rattle of the subway charging ahead), of psychic disturbance (disturbing, flickering lights), and of everything being raised to a boil (a gradual zoom in on Briony's face, the ever-increasing volume of the soundtrack) lead to a cumulative sense of all kinds of bottled up energies reaching a head. This, then, sets the perfect stage

for a cut to black, onto an unknown male voice asking "Briony?" only to reveal—rather than one totalizing, symmetrical image of this tortured character (now played by an aging Venessa Redgrave), a multitude of her images, a fragmentation of her image across more TV screens than she can bear. Gradually, as we cut in closer to these screens, eventually Briony cannot bear the pressure of the camera, and collapses—excusing herself because of her illness (in this case, an objective, scientific one—rather than a psychoanalytic hang-up) (fig. 21).
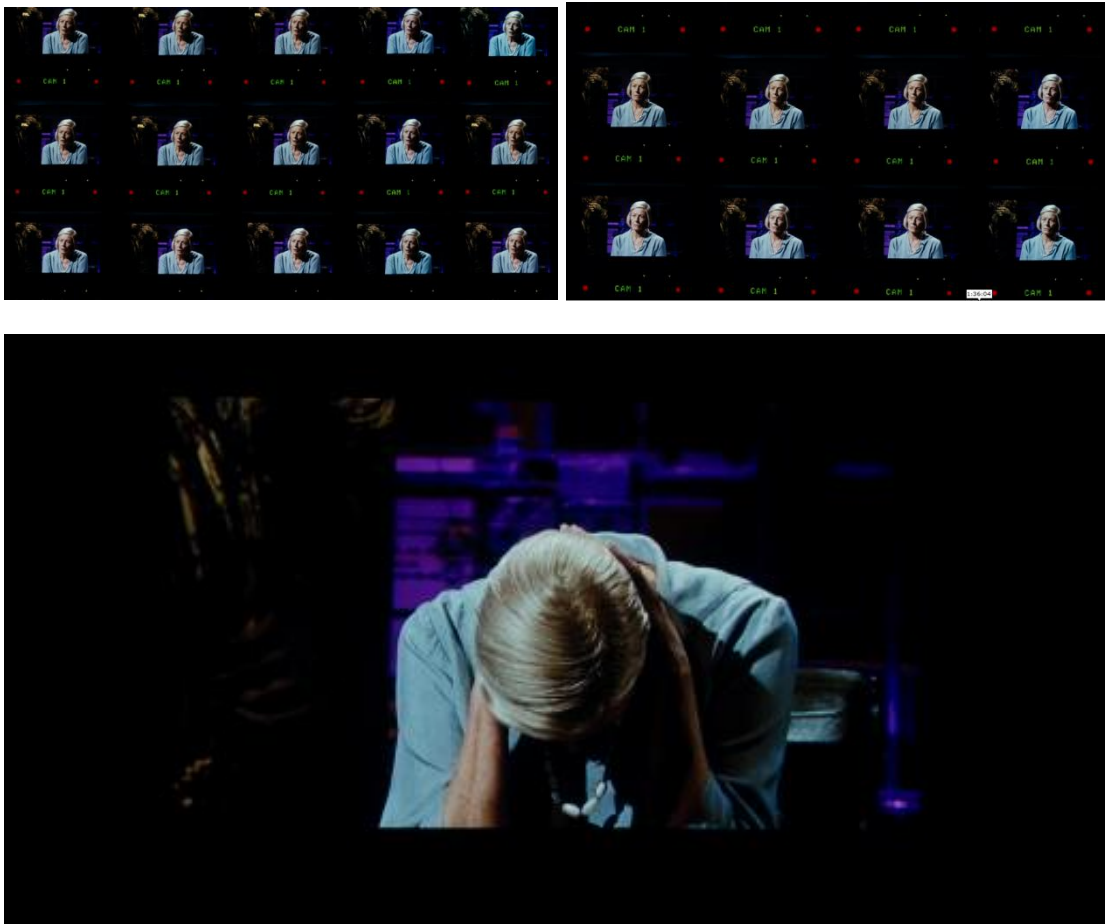

Figure 21: A dying, shameful Briony struggles to compose herself under the weight of the camera.

I also think that the connection to 2001 is strengthened by a comparison of Briony's attempt to "face herself" in her dressing room (fig. 22) and David Bowman's spooky confrontation with his mirror image that lies "Beyond the Infinite" (fig. 23).

As I have argued, I cannot be sure that these connection are intentional and thought through on Joe Wright's part. My own speculation is that Wright—like many cinema lovers before him—submerged himself in these films (and perhaps other films employing similar techniques to similar ends) and has an uncanny instinct for where ways of shooting have a subtly allusive and thematic significance. How do I make sense of these references with satisfying (but appropriate) interpretive control?

Figure 22: Briony's stark white dressing room has a clinical, deathly feel.

Figure 23: David Bowman discovers his sudden old age, beyond the infinite.

I believe that a return to that most clichéd of narrative explanatory models—Joseph Cambell's idea of the Hero's Journey (or monomyth) is a useful heuristic for beginning to think about how to bring these different moments together. The general outline of Campbell's story structure is well known, but for my purposes the most apt feature is that concerning the stage called "The Belly of the Whale":

> The idea that the passage of the magical threshold is a transit into a sphere of
>
> rebirth is symbolized in the worldwide womb image of the belly of the whale. The

hero, instead of conquering or conciliating the power of the threshold, is swallowed into the unknown and would appear to have died. [...] This popular motif gives emphasis to the lesson that the passage of the threshold is a form of self-annihilation. [...] But here, instead of passing outward, beyond the confines of the visible world, the hero goes inward, to be born again. The disappearance corresponds to the passing of a worshiper into the temple—where he is to be quickened by the recollection of who and what he is, namely dust and ashes if not immortal. The temple interior, the belly of the whale, and the heavenly land beyond, above, and below the confines of the world, are one and the same. [...] Once inside he may be said to have died to time and returned to the World Womb, the World Navel, the Earthly Paradise. [...] Allegorically, then, the passage into a temple and the hero-dive through the jaws of the whale are identical adventures, both denoting in picture language, the life-centering, life-renewing act (74-77).

Of course, the only one of these films which comes close to fulfilling all possible requirements for an archetypal "Belly of the Whale" sequence is *2001*. "Hero-diving" through the stargate, Bowman plummets back into the annihilating/recreating world womb. Entering unto a "temple interior" of neoclassical style, Bowman undergoes a metamorphosis—dying and being born again as a star child, the life-renewing act.

The Lynch films, however, find no consolation upon a plunge into the depths, where the heroes or antiheroes only find the darker, repressed sides of themselves and/or their surroundings. Rather than a life-renewing, there is only a life-centering amongst his own terror and shame. We plunge "inside" not into a world womb, but into something baser. For Lynch, the desire to plunge is not simply will to knowledge, but a will to return

to the physical womb, to start over, to erase oneself out of the inability to accept oneself.[18] Although Lynch is openly mystical (as chief public spokesperson for Transcendental Meditation™) and does not embrace scientific rationalism as McEwan does, this replacement of ultimate reality as a material immanence and limitation rather than heavenly transcendence connects Lynch's works with the critique I argue McEwan levels in the general direction of Virginia Woolf's secular mysticism. Lynch, though also a secular mystic, is not nearly as optimistic about the role of art to discover the thread that binds us:

> People have asked me why—if meditation is so great and gives you so much bliss—are my films so dark, and there's so much violence? There are many, many dark things flowing around in this world right now, and most films reflect the world in which we live (Lynch, 91).

Upon plunging into yourself—whether out of the desire to find knowledge or to find some kind of escape—you only find yourself, in the world, from your perspective. And upon recognizing yourself, there you are, back where you started: confronting what McEwan called the " hard mass of the actual" (72).

Confronting the actual, I argue, is where Briony finds herself at the end of her self-condemning spiral of re-imagining her mistake from every possible angle. Though Wright subtly appeals to our film knowledge to associate Briony's over-active imagination with Kubrick's mysticism of symmetry, McEwan's materialist worldview demands that this mysticism end with no authentic or untroubled "rebirth" after the confrontation with the self (the mirror image) (fig. 22 and 23). The archetypal hero of

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[18] Take, for instance, Henry's inability to accept his role as a father in *Eraserhead*, or the inability of the antiheros of *Mulholland Drive* or *Lost Highway* to confront their own violent potentials and actions.

Joseph Campbell we expect to be "reborn" in some sense after passing through some test—one of which can be an atonement with the father, or a god, or whatever is the highest metaphysical absolute of any context.

Atonement, taking place as it does against the backdrop of a disenchanted, non-metaphysical worldview, provides no god or father to atone to. The individual becomes her own god, responsible for a desire for rebirth which she has no power to bestow. The best the author can hope to do is live on through her own stories. Briony, instead, uses this final interview to emphasize her impending death, thus downplaying her possibilities for rebirth. Instead, she hopes to use her power as an author to give Robbie and Cecilia back to life. She makes, in essence, an atheistic version of a personal-Christ sacrifice.

Though Christopher Hampton has claimed that Robbie and Cecilia are the "heart of the film" and that Briony is the "beginning and end," the final images of the film as shot and orchestrated by Wright actually place emphasis on Robbie and Cecilia. Briony of course, does explicitly narrate and frame this final scene, but if we view the film more than once (or watch it having read the book) we realize that she has been implicitly narrating and framing the film as a whole all along. The final images of Robbie and Cecilia on the beach, young and in love in some kind of afterlife or super-reality (fig. 24) contrast with our final image of Briony, whose age Wright emphasizes (fig. 25). This close up of Briony's face, explaining her intent to give Robbie and Cecilia their happiness, is a match with the younger Briony's threatening gaze into the camera, in the darkness, which marked the moment when she began to seal the fate of the actual Robbie and Cecilia.

Figure 24: Robbie and Cecilia's imagined afterlife

Figure 25: Briony, looking into the camera, framed symmetrically, enclosing the fates of people as if they were her characters (compare to fig. 8).

In this section, I have demonstrated a kind of film criticism which begins by paying close attention to the sensory surface of the film. In paying close attention, I located patterns which appeared, in the moment, to have a significant relationship with themes and motifs I had located both in my reading of the novel and my reading of Joe Wright's interviews. Rather than create a sharp division between the "actual" surface of the film and proceeding to do interpretive work over it, I attempted to create, through writing, a sense of the experience of finding film form and significance in immediate,

life-like coexistence. This—what David Bordwell might call an "associative redescription" or fine-grained approach to interpretation—was used in the earliest scenes in the film (253). The process of not just thinking like this, but *act of writing* like this, provoked reflections which led to other concepts and associations which give my more "coarse-grained" interpretation of the final scenes of the film a stronger sense of validity and strength (259).

My hope is that the establishment of this thematic structure and network of associations, as well as its justification in—among other things—attentive detail to the surface of the film, can be viewed as a useful point of departure with which other viewers can try to experience the vast majority of the film which I have not spoken to in this section. While I think that the first 45 minutes and final scenes are the most rich with suggestion, the rest of the film is similarly layered not just with interesting hermeneutic levels, but with inviting stylistic details still waiting to be appreciated. There is much work still to be done, for example, in accounting for the multitude of references to cinematic history apparent in the famous tracking shot of Robbie, tearing through Dunkirk.

This section has been an an argument, in part, that Joe Wright needn't have felt the urge to apologize to McEwan over the ending of the film. That his film enhances *Atonement* as an ideal construct. A viewing of the film potentially enriches a reading of the book as a reading of the book potentially enriches a viewing of the film. This is not necessarily a demand that the film and the novel be seen as on equal footing. Throughout the writing of this thesis, I have constantly see-sawed back and forth about which I prefer. As I write this sentence, I feel myself more in accord, more curious about and

stimulated by the novel; though this may change tomorrow, or even later today. With this section, I hope to have demonstrated, among other things, that scholarly writing which not only holds open evaluative questions, but actually occupies and openly relies upon the energy generated by holding evaluative positions, can have scholarly value beyond a simple sense of arriving at evaluative agreement. Why would I want to convince you of the relative value of *Atonement* the film's quality when later today I may be more invested in the novel? Instead, through embracing the contingent state of an appreciative position, I leave behind potential pathways into *Atonement* which would not have been possible had I simply foreclosed the issue, or even just relegated my enthusiasm to disclaimers and bracketed commentaries which are not essential to my argument. My evaluation of *Atonement* and its changing has been absolutely essential to the writing of this section. But my hope is that one need not agree with the extent or character of that appreciation to see the value in it as an instance of scholarly practice.

c. "Torn Apart By Betrayal!": Marketing as the Practical Limit of Meaning

Though Thomas Leitch makes a reasonable case that there is something naive about how certain English professors protest the apparent failings and misrepresentations of their favored canonical texts in the vulgar, pandering, parasitic medium of film, it is nevertheless possible to well up with sympathy for them upon reading *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*'s critical introduction to its section on Jane Austen. This is its first sentence: "Although nowadays her portrait adorns coffee mugs and T-shirts, and journalists, making much of the movie adaptations of her novels, like to imagine her as the center of attention at Hollywood parties, Jane Austen spent her short, secluded life away from the spotlight."

Even in this fat, thoroughly English department-approved barricade of a textbook, those who consider the cinema an impure inflector of their favored classical works are not safe from its grating, contaminating influence. Here we may locate some ever so slight and distant trouble with one of my few points of agreement with Leitch. This idea that if you want the book, don't blame the movie for not being the book! Read the book, because the book will always be better at being itself! Well, what if the movie comes around and... changes the associations of the book in ways you can't avoid?

Published before Joe Wright's adaptation of *Pride & Prejudice*, Deborah Kaplan shows in her article, "Mass Marketing Jane Austen " that tip-sheets for prospective writers of harlequin romances suggest Mr. Darcy as a model for the "hero" (not necessarily in the sense of the hero protagonist, but the heroic subject of the heroine's desire): "The hero is 8 to 12 years older than the heroine. He is self-assured, masterful, hot-tempered, capable of violence, passion, and tenderness. He is often mysteriously

moody. Heathcliff (Wuthering Heights) is a rougher version; Darcy (Pride and Prejudice) a more refined one" (177).

Kaplan argues that recent film adaptations of Jane Austen novels—such as Ang Lee's *Sense & Sensibility*—participate in the "harlequinization" of her stories: "I mean that, like the mass-market romance, the focus is on a hero and heroine's courtship at the expense of other characters and other experiences, which are sketchily represented." The generic demands of modern mass market romances being derived from these kinds of re-readings of Austen, the film adaptations of Austen—which are not just fulfilling the generic demands of literary prestige pictures, but also have to constitute themselves and sell themselves through adherence to the generic demands of contemporary romance narratives—become harlequinized. What interests me is how this harlequinizing tendency with respect to Jane Austen has not just had an effect on how Austen is interpreted—this being Kaplan's concern—but also upon how *Atonement* is interpreted—not just as a film, but even as a book.

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In the case of *Atonement* these stakes are somewhat different, though arguably heightened. Here we wrestle with the possibility of potential infractions not just against the purity of a classical lit aficionado's reading experience, but with the public image of the most important text of an important living novelist. And although McEwan is one of the most popular English language writers alive, there are—despite no reliable records on how many times a copy of *Atonement* has been sold, let alone read—compelling reasons to suspect that more people have seen the adaptation of his most popular novel than have read his original. And certainly more have seen the cover of the DVD, or the film tie-in

reissues of the novel, than have read it. This chapter is an investigation of these public images of *Atonement*. This is not simply to take the conventions of marketing for heritage films/British lit adaptations to task, but also to suggest, that the misleading public images of *Atonement*, perhaps in spite of themselves, *preserve* the final trick of the film, which is to reveal itself something much more radical, cynical, and confrontational than these images present it and sell it as.

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One of the DVD extras for Joe Wright's adaptation of Pride & Prejudice is an "HBO First Look" at the film, created before its release. Interestingly, the featurette places an emphasis on the production company Working Title's association with Jane Austen and *Pride & Prejudice* in particular. Tim Bevan, a producer for Working Title, situates Joe Wright's new adaptation in terms of this apparent history:

> You know, virtually every single romantic comedy that we make—every contemporary romantic comedy—was in some way based on this story. [Working Title] brought you *Four Weddings and a Funeral*, they brought you *Notting Hill*, they brought you *Bridget Jones*, and now they bring you the original, probably, is an approach to it.

Though of these films, only *Bridget Jones' Diary* is an explicit reinterpretation of *Pride & Prejudice* or a Jane Austen novel, it may suggest a certain level of awareness producers have of the interplay between mass market romantic narratives and public expectations of what Jane Austen is.

I leave it to Kaplan to detail the exact ways in which marketing and Hollywood have betrayed Jane Austen, or how that context limits the potential for some kind of full

or better mode of adapting her works. Instead, I want to look closely at the marketing and packaging of *Atonement* both as a film and novel, before attempting to view various reactions to the film in light of these representations.

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The copy of *Atonement* which I tend to read is the Anchor paperback from 2002. It is entirely black and gray and white, with black—the background color of the spine—predominating. The cover begins with a black background, with "Ian McEwan" in large gray typeface, and "Atonement" beneath it in white, superimposed over a blend into a black and white photograph cover showing a young girl sitting on the steps of an elaborate estate, and she isn't happy. This, of course, is Briony. On the back, we have the march of acclaim... Selected as BEST BOOK OF THE YEAR by nine publications, Winner of the Los Angeles Times Book Prize, Booker Prize Finalist, a *New York Times Book Review* Editor's Choice, various blurbs calling the book "intense," "a tour de force," "brilliant," and praise for McEwan as perhaps "the most psychologically astute writer working today, our era's Jane Austen." We have a small portrait of Ian McEwan in black and white, staring straight into the camera with a mildly penetrating gaze. The synopsis is printed as follows:

> Ian McEwan's symphonic novel of love and war, childhood and class, guilt and forgiveness combines all the satisfaction of a superb narrative with the provocation we have come to expect from this master of English prose. [Paragraph break.] On a summer day in 1935, thirteen-year-old Briony Tallis witnesses the flirtation between her older sister, Cecilia, and Robbite Turner, the son of a servant. But Briony's incomplete grasp of adult motives and her

precocious imagination bring about a crime that will change all their lives, a crime whose repercussions *Atonement* follows through the chaos and carnage of World War II and into the close of the twentieth century.

Compare this to the 2007 movie tie-in Anchor paperback. The predominant color is a light pastel blue-green, which serves as the background color for the spine and most of the back cover. The front cover is divided into two large sections: the section is a shot of James McAvoy doing some moody brooding over the expansive, smoky background of Dunkirk. This is accompanied by the familiar gold circle, unfortunately not a sticker, proclaiming the novel "Now a Major Motion Picture." The bottom section shows Kiera Knightely in a field of almost day-glo flowers which match her skin tone (clearly the result of some kind of digital oversaturation). It is not an image which appears in the film. Dividing these two sections is, oh finally, it's Briony. It is the small full figure of Saoirse Ronan—and although her presentation here is similar to how she looks in the scene described in the last section, where she walks moodily away from the window with her newfound "adult" knowledge—here she is not seen indoors, but instead apparently walking in some kind of foggy field, with a distant forest far in the background. Her figure is about as tall as the title ATONEMENT, which is in the same hyperbolically typewritten-looking typeface which opens the movie and marks most of its promotional materials. The back cover uses this same image of Briony for the top section which details the awards the novel has received, minus the list of the publications noting it as "Best Book of the Year." The description of the novel is the same: respectably refraining from characterizing the novel as a romance. What's strange is how it preserves all of the same catchphrase blurbs from various reviews of the novel, *except* the one in which

Esquire hails McEwan for being as "psychologically astute" a writer as Jane Austen. This blurb is not even included as one of the lengthy blurbs on the inside of the novel. The spine of the book reproduces cut-ins on the faces of McAvoy and Knightley—one at the top and the other at the bottom.

The cover of *Atonement's* DVD looks as though it were designed to sit next to the DVD of *Pride and Prejudice*, with a spine that matches it in the placement of a portrait of Kiera Knightley wedged between the small Focus Features logo and the title of the film. Its cover is a dark blue. At the top is the programmatically included exclamation of 7! Academy Award Nominations (including) BEST PICTURE! (2007) and the names of the stars (McAvoy and Knightley rather than Ronan). Beneath this with a gold framed image of Knightley touching her hand to McAvoy's face as World War II rages on in the background, accompanied by the title of the film and Peter Travers' characteristic observation that the film is "A CROWNING ACHIEVEMENT! A Ravishing Romance!" The back cover has cropped versions of the two images we see on the cover of the tie-in novel placed close together, without the aforementioned backgrounds, beneath Leah Rozen's claim for People that the film is "****. A Sweeping Love Story." Beneath this are five images: one of Knightley in a green dress, one of McAvoy in the suit he wears when he has sex with her in the green dress, one of McAvoy and Knightley embracing by the seaside: and two small images of Briony: one as Vanessa Redgrave, and an even smaller one as Saoirse Ronan. Perhaps the most astonishing feature of this back cover, however, is the plot synopsis:

> From the award-winning director of *Pride & Prejudice* comes a stunning, critically acclaimed epic story of love. When a young girl catches her sister in a

passionate embrace with a childhood friend, her jealousy drives her to tell a lie that will irrevocably change the course of all their lives forever. Academy Award nominee Keira Knightley and James McAvoy lead an all-star cast in the film critics are calling "the year's best picture" (Thelma Adams, US Weekly).

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I have not done much to reign in the evaluative undertones (to put it mildly) in my description and contextualization of these instances of marketing. In fact, I think it best to make my evaluation clear. The original black and white cover of the novel approaches perfection. The tie-in novel packaging is annoyingly misleading and most importantly a revolting offense to the eyes in any context, though I do find the device of using the small image of Briony to "divide" McAvoy and Knightley somewhat clever. I even have some sick appreciation for how the Harlequinized Jane Austen-y looking appearance of the cover may have necessitated the removal of the blurb which points out that the novel is like Jane Austen in being "psychologically astute" rather than "like Jane Austen" in being lushly romantic or subtly sexy.[19] The DVD box, however, is what has annoyed me the most. If you have read this thesis, you will probably guess that my distaste is grounded in my fascination with the Briony character, and that this packaging not only almost completely erases Briony (especially the Saoirse Ronan performance) but actually *interprets* her character as telling a "lie" out of "jealousy."

Though in a sense I agree that Briony did lie, I only agree with this because I have read the book and seen the film and therefore been through the agonizing drama, multiple times, of wondering if she finally would lie or not, and finally settling on the

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[19] These last two descriptive phrases are not my own but taken from the a blurb on the Joe Wright *Pride & Prejudice* DVD.

interpretation that it is in fact a full lie, no matter how much it comes out of psychological confusion. But, the characterization of all of this as "her jealousy drives her to tell a lie" grossly closes some of the most interesting questions that the film asks: What *is* driving Briony to not just tell a lie, but to do *anything* that she does? Whose exactly are we seeing when we get this flashback to Briony almost drowning herself so that she can be rescued by Robbie? Is it an omniscient flashback? Is it Robbie's flashback? Is it Briony's imagining of what Robbie might have remembered at a particular moment? What, given all these complications, is its truth value? This trailer is even more forcefully complicit in this, with its strong focalization around Robbie and Cecilia and additive interpretive elements which range from dubious ("Torn Apart By Betrayal!") to downright counter-factual ("A Forbidden Love!")

The marketing for the film, in placing Robbie and Cecilia as the main characters of the film, in giving us this interpretation of Briony's action and priming us to see her as the film's simple antagonist, is not only irritating for giving a complex and layered film the appearance of stupidity as marketed. This is really just the nature of all film marketing and almost approaches being useless to gripe about. It's more that the nature of this film's complexity in particular—how its accretion of detail adds up to precisely controlled ambiguities, as I hope to have captured in the previous section—is particularly susceptible to being overwhelmed by the deafening stupidity of the marketing. It's a case of how forceful the power of marketing can be, in priming us to, in a sense, watch a film with a kind of exclusive simplicity *through* its lowest common denominator marketing, and conclude on this basis that the film is itself finally as lowest common denominator as its marketing.

This all may come across as being motivated by an over-investment, on my part, with the *status* of a film I'm highly invested in. I won't deny that there is some of this functioning here, but as a counter-measure to demonstrate the limit of that, I also want to acknowledge that the marketing, in its sheer stupidity, in a way allows the ending of the film—where it is revealed that Briony is the "author" of the story we have just witnessed—to have quite a bit more power than it would if the film were marketed as about Briony—as the book is. When we look at the black and white Anchor paperback of *Atonement*, In a way, this allows the film to function, potentially, as being about Cecilia and about Robbie upon first viewing, and to then potentially become more thoroughly about Briony upon rewatch (depending, of course, on how much one remembers of the ending on rewatch). So although I admit that I hate the marketing on some elitist level, I also take some perverse enjoyment in it.

Nevertheless, my position on the marketing is still, on the whole, critical. At the risk of overly indulging in anecdote, my only friend who is also an enthusiast of the film (and a huge enthusiast of Jane Austen adaptations) says that what she loves about *Atonement*, the film, is the process of "hating that little girl." Having been a film lover for years and in film studies classrooms since 2009, my social role is often to impishly suggest perverse re-readings of films, and this is the spirit in which my friend always receives my defense of Briony, which I view as completely lacking in my usual contrarian qualities. The spectacle of the film's marketing is so great that even when trying to show a willing fan of the film a shot-by-shot analysis of why Briony is not simply a little devil child, that I can still meet with failure.

This is admittedly only my own experience, apparently staked on my own aesthetic hangups. But I hope it illustrates a more general principle of the peculiar complexity apparent in marketing for film adaptations. Although I have gone to great lengths to demonstrate that *Atonement* is a powerful film at the highly subtle levels of performance, editing, sound design, and all of these such things, I have also argued—through arguing about the novel—that it also contains a complex mise-en-abyme structure which, in the film, announces itself with a brutal decisiveness. If we take the book and the film as an ideal construct, this ending can have an incredible complexity and poigancy which rhymes with the complexity of the book. The conditioning created by the marketing, however, risks having us see all moments of the film which are focalized around their significance to Briony—the ending in particular—as a kind of strange afterthought. In other words, we need the fidelity-preserving, evaluation-preserving, and authority-reconsidering idea of *Atonement* as an "ideal construct" in order to engage the film with the optimum acknowledgement of its context. If not an embrace, then at least an openness. In order to study not under literature, but as literate viewers.

Conclusion: Film and the Scene of the Writing

The young scholar casting their gaze upon the abundance of topics, approaches, and methods on offer at a large film studies conference can become both excited and terrified by the possibilities. On the one hand, the wide open status of the field is exciting. On the other, the lack of clear bounds to the discipline can make one feel unsafe. At this juncture—a moment at which anyone reading this paper presumably has some significant relation—it is reasonable to ask the question: what is film studies for? And, more to the point, what on earth is the "humanistic value" of taking the interviews of two authors at their word and going into great detail to try and mount readings of their work which are consistent with the inconsistencies in those interviews? Is this not just the indulgence of one film scholar and his aesthetic interests and personal preoccupations?

Film studies, as a discipline, allows different kinds of thinkers to enrich their thought in all kinds of ways. For my part, film studies is best thought as providing students and scholars with a space with which to try on different ways of seeing. Learning to submit oneself passionately to different ways of seeing, within the context of cinema—a form of media which engages and appeals to many different levels of culture through multiple of the bodily senses—allows us the potential to develop keen facility in engaging different levels of culture itself and moving between them with controlled flexibility.

In this thesis, I have used the interviews of Joe Wright and Ian McEwan and sought to put them into intense conversation with close readings of their works. I have insisted that this is not a return to a kind of naive garden state regarding authors as the final authorities when it comes to determining the meaning of their works, but is rather an

idealistic, "temporary embrace of authorship" necessitated by viewing *Atonement*, in particular, as an ideal construct. *Atonement*, in particular, benefits from being seen in terms of a critic's openness to the personas of the authors.

But even with all of the theoretical justification of the first chapter, this is still arguably an unpopular move within high-theoretical, academic discourse. Even the word "work" rather than "text" can be characterized as reactionary (as Leitch strongly implies). The director as author(ity) and the writer as author(ity) of their works, it may be argued, demands that the student or interpreter or critic take on a "servile" position in relation to the work, and that this just *has* to be bad! It just *has* to perpetuate "conservative" understandings and limits!

It should be clear that I consider this a calcification into dogma of once provocative concepts. In taking seriously the value of temporarily embracing so-called "servility" and its attendant ways of seeing (work rather than text, occupying evaluative positions rather than pretending to impartiality) I have opened up and mapped dynamics, struggles, and cultural reflections which are only accessible through these apparently servile/conservative/reactionary ways of seeing. However, the value of being trained in shifting in and out of different ways of seeing is that you can go *into* a way of seeing, produce knowledge that can only be produced, in its specificity, within that way of seeing, and then shift out of it to have another perspective on what you have produced. To "shift in" and to "shift out" of falling under the spell of a work is not only to be in a servile relation to it, as Leitch argues (or even as Avital Ronell argues, in a recuperative fashion). The total movement adds up to one more one of generosity and hospitality and willingness to learn than of submitting to a kind of domination. My reading of McEwan's

novel was a process of shifting in and out of, to put it very crudely, in Leitch's terms, more passive and more active relations to that text and that author's perspective. The same goes for my reading of Wright's film and even the film's advertising.

To take a critical position towards the idea of the director as author, it is best if we first have a clear understanding of what it is like to live with the idea of the director as author. Some may argue that all you have to do is see the arguments of auterist critics and pick apart their rational inconsistencies. The problem with this, however, is that it closes us off from the value and potential enrichment of ways of seeing that are not necessarily rationalistic.

For example, my own relation to David Lynch films (if not the man's statements themselves) could be fairly characterized as having some significant characteristics of passivity. Insofar as it is creative and active, that activity and creativity is more satisfying if passivity and a willingness to get "lost" in the film is the initial relation. When I watch one of his films, I want to have contact with a strange, imaginary world which gives me significant and moving experiences, and so I do whatever I can to enhance my ability to go into those worlds and retain their impressions, their ways of looking and sounding and feeling. Some may say this does nothing but to inflate Lynch's power as an author. But the impressions that David Lynch films have made upon me allowed me to immediately see the significant connection of sensibility, however remote, between his films and Joe Wright's when the latter expressed admiration for the former. If I had not occupied the space of seeing Lynch's films with positive evaluative appraisal (and attendant humility) I would have likely dismissed Wright's invocation of Lynch as pretentious and moved on. But then I would not have been able to make all kinds of important ("active") interpretive

moves when attempting to understand his work. This does not necessarily inflate Lynch's power. One may, for example, take the way that I have put *Atonement* into conversation with *Eraserhead*. Or, indeed, *Atonement*. My reading of the latter film, dependent upon my reading of the former, does not just serve the aims of those authors or those works. It allows us to reflect upon important questions of shame and of the individual's relationship to the other which we may well be critical of once parsing.

A passive or "readerly" (as opposed to "writerly") approach to a work is only completely emblematic of "conservative" values when those moments are seen in a vacuum. Seen as part of a larger toolkit of intellectual positions, they are invaluable tools for moving in and out of different ways of seeing. In this respect, an intellectual toolkit which does not have a robust appreciation of getting lost in or losing oneself in a work, and then getting out of its ways of seeing—or one which is biased towards hermeneutically "skeptical" procedures rather than hermeneutically "faithful" procedures—is more truly "conservative" in the sense that the critic is in more danger of conserving their old biases. If film studies is viewed as a way to move in and out of different ways of seeing and engaging culture, of opening oneself up to the process of the learning, the overly skeptical critic forecloses the crucial risk of having their mind changed. As I hinted in my invocation of Rodowick's critique of rationalism as the be-all and end-all standard of evluating arguments in film studies, even the tried and true method of rationalistic consistency, with its quest for certainty rather than agreement (or excitement, or perceptual suppleness) is meant to keep one at a distance from—to foreclose in advance—the journeying into experiences and ways of seeing which are valuable for reasons other than their ability to embolden certainty.

In adaptation theory, placing an anti-fidelity attitude as an organizing principle risks allowing us to view adaptations as unconnected to history, since the level of a text's fidelity is what anchors it in history and the past. For some, it is easier to get into the "historical context" of a particular period when we start with the perhaps "naive" and "idealist" appreciation of just one single work's beauty. But starting there does not entail ending there. We may start with the love of an aesthetic object and wind up with disgust towards it, while having gained interest in a particular era of history.

This, in turn, opens up the importance of evaluation in scholarly contexts. For the critic to deny his evaluative positions suggests an impossible impartiality. More radically, fully assuming an evaluative position gives energy and appeal to an argument, as well as a teleological joy to the process of submitting oneself to the more mundane and trying aspects of scholarly practice. We must not be ashamed of our partiality. Of course, showcasing partiality is not always appropriate. Indeed, sometimes an impartial style is appropriate. But there are some cases—I think, the case of my own history of reactions to *Atonement*—where my partiality, rather than disqualifying me from being a true critic and interpreter of the film, is exactly what puts me in a privileged position to speak to the ramifications of its power.

In terms of "authorship," individual authors themselves, being complex persons or personas, are just as rich as modes of intellectual organization—for the critic—as are the procedures of any theoretical camp within a discipline of humanistic inquiry. In fact, to encourage an appreciation for seeing art in individualist terms, we promote—in scholarly practice—the very basic and essential task of trying to understand the particularity of the other. Even a director's mere persona is other. The ability to empathize with the other is

related to the ability to speak across and reach understanding between theoretical camps. It encourages possibilities for harmonizing areas of disciplinary disagreement that are at seeming impasses.

This is all to say that using *Atonement* to speak to disciplinary debates within adaptation theory is not just doing that for the sake of doing that. This thesis is not doing it only because this is what scholarship is supposed to do. Speaking to the disciplinary debates around authorship, evaluation, and fidelity is a way of speaking to finding potentials for agreement or productive disagreement within larger debates in film studies as a discipline. This has ramifications for what we should privilege when we seek to frame a theoretical claim with an eye to its pedagogical import, as Thomas Leitch rightly does.

The political hope that everyone who is interested in film studies will find the cultural critique of the hermetic procedures of the French poststructuralism appealing is a utopian one. So too is the more seemingly clear, rationalistic, and disinterested hope that cognitive film theory or poetics will provide a universally agreed upon standard for interpreting film experiences. What film studies needs as its grounding—especially given its unboundedness as a discipline (which shows no sign of slowing)—is a return to encouraging ways of finding agreement and productive disagreement, a scholarly or intellectual or critical life oriented around such values.

One way to do this would be to favor different kinds of film writing which encourage students to reflect upon the complexity of their minute-by-minute viewing experiences. Film studies should favor kinds of film writing which are valuable not just for their ability to reduce the experiences of films down to clear meanings, but also to

induce experiences—or at the very least provide examples—in perspective-shifting. I mean a perspective shift not just on the part of the reader, but on the part of the writer. By trying to force our minute-by-minute viewing experiences into language, we obtain a greater degree of clarity about our own cognitive processes while film-watching, and demonstrate the details of (as well as the excitement in) cognitive processes to our potential readers, allowing them to experience what it may be like to be in the mind of another. (This, of course, is a key concern of *Atonement*, as I have suggested at length.)

Encouraging this kind of sensuous, psychologically reflective, and interpretive writing—when it places intersubjective empathy as the cornerstone of its pedagogical justification—may also encourage an ability to speak across theoretical camps and create disciplinary harmony where we find disciplinary fracture. Differences in theoretical wars, after all, may well be traceable to differences in temperament.

As both the preface and this conclusion (and probably the thesis itself) make clear, I do not have much personal investment in the will-to-rationality. I am more interested in non-rationalistically rigorous (but nevertheless reasonable) ways of knowing. However, because of my commitment to empathy, I have a better understanding of why those who are deeply invested in rationalistic rigor may have arrived there. Knowing this, I am more interested to know what they see as the value of that way of knowing. A minimum of sympathy towards the other, coupled with a lack of fear when it comes to making oneself vulnerable to being wrong, is the optimum starting point for having a discussion full of not just productive disagreement, but mutual learning. These, we might say, are the preconditions of any good conversation.

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