Life as text in *Atonement,* the novel and the film

Andrea Sonia Vartalitis

Instituto Académico Pedagógico de Ciencias Humanas, UNVM

avartalitis@unvm.edu.ar

Abstract

In a complex and deceiving world which has lost its innocence; a world where grand narratives have been emptied of universal meaning and proven to be but different versions of an ungraspable world of reality, post modernist fiction writers embraced language as the very substance of their works of art crafting their fiction worlds in self-reflexivity with metafictional devices. Examining issues of class antagonism, war and sexuality around a tragic misreading of reality, postmodern British author Ian McEwan wrote *Atonement* (2001), a highly intertextual work whose metanarrative is intended to explore life as text. The present paper considers the cinematic adaptation of McEwan´s novel, and analyzes how director Joe Wright and screenplay writer Christopher Hampton handled the dense interiority and subtle metanarrative of this fictional work. Acknowledging the relevance of this literary device and that of the statement it is aimed at conveying in the novel, Joe Wright and Christopher Hampton went beyond the eventfulness of the plot, and found the cinematic equivalents to translate the novel´s symbolic meaning into the audiovisual language of the film.

Resumen

En un complejo y falaz mundo que ha perdido su inocencia; un mundo en el que, vaciados de sus contenidos universales, los grandes relatos son considerados solo diferentes intentos de explicar un mundo esencialmente inexplicable, los autores postmodernos abrazaron el lenguaje como la sustancia misma de sus trabajos de arte y creando sus mundos ficcionales en auto-reflexividad usando recursos de Meta ficción. Examinando cuestiones de clase, guerra y sexualidad alrededor de una trágica malinterpretación de la realidad, el autor británico postmoderno Ian McEwan escribió *Expiación* (2001), trabajo altamente intertextual cuya meta-narrativa explora la vida como texto. El presente trabajo estudia la adaptación cinematográfica de esta novela, y analiza cómo el director Joe Wright y el guionista Christopher Hampton tratan la densa interioridad y el sutil uso de la meta-narrativa en este relato. Al reconocer la relevancia de este recurso literario y la del significado que busca realizar en la novela, Joe Wright y Christopher Hampton fueron más allá de la compleja trama de acontecimientos, encontrando el equivalente cinematográfico para traducir el significado simbólico de esta novela al lenguaje audiovisual del film.

The truth had become as ghostly as invention.

IAN MC EWAN, *Atonement* (2001: 41)

While in the nineteenth-century realist fiction was derived from the firm conception of an objectively describable world of common history, and readers had a sense of construal by referring the text to a real world that could be objectively represented, at the beginning of the twentieth-century, Modernist fiction already showed the emergence of a sense of fictitiousness; an awareness of the fact that any attempt at representing reality would only yield fragmented perceptions (Pfeifer in Waugh 1992: 36). Over the second half of the twentieth century, and as a result of the decline of the positivist and empiricist world-views of previous decades, both well-organized plots— which tried to narrate stories in the same way individuals tried to narrate the empirical world around them— as much as the authoritative god-like author were becoming old forms of the past. Freud´s views of the self, the crisis of determinism, the place of contingency in natural processes with Heisenberg´s principle of indeterminacy and Heidegger´s questioning of the Cartesian knowledgeable subject brought about paradigmatic changes in science that were rapidly

assimilated by the social and the artistic consciousness. The epistemological questions that had guided modern science in search of trans-historical theorizations were challenged by historically self-conscious hermeneutic queries.

The linguistic turn in the humanities, with post-structuralists like Derrida, Foucault, Lyotard and Davidson, further contributed to the change of paradigm, which unfolded from a perception of order and closure to an awareness of fragile ontological status and indeterminacy, bringing about the notion that civilization was not imprinted in the human spirit, but that it was only a shared perception of truth (Lyotard qtd. in Waugh 1992: 5). Focusing on the relationship between philosophy and language, these theorists argued that language was not a transparent medium, and that it could neither express what lied within the self nor represent what lied outside it (Davidson qtd. in Rorty 1991: 11); language was a structuring agent of both states of interiority and conceptions of the empirical world. Post-structuralists had shifted the focus from the signified over to the signifier, and, rendering meaning independent and detached from structures, argued that meaning was a linguistic construction, and so were truth and reality.

In this complex and deceiving world that had lost its innocence; a world where grand narratives had been emptied of universal meaning and proven to be but different versions of an ungraspable world of reality, post modernist fiction writers embraced language as the very substance of their works of art. Aware of how the world was perceived as a textual construction very much in the same way their fiction worlds were, they engaged in an ontological query (McHale 1987: 10) away from the epistemological concerns of modernist writers. Resisting exhaustion (Barth qtd. in McHale 1987: 10) and the "post-cognitive" (Higgins qtd. in McHale 1987: 10) period in the progression of human history, these writers begun to explore and symbolize the human experience not by trying to represent reality, but by trying to evade it in an endless intertextuality that referred the readers not to the real world outside the text, but to other texts for construal; often frustrating and sometimes fulfilling their expectations of meaning and closure, but always flaunting the condition of artifice of their fiction worlds (Alter qtd. in Waugh 1996: 21).

Among other characteristics of postmodern writing, metafiction found a new emphasis amid these fiction writers who were reacting against realist writing and the mimetic enterprise. Peter Brooks has asserted that "[The metafictional novel] finds a greater explicitness in the abandonment of mimetic claims, a more overt staging of narrative's arbitrariness and lack of authority, a more open playfulness and fictionality" (1984: 287). Metafiction has been described as a formal device that illustrates the ontological dominant of postmodernism; what Calinescu has referred to as "a major shift in contemporary thought from epistemology to hermeneutics" (1987: 87). Furthermore, and inspired by post-structuralist thinkers such as Barthes and Foucault, and by earlier theorists like Bakhtin and Brecht, Wenche Ommundsen (1993: 86) argued that it was precisely by calling attention to its own processes of mediation and construction that the reflexive metafictinal text points to and makes the readers aware of the cultural codes that inform "the construct we call 'reality'" (Ibid.: 97). Metafiction has thus given postmodernist novelists and readers not only a deeper understanding of the process and structure of narrative; it has also provided the models to conceive the human experience of the world as a language construction.

Examining issues of class antagonism, war and sexuality around a tragic misreading of reality, postmodern British author Ian McEwan wrote *Atonement* (2001) crafting a highly intertextual work whose metanarrative is intended to explore life as text. McEwan sets the beginning of the story on a hot summer day in 1935, when thirteen-year-old Briony Tallis witnesses a moment's flirtation between her older sister, Cecilia, and Robbie Turner, the son of a servant at the Tallis's. Briony's social prejudices, her partial understanding of adult motives and her precocious literary gifts bring about a crime that will change all their lives forever. As the narration of the repercussions of Briony's deeds unfolds through the chaos and carnage of World War II into the end of the twentieth century, *Atonement* engages the readers on every conceivable level only to leave them with a pervasive sense of the textual nature of their own lives when, towards the end of the novel, a delayed frame-breaking shatters the readers' expectations of closure and certainty. Exploring the role of Literature and imagination in a more humane quest for social justice and solidarity (Rorty 1991: xvi), *Atonement* symbolizes the postmodern condition, according to which all discourses attempting to make sense of life and the world share the fragile ontological status of fictional texts.

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The present essay considers the cinematic adaptation of *Atonement*, and analyzes how director Joe Wright and screenplay writer Christopher Hampton handled the dense interiority of this highly literary novel; its subtle metanarrative aimed at exploring the textual nature of human experience. Although it can be said that enough external drama renders the novel suitable for cinematic adaptation, one of the finest pleasures of reading this outstanding literary work derives from its metanarrative, whose adaptation to the big screen may and should be considered as a great challenge. Nevertheless, acknowledging the relevance of this literary device and that of the statement it is aimed at conveying in the novel, Joe Wright and Christopher Hampton went beyond the eventfulness of the plot, and found the cinematic equivalents to translate the novel´s symbolic meaning into the audiovisual language of the film. The use of strong visuals, of striking sound effects, and of diegetic and non-diegetic music (Fernandez Díez and Martinez Abadía 1999: 206) take the audience deeper inside the source text revealing meanings that are likely to go unnoticed when reading the novel.

Exploring life as text and the role of literary imagination in our lives, McEwan uses metanarrative devices forwarding the process of writing from the beginning and throughout the novel. In fact, *Atonement* opens with Briony having just completed her first play, *The Trials of Arabella*, which she has written for her brother, Leon. Extensive literary considerations on genre follow this event. Briony wonders which literary form better conveys the meanings she intends to unfold: to "guide him [her brother] away from his careless succession of girlfriends" (McIwan 2001: 4). Writing is again dramatically forwarded when Robbie writes several versions of a note of apologies to Cecilia following their encounter at the fountain. Here again, form and content are shown in tension in the construction of meanings. Robbie, a young and ambitious laborer of the 1930´s welfare state in England, and who is passionately in love with the daughter of his employer and benefactor, is trying to express his feelings, which go much deeper than convention would have them expressed in a note of apologies. Should he write a brief note or a more formal letter? Should it be typed or hand-written? Could he possibly just write the words that best express his feelings for Cecilia in this hot summer afternoon? Writing is also subtly fronted in the scene in which Robbie and Cecilia make love in the library, of all settings, against a wall covered with books, and where they are found unexpectedly by Briony. Finally, it can be said that in McEwan's novel, metanarrative is most of all a pending revelation: the narrative that explains its narrative; the story about how the story came into being. Towards the end of the novel, and after her wartime visit to Cecilia and Robbie in Balham, Briony parts from the couple at the tube station, and promises that she will write to her parents and to the lawyers admitting that she lied six years earlier when she testified to Robbie being a rapist. "She knew what was required of her. Not simply a letter, but a new draft, an atonement, and she was ready to begin" (Ibid: 349). At the foot of the same page "BT London 1999" is printed, and the puzzled readers realize, from the framing in the following section, that the initials "BT" refer to Briony Tallis, and that what they have been reading is the story of Briony´s novel. She is now 77 years old and has spent 59 years writing and rewriting the story in "half a dozen drafts" (Ibid: 470); the latest being the one we have just read, but which is not the final draft: "Robbie and Cecilia, still alive, still in love, sitting side by side in the library…" Briony lets her literary imagination flow again; a new draft? "It is not impossible. But now I must sleep" (Ibid: 472).This delayed framing and all other metanarrative devices in the novel constitute the form McEwan gave to the profound contents he explores in this exceptional literary piece; much of its value would have been wasted had the cinematographers chosen to disregard them in the film adaptation.

However, if McEwan's multi-layered novel is composed of a story and the metanarrative that accounts for its existence as a way to make sense of reality, so is Hampton and Wright's film adaptation. As director Wright has explained, he "…wanted to get this sense of an omniscient author and her writing of the story you´re watching" (qtd. in Douglas 2007). The cinematographers managed to retain the novel´s metanarrative in memorable combinations of images, music and sound effects by visualizing the activity of writing and the events that triggered Biony´s narration. Sometimes aimed at adding strength to the action of writing, or at evoking the image of the writing author and the power of literary imagination, sound effects contribute with their own expressive value in the construction of both these meanings. The film opens with the flash-forward sound of a working typewriter, and, as struck by the keys, the word "Atonement" is shown in an extreme close-up marking the film´s point of departure and advancing the script´s *thematic idea* (Fernandez Díez and Martinez Abadía 1999: 237). This initial ontological framing, in which the fictional author begins

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to write the story we are going to watch, goes unobserved by the innocent viewers, and is only made explicit towards the end of the film. In fact, at this point, the spectators are about to see the story of how Briony Tallis' story came into being: "Atonement," written by this visible author to repair the damage she has caused to her sister and her lover. Strategically, cutting from this initial close-up into another of the dollhouse replica of the Tallis' Victorian country house, an ellipsis takes the unaware audience back in time to 1935, when it all started; a new scene begins. The camera pans slowly across in a semi-long shot showing details of a very neat room. It moves into a close-up of Briony´s eyes fixed on the words she is typing: "The End." What could be seen as a contradiction, as the movie has just begun, is in fact the fronting of the different ontological levels which are generated whenever there is a narration; whenever we tell a story. Determined, the girl files the pages, and with firm steps we see her walking out of the room in search of her mother. The sound of persistent staccato strokes at the typewriter underlies the presence of the writer marking her march; this sound effect will evoke her image, that of the writing author, and it will bring her presence throughout the film.

Writing, mainly in the form of typing, is not only preserved in the film adaptation, it is given the prominence of the meaning-making device it has in the novel. Typing becomes conspicuously pervasive through sound effects and images as the story unfolds and it becomes the activity around which different meanings are realized. Robbie and Cecilia´s romance is partly achieved around images of writing, by means of which the cinematographers develop, for example, the sexual intimacy that made Robbie write the controversial note. The scene in which Robbie is in his small room at the servant's cottage, where he lives with his mother, begins with the flash-forward sound of Briony´s voice from the previous scene where she was reading her play. Used in the transition from one scene to the next, this sound effect breaks the sense of a realistic setting while it puts forward the scene´s condition of artifice, of fictitiousness, and, at the same time, it brings to the fore the presence of the omniscient author, who stands at a different ontological level. Gradually, Briony´s voice disappears, and only the sound of Robbie´s typewriter remains, shifting the focus toward the story itself. We see Robbie in the bath tub, and then in his pajamas, while he plays Puccini´s "O Soave Fanciulla" on the gramophone. In clear contrast with the sense of ficticiousness intended with the use of Briony´s voice at the opening of the scene, and given its more realistic quality, the use of diegetic music is now aimed at recreating the setting of the character and his mood ascribing them realism while focusing on the story; on the narration. In this scene, Robbie is seen typing the note of apology to Cecilia, and, as he discards several of the drafts he writes, he fantasizes about her and is gradually aroused. The close-ups of Robbie´s half-naked torso and face, eyes and lips are juxtaposed with those of Cecilia´s face and lips reflected on a mirror. Robbie´s feelings of not only love but specially desire slowly build up until he suddenly begins to type highly sexually charged words that are shown in an extreme close-up: "In my dreams I kiss your cunt, your sweet wet cunt." The words are typed, but are never spoken. Writing is shown, in the film as in the novel, in close association with the deepest human feelings. In an undefined relationship of cause-effect, one is seen bringing about the other; human experience of the world becomes text, and text becomes human experience.

Making use of strong visuals, director Wight creates the library scene in which Robbie and Cecilia come together for the first time; scene which he would later refer to as "the fucking insect shot" (qtd. in Douglas 2007). Aware of how sex from a wide shot always looks awkward and grotesque, Wright actually confronts the audience with the image that made Briony confirm her suspicions about Robbie being a maniac. The effect of the description of the couple´s love making on the readers of the novel is nowhere near that achieved in the audience with the image on the big screen: the frame composition that has Robbie crucifying Cecilia against the bookshelves as the central element. In this scene, Wright goes beyond exploring the lovers' sexual feelings, which he does with the close-ups of their kissing mouths and touching hands, to explore the misleading sight and the strong impression it is most likely to make in a thirteen year old girl. In fact, what Wright forefronts in this scene is the contingency of the meanings and interpretations of the ambiguous references that our ever ungraspable world of reality has to offer.

Another superb scene, in which the filmmakers forefront the sense of a present omniscient author, is that of the historical evacuation to Dunkirk. In an extended steadicam shot that memorably depicts the beach sequence, the camera is gradually perceived as a narrating consciousness given the seeming autonomy of its movements in different directions focusing on the different symbolic elements in the composition; sometimes even disregarding the protagonist's whereabouts and doings. Robbie and the other two soldiers

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have reached the meadows by the coast and begin running toward the beach. The camera follows the three men from a high-angle extreme long shot that helps to denote their vulnerability, and as they reach the high side of the dunes, the camera seems to overtake the soldiers while opening up in a horizontal plane shot of the apocalyptic scenario. Already at the beach, the camera tracks Robbie and the soldiers in pull-back camera shots adding dynamism to the scene. Robbie and his companions are seen coming in and out of the frame while the camera appears to sometimes disregard their moves letting other elements gain prominence in the composition. Suddenly, the men slow down their pace, but the camera pulls the focus away in a different direction and with movements that resemble those of the head of a human being makes a vertical panoramic move upward to follow the course of some sheets of paper that fly up in the air. The camera then focuses on the torn sails of a stranded vessel, and goes back downwards into a close-up shot of Robbie´s face although he is looking in a different direction. Showing his confusion in a medium shot, the camera focuses on Robbie for a couple of seconds but it does not follow him. Instead, we see Robbie move out of the frame again while, in a ninety degree horizontal movement, the camera pans the setting and is headed towards a roundabout where a group of doomed soldiers are singing the Christian hymn "Dear lord and father of mankind." In a circular tracking, the camera shows the grief in the face of each and every soldier, and while the use of diegetic music, that of the singing men, adds drama and strength to the already dramatic and strong war images in this scene reinforcing the realistic character of the surroundings, the simultaneous use of non-diegetic music, the music in off, reminds the audience of its status of artifice, suddenly substantiating the sense of a present narrating consciousness that the moving camera has engendered. A consciousness that, from a different ontological level, has been showing us the terrible war images; at times, focusing on the three men, and at times, narrating other events in the setting. Towards the end of the scene, Robbie comes to a bar where he had hoped to find something to drink. He descends to another room and finds that a French movie is being projected on a wall. It is a romantic scene; an extreme close-up of the faces of the protagonists kissing and promising each other eternal love. An outstanding final shot in the scene shows us the image of Robbie posed against the giant screen; a fictional character looking at another fictional character.

Like in the novel, the tension between the different ontological levels is released towards the end of the film when the omniscient author of the story is overtly made present. After we have seen Briony leave Robbie and Cecilia´s apartment in Balham, and already on the train going back to the hospital, the image of a close-up of her troubled countenance underlined by the staccato clicking sound effect of a working type-writer suddenly become a black screen in silence. An ellipsis takes the narration 59 years forward, and the audience is unexpectedly confronted with fifteen monitors showing fifteen identical images of Briony at 77 being interviewed for the occasion of the release of her novel. In this scene, director Wright chooses to make some audiovisual editing techniques explicit as a way of exploring the process of filmmaking; a kind of metafictional reflexivity aimed at underlying the state of artifice of the film. Nevertheless, this final and revealing twist, which in the novel has the power to get the readers go back to the first pages of the book and reread, does not have as powerful an effect on the audience of the film adaptation. For that to happen, Briony would have to be revealed as the filmmaker of the movie we are watching.

However, Wright and Hampton were able to construct an equally engaging ending. In this final interview, the camera moves closer to old Briony´s face –performed by Vanessa Redgrave, herself a powerful and emblematic English actress– and, as the author of the story in confession, she directly tells the audience why she wrote the novel and what has really happened to Robbie and Cecilia, which is an effective ending for the film. Briony wonders what purpose would have been served by complete honesty, and explains that although in the novel Robbie and Cecilia are happily together, in truth, they never saw each other again after their meeting at the tea house; Robbie died of septicemia and was never evacuated to Dunkirk, while Cecilia died in Balham underground during the bombings in London. The multiple endings of the story, which follows the tradition of metafictional narrative, give the audience another finale shown in dramatic images while the voice in off of the author narrates the events. Yet, these are not the last images of the film. Although the audience now knows that the lovers have died, Robbie and Cecilia are shown happily playing at the beach before they go inside the cottage. Like the writer, the filmmakers too choose to give the lovers their happiness, and in this the images in the film do have a more dramatic and lasting effect on the audience

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than do the words in the novel. The last scene closes in a mise en scene image of the seaside cottage framed beneath the white cliffs, where the lovers lived happily ever after.

Mastering content and form, Ian McEwan crafted his historical novel, *Atonement*, with metafictional literary devices seeking to lay bare the modernist illusion of a graspable reality. Exalting the medium and the very process of creation, he forwarded the construction of fictional worlds aimed at making sense of an empirical world which only offers ambiguous references to its ever contingent meanings and interpretations. Joe Wright and Christopher Hampton took this highly literary work and successfully translated its meanings into the audiovisual language not solely through a commitment to fidelity, for pure fidelity tends to leave the film empty and repetitive; they adapted *Atonement* to the big screen keeping its dense interiority and what makes the novel a masterpiece: its metanarrative. Through strong visuals and the powerful use of music and sound effects, which is the material Wright and Hampton use to craft their art, they managed to take us deeper into the source text and, by actually showing us the surface, the images, they made us see it in a different light, which, ultimately, is what any good film adaptation should do.

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