

... she felt the attraction of the neat, limited and controllable form she had left behind when she decided to write a play. A story was direct and simple, allowing nothing to come between herself and her reader – no intermediaries with their private ambitions or incompetence, no pressures of time, no limits on resources. In a story you only had to wish, you only had to write it down and you could have the world; in a play you had to do with what was available ...¹

In this way, Briony Tallis, the protagonist of Ian McEwan's 2001 novel *Atonement*, reflects on what can happen between committing words to paper and hearing them spoken on stage. At thirteen years

old, she has just been frustrated in her attempts to get her play, 'Arabella', performed for a family audience. Her reflections may lead us to wonder about the business of adapting novels to the screen, in which case a great many 'intermediaries' will be involved, and 'the world' the novelist has created must be re-imagined in another medium. There is probably more discussion about the literature-film adaptation than about any other matter in cinema studies. People feel very strongly and protectively about novels that they have admired and which they have, in a sense, already projected on the screens of their own minds.

When it comes to the film version of an admired novel, I want to suggest that it is easy to make unreasonable demands, such as a dogged adherence to character, event and idea, when it might be more reasonable to ask: what makes an exciting adaptation? How far has this particular film made something new and stimulating from the original novel? How far does it make us reconsider that original, whose quality (and qualities) remain(s) unchanged by any number of adaptations? These thoughts are suggested by the British film version of *Atonement* (Joe Wright, 2007) and its relation to Ian McEwan's award-winning novel.²

WATCHING, WRITING ATONEMENT

ABOVE: JAMES McAVOY AS ROBBIE TURNER IN *ATONEMENT*

Ian McEwan and the cinema

Perhaps not since Graham Greene has there been an author so closely associated with the screen as McEwan, and a recent commentator has said, 'As a novelist, McEwan has a cinematic imagination.'³ (It is instructive to consider what that might mean.) Five of McEwan's novels have been adapted to

the screen: *The Cement Garden* (1978, filmed by Andrew Birkin, 1993), *The Comfort of Strangers* (1981, filmed by Paul Schrader, 1990), *The*

Innocent (1990, filmed by John Schlesinger, 1993, from McEwan's screenplay), *Enduring Love* (1997, filmed by Roger Michell, 2005), and now *Atonement* (2001, filmed 2007), the last-named receiving more publicity and acclaim than any of the other films.

McEwan has also written several screenplays, including *The Ploughman's Lunch* (Richard Eyre, 1983), an important state-of-the-nation drama and critique of Thatcherite policies at the time of the Falklands War; *Soursweet* (Mike Newell, 1988), about a young Hong Kong couple trying to settle in London; and *The Good Son* (Joseph Ruben, 1993), a US film

which he adapted from his own story. His short stories have also provided the basis for films (for example, *First Love*, *Last Rites* [Jesse Peretz, 1997]) and television (for example, *Last Day of Summer* [Derek Banham, 1984], for which he also wrote the screenplay).

McEwan's record is worth noting in relation to the film under discussion: it inclines us to wonder if he has as a result more sense of the screen's requirements than most novelists, and whether his own experiences as a screenwriter have exercised some effect on his writing. In *Atonement's* dealings with time, for instance, it may be that he is influenced

A photograph of a young man in military uniform, wearing a helmet and a large backpack, standing in a vast field of red poppies. He is looking off to the side. The scene is set in a rural landscape with trees in the distance under a bright sky.

AND CONTROL: MENT

BRIAN MCFARLANE

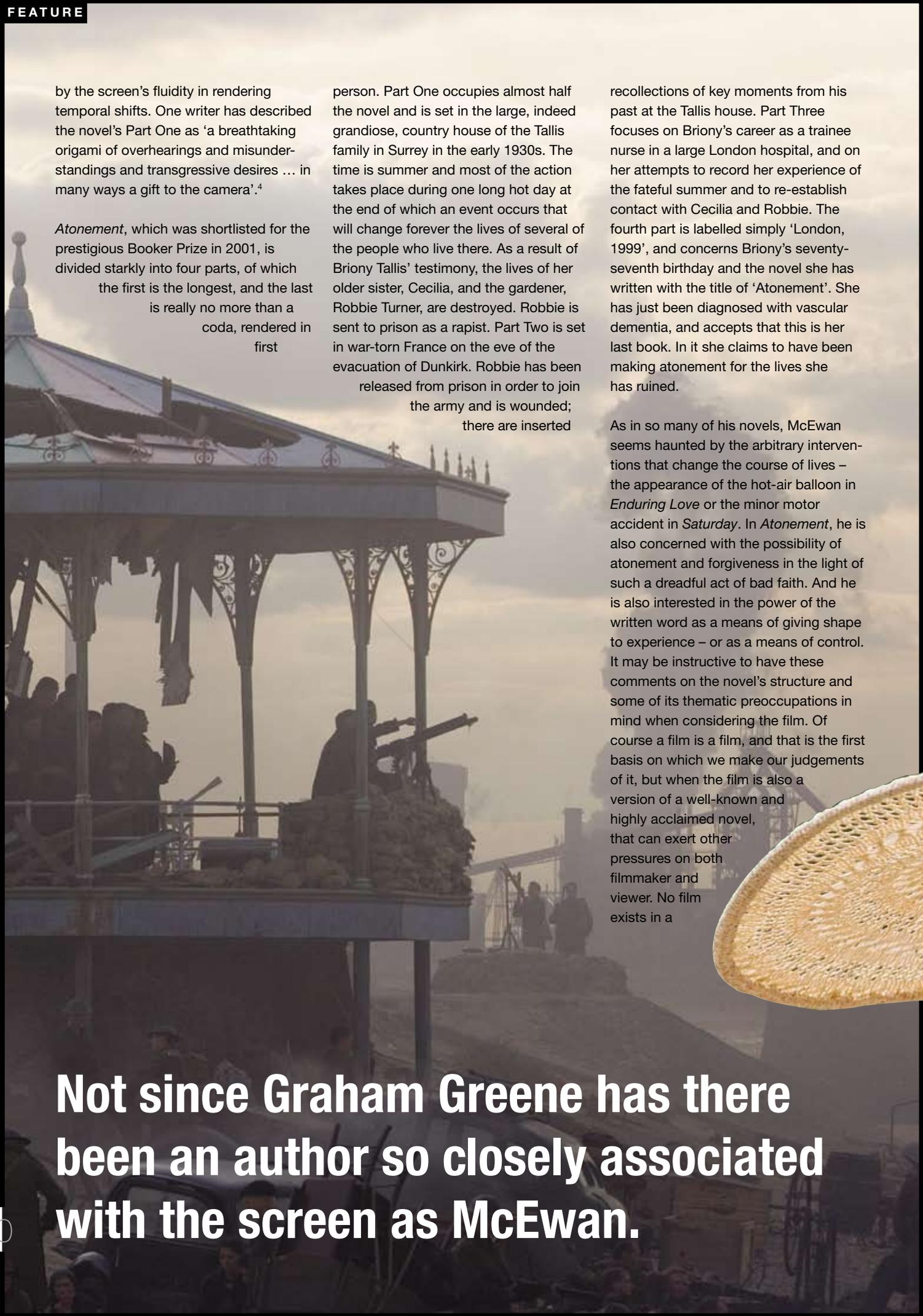
by the screen's fluidity in rendering temporal shifts. One writer has described the novel's Part One as 'a breathtaking origami of overhearings and misunderstandings and transgressive desires ... in many ways a gift to the camera'.⁴

Atonement, which was shortlisted for the prestigious Booker Prize in 2001, is divided starkly into four parts, of which the first is the longest, and the last is really no more than a coda, rendered in first

person. Part One occupies almost half the novel and is set in the large, indeed grandiose, country house of the Tallis family in Surrey in the early 1930s. The time is summer and most of the action takes place during one long hot day at the end of which an event occurs that will change forever the lives of several of the people who live there. As a result of Briony Tallis' testimony, the lives of her older sister, Cecilia, and the gardener, Robbie Turner, are destroyed. Robbie is sent to prison as a rapist. Part Two is set in war-torn France on the eve of the evacuation of Dunkirk. Robbie has been released from prison in order to join the army and is wounded; there are inserted

recollections of key moments from his past at the Tallis house. Part Three focuses on Briony's career as a trainee nurse in a large London hospital, and on her attempts to record her experience of the fateful summer and to re-establish contact with Cecilia and Robbie. The fourth part is labelled simply 'London, 1999', and concerns Briony's seventy-seventh birthday and the novel she has written with the title of 'Atonement'. She has just been diagnosed with vascular dementia, and accepts that this is her last book. In it she claims to have been making atonement for the lives she has ruined.

As in so many of his novels, McEwan seems haunted by the arbitrary interventions that change the course of lives – the appearance of the hot-air balloon in *Enduring Love* or the minor motor accident in *Saturday*. In *Atonement*, he is also concerned with the possibility of atonement and forgiveness in the light of such a dreadful act of bad faith. And he is also interested in the power of the written word as a means of giving shape to experience – or as a means of control. It may be instructive to have these comments on the novel's structure and some of its thematic preoccupations in mind when considering the film. Of course a film is a film, and that is the first basis on which we make our judgements of it, but when the film is also a version of a well-known and highly acclaimed novel, that can exert other pressures on both filmmaker and viewer. No film exists in a



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vacuum: its intertextuality will vary from viewer to viewer, and will include other films, novels, plays and so on which in some way bear on or influence the way we respond. In this case, McEwan's novel looms large for those familiar with it, particularly if they have read it but even those who haven't may well know about it and bring preconceptions to bear on how they receive the film.

Joe Wright, Christopher Hampton and the film

Director Joe Wright, working from a screenplay by Christopher Hampton, has maintained the overall shape of McEwan's novel, asserting the centrality of Briony's act of betrayal, its result and what she sees as her atonement. On two viewings of the film and two readings of the novel, one of the latter *after* my second viewing, I find it hard to think of any significant element of the narrative that has been omitted or given a different emphasis in the film.



ABOVE: BRENDA BLETHYN AS GRACE TURNER, ROBBIE'S MOTHER BELOW: KEIRA KNIGHTLEY AS CECILIA TALLIS OPPOSITE PAGE: THE BANDSTAND ON THE BEACH AT DUNKIRK

Having said that, I don't for a moment want to suggest that the film is a slavish act of transliteration from one medium to another. The film, while maintaining close narrative affiliation with the novel, is a triumph in cinematic terms, as might be expected from Wright, who directed the most recent – and very distinctive – version of *Pride and Prejudice* (2005), and from Hampton, not only a distinguished playwright and the director of three films but also a successful screenwriter, whose work includes the

script for adaptations of *The Honorary Consul* (John MacKenzie, 1984) and *The Quiet American* (Phillip Noyce, 2002).

Though Hampton is given sole credit for the screenplay, Paul Webster, one of the producers, claims 'the script became richer, more complex' when Wright 'started collaborating and working with Christopher', and 'he brought this kind of vast visual imagination to the project'.⁵ I want to argue that, unlike the reviewer who claimed that "Adaptation" here means finding pictures for McEwan's words, rather than shifting the mirror's gaze onto the movie itself,⁶ the filmmakers have at every turn made a *film*, with its own cinematic style. It is more than a matter of simply retaining the book's overarching structure; it is also a matter of ensuring that meaning is articulated through all the resources of the cinema, and this is important in adapting a novel so dependent on the interiority of its characters.

Summer madness

Certainly the film retains the basic settings and action of each of the book's structural divisions. The long first half of the film establishes the Tallis' Victorian gothic country mansion; the heat of the summer day in 1935, with Briony (Saoirse Ronan) finishing her



McEwan seems haunted by the arbitrary interventions that change the course of lives.

play, 'Arabella'; her irritation with the cousins who are less than cooperative about appearing in it; her observing of the behaviour of Cecilia (Keira Knightley) and Robbie (James McAvoy) at the fountain; the arrival of her brother and his friend; Robbie and Cecilia's frantic love-making in the library; and the catastrophic events which close this long, languorous day.

But notice how the narrative chain and its complex meanings are rendered in film's terms. Notice, for instance, the way Briony's intense need to control is suggested in the way all the toy animals in her immaculate bedroom are arranged facing in exactly the same direction. Or the purposeful way she types in 'THE END' – the play is

her creation and she alone knows when she wants it to stop – and then the camera follows her as, equally purposefully, she strides down stairs and along echoing corridors. A moment later, echoing McEwan's words, she wonders about the limits of the playwright's craft: 'It all depends on other people.' Without really understanding what she sees, she watches from her upper-floor window as Robbie and Cecilia grapple with a valuable vase which breaks in the tussle and leads Cecilia to strip to her underwear and dive into the

fountain where the pieces have fallen. Close-ups of Briony's serious, watchful face are a staple of this part of the film, interspersed as they are with so much rapid, purposive movement. What film can dramatize so precisely is the gap between seeing and understanding: later, when Briony sees Cecilia **spreadeagled** against the library shelves and **held in place** by Robbie, she again **misinterprets** what is afoot. This 'seeing', **allied to the letter** from Robbie to Cecilia which Briony has read, leads to her **supposing** him a sex maniac – and to the **mendacity** that will ruin his life at the end of this momentous day.

In the film's account of the novel's first part, there is more at stake than Briony's watchfulness and its misapprehensions. The film's images evoke the sheer sensuousness, sensuality even, of the long hot summer day. Is there something about the comparative rarity of such days in England that leads to a loosening of the **usual** constraints, to an obscuring of the **quotidian** realities that are so taken for granted? As I watched cinematographer Seamus McGarvey's sumptuous images, I couldn't help thinking of other films and books in which summer's unexpected balm releases the mind from realities and on occasions pushes tensions to breaking point.

Archetypally, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, one of the greatest fantasies in the language, only happens because the heroine falls asleep under the influence of the summer sun and imagines herself in a world where everything is a distorted version of what she knows. Think how tempers become frayed in the summer day's strawberry-picking episode in Jane Austen's *Emma* and, most germane as a comparison to *Atonement*, Mary Wesley's *The Camomile Lawn* and L.P. Hartley's *The Go-Between*. Both the last two not merely reflect on the dangers inherent in summer's loosening of the sexual stays but also involve children in matters beyond their youthful comprehension. All

of these literary texts have been filmed, perhaps most notably Joseph Losey's version of *The Go-Between* (1971), which in turn reminds one of his earlier film, *Accident* (1967), in which a simmering alfresco lunch in Oxford unleashes suppressions of various kinds.

These works form part of an intertextuality of Joe Wright's *Atonement*, as do those other films set in spacious country houses, such as James Ivory's *The Golden Bowl* (2000), derived from Henry James' intricate account of sexual duplicities, and Philip Haas' *Angels and Insects* (1995), adapted from A.S. Byatt's novel. To go back to McEwan, he acknowledged the influence of Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* as another 'tale of misreadings whose heroine misinterprets experience through the fervid perspective of gothic fiction'.⁷

On the beach

In the film's second section (as in the novel's), Robbie, released from prison and recruited into the army, is in France four years later, having become separated, along with two other soldiers, from his platoon. This section opens with a near-mistake, echoing the catastrophic mistake/lie that has sealed Robbie's fate. Here it's a matter of doubting the kindly intentions of French locals who have brought food and wine to the three holed up in a farm building. When one of the soldiers queries why Robbie is still a private when he talks so 'posh', Robbie's reply tersely fills us in on the preceding years: 'You're not eligible for officer training if you join up from prison. The last thing I am is a toff.' In such a line, not only is the narrative link established but so too is the film's awareness of the hideous cruelties of class snobbery.

Robbie and Cecilia's feeling for each other – they have grown up together, been remote from each other at Cambridge where he has done a better degree, and have been re-drawn together on that hot summer day – has at every turn been influenced by their different class associations. During this long central sequence of the film while Robbie is in France, the film frequently inserts his recollections of his reunions with Cecilia in wartime London, including an inhibited meeting in a café which ends touchingly with her saying, 'Come back to me', words that stay in his mind and are heard on the soundtrack as he trudges through the French countryside. In such moments and in her repudiation of her family which has been responsible for sending Robbie to prison, she has dissociated herself from the class into which she was born.

The war is rendered with a melancholy immediacy that allows the private and personal to be as vividly felt as the wider tragedy. Following images of Robbie and his mates making their way through the French countryside, under constant

threat of enemy shelling, and of a glorious inserted shot of Cecilia 'hearing' Robbie's words as she walks by the sea at twilight, suddenly the camera takes in a vast panoramic shot of the beach at Dunkirk (actually Redcar Beach in North Yorkshire). Few films have captured the grief and pain and horror of a war scene with such intensity and it is worth looking closely at how Wright and his collaborators have gone about producing this effect.

As Robbie observes the teeming hundreds of servicemen, alive or dead or in dreadful pain, and makes his way through them, his reaction is 'It's like something out of the Bible'. Cinematographer McGarvey has caught all this in a single Steadicam shot which keeps our focus on Robbie while making us privy to his view of the carnage and chaos around him. Production designer Sarah Greenwood, too, makes a major contribution to the poignancy of this sequence, in which landscape is again, as in the summer opening, imbued with threat and pain. Half-ruined buildings border the coastline; there is a Ferris wheel which hints at an almost unthinkable gaiety; and there is a





bandstand on which a group of wounded soldiers sing, with potent irony for the film's meaning, 'Dear lord and father of mankind/Forgive our foolish ways'. If the irony implicit in the look and sound of this should escape us, then a few moments later another group of raddled soldiery is found singing 'Fuck 'em all' to the tune of the popular Second World War hit song. All of this is bathed in a strange pre-dawn grey light that contrasts strikingly with the twilight beauty of the scene with Cecilia on the beach and with the summery haze of the earlier part of the film – and prefigures the very last shot of this intricately organized film.

White corridors

'Three weeks earlier' is the title that introduces the next section of the film, that corresponding to the novel's Part Three. Briony (now played by Romola Garai) is training to be a nurse – perhaps, as Cecilia has told us earlier, 'as some kind of penance'. The sequence begins with Sister Drummond (Gina McKee) marching the nursing aides along corridors that recall the passages and stairways of the Tallis mansion. In this section of the film Briony emerges as the real protagonist of the film. There are images of her surreptitiously typing at night, telling her friend that she doesn't want it read because 'It's not finished', and offering the most explicit statement of the basis of the film's drama when she says: 'It's about a young girl, a young and foolish girl, who sees something from the window that she doesn't understand, but thinks she does.' Her frantic hand-scrubbing is motivated on a realist level by the need for sterile cleanliness in the wards; on another, it is as if she is trying to cleanse herself from her sense of guilt. (Has someone remembered Mr Jaggars' compulsive hand-washing in Charles Dickens' *Great Expectations*?)

As Briony walks the hospital's corridors at night, she is accompanied on the soundtrack by Debussy's plaintive 'Clair de Lune', reminding one of how important the musical choices have been throughout the film. Apart from those already mentioned, one recalls the deeply romantic use of Puccini's 'O Soave Fanciulla' from *La Bohème*, as

editor Paul Tothill cuts sensuously between Robbie writing the fatal letter and Cecilia dressing. And reference to Cecilia's dress – that shimmering, backless emerald green – reminds one of how telling the discriminations are between costumes at various points in the film. When we next see Cecilia, when Briony has gone to seek reconciliation with her in London, she is dressed with a workday simplicity that piercingly recalls the sensuality of that earlier occasion. Briony, on the other hand, has been dressed in plain white as the watchful, writing child, and this impression is retained in the pale blue and white of the nurse's uniform, and, in the film's final sequence, according to designer Jacqueline Durran, 'it became absolutely essential that when we got to Vanessa Redgrave (old Briony), we'd carry on that colour way'.⁹ I quote this to suggest how skilfully Wright's team have, in their various roles, gone about creating the film's meaning. They are the sort of 'intermediaries' Briony may have had in mind in the quotation at the beginning of this essay, though 'collaborators' is really a more accurate word.

The ways in which events happening contemporaneously can be depicted on screen by the editing effect of cross-cutting is another example of what I mean. I've mentioned the instance of Robbie writing while Cecilia dresses, but this peculiarly filmic effect is used elsewhere to heighten tension, as in the sequence in which Briony watches while Cecilia and Robbie tussle with the vase. Where the novel must come back to Briony later to describe her perception of this, through editing we are made aware of the simultaneity of observer and observed. However closely the film may seem to be following the novel, up to this point at least, I want to claim that a very high level of film craftsmanship and artistry have gone into rendering it in entirely *cinematic* terms.⁹

The end of the affair

The film draws apart from the novel in a relatively minor way in its coda. Instead of making Briony's seventy-seventh birthday party an occasion for returning her to the Tallis home with a gathering of fifty relatives, the film has opted for her to be

interviewed in a television studio about her latest and last novel. Robbie had ordered her fifty-odd years before to write, with 'no rhymes, no embellishments', what really happened that hot summer night. She tells the interviewer (Anthony Minghella) that she has done what Robbie has required but that she has given them in the 'novel' what he and Cecilia missed in life: 'I gave them their happiness'. She sees this as 'an act of kindness'. It is for her also her act of atonement but does the film want us to accept this at face value? The last shot of the film shows the ill-starred lovers running carefree on a beach: it is a beautiful image but does this novelist's manipulation actually *mean* anything? Robbie died on war service; Cecilia was killed in the Balham Underground station during an air raid. If 'atonement' means 'reparation for wrong or injury',¹⁰ isn't it merely fanciful of Briony to think she has achieved it? Is the title ironic? Or is her real act of atonement in having lived the rest of her long life with the knowledge of the irreparable harm she has done to two people? As she slides into dementia, Briony will know the punishment of no longer having the control over the course of her life that, as a novelist, she has exercised over the characters of her creation.

What I have written

There is a great deal more about this very rich film to which I should like to have drawn attention: the acting, for instance, especially perhaps of the three actors who play Briony at various stages of her life (Saoirse Ronan, Romola Garai and Vanessa Redgrave). However, in the space remaining I want just to draw attention to the centrality of 'writing' to the film, and, therefore, of Briony as its protagonist. James McAvoy and Keira Knightley, both very fine as Robbie and Cecilia respectively, are nominated for awards as 'leading' actor and actress, but it is essentially Briony who controls the narrative.

The film opens with the title being clicked out on an old-fashioned typewriter, and from the start there is something minatory about the sound of words being produced. In the film's opening moments, Briony finishes typing her play, and, as we have seen, she frets about the incomplete control the playwright has over the fate of her words. Other written words which have far-reaching results are the sexually explicit letter Robbie writes to Cecilia and which he sends to her by mistake – via the hand of Briony who reads it and sees it as further

evidence for the testimony that will cause such havoc. When Briony reappears at the hospital, she is trying to order her thoughts and recollections of this event by committing them to paper. At the end, when she has become a famous novelist, she talks to the interviewer about the accuracy of everything in her last novel, which she has called 'Atonement', but in fact she has not relinquished the writer's control over what she has written.

The somewhat forced section headings I have used – all are titles of films¹¹ – are intended as a minor way of reinforcing my sense of this film's rich intertextuality. I think it is a major achievement in its own right but that the impress of other film (and literary) texts on our minds as we watch it means that it becomes for us an experience richer still. For many, McEwan's novel, which increasingly one feels is written in Briony's 'voice', will be the most crucial intertextual influence, but for those who know, say, Losey's *The Go-Between* or Wesley's *The Camomile Lawn* there may be other echoes worth heeding in responding to Joe Wright's haunting film.

What film can dramatize so precisely is the gap between seeing and understanding.



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Endnotes

- ¹ Ian McEwan, *Atonement*, Jonathan Cape, London, 2001, p.37.
- ² The book won the 2002 WH Smith Literary Award, the 2003 National Book Critics' Circle Fiction Award, the *Los Angeles Times* Prize for Fiction, also in 2003, and the Santiago Prize for the European Novel in 2004.
- ³ David Jays, 'First Love, Last Rites', *Sight & Sound*, October 2007, p.34.
- ⁴ Aida Edemariam, 'Enduring Fame', *The Guardian*, 18 August 2007 (reprinted as 'The Man Behind the Mirror', *The Age*, 22 December 2007, A2, p.15.
- ⁵ Quoted in the Production Notes, p.2.
- ⁶ Nick Bradshaw, 'Atonement', *Sight & Sound*, October 2007, p.49.
- ⁷ Quoted by Jays, loc. cit.
- ⁸ Quoted in the Production Notes, p.5.
- ⁹ *Atonement* was nominated for BAFTAs (British Academy of Film and Television Arts awards) in the categories Best Film, Best British Film, Best Director, Adapted Screenplay, Music, Cinematography, Editing, Production Design, Sound, Costume Design and Make Up & Hair, as well as for Leading Actor and Actress and Supporting Actress. It won Best Film and Production Design. At press time, it had been nominated for seven Oscars, including Best Picture.
- ¹⁰ This is one of the meanings attributed by the *Concise Oxford Dictionary*.
- ¹¹ The relevant films are *Summer Madness* (David Lean, 1955), *On the Beach* (Stanley Kramer, 1959), *White Corridors* (Pat Jackson, 1951), *The End of the Affair* (Edward Dmytryk, 1955; Neil Jordan, 1999) and *What I Have Written* (John Hughes, 1996).

