

**THE INDEPENDENCE OF ADAPTATIONS: THE METANARRATIVITY AND  
METACTIONALITY OF IAN McEWAN'S ATONEMENT' ADAPTED FOR THE  
CINEMA**

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**ABSTRACT:** Conceiving of cinematographic adaptations as being independent of their source material has come to be the standard approach for most specialists in this area. The stress on fidelity has made way for many other approaches, such as those focused on intertextuality, on the dilemma of form v. content, or on questions of genre and gender. The objective of this article is to present an overview of the principal theories which have been developed in the area as from 2000 in order to support this notion of independence, which will be exemplified by an exposition of the strategies used to adapt the metafictional and metanarrative elements in *Atonement* (2001) for the cinema.

**KEYWORDS:** adaptation; independence; Atonement.

**RESUMO:** Pensar as adaptações cinematográficas como independentes de suas fontes é a abordagem padrão para muitos especialistas dessa área atualmente. A fidelidade tem sido deixada de lado por eles em favor de tantas outras abordagens, como as focadas na intertextualidade, no dilema forma v. conteúdo, ou, ainda, na adaptação como uma questão de gênero biológico e textual. Nosso objetivo, nesse artigo, é apresentar um panorama das teorias da área a partir dos anos 2000 para justificar essa independência, para, subsequentemente, mostrar as estratégias usadas para adaptar os traços metaficcionais e metanarrativos de *Atonement* (2002) para o cinema.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** adaptação; independência; Reparação.

The primary purpose of the present article is to set out the most significant advances that have been made in recent adaptation theory,<sup>59</sup> going on to examine the adaptation for the cinema of Ian McEwan's novel *Atonement* (2007) by way of an illustrative case study.

## **1. Adaptation Theory Review**

### **1.1 2000 – 2007**

In *Film Adaptation* (2000), James Naremore invited leading names in adaptation theory, such as Andre Bazin, Dudley Andrew and Robert Stam, as well as renowned practitioners, like Richard Maltby and Lesley Stern, to provide an accessible historical overview of the field. The essays go beyond the question of fidelity to discuss multidirectional, dialogic and intertextual aspects of the adaptation process. The chapter

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<sup>59</sup> Although films have been adapted from literary and theatrical works since the short version of Shakespeare's *King John* shot by Herbert Beerbohm Tree in 1899, almost a century was to pass before critics sought to develop a theoretical framework within which to discuss the process. According to Cartmell, Corrigan and Whelehan, in their introduction to the first edition of the *Journal of Adaptation* (2008, p. 1ff), there are ten main reasons for this academic aloofness: 1) in the first half of the twentieth century, film purists saw adaptations as an inferior genre, principally because of their dependence on Literature; 2) in the same period, literary academics believed that adaptations were usurping masterpieces to the extent that the very existence of the book was under threat; 3) as from the 1960s, Film Studies in universities was accorded a secondary status, often subordinated to existence within a Literature department; 4) until quite recently logocentric beliefs sustained the argument that Literature is better than Film, since it is crafted from words rather than visual images; 5) there is a widespread prejudice against money interfering in art; 6) it is also believed that adaptations result in the fetishization of the individual genius; 7) Platonic thought is often invoked to underpin the argument that adaptations are merely copies of the original works; 8) the excessive emphasis on what is lost in adaptation distracts attention from what has been gained in the process; 9) discussion has been primarily focussed on the adaptations of canonical works, without taking into account the purpose of the adaptation; 10) it has been all too often assumed that adaptations are based on a single "source text", disregarding the impact of social and cultural concerns the process. It can therefore be seen that adaptation theory arose in a prevailing climate of opposition and provided critical tools that had long been absent from attempts to discuss film adaptation with some degree of objectivity.

written by Robert Stam (2000, p.54ff)<sup>60</sup> stresses the important role of intertextuality in adaptations, referring extensively to the pioneering work of Gerard Genette (1982). The French theorist had developed the concept of transtextuality, which he subdivided into five relationships: intertextuality, paratextuality, metatextuality, architextuality and hypertextuality. Stam perceived that the last of these was particularly relevant to adaptation theory, since it is defined as the relationship that unites a text B, known as a hypertext, to a text A, known as a hypotext, from which the former arises – not as a commentary, but independently from the source text and enabled to exist without it.

In 2003, a group of Brazilian theorists led by T. Pelegrini published *Literatura, Cinema e Televisão*. Covering both theory and practice, a central aspect of the work was the argument that fidelity is largely irrelevant in the context of adaptation theory. R. Johnson's essay in the collection, "Literatura e cinema, diálogo e recriação: o caso de Vidas Secas" (2003, p. 37ff) argues that fidelity is not a useful approach because it disregards the basic difference between the two media (films and books) and ignores the dynamics intrinsic to the two fields with which it dialogues; Johnson also stresses that every work of art should be evaluated according to the values and characteristics of its medium, rather than by those more appropriate for other media. In "Do texto ao filme: a trama, a cena e a construção do olhar no cinema" (2003, p. 61ff), I. Xavier focuses on the adaptation process, concentrating on the idea that the fidelity generally sought by the cinema-goer is that of the interpretation of the narrative, in other words, that the meaning of the film should be recognisably the same as that of the book. Xavier also discusses the distinction between fabula and plot. Having defined "fabula" as "a certain told story", with "certain characters", and "a sequence of events that befell in a certain place (or places) in a time break that can be longer or shorter" (XAVIER,

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<sup>60</sup> *ff* means "and the following pages", referring to the next page or pages in a citation – it is used here and on the further citations because the whole articles are being taken into consideration, and not just one specific page.

2003, p. 65),<sup>61</sup> he argues that, when we watch an adaptation we are watching its plot rather than its fabula, since it is hard to separate the detail of a narrative from the form in which the events are narrated. He goes on to deal with the opposition tell v. show, pointing out that the oft-stated argument that the book tells and the movie shows disregards the fact that the camera is not autonomous, but subject to a reading, a point of view, which further discredits the notion of fidelity. Another essay in the same collection, “O romance do século XIX na televisão: observações sobre a adaptação de *Os Maias*” by H. Guimarães (2003, p. 91ff), deals with adaptations as complex cultural processes that go beyond transposition between media. For Guimarães, cinematographic adaptations involve “dynamic processes of transference, translation and interpretation of historical-cultural meanings and values.”<sup>62</sup> In other words, what is being adapted is not just the narrative but also the context in which it is set.

The following year, in her important essay, “Literary Film Adaptation and the Form/Content Dilemma”, K. Elliot (2004, p. 221ff) argued that “adaptation critics have always been excoriated as outmoded and as lagging behind the critical times”, because, among other reasons, “adaptation suggests that form is inseparable from content”. For her, adaptation “affronts” all theories, specially the poststructuralism, raising for it “the untenable spectre of an original signified”, configuring a theoretical impossibility. Elliot stresses the importance of defining form and content in order to explain not just how they are constructed in the adaptation process, but also to assist in defining the adapted work itself, which is sometimes as no more than a signified to be represented faithfully by cinematographic significant, and at other times is considered to be merely an incomplete signification mode requiring a filmic realization, nonetheless competing with its adaptation to represent a signified that is bigger than them both. According to Elliot, there are six different views of the

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<sup>61</sup> “certa história contada” “a certas personagens” “uma sequência de acontecimentos que se sucederam num determinado lugar (ou lugares) num intervalo de tempo que pode ser maior ou menor” (XAVIER, 2003, p. 65)

<sup>62</sup> “processos dinâmicos de transferência, tradução e interpretação de significados e valores histórico-culturais.” (GUIMARÃES, 2003, p. 92)

concept of adaptation, an awareness of which helps to resolve the form/content dilemma: the psychic, the ventriloquist, the genetic, the de(re)composing, the incarnational, and the trumping. In the first, the focus is on retaining the spirit of the source text in the adaptation; in the second, the adaptation is seen as a voice given to a dead body; the genetic view presumes that true fidelity to the source text is impossible given the subjectivity involved in reading the text; the de(re)composing view sees adaptation as deconstruction, a mixture in which the specificities of each medium (book and film) will inevitably be lost; in the incarnational view, the emphasis is on the restrictions of language limitations, as a result of which the book only comes to life on the screen; and, finally, the trumping view is based on the subjective standpoint with regard to which of the two media is more successfully representational. Elliot's outline of the six viewpoints serves to explain why the significance attached to fidelity varies so much from one critic to another. Similarly, the viewpoint adopted by those involved in the adaptation process will influence their decision to privilege either form or content, as well as their capacity to perceive the close association between the two.

In *Literatura e cinema: tradução, hipertextualidade, reciclagem* (2005, p. 16ff) T. F. N. Diniz engages in a dialogue with Stam (2000), accepting his characterisation of adaptations as hypertexts, but arguing that there are degrees of hypertextuality; all texts recall previous texts, but those that do so more manifestly may be said to be more hypertextual than others. For Diniz, all narratives are composed of a network of information that can be taken and modified in the making of a film according to the wishes and requirements of the adaptors.

In Bortolutti and Hutcheon's article, "On the Origin of Adaptations: Rethinking Fidelity Discourse and "Success" – Biologically" (2007, p. 443ff), it is argued that, notwithstanding such theoretical developments as dialogism, intertextuality, reception theory, cultural studies, and narratology, critics continue to denigrate adaptations as being secondary in comparison with the "originals" upon which they are based. By way of response, the

authors propose a biological approach to the area, comparing adaptation theory to Darwinism, since both are concerned, at least initially, to classify their objects as high or low. For the authors, being descriptive, rather than evaluative, is more profitable in terms of suggesting new ways of thinking not just about cultural adaptations, including films, but also of seeking to understand why the same narratives have been so important for so many years and continue to being adapted as new media arise. Just like organisms, narratives evolve, and this evolution is understood to be a process of repetition and change – just as content varies, so does form, inseparable from its content, also vary. This explanation makes it possible to simplify all the debates concerning fidelity, by ignoring differences between media and concentrating on the repetition so common in narratives.

### **1.2 2008 – 2011: *Adaptation, an Oxford Journal***

In 2008, the first number of the journal *Adaptation* was published by Oxford Journals. In that issue, Thomas Leitch published an article entitled “Adaptation Studies at a Crossroads”, in which he argues that the boundaries between cinema and literature are less significant in adaptation studies than was previously thought. For him, the valuing of fidelity in adaptations results from two tendencies: the uncontrollable human desire to evaluate every work of art and the continuing determination within adaptation studies to define the area principally in terms of its proximity to literary studies. Leitch also addresses the articles that insist on deciding whether a given adaptation is better than the book it is based on: for the theorist, the answers provided by such texts are as inappropriate as the question itself, because the characteristics of the two media are so different that no meaningful comparison between them is possible.

In the second number of the first volume of *Adaptation*, Leitch (2008b) published an article commenting on the importance of establishing the cinematographic adaptation as a genre in its own right, referring to Neale (2000) and Hutcheon (2006). From the former, he takes the idea that it is precisely by existing as institutions that genres provide horizons of expectations for readers and ways of writing for authors; while, from the latter, he utilises Hutcheon's definition of adaptations, based on the ability of cinema-goers to recognise adaptations as such: "If large numbers of filmgoers signal their willingness to play this intertextual game by recognizing adaptations as adaptations, there must be textual markers that identify adaptations as such, analogues to the same sort of textual markers associated with genres like films noirs and romantic comedies." (LEITCH, 2008b, p. 108). In the remainder of his article, Leitch attempts to identify these "textual markers that identify adaptations as such".

According to Leitch, the shared characteristics that unite different adaptations are clear in practice, but difficult to pin down in theoretical terms, which is why he considers their identification to be so important. For the author, the notion of genre is interconnected with the notion of gender – the classic-novel and heritage genre emphasise female values, while the romance of adventure focuses on male values, which makes these notions even more significant to adaptation studies, since most adaptations fall within these three categories. Leitch argues that four elements stimulate film producers and filmgoers to recognise adaptations as adaptations, even when they are unfamiliar with the source text. The first is a *period setting*, because, irrespective of the period of the writing, the best-known adaptations are costume dramas, which portray the behaviour and customs of a particular period. The second element, intrinsically connected with the first, is the *music of the adaptation period* – which is an important component of the setting, and is a determinant in identifying an adaptation as such. The third element is an *obsession with authors, books and words*, based on

observations by Leitch's students who claim that the script is responsible for indicating the quality and the legitimacy of an adaptation. Finally, the fourth element is the presence of *intertitles*, understood to be the sentences that appear during the movies to add information, as the place of the narrative, or its time etc., which indicate the tension between simply giving information and reminding the audience that the film they are watching is an adaptation – it is this tension, according to Hutcheon (2006, apud LEITCH, 2008b), which reveals adaptations to be adaptations. On the other hand, *adoration of the source text* is not considered to be one of the elements which serve to identify an adaptation as such. The status of an adaptation can be rendered less self-evident when it is assumed that most of cinema-goers will not have read the book. However, Leitch argues that, rather than considering whether a particular adaptation has called attention to its own status, it is more important to think about why films continue to be marketed, and recognized, as adaptations.

The last theoretical author to be considered here is S. Cobb, whose article, "Adaptation, Fidelity, and Gendered Discourses" (2011, p. 1ff), was published in the fourth volume of *Adaptation*. The article examines fidelity in adaptation as a matter of gender. For Cobb, the insistence on fidelity as the main criterion in adaptation studies is based on the cultural male/female binary that structures the language used with regard to this topic – so long as specialists fail to realise how language is charged with a cultural-political force, especially in matters of gender and sexuality, they will continue to reproduce something they clearly reject. The inefficacy of the fidelity approach in adaptation studies is notable, and Cobb reflects on why it should continue to exert such a strong influence. She refers to Chamberlain (1992 apud COBB, 2011), for whom fidelity in translation metaphorically evokes the western cultural expectations of a heterosexual relationship, extending this idea to adaptation theory, comparing the film to the loyal wife and the novel to the fatherly husband.



Cobb goes on to argue that fidelity also has the power to legitimate an adaptation, since any changes would interfere directly with the kinship of the works of art. There are legal aspects to textual adaptation, since, as a derivative work, an adaptation may only be filmed after authorisation has been obtained from the copyright holder. This legal dimension relates to cultural discussions concerning not just fidelity but also originality and authenticity.

When evaluating an adaptation, cinema-goers tend to attack the film using a vocabulary related to adultery, with words such as *disloyal* or *betrayal*, which in their turn evoke other language of a religious or even sexual nature, such as *desecrate* and *degrade*, thus characterising the adapted text as a molester of the original source text. Cobb notes that even those theorists who advocate taking the critical debate beyond the issue of fidelity, such as McFarlane (1996), couch their arguments in terms of sexual infidelity.

Referring to Leitch's article (discussed above, 2008b), Cobb argues that its main contribution is in drawing our attention to the ladylike quality of adaptations since there are many more adaptations of romantic novels, which are notably related to the feminine public, than of adventure narratives, traditionally associated with the masculine public, with the result that the genre is dominated, or even defined, by this kind of narrative.

Cobb concludes her article by taking issue with Stam (2000; 2004) when he asserts that fidelity is so constantly present in adaptation studies because it camouflages itself as equivalency theory, which argues that filmmakers are obliged to find equivalents in the new medium which serve to substitute the style and technique of the author of the source text. Stam seeks theoretical support in Genette to solve this problem, but Cobb argues that, by using such a formal model, laden with terminology and which privileges the text rather than its context, Stam continues to attach a vestigial value to fidelity, as evidenced in his concern with the "ideal means" of adapting a literary text.

From this brief summary of some of the notable critical positions adopted in the area of adaptation studies in the first years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it is possible to see that a recognition of the specificities of the media of both the source and the result text, in addition to an understanding of the multidirectionality, dialogism and intertextuality of the adaptation process itself, have contributed to the growing acceptance of the genre in academic circles. Critical judgements based on the fidelity of an adaptation to its source have gradually become less widely accepted, enabling critics to analyse adaptations as being independent from their source text. In order to demonstrate this approach, we are now going to conduct a brief comparative analysis of an adaptation and its source text, focussing particularly on how the metafiction and metanarrative of the source novel were adapted very successfully for the cinema.

## **2. Case Study: a brief analysis of *Atonement* (2007)**

Ian McEwan's novel *Atonement* (2001) was released as a film in 2007. The director was the British director Joe Wright (b. 1972), whose very successful career has been largely based on adaptations. His first film, in 2005, was a critically acclaimed version of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, and after *Atonement* he went on to direct *The Soloist* in 2009, based on a biography written by Steve Lopez. His latest project was an adaptation of Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*, released in 2012. His only film not actually based on a book is *Hanna* (2011) – however it is worth noting that the theatrical release poster for the film bore the marketing caption “Adapt or Die”! The scriptwriter for *Atonement* was the renowned British playwright, screenwriter and film director, Christopher Hampton (b. 1946), who has been responsible for a long list of successful adaptations, most notably that of the 18<sup>th</sup>-century

novel *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*, by Choderlos de Laclos, filmed in 1988. Ian McEwan worked on the film as associate producer.

Both director and screenwriter were very devoted to the source text, particularly Joe Wright. According to the production notes, available on the website of the production company, Focus Features, the first version of Hampton's screenplay was considered by Wright to be too far from the book, and they started to rewrite the whole script together, seeking to be as faithful as possible to the source text.

As a novel with plenty of ideas, with a very participatory narrator, the easiest and most predictable tool to rely on in the adaptation would have been the voice over.<sup>63</sup> However, as Paul Webster, one of the film's producers, points out, Wright helped Hampton to achieve a beautifully crafted screenplay without making use of this convenient resource. Instead, the novel's digressions concerning characters and situations were represented through the actors, letting them talk in character, on occasion not even in words. The voice over is used in some scenes, such as when Robbie is writing a letter to Cecilia, but it is Robbie's own voice we hear, rather than that of the narrator:

ROBBIE (V.O.):<sup>64</sup> ... you'd be forgiven for thinking me mad – the way I acted this afternoon. [...] The truth is, I feel rather lightheaded and foolish in your presence, Cee, and I don't think I can blame the heat. Will you forgive me? Robbie." (HAMPTON, 2007, p. 23)

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<sup>63</sup> "A voice heard concurrently with a scene but not synchronically belonging to any character talking on the screen. The voice heard over the action may be that of (1) a commentator in a documentary; (2) an objective narrator in a fictional film bringing us forward in time, preparing us for an event, or commenting on the action; (3) a 1st person narrator who participates in the film and now gives us a subjective commentary on a scene in which he or she appears, or performs the narrative functions described in (2) during part of the film in which she or he does not appear; [...]" KONIGSBERG, I. *The Complete Film Dictionary*. New York: New American Library, 1987. p. 401.

<sup>64</sup> V.O is the abbreviation for voice over.

The participation of the narrator is one of the most obvious signs that this novel is about itself. From the very beginning, we can see that the third-person narrator is highly informed about the act of writing, as we can see in the contrast she draws between plays and stories early in the book:

The title lettering, the illustrated cover, the pages bound – in that word alone 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 make do with what was available: no horses, no village streets, no seaside. No curtain. [...]

(McEWAN, 2001, p. 47)

In the first section of the book, such considerations about writing serve to indicate its metafictionality. In the film, this metafictionality is indicated by sounds, particularly that of a typewriter in the opening sequence: “The SOUND of a typewriter, irregularly struck, now fluent, now creating an urgent rhythm that forms the percussive element of the opening score. [...]” (HAMPTON, 2007, p. 1)

These sounds recur throughout the film, conveying the idea that what we are seeing is a book being written – although we do not know that the author of this book is Briony. In the novel, there are a number of prolepses, defined by Moisés (2004, p. 371) as a “brief interruption in the present of the narrative by means of the anticipation of a future event: it is

a ‘narrative ploy that consists of narrating or anticipating a posterior event’ [...],<sup>65</sup> which provide us with some clues that Briony is the third-person narrator:

Six decades later she would describe how at the age of thirteen she had written her way through a whole history of literature, beginning with stories derived from the European tradition of folktales, through drama with simple moral intent, to arrive at an impartial psychological realism which she had discovered for herself, one special morning during a heat wave in 1935. She would be well aware of the extent of her self-mythologizing, and she gave her account a self-mocking, or mock-heroine tone. Her fiction was known for its amorality, and like all authors pressed by a repeated question, she felt obliged to produce a story line, a plot of her development that contained the moment when she became recognizably herself. [...] She also knew that whatever actually happened drew its significance from her published work and would not have been remembered without it. (McEWAN, 2001, p. 51-52)

In this passage, the “clue” is more of a “confession”: the “amorality” of the narrator’s “fiction” and the pressure of the “repeated question”, in conjunction with the assertion that it was her “published work” that lent significance to “a plot of her development”, lead the reader to understand that the story we are reading is being told by Briony, who is also a character in the plot itself.

The sound of the typewriter provides a soundtrack at three key moments in the film in addition to the opening sequence. The first of these is when Briony reads Robbie’s letter for

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<sup>65</sup> “breve interrupção do presente da narrativa por meio da antecipação de um evento futuro: é uma ‘manobra narrativa que consiste em narrar ou evocar antecipadamente um acontecimento ulterior’ [...]” (MOISÉS, 2004, p. 371)

the first time, is horrified by the word cunt, and draws the erroneous assumption that Robbie is a sexual maniac (HAMPTON, 2007, p. 26):



Still 1. Briony reads Robbie's letter.

Later, when Robbie is in the war, close to death, and is remembering all that has led him to that moment, the sound of the typewriter accompanies the shot of a typewriter lifting the ink from the page, erasing the word cunt from the letter, suggesting that, if the word had not been written, he would probably not be in that situation (HAMPTON, 2007, p. 63):



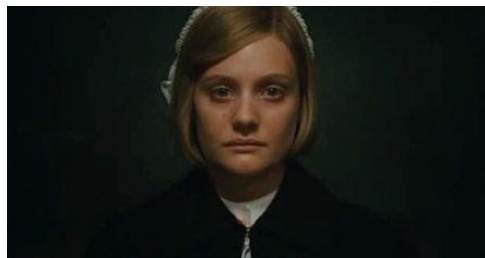
Still 2. Robbie about to die in Dunkirk.

Finally, when Briony is at Lola and Paul Marshall's wedding, at the very moment that the priest asks if anyone knows of any impediment to the union, she realises that he was who had raped Lola. At this moment, the sound of the typewriter is really strong and rhythmical, transforming into crashing organ chords that underscore the intensity of the moment (HAMPTON, 2007, p. 79-80):



Still 3. Briony at Lola and Paul Marshall's wedding.

It can be seen, then, that the metafictionality of the novel is conveyed by means of the film soundtrack – the sound of the typewriter communicates the idea that a book is being written as we watch. The metanarrative is also skilfully adapted into cinematic language: the narrative's first Atonement concludes with a close-up<sup>66</sup> of Briony on the Underground, just after leaving Cecilia's house, having atoned for her mistake with her sister and Robbie; the lights flicker on and off, until everything becomes dark and we hear Briony as an old woman speaking in voice-over:



Still 4. Briony going home after talking to Cecilia and Robbie.

On the other hand, the novel concludes with two sentences and a signature: "She knew what was required of her. Not simply a letter, but a new draft, an atonement, and she was ready to begin. BT. London, 1999" (McEWAN, 2001, p. 451). The use of the word "draft" and the signature indicate that Briony is the writer of the book we think we have just finished reading. However, there is then a further section, in which Briony herself reveals her authorship and all the changes she has made to the narrative:

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<sup>66</sup> English term that designates the close-up of a face, by opposition to *insert*, which is a close-up of an object. *Termo inglês que designa o grande plano de um rosto, por oposição ao insert, que é um grande plano de um objeto.* (original) (JOURNOT, 2002, p. 29)

It is only in this last version that my lovers end well... All the preceding drafts were pitiless. But now I can no longer think what purpose would be served if, say, I tried to persuade my reader, by direct or indirect means, that Robbie Turner died of septicaemia at Bray Dunes on 1 June 1940, or that Cecilia was killed in September of the same year by the bomb that destroyed Balham Underground station. [...] How could that constitute an ending? [...] Who would want to believe that, except in the service of the bleakest realism? [...] I no longer possess the courage of my pessimism. [...] When I am dead, and the Marshalls are dead, and the novel is finally published, we will only exist as inventions. (McEWAN, 2001, p. 479)

This last section is part of a larger narrative, also named *Atonement*, which contains the *Atonement* which terminates on page 451, but which was, of course, written by Ian McEwan, using the voice of Briony Tallis in the third person in the three first parts and in the first person in the fourth and final one. This constitutes a metanarrative. In the film, this fourth part does not show Briony alone thinking over how everything has happened in her life as she makes her way to her birthday celebration in the hotel that was formerly the Tallis' house. In its most radical departure from the source text the film concludes with Briony being interviewed on a TV show:





Still 5. Briony being interviewed on a TV show.

It is in this interview that she reveals everything, facing the camera, and explaining that her changes had the purpose of giving Robbie and Cecilia the happiness they were unable to have in life, as we can see in this excerpt from the screenplay:

OLDER BRIONY: So my sister and Robbie never had the time together they both so longed for and deserved, which, ever since, I've... always felt I prevented. But what sense of hope or satisfaction could a reader derive from an ending like that? So, in the book, I wanted to give Robbie and Cecilia what they lost out on in life. I'd like to think this wasn't weakness or evasion, but a final act of kindness.

*She thinks for a moment.*

I gave them their happiness. (HAMPTON, 2007, p. 91-92)



Still 6. Briony confessing her sins.

It can therefore be seen that the novel's metafictionality and metanarrativity are both present in the adaptation, achieved through that which differentiates the cinema from literature: the sounds and images of life. The metafictionality is manifested in part at least through the soundtrack, which is largely based on the sound of a typewriter, while the novel's metanarrativity is represented via the device of a TV talk-show interview, in which Briony talks directly to us, through the mediation of an interviewer, facing us and candidly confessing the guilt she still feels, even after so many years. This is her attempt at literary atonement, conscious that it is the only way of giving Robbie and Cecilia the happiness they deserved. However, the true delight of the novel's metanarrativity and metafictionality are preserved in the film, for, as one leaves the cinema, the conundrum of the truth at the heart of the narrative is just as perplexing and, ultimately, insoluble, as it is when one comes to the last page of the novel.

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