

**WORDS, IMAGES AND INVENTION:
THE POWER OF METAFICTION IN AUSTEN, McEWAN AND JOE WRIGHT**

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RESUMO: *Atonement*, romance publicado em 2001, do escritor inglês Ian McEwan, tem muito de seus efeitos atrelado aos usos e implicações da metalinguagem/metaficção. De modo interessante, o romance é introduzido com uma epígrafe retirada de *Northanger Abbey* (1818), de Jane Austen, um romance cuja significação também depende da consideração de aspectos metaficcionalis. O romance de McEwan foi recentemente adaptado em filme (*Desejo e reparação*, 2007, dir. Joe Wright), e, nele, o conteúdo metaficcional – sobretudo no que concerne à problemática do ver, testemunhar e interpretar – é decisivo para uma compreensão da construção da narrativa fílmica. Tendo tais questões em mente, o propósito desta discussão é analisar alguns dos efeitos da metaficção em termos éticos e estéticos, principalmente quando consideramos o diálogo entre Austen e McEwan, bem como entre a literatura e o cinema.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: adaptação fílmica; metaficção; ponto de vista; *Atonement*

ABSTRACT: *Atonement*, a 2001 novel by Ian McEwan, owes much of its effects to the uses and implications of metalanguage/metafiction. Interestingly, the novel is introduced with an epigraph quoted from Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* (1818), a novel whose significance also depends on the consideration of metafictional aspects. McEwan's novel has been recently adapted into a film

(*Desejo e Reparação*, 2007, dir. Joe Wright), and the metafictional material – mainly as it concerns the issue of seeing, witnessing and interpretation – is decisive for an understanding of the narrative

filmic construction. The purpose of this discussion is to analyze some of the effects of metafiction on ethic and aesthetic terms, mainly when one considers the dialogue between Austen and McEwan, and also between literature and cinema.

KEYWORDS: filmic adaptation; metafiction; point of view; Austen; *Atonement*

The film *Atonement* (2007), adapted by Joe Wright from Ian McEwan's novel (2001) of the same title, appeals to the viewer in terms of metalinguistic and metafictional strategies related to perception and point of view. Being a fundamental category in any process of narration, the question of point of view, as deployed in this novel/film, is intimately associated with ethical issues, thus foregrounding, in a most revealing way, the inseparable link between perception (and other related words such as witnessing, imagining, conjecturing), and the question of interpretation and ideology (or subjectivity), as well as the effects deriving from the kind of knowledge a certain point of view privileges.

In McEwan's *Atonement* the explicit combination between metalanguage and ethics is already introduced in the epigraph, taken from Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* (1818), worth quoting in full:

‘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 everywhere 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. (AUSTEN, 1994, p. 182)

For those familiar with the narrative and conflicts of *Northanger Abbey*, this is a key event in the novel, and constitutes the climax of the psychological and emotional process of education the heroine – Catherine Morland – has undergone to achieve maturity and self-knowledge, as it is common with Austen’s protagonists. Although the focus of the situation is Catherine, she herself is silent, and remains the recipient of Henry Tilney’s lecture/reprimand. The effect of the *lesson* is such that the narrator later mentions Catherine’s “tears of shame”. But what lesson has Catherine learned? What dreadful suspicions had she been entertaining? What atrocities had she imagined? What, after all, made her cry of shame? These questions are all authorized by McEwan’s choice of Austen’s passage to be the epigraph of his novel, since an epigraph produces at least a double reading movement: one pointing to its literary source (in this case, Austen’s) and another pointing to its new framing context (McEwan’s and Wright’s), from whose interrelationship a new chain of meanings may derive.

Northanger Abbey is the Austen novel in which the issue of reading and interpretation plays a most prominent role. Catherine, the protagonist characterized as an

anti-heroine, is addicted to reading Gothic literature, such as Radcliffe's *The mysteries of Udolpho*. Actually, a significant part of the novel provides a parodic comment on the cliché-like devices of the Gothic sensibility. The passage McEwan chose for his epigraph reflects Henry's violent reaction against Catherine's propensity at making sense of reality through the parameters of the Gothic literary universe and rules. The title of the novel (*Northanger Abbey*) is a metonym for this Gothic heritage and the whole atmosphere of mystery, murder, monstrosity and horridness that the term encompasses. The displacement of the narrative conflicts from Bath (first part of the narrative) to this "ancient building" aligns with the requirements of the Gothic, dependent on setting (castles, abbeys, towers, pits, vaults, etc) for its subjective implications to get materialized. In this way, it is at Northanger Abbey, the Tilneys' countryside property where Catherine most explicitly behaves as a character in a Gothic book, acting as a spy, looking into drawers and cabinets, searching for evidences that could confirm and back up her conjectures concerning General Tilney's supposed cruelty against his wife:

Catherine attempted no longer to hide from herself the nature of the feelings which, in spite of all his attentions, he had previously excited; and what had been terror and dislike before, was now absolute aversion. Yes, aversion! His cruelty to such a charming woman made him odious to her. She had often read of such characters; characters, which Mrs. Allen had been used to call unnatural and overdrawn; but here was proof positive to the contrary (AUSTEN, p. 166).

The way Catherine visualizes the General and his wife – one as cruel and odious, the other as charming and victim, respectively – does not have a solid foundation, being based on

feelings and on Gothic literary parameters resulting from her readings. This passage reveals how both husband and wife are suddenly transformed to her into literary Gothic characters with whom she is very imaginatively familiar. The haste of her evaluation is such that even remembering Mrs. Allen's remark about the exaggeration in the portrayal of such characters (villains) does not prevent her from making the association. But the most interesting point, which shows the complexity of Austen's narrative, is that Catherine is not thoroughly mistaken as a diegetic reader. In other words, though not corresponding to the monstrous Gothic character Catherine had in mind, the General does possess his own ordinary (one might say, human) monstrosity. The subplot of abuse and violence Catherine imagined from the part of the General against his wife is not actually real but he has an actual practice of abuse and violence against his own children. In this sense, Austen's consideration of the Gothic – via Catherine – denounces that

The potential of corruption and violence lies within all, and the horror comes above all from an appalling sense of recognition: with our contemporary monsters, self and other frequently become completely untenable categories (PUNTER and BYRON, p. 266).

That is why Henry's pedagogical speech is ironized some time later in the Austen narrative: for Catherine's "dreadful suspicions" and the "atrocities" she attributes to Henry's father do not correspond to reality (at least to that level of reality Catherine imagined), and that is why she cries, ashamed of herself (and also ashamed of having been 'unmasked' and reprimanded by Henry). On the other hand – and the irony lies here – both Catherine and Henry will eventually learn how actually cruel the General can be, when

Catherine “is turned from the house (...) without any reason that could justify, any apology that could atone for the abruptness, the rudeness, the insolence of it” (AUSTEN, p. 210), except that the General has discovered that Catherine “was guilty only of being less rich than he had supposed her to be” (AUSTEN, p. 228). Catherine is sent away from the house in a way that gives her no time to inform her parents; she is forced to leave very early in the morning and travels all the way back home alone; she is not only humiliated, but disposed of as an easily discarded object.

In a retrospective reading, when this further context is considered, we cannot help laughing at Henry’s didactic speech and its purpose to remind Catherine “that we are English: that we are Christians”; clearly, the principles of national identity imbricate with questions concerning the reliability and efficacy of education (Does our education prepare us for such atrocities?), of the laws (Do our laws connive at them?) and of the spirit of democracy and freedom inherent in the print media (literature, the newspaper). However, all this is undermined and contradicted by the General’s grossly and monstrous behavior against Catherine later on.

The epigraph enlarges itself in terms of ironic meanings when captured from the perspective of *Atonement*. Like Austen’s protagonist, McEwan’s Briony resonates with metalinguistic and metafictional significance; but whereas Catherine is mainly a *reader*, and an interpreter of reality greatly influenced by her Gothic readings, Briony is a reader and a *writer*, and her first play, *The trials of Arabella* (mentioned at the beginning of the novel/film), “told a tale of the heart whose message, conveyed in a rhyming prologue, was that love which did not build a foundation on good sense was doomed” (McEWAN, p. 3). Significantly, Briony’s play message alludes to the Austen plots, most emblematically

represented in *Sense and Sensibility*. As one can notice, granted the historical differences between both characters, it is the world of literature (and the imaginative scope inherent to it) that initially unites them. And it is Briony's "strange mind and a facility with words" (McEWAN, p. 7) that will lead her into a chain of "readings" whose outcome is not only catastrophic but tragic: Robbie's unjust accusation and arrest, his separation from Cecilia, his participation in the war and their eventual tragic death. Considering their metafictional significance, however, a great difference separates Catherine and Briony: the use they make of their imaginative impulses. Whereas Catherine invents plots as a consequence of her Gothic readings, Briony invents plots and intentionally distorts what she sees. In this way, the characters could be generally defined under the following terms: Catherine: reader / invention / imagination; Briony: writer / invention / distortion. Whereas Catherine's inventions did not (could not) affect anybody negatively, Briony's re-creations accused an innocent man and were powerful enough to destroy his life. This difference constitutes the heart of the matter when we generally think about the ideological concern of both authors – Austen and McEwan – mainly in terms of the implications of metafiction and the historical roots and literary affiliations of their novels.

In her book *Narcissistic narrative: the metafictional paradox* Linda Hutcheon criticizes the traditional literary perspective that tends to dissociate metafictional texts from life. She argues: "It is simplistic to say, as reviewers did for years, that this kind of narrative is sterile, that it has nothing to do with 'life'(...)." (HUTCHEON, p. 5). And she justifies her observation by explaining that in this kind of literature the life-art connection is materialized on different terms, which allow for "the imaginative process (of storytelling) instead of that of the product (the story told)" (p. 3). In her attempt at developing a

typology of metafiction, Hutcheon refers to diegetically self-conscious texts (in which the texts present themselves as narrative) and texts that demonstrate awareness of their linguistic constitution, that present themselves as language (p. 7).

Hutcheon elaborates these initial theoretical considerations by arguing that to deny the presence of *life* in metafictional texts is to deny the very human impulse of (mis) understanding life through language – for in what other way do we grasp experience if not mediated by patterns that organize and construct and interpret meanings? As she corroborates: “(...) literature has always been an ordered fictive construct in language. It is part of an inherent urge to create coherent worlds, to pattern and to organize the chaos of experience” (WELLEK, apud HUTCHEON, p. 18).

For that matter, the cognitive verbs and nouns found in the Austen epigraph and quoted at the beginning of this text are all significant: “consider”; “judging”; “consult”; “understanding”; “sense”; “observation”, etc, as they indicate the responsibility we have when interpreting and creating worlds. Second, the distinction between “storytelling texts” and “story-told texts” can only be accepted in terms of a gradation of implicitness or explicitness, since our role as readers has always been to investigate the level of textual construction, and not simply to consume the stories in texts. Therefore, differently from narratives that attempt at hiding their illusory or fictional status, “narcissistic narrative is process made visible” (HUTCHEON, p. 6). In this way, “[the reader] is forced to acknowledge the artifice, the “art”, of what he is reading (...) since explicit demands are made upon him, as a co-creator, for intellectual and affective responses comparable in scope and intensity to those of his experience” (HUTCHEON, p. 5).

Patricia Waugh also argues that “metafiction is a tendency or function inherent in *all novels*” (1984, p. 5; her italics). She justifies the relevance of studying this category on the following terms: “This form of fiction is worth studying not only because of its contemporary emergence but also because of the insights it offers into both the representational nature of all fiction and the literary history of the novel” (WAUGH, 1984, p. 5). Her conclusion is that “by studying metafiction, one is, in effect, studying that which gives the novel its identity” (WAUGH, 1984, p. 5).

I believe these questions are pertinent mainly in the present context, where the issue of metafiction is discussed in different media (literature and film) and in texts (Austen’s and McEwan’s) that are intertextually connected despite a historical separation of more than two centuries.

Perhaps a significant reason for the dissemination of the premise that metafictional texts lack life-experience lies in the usual insertion of these texts in a post-modern context and their identification with surfaces and artificiality¹. To a great extent, McEwan’s employment of Austen’s epigraph in his novel constitutes a relevant hint of the necessary articulation between not only metalinguistic devices and life-experience concern but principally between aesthetics and ethic moral issues. The Austen-McEwan connection (via the epigraph and the plethora of meanings it arises) constitutes a significant example of how varied the implications of metafiction can be. And if there is an inherent relationship between metafiction and the very identity of narratives (independent of their medium) as representational, the study of metafiction in a diachronic way allows exactly for the specific features and functions it possesses in different periods of art history.

For the purposes of the present discussion, granted the profusion of metafictional elements in both the literary and filmic texts selected, I have chosen to focus on two particular sequences of the film: the *repeated* (but different) sequences of the fountain. The first sequence is constructed and mediated through Briony's perspective; the second, by the cinematic narrator. The reason for this selection is that metafiction in *Atonement* is crucially a matter of vision, perception and witnessing, together with the inevitable precariousness and partiality entailed in any process of vision and interpretation. I thought the material appealed to the reader/viewer on specifically revealing visual terms. The juxtaposition of the two fountain sequences not only dramatizes the duplicitous (and duplicate) nature of perception: the strategy becomes emblematic of other duplications in the narrative. Some time before leaving the house to the fountain, Cecilia had looked at herself in the mirror, an act that alludes to subjectivity; it is on the fountain water that Robbie will softly place his hand, making it double; the Tallis's mansion, shown as miniature at the film's opening, is shown other times as the 'real' family house; the cousins from the north, Pierrot and Jackson, are twins; and *The trials of Arabella* (Briony's play) finds a parallel in *Atonement* itself (the book we have in our hands). Significantly, *Atonement* also divides itself into two: Briony's novel and McEwan's. "Two figures by a fountain" is the title of a story Briony writes and sends to the editor of the *Horizon*. These double, narcissistic elements – that characterize a *mise en abyme* structure – are also representative of the reflexive self-consciousness of the novel.

The opening of the film constitutes a good example of how filmic language can take advantage of its heterogeneous nature: the noise coming from a typing machine accompanies the presentation of credits, culminating in the very typing of letters that

compose the title ATONEMENT, in capital letters. The film makes use of a metonymic sonorous device to introduce the crucial matter of metafiction, specifically, writing. First we listen to the typing noise and only later on we are introduced to the “author”, the typing machine itself and the manuscript *The trials of Arabella*, by Briony Tallis. At this point, two diegetic worlds have been mixed up: the world of *Atonement* (the film we are beginning to watch), and the world explicitly characterized as literature (the play) the film is about. It is worth emphasizing that Briony, the film’s protagonist, is from the very beginning presented through the peculiar feature of authorship. In addition to that, as the narrative develops, her role overlaps, and she is at the same time an author, a narrator and a character; most specifically, in terms of focus of narration strategies, she constitutes a fallible filter, which, according to Seymour Chatman, occurs when “a character’s perceptions and conceptions of the story events, the traits of the other characters, and so on, seem at odds with what the text implies to be the facts” (1990. p. 149).

Through elements of the bedroom mise-en-scène, this initial sequence is also relevant to show other aspects of Briony’s characterization, such as her fondness for miniatures, as those of the mansion and of the line of tiny animals on the floor indicate. The presence of miniatures may suggest a microcosmic world that Briony can observe and control, thus constituting a metaphorical comment on her tidiness and self-discipline as well as on her eventual power to manipulate events that will be decisive for changing several people’s lives. The aspect related to discipline and order is further corroborated by the way she walks downstairs – as if marching – an effect made more conspicuous through the accompaniment of the variation of the typing machine sound, now clearly transformed into a recurrent and contaminating filmic sonorous asset.

It is from her bedroom window – a vantage point – that Briony witnesses the incident of the broken vase by the fountain. Her attention is initially called by a trapped bee buzzing on the window pane, a metaphorical foreshadowing of the eventual trap of the lovers. Cecilia and Robbie’s interaction down there is mediated by Briony’s gaze; now Briony constitutes a perceptual filter, being the interest-focus of that narrative sequence.² Following Chatman’s discussion on the issue of point of view, it is relevant to point out that even in situations like this “the filter occupies a space between the ‘naked occurrence’ of the images and the audience’s perception of them. The camera’s slant remains in place, even when it is temporarily mediated by the camera’s perceptual filter” (1990, p. 157). This constitutes a significant remark, especially in the present context, because the fountain event (first mediated by Briony’s gaze) will be alternated with images of Briony herself. In other words, the spectator is allowed to see *with* Briony and also to observe Briony’s reaction to what she sees. And of course, when we see Briony turning her back to the window, we (as Briony) miss parts of what is going on by the fountain. The consequence of this is not only a partial rendering of events on optical terms (Why does Cecilia seem so angry with Robbie? Why does she go into the fountain water? Why does she take her dress off to go into the fountain water?) in which the matter of distance is important, but principally on subjective terms (how to make sense of/interpret visual fragments).

An element that adds significantly to the tension of the sequence is the fact that Cecilia seems to be deliberately exposing herself to Robbie, being almost naked before him. Her “second” intentions had already been announced some time before, when she arranges her hair and checks herself in the mirror. From what we are allowed to see (and prevented from seeing) with Briony, the impression is actually that the sequence constitutes

an erotic ritual interplay. And it is this erotic component that will be further enlarged as the narrative develops. In fact, Briony does not perceive everything wrongly (and here she resembles Austen's Catherine, in her partial guess and evaluation of the General).

When we are exposed to the second sequence of the fountain – this time, without Briony's perceptual mediation – the matter of proximity and visibility is brought to the foreground. Now we have access to their dialogues, a fact which helps to contextualize their previous gestures. Clearly their dialogues imply the issue of social ranks; we get to know, for instance, of Robbie's economic dependence on Cecilia's father, who is paying for his studies. Cecilia's impatient behavior and apparent anger (initially related to Robbie's breaking the vase) will also eventually connote the matter of desire (against which she seems to be fighting), implied in their exchanging looks; besides, as a consequence of the heat, Cecilia is barefoot, wears light and transparent clothes, aspects that end up culminating in the way she exposes her body, thus revealing how sensuous she is and how much that sensuality appeals to Robbie.

It is not in vain that the title of the film in Portuguese brings the word "desire" (*Desejo e reparação*); for this is a crucial component in Briony's interpretation of facts. Briony is in her teens and is yearning a crush for Robbie. Like the Austen protagonist (Catherine), Briony is in a transition life period – that of learning and acquiring experience. But whereas in Austen the experience is mainly emotional and psychological (also encompassing affections), in McEwan the experience (though also being emotional and psychological) is explicitly mediated by the adult world of sex and power and desire. The events Briony witnesses and that trigger the whole tragedy in *Atonement* are all related to sexuality and desire: Cecilia's almost nakedness at the fountain; the written message ("In

my dreams I kiss your cunt, your sweet wet cunt. In my thoughts I make love to you all day long”) mistakenly sent by Robbie to Cecilia via Briony; Robbie and Cecilia’s sexual experience in the library; Lola’s rape.

The matter of witnessing and truth in *Atonement* provides the articulation between metafiction and life, aesthetic strategies and ethics.

(...) what she knew was not literally, or not only, based on the visible. It was not simply her eyes that told her the truth. It was too dark for that. (...) The truth was in the symmetry, which was to say, it was founded in common sense. The truth instructed her eyes. So when she said, over and over again, I saw him, she meant it, and was perfectly honest, as well as passionate (McEWAN, p. 216).

Comparing the key events in the novel/film with this account by the literary narrator we can hardly neglect its ironical effect: the impossibility of a total visibility and the extent to which truth depends on other elements such as symmetry (an allusion to how certain recurrent incidents fit) and common sense are premises that permeate Briony’s previous witnessing experiences. The irony gets enlarged when we consider that Briony did not even need to invent further: the “invention” was provided by a common-sense truth inherent to notions of class, hierarchy, being thus already given, having an existence of its own. Robbie, being the poor son of the family’s servant, could not fit better the role of a scapegoat. As such, the narrator makes the reader aware that the backward movement implied in “the truth instructed her eyes” can only constitute an ironical justification for Briony’s most terrible and deliberate mistake – actually, what dramatists would name a tragic flaw.

Going back to Austen's heroine and attempting to compare both characters again, we must consider that Catherine Morland's imaginative mind in *Northanger Abbey* is vehemently punished by Henry, no matter the ironizing effect his speech eventually acquires in the general context of the novel. Austen's is a context in which the heroine needs to surpass naiveté, through certain initiation (individual and social) rituals, so as to become enlightened. In *Northanger Abbey*, no matter the hardships along the process, order is restored at the end, since Henry is able to make amends, proposing marriage to Catherine. Interestingly, "to atone" is a recurrent verb in Austen's fiction, thus indicating a possibility of repair and reordering. In McEwan's *Atonement*, we are very far from what the title promises: in this novel, "atonement" can only get materialized on (meta)fictional terms; writing, for old Briony, constitutes a cathartic experience. Briony's unfair accusation not only sent Robbie to jail but to premature death in the war. Granted the whole tragic context of *Atonement*, the Austen epigraph enlarges itself in terms of ironic effects. How come that the Tallises (except for Cecilia) did not suspect the "dreadful nature" of Briony's accusation? The whole matter of being English, of being Christians, of living in a country that protects people through education, the law, the press all come to the foreground again. The difference, this time, is that the atrocities have not only been perpetrated on the private sphere (something already devastating) but multiplied (think of the war) to a wider political dimension.

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Notes:

1. Anelise Corseuil (2008) analyses the metafictional component of *Atonement* (novel and film) associating it to a post-modern context and defining it, following Hutcheon's works on *Postmodernism* as an anti-illusionist strategy. My argument (drawing also from Hutcheon, but a different source, *Narcissistic Narrative: The metafictional paradox*) for the effect of metafiction in both texts goes in a different direction; here, Hutcheon discusses the strategy in terms of linguistic and diegetic aspects, arguing for its effect on the ethical dimension. This material allowed me to understand the ironic and parodic effect of the association between Austen and McEwan (through the epigraph).
2. See Chatman's discussion in "A new point of view on 'point of view'". In: Chatman, Seymour. *Coming to terms: the rhetoric of narrative in fiction and film*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1990.