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Face Value: The Traps of Visual Storytelling in Joe Wright's *Atonement*

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When adapting a full-length novel into a film, portions of the story must be reshaped or omitted. Ian McEwan's *Atonement* poses particular challenges due to its metanarrative structure: the story is revealed to be a novel within the novel, written by character Briony Tallis. The realization that details, thoughts, and events have all been shaped according to Briony's fallible point of view prompts readers to question their own reading behaviors, as the novel both thematically and performatively undermines the connection between seeing and interpreting. Joe Wright's adaptation of *Atonement* takes up the same charge within a visual medium, and through the first section of the film, his translation of the text's metaphors and plotting achieves a compelling parallel. Ultimately, however, the physicality of the film's visuals works against the narrative ambiguity it seeks to maintain, leaving viewers with a slightly myopic understanding of *Atonement*'s story: it invites us to turn a critical eye on the storyteller, but not so much on ourselves.

The film opens on a close-up of a miniature replica of the Tallis estate before panning out across a line of toy animals that leads towards Briony. Her back is to them as she works at a typewriter, then runs off to show off her newly finished play. The diegetic sound of the typewriter keys morphs into the percussion for an opening melody as she runs through the house. These visual and aural metaphors subtly imply that Briony is the master of this universe, and that her prose may command the events to come. The dollhouse is a model of the idyllic setting of *Atonement*'s first section, and the toy animals, enthralled to their owner, represent the characters in the novel who are subject to Briony's whims. Using the dollhouse for the establishing shot thus immediately



primes viewers for the metanarrative elements of the story, and within two minutes of the film, Wright has foreshadowed the elder Briony's parting question: "how can a novelist achieve atonement when, with her absolute power of deciding outcomes, she is also God?" (McEwan 350). The film also relies on editing to communicate the difference between sight and perspective, which forms the thematic core of McEwan's novel.

The first few minutes of the film follow Briony's perspective, leading up to her witnessing, from a distance and through a window, an altercation between her sister Cecilia and Robbie, the son of the family's female servant. From Briony's view, it appears as if Robbie commands Cecilia to remove her clothes and dive into a fountain. Briony turns away, shocked by Robbie's ostensibly lewd behavior. The camera then cuts to Cecilia and breaks chronology, now following her actions leading up to her confrontation with Robbie at the fountain, where a tense conversation leads to their breaking a vase. From Cecilia's perspective, these events unfold much differently than they do from Briony's detached vantage. The gesture that ties the two scenes together is Robbie's raised hand, which Briony sees from behind and interprets as an authoritative command. In fact, Robbie is warning Cecilia not to step on a broken shard. Cecilia in turn removes her clothes not to satiate Robbie's sexual appetites, but to fetch another piece of the vase that had fallen into the water. Robbie, in response to her near nakedness, appears not lustful, but discomfited and unsure of himself. Both novel and film use careful plotting here to break Briony's



initial perspectival control over the story to help complicate Robbie's characterization at a crucial early point. However, where the novel must rely on description and dialogue to communicate the sexual tension between Robbie and Cecilia, the film has the advantage of physicality. We read Robbie's care for Cecilia on his face, and we pick up the tension in the two actors' gestures and body language, while Briony cannot.

Equally important for the outcome of the story is that both novel and film then reverse this movement to bring things back within Briony's ill-informed control. Soon after the fountain scene, the film depicts Cecilia and Robbie confessing their love for each other and getting physically intimate. Briony walks in after the amorous dialogue and sees only Robbie pinning Cecilia against the wall. Briony misinterprets the event as an assault and cries out "Cecilia!" as tears well in her eyes. Cecilia and Robbie then recompose themselves before—in what will prove a tragic miscalculation—silently

exiting the room, leaving Briony alone to contemplate the worst interpretation of what she witnessed. Seeing the two simultaneous points of view depicted contiguously in the film really enhances the theme of perspective in *Atonement*. The film invests, as it must, in using visual language and embodiment to communicate the volatile relationship between sight and interpretation, pairing Briony's visions with a lack of explanatory context. This is its greatest key to representing the work of the novel, and it is also the root of its ultimate failure to do so.

The crisis in *Atonement* that catapults nearly every character's life into turmoil is the (supposed) rape of Briony's cousin, Lola Quincey, on the Tallis estate's grounds. Here, again, both novel and film similarly stage the original incident. Briony happens upon Lola and the man with her, but is unable to positively identify him, while Lola is either unable or unwilling to do so. During the inquiry that follows (and to Lola's chagrin) Briony points the finger at Robbie with unsupportable certainty, leading to his arrest and the thing for which Briony ultimately tries to "atone." Her entire case against Robbie rests on the false conclusion she had drawn from the scenes she'd witnessed earlier: that Robbie's carnal attraction to Cecilia made him a "maniac."

From this point forward, the film less successfully parallels the novel. At issue are the ambiguities at the heart of Briony's path to atonement, because in the novel, McEwan establishes these largely through the narration—that is, through the elderly novelist Briony's own storytelling choices. In opting for immersive realism, the film can only do this through its selection of action and dialogue and through subtle metacinematic efforts to keep us at a critical distance from what we are seeing. For example, the film reproduces Briony's interview with the police, where a detective presses Briony on the line between "knowing" it was Robbie and "seeing" him, until ultimately, Briony vehemently commits: "Yes. I saw him. I saw him with my own eyes." But in the novel, the narrator also qualifies this moment ten pages before it occurs. McEwan writes that Briony "did not think she had the courage, after all her initial certainty and two or three days of patient, kindly interviewing, to withdraw her evidence. However, she would have preferred to qualify, or complicate, her use of the word "saw." Less like seeing, more like knowing. Then she could have left it to her interrogators to decide whether they would proceed together in the name of this kind of vision" (159–160). The qualifying language of this passage is in some ways defensive, suggesting that young Briony hadn't lied so much as substituted evidence for interpretation in her fervent belief in Robbie's guilt. But elder Briony is also shaping the blame readers should cast on her younger self by suggesting that she had deliberately covered over some doubt. By the end of the novel, readers should be asking why the elder Briony would have done this, but the film leaves us firmly focused on young Briony's actions, closing off an essential ambiguity too cleanly. In viewing the story without the context of the narration, we are put in much the same position as naïve Briony is when she views Robbie and Cecilia's interactions and leaps to her conclusions. While the film does try to keep us mindful of this, its efforts are ultimately undone by the kind of proof that the visual medium offers, and the level of control this exerts on viewers' satisfaction that they leave knowing the "absolute truth" of the story.

The second section of the novel follows Briony into young adulthood, and here the film makes one particular omission and one particular addition that collapse the critical narrative ambiguity. In the book, an initial hint that Briony is our story's author comes in the form of a publisher's letter

rejecting her novella, *Two Figures by a Fountain*. In it, the editor critiques the credibility of Briony's details: "A young man and woman by a fountain, who clearly have a great deal of unresolved feeling between them, tussle over a Ming vase and break it. (More than one of us here thought Ming rather too priceless to take outdoors? Wouldn't Sèvres or Nymphenburg suit your purpose?)" (McEwan 295). If we then page back to the fountain scene, we discover that the vase is now identified as a Meissen. The evidence of this changed detail, while minor, raises questions about how malleable fact and memory are for Briony, as well as what level of trust we should be investing in what we've been reading. It also, however, reminds us that Briony's story has been shaped by still other people's motives—namely, publisher demands, which focus squarely on what a reader would enjoy reading and be willing to believe. The second part of Wright's *Atonement* includes no such reminder of the role of fiction or the role that audiences of fiction play in desiring alterations of fact. The film tries to invoke something like it in its conclusion, but it is too little, too late: the nature of the visual encourages us to take what we see at face value unless something is added to induce disbelief. Since during this section of the film we watch the events unfold rather than track Briony's recounting of them, we are far less inclined to question the factuality of what we see.

Perhaps most damaging to our sense of narrative ambiguity is a scene Wright chose to add. In the story, Briony eventually concludes that it had been her brother's friend Paul Marshall she had seen with Lola on the night she got Robbie arrested. Both novel and film had already laid clues nudging us toward this conclusion: provocative dialogue, bruising on Lola's arms that Marshall attributes to her brothers, etc. These hints put the audience in a position of greater "knowing" than young Briony, even though we do not yet realize it is the elder Briony who is dropping them. When the film introduces this new development, it should also establish a new method of distancing us from Briony, as the publisher's letter does in the novel. Its attempt to do so, however, ends up instead solidifying Marshall's guilt, when this should be left unknowable. Because at this point in the story there are no other characters who can serve as checks on Briony's perspective, Wright has to depart from his earlier method of signaling us to doubt her conclusions. Here, he uses shots of Briony's face during a pause in action to register that she is processing or interpreting a visual or a memory—a processing that we are not privy to. This is a motif that



occurs in both the first and last segments of the film, but in the middle sequence, Wright actually gives us a visualization of her memory, and this time it includes Paul Marshall's face. In the novel, Briony's dawning realization that her prior conviction had been an error starts with a letter from her father announcing Lola's impending marriage to Marshall. In its own metacinematic moment, the film instead puts Briony in a movie theatre, seeing the planned nuptials announced in newsreel footage. Briony's suspicion is piqued, and it is clear that she begins to consider Marshall the likely perpetrator, so she attends the wedding, seeking a definitive confrontation to confirm her suspicions. Instead, this triggers an apparently repressed memory in which she sees Paul Marshall on top of Lola. The epiphany is blatant: we see Briony's (present) face register the shock of the onset of the memory, then we flash back to her young face as the film repeats its early footage of the discovery. This time, however, it cuts in Marshall's face as he turns toward her before fleeing.



Nothing in the novel suggests that Briony saw anyone clearly that night, leaving us to speculate whether Briony's new conviction is just another instance of her own fallible habit of reaching a conclusion and believing it to be a clear way to right a wrong. In fact, as evidence for the truth, Paul Marshall's engagement to Lola is just as specious as Robbie's carnal attraction to Cecilia was. If Briony had been willing to exaggerate in her testimony to police, change details to craft her story, and invent a new ending for Cecilia and Robbie, why would she be unwilling to villainize Marshall to exonerate Robbie? The novel persistently punishes readers for overly credulous behavior regarding Briony's visions. But in the film, Wright uses Robbie's face to communicate his true character, and Briony's face to convey silent narration, so the appearance of Marshall's face in this scene makes the viewer's certainty of Marshall's guilt that much harder to resist. In other words, Marshall's face betrays the film's own meta-level analysis of "seeing" and invites us to slip into "knowing." As a consequence, we might find it so comfortable to blame or to sympathize with Briony for all of her interpretive foibles that we stop questioning our own, and that is a major departure from the novel's apparent intent.

Like the novel, the film ends with Briony—now a famed author and fatally ill—musing over her construction of *Atonement*. Again, though, while the novel presents this in a memoir or journal entry, Wright conveys it in dialogue. Briony tells an interviewer that *Atonement* is at once “entirely autobiographical,” a product of drafts written over a span of many years, and a product of her commitment to tell the “absolute truth.” Then she slips into another long pause and says that she eventually “couldn’t any longer imagine what purpose would be served by” that project. She then admits that she manufactured the novel’s ending, including her own active attempts to exonerate Robbie and the happy reunion between Cecilia and Robbie. In the space of that pause, Wright again uses a close-up on Briony’s troubled face (shown above), so that we could conceivably recall the wedding/flashback scene and catch this signal of her internal debate between seeing and knowing, between fact and fiction, and rebalance the critical distance we’re meant to have. But in a film viewing, you can’t always just skip backward and re-see what you first thought you saw.

Both McEwan’s novel and Wright’s film explore themes of narrator reliability, credulity, and scapegoating, and raise doubts about the nature of truth in the first place. However, while the novel consistently turns these questions back onto the reader, the film ultimately trains viewers’ attention too squarely on Briony’s persona and on her culpability in both the central event and her fictionalized retelling of it. This diminishes our own culpability for “proceed[ing] together in the name of this kind of vision” (McEwan 160), which is a satisfaction we should be denied. 🐼

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McEwan, Ian. *Atonement: A Novel*. New York: Anchor, 2003. Kindle.

Wright, Joe, dir. *Atonement*. Universal Studios Home Entertainment, 2008.