

## *Cognitive Schemata and Meaningful Strategies in Adapting Ian McEwan's Novel, Atonement*

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**Abstract:** Adapting literary works for cinematography has not been of much interest until two-three decades ago, mainly because of numerous aporias and biases having to face across time. This paper is considering looking into this subject through the dynamics of the workflow of creation and receiving the product deriving from it with whatever mental activity it involves in order to be meaningful. "Atonement" based on Ian McEwan's novel and directed by Joe Wright, offers a good example concerning the filmmaker's double orientation in the process of artistic production: on the one hand, towards the literary text, attempting to respond to the indications offered by it, on the other hand focused on the audience, attempting to create a similar impact, to guide his way of perceiving the story, to anticipate the viewer's emotions and the cognitive ways through which he could access a meaning. Throughout its entire unfolding, the film is playing with the spectator, activating a series of cognitive schemata which will subsequently be subject to correction, guiding the activity of imagination in a manner that is analogous with the one operated by the strategies of the literary text.

**Keywords:** adaptation, cinema, cognitive schemata, reception, copy, interpretation, fidelity

In spite of the widespread practice and interest that it spurred among the filmmakers and the public, until towards the end of the last century, the cinematographic adaptation of the literary works had been the most marginal

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area of cinema studies. The few theoretical researches that up until the last two-three decades took an interest in adaptation are marked by two common denominators: the fidelity of the adaptation and the specificity of the two media. The first transformed adaptation into a simple copying of its source of inspiration and the second sustained the impossibility to separate the form from the content, therefore the illegitimacy of an aesthetic transfer from book to film. Overcoming the theoretical impasse in which adaptation found itself happens during the '80s, under the influence of the poststructuralist theories, which provide a series of concepts, such as "intertextuality", "dialogism", "hypertext". The new paradigm puts forward the horizontal relations against the vertical ones, which implied authority. There is more and more talk about adaptation as intertextual practice, as "a creative act of closeness/salvation"<sup>2</sup> or even "palimpsest", a term taken over by Linda Hutcheon from Gérard Genette's theoretical arsenal. These theories, being launched not more than 20-30 years' prior, have the merit of having led to the transgression of moralism and elitism, in the terms of which adaptation was regarded, and to understanding its nodal role in a web of relations. What can be reproached to them, however, is the continuous repetition of certain concepts, without seeking to explain the ontological dimension of the derived oeuvre and the strategies by which it opens up to the public, always keeping the memory of its source of inspiration.

This presentation proposes a new outlook upon adaptation, through the lens of the theory of reception and effect, of cognitive and constructivist psychology, in view of surprising the dynamics of the derived oeuvre's process of production and reception. By its quality of secondary oeuvre, the adaptation is a form of the literary text's interpretation. It expresses confidence in the communicability of the artistic creation, in the possibility of the "occurrence" of sense and it taking form into another work that does not deny, but, on the contrary, it affirms the previous one in a new form. For this reason, we will direct our attention to the manner in which the potential for sense of the literary oeuvre is harnessed in adaptation and, especially, to the manner in which the film anticipates the reactions, the emotions of the spectator,

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2. Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation* (New York and London: Routledge, 2006), 8.

the cognitive approach of semantic processing. We are interested in the effect of the literary text over the filmmaker, but also in the effect of the secondary oeuvre on the spectator. Our conviction is that, in view of meeting the requirement of fidelity, understood not as a simple transfer, but as respect owed to the previous creation, the second effect should be similar to the first.

The adaptation of Ian McEwan's novel *Atonement* by the director, Joe Wright offers a good example concerning the filmmaker's double orientation in the process of artistic production: on the one hand, towards the literary text, attempting to respond to the indications offered by it; on the other hand, towards the spectator, seeking to produce on him/her an effect similar to the one produced by the literary work, guiding the reception activity, anticipating the emotional reactions of the public and the cognitive modalities by which it might access a sense. Throughout its entire unfolding, the film is playing with the spectator, creating expectations only to contradict them later on, suggesting interpretations which prove to be non-compliant with the "reality", activating a series of cognitive schemata which will subsequently be subject to correction, guiding the activity of imagination in a manner that is analogous with the one operated by the strategies of the literary text.

In an interview with the journalist Rob Carnevale, the director Joe Wright said:

I think the book is very visual so therefore I tried to make an almost literal adaptation of the book. [...] With a lot of adapted novels, the catchphrase they all have is kind of, «at some point you need to throw the book away». I always used to nod my head and pretend to understand what they meant. But I think you only throw the book away if it's rubbish, so we never did that. We kept the book by our side throughout the whole process. Obviously, you have to cherry pick a bit. I also think a lot of literary people presume that literature and the written word has a monopoly over internal truth and I personally, as a dyslexic, don't agree with that. I think, to me, the films of Fellini or Bergman or the great classical masters of the medium spoke just as much truth as Tolstoy or Dickens. It's just another medium, so anyone who thought that the book was un-adaptable was probably underestimating the power of film.<sup>3</sup>

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3. Rob Carnevale, "Atonement - Joe Wright Interview," Indie London, 2007, [www.indielondon.co.uk/Film-Review/atonement-joe-wright-interview](http://www.indielondon.co.uk/Film-Review/atonement-joe-wright-interview).

Ian McEwan's novel is a novel about love, about war, but it is especially a self-reflexive novel, one that shows in what way imagination manages to "parasite" reality. For the screenwriter Cristopher Hampton, writing the adapted screenplay was a complex and a rather difficult process, due to the fact that he had to operate various revisions. Initially, the producer Robert Fox had handed over the project to Richard Eyre, however, the delay of the beginning of production, due to other projects in which the director was involved, determines Fox to replace Eyre with the younger Joe Wright, known until that time especially for the 2005 adaptation of the *Pride and Prejudice* novel by Jane Austen. The three or four screenplay versions written by Cristopher Hampton for Richard Eyre will be followed by three different ones, realized upon Joe Wright's request. The last version combines the classical logic of the narrative evolution with the fragmentary character, the discontinuity and the self-reflexivity of the postmodern discourse.

In Richard Eyre's vision, the film would have begun with the return of the writer Briony Tallis to the mansion where she had spent her childhood in order to celebrate her 77th birthday, an occasion for reflection and refreshing the memories of the moments that had profoundly marked her existence and the one of her loved ones. In this version, the entire narration of the film was thought about retrospectively. According to Cristopher Hampton's confession, Joe Wright did not like this idea, his main concern being that of eliminating the filmic "crutches": *the voice over* with an explanatory role, the narrative linearity and the frame. He showed interest in the mainly visual representation of the story and by the possibility of the ability to read the thoughts and the emotions of the characters on the face of the actors instead of exposing them by a voice from the background. The advantage of this new perspective consisted in, according to Hampton's opinion, the fact that „the viewer of the film, no longer alerted by premonitory hints, can suffer the same dislocating shocks at the end as the reader of the novel”<sup>4</sup>. In other words, the fidelity invoked by Hampton, but also by Wright, meant attention granted not only to the scrupulous illustration of the course of events and the details of

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4. Cristopher Hampton, "Introduction," in *Atonement. The Shooting Script* (New York: Newmarket Press, 2008), vi-vii.

the diegetic world, but also to the production of the same effect on the spectator as the one produced by the book, the filmic strategies being thought out in correlation with the literary ones, in order to pursue a similar movement towards the occurrence of meaning.

Any creative act is realized by successive readjustments of the schemata offered by tradition, by the deviation from what is already made trivial by usage. Referring to the manner in which the screenplay was initially structured, Joe Wright explains:

There was a script that Christopher Hampton had written with the previous director, Richard Eyre, and I read that script and didn't feel that it was in line with the film. I wanted to make, and felt like I needed to get some ownership of the material, in a way, creatively.<sup>5</sup>

According to Hampton's confession, both Eyre and Wright had in sight the principle of fidelity towards the book. However, the screenplays requested by them differ significantly, because they update the novel's potential for meaning in a different manner. For Joe Wright the correction of the initial schemata, of the other director's perspective is vital, since such an act offers him the chance to express himself creatively, to give up the convention of the retrospective telling and to seek cinematic equivalences for the strategies of the literary narration. In an interview with Edward Douglas, talking about the manner in which certain mental images are clarified within the director's mind over the course of the project, through the corrections and completions of the schemata, Wright said: „It's a funny thing when you're designing a film. You have certain images in place and then it starts to, almost like painting, you're balancing the composition if you like.<sup>6</sup>

In a similar manner, MacEwan explains the process of the literary creation:

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5. Edward Douglas, "Joe Wright on Directing *Atonement*," *Coming Soon*, 2007,

<http://www.comingsoon.net/movies/features/39526-joe-wright-on-directing-atonement>.

6. Douglas.

To some extent writing a novel has to be a journey without maps. A later draft allows one to smooth the edges and make that tension operate so that it looks as if everything was intended, but in the actual process I feel like I'm only partially in control of the material.<sup>7</sup>

The manner in which the initial schemata may sometimes suffer, in the process of creation, radical transformations can be understood from the writer's declarations referring to the *Atonement* novel, into the writing of which he had plunged with the image of a girl looking for a vase to arrange a few field flowers. The action should have unfolded in a future in which a privileged elite turns its back to the technological civilization to live at the countryside, in the spirit of Jane Austen's books. Together with the development of the second chapter, which subsequently became the novel's first chapter and with the appearance of Cecilia's younger sister, McEwan confesses that the creative direction had changed.<sup>8</sup>

Instead of the credit titles, the film opens with the sound of the typewriter, a sound which is, at first, non-diegetic, sustaining the paratextual elements. On the dark background, the letters of the title appear one by one: *Atonement*. The first frame sets the time and the space of the action: England 1935. In the foreground appears the mansion of the Tallis family. However, immediately the camera realizes a *travelling* motion from left to right and the viewer realizes that he/she was subject to an optical illusion: it was not the mansion, but a miniature of it, a doll house exposed in Briony's room (Saoirse Ronan.). Sitting at the table, she drafts at the typewriter the ending of her first play: *The Trials of Arabella*.

Both visual clues, as well as the sonorous ones converge towards the idea of the *mise-en-abîme* of the cinematographic discourse. The viewer is alerted right from the beginning that what he/she sees is not entirely credible, that the matters are not what they appear to be. At the end, it is confirmed that the entire filmic narration constitutes the product of the main character's imagination, of the little girl that we can see in the first

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7. Jon Cook, Sebastian Groes, and Victor Sage, "Journeys without Maps: An Interview with Ian McEwan," in *Ian McEwan*, ed. Sebastian Groes (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 146.

8. Cook, Groes, and Sage, 146.

sequence marching on the corridors with the manuscript in her hand, in a dazzling rhythm imprinted by Dario Marinelli's music. The camera follows her through successive approaches and distances, loses her from the frame and finds her again, in a tension potentiated by the original soundtrack, which valorizes magisterially the sound of the typewriter for *beat* and *tempo*. Resuming the same *staccato* suggests Briony's capacity as an author, in the second part of the film, when, being a nurse, she drafts the first version of the love story between her sister, Cecilia (Keira Knightly) and Robbie (James McAvoy).

Another element of metadiscourse is constituted by the image of the mansion, of the real ne this time, depicted by a "frozen" frame, followed by the camera's panoramic motion, just to set, in the end, on the image of Cecilia and her sister, lying on the lawn of the imposing edifice built in a Victorian style. Seen from above, the two girls seem they themselves dolls in the play of fiction, some simple toys, just like the ones in Briony's room, aligned in front of the miniature mansion.

The action is set in the year 1935. An unconfessed love smolders between Cecilia Tallis and Robbie Turner, the son of a servant, yet raised and educated along with the children of the Tallis family. The completion of the studies and the maturity that both reached brings a sort of uneasiness characteristic to the first thrills of love. Moreover, the distance interposed between them is emphasized by Cecilia's frustration, who sees in Robbie's decision of pursuing a second university to become a doctor an obstacle in the path of a potential relationship. The accumulated tensions burst in the artesian fountain scene, surprised randomly from the window of her room by Briony, Cecilia's younger sister, who, through the lens of her own fantasy, gives it a wrong interpretation. To this, it is added the letter with erotic connotations addressed by Robbie to Cecilia, opened by Briony, but also the library scene, where the little girl surprises the two lovers in an engagement full of passion, understood by her as a "wrestle". All these cumulated elements determine Briony to believe that Robbie is a maniac, reason for which when cousin Lola is raped, no one knows by who (without knowing the author of this act), Briony will make a false statement against Robbie, a mistake that she would regret for the rest of her life and which will only find atonement in the fictional novel written by her.

Based on the constructivist theories of perception and cognition, David Bordwell supports the idea according to which the activity of the film reception is circumscribed by the existence of certain schemata, generated as a result of previous narrative experiences, be they cinematographic or of a different nature. In his opinion, the spectator realizes inferences, emits hypotheses, then he checks them, and when they are not confirmed, he rejects them, generating new ones.<sup>9</sup> Let's see how these schemata work in the scene (sequence) from the artesian fountain.

Both in the book, as well as in the film, this scene is resumed from different perspectives, each of which sheds a new light upon the facts. In McEwan's text, it is first told by an omniscient narrator, who reveals Cecilia's thoughts while heading towards the fountain, then it is resumed from Briony's perspective, so that the third time, the literary text returns to this moment through an analepsis, which depicts the details of Cecilia's body, as they had been ingrained in Robbie's enamored memory.

The first description of events is presented as follows:

She hadn't changed, but there was no question that he had. He was putting distance between himself and the family that had been completely open to him and given him everything. For this reason alone—expectation of his refusal, and her own displeasure in advance—she had not invited him to dinner that night. If he wanted distance, then let him have it. [...] Her idea was to lean over the parapet and hold the flowers in the vase while she lowered it on its side into the water, but it was at this point that Robbie, wanting to make amends, tried to be helpful. «Let me take that» he said, stretching out a hand. «I'll fill it for you, and you take the flowers.» «I can manage, thanks.» She was already holding the vase over the basin.

But he said, «Look, I've got it.» And he had, tightly between forefinger and thumb. «Your cigarette will get wet. Take the flowers.» This was a command on which he tried to confer urgent masculine authority. The effect on Cecilia was to cause her to tighten her grip. She had no time, and certainly no inclination, to explain that plunging vase and flowers

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9. David Bordwell, *Narration in the fiction film*, Madison, University Of Viscon Press, 1985.



into the water would help with the natural look she wanted in the arrangement. She tightened her hold and twisted her body away from him. He was not so easily shaken off. With a sound like a dry twig snapping, a section of the lip of the vase came away in his hand, and split into two triangular pieces which dropped into the water and tumbled to the bottom in a synchronous, seesawing motion, and lay there, several inches apart, writhing in the broken light. Cecilia and Robbie froze in the attitude of their struggle. Their eyes met, and what she saw in the bilious mélange of green and orange was not shock, or guilt, but a form of challenge, or even triumph.

«You idiot! Look what you've done.»

He looked into the water, then he looked at back at her, and simply shook his head as he raised a hand to cover his mouth. By this gesture he assumed full responsibility, but at that moment, she hated him for the inadequacy of the response. He glanced toward the basin and sighed. For a moment he thought she was about to step backward onto the vase, and he raised his hand and pointed, though he said nothing. Instead he began to unbutton his shirt. Immediately she knew what he was about. Intolerable. He had come to the house and removed his shoes and socks—well, she would show him then. She kicked off her sandals, unbuttoned her blouse and removed it, unfastened her skirt and stepped out of it and went to the basin wall. He stood with hands on his hips and stared as she climbed into the water in her underwear. Denying his help, any possibility of making amends, was his punishment. The unexpectedly freezing water that caused her to gasp was his punishment. She held her breath, and sank, leaving her hair fanned out across the surface. Drowning herself would be his punishment. When she emerged a few seconds later with a piece of pottery in each hand, he knew better than to offer to help her out of the water. The frail white nymph, from whom water cascaded far more successfully than it did from the beefy Triton, carefully placed the pieces by the vase.<sup>10</sup>

Drawn into the traps of her own bookish fantasies, Briony plans on transforming this scene, which she notices randomly from the window, into the subject of her writings:

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10. Ian McEwan, *Atonement* (New York: Nan A. Talese (Random House Inc.), 2002), 27–29.

Closer, within the boundaries of the balustrade, were the rose gardens and, nearer still, the Triton fountain, and standing by the basin's retaining wall was her sister, and right before her was Robbie Turner. There was something rather formal about the way he stood, feet apart, head held back. A proposal of marriage. Briony would not have been surprised. She herself had written a tale in which a humble woodcutter saved a princess from drowning and ended by marrying her. What was presented here fitted well. Robbie Turner, only son of a humble cleaning lady and of no known father, Robbie who had been subsidized by Briony's father through school and university, had wanted to be a landscape gardener, and now wanted to take up medicine, had the boldness of ambition to ask for Cecilia's hand. It made perfect sense. Such leaps across boundaries were the stuff of daily romance. What was less comprehensible, however, was how Robbie imperiously raised his hand now, as though issuing a command which Cecilia dared not disobey. It was extraordinary that she was unable to resist him. At his insistence she was removing her clothes, and at such speed. She was out of her blouse, now she had let her skirt drop to the ground and was stepping out of it, while he looked on impatiently, hands on hips. What strange power did he have over her? Blackmail? Threats? Briony raised two hands to her face and stepped back a little way from the window.<sup>11</sup>

If Ian McEwan's narrative endeavor starts from an objective perspective over the facts, in order to illustrate later on, the manner in which these are decanted within the conscience of the characters, Joe Wright is aware that in order to obtain the same effect on the spectator, the narrative decoupage (montage) will have to bear within the film a rearrangement. Following this principle, the adaptation presents this scene only twice, first, as it is seen from the window by Briony, being in the position of the *voyeur*, and only afterwards completed by dialogue. The decision is justified by the specificity of the cinematographic medium in relation to the literary one. If the novel is capable to express the thoughts and states of consciousness assertively, the film can only suggest them through images. The director chooses to first present

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11. McEwan, 36.

the perspective of the little girl in a subjective montage, alternating the frames which are close-ups of her surprised guise, with the ones illustrating the confrontation between Robbie and Cecilia, precisely to guide the spectator to identification, to the overlap of his/her perspective over that of the viewer character. In this manner, even if the spectator does not know the entire interpretative process that is borne in little girl's mind, he/she realizes that he/she is the indirect witness of a happening whose impulse eludes her.

If the film had revealed right from the start the dialogue between Robbie and Cecilia, as the book did, the spectator's view would not have been an innocent one. The schemata that he/she would have constructed in his/her mind would have comprised a series of information, impossible to ignore. Already holding the key to the event, he/she would not have understood Briony's astonishment just as well. Instead, by guiding the interpretative process to the direction of creating first a general schemata, with numerous "spaces of indetermination" and only then completing this by resuming the sequence, the director creates on the one hand suspense, and on the other, he offers the spectator the chance to discriminate Briony's false interpretation from the reality of the facts. Joe Wrights follows the same principle in the case of the library scene, which is presented both in the book and in the film fragmentarily, at first, from Briony's perspective (who sees Robbie and Cecilia in penumbra, between the bookshelves, in a struggle full of passion, understood by her as "fighting, a hand to hand combat", and only afterwards in a complete image.

The two scenes (the one from the fountain and the one from the library), together with the sensual letter addressed to Cecilia by Robbie and fallen into Briony's hands, create in the child the conviction that her sister is the target of a „maniac“. The precipitation of the events through the rape of her cousin Lola determines her to make a false statement against Robbie, a mistake she shall regret her entire life and which shall find atonement only in fiction. Falling prey to her spirit of order, Briony herself had created a schemata for herself, a mental pattern meant to facilitate her „initiation into the secrets of the adult world“, to offer her precise answers to the questions eating away at her, to set the phenomenal reality into the bed of the predictable. She had knowingly eluded a series of evident details (Paul

Marshall's scratches, Lola's uncertainty in establishing the aggressor), processing the information selectively, emitting erroneous hypotheses and suppositions in order to justify her fears.

Right from the beginning, Joe Wright's intention was to make as explicit as possible, both for the spectators, as well as for the actors involved, Briony's fragmentary and distorted view of the facts. Due to this reason, even during the production process only the scenes showing the girl at age 13 (interpreted by Saoirse Roman) were shown to the actresses who would embody her at 18 (Ramona Garai) and at 77 (Vanessa Redgrave). This endeavor was meant to enable the actresses to understand the child's point of view better, and then to build their roles based on this identification.

Throughout the entire cinematographic account, the director pays close attention to the spectator's mechanisms of identification, because the emotion invested, the ability to make inferences, of tying the "signs" one to another and to untie them when the subsequent development of the plot requires it, to create, in the end, that web of well-articulated significances depends on them.

At the end, the film presents Briony, at 77, not in the ambience of a family reunion, as it happens in the novel, but in a TV studio where, being now a famous writer, she gives an interview. This apparent departure of the film from the text is compensated by creating the same effect of surprise on the spectator which the novel creates when the readers realize that nothing they have read up until that moment complies with the reality of the facts, but that it is, in part, a work of fiction created by the writer Briony Tallis. In addition, the convention of the interview enables a credible confession of the "author", referring to the entire artistic endeavor that has been presented to us until that moment. The talent with which the filmmaker manages to create an original, autonomous film at the same time, true to the spirit of Ian McEwan's book, the delicacy with which he approximates its significations and intentions, the good knowledge of the spectator's psychology, of the cognitive processes involved in the production of meaning, make Joe Wright one of the masters of cinematographic adaptations.

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