FROM PAGE TO SCREEN: CONSTRUCTING AMBIGUITY AND SUBJECTIVITY IN IAN MCEWAN'S *ATONEMENT* AND JOE WRIGHT'S FILM ADAPTATION

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Abstract Ambiguity is one of the fundamental characteristics of contemporary fiction, underlining the subjective function of the written text, its malleability and capacity of deceiving the reader. The aim of this article is to analyse McEwan's narrative in *Atonement,* the novel, and the way in which the ambiguous element is further transferred and reconfigured in the film, whilst addressing the multifaceted implications of a duplicitous narrator. Both the narrative and the film adaptation mirror the function of the written word in the process of altering reality, thus addressing the deconstructed element of the text in 21st century literature.
Keywords McEwan, ambiguity, subjectivity, narrative, deconstruction, Joe Wright.

"The truth has become as ghostly as invention."[1]

I. Introduction: Constructing (Un)certainty Across Media

Atonement is acknowledged as one of Ian McEwan's most renowned works, due to the complexity of the themes it explores. Its narrative structure differs from that of a traditional novel: namely, it consists of three parts, and the identity of the narrator remains unknown until the final pages of the novel. As the reader gets more acquainted with the text, the sense of ambiguity and uncertainty becomes more apparent, specifically in regards to the construction of the narrative. In this paper my purpose is to address the element of ambiguity as a pervasive characteristic of McEwan's text, in relation to Briony's narrative, which is marked by an acute sense of subjectivity. Concurrently, I plan to analyse the way in which this has been translated into the film adaptation directed by Joe Wright. By embracing a comparative approach, the focus is directed towards highlighting the process of conversion from text to visual storytelling via the use of cinematic elements.

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[1] Ian McEwan, *Atonement* (London: Vintage, 2007), 30.

Briony Tallis is the narrator of the story, whose identity as author of the story is disclosed only in the end, the narrative encompassing a recollection of the first 60 years of her life, concentrating on a dramatic event that had a long-term impact in the life of her family and Robbie Turner. The epigraph in the beginning of the novel – a segment from Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* – anticipates the way in which the narrative ought to be approached. Austen's novel analyses the implications of the consequences of a young person's unwise use of imagination: Tilney's remarks to Catherine concerning her volatile imagination can also be applied to Briony, whose lies will eventually cause irreparable havoc in many people's lives.[2] The construction of the novel marks the lurking presence of ambiguity and doubt, as the reader delves deeper into the story; one is put into the stance to attest the ethical and moral implications of Briony's actions and their consequences. Every new chapter challenges the reader to reassess his/her understanding of the narrative, leading to the overlapping of manifold uncertainties. According to James Harold, the "narrative imagining is not static or unified, but dynamic and multi-polar,"[3] which cunningly creates an ambiguous and ambivalent aura around the text. Hence, *Atonement* is a postmodern metanarrative novel that explores themes of guilt and betrayal, whilst also directing the attention of the reader towards the text, towards its subjective narrative voice. A primary attribute of postmodern metafiction is the unique approach to storytelling, which is oftentimes ambiguous, deceptive, even playful.[4] In *Atonement,* the story is narrated in the third story, whilst the last part consists of Briony's monologue or confession that discloses the kernel to disclosing the ambivalent character of the story. The transfer from anonymous author to author-narrator significantly contributes to the subjective nature of the storytelling, and it is Briony's double identity as author and protagonist that establishes the grounds of ambiguity and deception, as this paper attempts to demonstrate in the following paragraphs. Lyotard explores the characteristics of *metanarratives* in his work *The Postmodern Condition,* and assesses that metanarratives are stories whose purpose is to provide structure and guidance in the rewriting of the discourse of religion, philosophy, politics, etc. Thus, a metanarrative has the power of imposing or delineating certain truths acknowledged as universal. Due to the attributed legitimacy of the text, metanarratives can be perceived as authoritative mediums for forming new ideologies or deconstructing old ones.[5] Furthermore, a metanarrative makes reference to the "narrator's reflections on the act or process of narration,"[6] while metafiction attests to the constructedness element of the text. Since the authoritative function of metanarratives has significantly diminished, postmodernist fiction

[2] Wahaj Unnisa Warda and Mohammed Rezaul Karim, "(Un)reliable Narrative in Ian McEwan's *Atonement,*" *World Journal of English Language,* 14, no. 2 (2024): 16, https://doi.org/10.5430/wjel.v14n2p16.

[3] James Harold, "Narrative Engagement with *Atonement* and *The Blind Assassin,*" *Philosophy and Literature* 29, no. 1, (April 2005): 130, https://doi.org/10.1353/phl.2005.0005.

[4] Han Jie and Zhang Liming, "Deceptive Styles of Writing in Ian McEwan's *Atonement,*" *English Language, Literature & Culture* 5, no. 2 (2020): 69, https://doi.org/10.11648/j.ellc.20200502.13.

[5] Bran Nicol, *The Cambridge Introduction to Postmodern Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

[6] Birgit Neumann and Ansgar Nünning, "Metanarration and Metafiction," *The Living Handbook of Narratology,* ed. Peter Hühn et al. (Hamburg: Hamburg University Press, 2014), accessed February 10, 2026, http://lhn.sub.uni-hamburg.de/index.php/Metanarration_and_Metafiction.html.

employs the use of metafictional devices that, instead, direct the attention of the reader towards the text, what Călinescu described as: "a major shift in contemporary thought from epistemology to hermeneutics."[7] Metafiction grants writers and readers alike a more profound understanding of the structure of the narrative, thus attempting to approach the human experience through the lens of a language construction. Due to the metafictional dimension of the text, capturing the essence of ambiguity that is characteristic of the novel and ultimately transferring it into the film adaptation is a challenge that has been acknowledged by McEwan himself in an interview included on the *Atonement* DVD from 2007. He described the transition with acute scepticism, underlining the aspect of reconfiguration that is similar to a *demolition job.* Therefore, the film, in its essence, is a rewriting or, more explicitly, a reconstruction of the narrative in the novel. Nevertheless, the subjectivity that remains intrinsically bound to the act of storytelling in *Atonement* has been reframed in the making of the film, as the director Joe Wright and the screenplay writer Christopher Hampton attempted to intertwine the ambiguity and constructedness element of the written text and deliver it into a new form that exemplifies the depth of human experience and expression. While the readers of the novel are put in the position to analyse their stance towards their individual perception of the text as a medium for meaning making, the film challenges its viewers differently, as Joe Wright and Christopher Hampton attempt to deliver the same metaphors but through distinct lenses, translating the text into a relevant audiovisual language specific to films. Hence, besides restructuring the format of the written plot into the film, Wright and Hampton implemented robust, effective effects including specific sound effects (such as the recurrent sound of the typewriter that appears at given times throughout the film, alluding to the presence of an omniscient writer), and very relevant diegetic and non-diegetic music. These elements contribute to shaping the core of McEwan's novel, attempting to capture the depth of the text.

II. Ambiguity and Subjectivity as Mirrored in Discourse and Visual Storytelling

Briony's narrative starts with the events that take place in the course of a hot summer day in 1935, at the family's mansion in Surrey, in the English countryside. She embraces the role of a playwright and takes on the role of a demiurge through the creation and putting into stage of a play entitled *The Trials of Arabella*. Briony's ambivalent position as an author and protagonist explores the fine line between fiction and reality, and alludes to the ease with which this boundary can be altered. Afterward, she purposefully attributes her own impressions and perceptions regarding a range of events she witnesses, thus irrevocably changing the lives of Robbie Turner, Cecilia Tallis and her own. Briony's inborn tendency to dramatise and her need to grasp control of reality through her imagination is present from the beginning of the novel. As she witnesses subsequent adult interactions between her sister Cecilia and Robbie Turner – the son of the charlady, she tries to understand their relationship from a very limited, childish perspective. She perceives Robbie as a threat to her sister and decides to accuse him of assaulting Lola, the cousin visiting from the North,

[7] Matei Călinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity: Modernism, Avant-Garde, Decadence, Kitsch, Postmodernism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1987), 87.

resulting in Robbie being sent into prison. Briony's meddling in puts an end to Cecilia and Robbie's relationship, who can no longer fulfil their love. When Briony realises the severity of her actions, she attempts to attain atonement and forgiveness through constructing a distinctive reality through writing. It is only in writing that the consequences of her actions are mendable, since she uses fiction to remediate her errors. Therefore, Briony embraces the position of a child-demiurge, who attempts to manipulate the story: starting from her false confession about Robbie Turner and the way she continues to manipulate the storyline unfolding in front of the reader, using discourse as a means of achieving atonement for her mistake. She mercilessly subordinates her reality to the world of fiction created by her own imagination.[8] In the film, Briony is also delineated as an attentive beholder of the happenings in her surroundings. Besides her passion for writing and storytelling, she is also a silent observer of people. An example in this respect would be the scene by the fountain, where Briony observes Cecilia and Robbie from the second storey of the house. Her distant position could be interpreted from a metaphorical lens, alluding to Briony's acute impediment in both comprehension and vision as a child.[9] Simultaneously, as she quietly observes the interaction between her sister Cecilia and Robbie, she is in her nursery, an aspect that once again attests to Briony's immaturity, highlighting her self-attributed status of child-writer, who is unconsciously playing with the power of words. She is deeply passionate about discerning symbols, focusing on granting meaning to what she observes, regardless of her incapacity to fully grasp the essence of humanity that intrinsically propels people's actions (as it is the case with Cecilia and Robbie's complicated relationship).

Briony's enchantment with storytelling is instinctual and remains permanent throughout the whole novel; she uses her imagination for a deeper, more profound understanding of the reality around her. Concurrently, it is through writing that she seeks to attain and establish order – both in her mind and in the metaphysical world. It is through writing that she wants to attain redemption for the crime she commits, through the story she consciously creates. Briony – in the bilateral position of protagonist and narrator – relates to the world surrounding her through writing. Her desire to become a writer, which is introduced in the beginning of the novel, is paramount to the development of her character and the narrative. Briony is motivated by a strong desire to write, irrespective of topic. After a critical evaluation of her own work, she concludes that she is indeed capable of writing realistic descriptions; however, she comprehends that she lacks the dexterity of portraying profound emotions:

> "She could do the woods in winter, and the grimness of a castle wall. But how to do feelings? All very well to write, *She felt sad,* or describe what a sad person might do, but what of sadness itself,

[8]Brian Finney, "Briony's Stand Against Oblivion: The Making of Fiction in Ian McEwan's *Atonement,*" *Journal of Modern Literature* 27, no. 3 (2004): 69.

[9] Evelina-Iulia Hreceniuc (Cîrdei), "The Deconstructive Nature of Discourse and Storytelling in *Atonement,* the Novel and the Film," in *Reading Ventures,* ed. Cornelia Macsiniuc (Suceava: Editura Universității „Ștefan cel Mare" din Suceava, 2019), 93.

> how was that put across so it could be felt in all of its lowering immediacy? Even harder was the threat, or the confusion of feeling contradictory things."[10]

The process of writing and its multilateral and ambiguous nature is profusely explored by McEwan; there are multiple reflections on the process of writing presented by Briony in the position of child-author and adult-author alike, challenging the reader to assess and reassess the credibility of the narrative. When Briony comes in possession of the letter containing the vulgar word, she delves into concocting dramatic scenarios, based on her limited, childish understanding of the situation. It is her self-attributed role of a writer that supposedly gives her the authority to intervene in bringing and creating order: "But how to do justice to the changes that had made her into a real writer at last, and to her chaotic swarm of impressions, and to the disgust and fascination she felt? Order must be imposed."[11]

The presence of self-reflexive narration is a key characteristic of metafictional novels, typically accomplished through comments regarding the function of storytelling, as we can observe in the examples given above. Although Briony's identity as the narrator of the story isn't openly revealed until the final part of the novel, the reader gradually accumulates information that undermines the reliability of the narrative, conversely testifying to its subjectivity and ambiguity. In the third part of the novel, which covers Briony's time in London as a wartime nurse, the reader is introduced to a more mature Briony, who is more aware of the intricate process of writing. Although she is no longer as self-centred as she was in the beginning of the novel, Briony hasn't renounced her writing ambitions; she keeps a diary – although it was forbidden at the time – still hoping that someday she would become the writer she always dreamed of. Eventually, the reader discovers that the draft Briony works on after her shift ends is based on the events described in the first part of the novel – the havoc caused by her meddling in. The introduction of the letter from "CC", a famous critic, entailing a detailed, critical analysis of Briony's story *Two Figures by a Fountain,* alludes to the ending of story. The novel Briony publishes is a re-edit of the original version she sent to *Horizon,* which she rewrote according to the instructions given by the editor. The epilogue demonstrates that the narrative is ultimately a study of the multifaceted writing process of a fictional work, as the story is sourced by the author's desire to attain atonement for her past actions through the power of the written word. Thus, the reader is forced to reflect on the artificial character of the fictional process. The open ending further outlines that none of the two options provided by Briony can be regarded as the truth, which once again attests the ambiguous and subjective nature of storytelling:

> "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. That I never saw them in that year. That my walk across London ended at the church on Clapham Common, and that a cowardly Briony limped back

[10] McEwan, *Atonement,* 99.
[11] Ibid.*,* 98.

> to the hospital, unable to confront her recently bereaved sister. That the letters the lovers wrote are in the archives of the War Museum. How would that constitute an ending? What sense of hope or satisfaction could a reader draw from such an account?"[12]

Briony's final confession further subverts the reliability of the author, and the final revelation forces the reader to reconstruct the storyline and assess the blurry line between reality, imagination and memory. In the final pages of the novel, Briony's confession that she is struggling with dementia and memory loss, once again underlines her account as a partial, inaccurate author: "she regretted not being more factual, not providing herself with a store of raw material."[13] These types of mentions validate the subjectivity of the storyline, the latent unreliability of the narration, as the storyline is the result of reflective reconstruction from memory and later research.[14] It is not surprising that Briony's autobiographical memory is critical to the narrative. Briony perceives fiction and writing as a medium for escapism, giving her the possibility to accomplish structure and order, as she discloses in the beginning of the novel through the writing of *The Trials of Arabella.* The part of the novel entitled *London 1999* divulges that Briony's fictional material was the result of her researching archival material, to provide an authentic reconstruction of the Dunkirk retreat. However, she attempts to recreate the event from a personal perspective – namely reconstructing Robbie's subjective war experience that is extensively developed in the second part of the novel.[15] It is the final section of the narrative that ultimately reveals its ambiguous and subjective character – the unexpected, open ending marks the author as unreliable and duplicitous, since Briony "deliberately provides information that is later falsified by subsequent statements in the narration."[16] One aspect remains unchallenged and unaltered throughout the narrative – namely Briony's duplicitous, intrinsically subjective stance – as child and adult alike. Hence, from a structural viewpoint, the narrative of Atonement is undermined specifically by Briony's constructed perspective of reality.[17]

The function of the author in postmodern fiction is placed under scrutiny, and Michel Foucault investigates the complex position of the author from a poststructuralist angle in his essay "What Is an Author?". Instead of perceiving the author as an instance of authority and provider of meaning, an author is nothing else but a social construct society attributes meaning to.[18] Building on Barthes' "The Death of the Author," Foucault further argues that the function of the author

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[12] Ibid.*,* 306.

[13] Ibid.*,* 280.

[14] Huw Marsh, "Narrative Unreliability and Metarepresentation in Ian McEwan's *Atonement;* or, why Robbie might be guilty and why nobody seems to notice," *Textual Practice* 32, no. 8 (2017): 1336.

[15] Marsh, "Narrative Unreliability and Metarepresentation," 1336.

[16] Brian Richardson, *Unnatural Voices: Extreme Narration in Modern and Contemporary Fiction* (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press), 93-94.

[17] Marsh, "Narrative Unreliability and Metarepresentation."

[18] Michel Foucault, "What Is an Author?," in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews,* ed. Donald F. Bouchard (New York: Cornell University Press, 1977), 121.

ought to be redefined and the reader should recentre his/her attention on the text, since concentrating on the author's function too much can limit and inhibit a more profound comprehension of the narrative. Thus, a more in-depth understanding of the novel would require the reader to distance himself/herself from the text and the authoritative instance of authorship and analyse the grounds of Briony's confession. We could argue that McEwan utilises the novel to demonstrate the ambiguous and constructed nature character of storytelling, since writing it is alternately utilised throughout the novel to modify the truth. Simultaneously, the use of a duplicitous narrator reveals the ease with which reality can be distorted through fiction: the reliability of the written word isn't inherited, just as the author's authority over the text isn't ontological.

Bruno Zerweck discusses the presence of unreliability and uncertainty as a pervasive element that characterizes contemporary fiction, since "subjectivity and unreliability are accepted as realities, and reliability is regarded as an impossibility,"[19] in the sense that reliability is perceived as an inconceivable scenario in literature. Concurrently, the narrator that openly recognizes the epistemological limitations of storytelling is more in line with the finite spectrum of fictional representation. In the opening pages of *The Trials of Arabella,* Briony's belief in the power of fiction and the order brought through the written word perceived from an ironic angle: "an unruly world could just be made so."[20] Briony's trust in the narrative is a leitmotif of the novel, yet it is ironically conveyed, as the legitimacy of the written word is placed under scrutiny.

Umberto Eco has extensively analysed the element of ambiguity in his work *The Open Work* (1962). According to his study, traditional or classical art delivered a more straightforward message, meaning that it lacked ambiguity. Art would be used as a medium to deliver a message, to provide a response to its readers or viewers. Notwithstanding, in the context of modern or postmodern art, the medium of representation differs, the message is systematically and deliberately delivered in an ambiguous manner. Eco provides consequent examples to demonstrate this viewpoint, by referring to various modern and postmodern texts which mirror ambiguity, since various potential meanings coexist between the lines. The sense of openness can be accomplished through various means – not only through language but through the structure of the text as well – as it is the case with McEwan's novel, which intertwines distinct metafictional devices. A modern work of art is characterised by openness since it provides the possibility of numerous interpretations, as it is capable of generating different experiences.[21] Hence, it is through this ambiguous element that the reader (in the case of the written modern text) is challenged to interpret the text from his/her personal perspective, ambiguity – or openness – determining him/her to become an active participant in the interpretation of the text, instead of a passive recipient:

[19] Bruno Zerweck, "Historicizing Unreliable Narration: Unreliability and Cultural Discourse in Narrative Fiction," *Style* 35, no.1 (2001): 171.
[20] McEwan, *Atonement,* 7.
[21] Umberto Eco, *The Open Work,* trans. Anna Cancogni (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 24.

> "Any work of art can be viewed as a message to be decoded by an addressee. But unlike most messages, instead of aiming at transmitting a univocal meaning, the work of art succeeds precisely insofar as it appears ambiguous and open-ended. (...) The addressee finds himself in the situation of a cryptographer forced to decode a message whose code is unknown, and who therefore has to learn the code of the message from the message itself."[22]

This further outlines the role of the reader and the requirement for an interactive connection between author-text-reader. Another argument elaborated by Eco is that openness deliberately facilitates an incomplete experience, with the sole purpose of inciting the reader's natural curiosity and yearning for completion.[23] Hence, ambiguity occurs in the text with the deliberate intention of the author, being regarded as a productive feature, since it facilitates a dynamic relationship with the reader, in contrast with a *closed* work whose significance is less nuanced and open to interpretation. If we were to apply this concept to *Atonement*, we could say that through the uncertainty and extreme subjectivity delivered by the protagonist-narrator Briony, McEwan challenges the reader to reexamine the constructed element of the narrative, and assess the blend of reality, imagination and memory. An example in this respect could be McEwan's epilogue, representing the two lovers reunited only on the pages of Briony's novel, as in real life they were both dead. The scope of the epilogue is to emphasise the deconstruction of the narrative, which is a mere mirror of fictionalized reality, an artificial construction rooted in the author's subjectivity.

The elaborate, ambiguous plot of the novel is reconfigured in the making of the film also through the medium of visual and sound effects, including the attentive distribution of diegetic and non-diegetic sound that play a key part in composing the metafictional framing of the novel. The presence of discourse as an invisible power that shapes our reality is thus represented in the film through recurring references to the written text. An example would be the sound effect of the typewriter, which is integrated in the film at specific, attentively chosen moments. Namely, the viewers are introduced to the stringent sound of the typewriter from the very beginning of the novel, attesting to the presence of an omniscient author that is in charge of the storyline developing in front of them. In one of his interviews, Joe Wright has highlighted the intention of creating the illusion of an omnipresent writer through the sound effect of the typewriter, marking the subjective nature of the text in the process of creating or uncreating reality.[24] Simultaneously, the soundtrack of the film composed by Dario Marianelli plays a crucial role in articulating the essence of narrative subjectivity via audiovisual discourse. Hence, both the novel and the film deliver the same message about the acute subjectivity tied to the act of storytelling, but through different means. Specifically, the main piano theme integrated in the soundtrack entitled *Briony* becomes keenly emblematic, especially due to the rhythmic, almost obsessive sound of the typewriter that gradually becomes the main focus, eclipsing the calm opening melody that

[22] Eco, *The Open Work,* 195.
[23] Ibid.*,* 74.
[24] Edward Douglas, "Joe Wright on Directing *Atonement*," *Comingsoon.net,* November 2007, accessed January 14, 2026, https://www.comingsoon.net/movies/features/39526-joe-wright-on-directing-atonement.

introduces us into Briony's mind in the beginning of the film. The tension of the melody becomes more intense, as the sound of the typewriter becomes more prevalent and is gradually accompanied by a conglomeration of strings and other instruments, contributing to establishing and communicating the decisiveness of the scene. Thus, we could argue that the soundtrack functions as a narrative equivalent, articulating the narratorial presence of the author that is in charge of the plot. Simultaneously, the precisiveness of the melody, notably empowered by the sound of the typewriter highlight Briony's self-centred personality, attesting to her self-attributed role of a demiurge-child, who dares to represent the voices of the people she harmed – Cecilia and Robbie – in order to accomplish atonement by changing the narrative through the act of storytelling. The soundtrack composed by Marianelli is also fundamentally important in recreating the ambiguity of discourse that is key to the novel. Since the sound of the typewriter is synchronized with the melody of the soundtrack, at specific moments, we cannot separate or analyse this sound effect as wholly diegetic or wholly non-diegetic, since it has distinct functions at given times. Specifically, in the incipient phase of the melody, we see Briony absorbed in writing at her desk, in front of her typewriter. During her writing, the dominant function of the typewriter sound is clearly diegetic; however, as Briony gets about her business walking around the house, the typewriter sound becomes meta-diegetic, as it externalises Briony's position as the author, instead of operating merely as a non-diegetic sound. Thus, the sound effect externalises a more profound perspective, alluding to Briony's subjective stance. Additionally, since the sound effect is synchronized with the soundtrack, this might also hint at Briony's authorship and acute sensitivity in recreating a different reality. The musical theme is reiterated in numerous variations throughout the film, attempting to capture the intricate labyrinth of Briony's thoughts on that decisive summer day.[25] Concurrently, the audiovisual discourse effectively contributes to establishing a given degree of ontological ambiguity, determining the audience to ask whether the sound comes from a given space in the film (house, outside, etc.) or whether it can be fully attributed to Briony's narrative discourse. The purpose of the sound effect is disclosed in the final minutes of the film, as Briony's identity as author of the story is revealed in the epilogue, thus crystalizing the meta-diegetic function of the typewriter sound. Briony's delayed confusion has also been preserved in the film, effectively generating suspense whilst mirroring the ambiguous character of discourse. The interplay between moments accompanied by dominant musical themes and the sheer absence of music at other times is deeply metaphorical and purposefully arranged. At times, the director of the film intentionally points the attention of the audience towards raw, natural sounds (e.g. water, birds, etc.) in order to mark a pause and to highlight the expressivity of silence.[26] Moreover, in order to communicate the ambiguity of the narrative perspective, Wright replays the same section of the film – namely the scene by the fountain between Cecilia and Robbie – twice. As Robbie wants to help Cecilia fill the vase with water, a piece of the vase breaks off and falls into water. Consequently, Cecilia undresses and gets inside to water to rescue the missing piece. Firstly,

[25] Alexandra M. Wilson, "Unreliable Authors; Unreliable History: Opera in Joe Wright's Adaptation of *Atonement,*" *Cambridge Opera Journal* 27, no. 2 (2015): 10, https://doi.org/10.1017/S095458671500004X.
[26] Wilson, "Unreliable Authors; Unreliable History: Opera in Joe Wright's Adaptation of *Atonement,*" 11.

this scene is observed by the audience through Briony's subjective perspective – as she watches everything by the window, from her room. While she is unaware of the argument between Cecilia and Robbie, she is troubled by Cecilia's emergence out of the fountain, as she conveyed her body language as indecent and inappropriate. The scene is accompanied by a pertinent soundtrack, this time reiterated via strings and horn, instead of the piano in the introductory scenes, constructing Briony's alarming, slightly perplexing attitude towards the interaction between Cecilia and Robbie.[27] Immediately afterwards, the point of narration is alternated; we are introduced to a close-up narrating the same interaction from before, only this time through Cecilia and Robbie's point of view, instead of Briony's subjective perspective. This time, the scene lacks accompanying music, which intensifies the rawness of the connection between the two.

Another superbly rendered scene in the film that captures the essence of subjective perception is the Dunkirk scene, which mirrors the evacuation of the British soldiers in World War Two. In the novel, Robbie's consciousness is the medium through which we are narrated the Dunkirk episode, as McEwan's narrative concentrates on the physical and psychological deterioration that acutely shapes Robbie's perception: "Robbie was walking on a tender place on his foot, and the pain was constant, like a noise."[28] The physical pain juxtaposes the internal sense of collapse, being a medium through which the entire narrative is built. McEwan contours the image of a war that lacks the glory and false optimism that has been universally evocative of the Dunkirk spirit.[29] Conversely, war is presented through a succession of incoherent impressions, that are on the verge of hallucinations: "He could not begin to describe what he saw."[30] Robbie's inability to fully grasp what is happening around him is further rendered in the emblematic five-minute long shot on the beach. The technique used by the filmmakers – that of a single, uncut film shot – aims to encapsulate the brutal, unfiltered reality of war. The shot follows Robbie as he aimlessly moves along the beach accompanied by his companions, fuelling the internal dynamism of the scene. The long shot encapsulates the sense that there is no escape whatsoever, neither for Robbie, nor for the thousands of soldiers, as they are all trapped in a terrible nightmare of endless destruction and pain. The focus is thus redirected towards the general sense of chaos created by the war, which is minutely intertwined with Robbie's subjective perception. The circular tracking shot concentrates on reflecting the anxiety and grief experienced by each soldier. The emblematic Christian hymn about peace, overlapping the distressing soundtrack that depicts acute feelings of tension and apprehension are paradoxically combined. Namely, the tunes of the hymn contribute to reinforcing Robbie's desperation when faced with the horror of war and death. The filmmakers' unexpected intercalation of contrasting diegetic and non-diegetic music alludes to the constructed character of the scene, outlining the fact that our perception of reality is constructed through distinct forms of artifice. The Dunkirk sequence perfectly exemplifies the cinematic power of

[27] Wilson, "Unreliable Authors; Unreliable History: Opera in Joe Wright's Adaptation of *Atonement,*" 11.
[28] McEwan, *Atonement,* 210.
[29] Christine Geraghty, "Foregrounding the Media: *Atonement* (2007) as an Adaptation," *Adaptation* 2, no. 2 (2009): 99, https://doi.org/10.1093/adaptation/app006.
[30] McEwan, *Atonement,* 229.

narration accomplished through movie effects such as camera movement combined with attentively chosen diegetic and non-diegetic music; while the audience cannot depict the presence of an author, the sense of narration is masterfully built through effective storytelling techniques.[31] The long shot manages to depict the essence of what film critic André Bazin attributes to cinematic realism, which combines temporal and spatial integrity with an acutely subjective representation of war, thus alluding to the "ambiguity of reality."[32] Therefore, the audience can absorb the depth of the war scene through the use of specific visual effects, as the filmmakers created the impression of Robbie's consciousness as a medium for expressing the terrible reality of the war. Thus, the long shot plays a key part in establishing a sense of external narrative authority, adding to the ambiguity regarding the narrator of the scene. This approach is meant to render the co-existence of distinct narrative perspectives in McEwan's novel; specifically, the second part of the novel – which includes Robbie's wartime experience – is presented through Robbie's subjective perspective. Notwithstanding, the reader eventually discovers that Briony is the author of this section of the narrative as well, which once again attests to the constructed element of the written word. Hence, the Dunkirk episode remains one of the most representative scenes that epitomises the paradoxical infrastructure of narrative authority. It attests to the constructed aspect of subjective perception, attempting to contour Briony's complicated interiority as a storyteller seeking redemption through storytelling.

III. **Conclusion: (Un)certainty as a Transmedial Phenomenon**

To conclude, McEwan's narrative and the film adaptation attest to the constructed, subjective element of fiction. Just as the reader finds it difficult to depict the voice of the author whilst reading the novel, the film adaptation preserves the same ambiguous element whilst attempting to reconfigure the characters' consciousness through cinematic means such as camera staging, editing, combined with special visual and sound effects. The ending of the novel and the film alike emphasise the acutely subjective, unreliable nature of storytelling, as Briony's final testimony is defined by ambiguity, triggering a sequence of questions regarding authorship. McEwan acknowledges the duplicitous nature of the final part of the narrative in one of his interviews: "it is both an act of cowardice… but it is also her stand against oblivion – she's seventy years old, her tide is running very fast… She does not have the courage of her pessimism… She knows that when this novel is finally published… she herself will only become a character."[33] Simultaneously, Briony's final statement that "atonement was always an impossible task and that was precisely the point"[34] accentuates precisely the ambiguous element of the novel, the contradiction of expecting

[31] David Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), 50-53.
[32] André Bazin, *What Is Cinema?,* vol. 1, trans. Hugh Gray (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), 37.
[33] Ian McEwan, interview with Michael Silverblatt, *Bookworm (KCRW)*, July 11, 2002, accessed on 16 January, 2026, https://www.kcrw.com/culture/shows/bookworm/ian-mcewan.
[34] McEwan, *Atonement,* 307.

or attaining atonement through fiction, whilst concurrently highlighting the paradoxical motivation of her attempt. We can only try to make our own interpretation of the text and the film as Eco suggests, in the same way in which Briony sought to interpret Cecilia and Robbie's reality to bring a hypothetical restoration to their relationship. The impossibility of atonement is ultimately a quintessential characteristic of our own humanity, and it is precisely this conclusion that elucidates the power of storytelling as a remedy for human suffering.