“To be sure, one must first know to what end the adaptation is designed: for the cinema or for its audience. One must also realize that most adapters care far more about the latter than about the former.”

—André Bazin, “Adaptation, or the Cinema as Digest”
A RHETORICAL APPROACH TO ADAPTATION:
EFFECTS, PURPOSES, AND THE FIDELITY DEBATE

DISSEPTION

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Abstract

*A Rhetorical Approach to Adaptation* seeks to transform the longstanding debate in adaptation studies about the proper way to conceive of the relation between adaptations and their sources. More specifically, it draws upon key insights of the rhetorical theory of narrative to move beyond the debate between traditional advocates of formal fidelity to source material and more recent arguments that both sources and adaptations are infinitely intertextual. Despite their differences, both of these critical positions are content to compare events, characters, and techniques. In contrast, my rhetorical perspective closely attends to the multi-layered purposes—thematic, affective, and ethical—of both source and adaptation. By providing a new framework for understanding adaptation—source and target may use different means in service of similar purposes, similar means to achieve different purposes, and so on—I reposition fidelity as only one possible purpose for any adapter, while also detailing different kinds of intertextuality and what they accomplish in the work’s own terms. My dissertation moves past the original debate by showing that adapters may consider differences not only in media, but also in historical situation, audience, and authorial vision. As a result,
my rhetorical approach provides both better evaluations and better analyses of adaptations and their sources.

_A Rhetorical Approach to Adaptation_ combines its theoretical case for a fresh conception of adaptation with a series of new readings of modern and postmodern narratives. I have chosen narratives that foreground tricky problems of adapting print sources to film, specifically: how to deal with the shift in authorship in filming an autobiography (Susanna Kaysen’s _Girl, Interrupted_ and Harvey Pekar’s comic series _American Splendor_); how to deal with different conceptions of—and expectations about—flesh-and-blood audiences (Annie Proulx’s “Brokeback Mountain”); how to set up and deliver an effective twist ending (Ian McEwan’s _Atonement_); and how to convey the ethical dimension of a narrative that depends as much on its narration as on its events (Toni Morrison’s _Beloved_ and Russell Banks’s _The Sweet Hereafter_). From these case studies emerges a new theoretical approach to adaptation, one which recognizes the fundamental differences between different media while also comparing them in fruitful and incisive ways.
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Chapter 1: Between Scylla and Charybdis

Let me begin with a story.

In October of 2010, the fifth annual conference of the Association of Adaptation Studies was hosted by the Centre for British Studies in Berlin, and I was fortunate enough to be in attendance, presenting material that would go on to become the second chapter of this study. The detail from the AAS conference that I want to focus on here—the moment that makes the study you hold in your hands necessary—is one that I hope my readers will come to find as wrongheaded as I did at the time. The conference ended with a final roundtable discussion that featured half a dozen luminaries of the field, many of whom I quote in this study, who were tasked with summing up the conference proceedings and reflecting on what was to come, both for the field and for the AAS as an organization. The moderator began the session with the following question: “Over the past few days, we’ve heard a variety of competing theorizations of what adaptation means and how we as critics and theorists should approach analyzing these texts. As the field moves forward and gains more visibility, what do we think of this wealth of theoretical riches? Are we content to have a host of rival and sometimes contradictory theoretical approaches, or should we aim to establish a kind of ‘Grand Unified Field Theory’ of adaptation?” My academic readers will no doubt recognize this kind of softball. It’s the sort of slow pitch
that invites the panelists to close the conference on a high note by rejecting out of hand anything so absurd as a single, unified theoretical approach and celebrating instead the diversity of views represented over the previous days. And predictably, the group refuted the notion that any such definitive theory is possible in the first place and argued that even if it were, no self-respecting scholar could want such a thing.

But it was the first speaker’s opening line that struck me as most illuminating that day, shining a light on a singular blind spot in the field. Taking the podium, the speaker responded to the moderator’s question by stating emphatically, “Of course we would all endorse a host of critical approaches to adaptation, now that we all agree that fidelity is a dead letter.” Those readers who are well-versed in adaptation theory will no doubt recognize this sentiment, just as those who are new to the discipline will likely be startled by this confident rejection of what must seem to be a, if not the, central question at issue in the study of adaptation. But either group can certainly recognize the irony inherent in a statement that in a single breath celebrates a diversity of opinion, provided that these opinions are all grounded on a single article of consensus. It is this irony to which I direct this study.

I tell you that story to tell you another one: the story of how fidelity became a four letter word and its analysis and theorization an act of disciplinary heresy. In the following pages, I will explain how adaptation studies began and how it evolved into its contemporary state, wherein the question that we all might ask ourselves when we leave the latest *Harry Potter* or Jane Austen adaptation—how did that stack up against the book?—has become the one question that no Serious Scholar of adaptation must ever ask.
How did we get here? Why the hostility to this central question? And where do we go from here? Is fidelity worth talking about? And if so, how can we? It is to these questions that I now turn.

**The source of fidelity**

The question of how various media are alike and different goes back at least as far as 18 BCE, when Horace, in his *Ars Poetica*, issued his famous *ut pictura poesis*:

Poetry is like painting. Some attracts you more if you stand near, some further off. One picture likes a dark place, one will need to be seen in the light, because it’s not afraid of the critic’s sharp judgment. One gives pleasure once, one will please if you look it over ten times. (132)

This brief passage has become a touchstone of interart theorization, quoted and referenced in virtually any study of the topic. The same thread, for example, is picked up and developed in 1766 by Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, who begins his *Laocoon: An Essay upon the Limits of Painting and Poetry* by referring to Horace as “a man of fine feeling, who was conscious of a similar effect produced on himself by both arts” (vii). His admiration for this fine sense of feeling, however, does not prevent Lessing from ultimately calling this the view of an “amateur,” as compared to the more sophisticated “critic” who grasps that “[b]eauty, our first idea of which is derived from corporeal objects, has universal laws which admit of wide application” and who, “pondering upon the value and distribution of these laws, found that some obtained more in painting,
others in poetry” (vii – viii). Indeed, as telegraphed in his titular emphasis on limits, Lessing ultimately reaches the opposite conclusion from Horace’s:

    Painting, in its coexistent compositions, can use but a single moment of an action, and must therefore choose the most pregnant one, the one most suggestive of what has gone before and what is to follow.

    Poetry, in its progressive imitations, can use but a single attribute of bodies, and must choose that one which gives the most vivid picture of the body as exercised in this particular action. (92)

In other words, whereas Horace sees poetry and painting as fundamentally similar because they are capable of producing analogous effects, Lessing claims that their fundamental difference is much greater than Horace acknowledges, in that painting is a spatial art and poetry a time art. In fact, Lessing’s argument is as much prescriptive as it is descriptive, arguing that each medium ought to choose subjects that are appropriate to its own strengths and limitations—as contemporary media theory would have it, its own affordances. In Lessing’s words, “[i]f painting claim to be the sister of poetry, let the younger at least not be jealous of the elder, nor seek to deprive her of ornaments unbecoming to herself” (61).

    We can see in Horace and Lessing one of the two oppositions that has come to dominate adaptation theory: the competition between analogical approaches, which argue that media differ in their means of expression but can be seen as metaphorically similar, and categorical approaches, which argue that different media comprise completely separate and exclusive artistic realms whose borders artists and critics ignore at their
peril. Analogical approaches have always been present—for example in Eisenstein’s often anthologized essay comparing the montage techniques of Charles Dickens and D. W. Griffith—and have become increasingly visible over the last ten years, most notably in Kamilla Elliott’s groundbreaking *Rethinking the Novel/Film Debate*. But the categorical view has been the primary way of understanding interart relations throughout the twentieth century, and it continues to dominate thinking on the subject today. W. J. T. Mitchell encapsulated the power of this orthodoxy best when he observed that “[w]e tend to think . . . that to compare poetry with painting is to make a metaphor, while to differentiate poetry from painting is to state a literal truth” (49).

This categorical approach is deeply imbedded in the mid-twentieth-century emergence of adaptation studies as a discipline, which begins with the publication of George Bluestone’s seminal *Novels into Film: The Metamorphosis of Fiction into Cinema* in 1957. In fact, his first chapter alludes to the foundational nature of the categorical premise; by naming the chapter “The Limits of the Novel and the Limits of the Film,” Bluestone indirectly references his debt to Lessing’s own work on limits. In this chapter, Bluestone discusses at some length what he regards as the incommensurable realms of prose and cinema. According to Bluestone, “the root difference between the two media” of cinema and prose is the opposition “between the percept of the visual image and the concept of the mental image” (1). In other words, Bluestone claims that the fundamental experiences of the two media move in opposite directions: film viewers experience first the visual image, which then suggests mental concepts, while readers mentally construct visual, auditory, and other stimuli from the abstract signifiers of
language. Film and prose are both “organic,” by which Bluestone means “that aesthetic judgments are based on total ensembles which include both formal and thematic conventions,” and this organic quality combined with this fundamental percept/concept distinction results in Bluestone’s dictum that “differences in form and theme are inseparable from differences in media” (2). In making this claim, then, Bluestone challenges the assumption that film adaptation is a movement “from a given set of fluid, but relatively homogeneous, conventions to another” (5). Rather, “changes are inevitable the moment one abandons the linguistic for the visual medium,” and for Bluestone, “the end products of novel and film represent different aesthetic genera, as different from each other as ballet is from architecture” (ibid., emphasis original).

From this central percept/concept difference, Bluestone expands outward into a variety of other distinctions that he reads as key to understanding novel-to-film adaptation. These include—taking his subheadings as categories—contrasts in the media, the audiences and myths, and time and space. Under the first category, Bluestone includes the physical differences between print media and celluloid projection. Of particular note among these physical differences is the difference between the single track narration of prose fiction and—after the October 1927 release of The Jazz Singer, at least—the multitrack narration of sound film. ¹ Under the heading of cultural myths, Bluestone files all the myriad ways in which the contemporary film and the canonical novel operate in different cultural domains, fulfill different cultural roles, and therefore are targeted

¹ While this difference—a subset of the word/image distinction—may seem at first to be axiomatic, Elliott does a great deal to undermine this as an inherent medial distinction by considering both the existence of illustrations in novels (such as the famous Tenniel illustrations in Alice in Wonderland) and the presence of prose intertitles in silent film.
toward different audiences, though, of course, it is important to note that these distinctions are historically bound and have changed since 1957.

Lastly, Bluestone addresses how film and prose differ in their treatment of time and space. Bluestone notes that “the novel has three tenses, the film has only one,” and further argues that this temporal distinction has consequences for each medium’s ability to represent consciousness, one of the key aspects of twentieth-century fiction (48). With this in mind, Bluestone reads Robert Wiene’s 1920 *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, arguing that:

> [s]ince the camera is always the narrator, we need concern ourselves only with the chronological duration of the viewing and the time-span of the narrative events. Even when a narrator appears in the film, the basic orientation does not change. When Francis begins to tell the story of Dr. Caligari, the camera shows his face; then the camera shifts to the scene of the story and there takes over the telling. What has happened is not so much that Francis has turned over the role of narrator to the omniscient camera as that the omniscient camera has included Francis as part of the narrative from the beginning. (49 – 50)

Ultimately, Bluestone concludes that “the film has not yet begun to question its ability to render certain types of physical and even psychological reality,” while the novel, a more mature medium, is “no longer so confident” (14).

Pausing here, it is worth raising some objections that Bluestone’s categorical approach prevents him from seeing. For example, consider his argument that the novel has three tenses while film is limited to one, a claim that has a certain common sense
appeal. In making this claim, though, Bluestone actually manages to simultaneously underestimate both media. On the one hand, tenses like the pluperfect, perfect, imperfect, and future perfect (I had gone / I went / I was going / I will have gone) complicate Bluestone’s simple past/present/future prose temporality, as do narrative modes like the iterative (narrating one time what happened multiple times, as in Proust’s famous “For a long time I used to go to bed early”). As for film having only a single tense, while it is theoretically true that any given film image divorced from its context will be chronologically indeterminate, one wonders how Bluestone managed to avoid seeing such classic American films as *Citizen Kane* (1941), *Casablanca* (1942), *Double Indemnity* (1944), *Sunset Boulevard* (1950), *All About Eve* (1950), and *Singin’ in the Rain* (1951), all of which would be completely unintelligible for a viewer who is incapable of understanding a cinematic flashback. In other words, Bluestone’s categorical approach prompts him to insist upon clear and distinct borders between film and prose in spite of evidence to the contrary, rather than deducing from the available evidence the obvious fact that both media are capable of a variety of different kinds of temporal representation.

Bluestone’s reading of the *Caligari* narration is likewise problematic, as it is premised on a false dichotomy. Bluestone posits that either Francis must cede his status as narrator to the omniscient camera after his tale of the malevolent Dr. Caligari begins, or that the same omniscient camera must have been narrating the entire film from its opening shot, including Francis’s on-screen introduction to his story. In either case, Bluestone insists that the omniscient camera must be solely responsible for the tale that takes up the majority of the film’s length. Viewers familiar with Wiene’s film will
immediately notice a problem with this assertion, in that the end of the film returns to the
frame story to reveal that Francis is actually the inmate of an asylum, and that his eerie
tale of the deranged Dr. Caligari and his somnambulist familiar Cesare is in fact the
ravings of a madman. Thus in claiming that it is the camera, and not Francis, that is solely
responsible for the narration of this tale, Bluestone singles out the one part of the film
whose images necessarily must be the product of Francis’s mind. I’ll have more to say
about the possibilities for reliable and unreliable character narration on a film’s image
track in later discussions of Atonement, Beloved, and The Sweet Hereafter, but for the
moment what is significant is that Bluestone’s categorical distinctions between film and
prose preclude him from recognizing unreliable narration when he literally sees it in front
of him, since he disallows the possibility for any kind of visual narration but the
omniscient camera to which he attributes Francis’s story.

While we could continue to point out individual flaws in Bluestone’s analysis, the
important thing that emerges here is the problem with the categorical approach, at least as
Bluestone deploys it: it builds in a bias for prose and against cinema by first attributing
the successful effects of prose narration exclusively to formal features inherent to that
medium, then evaluating cinema relative to those formal features that it lacks. This is
distilled most clearly in a proscriptive passage from Virginia Woolf’s 1926 “The Movies
and Reality,” which Bluestone quotes:

Even the simplest image: “my love’s like a red, red rose, that’s newly sprung in
June,” presents us with impressions of moisture and warmth and the flow of
crimson and the softness of petals inextricably mixed and strung upon the lift of a
rhythm which is itself the voice of the passion and the hesitation of the love. All this, which is accessible to words, and to words alone, the cinema must avoid.

(qtd. in Bluestone 21)

What both Bluestone and Woolf don’t see—indeed, can’t see because of their logocentric bias—is that all of these qualities (“impressions of moisture and warmth,” etc.) are no more inherent in the lines quoted from Robert Burns’s poem than they are in a filmic image of a rose. Rather, the sensory and emotional impressions Woolf refers to are connotations that happen to attach to these lines because of the organic whole of the poem, the cultural environment in which these words and lines exist, and Woolf’s own subjective experiences of love, roses, June, warmth, softness, and the rest.

This is important because of the bias it reveals. There is no reason to assume, pace Woolf, that cinema is incapable of similar abstract connotations. The reader needs only recall the image of Watanabe singing softly on a swing at the end of Kurosawa’s *Ikiru* (1952) or the creeping shadow of the vampire in Murnau’s *Nosferatu* (1922), imagine the sweeping shots of Monument Valley in Ford’s *The Searchers* (1956) or the claustrophobic streets of a dystopian Los Angeles in Scott’s *Blade Runner* (1982), or hear Marlon Brando crying out Stella’s name or the mechanical whoosh of a lightsaber to know that film can and does produce emotional connotations in excess of its visual and auditory denotations, just as language does with verbal signs. The kind of categorical approach represented here by Woolf and Bluestone confuses what is produced—in this case, emotional reactions on the part of an audience—with the formal methods of how it is
produced, assuming that film is incapable of producing similar ends through different means.

We’ll return to this question of ends and means presently, but it is important to note that Bluestone’s work, and the logocentric bias embedded in its categorical approach, is the beginning of study of film adaptation as a discipline. It is also, then, the theoretical approach that lay at the heart of conceptions of fidelity from this inception in 1957. For Bluestone and those who followed him, fidelity was an evaluation of a film adaptation’s success as measured in terms of the formal features of its source material. This formal comparison of cinematic apples and prose oranges produced the expected results, with the cinematic fruit inevitably lacking the citric bite that Bluestone hoped for. In fact, Bluestone goes so far as to claim that while “it has always been easy to recognize how a poor film ‘destroys’ a superior novel. . . . [w]hat has not been sufficiently recognized is that such destruction is inevitable” (62).

And thus, as strange as it seems, both fidelity as a theoretical construct and adaptation studies as a discipline were born. From the outset, the assumption was that fidelity was paradoxically both impossible and the only goal of adaptation as an aesthetic practice. The best a film adaptation could hope to manage was to imitate successfully what had already been accomplished with more originality in another medium, and even then, the failure of film adaptation was inevitable because of the strict categorical divide between verbal and visual languages, which denied to cinema what was inherent in the formal features of prose. It is no surprise, then, that James Naremore says in the introduction to his *Film Adaptation* that “the very subject of adaptation has constituted
one of the most jejune areas of scholarly writing about the cinema‖ (1). After all, there are only so many ways to say that the book was better.

The rise of intertextuality

In making these critiques of formalist fidelity, I am echoing the predominant discourse in adaptation studies as it exists today. The fundamental shift came at the turn of the century, and since then, as David Kranz puts it, ―adaptation studies has, somewhat anachronistically, become the target of reform by several adherents of post-structuralist approaches within the now expanded field of film and media studies‖ (78). While Kranz notes that this shift seems odd given the gradual movement away from theory on the part of literature departments over the same decade, this poststructuralist position offers a formidable critique of the formalist conception of fidelity that has defined the field for much of its history.

The poststructuralist critique of formal fidelity is essentially the one I have articulated above. To quote my Berlin speaker, fidelity is a “dead letter” because it depends for its theoretical intelligibility, first, on a comparison between unlike semantic entities, and second, on one essentially and unfairly biased towards prose fiction. In other words, the game was rigged in prose’s favor from the start, and the rules didn’t make sense to begin with, anyway. The poststructuralist critics propose instead a reworking of the entire field of adaptation studies away from the concept of fidelity and instead around the poststructuralist notion of intertextuality. This approach takes as dogmatic Roland
Barthes’s dictum that “to try to find the ‘sources’, the ‘influences’ of a work is to fall in with the myth of filiation; the citations which go to make up a text are anonymous, untraceable, and yet already read: they are quotations without inverted commas” (160, emphasis original). Applying this same sentiment to film adaptation specifically, Robert Stam claims that:

filmic adaptations . . . are hypertexts derived from preexisting hypotexts that have been transformed by operations of selection, amplification, concretization, and actualization. . . . Film adaptations, then, are caught up in the ongoing whirl of intertextual reference and transformation, of text generating other texts in an endless process of recycling, transformation, and transmutation, with no clear point of origin.  

Thus instead of situating a film adaptation in a one-to-one relationship with its source material, the poststructuralist approach attempts to locate adaptations as nodes in a matrix, interconnected with a potentially infinite web of other texts, of which the so-called “source” material is only one insignificant part. Replacing a system of formal fidelity that assumes an adaptation to be a necessarily pale imitation of another text, intertextuality posits an endless network of quotation, reference, and allusion in which even “original” texts are always already derivative and imitative and no hierarchies of primary and secondary textual value can be said to exist.

In practice, scholarship in this vein takes the form of a kind of intertextual scavenger hunt and represents, along with denunciations of formal fidelity, the bulk of

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2 In addition the Barthes, Stam’s thinking here is also inflected by Gerard Genette’s terminology from *Palimpsests* and Mikhail Bakhtin’s dialogics.
academic writing in adaptation studies over the last decade. An example of this form can be found in Donald Whaley’s work on Francis Ford Coppola’s *Apocalypse Now* (1979). Whaley acknowledges that Coppola’s film is deeply indebted to Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, representing as it does a transposition both of Conrad’s basic plot and of his indictment of African colonialism into the horrifying landscape of Vietnam. But Whaley argues that everyone already knows this, and that by focusing on the hierarchical relationship between Coppola’s film and Conrad’s novella, we elide much more interesting intertextual references, quotations, and influences. Whaley highlights specific allusions to Dante’s *Inferno*, Kubrick’s *Dr. Strangelove*, and Ford’s *The Searchers*, among others, but regardless of the specific intertextual citations, the point is that *Apocalypse Now* is recontextualized from a film imitating a prose precursor to a remixed pastiche of a host of prose and cinematic texts, each one of which is similarly intertextual and none of which takes priority over another.

This kind of analysis is interesting and worthwhile, not only for the insight it gives us into individual texts like Coppola’s film, but as a reminder of the kind of the “endless process of recycling, transformation, and transmutation” that is inherent in artistic production, and it is an important part of the theoretical and analytical conversation that goes on in adaptation studies. (In this sense, I, too, prefer a variety of competing voices to a single orthodoxy.) The poststructuralist approach becomes a problem, however, when it shifts from being a lens through which we look at a text and becomes instead a dogmatic principle of the discipline. Take, for example, Thomas Leitch’s 2003 essay on the state of the field, in which he objects both to fidelity criticism
specifically and the use of literary tools in the study of film more generally. Reiterating the claims of Barthes and Stam, Leitch wonders why, if “every text, including allegedly original sourcetexts, depends on numberless intertexts . . . does it suit observers to elevate some intertexts to the status of sources and ignore others?” (“Where Are We Going . . .” 331 – 32). I’ll answer this rhetorical question presently, but for the moment, it is important to see where Leitch is going here. Rather than suggesting that this observation entails a particular analytical approach to specific adapted texts, Leitch wants to remake not only the field of adaptation studies, but indeed, the entire discipline of textual studies in general. In his words, the intertextual nature of all texts “seeks to dethrone the English Department’s traditional emphasis on literature, the existing canon that deserves close study and faithful adaptation, and replace it with literacy, the study of the ways texts have been, might be, and should be read and rewritten” (ibid. 332, emphasis original).

In order to demonstrate the fallacy here, consider a thought experiment. Assume for the moment that Leitch is correct not only about the fundamentally intertextual nature of all texts, but also about the disciplinary and structural implications this has for the study of prose, visual, and other texts in higher education. And assume further that we take his advice, housing all the different kinds of textual study in the Intertextual Studies Department and inflecting them all through the predominating lens of literacy. Granting Leitch all of this, his approach still has a fatal flaw: in this brave new world of intertextual studies, scholars will still need to develop a specific critical language for talking about the special case of a text that bears a particularly strong intertextual relationship to another specific text—in other words, an adaptation.
To put it another way, Leitch asks “why does it suit observers to elevate some intertexts to the status of sources and ignore others?” Though Leitch’s phrasing suggests that he sees this strange habit as indefensible, the answer to this question is that some texts announce themselves in a variety of ways to be adaptations, a type of text that is by definition characterized by a primary (though not exclusive) relationship with a source text. This, then, is the problem with defining the entire field of adaptation studies through the lens of poststructuralist intertextuality: in trying to address legitimate concerns with the way formal fidelity institutionalized a logocentric bias, the poststructuralist critique responded by discarding the concept entirely and redefining the field out of existence. A theory that explains everything explains nothing, and even if we accept the claims of Barthes, Stam, and Leitch to be as universal as they claim, they still leave adaptation studies without a critical vocabulary, unable to address itself to its central topic.

While the poststructuralist critique of the field was necessary and long overdue, it has blinded its proponents to some basic and obvious truths. Take, for example, another critique of the field from Leitch, “Twelve Fallacies in Contemporary Adaptation Theory.” In discussing his eighth fallacy—“Fidelity is the most appropriate criterion to use in analyzing adaptations.”—Leitch first claims that “[f]idelity to its source text . . . is a hopelessly fallacious measure of a given adaptation’s value because it is unattainable, undesirable, and theoretically possible only in a trivial sense” (161, my emphasis). But in the very next paragraph, Leitch begins by referring to “the indefensibility of fidelity as a criterion for the analysis of adaptations” as if this is the point he has just defended (ibid. 162, my emphasis). Of course Leitch knows the difference between evaluation and
analysis; the distinction is basic to any freshman composition classroom. But in making his (entirely valid) critique of formal fidelity’s logocentric bias, Leitch completely obscures this distinction, writing as if there is no difference between “the film is different from its source material” and “the film is different from its source material, and therefore worse.”

Further, by its own internal logic, an intertextual approach not only applies to everything but can ultimately say nothing. If we take the poststructuralist rejection of Barthes’s “myth of filiation” seriously, then this rejection doesn’t just undermine the examination of adaptations with respect to their primary source material. If we can say that the relationship between an adaptation and its source material is illusory, misleading, and trivial, as the poststructuralist approach claims, why are these qualities unique to that particular kind of intertextuality? Is the same not equally true, then, of these myriad other quotations and allusions? In other words, I’m willing to grant Whaley that a reading of *Apocalypse Now* that considers the film in dialogue with Dante, Kubrick, and Ford can be productive and interesting and give us a new understanding of Coppola’s film. In fact, I would agree that for much of its history, adaptation studies has been so myopically focused on formal fidelity to a named source that these intriguing intertextual possibilities have gone largely unexplored. But if the claim is that the relationship between *Apocalypse Now* and *Heart of Darkness* is trivial and illusory while the relationship between *Apocalypse Now* and Dante, Kubrick, and Ford is pregnant with meaning—a claim Whaley doesn’t make so explicitly but that is inherent in the poststructuralist rejection of even the possibility of fidelity—then one is forced to wonder how this double
standard can be maintained. If the source material is irrelevant to a reading of the film, then how can tangential allusions be significant? Or, vice versa, if so much can be said for the influence of Dante on Coppola, how can Conrad be so trivial?

Of course, the answer to these questions is that filiation isn’t a myth at all. While there are no doubt a host of clever and interesting intertextual allusions enriching David Lean’s *Great Expectations* (1946) or Robert Mulligan’s *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1962) or Kubrick’s *The Shining* (1980) or Peter Jackson’s *Lord of the Rings* series (2001 – 2003), the primary sources of these films are hardly “anonymous” or “untraceable.” Any reasonably well-read high school student could name these sources, and she wouldn’t even need Barthes’s inverted commas to do it, as they’re named right there in the titles.³ The attention poststructuralist theorists drew to the problems of formal fidelity was and continues to be necessary, but rather than repairing the concept, they simply discarded it and attempted to replace it with intertextuality. Failing to solve the problem of fidelity, they declared it moot. But the plain fact is that adaptation happens, filmgoers compare their experiences to source materials, viewers care about fidelity, and to ignore these facts is to make theory the enemy of praxis. Rather, the task of adaptation studies is not to explain why fidelity doesn’t matter, but to understand when, how, and why it does.

**A rhetorical approach to adaptation**

I hope I have convinced my readers of two things: first, that fidelity matters, and second, that approaching the study of fidelity by comparing the formal features of media

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³ Though this, of course, is not always the case.
that are presumed to be mutually exclusive—the poststructuralists were right here—is a mug’s game. The rest of this introduction and this study constitutes my modest proposal for how we can split the difference both between categorical and analogical conceptions of media and between formal fidelity and poststructuralist intertextuality.

We can begin by revisiting Horace’s *ut pictura poesis*:

Poetry is like painting. Some attracts you more if you stand near, some further off. One picture likes a dark place, one will need to be seen in the light, because it’s not afraid of the critic’s sharp judgment. One gives pleasure once, one will please if you look it over ten times. (132)

Recall that in making this statement, Horace is laying the groundwork for an analogical understanding of the relationships between different media, and recall further that Lessing critiques this analogical approach as insufficiently appreciating the categorical differences between media, in this case the difference between the spatial and the temporal. Lessing’s critique seems self-evident—after all, there are fundamental differences between kinds of art, and these differences have consequences for the affordances of any given medium—but let’s look a little closer at the stakes of Horace’s argument.

If we examine the elaboration that follows Horace’s initial statement, it becomes clear that Lessing’s critique is aimed at a claim that Horace is not making. In other words, Horace is not saying that “[p]oetry is like painting” in that the two art forms treat the same subjects in the same ways; the examples that follow his statement say nothing about content at all. Rather, Horace’s explanation of his statement relies on similarities in the
ways the audience of each medium reacts to the aesthetic object. While we can’t interpret Horace as saying that poetry is like painting in regards to similar formal features or subject matters, we could paraphrase this passage as saying that poetry is like painting in that both kinds of aesthetic objects are capable of eliciting similar audience responses through different formal means.

The reader will remember that this same distinction between the formal features of an aesthetic object and their rhetorical effects underlies my critique of Woolf. The mistake Woolf makes is to confuse the means used to produce an effect—the particular words, phrases, rhythms, rhymes, and generic and formal choices Burns employs—with the effect itself—the “impressions of moisture and warmth,” “the voice of the passion and the hesitation of the love.” While the inference she draws is that these effects are inaccessible to the language of cinema, the more obvious conclusion is that it is these formal means that are exclusive to verbal art, not their effects. As obvious as it is that a film adaptation of Burns’s poem would have to abandon meter and rhyme—at least in the literal verbal and poetic sense of these terms—it seems equally obvious to me that such a film adaptation could, through reliance on the various formal and cultural affordances of cinema, produce effects in the audience very much like those Woolf describes here.

The distinction between formal means and rhetorical ends is at the heart of my answer to the problems posed by the oppositions between analogical/categorical and fidelity/intertextuality. Addressing myself to the first divide, it would seem that both the analogical and the categorical approaches have something to recommend them. After all, on the one hand, the categorical approach usefully underlines what is obscured in
Horace’s *ut pictura poesis*: that media that rely on discrete semantic systems in order to communicate with their audiences are to that extent different in a fundamental way, and attempts to compare their formal features are doomed from the start, like trying to explain the appeal of Barber’s *Adagio for Strings* using the color wheel. And yet, on the other hand, adaptations are created and experienced in spite of this seemingly unbridgeable divide, and we use analogies constantly to make sense not only of artistic experience, but of the world around us more generally. After all, my readers will no doubt immediately understand what I mean if I refer to a glass of Bordeaux as heavy, or if I describe a Pollock painting as being a symphony of color, or if I point out that the sound of a piccolo is more like a hummingbird than a macaw. While no one would mistake these for literal statements, they all succeed in communicating through analogy something true about the qualities of the things described, and they do so in spite of the incompatible categories that these analogies bridge.

In this sense, an approach to adaptation that focuses not on the comparison between formal features of source and adaptation but instead on a comparison between the rhetorical effects they produce constitutes a middle way between the categorical and analogical approaches. On the one hand, a rhetorical approach recognizes that prose and film constitute radically different and incommensurable semiotic systems that necessarily rely on different formal means to offer emotional and ethical invitations to their audiences. By retaining this key observation from the categorical approach, the method I am advocating assumes from the outset that an adapter will necessarily make formal choices that diverge from those made by the source material’s author and that these
different choices will reflect the different semiotic systems each medium uses to communicate with its audience. Further, by recognizing that these differences are inevitable, a rhetorical approach will be able to see these formal divergences as only differences to be analyzed and not *de facto* as deviations to be evaluated against the formal standards of the source material.

But this same rhetorical approach is also able to recognize that while the formal languages used by different media are unique and exclusive, as the categorical approach insists, the distinct vocabularies and grammars of these different languages can still be used by authors and auteurs to communicate similar things, producing similar effects in their audiences. Borrowing Horace’s observation that both painting and poetry can elicit similar reactions from viewers and readers, the rhetorical approach that I’m advocating extends this observation to all interart relationships. It argues that while the categorical approach’s claims of semantic exclusivity are central to any comparative analysis between source and adaptation, these claims about different means do not preclude similarity of ends.

Further, because the rhetorical approach distinguishes between formal means and rhetorical ends, it is also able to find a way through the other tension that has shaped the field of adaptation studies, between fidelity and intertextuality. Remember that the poststructuralist critique of formal fidelity is that it relies on a comparison of necessarily unlike formal features, judging the failure of the adapted text to replicate the form of the original to be a flaw; formal fidelity is always a comparison between cinematic apples and prose oranges, one that fails to understand that while media do necessarily speak
different formal languages, that this difference does not entail a hierarchy of value. But because the rhetorical approach recognizes that different formal means can be used to employ similar rhetorical ends, it is able to discuss fidelity in a theoretically serious way while also recognizing the fundamental differences between media.

At the same time, then, it is able to address the fidelity/intertextuality opposition by reintegrating the central issue of fidelity back into the field of adaptation studies without repeating the mistakes of formal fidelity criticism. By attending not to formal features like character, plot, narrative perspective, and events but instead to rhetorical effects like affect, ethics, author-audience relationships, and the purposes to which these effects are put, the rhetorical perspective is able to recognize that differences between source material and adapted text are inevitable and that these differences do not in and of themselves entail an evaluative judgment. Further, the rhetorical approach also shows that comparative analysis between two texts is possible by juxtaposing the invitations each text extends to its audience, the emotional reactions each elicits and the ethical judgments each requires, and the rhetorical purposes these effects and textual dynamics serve.

**Stories, authors, audiences, and purposes**

Narrative theory is not entirely unknown to adaptation studies; Seymour Chatman's and Brian McFarlane’s work, in particular, relies on the language of narrative theory in order to understand adaptation as an aesthetic practice. This is a language, however, that is known for its penchant for neologisms, and rather than frontloading
every term I use throughout this study here, it will make more sense to define any obscure theoretical vocabulary as I go. However, a few critical concepts are worth pausing over, as they are fundamental to the project as a whole.

While the term narrative can be framed in a variety of different ways, I find the most accessible to be James Phelan’s definition: “somebody telling somebody else on some occasion and for some purpose(s) that something happened” (Experiencing 3). For much of the history of adaptation studies, scholars of formal fidelity focused on similarities and differences between only that last element: what happened in the storyworld (“diegesis”), how characters differed, etc. Further, the poststructuralist emphasis on the incommensurability of different semiotic systems is, in a way, an emphasis on the differences between occasion and the affordances that different media environments produce. I will be drawing on this work through this study, but I want to focus special attention, then, on the three neglected terms: somebody telling, somebody else, and for some purpose.

Let’s begin with purpose. Questions of purpose are integral to every case study that follows, and like author-audience relationships, purpose can take a variety of forms. As such, gesturing at specifics at this point is difficult, except to say that by “purpose” I refer to the thematic, emotional, and ethical responses authors generate in audiences by means of the text. In other words, when we read Huckleberry Finn and are amused by Huck’s comic adventures and admire Jim’s dignity and recognize that Huck’s choice to save his friend is the right thing to do, we are responding to textual dynamics designed by Twain for the purpose of eliciting certain responses in his audience. While the particular
details of thematic, emotional, and ethical purposes emerge *a posteriori* from engagement with a particular text, I take it as given that any aesthetic object is designed with the purpose of eliciting some such reaction from its audience, and that we can understand these purposes by considering the way that aesthetic choices produce local effects in the audience, with these local effects leading to global effects elicited for some thematic, emotional, or ethical purpose.

One implication of the rhetorical model’s focus on purpose is that it allows us to nuance the discussion of intertextuality and fidelity to include not only the fact that these relationships exist but also to investigate why they exist. For example, one consequence of the logocentric bias inherent to a formal approach to fidelity is the notion that the only purpose for adapting a text is to replicate its formal features—its character, plot, settings, etc.—in a different medium. But this view clearly ignores the wide spectrum of possibilities for an adapter, including the kind of replication formal fidelity referred to, commenting on the original, appropriating useful narrative material, or simply capitalizing on the cultural cachet of a known aesthetic product.⁴ Thus from a rhetorical standpoint, the only reason to dismiss an adaptation as a failure due to infidelity is to first demonstrate that the text reveals that fidelity was the purpose to begin with. In other words, by taking an *a posteriori* approach to purpose—by allowing adapters to choose and reveal their own purposes for adaptation through the textual choices they make—a rhetorical approach can fruitfully compare the original and the adaptation without assuming that differences between the two necessitate flaws. Indeed, as I will argue in

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⁴ The title of Julie Sanders’s *Adaptation and Appropriation* gestures at these distinctions.
later chapters, deviation in formal features may even be a way of producing similar effects on the part of the adapter, and for similar purposes.

Turning to the teller of a narrative, it is important to draw distinctions between three distinct terms: the flesh-and-blood author, the implied author, and the narrator. The flesh-and-blood or real author is the actual individual responsible for the creation of a given text. This is also what we might call the biographical author, a human being who may or may not still be living, who likely produced other texts, including paratexts that comment upon primary texts, and whose mind, like any other human being’s, we can never fully know. On the other end of the spectrum is the narrator, a textual phenomenon that is a function of the storytelling apparatus; a narrator can be reliable or unreliable, can be a character in the storyworld (“intradiegetic”) or outside of and ontologically distinct from it (“extradiegetic”), and can be more or less overt.

Between these two entities lies the implied author. By this I mean the authorial agent that is implied by and that the audience infers from the particular construction of the text itself. In other words, the implied author of a text is the agent audiences imagine when they ask themselves what sort of author would create this particular text in this particular way and for these particular purposes. This entity is distinct from the flesh-and-blood or real author.

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5 Here and throughout, I use “author” in the semantically neutral sense of “creator,” without respect to whether the produced text is verbal or cinematic in nature. Where it is needed for clarity, I will substitute auteur for author to distinguish between those who produce cinematic narratives and those who produce verbal ones.

6 Of course, in the case of cinematic texts, it is rare that a single individual can be said to be solely responsible for its creation; the material production of film is notoriously a communal endeavor, involving hundreds, if not thousands of flesh-and-blood authors. I will discuss this complication further below.

7 The concept of the implied author has been a contentious one since its introduction in Wayne Booth’s 1961 *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, and its supporters and detractors have regularly disputed whether it has a place in a model of narrative communication and whether it is logically distinct from both the text and the flesh-and-blood author, most recently in the Spring 2011 issue of *Style* devoted to the issue. While these
and-blood author in a variety of ways, but most importantly in that the implied author is knowable through analysis of the text itself; the implied author is the agent audiences imagine to be responsible for the text they are reading or viewing, while the flesh-and-blood author’s intentions, values, and choices are unknowable, and indeed, she may or may not actually be responsible for any given textual phenomenon, given the collaborative nature of artistic production.

Consider the example of Rebecca, a film 1940 adaptation of Daphne du Maurier’s 1938 novel of the same name, directed by Alfred Hitchcock and produced by David O. Selznick. The production of the film was particularly contentious as tensions between Hitchcock and Selznick revolved around the issue of fidelity. Hitchcock regarded short stories and novels as material to be reshaped and often radically altered to produce a cinematic text; he told Francois Truffaut that “[w]hat I do is to read a story only once, and if I like the basic idea, I just forget all about the book and start to create cinema” (Leitch, Encyclopedia 3). But Selznick argued, in a memo to Hitchcock on his first treatment of du Maurier’s novel, that “[w]e bought Rebecca and we intend to make Rebecca. . . . I don’t hold at all with the theory that the different medium [of cinema] necessitates a difference in storytelling, or even a difference in scenes” (qtd. in Schatz 278). Selznick argued that Rebecca “will succeed in the same manner as the original succeeded if only the same elements are captured and if only as much as possible is retained of the original”

Theoretical debates are worth having. I gesture at them here only to emphasize my pragmatic stance: whether or not the implied author is a necessary and universal component to every communicative experience, it strikes me as useful tool for understand the way audience members think about the agent that designed a text without falling back on an intentionalist fallacy that refers this agency to the ultimately unknowable flesh-and-blood author. It is particularly useful both for understanding the way viewers watch films and for how we can discuss adaptation and fidelity, both of which I discuss below.

In this sense, Selznick is firmly in Horace’s camp. Schatz’s seminal work on the studio system details the conflict between Hitchcock and Selznick in great depth.
(qtd. in Schatz 279). Further, as “no one, not even the author of the original work, can say with any degree of accuracy why a book had caught the fancy of the public,” even the “alleged faults of dramatic construction” should be transferred to the screen (ibid.). Hitchcock responded to Selznick’s orders that the film should “seem to be an exact photograph of the book” by rewriting the treatment entirely, but once production was underway and Selznick was distracted with *Gone with the Wind*, Hitchcock edited the film in camera, shooting only what he envisioned appearing in the final cut and thereby preventing Selznick from reediting the film later (ibid.).

Further, this clash between two of the film’s flesh-and-blood authors was exacerbated by a variety of other agents, including the Production Code Administration. Du Maurier’s novel depends for its narrative momentum on Maxim de Winter’s murder of his sadistic and promiscuous wife Rebecca, and at the time, the Code stated that the murder of a spouse must be punished in any Hollywood productions. As a result, despite Selznick’s devotion to rigid fidelity, the final cut of the film necessarily featured a flashback in which Maxim only contemplates the murder, moments before Rebecca trips over a coil of rope, hits her head on some nautical equipment, and does the job for him, leaving Maxim free to have a happy ending with the new Mrs. de Winter.

The point here is that a text like *Rebecca* necessarily has hundreds of flesh-and-blood authors, including the creator of the source material, the director, the producer, actors, writers, cinematographers, editors, musical composers, and even systematic influences like the Code or its contemporary equivalent, the MPAA rating system. But this reality of the material production of film texts does not necessarily influence the way
that audiences watch films; indeed, it is rare for audience members to have the kind of
intimate knowledge of production struggles I gestured at above. Rather, most audience
members can and do ask what a director meant by a particular choice, even if they know
on an intellectual level that this choice may have actually been made by an actor, a
screenwriter, or any one of hundreds of other flesh-and-blood agents. When audiences
ask this, then, they are asking about the implied author. Rather than focusing on a
question of film production, they are asking a question about the text: specifically, what
does this particular textual choice indicate about the agent implied by this text, and what
does that implication indicate about that agent’s design for the audience’s experience?

This concept is useful for adaptation studies, given that it is the key—along with
the complementary concept of implied audience discussed below—to a transmedial
comparison between the intentions, values, and priorities of the creators of source
materials and adaptations. It is odd, then, that it appears only once in the literature, as far
as I have been able to find. Brian McFarlane’s otherwise excellent Novel to Film, another
work of adaptation theory that relies on the tools of narrative theory, distinguishes
between the “what” of a narrative (the “story” or “fabula”) and the “how” (the
“discourse” or “syuzhet”). McFarlane claims that story elements require little to be
transferred into another medium, and that it is the discursive aspects of narrative—
elements like narrative perspective, chronological distortion and reordering, etc.—that
require true adaptation. Given his familiarity with narrative theory, then, it is odd to hear
him make so obvious an error as to claim that “[t]he implied author of Daisy Miller is a
very unobtrusive first-person narrator” (150). I hope it is clear at this point that the
implied author cannot possibly be a narrator, because implied authors do not speak directly but communicate to audiences through textual phenomena such as narrators, characters, and structural choices; rather, the implied author “Henry James” uses a largely covert first-person narrator to communicate his story to the implied audience.

In addition, because I am dealing with film, it is important to distinguish this implied author concept from auteur theory. Auteur theory, associated with Cahiers du Cinéma and the French New Wave, holds that certain directors—auteurs—are the sole producers of a film’s meaning, and that the industrial processes of film production and distribution are not enough to interfere with their visions. The distinction here is that auteur theory refers a text’s meaning upward to the flesh-and-blood auteur, ignoring the collaborative processes of filmmaking. The rhetorical approach’s implied author, on the other hand, enables us to recognize that a cinematic text is the result of hundreds or even thousands of individual agents, all making contributions to the construction and meaning of the final text. But at the same time, the concept of the implied author allows us to talk meaningfully about the fact that actual film viewers often watch movies as if they were the products of individuals. After all, while we may understand that asking what Hitchcock meant by a particular camera angle or edit or line of dialogue or piece of costuming is to significantly reduce the material complexity of film production, it is also a question that is easily understood as an inquiry into the motivations and intentions of the agent behind the text. The concept of the implied author allows us to take questions such as these seriously while also recognizing that the material reality that underlies the production of any text is more complicated than the myth of authorship would suggest.
Parallel to the tripartite distinctions between flesh-and-blood author, implied author, and narrator are the flesh-and-blood audience, the implied audience, and the narratee. The distinctions among these mirror precisely those among the authorial agents. The narratee is the audience for the narrator, and like the narrator can be extra- or intradiegetic (outside of or inside the storyworld) and overt or covert (actively characterized or more or less invisible). Like the flesh-and-blood author, flesh-and-blood audience members are the actual human beings that engage with texts. And finally, the implied audience is the audience implied by the text itself.\footnote{The distinction between flesh-and-blood audience members and the implied audience is to a certain extent the distinction between the sociological turn in adaptation studies, advocated by Dudley Andrew in his often anthologized essay, and my own rhetorical approach that focuses not on actual historically-bound viewers but the audience implied by a film. I return to this difference, and the opportunities it offers, in my conclusion.} Again, the distinction between these last two entities is worth emphasizing, in that any human being can be an audience member for virtually any text—a child can pick up Ulysses, for example, or I can read Green Eggs and Ham—but for a flesh-and-blood audience member to enter the implied audience requires the adoption of the knowledge, values, priorities, and concerns implied by the text. For me to enter the implied audience of the Seuss book would require (I hope) that I adopt a much more limited cognitive framework, and the child staring at the pages of Ulysses is unlikely to be able to enter Joyce’s implied audience at all. Or, to emphasize the more serious stakes of this distinction, we can all be flesh-and-blood viewers of Griffith’s Birth of a Nation (1915), but I would hope that we would be reluctant to enter into Griffith’s implied audience and adopt the racist values implied by his narrative.
Coming attractions

What follows are five case studies that point to the ways in which a rhetorical approach to adaptation can compare film adaptations to their prose source materials and consider fidelity as one potential purpose among many. At the same time, this approach also recognizes that film and prose will necessarily use different means, and these chapters demonstrate that the effects produced by these means and the authorial purposes they serve can be fruitfully compared. I will begin with a look at a problem highlighted by the rhetorical approach’s emphasis on implied authorship by asking what happens when a prose memoir—a text whose generic status relies on the explicit identification between its real and implied authors—is adapted into a film text with a different set of flesh-and-blood authors. What does this shift in authorship entail for the purposes of the adapted text, and what, if anything, can fidelity mean in the context of such a radical rhetorical and generic shift? By examining two autobiographical adaptations—James Mangold’s 1999 adaptation of Susanna Kaysen’s 1993 memoir *Girl, Interrupted* and Shari Springer Berman and Robert Pulcini’s 2003 biopic adaptation of Harvey Pekar’s autobiographical comic series *American Splendor*—I will compare two different approaches to these questions, demonstrating that rhetorical fidelity is not always dependent on—and indeed, can be antithetical to—the strict formal similarity between source and adaptation.

My second chapter shifts the focus from authors to audiences as I examine the debate between film reviewer Daniel Mendelsohn and producer James Schamus
regarding the queer ethics of Ang Lee’s *Brokeback Mountain*, the award-winning 2005 adaptation of Annie Proulx’s short story of the same name. My analysis reveals that the dispute between Mendelsohn and Schamus is dependent on two competing ethical strategies for eliciting sympathy for queer characters on the part of heteronormative audiences. By delving into the publication history of Proulx’s story, I argue that the difference in ethical strategies between the source material and Lee’s adaptation is a consequence of the different implied and flesh-and-blood audiences being addressed by these texts: in the one case readers of literary fiction, and in the other case a more heterogenous film audience.

In my third chapter, I move to questions of progression and radical reconfiguration, asking how the presence of a surprise ending can affect the adapted text and taking as my focus Ian McEwan’s 2001 novel *Atonement* and Joe Wright’s 2007 film adaptation. In McEwan’s novel, readers are surprised to find that for much of their progression through the narrative, they have been under the influence of a covert and unreliable narrator. But in shifting this same story to a different medium, Wright faces the problem of having to deviate from this covert homodiegetic narration into a cinematic equivalent. In making this shift, Wright also critiques the ethics of McEwan’s novel, inviting his audience to make a different ethical judgment of the deceiving narrator.

My fourth chapter focuses on the stubborn ethics of Toni Morrison’s 1987 novel *Beloved* and Jonathan Demme’s failed attempt to recreate Morrison’s subtle ethical effects in his 1998 film adaptation. This failure is instructive as it demonstrates again the difference between the fool’s gold of formal fidelity, which Demme relentlessly pursues,
and the rhetorical fidelity that he misses completely. As a consequence, Demme’s film illustrates that attempts to imitate the formal means of a source material’s textual dynamics will not necessarily result in the successful replication of its rhetorical ends.

Finally, lest my readers take the previous argument to instantiate a belief that prose is more ethically complex or superior to cinema or to reveal a hidden logocentric bias, my final chapter continues this investigation into stubborn ethics, this time by examining Atom Egoyan’s 1997 adaptation of Russell Banks’s 1991 novel *The Sweet Hereafter*. While the challenges posed by Banks’s novel are similar to those of Morrison’s, Egoyan’s adaptation is able to reproduce the effect of Banks’s stubborn ethics by paradoxically abandoning any pretense to formal fidelity and instead creating a completely new set of cinematic means to approximate the same ethical effect. In so doing, Egoyan’s film both demonstrates the ethical sophistication film is capable of and the ability of my rhetorical approach to recognize this sophistication.

In each of these chapters, my aim is to demonstrate the capacity of the rhetorical approach to produce insightful comparisons between adaptations and their source materials, without falling prey to the pitfalls of formal fidelity that the last decade of adaptation studies has so thoroughly critiqued. Over the course of this study, my hope is that my readers will see that fidelity is a concept that adaptation studies has first misunderstood and then ignored for too long, but that it can be recuperated as a theoretically intelligible concept by comparing not the apples and oranges of verbal and visual form but the rhetorical relationships among texts, authors, and audiences.
Chapter 2: Adapting from Real to Reel

When we view adaptation and fidelity through the lens of rhetorical theory, our eyes are open to see not only how a film adaptation transposes the form of its source material, but also how it adapts the relationships between author, audience, and genre that develop from that form. The degree to which these relationships are adapted is particularly important when our engagement with the original prose text depends on its flesh-and-blood author’s identity, as is the case when we read autobiography. Audiences read autobiographies to encounter a real author’s experience of her life, recreated through a narrative text. But adaptations by their very nature involve a change in authorship, a shift that disconnects the narrative of an autobiography from the real person who originally experienced it.\(^\text{10}\) The relationship between an autobiographical author and her audience, built through the text, cannot be easily transposed to a new medium with a new creator; in this way, autobiography adaptations have a fidelity issue built into their DNA. The question, then, is in what ways can a film adaptation recover the rhetorical effects of autobiographical referentiality, and to what purposes can it put these effects.

In this chapter, I answer this question by exploring the way an adaptation’s purposes and agenda are revealed by the representation both of its proximity to the source

\(^{10}\) An original author could, of course, create a film adaptation of her own autobiography, but no practical example of this theoretical possibility occurs to me.
material through recreation and of its distance from the source material through remediation. I begin by expanding on the paradox inherent to the practice of autobiographical adaptation, revising Philippe Lejeune’s theory of the autobiographical pact to argue for a conception of the autobiographical genre as a set of rhetorical effects, rather than a set of formal features. (This move replicates in miniature the global argument I’m making about adaptation and fidelity.) I then argue that film adaptations can replicate the historical and self-referential effects of autobiography by becoming “visible adapters,” pointing simultaneously outward to history at the same time as they point inward to their own mediation.\(^{11}\) In this way, adapters can balance two seemingly paradoxical rhetorical effects: the audience’s sense of the reality, the historicity of the events depicted, and its sense of the interpretive interventions between it and these events. In addition, the relationship between these two effects will be determined by and help readers to unpack the adapter’s repurposing of the source material.

To further explicate this concept, I will then offer close readings of the beginnings and endings of two autobiographical adaptations: *Girl, Interrupted* (1999) and *American Splendor* (2003).\(^{12}\) Each of these films uses its source material to a different purpose and thus strikes a different balance between gesturing toward the historical referentiality of its

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\(^{11}\) I borrow this concept of visibility from translation theorist Lawrence Venuti, who argues that translators should foreground their presence and effort in their translations, making readers aware of their mediation and the distance from the original text.

\(^{12}\) Though I will contextualize these beginnings and endings by reference to films in their entireties, I choose to focus on these moments because they serve particular functions. The beginning of any narrative starts to lay out for its audience what sort of narrative it is and how it should be read. While these opening moves can later be amended or even overturned—see my discussion of radical reconfiguration in chapter three—they are essential to audience members trying to orient themselves to the film. Likewise, an ending provides the lens through which an audience will view the narrative as a whole; it is the last chance for an author to guide the reader, and often the moment where aesthetic and thematic strategies are most explicit. As in chess, what moves these films make with the opening set-up will determine how the rest of the game plays out, and the way they finish the game will tell us much about how well they played.
source autobiography and highlighting its own mediation of that source text. *Girl, Interrupted* adapts Susanna Kaysen’s memoir of the same title in order to make a political and cultural argument about the 1960s and 70s in the United States; therefore, it uses a variety of easily recognizable cultural signifiers to locate its narrative within this historical context, but the filmmakers make little effort to highlight their mediation in a transparent way. *American Splendor* adapts Harvey Pekar’s long-running serial comics autobiography into a hybrid of documentary and dramatic narrative, balancing its repurposing of Pekar’s life story with a highly foregrounded sense of its own mediation. These two cases will not only illustrate two different approaches to the problem posed by autobiography adaptation, but will also demonstrate the importance of evaluating an adaptation’s fidelity to its source material by attending to the adaptation of the source text’s purposes and effects, rather than its formal resemblances.

**A problematic pact**

Scholars have long struggled to define the genre of autobiography by discovering a generic *sine qua non*, a formal shibboleth that allows readers to identify a piece of prose as autobiography without reference to paratextual or otherwise extratextual signs. A variety of solutions have been offered, but the one that best fits my purposes here is Philippe Lejeune’s compelling but flawed concept of the autobiographical pact. It may seem odd to begin with a flawed theoretical framework, but I start with Lejeune in order to emphasize the problem with the kind of one-to-one correspondences that characterize
formalist thinking. Paradoxically, however, examining this central problem with Lejeune’s pact will also point us toward an understanding of the autobiographical genre characterized by rhetorical effects rather than formal features.

Lejeune’s solution to the problem of how to classify autobiography, his pact, is the claim that “[i]n order for there to be autobiography . . . the author, the narrator, and the protagonist must be identical” (5, emphasis original). Lejeune’s emphasis here is on the name itself, not a more abstract understanding of identity; if these three agents share the same name, he argues, then the prose text in question is an autobiography. But where in the text itself is the author’s name? Lejeune himself acknowledges that “if we remain on the level of analysis within the text, there is no difference” between the narrative techniques of autobiography and of homodiegetic fiction; “[a]ll the methods that autobiography uses to convince us of the authenticity of its narrative can be imitated by the novel” (13, emphasis original). This is true, Lejeune argues, “as long as we limit ourselves to the text minus the title page; as soon as we include the latter in the text, with the name of the author, we make use of a general textual criterion, the identity (‘identicalness’) of the name (author—narrator—protagonist)” (13 – 14, emphasis original). Inflecting his pact through linguistics, Lejeune points to that name on the title page as the referent to the otherwise ambiguous autobiographical “I”; the author’s printed name is both the source of the I’s utterance and the object of its reference.

Thus, Lejeune’s pact names the reader’s identification of author, narrator, and protagonist—a fundamentally rhetorical phenomenon focusing on the relationship

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13 We can easily map the other narratological possibilities here. For example, when author ≠ narrator = protagonist, we have Genette’s autodiogenic narration; likewise, Stanzel’s authorial narrative situation can be expressed author = narrator ≠ protagonist,
between reader, author, and text—as the genre’s central formal feature, the Holy Grail theorists have been looking for. Lejeune is clear on this point, emphasizing that autobiography “is a mode of reading as much as it is a type of writing” (30). He acknowledges, somewhat paradoxically after insisting that his pact is a *textual* solution to the problem, that “[i]f autobiography is defined by something outside the text, it is . . . by the type of reading it engenders, the credence it exudes, and the qualities that are manifested in the critical response to autobiographies” (ibid.). This reading practice is so important, in fact, that Lejeune sees it as central even to studies of the history of the form itself, which, he argues, must include a “comparative history where we would be able to bring into dialogue the reading contracts proposed by different types of texts . . . and the different types of reading really practiced on these texts” (30). In spite of his claim to have found a formal solution to the problem, Lejeune continually reiterates for his readers that the solution he proposes is a rhetorical one, focused on the relationships between author, audience, and text.

Lejeune’s pact is useful for my purposes here, but as I suggested, it is not without its problems. One objection, for example, is that the title page of an autobiography—the source of the author’s name that completes the tripartite identification that Lejeune uses to delimit the genre—is not self-evidently a part of the text itself. Lejeune characterizes previous considerations of autobiography as looking at “the text minus the title page,” but there is no particular reason we shouldn’t conclude that Lejeune is actually looking at the text *plus* a single paratext. Lejeune is begging the question here, in that he defines “the text” in such a way that the text necessarily includes in its form the identity of the flesh-
and-blood author, a definition more problematic than he lets on, and one that needs to be argued.

The more salient point to object to, however, is Lejeune’s assumption that any text in which we can identify author, narrator, and protagonist by name is necessarily an autobiography—that this single formal feature is always and everywhere indicative of an autobiography.14 A universal one-to-one proscription like this yearns for a counter-example, of which there are many. You may feel free to come up with your own; I find myself immediately wondering what Lejeune would do with The Divine Comedy, which features an author, a narrator, and a protagonist that all answer to “Dante,” or the disorienting appearance—in novels by Kurt Vonnegut and Paul Auster, among others—of narrators and characters that share the name of their real-life creators.15 I imagine that Lejeune would respond by saying that The Divine Comedy is a pseudoautobiography—that the flesh-and-blood Dante exploits the pact to appropriate the rhetorical effect of autobiography in a narrative that, of course, is not grounded in actual autobiographical facts. Likewise, Lejeune would probably claim that the postmodern novelists named above employ a technique, metalepsis, that breaks the ontological boundaries between narrative levels, and as such, they, too, are purposefully using the pact ‘incorrectly’, replicating the conditions of autobiography, but in ways that are deliberately ontologically incoherent.

14 Or, to reverse the objection, we can find fault with Lejeune for excluding autobiographies with narration in the third person (author = protagonist ≠ narrator, a formulation conspicuously absent from my earlier footnote) like The Education of Henry Adams or Norman Mailer’s Armies of the Night.

15 I’m thinking here specifically of Breakfast of Champions (1973) and The New York Trilogy (1987), respectively.
But if this is the case, Lejeune has identified not a formal autobiographical pact, but instead a method with which authors can produce in readers the sense that they are reading about a real person’s actual life (even if the audience know that this is factually not the case). In other words, if we recognize that Lejeune’s identity between author, narrator, and protagonist is not the ultimate formal marker of autobiography, but instead one way (among many) of generating the effect of autobiography—an effect that can be used for a variety of purposes—then we’ve taken an important step toward addressing the problem of fidelity in film adaptations of autobiography. If you recall, we began with the assumption that because film adaptations in practice, if not in theory, involve a shift in flesh-and-blood authorship, these film adaptations by definition cannot be faithful to the autobiographies they adapt; they will by definition require a change in genre. But if we understand the pact not as a requirement, but as one way a text can generate the effect of autobiographical referentiality—in other words, if we orient the genre itself not as a tendency toward a set of certain formal features but instead as a tendency toward a set of certain rhetorical effects that invite readers to encounter the text as an account of a real life shaped by the person who lived it—then we can acknowledge that there might be ways for film adaptations to generate some of these effects without requiring that they mirror the formal structure of their source materials.

But how would an autobiography adaptation manage this? The most obvious analogue to Lejeune’s pact—and thus one way an autobiography adaptation might generate an autobiographical effect—is the ubiquitous “based on Title by Author” construction featured in many adaptations’ credits. We can immediately see, however,
that this poses much the same problem as the pact itself. Just as the correspondence of the author’s, narrator’s, and protagonist’s names does not always indicate a specific genre, the words “based on” don’t necessarily mean anything in particular. Even if this “based on” construction specified the source material’s genre, this still would not tell the audience much, as the phrase “based on” can indicate any number of relationships between adaptation and source, from slavish devotion to the most tangential inspiration.\(^\text{16}\) But we should expect no different from the futile attempt to find a single marker for a genre. Rather than tilting at that particular windmill, I’d like to spend the rest of this chapter considering how my examples engage with the two most relevant aspects of autobiography adaptation: the representation of a source material’s historicity, and the foregrounding of an adaptation’s own mediation. By balancing these two factors in various ways, these two films exploit the effects of autobiography to a variety of purposes, as we shall see.

**Writing the unrecoverable**

In her 1993 autobiography *Girl, Interrupted*, Susanna Kaysen reflects on the years in the late 1960s she spent in a psychiatric hospital being treated for borderline personality disorder. Kaysen’s account is powerful and unnerving, continually reminding her audience that the line between their sanity and her mental illness is a tenuous and

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\(^{16}\) In fact, my two examples don’t even specify the genre of their source materials. In both cases, the “based on” construction refers only to medium: “book” for *Girl*, and “comic book series” for *Splendor*. 42
shifting one, as much about social constructs and mores as it is about brain chemistry. The line between sick and healthy is equally unstable; Kaysen is released from the hospital not because she is declared well, but because she gets married. These shifting boundaries and ambiguous continuums between sane and insane, sick and healthy contribute to Girl’s central problem; like many autobiographies about mental illness, Kaysen’s focuses not only on her history, but also on her struggle to produce a factually accurate narrative of a time in her life when she could not rely on her own perceptions of the world around her. In other words, Kaysen’s Girl is as much about the challenges of the telling as it is about the events told.

The formal contours of the book reflect this tension by featuring an episodic structure, as opposed to a chronological one. This episodic rhythm continually disrupts the story’s momentum, vacillating between narrative descriptions of Kaysen’s time in McLean Hospital and more self-reflexive lyric passages in which Kaysen explores the nature of her illness and what it means to be (and to have been) diagnosed as mentally unstable. The narrative episodes are also not bound to any steady chronological pattern but instead wander temporally between Kaysen’s hospitalization, the months and years leading up to it, and its aftermath. In this sense, Girl’s structure instantiates the nonlinear thought patterns and recollections of its narrator, fragmenting the progression in such a

17 Gender plays a particularly strong role in the construction of mental illness, according to Kaysen. Years after her hospitalization, she gets access to her medical records and compares them to the description of borderline personality disorder in the DSM III (reproduced in Girl). She points out the that DSM acknowledges that borderline personality disorder “is more commonly diagnosed”—not “found,” but diagnosed—“in women,” a sentence that suggests to Kaysen that the largely male medical establishment “didn’t even bother trying to cover their tracks” (149, 157). She also notes that “compulsive promiscuity” is considered a symptom of borderline personality disorder and wonders “[h]ow many girls . . . a seventeen-year-old boy would have to screw to earn [that] label” (158).
way that readers find themselves mimicking the stutters, false starts, revisions, and spirals of Kaysen’s own experience.

In addition to this narrative fragmentation, Kaysen continually disrupts her own words with facsimile reproductions of documents from her medical records that complicate and often contradict her account. In fact, Girl begins and ends not with Kaysen’s own prose, but with the beginning and ending of her medical report, the first page of her case report folder and her discharge form. In between, interspersed throughout her own episodes, are progress reports, admission forms, and letters documenting her stay in McLean. These reproductions help to generate a sense of historicity, covered as they are by redactions and handwritten notes, traces of the world outside of the text. But more importantly, these documents produce a counternarrative to the narrating Kaysen’s own remembrances. For example, at one point Kaysen struggles to reconstruct the session with her doctor that led her to be committed; she remembers it as only a twenty-minute interview, while her doctor claims it lasted three hours. In an episode entitled “Do You Believe Him or Me?,” Kaysen tries to resolve this contradiction by turning to her medical record but finds her own account undermined by the Nurse’s Report on Patient Admission, which records her arrival at McLean as 1:30 p.m.—ample time for the three hour interview the doctor remembers. “[N]ow you believe him” (72). But then Kaysen produces another document, the admission note written by a doctor at McLean, which notes the time of her admission as 11:30 a.m., early enough to confirm her version of events. “Now you believe me” (ibid.).
But of course the reader can believe neither. The narrating Kaysen’s reference to historical evidence resolves nothing; she still must have arrived at a particular time, must still have spoken to her doctor for a specific duration, but there is no way to decide between the mutually exclusive possibilities she presents. The tension between these varying accounts—the narrator’s, the doctor’s, the conflicting official forms—exemplifies Kaysen’s larger struggle with her relationship to the world around her: she knows that there is a contradiction between her perceptions and the official record, but neither of these has the final authority. Some critics attempt to resolve this contradiction by claiming that Kaysen is here establishing “a different kind of truth” that reveals her as “the authority of her experience,” but this reading mistakenly attributes the narrator’s certainty about her experience to the implied author, not noticing that the narrator’s willingness to simply accept the evidence that confirms the story and disregard the evidence that undermines it marks not authority but unreliability, presided over by an implied author who is much more interested in the disconcerting irresolution between the two versions of events (Marshall 122). And here we see the implied Kaysen’s global purpose clearly. By placing an unreliable persona in charge of narrating her autobiography and then subverting that unreliable account with historical documents, the implied Kaysen invites the audience to share both in the disorienting experience in the mental hospital and also in the challenge of reconstructing an accurate account of events when the events themselves aren’t known.

Both the narrating Kaysen and her audience experience this confusion more viscerally in “Bare Bones,” a later episode in which another patient, Torrey, is discharged.
to return home to her family and an almost certain relapse into amphetamine addiction. The patients plan to help her escape as she is transported to the airport, but their scheme is foiled when the head nurse gives Torrey a dose of Thorazine to calm her before the trip. Traumatized by this episode, Kaysen spends the day in a malaise, eventually fixating on her hand:

I started to get worried. Where were my bones? I put my hand in my mouth and bit it, to see if I crunched down on something hard. Everything slid away from me. There were nerves; there were blood vessels; there were tendons: All these things were slippery and elusive. . . .

I began scratching at the back of my hand. My plan was to get hold of a flap of skin and peel it away, just to have a look. I wanted to see that my hand was a normal human hand, with bones. My hand got red and white . . . but I couldn’t get my skin to open up and let me in. (102)

Kaysen eventually bites through the skin of her hand, drawing blood but not reaching the bones she’s looking for. Before she can go further, however, the nursing staff stops and sedates her with a dose of Thorazine. As she fades into unconsciousness, Kaysen has an epiphany that explains her behavior as a response to Torrey’s discharge: “now I was safe, now I was really crazy, and nobody could take me out of there” (104).

Set in the context of Torrey’s traumatic departure, we can see how Kaysen’s actions, self-destructive and unbalanced as they are, have a kind of internal logic to them; she fears that, like Torrey, she will be ejected from McLean’s safety and structure, and so she behaves in such a way as to ensure that she will be kept there. However, this
understanding is immediately undermined by a note in her chart, reproduced on the facing page:

The patient suffered an episode of depersonalization on Saturday for about six hours at which time she felt that she wasn’t a real person, nothing but skin. She talked about wanting to cut herself to see whether she would bleed to prove to herself that she was a real person. She mentioned she would like to see an X-ray of herself to see if she has any bones or anything inside. The precipitating event for this episode of depersonalization is still not clear. (105)

Once again, the historical document the implied Kaysen reproduces for us contradicts her own narrating self’s account. In the hospital’s ironically depersonalized version, there is no mention of her actually drawing blood, surely a detail that a medical report would include; conversely, Kaysen’s version makes no mention of requesting an x-ray, reporting instead that she was not interacting with anyone else until she was restrained. More importantly, though, Kaysen’s account supplies a “precipitating event,” one that the nursing staff misses, as the medical staff fails to make the connection between Torrey’s discharge and Kaysen’s episode of depersonalization, but also one that readers clearly cannot accept at face value, either.

So which do we believe, the narrating Kaysen’s account\textsuperscript{18} or the hospital’s? And, more importantly, which does the implied author want us to believe? As with the twenty-minute or three-hour interview with Kaysen’s doctor, here we see the implied Kaysen

\textsuperscript{18} Of course, further complicating the issue is the potential bifurcation of Kaysen’s account. The tense of Kaysen’s explanation is ambiguous and can be read either as an explanation of the character Kaysen’s thoughts at the time, recreated but not endorsed by the narrator, or of the narrating Kaysen’s later understanding of the event.
struggle with her own telling, attempting both to be true to her unreliable perceptions and to the historical record. This, in turn, repeatedly reinforces the narrative’s historicity for the reader; even if neither Kaysen nor her audience can ultimately know what the facts are, we are continually made aware that her narrative is an attempt to capture not only the subjective experience of her committal, but also the historical facts that underlie it. In this sense, Kaysen generates her autobiographical effect not just through the identification of the author’s, narrator’s, and protagonist’s names, but also through the repeated appearance of this same name as the subject of these medical documents. This last appearance—the historically verifiable name—complicates any easy identities we could make between these Kaysens, as it highlight the gulf of reliability separating the narrator and the implied author; each knows that she is unreliable, but while the narrator experiences this unreliability as an impediment to her storytelling, the implied Kaysen recognizes that her unreliability is her story. By foregrounding her own frustrated effort to produce a reliable autobiographical narrative and by undermining this effort with images of her medical records, Kaysen never allows the audience to forget that *Girl* is an attempt to recover an ultimately unrecoverable history.

*Girl, interpolated*

This is not so with James Mangold’s 1999 film adaptation. Mangold’s film goes to great lengths to establish the historicity of its source material through references to the cultural milieu of the late 60s, but it fails to account for its own mediation, largely
ignoring and at times even obscuring its transformations of Kaysen’s autobiography. In this sense, we might consider Mangold’s adaptation to be sufficiently faithful on a formal level, in the sense that it directly dramatizes the events and characters of Kaysen’s autobiography. But because it also renders its remediation, which is also a repurposing, insufficiently visible, minimizing its own mediating presence to instead construct a typical Hollywood narrative, it is at the same time rhetorically unfaithful, without letting the audience in on the trick. This is true for two reasons: first, because Mangold uses the formal material of Kaysen’s autobiography in order to generate a narrative about the danger posed to American culture by the liberalism of the 60s and the restoration of order in the decade which followed, a purpose radically different—and perhaps antithetical to—Kaysen’s nuanced exploration of her own unreliability; and second, because this intervention is not signaled to his audience by rendering it visible. In this sense, while Mangold’s film recreates characters and events and scenes that Kaysen’s readers will recognize, from a rhetorical standpoint it is less an adaptation of her autobiography and more an appropriation.

Ironically, the film opens with one of the few scenes not found in the source material. On a black background, the words “Columbia Pictures Presents” and “A Red Wagon Production” appear while echoing pipes rattle on the soundtrack. Then the

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19 Though no doubt there are a variety of political and financial motivations for this appropriation, I suspect that it is primarily due to the enormous financial and critical success five years earlier of Forrest Gump (1994), which heavily featured a nostalgia for the values and ethos of the 1950s—a sentiment reflected in the political landscape of the same year, most explicitly in Newt Gingrich’s Contract with America, which led to the first Republican-led House of Representatives since 1954 and a series of unsubtly named legislation like the Taking Back Our Streets Act, the Personal Responsibility Act, and the American Dream Restoration Act. For more on Gump’s politics, see Leitch (“Know-Nothing Entertainment”), Byers, and Wang.
sustained note that opens Simon and Garfunkel’s “Bookends Theme”\textsuperscript{20} slowly rises as we fade in on a gray sky seen from a low angle through a barred window. As the familiar guitar melody begins, the camera tracks down from the window across a dirty wall and stairway and the film’s title appears, then fades. The shot comes to rest briefly on a tight close-up of Winona Ryder’s (Kaysen’s) profile; as she turns to look downward, the tracking shot continues past Ryder’s hand, which is injured, to end on another close-up, this time of Lisa’s (Angelina Jolie) traumatized stare, cradled by Ryder’s other hand.\textsuperscript{21} Paul Simon and Art Garfunkel’s voices enter the soundtrack as Lisa’s face comes into frame. The first cut of the film returns us to Ryder’s face, as she looks across the room; an eyeline match reveals the object of her gaze to be a horribly scarred young woman (Polly, played by Elizabeth Moss), sobbing and holding a cat, which leaps away from Polly and up to the barred window, before the camera finally cuts back to Ryder’s gaze.

At this point, a voiceover monologue begins on the soundtrack, spoken by Ryder’s disembodied voice, which continues over the rest of the scene:

Have you ever confused a dream with life? Or stolen something when you had the cash? Have you ever been blue? Or thought your train moving while sitting still?

Maybe I was just crazy. Maybe it was the 60s. Or maybe I was just a girl . . . interrupted.

\textsuperscript{20} The song is from their 1968 album \textit{Bookends}, rendering its use particularly apt, chronologically speaking.

\textsuperscript{21} Here and throughout my description of this opening scene, I refer to Ryder the actress rather than Kaysen the character, a reversal from the typical film scholarship convention. I do this to underline the fact that at this point in the film, the audience—particularly in 1999—would instantly recognize Ryder, but they have no way of knowing who she is playing. This would be true even if they were brought into the theater by the film’s trailer; although it does name Ryder as Susanna, it only briefly displays “Based on a true story” without naming Kaysen’s autobiography as its source.
As this voiceover continues, Ryder turns, and another eyeline match reveals a fourth girl (Georgina, played by Clea DuVall) sweeping up shards of broken light bulbs, among which she finds and picks up a syringe. The camera cuts back to Ryder’s face a third time, then to a long hallway with a barred door; lights flash at the other end, a visual metaphor for the moving train mentioned in the monologue, as orderlies with flashlights run to and unlock a door. The camera returns finally to Ryder and stays there to the end of the scene. Over the last lines of Ryder’s monologue, an ambulance siren rises on the soundtrack, layered with “Bookends.” In the long pause between “girl” and “interrupted,” Ryder turns and looks directly into the camera, breaking the fourth wall and seeming to address the audience. (See fig. 1.) And as the final word is spoken, hands appear on her shoulders and push her back, masking a sudden and disorienting smash cut to a flashback in which Ryder is held down on a hospital bed after her suicide attempt.

The film is quickly off and running, but I want to pause for a moment over what kind of cues the audience is being given in these first two minutes of the film. First, we receive very strong signals, primarily in the form of the eyeline matches but also in Ryder’s monologue and her breaking the fourth wall, that Ryder’s character will be our protagonist, the emotional and perceptual focalizer for these events and the film as a
whole. Each cut to a new element of the scene—Lisa, Polly, Georgina, the hallway—is
bookended by shots of Ryder’s gaze. In addition, audiences in 1999 would have naturally
expected a big star like Ryder to be the film’s heroine; Jolie received an Academy Award
for her work in Girl and her star continued to rise, but at the time, Ryder was the more
famous actress. As such, both off-screen knowledge of the cast and the film’s editing
suggest that Ryder will be at the center of the film we are watching.

I make this obvious point to underline what we are not told here. While Ryder is
instantly recognizable as an actress and we are cued to place her at the center of the film
both perceptually and emotionally, we have absolutely no idea who she is playing. In
fact, the name “Susanna” isn’t used until after the hospital scene, when we are again
abruptly shifted, this time from the hospital bed to Kaysen’s therapist’s office. But even
if we had the name Susanna Kaysen, it wouldn’t mean anything to us, as the opening
credits don’t include the standard “based on” credit that would foreground the film’s
status as an adaptation of an autobiography; what’s more, we don’t get this boilerplate
until the end credits begin to roll. In effect, the audience is given no cues at all that Girl is
an adaptation, much less an adaptation of an autobiography. Perhaps the closest we come
to a deviation from the conventions of standard Hollywood fiction film is Ryder’s
breaking of the fourth wall, which occurs at the same instant that she repeats the name of
the film—a moment that could ironically be read as literally authoritative, but only if we
knew that Girl was an adaptation of an autobiography by the same name and that Ryder

Credit where credit is due, these sudden shifts in the first third of the movie—usually pulled off by rapid
smash cuts or by introducing the new scene on the soundtrack before the shift appears on the image track—are a clever gesture toward the episodic, achronological structure of Kaysen’s book. That said, unlike Kaysen’s episodic structure, the film drops this device after the first act; Kaysen appears to be miraculously cured of her temporal disorientation as soon as all the relevant details of her background are established.
was playing the author of that autobiography. As it is, however, both Ryder’s address to the audience and her quotation of the title we just saw flash across the screen read not as a covert signal of the film’s generic status, but instead as a ham-handed and indulgent move on the director’s part.

Finally, one other effect of this focalization through Ryder’s character is that she is established as the narrator, in addition to the protagonist. Both her voice-over and her eye contact with the audience suggest that Ryder is not only the central character, but also an individual who has some awareness of and control over the narrative. Like Ryder’s quotation of the film’s title, her status as narrator has the potential to be read as authoritative, though with the same caveat as before: that the film audience is unaware that anything has been authored, in either the real world or the storyworld. But unlike the narrator of Kaysen’s autobiography, the character narrator in Mangold’s film shows no signs of being unreliable. While the character is clearly signaled as unstable, both by the smash cut into a flashback and by the fact that this flashback involves Ryder’s character having her stomach pumped after a suicide attempt, the juxtaposition between that character and the calm voice and steady gaze of the narrating Ryder offer no hint of the unreliable, self-doubting narrator in Kaysen’s book. In this sense, Ryder’s control over the narrator suggests less the confusion and unreliability of the character narrator Kaysen, and more the narrative competence of the implied author Kaysen, though again, their talents are put to very different purposes.

In fact, the rest of the film bears this out; while as we have seen, Kaysen’s autobiography never resolves the question of her reliability, the film ends with another
voiceover monologue from Ryder, who at this point is clearly identified as a character named Susanna Kaysen, though not as the author of anything besides a journal, much less an autobiography entitled *Girl, Interrupted*:

Crazy isn’t being broken or swallowing a dark secret. It’s you or me . . . amplified. If you ever told a lie and enjoyed it. If you ever wished you could be a child forever. They were not perfect, but they were my friends. And by the 70s, most of them were out, living lives. Some I’ve seen, some never again. But there isn’t a day my heart doesn’t find them.

During this voiceover, we see a careful mirroring of the opening monologue, with shots of Georgina (the liar), Polly (the child), and Lisa (as Ryder mentions the 70s) that parallel those from the beginning. This deliberate and carefully constructed repetition—in fact a precise reversal of the order at the beginning, the camera lingering on each character in the opposite order it introduced them—implies a narrating Kaysen who is capable of constructing a formally and thematically balanced narrative, not unlike the implied author of the autobiography. But this is also a Kaysen who can speak with confident authority as to the unambiguous content and meaning of her illness. As such, the film’s opening does cue the audience to attend to Ryder as both protagonist and narrator, but a protagonist who comes to reductive conclusions about her illness and a narrator who characterizes that illness as a function of “amplified” excess that is cured by the end of the 60s.

Considering the film’s beginning as an anticipation of its end underscores two other cues the audience receives as they begin to watch, cues which point us toward Mangold’s repurposing of his source material. First, I mentioned above that this
beginning is one of the scenes invented from whole cloth for the film. There are several others, but this one is particularly significant because its location at the beginning prioritizes the cues it offers to the audience as to how they should read the film. In this case, the film begins *in medias res*; most of the rest of the film will be spent backtracking and showing the audience how these characters arrived at this scene, which is clearly the aftermath of a traumatic confrontation. As such, this beginning invites readers to ask a variety of specific questions about what they see. Who are these women? Why are they wearing pajamas and robes in a dirty basement? How did Ryder’s character hurt her hand, and why is Jolie’s character in shock? Where did the broken glass come from, and why is there a syringe in it? And why is the woman with the burn scars sobbing uncontrollably? Any individual viewer’s set of questions will vary slightly, of course, but it is the nature of these questions that is important: they are all plot-driven questions that will be definitively answered by the film’s end, when we will return to this narrative present and resolve the tensions this scene establishes. This is a particular affordance of the *in medias res* construction; it disorients the audience, but it does so in highly legible ways that promise eventual clarity. Thus Mangold uses the camera to draw the audience’s attention to what is mysterious or unusual about the scene, with the promise inherent to the form that these details will be explained by the time we come back around to this moment.

But note the kind of questions that the audience isn’t asking. Unlike the first two pages of Kaysen’s autobiography that immediately contrast her narrative with the official medical record, nothing in this opening invites us to wonder about either the ambiguity of
these characters’ experiences or the reliability of the narrator’s discourse. In fact, the in medias res form, at least as Mangold uses it, does exactly the opposite. The promise inherent to the construction—that our questions are the right ones to ask, as evidenced by their inevitable answers—implies an ordered, logical, and unambiguous storyworld. The beginning invites the audience to ask questions that are prompted by chronological displacement, but that displacement is the only impediment to our understanding; once it is resolved through a movie-length flashback, all of our questions are easily answered, with no lingering ambiguity or irresolution. In this sense, Mangold’s in medias res construction is a subtle but radical departure from Kaysen’s narrative architecture. Where Kaysen’s episodic structure lends itself to questions that focus on the nature of her experience, questions that ultimately must remain complicated and unresolved, the film’s beginning establishes a teleological trajectory that focuses exclusively on plot questions, unknowns that are only unknown at all because their answers are withheld from the audience by a chronological reordering. Kaysen’s narrative order is, of course, no more natural than Mangold’s, but each is suited to the implied author’s purpose, the kind of questions each wants his or her audience to ask. And in Mangold’s case, these questions and their simple, clear answers are antithetical to Kaysen’s original purpose, though they are well-suited to his own.
And what is that purpose? Here we turn to the beginning’s final cue to the audience: the foregrounding of the film’s chronological and cultural setting. In just the first two minutes of the film, the soundtrack blatantly signals the 60s twice: first with the famous Simon and Garfunkel song, and second with the voiceover narration’s suggestion that “maybe…the 60s” are the cause of Kaysen’s illness. This is a motif that continues throughout the film, as the soundtrack goes on to feature other musical signifiers of the late 60s like Petula Clark’s “Downtown,” Aretha Franklin’s “The Right Time,” Jefferson Airplane’s “Comin’ Back to Me,” a cover of Bob Dylan’s “It’s All Over Now Baby Blue” by Them, “Got a Feeling” by The Mamas and the Papas, and “The Weight” by The Band. And the image track follows suit; at various points in the film the audience sees Kaysen walk past a Robert Kennedy campaign poster on her way to McLean, a handmade “Come Together” poster hanging over the television in the McLean common room (referencing the famous

Fig. 2: Mangold’s sixties signifiers

23 “Bookends” does double duty here, not only inviting the audience into a fictional version of the 60s, but also commenting on this setting as “a time of innocence / a time of confidences” and instructing viewers to “preserve your memories / they’re all that’s left you,” an injunction that resonates with the nostalgic tone of the film as a whole.

24 The fact that four of the artists featured in Girl, Interrupted are also found on Forrest Gump’s soundtrack lends credence to my earlier suggestion that the latter is a primary intertext for the former.
Beatles song of the same name), and the McLean patients watching news footage reporting on the Vietnam draft and, later, the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr.\textsuperscript{25} 

(See fig. 2.)

The effect of this onslaught of 60s signifiers is to create in the audience a sense of this cultural moment, but only in the broadest strokes. Importantly, Mangold’s constant references to the 60s are not there for the purpose of accurately recreating an authentic sense of Kaysen’s autobiographical experience, a fact easily demonstrated by the surprising amount of anachronism present in his use of these references. For example, we know that Kaysen walks past the Kennedy lawn sign to be admitted to McLean on April 27, 1967, but Kennedy didn’t announce his campaign for president until March 16th of the following year. Similarly, “Come Together” was released on \textit{Abbey Road} on October 6, 1969, nine months after Kaysen’s release on January 3rd of the same year. And the draft lottery scene is doubly problematic: the first televised draft lottery was held in November of 1969, after Kaysen’s release, but also well after King’s assassination on April 4, 1968, even though the order of these events is reversed in the film.

I go on at such length here in order to underline the fact that Mangold expends a great deal of effort providing his audience with highly visible and readily legible signifiers of the film’s chronological and cultural setting, but this is not a historically accurate set of signifiers, nor is it reflective of Kaysen’s experience of history. We could imagine a version of Kaysen’s autobiography in which the implied author uses

\textsuperscript{25} In this the film fulfills the promise of the trailer, which devotes a fifth of its running time to a voiceover that references Woodstock and Vietnam, with accompanying documentary footage and the opening riff of Buffalo Springfield’s “For What It’s Worth.” As we might anticipate at this point, it closes with the words “based on a true story,” with no hint that this “story” is in fact a published autobiography.
anachronism as a way of indicating the narrator’s unreliability and the scope of her disorientation, but as it exists, Kaysen’s *Girl* does little with the setting. Nor can we attribute this motivation to Mangold, as the anachronisms are unmarked by the narrative and are off by little enough that audience members in 1999 would not likely have noticed the discrepancies. Rather, Mangold’s is a “movie version” of the 60s, characterized by reference to a relatively small pool of allusions that foregrounds for the audience in an uncomplicated way certain connotations of the era, including political assassinations, racial turmoil, rampant drug use, the women’s liberation movement, and Vietnam.

In this sense, Mangold’s setting is unfaithful when compared either to history or to his source material, but it’s apt for his purposes in that it adapts Kaysen’s chronological setting to serve as a logical explanation for Kaysen’s madness. Recall that the first two minutes of the film are already alluding to the 60s, through the Simon and Garfunkel song and through the voiceover narration, shortly before a taxi drives Kaysen to McLean. Mangold returns to this motif in the film’s closing monologue, which, as we have seen, mirrors the film’s beginning; this is true, as well, of the way the voiceover uses the era as an explanation for Kaysen’s illness and subsequent recovery.\(^{26}\) For while the implied author Kaysen’s prose explains simply that “[m]ost of us got out eventually” (160), the film’s character narrator Kaysen makes explicit mention again of the decade, as at the beginning: “by the 70s, most of them were out” (*Girl, Interrupted*). With the addition of only a few words, the implied Mangold explicitly marks his movie version of 60s liberalism and social unrest as the underlying cause of not only Kaysen’s mental illness,

\(^{26}\) Naturally, the closing voiceover takes place in the back of a taxi driving away from McLean, improbably driven by the same cabbie who took her to the hospital nearly two years earlier.
but that of all of the characters. And it is only the rejection of these 60s values inherent in the following decade that allows the girls to be cured.

Here we can see the importance of attending to an autobiography adaptation’s representation of both its source material’s historicity and its own mediation. In the case of *Girl, Interrupted*, Mangold goes to great lengths to evoke a certain quasi-mythological version of Kaysen’s setting, but he does nothing to show his audience the ways in which this version of history differs significantly from either the actual historical record or from Kaysen’s experience. In other words, he renders the 60s highly visible but makes no similar effort to guide his audience to read this history as his adaptation of—in fact, his argument about—his source material. Yes, Mangold is largely faithful to the formal elements of Kaysen’s autobiography. But from a rhetorical standpoint, his repurposing of these formal elements—most especially setting—represents a radical departure from Kaysen’s original purposes, but a departure the audience is unable to recognize as such.

**Who is Harvey Pekar?**

The opposite is true of Berman and Pulcini’s adaptation of Harvey Pekar’s long running autobiographical comic series *American Splendor*, which repurposes its source material in ways visible to the audience. Published since 1976, Pekar’s *American Splendor* tells stories from the author’s life, with a focus on the ordinary and the mundane: Pekar’s boring job as a hospital filing clerk, his longing for romance, his car troubles and financial worries. These narratives frequently take the form of meditative
comic essays; the action of the narrative will be relatively unimportant—Harvey takes a walk, for example, in “I’ll Be Forty-three on Friday (How I’m Living Now)”—while Harvey’s thoughts will range from the lessons of his past to the meaninglessness of life. Interspersed throughout these commonplace narratives are Pekar’s opinions about comic book aesthetics and jazz history, as well as philosophical meditations on the meaning of life and identity, as in the minimalist “The Harvey Pekar Name Story,” in which Pekar simply faces the reader and tells a story about other people who have the same name as he does. (See fig. 3.)

What makes Pekar’s *American Splendor* particularly rich source material for an adaptation is that Pekar does not illustrate his own comics. (Berman and Pulcini portray him as barely capable of composing a stick figure.) Instead, he storyboards his comics and then gives this template to a collaborator to draw; indeed, the list of names of artists who have drawn issues of *American Splendor* reads like a veritable who’s-who of underground comics. In addition to frequently collaborating with Kevin Brown, Gary Dumm, Sue Cavey, and Gerry Shamray—all associated primarily with *Splendor*—Pekar has also worked with Gilbert Hernandez, Eddie Campbell, and most famously, R. Crumb, who illustrated many of the early strips. This variety in Pekar’s illustrators naturally produces a variety of visual styles, both for the issues in general and for the visual...
representation of the character Harvey in particular, as seen in this panel from “A Marriage Album” where Joyce Brabner, Pekar’s third wife, prepares to meet him for the first time and wonders what the real Harvey will look like. (See fig. 4.) As such, *American Splendor* is an autobiography that is always already mediated by its artists, making it an apt candidate for a film adaptation.²⁷

Berman and Pulcini’s *American Splendor*, like Mangold’s *Girl, Interrupted*, repurposes its source material, using Pekar’s sprawling, episodic series of vignettes to construct a straightforward biographical arc for their protagonist, in which Harvey discovers his medium, finds love, builds a family, and overcomes cancer. However, where Berman and Pulcini’s film differs from Mangold’s is in its overt display of its own status as an interpretation of Pekar’s work. By rendering their own role as mediators and interpreters visible, Berman and Pulcini invite their audience to not only engage with their text, but also to see how it is a repurposing of Pekar’s. As in *Girl, Interrupted, American Splendor* lays the groundwork for this repurposing in the first few minutes of the film, guiding its audience to fit the facts of Pekar’s life into a certain kind of dramatic arc. In the three short, discrete scenes which open the movie, Berman and Pulcini first announce their intent to fit Pekar’s *American Splendor*.

²⁷ Berman and Pulcini see themselves as “performing the same function as the artists who illustrate [Pekar’s] stories” and use this facet of his work as “a license to have the multiple Harvey Pekars in the movie” (Porton 14).
*Splendor* into a teleological biographical storyline, then foreground their cinematic remediation of Pekar’s comic form, and finally undermine their own repurposing by presenting a forceful counter to their own narrative by allowing Pekar himself to interrupt its building momentum.

Like Mangold’s film, Berman and Pulcini’s begins with one of the only narrative scenes in the film not found in Pekar’s comic books. The film opens with a musical sting featuring brass instruments playing minor chords and a prominent theremin, an electronic instrument frequently used in soundtracks to create an eerie and mysterious effect. We then open on a close up of a child’s hand ringing a doorbell, upon which is superimposed a comic-style caption which reads “1950: Our story begins . . .” A wider shot follows, revealing five children standing on a porch decorated for Halloween; four children are clearly dressed as superheroes, while the fifth appears to be wearing normal street clothes. (See fig. 5.) A woman appears on the porch and awards candy to the costumed children, explicitly naming the characters—Superman, Batman and Robin, and the Green Lantern, all franchise characters of DC Comics. And then she reaches the last child:

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28 See, for example, its use in two sci-fi classics from 1951, *The Day the Earth Stood Still* and *The Thing from Another World*, as well as more recently in Tim Burton’s biopic *Ed Wood* (1994).
WOMAN: And what about you, young man?

YOUNG HARVEY: What about what?

WOMAN: Who are you supposed to be?

YOUNG HARVEY: I'm Harvey Pekar.

OTHER KIDS: (whispering mockingly) Pecker.

WOMAN: Harvey Pekar? That doesn't sound like a superhero to me.

YOUNG HARVEY: I ain't no superhero, lady. I'm just a kid from the neighborhood, alright? Aw, forget this.

The young Pekar stalks off the porch and into the street past other trick-or-treaters, throwing his sack of candy into the gutter and muttering "Why does everybody have to be so stupid?" The camera then match cuts to Pekar as an adult (Paul Giamatti) trudging down a similar street with a look of disgust on his face, while a loud jazz tune introduces the opening credits.

Before moving on to the credits, I want to pause and examine what sort of expectations this short scene sets up for the audience. This audience may be familiar with Pekar and his work in underground comics or may have wandered into the theater with no prior information at all, but either way the film uses this first scene to set up its central problem: that Harvey is a misanthropic crank who has trouble fitting in, a regular working-class joe in a world that only cares about superheroes. This, in a nutshell, will be the problem that sustains the dramatic action of the entire film, the through line that will motivate Harvey’s insistence that he can write comics about the ordinary, his neurotic romance with Brabner, his public feud with David Letterman, his battle with cancer, and
finally his formation of a quasi-nuclear family when he and Brabner adopt Danielle, the biological daughter of the artist who drew Our Cancer Year.29

In this sense, the opening scene of Berman and Pulcini’s film is not unlike the beginning of Girl, Interrupted, in that it sets up a question that the rest of the film will answer. While Mangold uses an in medias res construction to subordinate the narrative action of Girl to this initial mystery, Berman and Pulcini use this fabricated childhood prologue to suggest that all of Harvey’s problems can be summarized in this single incident. The film invites the audience to wonder how young Harvey will find happiness and fulfillment in a world where the only stories worth telling are about the extraordinary. With this prompting, then, the film encourages the audience to read everything that follows—the story of Harvey’s life—as a response to this problem, generating the same sort of interpretive teleology we saw in Girl’s in medias beginning.

That said, however, the credits which follow immediately begin to undermine this nascent comics bildungsroman narrative, both by focusing the film’s attention on the materiality of Pekar’s autobiography itself and by depicting several different versions of Harvey on the screen.30 Pekar’s comics aesthetic is foregrounded in a variety of ways. First, the match cut from young Harvey to the older version played by Giamatti leads to a series of brief cuts that emulate the comics form. The shot sequence is brief, less than

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29 The DVD commentary reveals that this last detail is a fabrication; Pekar and Brabner requested that the writers “fudge” the story of how Danielle comes to live with them.

30 Though only audiences with prior knowledge of Pekar’s interest in jazz would notice, Pekar actually seizes control of the film’s soundtrack at this point, which features Joe Maneri’s “Paniots Nine” (from the 1963 album of the same name) during the credits. This is not only reflective of Pekar’s interests generally and a striking shift from the dramatic music in the opening scene; in 2000, Pekar actually published a glowing review in Jazziz Magazine of the CD release of Maneri’s album, admiring “his employment of microtones . . . and his blending of jazz, free improvisation, modern classical, Greek, and klezmer sources” and raving that “Maneri’s still at least 10 years ahead of his time” (Rev. of Paniots Nine). Paradoxically, in this moment the soundtrack of an autobiographical film displays remarkable fidelity to its mute source.
seven seconds, and consists of a longer single take of Giamatti trudging down the street that has had two sections cut from it. The effect of cutting abruptly over the missing moments to a new image that almost matches the previous one is a cinematic analogue for the temporal caesura inherent to the panels and gaps that characterize most comics, including much of Pekar’s Splendor. Just as the spaces between comics panels “fracture both time and space, offering a jagged staccato rhythm of unconnected moments” but also invite readers “to connect these moments and mentally construct a continuous, unified reality” (McCloud 60), these abrupt cuts create a syncopated visual rhythm that lines up with the soundtrack, but requires audiences to fill in the temporal gaps missing from the take. This technique makes only a brief appearance here, but its presence announces a kind of hybrid form between Berman and Pulcini’s film and Pekar’s comics, one that continues throughout the credits.

Immediately after mimicking the temporal pace of the comics form, the camera pulls back to reveal that the credits are also actually structured as a comic book. The camera moves from left to right as if reading a page, and each panel contains either a
location shot from the streets of Cleveland, which comes to life as the camera focuses on it, or a still illustration of Harvey, talking to the audience about the film they’re about to watch. (See fig. 6.) Over the course of the credits, various iterations of Harvey’s image cohere into the following monologue:

CRUMB HARVEY: My name is Harvey Pekar. I’m a character in a celebrated underground comic book.

BUDGETT AND DUMM HARVEY: Different artists draw me all kindsa ways.

PHOTOGRAPHIC HARVEY: But hey, I’m also a real guy . . .

CRUMB HARVEY: An’ now this guy here’s playin’ me in a movie . . .

SHAMRAY HARVEY: Anyway, if you’re wonderin’ how a nobody guy like me ended up with so many incarnations, pay attention . . .

The names here refer to which artist’s version of Harvey is speaking. Those audience members who are fans of Pekar’s Splendor might not be able to match each image to an artist in this way, but nevertheless, taken together these images represent how Harvey looks for a majority of Splendor.

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The camera then zooms in on the next panel, and we leave the credits behind to return to the narrative present of the film, this time with a voiceover narrator addressing the audience and talking about Harvey as he walks down the street.

We’ll turn to this narrator in a moment, but I’d like to pause first and unpack some of the work that these credits are doing. If, as I’ve argued, the first scene depicting Harvey’s childhood invites viewers to construct a biographical teleology that colors the subsequent narrative, these credits immediately begin to complicate Berman and Pulcini’s repurposing, both by presenting Pekar’s own work to the audience and by displaying, on a literal level, a variety of different Harveys for the audience. Pekar’s work is put literally in front of the viewers’ eyes, in the general form of the comics medium, but also in these...
specific illustrations of Harvey taken from Pekar’s work. Naturally, this cuts a couple of different ways. On the one hand, Harvey’s introduction can be read as Pekar’s more authentic voice intruding upon and seizing control of the narrative just as it is beginning; at the same time, however, viewers can also see this not as authentic Pekar, but as Berman and Pulcini co-opting Pekar as a seal of approval that legitimizes their particular repurposing of his life. But in either case, Harvey’s introduction explicit reminds the reader that “[d]ifferent artists draw me all kinds a different ways,” foregrounding the fact that the film American Splendor is just another instantiation of this pattern.

This explicit point is made metaphorically, as well, in the many different visual incarnations that the audience sees in the credits. Just over three and a half minutes into the film, the audience has already seen eight different visual representations of Harvey. This includes the still illustrations mentioned above, the young Harvey of the prologue (Daniel Tay), and Giamatti’s Harvey, who will carry the role for most of the rest of the film. (Donal Logue appears in a later scene as an actor playing Harvey in a dramatic adaptation of American Splendor—with Giamatti’s Harvey looking on, of course.) But mathematically-inclined readers will have already noticed that this adds up to only seven Harveys; the eighth is the actual Pekar himself. In several of the film panels that pepper the opening credits comic, the tighter shots of Harvey’s prowl through Cleveland’s urban decay pull back to long shots that encompass the skyline, dwarfing his figure. In these long shots, observant viewers will note that Giamatti is actually replaced by another figure: the flesh-and-blood Pekar himself. 32 (See fig. 7.)

32 Jason Sperb argues that this multiplicity suggests that “there is no single, definitive Harvey to reclaim narratively,” leaving audiences with no sense of the real. (124). I might find his point more persuasive if he
These multiplying Harveys produce much the same effect as Berman and Pulcini’s use in the credits of Pekar’s comics: viewers begin to wonder to what extent the directors are contextualizing their own narrative as only one of several possible interpretations, pointing out that their story is a repurposing of Pekar’s material, and to what extent this same move is actually a further repurposing, one that presents its self-awareness as a way of legitimizing their narrative. But note that this is already a question that would never occur to the audience of Girl, Interrupted. Unlike Mangold, Berman and Pulcini make visible—if, to this point, indeterminate—their own position as mediators between the audience and their source material. Audiences cannot necessarily know at this point how Splendor’s filmmakers have repurposed their source material, but the juxtaposition between the opening scene of Harvey’s fictionalized childhood and a credits sequence that foregrounds both the comics medium and the mediation inherent in Pekar’s work invite the audience to at least engage with the issue.

The last scene of the film’s beginning clarifies both the film’s central plot instability (Harvey’s cynical misanthropy as an impediment to happiness, love, and fulfillment) and its governing rhetorical tension (the friction between Pekar’s original

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were discussing a fiction film, but given that the audience knows that there must be a flesh-and-blood Pekar, this multiplicity can only reassert this single, definitive Harvey, even as it keeps the audience at arm’s length from him.

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authorship, Berman and Pulcini’s adaptation, and the audience’s attempt to sort out the
difference) by introducing a surprising new formal device. As I said, the final credits shot
zooms in to one of the comic book panels, returning to Giamatti trudging along, but this
time with a raspy voiceover narrator:

Okay, this guy here, he’s our man. All grown up and going nowhere. Always a
pretty scholarly cat, he never got much of a formal education. For the most part,
he’s lived in shit neighborhoods, held shit jobs, and is now knee-deep into a
disastrous second marriage. So if you’re the kind of person looking for romance
or escapism, or some fantasy figure to save the day, guess what? You got the
wrong movie.

At first, the narrator’s characterization seems to endorse the view of Harvey set up in the
film’s prologue; he depicts Harvey as a loser antihero and his story as the antithesis of the
kind of “escapism” represented by the “fantasy figure” of Superman or Batman. But
while the content of the last line seems to validate this interpretation by endorsing
Berman and Pulcini’s *Splendor* as a

the image track undercuts the line by
cutting to the narrator—the flesh-and-
blood Pekar himself, sitting in an empty
white space surrounded by film

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Fig. 8: The real Pekar in *Splendor’s*
documentary space
equipment and reading his narration into a microphone. (See fig. 8.)

Pekar proceeds to have the following unscripted conversation with an offscreen voice, identified in the credits as Berman:

PEKAR: Okay, so now you got four takes. You ought to be able to patch one together from there. Right? Let’s go to the next one, alright?

BERMAN: Hold on a second. Do you want some water or something?

PEKAR: Nah, I got lots of orange.

BERMAN: Do you like orange soda?

PEKAR: Yeah, orange is alright.

BERMAN: Alright, so let’s go to the next sequence. Did you actually read the script?

PEKAR: No. A little bit. I . . . just to check the construction. You know, how the piece was constructed. I didn’t read it word for word.

BERMAN: Do you feel weird saying this stuff?

PEKAR: Nah, I don’t feel weird saying it. I don’t know how long my voice is going to hold out, but . . .

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33 Interestingly, Pekar appears in the credits not as playing “himself,” as one might expect, but as “Real Harvey,” suggesting that like “Young Harvey” and “Stage Actor Harvey,” even the flesh-and-blood person is just another interpretation. In a similar move, Pulcini’s on-screen appearance is credited as “Bob the Director.” In American Splendor, no one is simply “himself,” and no self is simply one person.
The camera then cuts to the first dramatized scene of adult Harvey’s life: a crisis involving the simultaneous loss of his voice and his second wife. But the film will return to this documentary space throughout the film, depicting both the flesh-and-blood Pekar alone and with the real Brabner and his friend and co-worker Toby Radloff, and each time the effect is similar to this first occasion.34 (See fig. 9.) The abrupt shift into an unscripted documentary mode turns the focus to the film’s real life subject and protagonist Pekar, but here we get a Pekar who is more or less indifferent to the entire project. Berman’s questions attempt to engage her subject in a discussion of the film and elicit his thoughts and feelings about it, but Pekar expresses more enthusiasm for his soda than for the script, and is more concerned with getting through his voice work than exploring his feelings about the project. In fact, Pekar’s indifference toward the film that purports to tell the story of his life prompts the audience to align themselves with his authorial perspective, viewing Berman and Pulcini’s narrative as a construction that’s tangentially related to Pekar’s life, worth glancing at, but not anything to take too seriously.

This feeling will fade, of course, as Berman and Pulcini’s narrative gathers momentum and engrosses viewers, but each time it starts to become naturalized as a

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34 The filmmakers actually describe this abstract white space as a cinematic analogue for the blank backgrounds in Harvey’s comics’ panels, suggesting that it extends the work of the credits in continuing to use Pekar’s medium in their own (West et al. 42).
realistic depiction of Pekar’s life, the documentary space intrudes to remind viewers—not just through the intrusion, but also through Pekar’s attitude toward the film—that the dramatic narrative is a repurposing of the facts of Pekar’s life, not a recreation of it. Later Pekar and Brabner will discuss whether Pekar’s negativity is cynical or simply realistic, and at one point we hear Pulcini yell “cut” at the end of a dramatic scene, shifting abruptly into the documentary space as the actors, finished with their scene, sit and watch a conversation between the people they are playing. In each individual case and in the overall pattern, the effect is to undermine Berman and Pulcini’s narrative, presenting it as an artifice—no less valuable for being so, but an artifice nevertheless.

Although Girl and Splendor are opposites in terms of their willingness to make visible their narratives as repurposed constructions, Splendor follows Girl in carrying its pattern through to its end. Berman and Pulcini structure Splendor’s ending in such a way as to mirror the oscillation between their narrative and Pekar’s critique found in its beginning. The final dramatic scenes of the film feature, in rapid succession, the critical success of Pekar and Brabner’s Our Cancer Year, a doctor’s assurance that Harvey is cancer-free, Harvey’s satisfaction with his nuclear family, and Danielle expressing a burgeoning interest in making her own comics. These scenes act as a response to the film’s prologue; Harvey has managed to find health, happiness, and creative fulfillment in spite of his bleak view of the world. However, as viewers have come to expect, the final shot of Giamatti’s Harvey fades into a match of Real Harvey, and Pekar responds to Berman and Pulcini’s denouement through his voiceover:
Yeah, so I guess comics brought me to life. But don’t think this is some sunny, happy ending. Every day is still a major struggle. Joyce and I fight like crazy. And she barely works. The kid’s got ADD and is a real handful. My life is total chaos. With a little luck, I’ll get a window of good health between retiring and dying. The golden years, right? Who knows. Between my pension and the chunk of change I get for this film, I should be able to swing something. Sure, I’ll lose the war eventually. But the goal is to win a few skirmishes along the way. Right?

As Pekar finishes, the image track shows his retirement party—Pekar surrounded by friends and family who love him—but this documentary footage may or may not be staged. The camera finally comes to rest on the cover of Pekar’s *Our Movie Year* sitting on a stack of medical records, a detail of the *mise en scene* that cuts both ways by suggesting that Berman and Pulcini have staged the entire party, but also by promising that Pekar himself will have the last word after the film has come and gone.35 In the end, the audience is left oscillating back and forth between Berman and Pulcini’s narrative and Pekar’s, aware of the tension between the two, but unable to resolve it.

“You c’n do anything with words an’ pictures!”

If this ending doesn’t resolve the tension between Pekar and the filmmakers, though, it does carry it to its logical conclusion: that the audience must sort out for themselves which interpretation is more faithful to Pekar’s life. Is Pekar too negative, as

35 In fact, this promise is fulfilled not only in the subsequent publication of *Our Movie Year*, but also in the single story “My Movie Year,” published as a small color comic with the DVD.
Berman and Pulcini seem to suggest, unable to recognize that the narrative arc of his life has bent toward happiness and success? Or have the filmmakers repurposed a complex and ultimately pretty bleak life in order to reach their predetermined happy ending? Neither interpretation of *American Splendor* gives us an easy answer, but the film does give its audience the tools to see how it reinterprets Pekar’s source material, and to what purpose.

And in this sense, *Splendor* is radically different from *Girl*. If we take the standard formal approach to their fidelity, they seem fairly similar. Both face the same problem inherent in adapting an autobiography, the change in authorship, and both approach the problem by dramatizing narrative scenes from their source material in fairly faithful ways. And both depart similarly from their source material by shifting the thematic focus in order to tell a more appealing and familiar story to their audiences: a story about the corrupting influence of the 60s on the one hand, and a story about a flawed man finding happiness on the other. But paradoxically, Berman and Pulcini’s adaptation ends up being the more faithful from a rhetorical standpoint, precisely by making visible its own status as adaptation and pointing the audience toward the competing claims of the source material and its author. The result is a film that brings the audience closer to Pekar’s life by showing them the way both the film and the comic books are interpretations of it, and that presents the audience with a more sophisticated understanding of its source material precisely by rejecting the pretense of formal fidelity.
Chapter 3: Queer Flesh, Dried Blood, and the Ideology of Audience

In 2005, *Brokeback Mountain* was hailed as one of the most faithful adaptations ever put on screen and also a deeply important political film. It is the intersection between these seemingly disparate claims that makes up the subject of this chapter. I argue, first, that critics of the film have not fully accounted for the important differences between the variety of flesh-and-blood audiences for the short story, first published in the *New Yorker* and later in a collection of short stories, and the film. This is important because it reveals the extent to which formal fidelity fails to help us evaluate the complex rhetorical changes made by director Ang Lee and screenwriters Larry McMurtry and Diana Ossana, all while maintaining fidelity of character and plot. Second, I argue that this rhetorically-inflected understanding of fidelity can help us to resolve a debate between reviewer Daniel Mendelsohn and producer James Schamus as to the film’s ideological goals, a debate that has larger resonances as to what queer film should do.\(^{36}\)

“Now let’s talk about movies…”

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\(^{36}\) “Queer” is a problematic theoretical and ideological term, and I use it with an awareness of its complicated meaning. I use the term “queer” here as an antonym for “heteronormative,” and inclusive of such diverse identities as homosexuality, bisexuality, transgender, and other non-normative groups. In my specific case, *Brokeback Mountain* is a film about a romantic relationship between two men whose own sexualities are not entirely clear, but whether they are gay, bisexual, or something else, the film itself is queer to the extent that it challenges heteronormative ideology and practices.
In January of 2010, the U.S. District Court for the Northern District of California began hearing the case of Kristin M. Perry v. Arnold Schwarzenegger. The case addresses the constitutionality of Proposition 8, the amendment to the California State Constitution approved by voters in November of 2008 that bars the state from recognizing same-sex marriages; the plaintiffs, along with many gay rights groups closely watching the case, hoped that District Court Chief Judge Vaughn Walker would overturn the marriage ban. Judge Walker later ruled that Prop 8 violated the Due Process and Equal Protection clauses and was thus unconstitutional; as of this writing, his ruling has been stayed by the Ninth Circuit pending an appeal. Whichever way this is resolved, their decision will almost certainly be appealed again and make its way to the U.S. Supreme Court, marking it as a landmark case in the history of civil rights.

The trial has covered quite a lot of controversial ground, touching on the psychological effects of discrimination against gays and lesbians, the possibility of damage to the children of homosexual couples, the potential for economic gain should the state allow gay marriage, the history of marriage as a social institution and homosexuality as both a practice and as an orientation, and the possibly prejudiced motivations of those who supported Prop 8. Of particular interest to the defense was refuting claims that the motivation behind the Prop 8 ban was discriminatory, a possibility which would suggest that the ban itself is also discriminatory; the defense argues instead that there is a legitimate state interest in defining marriage as a legal union between a man and a woman. David Thompson’s cross-examination of George Chauncey, a Yale history
professor who specializes in the history of homosexuality, is especially illuminating in this regard. The cross-examination begins with Thompson quoting Chauncey’s own admission that “as a historian I am most struck by how quickly public opinion is changing in regard to the recognition of same-sex relationships” (Chauncey xii). Thompson builds his line of questioning from there, implying that this improvement in public opinion is evidence that Prop 8 supporters could not have been motivated by discrimination. During his cross-examination, Thompson cites a variety of evidence for this shift in public opinion, including the American Psychiatric Association’s 1973 decision to remove homosexuality from its list of mental disorders, the public outcry following the 1998 murder of Matthew Shepard, the Supreme Court’s 2003 decision in Lawrence v. Texas which struck down laws prohibiting sodomy, a decline in the number of police raids on gay bars over the preceding decade, and a 2002 Gallup poll that found that 86% of respondents felt that homosexuals should have equal job opportunities (Perry v. Schwarzenegger 466 – 76). 37

Putting aside the question of whether a trend towards greater acceptance of homosexuality in the United States is evidence for Prop 8 supporters’ non-discriminatory motivations, there is a surprising item buried in Thompson’s catalogue of gay success stories:

37 While Thompson does note that 44% also responded that they thought of homosexuality as “an unacceptable alternative lifestyle,” he fails to acknowledge the statistic most relevant to the central question of Perry v. Schwarzenegger: that “six out of ten Americans are opposed to the recognition of marriages between homosexuals as legally valid unions, with the same rights as traditional marriage” (Newport). Even when the question was rephrased without the word “marriage,” those polled remained starkly divided, with 46% for and 51% against civil unions.
Thompson: Now let’s talk about movies. . . [Y]ou would agree that it was important that there were films that included gay characters, correct?

Chauncey: Yes.

Thompson: The movie *Philadelphia* was the first Hollywood studio film to address AIDS, correct?

Chauncey: Yes. Certainly, the first large-budget film to do so, yes.

Thompson: And it was a huge success, correct?

Chauncey: Yes.

Thompson: And that was in 1993?

Chauncey: Yes.

Thompson: And, more recently, *Brokeback Mountain* was a box office success, correct?

Chauncey: Yes. Although, I’m actually struck by how few such movies there are.

But, yes, it was.

Thompson: And it received numerous awards; did it not?

Chauncey: I believe so.

Thompson: Okay, now let’s talk about some of the governmental discrimination that you referenced during your direct testimony. (480 – 81)

Thompson leaves the topic of queer film rather quickly, content to gesture at *Philadelphia* and *Brokeback Mountain* (and, moments earlier, the television show *Will & Grace*) as proof of America’s embrace of homosexuality. And he does have his facts right. *Brokeback Mountain* was a box office success, making over $83 million, and it remains
the most financially successful queer drama in history. And *Brokeback* won its share of plaudits, as well, including the Academy Awards for Best Director, Best Adapted Screenplay, and Best Score, as well as four Golden Globes and four BAFTA awards. But Thompson’s hurry to move on from the topic betrays the inaptness of his selection of this particular film as an example of positive public opinion of homosexuality, given the fierce public controversy *Brokeback* generated.

The debate around *Brokeback*, which Thompson seems so eager to gloss over, was couched primarily as a political one, setting the conservative right and the values of evangelical Christianity against so-called “Hollywood values.” This debate was played out in the usual venues of talk radio and television punditry, with the expected themes emerging. First, there was the predictable concern about “the homosexualization of America,” as well as the suggestion that the buzz around the movie was solely the result of Hollywood and the media kowtowing to this homosexual agenda—or, as Fox News’s Cal Thomas put it, “[t]his thing is a—is a wet kiss, you should pardon the expression, to the gay community” (“Conservatives quick to opine”). This talking point also appeared among conservative groups, as when Janice Crouse, a member of the Concerned Women for America, argued that the success of *Brokeback* (along with *Transamerica* and *Capote*) at the 2005 Golden Globes was a sign that “the media elites are proving that their pet projects are more important than profit” (“CWA’s Crouse says, ‘Golden Globes Goes Political!’”).

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38 The movie revenue website *Box Office Mojo* lists *Brokeback Mountain* as the third highest grossing gay/lesbian film of all time, but the first, *The Birdcage*, is a comedy, and while the second, *Interview with the Vampire*, contains homoerotic undertones, it is perhaps a stretch to consider it a film that “primarily deal[s] with homosexual themes,” much less a film that mainstream America identified as queer (“Gay / Lesbian Movies”).
Another pattern that emerged was the need on the part of male commentators to bolster their heterosexual credentials by contrasting *Brokeback* with other, presumably straighter fare. Bill Donohue, president of the Catholic League, insisted that he would see Peter Jackson’s remake of *King Kong* instead of *Brokeback*, noting that “I suspect that the people who make these movies, though—like gay cowboy [sic]—would go see a movie called *The Gay Gorilla*. But that’s the difference between Hollywood and mainstream” (“Conservatives quick to opine”). Fox News hosts Bill O’Reilly and John Gibson were quick to join Donohue in distancing themselves from the film’s audience; O’Reilly protested that “they’re in the tent together rolling around. . . . I want to watch ESPN. . . . I want to watch the highlights of the game, not the pup tent,” while Gibson compared homosexuality to torture by asking “[w]hich is harder to watch, the pulling out of the fingernails in *Syriana* or Heath and Jake *enamorada* [sic] in this?” (ibid.).

Gibson’s comment begins to make explicit what lurks underneath the surface of Donohue and O’Reilly’s remarks: active revulsion at the prospect of seeing two men having sex. In spite of the fact that the “pup tent” scene is only about 100 seconds of a 134 minute film, the image of gay sex (for these commentators, explicitly unseen and wholly imagined) became a metonymy for the entire work. This was most crudely put in the derisive parodies of the film’s title; “Bareback Mountain,” “Brokebutt Mountain,” and “Fudgepack Mountain” were favorites of talk radio hosts Rush Limbaugh and Don Imus, among others.\(^\text{39}\) Nor was this disgust limited to paid media figures; responding to a

\(^\text{39}\) Corey Creekmur notes that *Brokeback* parodies and spoofs were not the solely the province of the right, calling our attention to visual appropriation, in the form of the *New Yorker* cover “Watch Your Back Mountain,” which replaces images of Jake Gyllenhaal and Heath Ledger with caricatures of George Bush and Dick Cheney, as well as camp parody in the form of Nathan Lane’s appearance in a skit entitled
question about “that movie,” “cowboy poet” Roddy Schoenfeldt noted that he was
“saddened that the agenda-driven Hollywood crowd’s movie, Humpback Mountain—you
may laugh at that if you like—disparages the way of my life” (Woolley 15). And at least
one theater owner pulled the film only hours before it was scheduled to begin showing,
defending his decision by worrying that “[g]etting away from the traditional families…is
a very dangerous thing” (Pierce par. 2). This condemnation of the film was felt by those
who chose to see it, as well; responding to a survey, a student at the University of North
Texas said that he “was bombarded with questions and accusations from friends and
colleagues. Friends snickered and joked, saying that [I] was now a homosexual simply
for seeing the movie with another male. . . . One female coworker was so disgusted when
she discovered that I had seen the film that she no longer speaks to me” (qtd. in Benshoff
par. 15).

We see in these quotations a “politics of disgust,” Martha Nussbaum’s term for a
pattern in which “many people react to the uncomfortable presence of gays and lesbians
with a deep aversion akin to that inspired by bodily wastes, slimy insects, and spoiled
food—and then cite that very reaction to justify a range of legal restrictions, from
sodomy laws to bans on same-sex marriage” (From Disgust to Humanity xiii). What we
don’t see, pace the defense in Perry, is evidence that Brokeback Mountain’s financial and
critical success is indicative of vanishing discrimination and homophobia. If anything, the
reception of the film makes the opposite case from the one that Thompson is trying to

“Brokeback! The Musical!” on The Late Show with David Letterman (“It’s kind of like Rogers and
Hammerstein meets Abercrombie and Fitch.”) (105). But while these do reference a variety of cultural
stereotypes about homosexuality, they lack the disgust with their source material that characterizes
conservative parodies.
prove in his cross-examination; while certainly praised both as a cinematic achievement and as a powerful political statement, the film had detractors who were vocal and widespread, and their condemnation of *Brokeback* was not only virulent, but present to a large degree in the general public.

**What should a queer film do?**

In spite of the cultural furor the film raised, academic discussion of *Brokeback* tends not to focus on the complaints of the right.\(^{40}\) Instead, commentary on the film concentrates, usually implicitly, on asking what queer films should do, and how this particular film meets or fails to meet those standards. As a result, much of the academic conversation around the film has revolved around a discussion of the kinds of radical work the film doesn’t do or the communities that the film neglects or fails to address. These conversations highlight particular facets, like the presentation of masculinity, the construction of the American West, the film’s racial homogeneity, and the problematic assertion that the film’s protagonists are, in fact, gay, but in each case the overarching question is to what extent and in what ways *Brokeback* is a queer film.\(^{41}\)

\(^{40}\) A handful of scholars do address the issue, however, worrying that the film is “a Christmas gift to conservative Christians,” playing into the hands of those who would appropriate *Brokeback* as a tragedy caused by the sin of homosexuality, rather than homophobia and intolerance (Cobb 102).

\(^{41}\) On the question of masculinity, see Keller and Jones, particularly their argument that *Brokeback* only succeeds as a queer film to the extent that it reasserts masculine stereotypes. Alley and Jones look at the construction of the film’s rural setting as pastoral; Sharrett and Howard address the film’s recreation of the American West, with Sharrett arguing that the final shot represents “the strong, silent American male . . . come to a cul de sac” (27), while Howard criticizes author Annie Proulx and screenwriters Larry McMurtry and Diana Ossana for their inability to “imagine a sustainable gay relationship in the country”—unlike, say, Tennessee Williams, Fannie Flagg, and Alice Walker. Needham also provides an excellent reading of the film in the context of the Western genre (31–78). Manalansan, McBride, and Bui tackle the question of
These topics are, of course, all interesting in their own right, and worthy of discussion, but the most interesting dispute from the standpoint of a rhetorical theory of adaptation is the debate between Daniel Mendelsohn, who reviewed the film for the *New York Review of Books*, and James Schamus, a long-time collaborator of director Ang Lee’s who both co-produced *Brokeback* (along with McMurtry and Ossana) and heads the studio, Focus Features, which distributed it. Mendelsohn’s review is almost unreservedly positive about the film itself, praising *Brokeback* as “a movie specifically about the closet” that “beautifully and harrowingly expose[s]” the self-hatred, repression, and frustration of internalized homophobia, but in spite of his admiration for the film, the tone of the review is largely negative (13). Mendelsohn’s praise for *Brokeback*’s aesthetic achievements is undermined by what he sees as a tendency both among his colleagues and the film’s own marketing campaign “to diminish [its] specifically gay element,” presenting it instead as “a sweeping romantic epic with ‘universal’ appeal” (12). In this way, his claim is parallel to Harry Brod’s, that reading the film as gay effaces its true bisexual nature; Mendelsohn argues that contextualizing the story of Jack and Ennis’s relationship with reference to the universality and ubiquitous appeal of love stories obscures the actual achievements of the film by denying its queer content and shoving it back into the closet.

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race; Manalansan argues that the film’s tragedy is “made possible through the elision of gender, race, class, and ethnic differences” (100), while McBride goes farther to say that the ideological commitment in the U.S. to white romance permits audiences to root for Jack and Ennis, even though they are both men. Bui places the film into dialogue with *Crash*, the 2005 film directed by Paul Haggis, which many feel unjustly stole the Best Picture Oscar from *Brokeback Mountain*. Lastly, Brod is one of the critics arguing that *Brokeback* “reinforces the fundamental stereotype that people can be so dichotomously characterized into gay vs. straight” by ignoring the (to him) plain reality that Jack and Ennis are in fact bisexual (253).
This denial is partially the fault of reviewers of the film, Mendelsohn claims, and quotes several that, in his view, downplay the homosexuality of *Brokeback* with their praise. The review in the *Los Angeles Times*, for example, describes the film as “a deeply felt, emotional love story that deals with the uncharted, mysterious ways of the human heart just as so many mainstream films have before it. The two lovers here just happen to be men” (qtd. in Mendelsohn 12). This marginalization of the film’s queerness is echoed in *The Wall Street Journal*’s review, which promises readers that “this [love story] stays with you—not because both lovers are men, but because their story is so full of life and longing, and true romance,” as well as in the *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, whose review objects to references to “the gay cowboy movie,” arguing that “it is much more than that glib description implies. . . . This is a human story” (ibid.). Mendelsohn doesn’t dispute these critics’ admiration for *Brokeback*, but protests that presenting the film’s queer content as somehow incidental to its success or to the audience’s experience undoes the potentially radical work the film is poised to do.

However, according to Mendelsohn the primary source of this marginalization is not film critics, but instead the manner in which the film’s creators presented *Brokeback* to the public. Mendelsohn offers a fairly damning catalogue of examples of this pattern, ranging from Ang Lee’s comment at the Golden Globes that he “just wanted to make a love story” to the forty-nine-page press kit Focus Features distributed to critics, which he claims never describes the film’s protagonists as “gay” or “homosexual” (ibid.). In addition, the print advertising quotes the reviews above as evidence of the film’s

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42 I was unable to obtain a copy of the press kit to verify this claim, which Schamus argues is inaccurate in his response to Mendelsohn.
widespread (i.e., not homosexual) appeal. Mendelsohn also criticizes television ads for *Brokeback*, noting that several images of Jack and Ennis embracing their wives appear in these commercials, but none of the two men’s physical relationship.\textsuperscript{43} For Mendelsohn, these all point to a conscious attempt on the part of the filmmakers to bolster the film’s financial success by distancing *Brokeback* from its own queerness, marketing it as love story that just happens to be about two men, a fact incidental to the movie’s actual appeal.

It is natural, then, that producer James Schamus would take umbrage at Mendelsohn’s critique. Writing back in a letter to the editors of the *Review*, Schamus makes the argument that Mendelsohn “sets up a false dichotomy between the essentially ‘gay’ nature of the film and the erasure of this gay identity through the marketing and reception of the film as a ‘universal’ love story” (“*Brokeback Mountain: An Exchange*” 68). Though he acknowledges that *Brokeback* was marketed “primarily as an epic,” the film, Schamus claims, is purposefully designed to be a “distinctively gay story that happens to be so well told that

\textsuperscript{43} One wonders here how Mendelsohn would read the poster for the film’s theatrical release, which both reflects and inverts the iconic image from *Titanic*’s (1997) ad campaign. (See fig. 10.) Is this a queer subversion of a major signifier of heterosexual love from the previous decade, or a redaction of the film’s queerness? And does it matter that in the *Titanic* poster, the protagonists are shot together and we can faintly see Leonardo DiCaprio’s arm around Kate Winslet, whereas in *Brokeback*’s queer reflection, the two lovers are clearly edited together from two separate photographs? (Note Gyllenhaal’s missing right arm, which should be wrapped around Ledger in a reflection of DiCaprio’s.) And what do we make of the fact that the bow of the ship, which separates DiCaprio and Winslet, is replaced by Ledger’s own shoulder?
any feeling person can be moved by it” (ibid.). His explanation of this design is worth quoting at length:

One thing this means is that we solicit every audience member’s *identification* with the film’s central gay characters; the film succeeds if it, albeit initially within the realm of the aesthetic, *queers* its audience. But in so doing, it paradoxically figures its gayness not just as a concretely situated identity, but also as a profound and emotionally expansive experience, understandable by all. (ibid., emphasis original)

In other words, Schamus locates *Brokeback’s* (aesthetic and political) success or failure neither in the advertising that the audience may encounter before watching the film, nor in whatever political action they may take after viewing it, but in the prospect that the act of viewing the film is itself a transformative experience.

In his response to Schamus’s letter, Mendelsohn dismisses this as an attempt “to distract us with a display of theoretical wizardry,” but I’m not so sure (ibid.). From the standpoint of a rhetorical approach to film viewership, Schamus’s claim is worth taking seriously, particularly as it relates to the important differences between the film’s flesh-and-blood audience and that of Annie Proulx’s original short story. As such, I want to spend the rest of this chapter arguing, first, that both Mendelsohn’s and Schamus’s claims about *Brokeback* are essentially ethical ones, informed by their differing conceptions of what queer films should do, and second, that a full account of the specific approach Ang Lee’s *Brokeback* takes to this problem is dependent on understanding how the film’s formal structure is prompted by the shift from Proulx’s flesh-and-blood readers to a more
heterogeneous film audience. For while Mendelsohn claims that the film is “faithfully based” on the short story, the reality is that Lee and the screenwriters alter the structure of Proulx’s story and exploit the particular affordances of film in ways that have significant consequences for their own audience’s engagement with *Brokeback* (Mendelsohn 12).

**Two ethics of queer cinema**

In making claims about what sort of film *Brokeback* should be in order to qualify as queer, both Mendelsohn and Schamus are making fundamentally ethical arguments about what things a queer film should aim to do. Mendelsohn argues that the characterization of *Brokeback* as universal, by reviewers or by the filmmakers themselves, betrays its queer content, marginalizing politically the cause it hopes to advance aesthetically. Implicit in this argument is a positive claim that queer narratives, to whatever extent they can be called queer, should be aggressive in their presentation of alternative sexualities. Rather than stressing what is shared by heterosexuality and queerness in an attempt to bridge the gap for its heteronormative audience—things like sexual desire, love, affection, companionship, and passion—the queer narrative should accentuate the gap itself, the dissimilarity and otherness that this difference entails. Whatever else they are, queer narratives must be queer first and foremost; to emphasize, in *Brokeback*’s case, the love story or the universality of human emotions is to normalize the text’s queerness, thereby negating it.
I read in Mendelsohn’s conception of queer narrative an ethic of alterity that has its roots in the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas. Levinas’s “ethics as first philosophy” claims that the encounter with the face of the Other makes an immediate demand on the self and entails an obligation to acknowledge the Other as fully human. By virtue of this encounter, this obligation exists before the self accepts it, and indeed, prior to the realization that there is anything to be accepted. Hence, ethics as first philosophy, prior to any search for knowledge. In this sense, “[t]he approach to the face is the most basic mode of responsibility” (Kearney 23). Indeed, this responsibility surpasses the self’s own rights:

In the relation to the face I am exposed as a usurper of the place of the other. . . .

To expose myself to the vulnerability of the face is to put my ontological right to exist into question. In ethics, the other’s right to exist has primacy over my own, a primacy epitomized in the ethical edict: you shall not kill, you shall not jeopardize the life of the other. The ethical rapport with the face is asymmetrical in that it subordinates my existence to the other. (ibid.)

Thus the encounter with the Other is not one between equals; the gaze of the Other’s face is a “gaze that supplicates and demands, that can supplicate only because it demands, deprived of everything because entitled to everything” (Levinas 75).

Levinas’s ethic of alterity—the self encountering the Other—is, then, parallel to an audience’s encounter with a text, a point well-made by Adam Zachary Newton. Newton argues that “narrative situations create an immediacy and force, framing relations of provocation, call, and response that bind narrator and listener, author and character, or
reader and text” (13). Like Levinas’s encounter with the Other, “these relations will often precede decision and understanding, with consciousness arriving late, after the assumption or imposition of intersubjective ties” (ibid.). The encounter of the text is, then, as inherently ethical as the encounter with the Other, and the obligations inherent in the textual encounter precede our analysis of it. While Newton focuses his analysis on the relations generated by and inherent in prose texts, his argument can be extended to cinematic ones; indeed, the experience of intersubjectivity may be more forceful on screen than on the page, as cinema audiences experience not merely the description of the Other’s face, but its celluloid reproduction, often larger and closer on the screen than in the faces we encounter in our daily lives.

Reading Mendelsohn’s critique of *Brokeback* through Levinas and Newton, then, I see his unease about the marginalization of the film’s queer content as a concern that the film’s Otherness is being consciously undermined and normalized by the filmmakers. By excising the queer content from the film’s advertising, by avoiding the words “gay” and “homosexual,” by emphasizing the universality of love rather than the distinctness of the homosexual experience, the filmmakers twist audience’s encounter with queer difference into a banal reflection of a preexisting narrative of heteronormative romance. Rather than being confronted with the queer face’s “right to exist,” the audience is reassured that the Other is not other at all, and therefore deserves no special treatment.

Considering Schamus’s response to Mendelsohn in this light, the aesthetic—and ethical—strategy of “queering the audience” shuns the confrontation of alterity, preferring to elicit the audience’s empathy by making them complicit in the queer
experience. Rather than experiencing the stark difference between heteronormative and queer, and thus realizing the ethical obligations to the Other such difference entails, queering the audience involves “identification with” the Other. Through the process of this identification, the viewer of a queer film experiences queerness “not just as a concretely situated identity”—as a Levinasian ethic would have it—but as “a profound and emotionally expansive experience,” one that invites the audience in, rather than making demands on it from without (“Brokeback Mountain: An Exchange” 68). In this sense, Schamus’s ethic has the same goal as Mendelsohn’s—an audience that recognizes and respects the humanity and value of queer subjects—but its strategy is less confrontational and more persuasive.

**Proulx’s flesh-and-blood audiences**

Schamus’s is also a riskier strategy, in that it relies not on a self-evident demand made by the face of the Other, but on the successful attempt to invite its audience into that otherness through its engagement with a text. I don’t want to try to determine now which of the approaches to queer cinema, Mendelsohn’s or Schamus’s, is *a priori* more ethical or politically effective, in part because both standpoints argue about what a queer film should be and do without really addressing what *Brokeback* is and does. Instead, I want to examine *Brokeback*, and in particular, what has been changed in the process of its adaptation from short story to film, in order to see what sort of ethic emerges *a posteriori* from the film. Both Mendelsohn and Schamus focus on the marketing of the film, but it is
the film itself that deserves scrutiny, either for confronting or queering the audience. And
the starting place for understanding the film’s ethical strategies is to consider that of its
source material, in its various forms.

McMurtry and Ossana first encountered “Brokeback Mountain” in the pages of
*The New Yorker*, where it was published in October of 1997. Annie Proulx’s story covers
several decades, spanning the relationship between Jack Twist and Ennis del Mar, two
men who, while herding sheep one summer on Brokeback Mountain, discover in each
other a passion neither expected. In the following years, Jack and Ennis see each other
infrequently, stealing away from their wives, their children, and their closeted lives to be
together on camping trips in Wyoming’s mountains. Though these visits are brief, the two
men are able to share their lives in these moments together: Ennis’s drift from job to job,
the birth of his two daughters, his divorce from his wife Alma; Jack’s marriage to a rodeo
queen named Lureen, his constant struggles with an overbearing father-in-law. Until one
day a postcard Ennis sent to Jack comes back marked “Deceased,” and Lureen tells Ennis
that Jack was killed by an exploding truck tire. Ennis suspects that Jack was murdered,
much like a gay man from his childhood named Earl, and travels to Jack’s childhood
home to retrieve his ashes and spread them on Brokeback. Jack’s father refuses to
relinquish the ashes, but Ennis leaves instead with a more personal trophy: a shirt he
believed lost on Brokeback decades earlier. Ennis learns instead that Jack had stolen the
shirt and kept it tucked inside one of his own, a potent symbol of their relationship that
Ennis reverses and preserves, hanging in his trailer alongside a postcard of Brokeback.
The short story was an enormous success, winning an O. Henry Award, as well as garnering *The New Yorker* a National Magazine Award for its publication. It later appeared as part of Proulx’s short story collection *Close Range*, which was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize, and this *Close Range* version of “Brokeback” has some significant differences from the *New Yorker* version, which we’ll come to in a moment. But the *New Yorker* publication can tell us much about what the original audience of the story looked like and what was considered remarkable about the story in this context.

As we all know, *The New Yorker* is a publication that markets itself, not only to actual New Yorkers, but to the United States as a whole as a cultural and intellectual publication. In the popular perception, it is an elite and liberal magazine, to such an extent that it is frequently used as a class signifier in political debates (as in “my opponent is a latte-sipping, arugula-eating, New-Yorker-reading . . .”). Whatever one thinks of this culture war verbiage, this characterization is borne out in *The New Yorker*’s contents. Its artistic and literary interests run to the sophisticated and high-brow, regularly featuring award-winning poets and authors; its left-leaning politics are evident not only by virtue of the topics it chooses to cover, but also in the fact that *The New Yorker* endorsed a presidential candidate for the first time in 2004, supporting Democratic candidate John Kerry, followed by their endorsement in 2008 of Democrat Barack Obama. It is, in short,
a publication for those educated and cosmopolitan readers interested in art, literature, culture, and liberal politics, perhaps best illustrated in The New Yorker’s unofficial mascot Eustace Tilley, whose expression, depending on one’s political and class perspective, is either the calm gaze of discriminating taste and class, or an effete sneer, the literalization of the phrase “to look down one’s nose.” (See fig. 11.)

These characteristics are all borne out in the New Yorker issue where “Brokeback” first appears. The cover by Edward Sorel, titled Fall Colors, is a visual remix of Michelangelo’s The Creation of Adam, depicting God, surrounded by a flock of cherubs bearing cameras, directing their lenses with his iconic gesture down to the colorful autumn foliage; in order to get the joke, readers must simultaneously gloss an Italian Renaissance fresco and a popular regional and seasonal activity local to New England. The table of contents also illustrate the sophistication and liberal values of the magazine; this issue contains an article about Secretary of State Madeline Albright, two poems, a piece on artist Roy Lichtenstein, a brief discussion of the Booker Prize, and an “oral biography” by George Plimpton about the writing of In Cold Blood.

This last contains a particularly interesting detail that underlines the importance of New Yorker readers as the original audience for Proulx’s story. Plimpton’s article ends, only three pages before Brokeback begins, with a full page homoerotic portrait of Capote (taken by Richard Avedon), naked from the waist up, captioned “Capote in 1955: he made a deliberate effort to play the part of the kook” (Plimpton 71; see fig. 12). I stress this because it is important to recognize that the original New Yorker audience for “Brokeback Mountain”—unlike Ang Lee’s more heterogeneous national film audience—
could be counted on not to recoil from the body of an openly gay man (and a “kooky” author, no less). In this context, coming only a few pages later, the queer content of “Brokeback” would not have seemed radical or shocking at all.\textsuperscript{44}

If anything, the queer content is the aspect of “Brokeback Mountain” most consonant with its \textit{New Yorker} context, the facet of the story the \textit{New Yorker} audience can be expected to accept most readily. Instead, the story’s paratexts point us toward what the editors believed would be the truly unique aspect of the story, the Levinasian other whom the \textit{New Yorker} reader is meant to confront: not the queer man, but the Western man. The table of contents, for example, includes a brief teaser for each essay or story; underneath “Brokeback,” it reads “Who says a cowboy has to be lonesome?” A similar tagline appears underneath the title on the first page of the story; this one reads “Cowboys and horses and long, lonely nights in the wilderness” (Proulx 74).\textsuperscript{45} Even the sketches that accompany the story, a trademark of \textit{The New Yorker}, reference not the erotic or amorous content of the story, but its Western setting (see fig. 13).\textsuperscript{46} These paratexts,

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\item The original publication actually goes so far as to interrupt “Brokeback” with an insert ad for \textit{Nothing but You}, an anthology of \textit{New Yorker} love stories, implicitly identifying Proulx’s story as a love story, not a queer story.
\item These taglines are, of course, both coded references to homosexuality, particularly the first, which is an oblique reference to Andy Warhol’s camp western \textit{Lonesome Cowboys} (1968). I maintain, however, that even these allusions still operate by foregrounding the story’s rural content; they are gay references, in other words, but what makes them stand out is that they are gay \textit{Western} references.
\item Two other small sketches accompany the story. One is another Western signifier, a native drum; the other, an athletic cleat, seems to have no bearing on the story’s setting, queerness, or anything else.
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intended to draw readers’ attention to the story, suggest an audience for whom homosexuality is less worthy of comment than a rural setting.

These characteristics of the New Yorker context and Proulx’s original flesh-and-blood audience have largely escaped the notice of those who study either the story or the film. In fact, to my surprise I was able locate only one reference to the New Yorker publication in the works cited of those critics I summarized earlier, or in any other articles. Instead, critics invariably reference either Brokeback’s published screenplay, a stand-alone edition of the story published as a movie tie-in, or Close Range, all of which contain versions of the story identical to each other but significantly different from the original version. These versions lack The New Yorker’s Western-themed paratexts that frontload the story’s rural setting rather than its queer content, as well as The New Yorker’s queer-friendly political context. In fact, Close Range—the full title is Close Range: Wyoming Stories—minimizes the original emphasis on setting, placing “Brokeback” in a context where its backdrop is shared with all of the other stories in the volume, but its queerness stands out as unique.

Alley mentions briefly the difference between the New Yorker and Close Range publications but only to argue that the addition in the latter shows that Ennis has found peace. The Stacy anthology of Brokeback Mountain scholarship is particularly egregious in this regard, standardizing all of its references to the text as referencing the version that appears in Story to Screenplay. In part to call attention to the erasure of the earlier version, all references to Proulx’s story, unless otherwise noted, will be from the New Yorker version. References to the revised version of the story will be from the Close Range printing.
This important shift in context is underlined by the fact that the post-*New Yorker* versions of the story contain not just a contextual difference, but a textual one, as well. While the versions in *The New Yorker, Close Range*, the movie tie-in, and *Brokeback Mountain: Story to Screenplay* are almost entirely identical, the latter three contain a revision not present in the story’s original publication. The story as originally published begins in 1963, with Jack and Ennis first meeting each other, and proceeds chronologically, but all post-*New Yorker* versions begin with a two paragraph prologue, printed entirely in italics, that establishes the narrative present of the story not in 1963, but after Jack’s 1983 death, and depicts Ennis waking up from a dream years later. This recasts everything that follows as a flashback, bounded at the story’s end by Ennis’s mourning and unfulfilled longing for Jack, manifested in dreams which leave him “sometimes in grief, sometimes with the old sense of joy and release; the pillow sometimes wet, sometimes the sheets” (85). This is the penultimate sentence of the story—followed only by Ennis’s tragic almost-epiphany that “[t]here was some open space between what he knew and what he tried to believe, but nothing could be done about it, and if you can’t fix it you’ve got to stand it” (ibid.); in all post-*New Yorker* versions of the story, this returns readers to that opening prologue, which depicts Ennis “suffused with a sense of pleasure because Jack Twist was in his dream. . . . it might stoke the day, rewarm that old, cold time on the mountain when they owned the world and nothing seemed wrong” (*Close Range* 255).

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49 Bill Buford, who edited “Brokeback Mountain” for *The New Yorker*, confirms that he “hadn’t realized that there was a different opening in the published book version; that would have been added afterwards,” as opposed to removed for the *New Yorker* publication.
This is important because it tells us something about Proulx’s rhetorical goals for the story. In the *New Yorker* context, Proulx introduces her characters first as “high-school drop-out country boys with no prospects, brought up to hard work and privation, both rough-mannered, rough-spoken, inured to the stoic life”—an opening that, like the *New Yorker*’s Western-themed paratexts, locates the story’s potential audience appeal in its rural hypermasculinity (74). But stripped of the urban, queer-friendly *New Yorker* context and placed in a *Wyoming Stories* collection, Proulx feels the need to frontload not the Western setting, but Ennis’s homosexuality. In other words, depending on the context, Proulx chooses to emphasize that aspect of the story that is most alien to her potential audience, always leading with alterity.\(^5\) Whether Proulx’s writing appears in a few pages after a topless Truman Capote or a series of stories with titles like “The Half-Skinned Steer,” “Pair a Spurs,” and “The Governors of Wyoming,” she makes it a point to shock the reader first with that which is other.

“You know I ain’t queer.”

Understood in their contexts, then, both the *New Yorker* and the *Close Range* versions of “Brokeback” are designed around a Levinasian ethic of alterity that doesn’t queer Proulx’s two different flesh-and-blood audiences, but challenges each of them to engage with the characters despite a wide gulf of difference frontloaded into the story’s

\(^5\) The fact that it is the opening of Proulx’s story being altered is of special importance. Whether they discuss exposition/launch/initiation/entrance (Phelan’s *Experiencing Fiction*), rules of notice (Rabinowitz), or the primacy effect (Menakhem Perry), narrative theorists emphasize the common sense notion that first impressions are important, and Proulx makes an effort to ensure that audiences’ first impressions of her characters are distancing ones.
first paragraph. This is clearly a strategy available to the filmmakers as they transpose Proulx’s story from the context of *The New Yorker* to that of a big-budget Hollywood feature; after all, the *Close Range* version appears six years before the film’s release, and Lee’s heterogeneous national (and international) cinematic audience has much more in common with the audience and context of this version than the solidly liberal and queer-friendly audience of the *New Yorker* version. In addition, the strategy inherent in Proulx’s revisions of “Brokeback” would meet the approval of Mendelsohn, who would appreciate the efforts she goes to in order to frontload alterity and distance her audience from her characters.

But instead of beginning the film with an older Ennis roused from a homoerotic dream about his dead lover—the *Close Range* beginning that would have certainly issued a challenge to American heteronormative audiences to engage with this unabashedly queer text—*Brokeback Mountain* follows the script laid out in the original publication, staying true to the progression of the original but missing completely the function of that progression in the original context. Unlike Proulx, rather than leading with difference, Lee’s film defers it until a quarter of the way through the film, when the “pup tent scene” finally confirms *Brokeback’s* queerness for its audience.

Whatever one thinks about the politics of this deferral, it is clear from the decision not to follow Proulx’s aesthetic strategy of frontloading difference that *Brokeback* is not a film interested in the kind of Levinasian encounter with the other that Mendelsohn advocates as an ethics of queer cinema. In fact, it gives the lie to Mendelsohn’s claim that it is the film’s reviewers and advertising that are “diminish[ing] its” specifically gay
element.” Rather, it is the film itself that does this from its opening shot, choosing to follow the New Yorker version in emphasizing its Western content instead of the queer emphasis of later versions, but in so doing, presenting its cinematic audience with familiarity rather than alterity. It also suggests that perhaps film critics who praised the film as faithful to the short story—Mendelsohn included—were too quick to make such a judgment without considering which “Brokeback” the film was intended to be faithful to, and how. For while Brokeback is a model of fidelity in terms of plot, events, and characters—the standard formal understanding of fidelity—this shift in context generates a very different rhetorical experience for the audience.

So if Brokeback isn’t faithful to Proulx’s confrontational emphasis on alterity and doesn’t participate in Mendelsohn’s Levinasian approach to queer cinema ethics, what does it do? I want to argue in this section that Schamus’s characterization of the film’s aesthetic strategy as “queering the audience” is, in fact, a fairly accurate description of what happens in the film, but with two caveats. First, Schamus fails to acknowledge that, to whatever extent the film achieves this goal, it is a departure from Proulx’s story and is less faithful to its source. And second, and more importantly, this effect is not at all a universal one, characterizing the film as a whole, but instead is local to specific moments—moments that do build a bridge between queer characters and heteronormative audience members, but that by no means eradicate difference and allow the audience into a queer experience. I’ll return to this point in a moment, but first we have to understand the way in which Brokeback attempts to queer its audience—a more conservative, heterogeneous, and less queer-friendly audience than Proulx’s New Yorker audience. The
film attempts this first by altering the plot progression so as to minimize the queerness of Jack and Ennis’s relationship, and second by replacing Proulx’s frank and direct prose with a cinematic discourse of ambiguity.

I have already gestured at one way in which Brokeback downplays its own queerness: by delaying the revelation that Jack and Ennis are anything but straight men. Without the benefit of the Close Range beginning, viewers of Brokeback spend half an hour with Ennis and Jack before they are made aware, along with the characters, of the true nature of their relationship. This is substantially different even from the New Yorker version, as well; although the progression is the same, readers of the New Yorker “Brokeback” arrive at Jack and Ennis’s first sex scene at the bottom of the story’s second page—hardly the thirty minutes cinematic audiences will spend with these characters before uncovering their sexuality. In other words, although the order of events is the same, as well as the discursive time—i.e., the scene occurs roughly a quarter of the way through both the movie and the short story—the actual time it takes for an audience member to reach this point is substantially different. Even if Brokeback’s positioning of the event in the syuzhet is faithful to its appearance in Proulx’s story, the practical effect, by virtue of expanding the short story into a feature film, is to delay the revelation of Ennis and Jack’s queerness.

Now, of course, any audience member purchasing a ticket to Brokeback Mountain in December of 2005 would surely know from the film’s own advertising or from the cultural and political buzz it created that it was a romance featuring two men. (Again, this is distinctly unlike the audience of Proulx’s New Yorker story, which has no way of
knowing this, and is primed to feel charitably towards the discovery when it is revealed, if only because they are *New Yorker* readers.) However, I would argue that the first half hour of the film works to undermine that paratextual prior knowledge. Before they are introduced to us as homosexuals, Jack and Ennis are presented by the film as rural youths, hard workers, skillful cowboys, humorous storytellers, and stoic men who handle the difficulty of their lives—their shared poverty, Ennis’s dead parents and Jack’s distant ones, their exploitation by herd owners like Joe Aguirre—with quiet dignity and strength. Whatever information about Jack and Ennis audience members bring into the theater—almost certainly limited to some version of “gay cowboys”—is supplemented, and even perhaps pushed aside, by the positive and nonsexual presentation of the two men for the first quarter of the film’s running time.

This, in turn, has the effect of establishing substantial audience sympathy for these two men long before the infamous pup tent scene. For the vast majority of the film’s first half hour, Jack and Ennis are the only two characters audience members will spend any time with, establishing both as the film’s protagonists. Thus, unlike in the *New Yorker* version, where readers invest only a few minutes in the story before arriving at the first gay sex scene, and unlike in the *Close Range* version, where readers know from the first paragraph that Ennis had a deep emotional connection to the man he dreams about, Lee’s film seduces the audience’s sympathies and requires a large investment of time, attention, and bonding engagement with Jack and Ennis before revealing the homosexuality that might turn off some audience members.
To put it another way, we might think of Jack and Ennis’s romantic relationship as the central global instability of *Brokeback*, the problem whose arc shapes the progress of the text from its inception through its complication and, finally, to a resolution. Virtually any audience member will know this already when she walks into the theater; it is perhaps even the job of paratexts like trailers, posters, and press interviews to communicate broad information like genre, setting, and central conflicts to potential viewers in order to entice them to buy tickets. What the first thirty minutes of the film does, however, is nuance this instability from the simplistic “gay cowboys”—a phrase as ripe for parody as it is for tragedy—to a more complex and compassionate understanding of who these specific individuals are and why their love for each other is indeed tragic.  

By the time the audience finally reaches the gay romance they always knew was coming—again, an anticipation particular to the film—their understanding and expectation of it has been contextualized by the time they’ve spent getting to know Jack and Ennis not as “gay cowboys,” but as individuals.

We see a similar bonding effect in another alteration the film makes to the story’s progression, this one with the goal of revealing fabula information earlier in the syuzhet. In Proulx’s story, Jack and Ennis’s time together ends when their boss, Joe Aguirre, calls them down off the mountain at the end of the summer. The two say their goodbyes briefly, neither acknowledging the pain they feel at their separation. But an interesting detail appears in Proulx’s prose, one that isn’t immediately comprehensible to the reader. While Ennis discusses his plans to marry Alma, he “look[s] away from Jack’s jaw,

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51 Martha Nussbaum’s term for this kind of specificity is “the priority of the particular,” an emphasis on context and detail central to her Aristotelian ethical stance. (See *Love’s Knowledge.*)
bruised blue from the hard punch Ennis had thrown him on the last day” (76). This is the first Proulx’s reader has heard about the punch, and the reference seems specifically designed to arouse and frustrate the reader’s curiosity, as no explanation is forthcoming. In fact, Proulx teases the reader several more times about this conspicuously elided event. Two pages later, after Jack and Ennis’s passionate reunion and the resumption of their affair, Ennis expresses surprise that Jack had sought him out, as he “figured [Jack] was sore about that punch” (78). This comment, too, goes unexplained; Jack responds by telling Ennis about his rodeo career and about meeting Lureen, but Ennis’s concern about the punch is (graciously?) set aside. Jack finally returns to the subject on the next page as he reminisces about their summer on Brokeback, noting that “that little punch a yours surprised me. I never figured you to throw a dirty punch,” but offering no other explanation to the reader (79).

The goal here is to get the reader to wonder what happened that last day on Brokeback, and, having piqued the reader’s curiosity, Proulx doesn’t return to the subject until the last page of the story. In Jack’s childhood home, Ennis explores his lover’s room, and makes his heartbreaking discovery:

At the north end of the closet a tiny jog in the wall made a slight hiding place and here, stiff with long suspension from a nail, hung a shirt. He lifted it off the nail. Jack’s old shirt from Brokeback days. The dried blood on the sleeve was his own blood, a gushing nosebleed on the last afternoon on the mountain when Jack, in their contortionistic grappling and wrestling, had slammed Ennis’s nose hard with his knee. He had stanched the blood, which was everywhere, all over both of
them, with his shirt-sleeve, but the stanching hadn’t held, because Ennis had
suddenly swung from the deck and laid the ministering angel out in the wild
columbine, wings folded. (85)

Only after this flashback does Ennis find his own shirt inside Jack’s, “lost, he’d thought,
long ago in some damn laundry”—the first we’ve heard of a missing shirt (ibid.). The
effect here, with Ennis’s discovery of the nested shirts coming simultaneous with the
reader’s discovery of the violence that last day on Brokeback, is to associate in the
reader’s mind the deep love and care of Jack and Ennis’s relationship with the violence
that continually erupts from the closet they find themselves trapped in. This conflation of
love and violence is not generally a feature of American narratives of heterosexuality, and
its presence here focuses the story’s emotional climax on the specific, conflicted nature of
closeted love between two men.

This, too, was an option available to the filmmakers, and here there is not even the
potential confusion of differing versions of the story, as in all versions Proulx places the
discovery of the shirts and of the Brokeback fight side by side. The film, on the other
hand, presents the fight on Brokeback in its chronological context, situating it as the
result of both men being unable to express their sorrow at the end of their time together
and divorcing it from the potent symbol of their love that appears at the film’s end. In
fact, there is nearly an hour and twenty minutes of screen time between the fight and
Ennis’s discovery of the shirts, enough time to fit another whole film in between these
events that are so inextricably linked in the story. Ennis does telegraph the importance of
the shirts in the film, muttering to himself that he “can’t believe I left my damn shirt up
there,” but this only serves to prompt the audience to ask “what happened to Ennis’s shirt?” and theorize about the possibility of Jack stealing it, not to wonder what violent outburst happened on the last day on Brokeback. When Ennis discovers the two shirts in the movie, the camera’s framing emphasizes the dried blood, but by this point, it’s too late. (See fig. 14.) What was in Proulx a potent symbol of the many contradictions of the closet, the love and self-loathing and violence and passion inherent in Ennis’s need to punch the same face he kisses, becomes a more heteronormative symbol of romance and longing, still representative of Jack’s desire and love for Ennis, but divorced from the violence that is just as central to their relationship as their love.

These two shifts the film makes in the order of the syuzhet relative to the fabula may not seem like much—they certainly didn’t to the reviewers and critics who praise the film’s fidelity—but they’re demonstrative of the filmmakers’ attempt both to delay the audience’s encounter with queerness and to normalize the film’s queerness by separating it from the violence that results from its closeted nature. The cumulative effect here is to encourage the film’s heteronormative audience to care about Ennis and Jack as rugged, Western men first, prior to the discovery of their homosexuality, and then to reassure this
audience that Jack and Ennis’s experience of homosexual love is really not all that
different from heterosexual love. The shirts become simply a signifier of romantic
devotion and longing, disassociated from the physical and emotional violence Jack and
Ennis do to one another.

The open space between what an audience knows and what it tries to believe

But having sublimated its own queer content in this way, *Brokeback* proceeds to
transform Proulx’s story in a different way—or rather, it forces its audience to struggle
with the uneasy ambiguity and uncertainty central to Jack and Ennis’s own lives. It will
be obvious even from the few excerpts quoted here that Annie Proulx’s prose style is
spare and direct, beautiful but harshly so, her form matching the callused hands and stark
landscapes of her content. And for the most part, Lee’s cinematography provides the
visual equivalent of this prose, offering grand vistas of an uncaring landscape, contrasted
with the dirt and blood and sweat that makes up Jack and (especially) Ennis’s rough lives.
But on several important occasions, the camera presents its viewers with images too
underdetermined to comfortably resolve, leaving the audience in a position of ambiguity
that allows them to share—if only momentarily—the consciousness of these queer
characters.

This aesthetic of ambiguity appears throughout the film, but two examples from
late in the film will suffice to make the larger point. The first occurs after what will be
Ennis and Jack’s last camping trip. This trip ends in an explosive argument, one in which
all the repressed resentments of years in the closet spill out, spurring the two men to hurt one another. Jack reveals that he has gone to Mexico for sex when he couldn’t have Ennis, and Ennis, in lines not found in Proulx’s story, blames Jack for being “like this. I’m nothin’. I’m nowhere” (83). What follows in the fabula is Ennis’s discovery of Jack’s death and his phone conversation with Lureen, which we’ll come to in a moment. But the syuzhet of Proulx’s story follows the lovers’ fight with a section break, followed by a flashback to “[w]hat Jack remembered and craved in a way he could neither help nor understand . . . that distant summer on Brokeback when Ennis had come up behind him and pulled him close, the silent embrace satisfying some shared and sexless hunger” (83). The rest of the section describes perhaps the most tender moment in the story, Ennis holding Jack from behind before he has to mount up to go tend Aguirre’s sheep, echoing a phrase from his dead mother when he tells Jack “you’re sleeping on your feet like a horse” (ibid.). The section then ends with a paragraph explicitly locating the flashback in Jack’s mind and explaining its meaning for the audience:

Later, that dozy embrace solidified in his memory as the single moment of artless, charmed happiness in their separate and difficult lives. Nothing marred it, even the knowledge that Ennis would not then embrace him face to face because he did not want to see or feel that it was Jack he held. And maybe, he thought, they’d never got much farther than that. Let be, let be. (ibid.)

The same scene appears in the film, and in the same place, but the film’s presentation renders this scene’s source ambiguous, left to the audience to resolve. At the end of their fight, the camera pulls in tight on Ennis’s anguished face as Jack clutches
him to his chest. The audience is then given a dissolve to the dying embers of a fire; the camera then pans up to reveal Ledger without his aging makeup and Gyllenhaal without his moustache, clearly establishing the scene as a flashback. The scene plays out as Proulx describes it in her story, ending with a close-up of Jack watching Ennis ride away. But rather than moving directly to the scene where Ennis discovers that Jack has died, we instead cut from young Jack’s face back to the narrative present, to a shot of Ennis driving away, their fight presumably unresolved. The final shot of the sequence returns us to Jack’s older face, watching Ennis leave, this time exuding rage and sorrow rather than longing.

Unlike the prose flashback, which clearly locates its source in Jack’s memory, the film flashback is underdetermined. Is the scene Ennis’s flashback, as the dissolve from his face to the past would suggest, and thus representative of his longing for a simpler time with Jack, uncomplicated by work, children, and the impossible strain of the closet? Or is it Jack’s memory, as suggested by the parallel shots of his gaze at the end of the flashback, suggesting that this memory should be read through the lens of his anger, a glimpse of all that they could have had, if not for Ennis’s intransigence? Or should we locate the agency for the flashback not in either of the characters, but in Lee’s camera? Instead of being a mindscreen of the internal state of either character, is this rather a reminder from the film’s implied author, sandwiched between their worst fight and Jack’s death, of the potential that was snuffed out by each man’s internalized homophobia? Without any way of resolving this ambiguity, the audience is trapped by “continuing sets of ellipses . . . [that] resist articulation,” as Richard Block puts it in his reading of this
scene (268). This resistance to articulation, the refusal of a resolvable epistemology, forces the audience, if only momentarily, into the closet with Jack and Ennis, unable to say what their time on Brokeback means, and why it erupts into their life at this moment.

This instance of ambiguity is, however, just a prelude to the film’s most important use of this aesthetic. In Proulx’s story, the flashback just discussed is followed by the scene in which Ennis learns about Jack’s death. This is already referenced in the first sentence, where the narrator tells us that “Ennis didn’t know about the accident for months” (83, my emphasis). What follows is first Lureen’s description of the event:

she said in a level voice yes, Jack was pumping up a flat on the truck out on a back road when the tire blew up. The bead was damaged somehow and the force of the explosion slammed the rim into his face, broke his nose and jaw and knocked him unconscious on his back. By the time someone came along he had drowned in his own blood. (84)

Ennis, however, immediately rejects Lureen’s account, thinking “No . . . they got him with the tire iron” (ibid.). A moment later, though, he “didn’t know which way it was, the tire iron or a real accident, blood choking down Jack’s throat and nobody to turn him over” (ibid.). Ennis remains in this state of uncertainty until he meets with Jack’s father, who tells him about Jack’s plan to bring a ranch neighbor from Texas up to his parents’ home in order to help them run the ranch. The implication that Jack was forming another homosexual relationship in Texas confirms for Ennis his suspicions: “now he knew it had been the tire iron” (ibid).
And after this the cause of Jack’s death is dropped entirely. For Proulx’s story, the important resolution here is not that the audience discovers how Jack actually died, but that Ennis believes that he has been murdered. In the film, this plays out somewhat differently, with echoes of the ambiguous flashback that occurred only a few minutes earlier. While Lureen speaks the dialogue quoted above, the camera stays on her, speaking into the phone in Texas. As she says the last line, we cut to a shot of Ennis listening, shocked, in Wyoming. As she goes on to point out that Jack was only thirty-nine, we cut again to a blurry depiction of three men beating a fourth with a tire iron, though the only sound we hear is Lureen’s continuing monologue. (See fig. 15.) Ennis does not speak, and the camera cuts back to his face as Lureen asks if he is still on the line.

Critics read this moment in a variety of ways. Some, including Mendelsohn, read the murder depicted by the camera as “clearly represent[ing], in a flashback . . . a roadside gay-bashing incident,” implying that the camera is depicting what actually happened (12). Others, like Christian Draz, read this presentation of Jack’s death as definitely “through Ennis’ imagination,” as “the Jack he sees being bashed at the roadside is not that of 1983, when it actually happened, but instead the Jack of 1963, the year in
which they first met‖ (12).\textsuperscript{52} Block reads the same images as Ennis’s dramatization not of Jack’s death, but of Earl’s, the man whose murdered body Ennis’s father took him to see as a child, making this depiction “a memory of a memory” (270). He goes on to suggest that “[t]he film . . . does not foreclose the possibility that Lurleen [sic] is imagining the true events as she tells Ennis the official party line” (ibid.). Or the moment could be all of these things at once: the truth behind Lureen’s lie, Ennis’s suspicions, Lee’s camera showing us the truth or only what Jack’s wife and lover believe.\textsuperscript{53}

By substituting Proulx’s clear use of thought tags with this aesthetic of ambiguity, Lee’s film forces its audience into exactly the same position of uncertainty that Ennis experiences in this moment. Like Ennis at the story’s end, the film’s audience is left with “some open space between what [they] knew and what [they] tried to believe” (85). In fact, our ambiguity runs even deeper than Ennis’s uncertainty about Jack’s death, because we cannot even be certain that that uncertainty belongs to Ennis. It could be Lureen’s, or even Lee’s, but whoever else it belongs to, it belongs to us.

**What this queer film does**

It is in this sense that *Brokeback* does transform its audience, inviting it to experience something alongside the film’s gay protagonists. But that said, Schamus goes

\textsuperscript{52} Draz is actually wrong on the facts here; Gyllenhaal’s moustached appearance in the scene indicates that this Jack is the one we have seen only a few moments before in their last fight. That said, this is no fault of Draz’s, as his article appeared in print before the DVD release of the film, which allows viewers to view the scene frame-by-frame. In fact, his misapprehension and misremembering is illustrative of how the blurry shots and quick cuts can confuse the audience as to what they’re actually seeing.

\textsuperscript{53} Not that it would matter to the film viewer, but the screenplay is ambiguous, as well; it describes the scene only as “a MAN being beaten unmercifully by THREE ASSAILANTS, one of whom uses a tire iron” (87).
too far to equate a shared experience of ambiguity with an audience that leaves the theater queered. This effect is a local one, tied not to the overall experience of watching the film, but to specific moments, moments that emphasize not only what the audience can share with Jack and Ennis—the uncertainty and confusion that can accompany romantic passion—but also what a heteronormative audience cannot easily fathom—the fear of the closet, the self-loathing of internalized homophobia, the impossible heartbreak of never knowing whether a lover’s death was an accident or a murder, of not even being able to ask. In this sense, Schamus’s “queering the audience” ethic is perhaps closer to the truth of what Brokeback does to its audience than Mendelsohn’s ethic of alterity, but it’s too simplistic to equate an audience sharing an experience of ambiguity and epistemological irresolution with gay characters with an audience sharing their queer experience. Brokeback does indeed offer “a profound and emotionally expansive experience,” as Schamus argues, but he goes too far when he says that it is “understandable by all” (Brokeback Mountain: An Exchange” 68). The sophistication of the film is not only that it builds a bridge for the audience between heteronormativity and queerness, but also that it emphasizes the gulf the bridge spans. Ultimately what is understandable by all is not the queer experience, which is at best rendered only partially legible in these moments, but instead the important things that are left unsaid by the film, not experienced by its audience. In this sense, Mendelsohn and Schamus are both partly right: Brokeback invites its audience to share experiences with Jack and Ennis, building a bridge rather than making demands from a position of Otherness, as Schamus claims. But the end result is that this strategy serves to emphasize not only what the audience has in
common with these men, but also what a vast difference the alterity of queer identity makes, the unknowable difference Mendelsohn emphasizes. In this way, experiencing *Brokeback* as a film entails, on the level of its aesthetic form, an attempt to understand the queer experience, but also a recognition of the impossibility of full entrance into it.

But this reading of *Brokeback* also tells us something about the importance of considering flesh-and-blood audiences and progression when we think about adaptation fidelity. As we have seen, critics who praised *Brokeback*’s faithfulness to Proulx’s story have failed to consider, first, which version of this story should be the standard of fidelity, and second, how these versions embody different rhetorical strategies depending on which flesh-and-blood audiences is being addressed. Considering Proulx’s flesh-and-blood audiences has shown us that her first aesthetic priority isn’t eliciting political compassion for homosexuals, but instilling a sense of alterity from the opening lines of her story. In this sense, the fact that *Brokeback* retains virtually all of Proulx’s plot events and characterization is irrelevant to considerations of fidelity, since the film’s aesthetic goal is a more complicated sense of impossible identification with queerness.

All of which brings us back to David Thompson’s cross examination of George Chauncey, when he uses *Brokeback*’s success as an indicator that Americans have largely embraced homosexuality in the past few decades. Looking back on this moment, Thompson seems to have all the parts right, but he has confused cause and effect. As we have seen, the reception of the film indicates not widespread acceptance of homosexuality, but a deep divide in the political and ethical culture of the United States. But *Brokeback* may have done its small part to improve the situation, as optimistic a
statement as that may be. If, as I have argued, *Brokeback* is able to help audience members not just to encounter queerness, but to understand both what is universal and what is unique about the particular instantiation of queerness represented by two gay cowboys, if only for the two hours they spent watching the film, then perhaps the film is less an indicator of American acceptance of homosexuality than a narrative that helps us to move in that direction.
Chapter 4: “How could that constitute an ending?”

In the last chapter, I focused on the different beginnings in “Brokeback Mountain”—Annie Proulx’s two different prose versions, and Ang Lee’s film adaptation—as a site of special importance, where implied authors carefully position their different implied audiences into ethical relationships with the story’s protagonists. In this chapter, I shift my attention from beginnings to another privileged position: endings, and in particular, twist endings. Here, I want to focus on the closing of Ian McEwan’s *Atonement*, which has been both praised and criticized for radically reconfiguring the ontological status of the entire storyworld generated in the previous three sections of the novel. This shift in ontological status has ethical consequences not only within the storyworld, but also for the implied audience’s relationship with Briony Tallis, the novel’s central character, and the implied McEwan. As such, the ethical complexity of this twist ending—especially its reliance on Briony as a homodiegetic narrator—creates a particular challenge for adapting this narrative to film.

The difficulty of the ending is evidenced in the reception of Joe Wright’s 2007 adaptation of McEwan’s novel, where both positive and negative reviews focus on the conclusion as a particularly troubling spot. Even laudatory reviews referred to the ending as “forced” (M. Scott par. 13), while some more scathing reviews called it “one of the
most patently manipulative conclusions in movie history” (Beresford-Howe par. 2).\textsuperscript{54} The reversal of the ending prompts one reviewer to criticize not only the ending, but the entirety of the film as “about as substantial and authentic as the diffused, air freshener-ad light that keeps bathing the characters in rays of synthetic sunshine”—an artificiality we’ll return to below (Pevere par. 10). In this chapter, I want to argue that the discomfort caused by the conclusion of Wright’s film is directly traceable to the challenges of adapting McEwan’s twist ending. Because the film version of \textit{Atonement} cannot engage in the kind of first-person diary construction that contributes to the ambiguous ethics of the novel’s end, Wright instead relies on the affordances of cinema to produce a similar effect. But this move from prose to filmic discourse shifts the ethical focus from Briony’s own responsibilities as a character and an author to the audience’s investment in the fictional world she creates, thereby transposing the ethical indictment of Briony onto the film’s viewers. In order to see both the logic of Wright’s adaptation and its ultimate ethical effects, I will focus here on two questions: first, how do McEwan and Wright prepare their different audiences for the radical reconfiguration of their twist endings; and second, how are audiences differently affected by the ethics of these endings once the surprise ending is revealed?

\textsuperscript{54} It is perhaps a sign of fidelity that these complaints echo reviews of Wright’s source material. Caroline Moore called McEwan’s ending “frustrating” (12), and Margaret Boerner goes farther to say that “[i]n a kind of lunacy…McEwan destroys the structure he has set up” (43).
McEwan’s *Atonement*

McEwan’s novel is structured in three major parts, with the twist ending occurring in a coda in the last twenty pages of the book. In Part 1, set on her family’s estate on a hot summer’s day in 1935, thirteen-year-old Briony Tallis witnesses the beginning of a romantic relationship between her older sister Cecelia and Robbie Turner, a childhood friend and son of the Tallis family’s charwoman. From her window, Briony watches and misinterprets a confrontation between Cecelia and Robbie, in which Cecelia strips down to her underwear and dives into a fountain to retrieve fragments of a vase that the two have broken. Briony’s misunderstanding is further compounded as the day continues; first, she reads a sexually explicit note (sent mistakenly instead of an apology for the broken vase) to Cecelia by Robbie, and then, as a consequence, she later misidentifies Robbie as a “sex maniac,” telling police that he is the shadowy figure she saw sexually assaulting her cousin Lola. As a result of Briony’s lie, Robbie is imprisoned, separated from Cecelia at the threshold of their romance.

Part 2 of *Atonement* shifts from Briony’s perspective in 1935 to Robbie’s in 1940, when he has been released from prison in exchange for his enlistment in the British Expeditionary Force at the beginning of World War II. This section of the novel relates Robbie’s desperate efforts to survive the BEF’s retreat to Dunkirk in the face of the approaching German army and return to England—and to Cecelia, who refused to believe Briony’s story and wrote to Robbie in prison, promising him she would be there when he was released. Accompanied by two other soldiers, Robbie struggles across the French
countryside toward the coast, injured and in constant danger from German bombs and bullets. Given hope by memories of Cecelia’s letters and the promise of their future together, Robbie finally makes it to Dunkirk; Part 2 ends with him falling asleep in the basement of a ruined building, assured by his companion that they will be evacuated at first light.

Part 3 shifts perspective again, back to Briony’s experience. Driven by guilt for her lie and its devastating consequences for both Robbie and her sister, Briony has estranged herself from her family and refused her preordained future in Cambridge, opting instead to become a trainee nurse in London. Working under difficult conditions caring for the maimed and dying soldiers returning from the front lines, she attempts to do penance for her crime. In her spare time, Briony tries her hand at transparently autobiographical fiction, including a novella entitled *Two Figures at a Fountain*, which is read enthusiastically but ultimately rejected by no less than famous critic, editor, and author Cyril Connolly. When she hears that her cousin Lola is marrying Paul Marshall—friend of the Tallis family and, Briony now realizes, the actual rapist from that night in 1935—Briony first attends their wedding, and then locates Cecelia, who is also working as a nurse. When she arrives at Cecelia’s flat, Briony finds Robbie there, as well, psychologically scarred by the prison cell and the battlefield, but nonetheless intact. The section ends with Briony attempting to atone for her crime, promising the pair that she will confess, both to her family and the police, that her original testimony was a lie, in spite of the fact that Lola’s marriage to her rapist ensures that no legal action could
possibly be taken. But oddly, the last page of this section contains an authorial signature: “BT / London 1999” (349).

Readers turn the page to find not “Part 4,” but a coda echoing this signature, entitled “London, 1999.” Here they encounter a diary entry from the now elderly Briony, a celebrated author who has most recently finished writing an autobiographical novel—the manuscript, made up of the first three sections, that the reader has just finished. Diagnosed on that very day with vascular dementia and afraid of losing both her memory and her capacity to write, Briony has finished her novel knowing that it cannot be published while the Marshalls are still alive, due to the inevitable libel suit that would result from the manuscript’s allegations. However, the reader also learns that while most of Briony’s novel is factual, she has changed the ending; in an attempt to avoid what she calls “the bleakest realism,” Briony has suppressed the fact that Robbie never escaped from Dunkirk, dying of sepsis from his shrapnel wound on the eve of the evacuation, and that her sister died months later in the collapse of a bomb shelter in London (McEwan 371). The two were never reunited, and Briony neither confessed her crime nor asked their forgiveness. The novel ends with Briony at a production of her simplistic childhood play The Trials of Arabella, written for that summer’s night in 1935 and only performed now on her seventy-seventh birthday; she pictures Robbie and Cecelia sitting together with her watching the play, claiming that such a reunion is “not impossible” to imagine (372). Thus the twist is revealed, and, as David Lodge puts it, “[w]hat seemed to be a conventional realistic novel turns out after all to be a postmodernist metafiction” (85).
In adapting McEwan’s narrative for the screen, Wright remains scrupulously faithful to the novel on the level of plot, hitting all of the expected beats and altering nothing of significance about the characters, events, or progression. When Wright reaches the coda, however, the diary format of “London, 1999” offers him an opportunity—indeed, almost requires him—to foreground the affordances of the cinematic medium rather than attempting to replicate the first-person immediacy of Briony’s journal. Before turning to Wright’s ending, though, I want to focus on how each text sets up its surprise, which will help us not only to understand the logic of McEwan’s narrative, but also how Wright’s reliance on cinematic affordances sets his audience up for a different ethical effect in his twist.

_Atonement’s intertextuality_

McEwan employs two different strategies to ensure that, upon finishing the novel, his readers will view the twist ending not as a cheap trick, but as a surprise that was cleverly prepared for over the course of the narrative. First, as many scholars have noted, McEwan composes Briony’s novel in such a way as to invite readers to see a range of intertextuality and literary allusion in the text; while this intertextuality is generally attributed to McEwan, and not to Briony, this technique generates a pattern of control and awareness that encourages readers to see the coda as the work of a masterful implied author, as opposed to the act of destructive lunacy referred to by Boerner. And second, he cunningly includes hints of Briony’s own revision of her novel, inviting attentive readers
to trace shadows of earlier drafts behind the final version that appears on the page. Having reconfigured the text as a novel-within-a-novel, this effect encourages readers to see these traces as subtle preparation for the “London, 1999” reveal.

Because much of the critical work on McEwan’s novel is dominated by and focuses explicitly on its intertextuality, I will focus the bulk of my attention here on his strategy of embedding Briony’s revisions into both her own novel and the whole of *Atonement*. That said, it is worth focusing, at least briefly, on how *Atonement*’s intertextuality acts as preparation for the metafictional turn in the coda. As has been observed by a variety of scholars, McEwan’s work is rife with literary allusions. The novel opens with an explicit mention of another text in an epigraph from *Northanger Abbey*. In addition, the characters themselves often refer to other works in both their thoughts and conversations; these include references to Fielding and Richardson (a conversation between Robbie and Cecelia), Auden’s elegy of Yeats (carried by Robbie during the Dunkirk retreat), and allusions to a variety of Modernist literary figures, most especially Virginia Woolf (in the rejection letter Briony receives from *Horizon*, discussed below). In addition, more implicit intertextual references have been mined by critics. D’Angelo reads Briony’s play *The Trials of Arabella* as a covert reference to Charlotte Lennox’s *The Female Quixote*, by which McEwan “reminds readers to be critically engaged with the text” (92). Responding to the observation that “the question of how the past is represented in language has become the central obsession of British fiction over the past three decades” (Macfarlane 23), Hidalgo argues that McEwan’s novel is thematically engaged with the whole of British literary history, including *Mansfield Park*,

55 McEwan actually refers to *Atonement* as “my Jane Austen novel” (Giles 94).
Howards End, and Brideshead Revisited (83). Further, Anna Grmelová goes so far as to argue—through reference to implicit allusions to Auden’s “Musée des Beaux Arts” and Breughel’s Icarus—that “there is hardly a dichotomy between the first, metafictional part of the novel and the second, ‘realist’ one as it is sometimes claimed; both parts of the novel are discursive” (157).

This last point is significant. While there is, of course, some degree of difference between various critical claims, underlying all of these analyses is the argument that the intertextuality that McEwan imbeds into the text serves not only as a guide for savvy audience members as to how to read the text, but also as an anticipation of and an explanation for McEwan’s surprise ending. Grmelová’s claim quoted above is predicated on the fact that Auden’s poem—first published in 1940, the year of Robbie’s death—would have been unavailable to him; therefore, his knowledge of it is necessarily metafictional and is an anticipation for attentive readers of the metafictional status of the first three parts of the novel. Likewise, given that “McEwan positions Atonement against earlier narrative models . . . concerned with the author-reader relationship, specifically the 18th-century novel and the modernist novel,” D’Angelo ultimately argues that the coda sets up an “implicit argument about the value of critical reading” (89, 103).

For my analysis, the significance of these claims is that, whatever their conclusions, they all read this intertextuality—both explicit and implicit—as preparing the readers for the emotional, textual, and ethical consequences of the coda’s surprise. Of course, this intertextuality can only lay this groundwork for those readers who recognize it, and while it is plausible that McEwan’s implied audience will pick up explicit
references to major authors like Fielding and Woolf, it seems to me less likely—though not impossible—that the intertextual echoes of Rosamond Lehmann’s *Dusty Answer* will be a touchstone for most readers, as D’Angelo claims. However, McEwan’s second strategy—including traces of Briony’s revisions at strategic points throughout the novel—ensures that even readers who miss his pattern of intertextuality will nonetheless encounter a design that retrospectively points to the radical reconfiguration of the coda.

**Briony’s revisions**

McEwan points to Briony’s revisions at two major points in the novel: first, in the rejection letter Briony receives from *Horizon* regarding *Two Figures by a Fountain*, and second, in Briony’s own reflection in “London, 1999” on her writing process. The former anticipates the revelation that everything but the coda is the product of Briony’s pen, while the latter, occurring as it does after the coda’s revelation, underscores the precision with which the trick has been pulled off. The rejection letter, penned by Cyril Connolly, is recreated in its entirety in Part 3, immediately after Briony sits by the bedside of a dying French soldier and accepts her role in his deathbed hallucination that she is his fiancée. Though Connolly rejects Briony’s novella, he is also effusive with his praise, remarking on the fact that both he and Elizabeth Bowen, among others, read the entire work with great interest. He commends her deft images—the phrase “the long grass stalked by the leonine yellow of high summer” is singled out for particular praise (312)—and compares her interest in “the crystalline present” to Virginia Woolf, though he speculates that too
much of *Two Figures* is owed to the Modernist author.\(^{56}\) Connolly includes minor critiques throughout—he suggests that the story works better if the young girl isn’t aware that the two figures have broken the vase, wonders if a Ming vase is “rather too priceless to take outdoors” (313), and corrects Briony’s reference to Bernini’s *Triton* as being in the Piazza Barberini, not the Piazza Navona—but his major critique is that nothing much happens in Briony’s story:

So much might unfold from what you have—but you dedicate scores of pages to the quality of light and shade, and to random impressions. Then we have matters from the man’s view, then the woman’s—though we don’t really learn much that is fresh. Just more about the look and feel of things, and some irrelevant memories. The man and woman part, leaving a damp patch on the ground which rapidly evaporates—and there we have reached the end. (ibid.)

“[W]riting can become precious when there is no sense of forward movement,” Connolly advises, and encourages Briony to include instead “an underlying pull of simple narrative” (312). While “keeping some of the vivid writing about light and stone and water” (313 – 14), he presses Briony to include some kind of progression and conflict that move the story forward:

If this girl has so fully misunderstood or been so wholly baffled by the strange little scene that has unfolded before her, how might it affect the lives of the two adults? Might she come between them in some disastrous fashion? Or bring them closer, either by design or accident? Might she innocently expose them somehow,

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\(^{56}\) Apstein develops this comparison, arguing that “Woolf’s influence extends beyond the shimmer and lambency of poetic descriptions,” not only for Briony, but for McEwan, as well (11).
to the young woman’s parents perhaps? They surely would not approve of a liaison between their eldest daughter and their charlady’s son. Might the young couple come to use her as a messenger? (313)

Though this is a major critique requiring a significant amount of revision, Connolly encourages Briony to “take our remarks—which are given with sincere enthusiasm—as a basis for another draft” (314). He even extends an invitation to discuss her draft further over a glass of wine, and notes—on the third page of his letter—that his rejections are rarely longer than three sentences. Finally, Connolly ends his letter with a few comments on an artist’s obligation to ignore the war and an oblique reference to Cecelia; apparently someone at the Horizon offices recognizes the surname Tallis.

Connolly’s letter stands out as an exception to the grim and bloody business of Part 3, focusing as it does on Briony’s immersion into the bleak hospital world of triage, amputation, and death. But it also draws particular attention from McEwan’s implied audience because it is strongest confirmation for readers that Briony is interested in reproducing the events of her childhood in fiction. From the beginning of the novel, readers have known that she had an interest in writing based on her composition of The Trials of Arabella, a juvenile play in rhyme that featured a young woman who runs away from home, falls ill, and is healed by a disguised prince, whom she subsequently marries. Likewise, passages in Part 1 describe the young Briony’s dawning realization of “the unbearable idea of other minds and the superiority of stories over plays” and her subsequent rejection of both the Arabella aesthetic and the values it encodes (41). In addition, her Horizon submission is mentioned tangentially earlier in Part 3, though its
title and contents are not revealed. With Connolly’s letter, Briony’s desire to revisit and reshape her past becomes most explicit for the implied audience, though only the most astute among these readers would suspect that everything up until this point—including the appearance of Connolly’s letter—is part of this project.

This is sufficient for most readers on their first time through the book, but consider this same passage through the eyes of a reader who has read the coda and reconfigured this passage and the text that precedes it as Briony’s novel. If readers are willing to do the verbal legwork, they will find that McEwan has actually given the whole of the surprise away in Connolly’s letter, which offers not just traces of Briony’s earlier draft, *Two Figures by a Fountain*, but also points to the fact that the text we’ve been reading is a further revision of the *Horizon* submission. First, Connolly’s suggestion that Briony shift her focus from “the quality of light and shade, and . . . random impressions” to the “underlying pull of simple narrative” has clearly been followed. In fact, some of Connolly’s proposals for the kinds of conflict that could ensue likely struck Briony a little close to home, as his suggestions that the young girl act as a messenger for the couple, that her misunderstanding might affect the couple’s future, that she might expose them to her family, and that her intervention might “come between them in some disastrous fashion”—all of these, in addition to providing dramatic tension and narrative propulsion, are in fact true. And not only true within the storyworld, but also the central action of the first half of *Atonement*.

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57 As Briony records in the coda, her second draft—the first to include an account of her life—wasn’t written until seven years after Connolly’s letter; perhaps the ease and accuracy with which he imagined the truth caused this delay in a young woman not yet ready to face it.
If these broad strokes aren’t enough, the industrious reader will find that even Connolly’s smaller suggestions have been taken into account in Briony’s manuscript. She has corrected her mistake about the fountain, correctly referencing “the half-scale reproduction of Bernini’s Triton in the Piazza Barberini in Rome,” as Connolly specified (18). Likewise, Briony has taken his suggestion about the vase’s provenance into account, though she ignores his suggestion that “Sèvres or Nymphenburg [might] suit your purpose,” opting instead to describe it as “Meissen porcelain” (313, 23). Even the line Connolly admires—“the long grass stalked by the leonine yellow of high summer”—has been retained almost verbatim; this line naturally appears on the same page that the young Briony witnesses Cecelia dive into the fountain—without, as Connolly suggests, noticing the broken vase (38). It is unlikely, of course, that readers will catch these minute details on the first read of Atonement; it would require the ability to recall obscure textual details—the name of an Italian piazza, the design of a vase, a particular line of prose—three hundred pages after they were encountered, a daunting task for even the most attentive readers. Moreover, McEwan wouldn’t actually want first-time readers to catch these details, even if they could. Doing so would completely undermine the shock coming a few pages later in “London, 1999.” Rather, the only readers who are equipped to make these connections are those who are returning to the passage after reading the coda, thus understanding the way in which McEwan has built Briony’s revisions into the text itself.

In addition to functioning as a textual clue, Connolly’s letter also operates on a thematic level, as it anticipates the radical generic and ontological reconfiguration of
"Atonement"’s coda. The historical Connolly was indeed editor of *Horizon* beginning in 1940, the year Briony submits *Two Figures*; his appearance, as well as that of Virginia Woolf and Elizabeth Bowen, in McEwan’s fiction simultaneously offers metafictional possibilities while also being easily read within the conventions of historical fiction, wherein historical people and places come mingle with fictional characters. Of course, first-time readers will likely interpret Connolly’s presence as precisely the sort of allusion to be expected from historical fiction, which is what they believe themselves to be reading. Herein lies the particular cleverness of this clue: it confirms for both audiences that they are reading exactly the kind of generic text they suspect, whether they are uninitiated readers who have not yet read the coda or readers who have retroactively reconfigured McEwan’s novel as a postmodern historiographic metafictional narrative interested in disrupting the boundaries between characters’, implied audiences’, and flesh-and-blood readers’ worlds. In this way, Connolly’s presence in the fictional storyworld confirms both the stable historical fiction uninitiated readers think they are encountering and also foreshadows the ontological break of “London, 1999”—if readers are already aware of this break. During the first reading of *Atonement*, the appearance of historical figures not only fails to give away McEwan’s game, but further confirms readers’ misinterpretation as they naturalize Connolly’s appearance as a convention of historical fiction.

Finally, Connolly’s letter—and the revision of *Two Figures* that it prompts—is effective in one last way, in that it provides a psychological motivation that helps explain Briony’s resistance to “bleak realism” that inspires her to write around Robbie and Cecelia’s historical deaths. McEwan—and also Briony—place her reading of Connolly’s
letter immediately after her traumatic experience at the beside of Luc Cornet, a French soldier dying of a horrendous head injury. As Cornet dies, his wound causes him to hallucinate that Briony is in fact his fiancée; reluctantly at first, and then more willingly, Briony participates in the delusion, confirming Luc’s false memories of the first time she came into his family’s bakery and reassuring him that she returns his love. After Luc’s death, a shaken Briony returns to her room in the hospital:

She sat on her bed in her nightdress with the letter in her lap and thought about the boy. The corner of sky in her window was already white. She could still hear his voice, the way he said Tallis, turning it into a girl’s name. She imagined the unavailable future—the boulangerie in a narrow shady street swarming with skinny cats, piano music from an upstairs window, her giggling sisters-in-law teasing her about her accent, and Luc Cornet loving her in his eager way. She would have liked to cry for him, and for his family in Millau who would be waiting to hear news from him. But she couldn’t feel a thing. She was empty. She sat for almost half an hour, in a daze, and then at last, exhausted but still not sleepy, she tied her hair back with the ribbon she always used, got into bed and opened the letter. (311)

The reproduction of Connolly’s letter immediately follows, thus linking her fantasy of an impossible future with Luc and her eventual final draft of Two Fountains that includes both an accurate account of her crime and a fictionalized version of Robbie and Cecelia’s future that elides their deaths. In fact, Briony’s detailed fictional future directly parallels the image that ends the coda: Briony’s fantasy of Robbie and Cecelia at her side, alive,
together, and attending the first staging of *The Trials of Arabella*. In this way, the combination of the trauma of Luc’s death and the questions posed by Connolly’s letter both foreshadows (for uninitiated readers) the revelation that Briony has decided to suppress the couple’s tragic fate and, at the same time, provides psychological motivation (for reconfiguring readers) for Briony’s decision, shaken as she is by Luc’s death in the moments before she first begins to consider how to revise her novella. Although Briony writes in the coda that all drafts prior to the final March 1999 manuscript “disguise[d] nothing—the names, the places, the exact circumstances—I put it all there as a matter of historical record,” reconfiguring readers can trace her final commitment to a happier fiction to this trauma, in which her fictional game with Luc failed to cover over the bleak realism of his fatal injury.

As if to emphasize the importance of Connolly’s letter as both an anticipation of and an explanation for the surprising revelation in “London, 1999,” McEwan actually repeats this strategy in the coda, after his metafictional trap has already been sprung. While the true fates of Robbie and Cecelia aren’t revealed until the closing pages of the novel, the first surprise—the fact that Briony is the author of the entire book up until this point—is exposed in the first part of the coda, which features Briony traveling to the Imperial War Museum to check some final sources for her manuscript. In particular, the coda details a series of notes and corrections to her manuscript made by a veteran of World War II. These notes largely address minor historical and idiomatic details, correcting the colloquial term for a “twenty-five-pounder gun” and the American “on the double” to the British “at the double,” highlighting errors in the details of RAF headgear,
and irascibly chiding Briony for a typo that suggests that a Stuka—a German dive bomber—could carry a thousand-ton bomb: “Are you aware that a navy frigate hardly weights that much? I suggest you look into the matter further” (359 – 60). These corrections function in much the same way as Connolly’s earlier letter; now that even first-time readers are aware that the first three sections of the book are Briony’s work, the entire audience is capable of recognizing that these, too, are traces of an earlier draft of the manuscript. In fact, these changes have been incorporated into the manuscript the readers have just finished, and while again the details are too minor to be easily recalled, the industrious reader can indeed go back and find the changes in Part 2. 58

Moreover, if Connolly’s letter inserts a recognizably historical figure into McEwan’s fictional storyworld, Briony’s reliance not only on the corporal’s corrections but the entire Imperial War Museum’s archive expands this ontological fluidity. For while Connolly’s letter gestures inward at the text—confirming Atonement’s generic status first as historical fiction, then in retrospect as postmodern metafiction—the presence of the Imperial War Museum among Briony’s sources points outward toward its paratexts and its author. Readers who carry on past the coda of Briony’s diary entry will find McEwan’s acknowledgements—signed “IM” in an echo of Briony’s “BT” at the end of Part 3—which begin thusly: “I am indebted to the staff of the Department of Documents in the Imperial War Museum for allowing me to see unpublished letters, journals and reminiscences of soldiers and nurses serving in 1940.” Thus, what readers believed was an actual archive fictionally employed by Briony, herself a fictional author, to compose a

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58 For those not inclined to pore over the text, the “twenty-five pounder” correction appears on page 220, “at the double” on 223, the Stuka’s “thousand-pound bomb” on 236, and the RAF soldier’s cap on page 251.
narrative that readers have just discovered, first, that they are reading, and second, that is partly fictionalized, turns out to in fact be an actual archive employed by the flesh-and-blood author, with this research then fictionalized into the text. In this way, McEwan insinuates even the paratextual elements of his text into the service of the radical reconfiguration of the coda, positioning Briony as both a parallel figure of the author and underlining her fictionality, the creator of one text and the object of another.

The challenge of adapting *Atonement*

If McEwan prepares his readers for the radical reconfiguration of the coda by composing for Briony a novel that is deeply intertextual—foregrounding the relationships between authors, readers, and texts—and that implicitly and explicitly contains the evidence of both her textual revisions and the ethical issues that prompt these revisions, these are strategies that are categorically unavailable to Wright as he adapts the novel to film. In this sense, McEwan has it easy; after all, the novel that Briony writes is materially indistinguishable from McEwan’s *Atonement*, and thus he can easily disguise his use a fictional intervening agent between this text and his own authorship. As the author of a cinematic text rather than a prose one, however, Wright faces a very peculiar choice. On the one hand, he could remain faithful to the *structure* of McEwan’s novel and alter Briony as a character, turning her into a filmmaker who has directed a mostly autobiographical film about her crime as a child and its subsequent effects. This choice

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59 Crosthwaite comments on this authorial crossover but is less interested in the ontological rupture caused by it and focuses more on the way “McEwan’s artistic predicament as well as the development of some of his (partial) solutions are inscribed into the text itself” (62).
retains the architecture of McEwan’s narrative, in which Briony generates a text that is embedded within a framing text of the same type. This adaptation strategy would potentially enable Wright to retain McEwan’s approach to setting up the coda’s surprise, first, by including cinematic intertextual allusions in the same medium as Briony’s text, and second, by incorporating critiques of earlier cuts, or drafts, of the film that would enable the audience to detect the revisions of Briony the filmmaker. On the other hand, Wright could remain faithful to the plot of McEwan’s novel by retaining Briony’s role as a novelist—but this choice generates a cinematic text that is not the product of Briony’s direct authorship.\(^60\)

To put this difficult problem another way, what we have here is a question of content and form, of story and discourse. In the storyworld of McEwan’s novel, Briony is directly responsible for both the story elements of parts one through three—details like events, characters, and settings—and for the discursive elements of the same text—factors like temporal order, focalization, diction, and syntax. If Wright wishes to retain Briony’s responsibility for both the content and the form of her portion of the film, she must be transformed from author to filmmaker; in this way she can still be the authorial agent behind both the film’s story and its cinematic discourse—elements like lighting, cinematography, casting, editing, and the soundtrack. This would maintain fidelity to Briony’s function as the metafictional center of McEwan’s novel, but at the cost of abandoning fidelity to a crucial element of Briony’s character, her work as a novelist.

\(^{60}\) There are, of course, a range of other less realist options, including the metacinematic adaptation strategy employed in Karel Reisz’s film adaptation, written by Harold Pinter, of John Fowles’ *The French Lieutenant’s Woman.*
It’s not surprising, then, that Wright rejects this strategy outright, as it would lead to a fundamental restructuring not only of Briony’s character, but of much of the rest of the storyworld. (Would *The Trials of Arabella* become a home movie? Who would replace Connolly in rejecting Briony’s first filmic draft?) This would also require a significant departure from the historical referentiality of McEwan’s novel, as Briony’s choice to tell her story on celluloid in the 1940s, as well as the likelihood of the film industry allowing such an opportunity to a female director, are implausible in terms of cinematic history. Instead, Wright opts for a text that remains faithful to Briony’s role as a novelist, but in doing so, strips her of her authorship of the discursive elements of the film. In Wright’s *Atonement*, Briony is still the author of an autobiographical novel—here explicitly named *Atonement*—which relates the story of her lie many years before and the terrible consequences that flow from it, and this novel still obscures the tragic deaths of Robbie and Cecelia.

In choosing to adapt Briony’s novel into a film without concern for naturalizing the presence of the film as an adaptation within the storyworld, Wright replaces Briony as the implied author of the image track, and, in turn, creates the challenge of finding the cinematic equivalent of the diary entry that will necessitate the narrative’s radical reconfiguration. The strategies of intertextuality and revision that McEwan uses to prepare his audience for the coda’s surprise are no longer available to Wright, because they no longer refer to Briony as an authorial agent.\(^{61}\) McEwan’s use of intertextuality

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\(^{61}\) This isn’t to say that Wright’s film isn’t intertextual. In fact, Christine Geraghty identifies a variety of cinematic references in the film, including David Lean’s *Brief Encounter* (1945) and *The Third Man* (1949), Frank Laudner and Sidney Gilliat’s *Millions Like Us* (1943), and Basil Dearden’s *The Bells Go*
and embedded revisions operate as groundwork for the “London, 1999” radical reconfiguration precisely because they point, implicitly and explicitly, to Briony’s process as the author of the text the audience is reading. Without a filmmaking Briony, adapting McEwan’s strategy to include intertextual allusions to cinematic history or traces of early edits of the film would be unintelligible as an attempt to prepare the audience for the film’s radical reconfiguration, even for an audience retrospectively examining the film for clues.

**Wright’s unpredictable ontologies**

Rather than adopting McEwan’s strategies of intertextuality and revision, then, Wright must find other means to the same end of preparing the audience for the surprise that is coming. I argue that he accomplishes this by foregrounding the exact issue that causes him problems: the presence of a teller, an authorial agent who is constructing the cinematic discourse. He foregrounds this discursive agency in two different ways. First, Wright engages in a kind of diegetic “looseness” throughout the film, using elements of cinematic discourse (like cinematography or the presence of a soundtrack) to suggest an ontological permeability that asks viewers to rapidly shift between diegetic levels. And second, he foregrounds the particular synthetic affordances of film as a narrative medium in order to emphasize the film as cinematic, including extra-narrative flourishes that do little to contribute to the narrative progression but continually remind viewers that they

\textit{Down} (1943). The point here is simply that in the case of the film this intertextuality is evidence of a filmic sophistication unrelated to Briony’s authorship.
are watching a movie. By foregrounding the cinematic and continually gesturing at the porous membrane between diegetic and nondiegetic elements, Wright invites the audience to contemplate how the narrative is being manipulated by an extradiegetic authorial agent, even if this agent is no longer Briony, but the implied Wright himself.

Wright’s diegetic play begins from the opening moments of the film, in a scene that foregrounds quite explicitly the ontological shifts that will culminate in the coda. The film begins with the usual pre-title credits, presented in a typewriter font. Curiously, the sounds of carriage returns play on the soundtrack, though no diegetic source for this sound is in evidence. The soundtrack and the credits then come together as the film’s title is spelled out one capital letter at a time, each letter accompanied by the satisfying clack of a typewriter key. After the title, the first image of the film appears: a tight shot of a child’s dollhouse, over which is superimposed—again, one keystroke at a time—a subtitle identifying the place as England and the time as 1935. The camera then pulls back and turns, following a meticulous procession of toy animals and people that lead away from the dollhouse’s door, coming to rest finally behind a young girl seated at a desk. She pecks away at an old Corona, typing “THE END” on a sheet of paper, then ripping it out of the typewriter and sliding it, with the rest of her manuscript, into a folder labeled “THE TRIALS OF ARABELLA / by / Briony Tallis.” Attended by an ominous and percussive piano theme, Briony stalks out of her room and through the house, searching for her mother. Along the way, the camera alternates between focalizing shots.

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62 In this sense, these flourishes fulfill Bordwell’s decorative function of style. As opposed to denotative, thematic, or expressive functions, “[h]ere style takes narrative denotation or an expressive quality as an occasion for exhibiting perceptual qualities or patterns”—in this case, exhibition of cinema’s affordances (377).
over her shoulder and anticipatory set-ups that predict her movements and wait for her around corners and doorways. Along the way she encounters busy servants, including Robbie’s mother Grace (though she is at this point only identified as a member of the kitchen staff), and Robbie himself, who already knows about Briony’s play (through “jungle drums”) and wants to read it, though he expresses hesitation about actually attending the performance that evening. Finally, Briony locates her mother in the drawing room and closes the door, shutting the trailing camera out of the room and bringing the martial soundtrack to a stop.

The following scene leaps forward in time to Mrs. Tallis finishing the play and heaping praise on Briony, who worries that her older brother Leon won’t like it. But before moving on, there’s quite a bit of diegetic play to unpack in this opening scene—especially for audience members who know, in retrospect, that this sequence is a cinematic analogue to Briony’s fictional novel. Importantly, this diegetic play occurs exclusively on the level of discourse; in other words, while the ontological flux doesn’t point to a filmmaker Briony, audiences are continually reminded in this scene of the overt manipulations of some authorial agent who is constructing this narrative. This is apparent, first, on the image track, which depicts Briony’s dollhouse as a kind of set, in front of which she has artfully and painstakingly arranged all of her toys in careful order. Contrast this to the careless heap we might expect to find in a child’s room: this image first suggests the deliberate work of an agent who has arranged these figures into a careful procession, then reveals that agent to be the young Briony, at precisely the moment that she finishes another composition in the form of Arabella. But while it is
revealing of Briony’s character as someone interested in created ordered tableaus, it doesn’t yet suggest any ontological instability. The march of toys operates instead as a thematic anticipation of the coda’s revelation of Briony’s authorship, suggesting not only her habit of rearranging representations of people to suit her liking, but also placing her in the company of another all-powerful author, orchestrating the orderly procession of animals two-by-two.  

Like much of *Atonement*, this image suggests an ontological shift only in retrospect, but in this case audiences don’t have to wait until the coda to reinterpret this as an image of diegetic play. In the scene immediately following Briony’s conversation with her mother, we again leap ahead in time to a point later in the afternoon, where Briony and her sister lie on the lawn talking. This scene begins with a crane shot that pans down from the Tallis house and across the lawn, coming to rest almost directly above Cecelia and Briony. What is striking about this shot is the appearance of the house itself, which is virtually identical in appearance to Briony’s dollhouse, the first image of the film which appeared on the screen less than three minutes earlier. (See fig. 16.) This short gap between the two images guarantees that the audience will recognize their similarities. This is easy enough to naturalize; clearly someone—Robbie, perhaps?—has constructed for Briony a scale model of the house she lives in. But the sudden appearance of this graphic match of Briony’s dollhouse is likely to produce at least a moment’s ontological disorientation in the audience, a disorientation that leads to further thematic parallels.

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63 McEwan’s Briony makes this comparison explicitly in “London, 1999,” asking, “how can a novelist achieve atonement when, with her absolute power of deciding outcomes, she is also God” (371).  
64 Briony pointedly asks her sister, “What do you think it would feel like to be someone else?” In one sense, this is perhaps the fundamental question of any fiction, and is thus thematically appropriate at the beginning of what audiences will later discover to be Briony’s fictional attempt to feel like Cecelia and Robbie.
Like the dollhouse, is the Tallis house primed to become a stage on which Briony tells her story? Briony and Cecelia occupy the same position relative to the manor as Briony’s toys did to her dollhouse; do they also occupy the same functional position as figures manipulated into position by a designer? The answers to both questions is an emphatic yes in retrospect, and for a first-time audience unaware that Briony is controlling the content of this narrative, too, the diegetic drift from dollhouse to manor house prepares the ground for this revelation.

In addition to the parallel images on the image track, this sequence also toys with the film’s ontology in the soundtrack through the use of the typewriter. As described in my summary above, the sounds of a typewriter’s carriage return and keys appear first over the credits, with no clearly diegetic source. This is not particularly unusual, however; films regularly introduce diegetic sound while the opening credits roll, with the source only becoming apparent when the image track appears. *Atonement’s* audience is likely to naturalize the typewriter sounds in this way, though this reading is quickly undercut by the fact that this supposedly diegetic sound is apparently capable of having an effect on extradiegetic elements of the discourse: specifically, the film’s title and the subtitles.
superimposed on Briony’s dollhouse. This suggests that the typewriter is an extradiegetic sound, and further, that we are hearing the production process of the composing agent. For reconfiguring audiences, this is clearly a reference to Briony’s authorship of the text; ironically, for uninitiated audiences, the fact that we discover this sound emanating from the diegesis in the form of Briony’s typewriter undermines this hypothesis, rather than confirming it.

The appearance of Briony’s typewriter on the image track should provide firm ontological footing for the viewers, but Wright quickly pulls the rug out from under their feet. Briony types, and the minimalist piano theme mentioned above begins on the soundtrack. Then, as Briony assembles her manuscript and begins hunting for her mother, the solo piano is joined by a martial beat. It may take audiences a moment to notice that this percussion is produced by the carriage returns and keystrokes of a typewriter, and that this beat is introduced to the composition at almost the exact moment that Briony stops typing; the music—both the piano and the typewriter—then increase in intensity until Briony locates her mother and shuts the pursuing camera out of the room. Thus the typewriter, originally ambiguous, then firmly interpolated into the diegesis, here becomes unambiguously extradiegetic, a part of the soundtrack that is the sole province of the implied author of the text. Reconfiguring readers may think of this as a cinematic analogue for Briony’s writing process, though again, it’s important to remember that in Wright’s adaptation, there is no way to attribute discursive elements like extradiegetic music to Briony herself. Rather, this diegetic play on the soundtrack foregrounds and complicates the notion of an ontologically distinct authorship—just who is in charge
here?—without actually holding out Briony as an answer. Additionally, viewers are invited to entertain the hypothesis that someone is writing the story that we are now seeing visually, a medial crossover that models Wright’s own visual adaptation of McEwan’s, and Briony’s, verbal text.

This is therefore unlike McEwan embedding Briony’s earlier drafts in his text, which implicates Briony herself in the production of the narrative, although it is similar to his use of intertextuality in that both techniques call attention to the presence of a sophisticated creative agent behind the discourse without specifying anyone in particular. But in this case, Wright is relying on a specifically cinematic affordance—the dual track narration of both image and audio tracks—in order to generate this ontological instability. In fact, this example, which I have unpacked in depth, is only the first in a pattern in which Wright manipulates the soundtrack to create an ontological swing in and out of the diegesis.

A few minutes later, for instance, the example of the typewriter discussed above, in which diegetic sounds migrate onto the extradiegetic soundtrack, occurs in reverse. Cecelia has gathered flowers in anticipation of her brother’s arrival and places them in the heirloom vase that will be broken in her tussle with Robbie. The vase rests on top of a piano, and Cecelia contemplates it for a moment. On the soundtrack, a piano melody similar to Briony’s theme recurs, this time without the typewriter beat. Building to a frenzied crescendo, this melody repeats a single note until suddenly stopping when Cecelia leans over and plucks a string on the piano—the same note that has been repeated on the soundtrack. In this case, what was purely extradiegetic music suddenly intrudes
into the storyworld and is completed by a character who is ontologically disqualified from being aware of it in the first place. Though the pattern here is reversed, the effect is the same: this diegetic shift points to an extradiegetic agent who both is responsible for the music itself and orchestrates Cecelia’s actions such that she completes the melody, even though this extradiegetic agent cannot be read as Briony, even in retrospect.

One final example of this phenomenon will be of use because it combines both Wright’s diegetic play and his interest in foregrounding the cinematic. Leaping ahead in the film to when Robbie arrives with his two companions, Mace and Nettle, at the beach at Dunkirk, he finds a Boschian pandemonium of men, animals, and military equipment. Robbie’s arrival on the beach initiates a long take which lasts five and a half minutes and accompanies Robbie and his companions through the chaos of the retreat. Beginning with a tracking shot that follows the three men as they try to get information about the retreat from a naval officer, without cutting, the camera escorts them past a grotesque sight: cavalry officers lining up their horses to be shot to prevent them from falling into the hands of the advancing German force. At this point, Mace stops to watch in horror while Nettle continues on with Robbie, past documents being burned and a beached ship, crawling with soldiers, one of whom swings from the mast shouting “I’m coming home.” At this point, a mournful string arrangement can be heard on the soundtrack. Robbie and Nettle continue moving through the bedlam, passing a soldier performing a gymnastic routine on a pommel horse, another sunbathing, another two fighting. The camera moves up the beach to the boardwalk, framing a surprisingly operational Ferris wheel in the background against a gazebo in the foreground. Focusing on a group of men in the center,
the camera moves close enough to hear them; they are singing, and as the camera circles them before moving back out of the gazebo, audiences will recognize that the melody the soldier choir sings is from the string arrangement on the soundtrack. Pulling away from the gazebo, the camera returns to Robbie, rejoined by the two other soldiers, as he passes a carousel crowded with men, followed by a line of trucks whose radiators are being destroyed in a gesture parallel to the earlier horses. The three men arrive finally at a bar overlooking the beach and go inside, leaving the camera to turn back and survey the scene through which they have moved. The final image takes in the entire panorama, as again, from a great distance, the audience hears from the beached ship the shouted refrain: “I’m coming home.” (See fig. 17.)

We have here the same diegetic blending on the soundtrack; the orchestral arrangement on the extradiegetic soundtrack morphs into the hymn sung by the choir in the gazebo—itself a surreal facet of the mise-en-scène, if not an ontologically disruptive one—then migrates back to the soundtrack. The ontological disruption here is further compounded by the song itself; unlike the typewriter clacking or solo piano theme from earlier examples, this hymn, “Dear Lord and Father of Mankind,” is recognizable to
the audience as part of their own history. For uninitiated viewers, the hymn first appears to be an intertextual allusion on the part of the implied author to a melody that audience members could be expected to know. As the take progresses, though, the melody reveals itself to be an extradiegetic anticipation of an event within the storyworld—the choir’s singing—which is itself a fictional representation of the historical events of World War II, suggesting an ontological continuity with the viewers’ world. Again, the effect is the same: the overtness of this diegetic play points to the presence of an implied author explicitly orchestrating the soundtrack and the storyworld in concert, creating an image track of a narrative that someone else is writing.

**Foregrounding the cinematic**

Beyond being another iteration of Wright’s diegetic play, the Dunkirk long take provides our first example of Wright’s other strategy for setting up the coda’s surprise by foregrounding the synthetic affordances of cinema in an especially overt way. This sequence is mentioned in a variety of reviews, though it receives particular criticism from A. O. Scott, who writes that “[t]he impression left by a long, complicated battlefield tracking shot is pretty much ‘Wow, that’s quite a tracking shot,’ when it should be ‘My

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65 This is particularly true of Atonement’s UK audiences. A 2005 BBC study found that the hymn—an excerpt from John Greenleaf Whittier’s The Brewing of Soma set to a tune by Hubert Parry—polled second on a list of favorite hymns, after “How Great Thou Art” (“The nation’s favourite hymn”).
God, what a horrible experience that must have been’” (Scott, “Lies” par. 7). Scott is certainly correct in noting that the long take is inescapably conspicuous, but while he reads this as a mimetic flaw, I argue that this is an example of Wright’s efforts to highlight precisely those discursive elements of film that are largely invisible under standard Hollywood conventions. In doing so, this take distances viewers from what is being shown in the scene; Scott is right in that regard. But by calling the audience’s attention to the filmic discourse—how the scene is being shown—Wright also calls attention to the authorial agent behind this presentation. Again, audiences cannot attribute this long take to Briony, even in retrospect, but by emphasizing the telling of the narrative by some controlling author, Wright prepares viewers for the revelation that the content of the film, as well as the discourse, is being manipulated.

This emphasis on synthetic cinematic elements recurs throughout the film, but a few more examples will suffice to demonstrate the larger point. Immediately following the long unbroken shot on the beach, the camera cuts to the inside of the bar, where Robbie searches for something to quench his thirst among a cacophonous horde of soldiers waiting for evacuation. Making his way to the back of the bar, he discovers yet another surreal detail. In what appears to be the basement of the bar, a French film is being screened for an unseen audience. (Geraghty identifies this film as *Le Quai des Brumes (Port of Shadows)*, a 1938 film directed by Marcel Carné [100].) Having finally

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66 The *New Yorker* review of the film is similarly dismissive, calling the shot “overkill” (Lane par. 4). Lane also points out that the Dunkirk evacuation takes place five years after 1935, “not four, as the film innumerately tells us” (ibid.). Audiences quick enough to catch the mistake are likely to dismiss it as just that—a mistake—but it is possible to read this as an analogue both for Briony’s “thousand-ton bomb,” an error pointing towards her responsibility for the narrative, as well as for the achronological appearance of Auden’s “In Memory of W. B. Yeats” discussed by Grmelová.
found a place of stillness and peace, Robbie climbs down into the basement behind the screen and, with the black and white faces of two lovers obscuring him from one audience and silhouetting him for another, he breaks down. Covering his face in his hands, Robbie quietly comes apart as the horrific tableau above hits home. (See fig. 18.)

The juxtaposition between the diminutive figure of Robbie in the foreground and the close-ups in the film behind him is thematically appropriate, reminding both Robbie and the viewers of the love he is desperate to return to in England; having finally reached Dunkirk, Robbie is tantalizingly close to the future he envisions with Cecelia, represented by the image of a seaside cottage on a postcard from Cecelia that he carries with him. But in addition to this thematic parallel between *Le Quai des Brumes* and Robbie’s yearning to return to Cecelia, there is a synthetic parallel, as well. By so explicitly foregrounding this film-within-a-film, Wright calls special attention to the gap between *Le Quai*’s fictional ontology, represented by a pair of lovers embracing, and the storyworld of Dunkirk, characterized by death and separation. For reconfiguring viewers, the relationship between fantasy of *Le Quai* and the reality of the Dunkirk beach is precisely the relationship between this same representation of Dunkirk, now understood to be Briony’s romantic revision of history in
which Robbie is destined to return to Cecelia, and the grim reality of the fact that he will
never see her again.

Another example of Wright’s emphasis on the synthetic affordances of cinema
occurs a few scenes later. After searching the ruined town for shelter, Robbie and Nettle
finally locate an intact basement to take refuge in for the night. The room is crowded with
other soldiers waiting for the evacuation, but Robbie is able to find a place to lie down.
As he drifts off to sleep, he uses a match to look one last time at Cecelia’s postcard. As
Robbie falls asleep, the match dies, leaving the audience with him in darkness,
punctuated only by the sound of waves lapping on the shore. Then suddenly the audience
is presented with three scenes they’ve seen before—Robbie and Cecelia fighting over the
urn and a shard falling into the water, a close-up of Robbie’s hand offering Briony his
letter, and an extreme close-up of Robbie’s typewriter inscribing the fateful word “cunt”
on his letter to Cecelia—but each of these scenes is presented in reverse. The shard drifts
up through the water, Briony hands the letter back to Robbie, and the letters t, n, u, and c
are lifted miraculously off the page. Then, just as suddenly, viewers see Robbie as a
soldier, walking alone through a field of poppies, then a crowd of men staring directly
into the camera and singing “The White Cliffs of Dover,” an iconic WWII song of hope.
The following shot brings us back to Robbie behind the movie screen as he lifts his eyes
to the figures projected on it, suggesting that this choir of men is actually Le Quai’s
audience. At this point, Robbie’s voiceover narration joins the soldiers’ chorus as he
repeats his promise to Cecelia to “find you, love you, marry you, and live without
shame.” Finally, the audience again witnesses the police taking Robbie away on that
summer’s night in 1935—again shown in reverse, Robbie exiting the police car and walking backward to Cecelia, only to start moving the correct direction in time so that we can hear Cecelia whisper to Robbie, “I love you. Come back. Come back to me.” At this point, the audience is returned to 1940 and the Dunkirk basement, where Nettle is trying to quiet Robbie, who has been shouting in his sleep. Nettle shares the good news that the evacuation will begin in a few hours; it appears that the men are saved. The scene ends with Robbie drifting back off to sleep, assuring Nettle, “You won’t hear another word from me. Promise.” The next image is a hospital corridor with the subtitle “London / Three weeks earlier,” and the audience is thrust from Robbie’s story into Briony’s.

This sequence is striking in the way that, like the long take on the beach, it foregrounds the particular affordances of cinema—in this case reversing time by literally reversing the film—in order to bring to the foreground the agency of a controlling author. It is perhaps more emphatic in this way than the long take, because, rare as they are, long takes are easily legible to film audiences. While the absence of a cut is unusual in the beach sequence, no reinterpretation of the storyworld is required to account for it. This is not the case for the reversed pieces of film here; audiences must in some way account for this unusual facet of the discourse. In this particular case, Wright offers uninitiated audiences an easy answer by bookending the reversed film with shots of Robbie, first falling asleep, then waking up; clearly this expressionistic presentation is meant to be read as Robbie’s dream, focused as it is on literally reversing the critical events of that day in 1935 and returning to Cecelia’s arms, even if it means walking backward. Reconfiguring audiences, however, can replace this explanation with another: this is not a
representation of Robbie dreaming, but of Robbie dying. For in retrospect, the audience is aware that Robbie never leaves this basement, and that this moment of synthetic play is also the precise moment when Briony chooses, in her novel, to purposefully replace the bleak realism of Robbie’s history with her own fiction of his survival. In this sense, Wright’s reversal of the film represents not only Robbie’s desire to rewrite the past, but also Briony’s.67 Even though she is not directly responsible for the filmic discourse, here the expressionistic reversal of the film acts as an analogue to her act of creation, though it initially is legible only as a representation of Robbie’s dreaming subconscious. For reconfiguring readers, however, the reversal of the film’s image track acts as an analogue to the retrospection and reversal of Briony’s narrative.

One final example of Wright highlighting the cinematic will suffice to demonstrate the general pattern—this one replacing Connolly’s letter in the narrative progression. In this scene, Briony bravely walks away from Luc’s bedside through a ward crowded with the sleeping wounded. Debussy’s “Clair de lune” plays quietly on the soundtrack as the film cuts from Briony to documentary footage of the Dunkirk evacuation. Black and white images of soldiers disembarking from ships, grinning as they devour sandwiches, and sharing cigarettes fill the screen without explanation. After a series of these images, the film cuts to Briony’s face with a bright light coming over her shoulder; she is watching, with other hospital staff and patients, a news reel showing

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67 Though not crucial to my point here, there is a long association between an audience’s experience of watching a film and their experience of dreaming, suggested as early as 1916 by Hugo Munsterberg and elaborated by Suzanne Langer, Parker Tyler, and Colin McGinn, as well as given cinematic form in films from Sherlock Jr. (Keaton, 1924) to Inception (Nolan, 2010). If “a movie is a dream idealized . . . a dream as we wish we had them,” then this link provides an opportunity for Wright to conjoin our narrative desires with Robbie’s; like Robbie, we long for an ending that undoes the mistakes of the past (McGinn 168). As I argue below, it is precisely this desire that becomes the object of critique in the coda.
footage of the Dunkirk evacuation—another image of an audience watching a film. Almost immediately after viewers have reoriented themselves to this discovery, the news reel changes to footage “on the home front,” in which Queen Elizabeth visits a chocolate factory in the north of England. The factory is owned by none other than Paul Marshall, Lola’s rapist from 1935, and as the announcer informs the audience of their impending marriage, they appear on screen, interacting with the queen in the documentary footage. Prompted by seeing Lola, Briony walks away from the screen; the next scene continues this motion, as she marches through London streets to witness the Marshalls’ wedding.

Because this footage replaces Connolly’s letter in the narrative progression, it also complicates the letter’s function as a motivation for Briony’s revisionist history. Rather than focusing on Luc’s death and Connolly’s letter as the seeds which grow into Briony’s rejection of bleak realism, this sequence foregrounds instead the injustice of the Marshalls’ marriage set against representations of Robbie’s compatriots at Dunkirk as the immediate precursor to Briony first observing the wedding, then finding Cecelia to tell her of her plans to come forward and confess. In addition, Wright’s use of documentary footage here serves much the same function as McEwan’s inclusion of the Imperial War Museum as source material. The film’s audience here is asked to conflate a variety of ontological levels here, as historical footage is used as a film-within-the-film, which then turns out to itself be a fiction within the larger narrative. Moreover, embedded within this historical footage are fictional characters; the presence of the actors playing the Marshalls—digitally inserted with CGI—further contribute to the ontological fluidity of Wright’s usage of this footage.
While other examples exist throughout the film, these suffice to demonstrate Wright’s solution to the problems posed by McEwan’s novel. Because he cannot rely on intertextuality and revision to plant clues to Briony’s role as intermediate author—indeed, because Briony no longer is the intermediate author—Wright instead uses the discursive elements of his film to create diegetic flux and to highlight the synthetic affordances of cinema. This strategy cues audiences to pay attention to the signs of a manipulating authorial agent in the film, and while this agent cannot be retroactively explained as Briony herself, reconfiguring viewers can read these instances as an analogue to her intervention. But what consequences do these different strategies for the ethics of both narratives’ endings? In my last section, I will examine the ethical shift that results from the opportunities and limitations afforded Wright by the cinematic form.

A final act of kindness

For McEwan, the ethical question posed by “London, 1999”—is Briony’s revisionist history truly a legitimate act of atonement?—is undercut by the form her confession takes. Because McEwan presents her confession in the form of a diary entry, the earnestness of her appeal to “a stand against oblivion and despair” is somewhat undercut (372). In fact, as Briony notes, because of the inevitable libel suit the Marshalls would bring against Briony and her publisher, the novel will never be published while any of the relevant parties are alive, thus assuring not only that the Marshalls escape
condemnation, but that the novel’s author will, as well. As a result, when Briony says that she would “like to think that it isn’t weakness or evasion” to rewrite history (ibid.), McEwan’s readers are right to note that she protests too much; in fact, evading the compounded consequences of her childhood lie is precisely what she has done by choosing to withhold the novel’s publication and confess only in the privacy of her diary. Thus when Briony claims that “[i]t’s not impossible” to imagine “Robbie and Cecelia, still alive, still in love, sitting side by side in the library, smiling at The Trials of Arabella,” McEwan’s implied audience is invited to read this statement as the escapist wish of a woman who has taken a step toward atoning for her crime, but an insufficient one. Yes, it is possible to imagine Robbie and Cecelia’s unfulfilled future together, but the simple act of imagining it—as Briony has done in her novel—doesn’t make it so, nor can this private act of imagination serve as penance or compensation for their terrible loss.

In addition, the conflation of Briony’s imaginative escapism with her childhood play cue readers to see her revisionist history not only as an evasion of her ethical responsibility, but also an aesthetic failing, a reversion to the fanciful artistic priorities of Arabella that her younger self so clearly rejects:

Briony had her first, weak intimation that for her now it could no longer be fairy-tale castles and princesses, but the strangeness of the here and now, of what passed between people, the ordinary people that she knew, and what power one could have over the other, and how easy it was to get everything wrong, completely wrong. (39)

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68 In fact, as James Phelan notes, the only possible defense against such a libel suit would be to call the novel what it is: a fiction (Experiencing Fiction 127).
Rather than retain this manifesto as the first principle of her art, Briony’s confession reveals the extent to which she has reverted back into the facile comfort of fairy tale logic; instead of remembering “how easy” it was for Briony to carelessly ruin Robbie and Cecelia’s lives, both her confession and her composition reveal how easy it is for her to imagine their presence beside her. For readers that have been invested both in Robbie and Cecelia’s relationship and Briony’s development as an artist, her ethical and aesthetic misjudgments cue the audience to reject her Arabella fantasy as both an inadequate atonement and an ethically compromised aesthetic effort.

Wright’s investment in the affordances of cinema produces a quite different coda, both because an ending featuring a woman writing in her diary would be decidedly uncinematic, and because the shift in authorial responsibility from Briony to the implied Wright leaves no room for a consideration of Briony’s aesthetic development. Instead, Wright opts for a different solution to the problem, and in so doing, shifts his audience from critics of Briony’s revision to coconspirators in her crime. In the film, the coda begins with Briony riding on the tube away from her sister’s flat in 1940, determined to make a public confession—the same scene which ends Part 3 in McEwan’s text. The clacking of the train’s wheels morphs into the clacking of typewriter keys, and the screen goes suddenly black, a disembodied voice asking, “I’m sorry, could we stop for a moment?” The next image is a bank of television monitors, all showing an elderly woman sitting across from a man. The woman rises to walk out of frame, and the footage rewinds on each monitor; starting again, the man says, “Briony Tallis, your new novel, your twenty-first, is called Atonement,” and Briony lowers her face into her hands and
repeats her request that they pause. We see Briony compose herself under the harsh buzz of a dressing room’s fluorescent lights, and then return to what is clearly the set of a television interview. The interviewer begins again, and Briony corrects him that *Atonement* is not her twenty-first novel, but her last. The camera begins over the interviewer’s shoulder in a classic shot-counter-shot set-up, but as Briony describes her illness, the shot slowly closes in on her, framing out the man, and the set dressing behind Briony goes dark, leaving her speaking against a black void. She discusses how long the novel took to write, but when the interviewer asks if the problem was its autobiographical nature and the fact that no names have been changed—precisely the problem in McEwan’s novel—she answers with a terse no. Instead—as dramatic extradiegetic string music fades in on the soundtrack—Briony confesses that the problem was that “the effect of all this honesty was rather pitiless, you see. I couldn’t imagine any longer what purpose would be served by it….by honesty, by reality.” One by one, then, Briony comes clean about her novel’s evasions, as we see depicted on the screen cinematic images of the historical truth she narrates: Briony typing her novel in the hospital instead of going to her sister, Robbie’s lifeless body in the Dunkirk basement, clutching Cecelia’s postcard, water rushing in slow-motion down the steps of the Balham tube station to drown those sheltering there, Cecelia’s body drifting through the water like
the reversed footage of broken porcelain. The film then returns to the site of the interview, but with a difference; the camera has shifted slightly so that it is now facing Briony straight on, capturing her confession as she meets the viewer’s eyes (see fig. 19):

My sister and Robbie were never able to have the time together they both so longed for and deserved, and which ever since…ever since I’ve always felt that I prevented. But what sense of hope, what satisfaction could a reader derive from an ending like that? So in the book, I wanted to give Robbie and Cecelia what they lost out on in life. I’d like to think this isn’t weakness or evasion, but a final act of kindness. I gave them their happiness.

These are the last words of the film, but the camera then cuts to a shot of sunlight glittering off a receding wave as the last strains of the string arrangement dissipate and a solo piano theme takes its place. As we watch, Robbie and Cecelia, “still alive, still in love,” walking together down the beach, playfully pushing each other into the water and spinning hand-in-hand as the handheld camera spins with them. The two climb up the dunes to a white house overlooking the ocean and the Dover cliffs; the film ends with this shot, the physical incarnation of the image on Cecelia’s postcard. (See fig. 20.)

The cinematic affordances of Wright’s film create a coda, then, that is fundamentally different from McEwan’s in two significant ways. First, by shifting the form of Briony’s confession from a diary entry to a televised interview, Wright has done away with the issue of her confession’s legitimacy as decisively as Briony dismisses the interviewer’s suggestion that retaining the actual names was the reason for the novel’s long gestation. Briony’s confession is here direct and decisive, acknowledging not only
her childhood crime but also her fictional obfuscation not only to the interviewer and, by extension, a widespread television audience, but also directly to another potentially aggrieved party: the viewers themselves, who have been misled by her fiction. As such, the entire question of the seriousness of Briony’s confession is eliminated; whether viewers think her attempt to atone is adequate or just, the public nature of her confession suggests that it is not a weakness or an evasion.

This point leads us to the second way in which film as a medium shifts the ethics of Wright’s coda from those of McEwan’s. In the novel, the vision of Robbie and Cecelia alive, together, and supporting Briony and her art by attending the premiere of Arabella is filtered directly through Briony’s consciousness. Readers have no problem attributing this wish solely to Briony and reading it as another facet of her desire to escape her responsibility by taking refuge in fiction, as well as a reversion to her childhood artistic practices. By contrast, Wright’s final scene of Robbie and Cecelia on the beach occupies the same place in the progression, but like the other discursive manipulations discussed above—the diegetic play on the soundtrack, the long take, the expressionistic rewinding—there is no way for audiences to definitively attribute these images to Briony herself. This, combined with Briony’s calm, direct gaze as she confesses, implicates the audience in her fiction, and by
including these images of Robbie and Cecelia happy, the implied author seems to backhandedly offer us exactly what the audience wanted all along, without affording us the opportunity to pass this narrative desire completely off on Briony as the author of an ethically flawed narrative. Instead, the same images that the audience anticipated and hoped for as the resolution of *Atonement*’s narrative momentum are painful and hollow—as I quoted at the start, “about as substantial and authentic as the diffused, air freshener-ad light that keeps bathing the characters in rays of synthetic sunshine.” By presenting these images without explicitly locating them as the product of Briony’s ethical or aesthetic efforts, Wright reminds viewers that they were also the product of our own wishes for Robbie and Cecelia, which turn out to have been a cinematic *Arabella*: facile, simplistic, unrealistic, and escapist. While McEwan’s coda also invites readers to recognize their own narrative desire to turn away from bleak realism and toward a fairy tale happy ending for Cecelia and Robbie, it also offers a scapegoat for this desire; McEwan’s audience can view themselves as taken in by the manipulations of an author who, in the coda, reveals herself to be weak and evasive. If McEwan’s coda invites the audience to critique Briony for her desire to escape into the fictional conventions of romance and happy endings, Wright’s text offers no analogous way out, as this Briony is neither responsible for the visual text which produced the same desire in the audience, nor is she the weak and evasive author of McEwan’s text, confessing without consequence to her own diary. Rather, Wright’s ending turns that ethical critique on the viewers themselves by giving them the happy ending that they wanted, but drained of any fulfillment it could have offered.
Thus Wright manipulates the affordances of cinema to set up the coda’s surprise in a way that is similar to McEwan’s use of intertextuality and revision, relying on vastly different filmic means to accomplish the same radical reconfiguration, but this manipulation also results in a very different ethical valance to the film’s twist ending. In doing so, Wright’s adaptation also acts as a revision of McEwan’s ethics, suggesting that perhaps we shouldn’t be so hard on Briony’s longing, despite her crime, to have everything work out alright in the end, to reject “the bleakest realism” and find instead that “the lovers survive and flourish,” happily ever after, like the storybooks say (McEwan 371). After all, like Briony, we wished for that, too.
Chapter 5: Adapting Stubborn Ethics 1: Multiple Perspectives in *Beloved*

So far in this study, I have considered texts that make challenging and sometimes difficult ethical demands on their audiences, asking how the ethics of prose source material are transposed into cinematic adaptations. But what if instead of offering readers complex but ultimately resolvable ethical dilemmas, a narrative presents its audience with an event that demands an ethical response, but refuses to offer a final ethical position on this event, a position that is endorsed by the implied author and signaled as the ethical stance the implied audience should occupy? What if instead of mere ambiguity or difficulty, the ethics of a text remain obstinately opaque in the face of even the most persistent critical inquiry, forcing readers instead into the uncomfortable position of facing a serious ethical impasse without offering a way through? Indeed, what if such an ethical impasse is not a failure on the part of the audience, but is in fact the ethical goal of the implied author? How would a novel like this generate such an effect? And could a film capture the same complexity and stubborn ethical opacity?

I address these questions over the next two chapters by examining two novels with notoriously stubborn ethics: Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* and Russell Banks’s *The Sweet Hereafter.*69 Both novels concern the deaths of children—in *Beloved*, a single child, and

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69 I borrow the term “stubborn ethics” from James Phelan, who distinguishes between the difficult, which is “recalcitrance that yields to our explanatory efforts,” and the stubborn, which is “recalcitrance that will not
in *The Sweet Hereafter*, nearly all of the children of the town of Sam Dent—and meditate on the questions of guilt and blame that inevitably arise in such dire situations. I choose the word “meditate” carefully here; while both texts represent sincere and serious consideration of the various ethical positions possible in response to their respective tragedies, neither narrative ultimately presents an argument for any one position to the exclusion of others. Rather, these novels invite their readers to struggle with serious ethical questions—who is to blame for these deaths? what punishment do they deserve? how can the living be compensated for their losses? what is the proper way to grieve?—without finally extending an authorial endorsement to any single response.

Though no doubt ethical stubbornness can result from any number of textual means, I argue here that these two particular novels generate this effect in two broad ways, both reliant on multiplicity. First, both Morrison and Banks structure their narratives by offering a variety of different physical, emotional, temporal, and ethical perspectives on their central tragedies, both through multiple narration and multiple focalization. This multiplicity invites readers to occupy and consider various subject positions with respect to the novels’ tragedies, but while both novels at times undermine some of these positions—thereby suggesting that readers should reject these views—neither Morrison nor Banks ultimately validates any particular stance as the one the audience should adopt to the exclusion of others.

Moreover, Morrison’s novel also complicates its ethics by prominently featuring a series of multivalent metaphors—metaphors in which a single source concept can

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*yield*” (*Narrative as Rhetoric* 178). Further, his reading of *Beloved* and the critical impasse surrounding the novel informs to a large extent my reading of Morrison’s novel.
potentially apply to a variety of mutually exclusive targets. In other words, several key
metaphors, especially the title character of *Beloved*, are clearly marked as ethically
symbolic, but the text refuses to resolve them into a stable metaphorical relation even
while it signals a variety of ways to map this metaphor. This proliferation of metaphorical
directions suggests a similar proliferation of ethical consequences, and the refusal of the
metaphor to resolve into a single determinate reading generates an ethical instability that
is similarly irresolvable. We will see the phenomenon further in Atom Egoyan’s use of
*The Pied Piper* in his film adaptation of *The Sweet Hereafter*, an ethical innovation that is
unique to Egoyan’s film.

By relying on multiple perspectives and multivalent metaphors to generate the
effect of ethical stubbornness, both *Beloved* and *The Sweet Hereafter* offer a striking
challenge to a medium with an entirely different system of communicative affordances:
how can film adaptations of these novels generate the same delicately balanced effect of
ethical stubbornness when this effect is grounded in the ability of prose, first, to penetrate
the minds and hearts of different characters, and second, to generate complex and
unstable metaphors which point in a variety of conflicting directions? While film is
obviously well-equipped to handle visual perspective, providing contrasting emotional
and ethical perspectives—particularly when these perspectives are internal to
characters—is a different sort of problem entirely. Likewise, while metaphors are clearly
not unknown to visual arts, there is a reason that we consider metaphor first and foremost
a figure of speech—that is, a figure of linguistic communication. For a film to adopt the
multivalent metaphor of its source material, it will clearly have to find a way to implicate that complex network of ideas into a visual form.

In this chapter, I will focus on Jonathan Demme’s 1998 film adaptation of *Beloved*, starring Oprah Winfrey, which I argue fails on nearly every level to incorporate the multiple perspectives and multivalent metaphors of its source material, and, as a result, likewise fails to capture the ethical nuance of Morrison’s novel. Although Demme’s film is—in his own ineptly chosen words—“slavishly” faithful to Morrison’s novel on the level of plot, Demme fails to provide cinematic analogues for the techniques that Morrison uses to generate her stubborn ethics (Corliss 76). I will focus primarily on Morrison’s multiple perspectives because this allows to zero in on a close reading of a particular sequence that illustrates the larger issues in Demme’s adaptation; the next chapter will focus more centrally on multivalent metaphors as a key to Egoyan’s more successful adaptation of Banks’s novel.

**The ethical response to Beloved and Beloved**

The complexity of Morrison’s novel is belied by the ease with which its plot is summarized. Based on the historical figure of Margaret Garner, *Beloved* tells the story of Sethe, a slave who escapes Sweet Home plantation on foot and makes her way to Cincinnati, to the house at 124 Bluestone Road where she has already sent her two boys

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70 However, this failure should not be taken to imply that cinema is incapable of the ethical nuance of prose, as we shall see in the next chapter.
and her “crawling-already?” baby girl to be with her mother-in-law, Baby Suggs. En route, she is aided by an itinerant white girl and gives birth to a fourth child, a girl she names Denver. Shortly after arriving in Cincinnati, schoolteacher, the cruel overseer of Sweet Home, tracks her down in order to return her to the plantation. In a desperate attempt to protect her children from being returned to slavery, she gathers them up and escapes to the woodshed. When her pursuers catch up to her, they find that she has killed her unnamed baby girl by cutting her throat with a saw.

The narrative present of the book occurs years later, with Sethe living with her teenage daughter Denver in 124, which is haunted, “spiteful,” “[f]ull of a baby’s venom” (3). This baby ghost is exorcised by Paul D, a fellow escapee from Sweet Home who arrives in Cincinnati and quickly takes up with Sethe, much to her daughter Denver’s irritation. This burgeoning family unit is quickly disrupted, however, by the mysterious appearance of a young woman who calls herself only “Beloved,” the single word carved into Sethe’s dead daughter’s headstone. Beloved wreaks havoc on 124, first driving a wedge between Paul D and Sethe, then, like a psychic vampire, draining Sethe of any desire but to take care of her. Concerned for her mother’s life, Denver enlists the help of the city’s women, who arrive to exorcise the house for a second time. Their communal singing and prayer drive Beloved away, leaving Paul D to return to care for Sethe and nurse her back to health.

The clarity of Beloved’s story is obscured, however, by an extraordinarily intricate discourse. In addition to the multiple perspectives and multivalent metaphors that I will discuss presently as contributing to Morrison’s stubborn ethics, the novel boasts a variety

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71 For a thorough discussion of the historical background of the novel, see Davis.
of formal features that can test the keenest readers. First, Morrison’s narrative is achronous to a remarkable degree, constantly shifting between at least four different temporal planes: the narrative present, in which Sethe, Denver, and Paul D deal with the appearance of Beloved; the timeline of Sethe’s escape from Sweet Home and the idyllic month at 124 before schoolteacher’s arrival; Paul D’s life since Sweet Home, including incarceration in a hellish Georgia chain gang; and a variety of other vignettes from the past which flesh out life on Sweet Home, Sethe’s marriage to her husband Halle, and her memories of her mother. Morrison’s discursive ordering is ultimately more logical than chronological; rather than arranging the discourse according to the order of events, Morrison layers cause and effect to reveal the characters’ present circumstances, responses, and decisions to be consequences of their histories—and, by extension, implicating the reader’s own present as part of this history. This can only be said in retrospect, however; a first-time reader’s progression through Beloved is likely to be characterized by chronological disorientation rather than logical cohesion.

In addition to this chronological disorder, Morrison also includes a variety of unusual discursive features which complicate a reader’s experience with Beloved. I have gestured to several already in my summary, including the typographically unusual “crawlingalready? baby” and always lowercase “schoolteacher” used as a proper noun. More famously, the novel includes two formally radical chapters late in the book which shatter the narrative’s previously accessible prose and demonstrate in miniature the many

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72 In addition, Phelan points out that there are actually chronological errors in the construction of the story’s narrative present which point paradoxically to both 1873 and 1891 as the present time of the novel (Narrative as Rhetoric 179).
possible ways Beloved can be mapped as a metaphor. In the first of these two chapters, punctuation vanishes, and a strange homodiegetic narrator suddenly appears:

I AM BELOVED and she is mine. I see her take flowers away from leaves she puts them in a round basket the leaves are not for her she fills the basket she opens the grass I would help her but the clouds are in the way how can I say things that are pictures I am not separate from her there is no place where I stop her face is my own and I want to be there in the place where her face is and to be looking at it too a hot thing (210)

The narrative voice continues in this vein, telling how “the men without skin” captured the narrator and her mother, relating the horrors of the Middle Passage voyage, and focusing particularly on the mother’s suicide en route. After a few pages, though, the discourse shifts radically again, this time into a chapter written in poetic dialogue:

Tell me the truth. Didn’t you come from the other side?

Yes. I was on the other side.

You came back because of me?

Yes.

You rememory me?

Yes. I remember you.

You never forgot me?

Your face is mine.

Do you forgive me? Will you stay? You safe here now.

Where are the men without skin?
Out there. Way off.

Can they get in here?

No. They tried that once, but I stopped them. They won’t ever come back.

One of them was in the house I was in. He hurt me.

They can’t hurt us no more.

Where are your earrings?

They took them from me.

The men without skin took them?

Yes.

I was going to help you but the clouds got in the way.

There’re no clouds here.

If they put an iron circle around your neck I will bite it away.

Beloved.

I will make you a round basket.

You’re back. You’re back.

Will we smile at me?

Can’t you see I’m smiling?

I love your face. (215)

These passages are notable in that they are the only glimpse the narrative offers inside the troubling consciousness of Beloved herself; aside from two sections, the novel keeps readers at a frustrating distance from her interiority, forcing us into the same position relative to Beloved as Sethe, Paul D, and Denver. Similar to Morrison’s description of
Sethe’s crime itself, discussed below, the implied author here invites readers to anticipate an understanding of Beloved’s identity as a major goal of the progression, only to offer more questions than answers when her consciousness is finally presented to us. For these passages present only contradictory and mutually exclusive hints as to Beloved’s identity, offering evidence that she is indeed the ghost of Sethe’s murdered child, but also lending support for the contradictory claims that she is an anonymous ghost from the Middle Passage, a specter of Sethe’s own mother, or even that she is not supernatural at all, but the escaped prisoner of a local white man, driven insane by her captivity.

This confusion as to Beloved’s identity is, in fact, one of the primary sources for ethical stubbornness, in that the text clearly signals her symbolic weight as a metaphor but ultimately refuses to resolve which of the possible metaphorical target domains is finally intended. On the level of plot, the narrative most strongly suggests that she is indeed the ghost of the child Sethe murdered, suggesting that her appearance itself is an implicit condemnation of Sethe’s act as unjust. But passages like the ones quoted above suggest instead that this character has detailed—though fractured—memories of being captured in Africa and taken to the Americas on the Middle Passage, events that Sethe’s mother experienced but the murdered child was never even capable of being aware of. Likewise, comments like “[o]ne of [the men without skin] was in the house I was in” are only intelligible as references to the local escaped lunatic, an explanation that undermines any supernatural explanations while at the same time relying on an extraordinary series of coincidences, such as Beloved’s references to Sethe’s “diamonds,” which invite Sethe to interpret Beloved as her daughter.
This is important because a reading of the ethics of *Beloved* is necessarily dependent on understanding how the titular character works as metaphor, as her physical reappearance in the story acts as a symbolic return of some unnamed and unexorcised repressed. In order for readers to position themselves in an ethical relation with Sethe’s crime, they must know to what extent Beloved is to be read exclusively as a just punishment for Sethe’s particular crime, as opposed to a more generalized indictment of the system of slavery writ large, of which Sethe is also a victim, a reading suggested by the references to Sethe’s mother and the escaped lunatic. This ambiguity is reflected in the critical dialogue surrounding Morrison’s novel, both regarding Beloved’s identity and the ethical consequences which follow from it and allow for a variety of readings. Thomas Girshin, for example, reads the novel as advocating “an ethic of corporeality . . . in which the bodies of all living and non-living entities are interconnected”—an interpretation that depends on Beloved’s own ambiguous corporeality for its effect (151, 156). Alternately, Lucille Fultz reads this ambiguity as fundamentally linguistic, arguing that it is representative of an exclusively black ethics, a code of linguistic performance that counters white racial culture. William Handley, too, addresses himself to the ambiguous power of words, though he attributes the tension between “allegory” and “nommo [African word magic] through the literalized ghost of Sethe’s daughter” as the result of “the incommensurable cultural gap between Western critical theory and African ‘magic’ [which] forbids any kind of agreement” (678). And in one reading, Beloved even becomes a figure for all the female descendents of slavery, “trying to trace their ancestry back to the mother on the ship attached to them” (Horvitz 157).
Indeed, the multivalent metaphor of Beloved has unsurprisingly led critics to disagree on the central ethical problem in the novel: how should readers view Sethe’s decision to murder her child rather than let her be taken by schoolteacher? Alfred Hornung argues that, because ethnic experience is defined in the West by “the importance of survival-oriented ethics,” the recognition of difference “determines Sethe’s cruel deed . . . which is relativized in the light of the cruelty of slavery” (213, 220). Marjorie Stone, quoting Morrison, argues that Sethe “did what was right although she did not have the right to do it” (148), while Homi Bhabha goes so far as to argue that by the end of the novel, Sethe’s murder must be seen as entirely ethical because of its underlying motive of love (16 – 17). On the other hand, many critics are reluctant to exonerate Sethe so quickly; Yung-Hsing Wu critiques Bhabha’s position, pointing out that “[d]espite [his] insistence that radical ethics demands openness in reading, Bhabha in his reading ultimately forecloses the possibility of continued reading” by concluding that “the infanticide actually results in the good of a postcolonial agency” and “Sethe is in the end justified” (792 – 93).

The “openness” promoted in this last position echoes Phelan’s reading of Beloved as a case of stubborn ethics in which the narrative retains a “recalcitrance that will not yield” (Narrative as Rhetoric 178). This position, stated in various different ways, has become the closest thing one will find to a critical consensus on the novel: that a reader’s encounter with Beloved—and specifically, with the ethical dilemmas posed by the narrative—must necessarily remain unresolved and in process, a struggle which demands an ethical response to Sethe’s crime while also forcing the readers to acknowledge that
any final judgment is impossible. As Wu points out, this interpretive frustration inherent in *Beloved* becomes a recurring theme in the special 1993 Morrison issue of *Modern Fiction Studies*; indeed, the central motif of the issue, as Anthony Hilfer puts it, is to avoid “unified critical analysis” while attempting to understand “the complexity and fullness of [Morrison’s] art” (qtd. in Otten 651). Molly Travis puts this slightly differently when she argues that “[t]he full ethical force of *Beloved*’s design derives from [the] side-by-side relationship between stories that do not coalesce or resolve themselves into a harmony” (237), but the effect here is the same: the ethics of Morrison’s novels, especially *Beloved*, offer an ethical challenge that must be grappled with, but cannot be resolved.

**Three perspectives on Sethe’s crime**

If the effect of stubborn ethics is in part due to the presence of multivalent metaphors like Beloved, wherein the source domain of the metaphor (the character of Beloved) comes to represent ontologically incompatible target domains (Sethe’s murdered daughter, Sethe’s mother, the sixty million victims of the Middle Passage, an anonymous lunatic), this stubborness is also generated by the competing perspectives on the murder itself.\(^{73}\) Like the presentation of Beloved’s consciousness, readers are guided

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\(^{73}\) Though Beloved is the only example of multivalent metaphors I need to make my ultimate point about Demme’s film adaptation, this is not to suggest that she is the only such figure in Morrison’s novel. The novel’s animal metaphors are particularly rich in this regard, as they are sometimes used as terms of explicit abuse (schoolteacher instructing his charges to list Sethe’s animal and human qualities side by side), sometimes as critiques of Sethe’s murder (as when Paul D responds to her account of the murder by saying “You got two feet, Sethe, not four” [Morrison 165]), sometimes as a pricking of hummingbird beaks in her scalp that drive her into “an ecstasy of unendurable anguish” (Stone 151), and sometimes as an
to anticipate the revelation of Sethe’s crime after a series of oblique hints to the murder throughout the first half of the novel. At the halfway point in the novel, Morrison then quickly presents three different versions of the horrifying incident in rapid succession; each offers a different visual and emotional perspective on Sethe’s actions, and consequently each presents the reader with a different possible ethical position, as well.

The first account of Sethe’s murder is told by the same extradiegetic narrator that has governed the narrative to this point, but it is focalized through the new perspective of the slave catchers, led by schoolteacher, and is thus signaled from the outset to be immediately rejected by readers loathe to occupy the same position as the scene’s antagonists.74 Arriving at 124, the men make their way behind the house to the woodshed as the narrator ominously shares their thoughts, unconnected to any particular individual, on the difficulties of recapturing a slave:

Even then care was taken, because the quietest ones . . . would go along nicely for two or three seconds. Caught red-handed, so to speak, they would seem to recognize the futility of outsmarting a whiteman and the hopelessness of outrunning a rifle. Smile even, like a child caught dead with his hand in the jelly jar, and when you reached for the rope to tie him, well, even then you couldn’t tell. The very nigger with his head hanging and a little jelly-jar smile on his face could all of a sudden roar, like a bull or some such, and commence to do

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74 Paradoxically, this clearly negative perspective, because it is the first account and therefore subject to the primacy effect, also serves as the baseline to which the two subsequent accounts offer correctives; in this way, the progression here is not unlike Morrison’s own efforts to reconsider the history of slavery—a history first written through white discourse and then later recuperated and nuanced—through the fictionalized story of Margaret Garner.
disbelievable things. Grab the rifle at its mouth; throw himself at the one holding it—anything. So you had to keep back a pace, leave the tying to another. Otherwise you ended up killing what you were paid to bring back alive. Unlike a snake or a bear, a dead nigger could not be skinned for profit and was not worth his own dead weight in coin. (148)

Occurring immediately before the first account of Sethe’s crime, this passage functions to distance readers from an obviously brutal and racist point of view, one that thinks of an escaped slave as “it” and bemoans the fact that this same human being, if murdered, can’t be skinned for profit. But in pushing readers away, the passage also encourages them to distance themselves from what may be their first, instinctive ethical reaction to the murder they are about to witness: that the act of a mother killing her child is unthinkable, incomprehensible—or, as schoolteacher puts it, “disbelievable.” In other words, if schoolteacher and his men find the behavior of recaptured slaves to be incomprehensible, readers are more likely to search more deeply and more generously for an explanation for the murder they are about to witness.

Passing Baby Suggs and family friend Stamp Paid and arriving at the woodshed, schoolteacher and his men open the door to find a grim scene:

Inside, two boys bled in the sawdust and dirt at the feet of a nigger woman holding a blood-soaked child to her chest with one hand and an infant by the heels in the other. She did not look at them; she simply swung the baby toward the wall planks, missed and tried to connect a second time, when out of nowhere . . . the
old nigger boy . . . ran through the door behind them and snatched the baby from
the arch of its mother’s swing. (149)

The image here is shocking, particularly as it is the first opportunity for readers to fully understand the allusions throughout the novel to the terrible events in the woodshed. Shocking, too, is the fact that none of the white men move to interrupt this tableau; instead, schoolteacher reflects that “[r]ight off it was clear . . . that there was nothing there to claim,” while it is Stamp Paid who leaps to prevent another murder (ibid.). As the slave catchers stand stunned, schoolteacher reflects that this is “what happened when you overbeat creatures God had given you the responsibility of,” and his nephew wonders “[w]hat she go and do that for? On account of a beating? Hell, he’d been beat a million times and he was white” (148). The implied audience’s position here is thus rendered deeply ambiguous, torn between rejecting the racist perspective and mirroring its horrified response. In this way, Morrison positions her readers to reject this first account as an ethically insufficient position even as it captures an essential truth about Sethe’s actions: the horror and revulsion anyone would feel in response to the scene.

The second account of Sethe’s crime, then, offers readers an opportunity to view the same events from a different and more sympathetic perspective and to nuance their own ethical positioning. Feeling that Paul D deserves to know about 124’s past as he begins to build a life with Sethe, Denver, and their strange visitor, Stamp Paid confronts him with an old scrap of paper: the newspaper article about the crime, illustrated with a sketch of Sethe. This chapter, however, is characterized by elision and refusal from the first sentence, in which Paul D denies the veracity of Stamp Paid’s story by questioning
the sketch, saying “[t]hat ain’t her mouth” (154). If in the last version readers were primed to reject schoolteacher’s account because it is focalized through an antagonist, this version accomplishes the same end through reversed means: in spite of the official imprimatur of a newspaper account, Paul D’s denial immediately signals Stamp Paid’s account as insufficient, while also pointing to his own reluctance to face the truth.

The account continues with the narrator’s lengthy description (almost a quarter of the short chapter) of the Cincinnati slaughter houses, where Stamp Paid and Paul D work “poking, killing, cutting, skinning, case packing and saving offal,” surrounded by “the grunts of the stock” and “crying pigs” (155). This digression on the narrator’s part acts as a discursive repetition of Paul D’s own denial of Stamp Paid’s account, as well as his reluctance to hear anything further about it; the narrator’s extemporaneous musings on the hard work required in the slaughterhouse, as well as its place within an economic and geographical system of farming and transport, whets the readers’ appetite for Stamp Paid’s story by delaying it, while at the same time mirroring Paul D’s desire to turn his attention anywhere else. Further, it also functions as another anticipation of Sethe’s crime, this time more positive than schoolteacher’s worries about what a recaptured slave might do. Here instead of being figured as the “disbelievable” actions of a maddened animal, Sethe’s bloody murder is echoed in Stamp Paid and Paul D’s work at the slaughterhouses: no doubt an unpleasant and gory task, but one that is the result of an entire agricultural and economic system that inevitably ends in butchery, which exploited blacks must deal with as best they can.
Paul D’s illiteracy renders the newspaper account impenetrable to him, as well as to the readers who look through his eyes. Instead, over his repeated denials about the sketch that accompanies the article, Stamp Paid tries to relate his version of the events leading up to schoolteacher’s arrival at 124. This attempt, though, is characterized entirely by narrative refusal, in which the audience reads how Stamp Paid “was going to tell him about” the restlessness that pervaded the house that morning, and how he “did not tell him how” Sethe gathered up her children and ran for the woodhouse, where there was “[n]othing but sunlight. Sunlight, shavings, a shovel. . . . and of course the saw” (156, 157). This disnarrated account of what Stamp Paid did not tell and did not do marks his entire account as provisional because it remains unspoken; though Stamp Paid’s narrative is more sympathetic to Sethe than schoolteacher’s, it is also denied from the outset by Paul D and remains only a hypothetical testimony, marginalized through negation and the subjunctive.75

Rather than sharing with Paul D his more personal and sympathetic account, Stamp Paid:

took a breath and leaned toward the mouth that was not hers and slowly read out the words Paul D couldn’t. And when he finished, Paul D said with a vigor fresher than the first time, “I’m sorry, Stamp. It’s a mistake somewhere ’cause that ain’t her mouth.” (158)

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75 I borrow the term disnarrated from Gerald Prince, who defines it as “those passages in a narrative that consider what did not or does not take place” (1). Robyn Warhol distinguishes this from the “unnarrated,” which “refers to those passages that explicitly do not tell what is supposed to have happened, foregrounding the narrator’s refusal to narrate” (221). I rely on this distinction below and in my discussion of Demme’s film.
While Stamp Paid’s personal account is disnarrated—made available to the reader without actually occurring as an event in the storyworld or being shared with Paul D—the newspaper account at the center of this chapter is unnarrated, present in the storyworld and shared between Paul D and Stamp Paid without the audience having any access to it at all. And if Stamp Paid’s reticence undermines his ethical position on Sethe’s crime as a possible position for the audience to occupy, this elision of the newspaper article, along with Paul D’s repeated denials, doubly deny this option to readers: first, by barring the audience entirely from the account itself; and second, by marking it as insufficient through Paul D’s dissent.76 In the end, this chapter builds on the previous one by presenting Morrison’s audience with two more insufficient responses to Sethe’s crime, but it brings us no closer to a response endorsed by the implied author. In fact, in the closing sentences the events themselves begin to grow hazy and dim, undoing schoolteacher’s account as Stamp Paid comes to “wonder if it had happened at all . . . that while he and Baby Suggs were looking the wrong way, a pretty little slavegirl had recognized a hat, and split to the woodshed to kill her children” (158).

The final version of the events in the woodshed begins “[s]he was crawling already when I got here,” signaling Sethe’s own voice from the start. This in medias monologue beginning is quickly reframed as Sethe’s “answer to the question [Paul D] had not asked outright, but which lay in the clipping he showed her” (161). For several

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76 Interestingly, this rejection of the newspaper article invalidates the only written account of Sethe’s crime, undermining all of the claims to objectivity, historicity, authenticity, and factuality attendant to the “official” record of written history. In so doing, this rejection represents in miniature the entirety of Morrison’s project: to recuperate the historical experience of Margaret Garner (and by extension, the victims of slavery more broadly) from the mere accuracy of historical accounts through the larger truths of fictional narrative.
pages, though, readers are presented not with Sethe’s memories about 124 and Cincinnati, but instead her reflections about Sweet Home and about the difficulty of learning how to care for a child without the support and knowledge that could have been provided by older women, including her own lynched mother. As she whirls around Paul D, she explains how she didn’t know “[h]ow to make that thing you use to hang the babies in the trees” to keep them safe while working, and which “leaf thing they gave em to chew on,” and how she had to tie her son Buglar to a tether to keep him safe because “I didn’t know what else to do” (160). This background is marked by Paul D as irrelevant, who “caught only pieces of what she said—which was fine, because she hadn’t gotten to the main part” (161), but unlike in the last chapter, Paul D’s denial of this story is challenged by Sethe’s insistence on telling it. Previously, Paul D’s reaction to Stamp Paid’s story and article is sympathetic, given Paul D’s centrality in the narrative so far; readers are less likely to so quickly disregard Sethe’s own account, not only because she, too, is a protagonist, but also because she is necessarily the first witness to the child’s death, if not an objective one.

In addition, the narrator enters Sethe’s mind, as well, indicating that she is trying to explain herself to Paul D because of his “smile, or maybe the ever-ready love she saw in his eyes . . . love you don’t have to deserve” (161). This emphasis not on the murder but on love inflects Sethe’s desire to tell her story—both because of Paul D’s love for her and because of her own love for him—and causes her to begin not on that morning in Cincinnati, but years earlier at Sweet Home. As a result, her earnestness and the sympathy readers have for her invite the audience to consider her actions in the woodshed.
as a natural consequence both of the terrors of slavery and of Sethe’s love for her children and her desire to give them what they need. Indeed, she goes on to focus not on the events in the woodshed, but on her extraordinary achievement in first getting all of her children out of Sweet Home, then escaping herself and rejoining them. This achievement even makes her feel as if “I loved em more after I got here. Or maybe I couldn’t love em proper in Kentucky because they wasn’t mine to love” (162). And Paul D even endorses this view, remembering how while he was on the chain gang you “protected yourself and loved small . . . a big love would split you wide open” (ibid.). And it is this big love, “a selfish pleasure I never had before,” that makes Sethe realize that “I couldn’t let all that go back to where it was, and I couldn’t let her nor any of em live under schoolteacher. That was out” (163).

But like Stamp Paid’s account, what follows is only thought by Sethe, not shared with Paul D. Realizing that “[i]f [he] didn’t get it right off—she could never explain,” Sethe reflects on the “simple” truth that she was squatting in the garden and when she saw them coming and recognized schoolteacher’s hat, she heard wings. Little hummingbirds stuck their needle beaks right through her headcloth into her hair and beat their wings. And if she thought of anything, it was No. No. Nono. Nonono. Simple. She just flew.

Collected every bit of life she had made, all the parts of her that were precious and fine and beautiful, and carried, pushed, dragged them through the veil, out, away, over there where no one could hurt them. Over there. Outside this place, where they would be safe. And the hummingbird wings beat on. (163)
This explanation is by far the most sympathetic version of that day’s events that the audience encounters, one that highlights the desperate panic of a mother attempting to protect the children she has only just now found the freedom to love fully. In addition, Sethe’s account appropriates the dehumanizing animal references of schoolteacher’s narrative, deploying instead a metaphor that builds on Stamp Paid’s hawk images to suggest that her behavior was not bestial and subhuman, but instinctual in the humanely maternal sense. But like Stamp Paid’s account, Sethe’s story is undermined by virtue of the fact that she doesn’t actually share it; lacking the confidence that Paul D will consider it a valid explanation for her crime, Sethe’s elision qualifies her account, positioning it not as a justification but a self-justification.

Instead, Sethe says only “I stopped him . . . I took and put my babies where they’d be safe” (164). Now it is Paul D’s turn to hear a “roaring in [his] head” as he realizes, with the reader, “that what she wanted for her children was exactly what was missing in 124: safety” (ibid.). After all, Sethe has lived alone for years in a haunted house, has completely cut herself off from the community, and of her three remaining children, her two sons have fled and Denver is afraid to leave. On top of this, in spite of the fact that Paul D has recently exorcised 124, Sethe’s home is now menaced by an even more threatening supernatural agent in the form of Beloved, who threatens to drive away Paul D and consume Sethe entirely. Paul D suddenly “saw what Stamp Paid wanted him to see: more important than what Sethe had done was what she claimed,” and, primed to sympathize with him by his rejection of Stamp Paid’s story in the previous chapter, readers are likely to agree (ibid.).
If the chapter ended there, Morrison would have provided readers with an ethical stance on Sethe’s actions that is coded as endorsed by the implied author; both Sethe’s reluctance to justify her position and Paul D’s rejection of it on the grounds that it didn’t actually keep her children safe suggest to readers that her justification of the murder of her child doesn’t hold water. Furthermore, Sethe’s focus on events months and years before the day schoolteacher arrived and her complete elision of what happened in the woodshed imply that her insistence that this background justifies the murder is in fact a self-serving evasion. But two important events occur in the remaining page of the chapter that undermine what seems to be an emergent stability, a conclusive ethical stance that readers can recognize as endorsed by the implied Morrison.

First, Sethe immediately pushes back against Paul D’s judgment, insisting that “[i]t worked” because “[t]hey ain’t at Sweet Home. Schoolteacher ain’t got em” (164, 165). Paul D protests, but Sethe is intractable on this point: “It ain’t my job to know what’s worse. It’s my job to know what is and to keep them away from what I know is terrible. I did that” (ibid.). Sethe’s insistence on this point could read as an intractable refusal to consider her behavior honestly, but it is consistent with her insistence that the story of the woodshed begins not with schoolteacher’s arrival at 124, but years before in slavery at Sweet Home. This consistency characterizes both her prioritizing of the Sweet Home background and her resolve that her children’s death was preferable to letting them be enslaved as not evasions, but an honestly-held ethical position, regardless of whether readers agree or not.
If Sethe’s insistence legitimizes her point of view to the audience as honest and not evasive, Paul D’s reactions go further by discouraging readers from taking his critique of Sethe as a default position. Throughout the previous chapter and up until this point in this chapter, Paul D has been the center of narrative focalization and the emotional focal point, priming the audience to identify with his ethical point of view regarding Sethe’s crime. But here, his critique of Sethe is likely to alienate readers in at least two different ways. First, Paul D specifically critiques her defense that maternal love motivated her actions, thinking that “[t]his here Sethe talked about love like any other woman . . . but what she meant could cleave the bone” and saying that “[y]our love is too thick” (164). Whether true or false, this critique is likely to read as a particularly strong rebuff to readers, who, unlike Paul D, have access to Sethe’s consciousness and know that only moments before, it was Paul D’s “love you didn’t have to deserve” that encouraged Sethe to try to explain what she had never before felt obliged to justify (161). Rejecting her safety justification as symptomatic of a defect in the way she loves—and in particular, in the way she loves her children—prompts readers to distance themselves from Paul D’s ethical response, if only because it is couched in terms that seem particularly cruel.

If Paul D’s comments here are a stinging rebuke, though, it is one he cannot be conscious of; after all, he doesn’t have the same access to Sethe’s mind that the audience does, and the only explanation he has received is a terse assertion that she made her children safe, not the emotionally fraught internal monologue readers have been privy to. But his next comment signals a total break from Sethe, and from the audience:

“What you did was wrong, Sethe.”
“I should have gone back there? Taken my babies back there?”

“There could have been a way. Some other way.”

“What way?”

“You got two feet, Sethe, not four,” he said, and right then a forest sprang up between them; trackless and quiet.

Later he would wonder what made him say it. The calves of his youth? or the conviction that he was being observed [by Beloved] through the ceiling? How fast he had moved from his shame to hers. From his cold-house secret straight to her too-thick love.

Meanwhile, the forest was locking the distance between them, giving it shape and heft. (165)

The implied audience is invited to distance themselves from Paul D’s condemnation in two ways here. First, the narrator’s insight into his consciousness shows readers that he himself questions his motives and will come to regret these words. The brief proleptic cue “later” tells audience members that Paul D will come to regret this critique in the future, suggesting that viewers should not even temporarily adopt this provisional stance on Sethe’s crime; Paul D’s future suspicion that he was simply “mov[ing] from his shame to hers” invalidates his own critique. Further, the content of his comment also provokes the audience to distance themselves from him, precisely because his animal metaphor echoes the racist worldview of schoolteacher, who began this progression with an explicit comparison between recaptured slaves and animals. Paul D may not be able to fully comprehend the forest that springs up between him and Sethe with these words, but
readers can easily make the connection between schoolteacher’s comments and his own; Paul D’s inadvertent rejection of both Sethe’s love and her humanity undermines audience sympathy with him, and by extension, his view that Sethe’s actions are the actions of an animal, and that they have failed.

The chapter ends this triptych progression through different perspectives on Sethe’s crime, but in the end, what possible ethical stance does Morrison offer her audience? Readers have seen what was likely their original reaction—horror at the unthinkable—rejected as the position of schoolteacher, a racist and a sadist who is incapable of seeing Sethe as human. Attempts to get at the official historical record (in the form of the newspaper) and the views of the community (in the form of Stamp Paid) are scuttled by the elision of the former and Paul D’s rejection of the latter. But in the following chapter, Paul D’s attacks cause the audience to reject his condemnation of Sethe as too hasty, even as we cannot readily accept Sethe’s own position; her omission of the events in the woodshed is dubious, and Paul D’s retort that her children are not, in fact, safe is too persuasive to be easily brushed away. Although Andrew Levy claims that “the story remains ‘unspeakable’: too painful, too perverse, to be told and understood,” the problem isn’t actually the story itself, painful and perverse though it is, which gets told and retold from a host of different perspectives (114). Rather, this chorus of voices all cancel each other out as ethical positions endorsed by the implied author, invalidating themselves and each other until the reader has no possible ethical stance left to take; even the position that Sethe’s crime is unthinkable (and therefore “unspeakable”)—a stance that seems to be promoted by the variety of competing perspectives—is undermined from
the outset by schoolteacher’s endorsement of it. In this way, Morrison guides her audience through a process of negation and rejection that simultaneously demands that readers take an ethical position with respect to that day in the woodshed while also highlighting the inadequacy of each character’s response to it. While readers know that Sethe’s story is “not a story to pass on,” we must also accept that it is not a story we can pass final judgment on, struggling instead with the struggle itself (Morrison 274).

It is the paradox inherent in this final line of Beloved that points to Morrison’s purpose in so carefully and thoroughly blocking her readers’ attempts to come to terms with the central ethical dilemma of her novel. Sethe’s story is simultaneously not one to pass on in the sense of rejecting or skipping over, not one to pass on in the sense of sharing or disseminating to others, and not one to pass on in the sense of never passing away or dying. These three mutually exclusive imperatives—to attend carefully to this story, to keep it a secret, and to make sure that it does not disappear (presumably by telling others)—demonstrates in a few words both Morrison’s strategy of layering contradictory meanings and interpretations while denying the readers a way of untangling them and also her purpose in forcing her readers to grapple with Beloved’s stubborn ethics. The refusal of Sethe’s crime to produce a stable ethical judgment points Morrison’s readers at the impossibility of coming to a final, stable ethical judgment of the material realities of slavery in the United States or of its continuing repercussions for the contemporary moment. Rather than giving her readers a heroine whom they can judge as responding justly to the injustices she has endured, Morrison uses the fluctuating figure of Beloved to create a world that can never be fully understood, and uses multiple
perspectives on Sethe’s crime to point to radical and incomprehensible violation of even
the concept of ethical behavior inherent in the slave system. By rendering her readers
incapable of judgment, while simultaneously demanding that they judge, Morrison invites
them to enter an implied audience that sheds the ethical certainty provided by historical
distance and contemplates both the necessity and the impossibility of an ethical response
to the systematic destruction of the “Sixty Million and more” to whom Morrison
dedicates her novel.

Demme’s failed adaptation

I have argued here that Morrison’s stubborn ethics are generated both by her use
of multivalent metaphors—especially in the form of the fluctuating identity of the title
character—and also by the presence of multiple ethical perspectives on the central event,
none of which are endorsed by the implied author. Given the fact that both of these
techniques are produced using techniques that are exclusive to the affordances of prose,
how does a film adaptation generate a similar effect in its audience? While in the next
chapter I will argue for a successful film adaptation of stubborn ethics in the form of
Atom Egoyan’s The Sweet Hereafter, here I want to argue that Demme’s film adaptation
of Beloved fails—both as a transmediation of Morrison’s material and as an autonomous
work—precisely because it attempts to adapt the formal properties of Morrison’s text
without taking into account the effects of the divergent affordances of cinema on her
multivalent metaphors and multiple perspectives, thereby failing to recreate the ethical
complexity of Morrison’s novel. While in my above discussion of the novel, I began with Beloved as a multivalent metaphor, then moved into the particulars of the multiple perspectives on Sethe’s crime, I’ll reverse that order here so as to begin with a specific instance of what is a pervasive problem with the film: that it attempts to transpose the ethics of Morrison’s novel without translating them into the language of cinema.

Demme’s film begins its sequence of perspectives on Sethe’s crime at approximately the same place in the discourse—about halfway through the film—but rather than beginning with the description of the crime from schoolteacher’s point of view, Demme shifts Stamp Paid’s conversation with Paul D to the beginning of this sequence. Here, Stamp Paid is prompted to share his story not only by Paul D’s increasing commitment to a life and a home with Sethe—in the previous scene he has bashfully confessed to her that he “wants her pregnant” before the two run home hand-in-hand, laughing like children—but also by his discourse on freedom in the North, proclaimed while standing in the hog pens:

If a man can make a plan, the man can make the good times happen. . . . Me and my woman’s plannin’ on startin’ a family. Yeah, a new life. Born free! Now, if that don’t mean a good time, I don’t know what does. I been bought and sold five times. The last time, to the Northpoint Bank and Railway Company. No more! I walk and I sleep and I eat where I please. I earn a free man’s wage. Nobody’s gonna own us no more. Nobody’s gonna own my children either. No more! No more!  

77 All quotations from the film’s dialogue are presented as seen in the subtitles, which are written in this stylized black dialect throughout.
The camera cuts to Stamp Paid’s increasingly concerned expression several times during Paul D’s speech, but he does not interject. One of their coworkers does contest Paul D’s optimism, though, retorting that “[c]hildren inherit where they come from. Just ‘cause you can’t see no chains don’t mean they not there. And as long as the world is white, that’s where we stayin’.”

Chastened, Paul D lowers his eyes, and the next scene finds him eating alone until Stamp Paid joins him to show him the newspaper. The conversation is still fresh in Paul D’s mind as he invites Stamp Paid to sit, telling him it’s a “[f]ree country, no matter what nobody say.” Seated among the hog carcasses—a visual anticipation of the images of the woodshed to come—Stamp Paid begins his story by referencing Paul D’s connection to Sweet Home, and especially to Baby Suggs, whom he reveals did not die “soft as cream,” as Sethe told Paul D. He then hands Paul D the scrap of newspaper, and the camera pans so as to show viewers the sketch of Sethe, though the accompanying article is too small to read and its title is partially covered by Paul D’s hand. After Paul D’s insistence that the sketch does not look like Sethe, Stamp Paid correctly guesses that he is illiterate and offers to read the story to him.78

At this point an edit elides Stamp Paid’s reading of the article much as Morrison’s novel does, and a new scene begins in which Paul D confronts Sethe and the audience is presented with the only account of the crime in Demme’s film. Before discussing this scene, which is a complicated conflation of several different perspectives, it is worth pausing to think about what is altered in Demme’s version of the Stamp Paid account.

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78 Here Paul D has to ask Stamp Paid who the picture is of before denying that it looks like Sethe, suggesting that his subsequent rejection of the sketch’s resemblance to Sethe is more legitimate than Morrison’s novel implies.
First, while the newspaper story is unnarrated here in much the same way it is in Morrison’s novel, it matters that this unnarrated account of Sethe’s crime is now the first account. In Morrison’s novel, Stamp Paid’s account followed schoolteacher’s, and as a result, while readers were denied the specific perspective of the official newspaper account, the audience was still aware of what was being elided. In other words, the elision of Stamp Paid’s article functions in the novel as a rejection of this official version precisely because readers possess enough information to know that they are being denied a particular perspective on a set of already-known events.

By contrast, the film’s elision is the first time Demme’s viewers have encountered a version of Sethe’s crime, but they do not yet know it to be such. As a result, Demme’s implied audience, savvy in the ways cinematic narratives deny information to build anticipation, is primed to read this elision not as a denial, but as a deferral. Cutting away from Stamp Paid reading the article does deny us access to the account, but because audience members are not aware of the content of the article, this has the effect of opening a temporary gap in our knowledge that we (rightly) anticipate will shortly be filled, and not of cuing us to reject the possibility of an official objective account as such.

In addition, Demme’s version of this scene also precludes any entrance into Stamp Paid’s own experience of the events of that day, though it would be plausible enough to offer this perspective to the audience with some combination of visual flashback and voice-over narration. Indeed, Demme is about to use this very combination of techniques in order to present Sethe’s retrospective version of that day. This is significant not only because it eliminates a sympathetic perspective on Sethe’s crime, but
also because it leaves Sethe’s flashback as the only visually narrated version of the crime. Given the reality effect inherent to the visual narration of the camera eye, the absence of any competing or contradictory accounts during the episode between Stamp Paid and Paul D in the hog pens, combined with the anticipation prompted by the elision of the newspaper account, lends an air of legitimacy to the account Sethe will momentarily provide and suggests that if viewers are patient, they will be shown not one subjective version of Sethe’s crime, but a visual depiction of the crime itself.

Finally, the two moments that precede the introduction of the Stamp Paid’s scrap of newspaper are noteworthy because of the way they frame Sethe’s crime as it is introduced into the narrative. First, there is the matter of Paul D’s speech about freedom, which bears little resemblance to any material spoken by him in the novel. However, it is likely to remind Morrison’s readers of Sethe’s explanation for the murder in its emphasis on freedom, love, and children; indeed, his assertion that “nobody’s gonna own my children” sounds uncannily like Sethe’s claim that her attempt to keep her children safe worked because “[t]hey ain’t at Sweet Home. Schoolteacher ain’t got em.” Though the other black men at the slaughterhouse dismiss Paul D’s notions—whether because they are more cynical or simply more realistic—Paul D’s newfound beliefs about freedom and love complement the very feelings Sethe uses to frame her account and to justify her crime in both the novel and the film, and as such, they lend credence to her justification. After all, even if they are naïve, these feelings seem to be a legitimate response to newfound freedom and not simply a self-justification, and if they are capable of inspiring in Paul D a biologically-foolhardy desire to create new life with Sethe, it stands to reason
that the violation of Sethe’s similar feelings could drive her to destroy life in order to protect it from schoolteacher.

In addition, Demme’s version of the Stamp Paid account also introduces a link between an explanation of the murder and the figure of Baby Suggs, an association not made in Morrison’s novel. Stamp Paid initiates his conversation with Paul D by asking, “you don’t know, do you, son,” but when Paul D asks, “know what?,” Stamp Paid replies with another question: “You one of Baby Suggs’ Sweet Home men, ain’t ya?” When Paul D answers, Stamp Paid then calls Baby “holy” and says “God rest her soul,” before suggesting that her death was not as peaceful as Paul D suspects. After this, Stamp Paid pulls out his article and begins to tell Paul D his story, and neither Sweet Home nor Baby Suggs are brought up in the rest of their conversation. Their absence is curious, as Stamp Paid never makes clear why he thinks that Baby Suggs is a pertinent place to begin his story. Much as the elision of the newspaper article primes Demme’s audience to anticipate that this gap will be filled, the connection between Baby Suggs and the murder is hinted at here, only to come to fruition in the following scene.

The same editing that excludes Demme’s audience from Stamp Paid’s reading of the article takes us instead to 124, where Sethe is sweeping the porch. The camera slowly draws closer to her face as she looks up and smiles, seeing Paul D. The camera angles here show Sethe in medium and close-up shots, while Paul D appears in extreme long shots, across the frozen yard. As such, the viewer is aligned both spatially and emotionally with Sethe, as her excitement at seeing Paul D arriving home is visible, while Paul D’s figure is too distant to make out. (See fig. 21.) Indeed, the only shot in this scene
which positions the camera closer to Paul D than Sethe shows him only from the back, still focused over his shoulder on Sethe’s face, and when he approaches and unfolds the newspaper article, silently asking for an explanation, her figure looms large over his on the steps. In contrast to the previous scene where Paul D was the audience’s emotional focal point, the camerawork here positions viewers literally at Sethe’s side. While Demme’s audience is anticipating an explanation of the newspaper article and why its contents have so disturbed Paul D, these introductory shots cue viewers to see Sethe as the protagonist in this scene.

The couple moves inside and sits in the kitchen, and Sethe begins her story by saying “I don’t have to tell you about Sweet Home, what it was.” She then proceeds with an explanation that resembles that of the novel, in which she refers to her pride at getting all of her children out, the unprecedented feeling of waking up and getting to decide for herself what to do with her day, and her newfound capacity to love. Throughout this sequence, the image track remains in the present, following Sethe as she walks around the room and occasionally cutting back to Paul D’s reactions, though he does not speak. But suddenly, the camera
frames Sethe’s face in close-up as she looks not at Paul D, but out the kitchen window, and reminisces about “when the people would gather—they’d come from all around to hear Baby Suggs Holy—I seen and heard things I ain’t never seen before. I seen what free Negroes look like for the first time.” And as Sethe speaks this last sentence, the camera fades from the dark wintery light of Sethe’s kitchen to the vernal glow of a clearing in the forest where Baby Suggs preaches to the assembled crowd:

Here in this place, we are flesh. Flesh that weeps, laughs, dances barefoot in the grass. Love your flesh. Love it hard. Yonder, they do not love our flesh. Oh, my people, they do not love your hands. Those, they only use, tie, bind, chop off, and leave empty. Love your hands. Raise them up, and kiss them.

The camera then fades from the laughing crowd back to Sethe’s cheerless face, and she says only “Twenty-eight days of freedom. And on the twenty-ninth day, it was over.” The camera then cuts suddenly, without a fade, to another flashback: this time, the sepia-tones of the day schoolteacher arrived at 124.

Before turning to this sequence—which, again, is the only visual depiction of Sethe’s crime that appears in Demme’s film—it is worth pausing on this preface in the forest. This sermon does not appear anywhere in Sethe’s explanation as Morrison presents it in her novel; though Sethe does orient her explanation by referring back to Sweet Home and to her feelings upon arriving in Cincinnati, Baby Suggs’s preaching is not mentioned at all. This passage does appear in Morrison’s novel as part of a significantly longer sermon, but approximately seventy pages before Sethe attempts to justify her crime to Paul D. Thus, Demme’s transplant of this sermon directly preceding
Sethe’s flashback to the crime and her justification of it—like the previous scene in which Stamp Paid brings up Baby Suggs right before revealing the newspaper article—reframes Baby Suggs and her discourse on freedom as central to understanding why Sethe murdered her child. Sethe’s remarks about her capacity to finally love her children are supplemented, and indeed, justified, by Baby Suggs’s call to “love your flesh. Love it hard.” While Paul D will momentarily contest this justification, in Demme’s version Baby Suggs’s is twice prioritized as an important lens through which Stamp Paid and Sethe (and, by extension, the audience) can understand her crime as the result not only of the instinct that arises from natural maternal love, as in Morrison’s novel, but also as a direct consequence of the ethical imperative of a freed slave to love fiercely that which schoolteacher wants only to tie and to bind.

With this preface, both the sound and image tracks depict the day of schoolteacher’s arrival, though the edit from the close-up on Sethe’s face at the window, which just introduced and concluded the sermon sequence, suggests that what the audience sees and hears in this sequence is not a temporal flashback to the events of that day as they happened, but instead a mindscreen that presents cinematically what Sethe is relating to Paul D verbally. The sequence begins with several establishing shots that position Baby Suggs and Sethe, with the newborn Denver, tending the garden, Sethe’s two sons Buglar and Howard playing together with the crawling-already? baby, and Stamp Paid chopping wood. With this pastoral scene established, the camera cuts first to Sethe looked up with a concerned expression, then to a distant shot from her spatial point
of view that slowly reveals schoolteacher and his men coming around the bend in the road.

The camera then cuts to a series of increasingly closer shots on the group of men, then on schoolteacher and his nephew, and finally on the manacles that dangle from schoolteacher’s saddle, accompanied by Sethe’s present-time narration to Paul D:

“There’s a look that white folks get. Righteous look that’s like a flag goin’ up a pole. A righteousness that comes along with the whip and the fist, the burnin’, the lie. Long before it happens in the open.” These increasingly closer shots are impossible from Sethe’s physical point of view within the memory, and along with the voice-over narration, they remind Demme’s audience that what they are seeing is a subjective reconstruction of these events and not the events themselves. In addition, the present-time voiceover is punctuated by a very brief return to Sethe’s act of narrating on the image track, showing her face again at the window in the pallid winter light before plunging back into her memory.

Back in the sepia glow of the field, Sethe leaps up, screaming “No, no!” and grabs Denver. Yelling for Buglar and Howard to get in the shed, she scoops up the crawling-already? baby and disappears with her children, though she can still be heard screaming as Baby Suggs watches, shocked. Curiously, the scene then continues not from Sethe’s point of view, but from schoolteacher’s; while the scene has clearly been established as Sethe’s memory, she does not appear again in the scene until the white men open the door to the shed. Instead, the sequence continues as a hybrid between Morrison’s separate accounts from schoolteacher’s and Sethe’s perspectives. The camera
stays with the white men as one runs up to investigate 124, another holds a rifle on black
passersby, and schoolteacher’s nephew takes Stamp Paid’s hatchet; though Sethe’s
screams, followed by her sons’, can be heard throughout the scene, viewers of Demme’s
film have no way of knowing what exactly is going on in the shed. Conversely,
schoolteacher’s approach to the shed was not witnessed by Sethe and, as part of her
mindscreen, must be an account reconstructed or imagined after the fact. In other words,
Sethe narrates to Paul D (and to Demme’s audience) events that she did not witness,
while at the same time leaving unrepresented the concurrent events she did.

Importantly, though, the fact that viewers are aligned with schoolteacher’s visual
perspective does not mean that they are presented with his ethical perspective. Unlike in
Morrison’s novel, Demme’s presentation of schoolteacher’s approach, while certainly
menacing, lacks any presentation of his interiority, much less the specificity of
Morrison’s presentation of his concerns about the bestial behavior of runaway slaves.
While all of the events of schoolteacher’s account are present here—the approach,
“disarming” Stamp Paid, walking toward the woodshed, opening the door—none of his
foreshadowing discourse about maddened captured runaways or mistreated animals
makes an appearance in Demme’s film. In fact, the only approximation of this material is
in Sethe’s voice-over, which attributes “the whip and the fist” to schoolteacher by
implication but says nothing about the inherently racist way in which he sees her. And as
a result, just as the audience is denied Stamp Paid’s perspective on Sethe’s crime, this
sequence elides another ethical perspective on these events—one that Morrison
ultimately guides the audience to reject but that, through negation, prompts the audience
to triangulate the absence of an ethical stance endorsed by the authorial audience. In Demme’s version, rather than providing an ultimately untenable ethical hypothesis, schoolteacher’s account merely serves the same function as the elision of Stamp Paid’s newspaper account: both elisions heighten audience tension and anticipation for the moment when Sethe’s crime is finally revealed. Because Sethe’s reminiscence is the only version presented and Demme’s audience has no prior knowledge of what is happening in the woodshed, the integration of schoolteacher’s physical perspective into Sethe’s narration serves to delay and heighten the eventual revelation of the horror, much like the ominous approach to a closed door in a haunted house movie, without actually providing a different emotional or ethical perspective on the event itself.

The emphasis on schoolteacher’s physical perspective continues into the woodshed, as a white hand reaches around the camera and opens the door. The bodies of the white men frame the dark interior, where Sethe clutches her crawling-already? baby to her chest, dead from the saw wound across her throat, and swings Denver by her feet, trying to bash her head against a post. This shot, as well as the subsequent reverse shot in which Stamp Paid pushes past the white men to snatch Denver out of the air, is presented in slow-motion, complete with a requisite elongated shout of “Sethe!” from Stamp Paid. Here the intent seems to be to heighten the effect of the shock and horror in the woodshed, though again, this discursive embodiment of shock is odd to see here as it exists only in the minds of the white men and Stamp Paid, and not in the mind of the narrating Sethe. In addition, this slow-motion effect reads not as an unthinkable horror, but is instead familiar to a film audience as a kitschy film cliché; Stamp Paid’s leap to
save Denver is pitched by the cinematic discourse as an act of improbable heroism made campy by its action movie presentation.

The scene proceeds much as it is described in schoolteacher’s account in Morrison’s novel, the only version of the story that actually presents the events inside the woodshed. Schoolteacher’s nephew reacts with astonishment—although the audience is not privy to his inward comparison between Sethe’s beatings and his own—and the sheriff laments that there’s “[n]othin’ here left to claim” before Stamp Paid exchanges Denver for the dead child at Sethe’s breast and Baby Suggs revives the two unconscious boys. The visual affordances of cinema also allow Demme to show us the grisly details of the scene: the saw fallen in the sawdust, Sethe’s blood-drenched frock, and the close-up face of the dead infant. These are, of course, present in Morrison’s version of schoolteacher’s account, but their visual presentation is far more visceral.

The visual nature of this depiction also affords Demme the opportunity to make two minor additions to this scene, however. First, by employing a shot-reverse-shot construction, Demme also ensures that the audience sees Sethe’s defiant stare as she meets schoolteacher’s eyes. (See fig. 22.) By way of contrast, the only initial reference to Sethe’s gaze in the novel’s version of schoolteacher’s account specifies that “[s]he did not
look at them” (149). Right before he exits the woodshed, schoolteacher does reflect
“[e]nough nigger eyes for now. . . . the worst ones were those of the nigger woman who
looked like she didn’t have any. Since the whites in them had disappeared and since they
were as black as her skin, she looked blind” (150), but this inhuman depiction of Sethe’s
eyes is clearly quite different from the bold gaze she meets schoolteacher with in
Demme’s scene. Likewise, the response that this gaze elicits is original to Demme’s
version: reacting to Sethe’s furious stare, a single tear rolls out of schoolteacher’s right
eye. (See fig. 23.) It goes without saying that
no such moment of humanity occurs in
Morrison’s novel, and only moments later,
schoolteacher ensures that this tear will earn
him no sympathy from the audience by
throwing his hat down and spitting
“Animal!” at Sethe. But his initial reaction,
combined with Sethe’s bold glare, frame her
act not as the slow-motion horror Demme’s
camerawork would suggest, but instead as a tragic but ultimately justified response to
schoolteacher’s cruelty.

The rest of the scene plays out as expected, ending with Sethe’s face, crying but
still defiant, before cutting back to Sethe’s present-tense narration. For the first time, the
edit returns the audience not to the close-up of Sethe’s face at the window, but instead to
Paul D’s side, framing Sethe’s back over his shoulder as he begins his criticism of her
too-thick love. The scene continues as in Morrison’s novel, with Sethe claiming that “[t]hin love ain’t no love at all” and arguing that her efforts did keep her children safe, though here her argument is inflected through a religious discourse—“I’d rather know they at peace in heaven than live in a hell here on Earth, so help me, Jesus”—that is not present in Morrison’s text. Paul D makes similar objections, as well, arguing that the murder did not keep her children safe and, as in the novel, telling Sethe how many legs she has, echoing the “Animal!” schoolteacher spits at her. The scene ends with Paul D quitting the house as the camera fades to Sethe, Denver, and Beloved by the kitchen fire with Paul D long gone.

In spite of Demme’s fidelity to the story content of Morrison’s novel here, three minor changes—all consequences of the cinematic discourse—are worth dwelling on. First, the last lines in Morrison’s scene are Sethe’s thoughts as she watches Paul D walk away:

Sweet, she thought. He must think I can’t bear to hear him say it. That after all I have told him and after telling me how many feet I have, “goodbye” would break me to pieces. Ain’t that sweet.

“So long,” she murmured from the far side of the trees. (165)
In order to solve the problem of representing interiority on screen, Demme simply transposes these lines of quoted internal monologue into direct speech, saying “After all I just told you, Paul D, and after you tellin’ me how many feet I got, you think sayin’ good-bye is gonna break me into pieces? You’re a sweet man. So long, Paul D.” Sethe’s delivery of these lines is not as defiant as the look she gave schoolteacher moments before, but it is still calm and strong, making Paul D’s retreat look cowardly by comparison. By externalizing these thoughts, Demme shifts the final words in the scene from Paul D’s “two feet, not four”—a comment that is both devastating and more cruel than he knows—to Sethe’s patient critique which even frames his reticence and weakness as kind.

Sethe also comes across as more sympathetic to the audience in this version because of the cinematography Demme employs to capture the debate between Sethe and Paul D. After returning to the present tense, the entire scene is edited in a shot-reverse-shot pattern, with Paul D seated and Sethe standing. The result is that the camera

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79 Note here the shift from “telling me how many feet I have” to “tellin’ me how many feet I got,” a vernacular shift prevalent throughout the film.
is always looking down on a static Paul D, while it captures Sethe from below looking up as she dynamically moves around him. As the audience adopts these physical perspectives, however, there are also rhetorical consequences: as Paul D objects, he literally looks small and slight, while Sethe’s insistence that she kept her children safe is presented in a point of view that makes her look strong, confident, and forceful. Where Morrison’s novel presents these contradictory viewpoints as equivalent, unmarked except for inquit tags and quotation marks, Demme’s camerawork gives precedence to Sethe’s physical—and thereby ethical—positioning, literally elevating her in the viewers’ eyes.

Lastly, as with Stamp Paid’s slow-motion rescue of Denver in Sethe’s flashback, Demme again manipulates the cinematic discourse using a framing convention that his viewers are likely to read as another genre film cliché. After Paul D’s comment about the number of Sethe’s legs, he gets up to leave while Sethe verbalizes what was internal monologue in Morrison’s version. As Sethe begins her response, however, the camera rolls into a Dutch tilt, a framing convention in which the camera shoots its subject off of a vertical axis. In this case, the tilt is particularly unsubtle, framing the upright Sethe at a nearly forty-five degree angle off vertical. (See fig. 24.) This technique is generally used to indicate some sort of emotional, mental, or moral instability—the physical distortion symbolizing a less tangible crookedness—though it is more commonly a staple of the caricatures of villainy and madness found in genre film. 80 (See fig. 25.)

80 Indeed, tropes like these were a focal point for criticism of the film when it debuted. Richard Alleva makes the point that Demme relies too much on unsubtle horror movie clichés that “put us in the wrong frame of mind for the subtle human relationships that follow” (18) and John Tibbetts comments on “an overindulgent use of slow-motion effects, sudden flashbacks, a barrage of persistently recurring image motifs . . . a succession of starkly contrasting mood changes, and numerous irritatingly contrived special effects” (75), while Anissa Wardi focuses particular attention on the way Thandie Newton’s performance as Beloved shifts the character from an enigma to a grotesque.
The implication of this shot taken in isolation is that the cinematic discourse is operating as an authorial critique of Sethe’s confidence that she has done the right thing, undermining her certainty in her ethical position by depicting her as destabilized and off-kilter. However, this reading is immediately undercut by the fact that the counter-shot of Paul D, pausing at the kitchen door and looking back at Sethe, also begins to tilt as the camera closes in on his face. (See fig. 26.) Here the tilt is less drastic and in the opposite direction, away from Sethe’s orientation, and because Paul D does not speak here or in the rest of the scene, it is difficult to read this angle as a critique of his ethical position. Instead, the fact that both characters are shot this way, combined with the opposite direction of their tilts and the introduction of this technique immediately after Paul D’s comment about the number of Sethe’s legs, retroactively reconfigures Sethe’s tilt not as a critique of her ethical position, but instead as a cinematic equivalent of Morrison’s metaphorical “forest [that] sprang up between them” (165). As such, any discursive appraisal of Sethe’s ethics is reframed as an authorial commentary on the violence of Paul D’s response, distancing Demme’s audience from his critique of Sethe.
**Demme’s ethics**

I have dwelt on this sequence at length and in great detail to illustrate what happens to Morrison’s stubborn ethics as Demme transposes them into the discourse of cinema. The reader will recall that in the novel, Morrison’s audience is challenged to view Sethe’s crime as an act that requires an ethical response, while at the same time Morrison undermines each ethical position presented by individual characters. Schoolteacher’s assessment of Sethe’s actions as unthinkable and inhumane is invalidated because of his brutal racism; readers will be loathe to identify at all with Sethe’s antagonist, even as they might initially be tempted to view Sethe’s actions as inexplicable. Stamp Paid’s perspective is undermined by his inability to actually voice it in the face of Paul D’s refusals and is disnarrated by Morrison’s narrator, while the contents of his theoretically objective (but no doubt in practice institutionally racist) newspaper article are denied to the reader through unnarration, though Paul D does hear them. Morrison primes her readers to reject Paul D’s response to Sethe as needlessly (though inadvertently) cruel in its evocation of schoolteacher’s animal metaphor, and even Sethe’s own account is deeply problematic, given Paul D’s legitimate critique that her children are not safe, as well as her wholesale avoidance of what actually took place in the woodshed. Ultimately Morrison refuses to endorse for her audience any ethical perspective on Sethe’s crime, while at the same time the narrative, not to mention the act itself, demands that readers do respond ethically.
Demme’s film, on the other hand, fails to capture these stubborn ethics by reducing Morrison’s multiplicity of perspectives into a single account. The plot events of Stamp Paid’s account are present—Stamp Paid confronts Paul D in the hog pens to tell him what he knows about Sethe—but without a cinematic attempt to reveal the Stamp Paid’s interiority, this scene functions solely to stoke the audience’s curiosity about the ultimate revelation of Sethe’s crime without providing a competing version to contest her account. Likewise, while the plot events of schoolteacher’s account are integrated into Sethe’s telling—curiously, as Sethe could not have witnessed the white men’s approach to the woodshed—his ethical critique of Sethe’s actions as incomprehensible, likely the audience’s first reaction, is reduced to his curt “Animal!”

Instead, Demme’s viewers are given access to only one verbal and visual account of the day of schoolteacher’s arrival, which has the consequence of rendering this account authoritative. This is true both because Sethe’s account is uncontested, except by Paul D’s protests—more on this momentarily—but also because the affordances of cinema suggest that, as with extradiegetic prose narration, convention dictates that audiences will assume that the images presented are reliable unless signaled to read them as unreliable. As such, despite the fact that Sethe’s mindscreen is clearly signaled as a subjective memory, its uncontested status combined with the reality effect inherent to Demme’s camerawork leaves the audience with the impression that Sethe’s visual and verbal narration is accurate. In other words, because Sethe’s account includes a visual depiction of schoolteacher’s single tear, and because there is no other visual or verbal account given to contradict this event, Demme’s audience is unlikely to read schoolteacher’s tear as an
embellishment on Sethe’s part, nor of wishful thinking or self-serving revision. Instead, viewers have no choice but to consider Sethe’s narration of the event to be identical to the event itself, and no competing versions of the event are available to signal viewers to question Sethe’s reliability.

By extension, allowing Sethe’s version of events to stand for the event itself, suggesting that her narration is reliable, also buttresses her ethical reliability. The primary objection to Sethe’s account in Morrison’s novel is that she completely avoids any mention of the actual events inside the woodshed; as a result, her justification to Paul D that she kept her children safe is undermined by her avoidance of the graphic consequences of her actions. By way of contrast, Demme’s delayed revelation of the woodshed and his conflation of schoolteacher’s and Sethe’s accounts means that in the film, Sethe doesn’t avoid this gruesome reality at all. While Sethe’s account does include details like schoolteacher’s tear and her defiant stance that help her case, she is also responsible for the visceral images of the saw laying in the sawdust and her gore-soaked dress—in spite of the fact that she could conceivably elide these details, as Paul D is already aware of her crime by way of Stamp Paid’s article, even if Demme’s audience is not. The responsibility she takes through her narration for her actions and their consequences leaves her immune to the claim that she is refusing to face what she has done or that her argument that her children were made safer and that her act was predicated on love are self-serving.

This final claim is given further support in Demme’s version in the way Baby Suggs becomes central to understanding Sethe’s crime. Stamp Paid broaches the subject
with reference to her holiness, and Sethe herself refers to (and the image track depicts) Baby Suggs’s sermon as a frame of reference for helping Paul D understand that day, as well as her justification for her actions. Demme relocates Baby Suggs—and, in particular, her preaching—as a central motif in his film, even going so far as to replace Morrison’s ambiguous concluding statement that “this is not a story to pass on” with a continuation of Baby Suggs’s sermon—appearing in flashback before the closing credits—that punctuates Sethe’s story with a demand to “[l]ove your heart . . . hallelujah!” By refracting her own story through Baby Suggs’s insistence that freed slaves have an obligation to love as hard as they can in the face of racial hate, Sethe further strengthens her own position that her actions in the woodshed were motivated by love and were ultimately a just response to the threat schoolteacher represented. Further, Stamp Paid’s similar association of the story with Baby Suggs’s holiness casts Sethe’s own reference to the sermon not as an evasion, but as an accurate understanding of the events.

Thus Demme’s adaptation of Morrison’s progression presents a virtually identical storyworld, but narrows the many perspectives on Sethe’s crime to a single one, Sethe’s own, radically altering the discourse. Sethe’s story is legitimated both by virtue of its status as sole account and also by its presentation, which casts Sethe as a far more reliable and thorough narrator than she is in the novel. As for those moments when the cinematic discourse threatens to qualify her account—Stamp Paid’s slow-motion rescue and the Dutch angles—the former is likely to come across as a campy and hyperbolic aesthetic flaw, while the latter cuts both ways, framing both Sethe and Paul D as off-kilter and thereby critiquing not Sethe’s story, but Paul D’s cruel response that knocks the

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81 Marc Conner’s reading of the film’s ending frames this change as particularly problematic.
couple's relationship askew. Rather than positioning his audience in the untenable position of demanding an ethical response but simultaneously invalidating each character’s individual perspective, Demme’s film offers the viewers a horrifically graphic crime, but one that is easily understood as the difficult but ethical actions of a mother motivated by love and threatened by both a cruel individual and a racist culture.

Demme’s endorsement of Sethe’s ethical position also finally has consequences for the character of Beloved, framing her exclusively in terms of the film’s antagonist. In Morrison’s novel Beloved is the text’s major multivalent metaphor and is simultaneously and paradoxically the ghost of the crawling-already? baby, an escaped lunatic, and a Middle Passage ghost—not to mention a complex symbolic representation of the gothic horrors of slavery and the way the racial legacy of the United States haunts contemporary life. But in Demme’s film, these fluctuating identities are eliminated in favor of Beloved’s single identity as Sethe’s baby’s ghost, “no longer a meaningful metaphor . . . but a freak on display in a sideshow” (Tibbetts 76); other hints to Beloved’s identity are excised entirely, with the exception of Denver’s cryptic remark after Beloved’s second and final exorcism that “[a]t times, I think she was more.” But without Demme’s film offering any other concrete or metaphorical alternatives—and especially without any cinematic transposition of Beloved’s interiority as presented in Morrison’s novel—Beloved is easily reduced from an enigmatic metaphor which contributes to the narrative’s stubborn ethics to merely a vengeful ghost, unfairly tormenting the sympathetic Sethe for past actions that, while horrifying, were ultimately both just and justified.
By eliminating Morrison’s multiple perspectives and multivalent metaphors, Demme creates a film that is faithful to its source material on the level of plot; as he puts it, “[a]lmost everything, every line of dialogue, every article of clothing, every detail we shamelessly took from the book to put in the movie” (Corliss 76). But here again we see how formal fidelity fails, both as an adaptation strategy and as an analytical tool. Replicating the story details of Morrison’s novel on the screen without creating cinematic analogues for Morrison’s prose affordances fails to replicate the rhetorical effect of her stubborn ethics. A one-to-one adaptation of the formal aspects of a text does not necessarily result in the replication of its rhetorical effects, and while cinema is perfectly capable of adapting stubborn ethics—a topic addressed in the next chapter—Demme’s Beloved fails to rise to the occasion. While Demme strives to include all of the narrative equipment Morrison uses to tell her story, the stubborn ethics that make Beloved such a powerful ethical experience for readers are simplified by his adaptation of Morrison’s novel into a mere ghost story.

And what of the purpose of Morrison’s stubborn ethics? I argued above that in forcing her readers to grapple with an ethical problem while also refusing to offer a solution, Morrison invites her audience to consider the impossibility of formulating an ethical response to the system that abused, tortured, and murdered her Sixty Million and more; in the end, as they struggle with the meaning of Sethe’s crime which is “not a story to pass on,” they must also face the possibility that slavery was not only an unethical system, but a practice that annihilated the very concept of ethical behavior for all whom it touched.
Compared to this, Demme’s film, despite its meticulous fidelity to dialogue and clothing, not only fails to replicate Morrison’s ethics, but inverts them. Here we are offered a story of a woman who, subjected to an impossible wrong, commits an act that is extreme but finally justified. Here we end not with the incomprehensible koan of “not a story to pass on,” but with Baby Suggs’s benediction which elevates Sethe to the status of a martyr who endured not only the depredations of slavery, but even the horror of sacrificing her children to keep them safe. Or, to put it another way, if Homi Bhabha’s claim that in Morrison’s novel Sethe’s actions are ultimately justified because they are motivated by love is an over-simplification of Morrison’s stubborn ethics, as I argued above, the same claim is also a precise description of the ethical stance Demme’s film asks viewers to adopt.

It is this, finally, that causes the failure of Demme’s film as an adaptation. Though Demme could have adapted *Beloved* to any number of purposes, by so publicly declaring his allegiance to the details of Morrison’s text, Demme led viewers who had read the novel to expect that his film would capture the ethical stubbornness that makes *Beloved* such a powerful ethical experience. But when they sat in theaters to watch his film, Demme’s audience watched a story unfold that not only failed to capture the spirit of the novel, but in fact offered them precisely the kind of comfortable ethical condemnation of racism and elevation of its beleaguered victim that Morrison’s stubborn ethics opposed, a film that assured its audience that slavery was not only comprehensible, but that a just response to it is within our compass. Far from destroying ethics, the slave system in
Demme’s *Beloved* elevates Sethe from mother to martyr, giving her the opportunity to demonstrate that a mother’s love really does conquer all, punctuated by a Hallelujah.

Poststructuralist theorists have been right to point out that adaptations can have any number of relations with their source materials; the word ‘betrayal’ is carelessly used too often in adaptation studies, as poststructuralist theorists have rightly pointed out, and not every case of adaptation that alters its source material is necessarily a violation, as I shall discuss in the following chapter. But in this case, Demme’s promises of fidelity betrayed not the source material but his audience, promising them the impossible complexity Morrison’s stubborn ethics in which judgment is both required and impossible, and instead delivering a maudlin tear rolling down the cheek of a slavecatcher. In the end, to those for whom Morrison’s novel provided an ethical challenge worth the struggle, Demme does offer a story to pass on—but only in the one sense.
Chapter 6: Adapting Stubborn Ethics 2:

Polychronic Narration and Multivalent Metaphors in *The Sweet Hereafter*

In the previous chapter, I examined Jonathan Demme’s failure to transpose the stubborn ethics—a rhetorical effect generated by a narrative’s simultaneous invitation to the implied audience to render an ethical judgment while also denying authorial sanction to any possible ethical stance—of Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* into his 1998 film adaptation. In making this argument, I echo the negative reviews of a variety of film critics, who largely panned the film.\(^{82}\) I am also aware, though, that adaptation scholars will recognize another set of echoes: that of adaptation theory’s old critical practices, which often exhibited a pattern of dismissing film adaptations for failing to live up to their literary source materials. This critical tendency couches cinema as always already a reductive simplification of the more profound and serious ethical and aesthetic achievements of prose narrative, at best an imitation of what has already been successfully accomplished elsewhere.

As I hope will be obvious at this point, however, it is not my position that cinema is inherently a less subtle or sophisticated medium than prose, and while I stand by my

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\(^{82}\) While Mia Mask disagrees with my assessment and considers the film a success, she argues persuasively that white mainstream publications sought to dismiss the project as part of a conservative pushback against multiculturalism generally and black femininity specifically, while black publications were completely uncritical and thus unserious about the film.
argument that Demme’s film adaptation is ethically and aesthetically inferior to its source material, this should not be extended to imply any larger statement about the superiority of prose as a medium, or indeed, even as a claim about an inability on the part of cinema to represent stubborn ethics. In order to preemptively defend the rhetorical approach to adaptation against accusations of logocentrism and to explore how stubborn ethics can be produced in cinema, this chapter focuses on a novel-to-film adaptation that closely parallels the *Beloved* case, but demonstrates that film is capable not only of replicating stubborn ethics found in prose, but even enhancing them.

My sample texts in this chapter and the previous one have a remarkable amount in common. Russell Banks’s novel *The Sweet Hereafter* was published in 1991, four years after Morrison’s groundbreaking novel, and Atom Egoyan’s film adaptation of Banks’s novel appeared on screen in 1997, only one year before Demme’s adaptation hit theaters. Both narratives deal with similar subject matter: in Morrison’s case, the aftermath of a single child’s death at the hands of her mother, and in Banks’s, the grief of an entire town after fourteen of their children die in a tragic bus accident. Both novels are also based on historical events: the story of Margaret Garner in the case of *Beloved*, and for *The Sweet Hereafter*, a 1989 accident in Alton, Texas, which resulted in twenty-one of the town’s children drowning when their school bus was hit by a Coca-Cola truck and rolled into a flooded gravel pit. And finally, both novels are similar in that each requires its implied audience to take an ethical position on the deaths of these children—reflecting on the possibility of assigning blame, the appropriate emotional response to a tragedy, and the
proper way to grieve for such a profound loss—but also refuses to offer this same audience an ethical position endorsed by the novel’s implied author.

Granted, there are some differences worth mentioning, as well. The central event that requires audience judgment in *Beloved* is a deliberate act, a choice on Sethe’s part to commit what she sees as justified murder; Banks’s novel, on the other hand, is focused not on a character action but on an accident, and individual or collective responsibility for that event is not only remains unsettled, but is one of the central ethical issues in *The Sweet Hereafter*. Further, Morrison positions Sethe’s murder as a central moment in her novel’s progression, both in terms of its location in the text’s discourse and also in terms of its importance to Morrison’s overall purposes. By contrast, the bus accident in Banks’s novel is a much more diffuse event, preceding each character’s narration and providing a catalyst for their meditations on guilt, responsibility, and grief. But ultimately these different means produce the same end of creating in the audience the effect of ethical stubbornness. Just as Morrison’s readers encounter a variety of ethical positions to take in relation to the murder but are guided to reject each one, Banks’s progression exposes his implied audience to four different ethical responses to the accident, but also reveals each one to be an ethically insufficient response to a public crisis because each is also simultaneously a self-serving response to a personal trauma. As such, despite their differences in means, both novels ask their implied audiences to take an ethical position in relation to a traumatic event, but also disqualify each character’s position, thereby producing ethical stubbornness.
The important difference, then, between these two texts—at least for my purposes here—is how each novel is adapted to the screen. I have already shown how Demme fails to replicate Morrison’s stubborn ethics; here I will make the case that Egoyan’s film adaptation goes beyond simply replicating Banks’s stubborn ethics by enhancing them. Egoyan accomplishes this by transposing Banks’s formal choice of multiple narrative perspectives into the discourse of cinema, first by reframing Banks’s multiple narration as polychronic narration, and second by including a predominant multivalent metaphor not found in Banks’s novel. This addition, a recurring motif involving Robert Browning’s 1888 poem *The Pied Piper of Hamelin*, extends Banks’s stubborn ethics by inflecting them through a metaphor that assigns guilt and blame in various ways throughout the film and ultimately undermines the audience’s assumptions about the narrative agency behind the film itself. As a result, Banks’s ethical claims, which I’ll explore in the following section, are not only translated to the screen, but translated in a way that produces a more ethically complex text that places Egoyan’s film audience in the position of experiencing what Banks’s novel only describes.

**A town that loses its children**

Like *Beloved*, Banks’s novel offers a variety of different perspectives on its central event, the bus accident that kills fourteen children in Sam Dent, a small town in upstate New York. But while Morrison’s progression discussed in the previous chapter is told by a single extradiegetic narrator but focalized through three different characters, *The
*Sweet Hereafter* is instead multiply narrated, structured in five separate sections told by four different character narrators: Dolores Driscoll, who drove the school bus the day of the accident; Billy Ansel, a Vietnam veteran and widower whose two children were killed in the crash; Mitchell Stephens, a New York City lawyer who seeks to represent the town’s parents in a class action suit; and Nichole Burnell, a fourteen-year-old beauty queen who was paralyzed in the crash and becomes an important witness to the accident. Each of the five sections is headed only by the narrator’s full name—Mitchell’s section adds an officious “Esquire” to his name in the title—and features an unbroken dramatic monologue, addressed to an unspecified narratee, that reflects on the narrator’s life before the accident, the accident itself, and the lawsuit that emerges as the town struggles to assign blame. These narrators also inflect their understanding of the accident through their own pasts, including other traumas that they experienced. Only the fifth and last chapter—the second narrated by Dolores—moves past the trial into the aftermath of the accident.

According to Ernest Acevedo-Muñoz, one effect of the multiple narration that characterizes *The Sweet Hereafter* is that:

> [e]ach of the characters interprets the accident and assesses its meaning and effects on the community according to his or her perspective and beliefs, giving the novel a kind of *Rashomon* effect. Paradoxically, from the four first-person narratives, each different in content, style, and tone, there surfaces an omniscient, arguably objective account of the events and their meaning. (132)
Acevedo-Muñoz is partially correct here, in that from the intersection of these four different narrative perspectives, Banks’s implied audience is able to construct an objective account of the events leading up to the accident, as well as the accident itself. But I want to contest his claim that the combination of these different accounts produces a settled, objective account of the meaning of the accident. Instead, *The Sweet Hereafter*, like *Beloved*, is an example of a narrative that generates stubborn ethics in the tension between competing interpretive and ethical judgments on a single event. 83 In order to understand Egoyan’s film adaptation as an extension of these stubborn ethics, then, we must first examine the way Banks’s novel generates this effect through tension among the narrators’ various ethical responses to the accident.

**Dolores’s sense of duty**

The first account of the accident in the novel comes from Dolores, who has driven Sam Dent’s bus route for several decades without incident. Her section begins with Dolores reflecting on the dog she “saw for certain. Or thought I saw” that led to her swerving the bus off the road and into the sandpit where fourteen children drowned (Banks 1). She shortly returns to roughly chronological order, however, giving her account of the morning’s bus ride in a mix between iterative and singulative narration—

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83 For the same reason, the aptness of Acevedo-Muñoz’s reference to a Rashomon effect is also questionable. Kurosawa’s film famously denies its audience the basic facts of what occurred in a forest clearly between a bandit, a samurai, and his wife. On the other hand, Banks’s novel does not obfuscate the facts of the accident, but depends for its climax on the audience having a sufficiently clear understanding of these facts to grasp that Nichole’s testimony in her deposition is not a competing interpretation of the accident, but a deliberate lie. In terms of film history, the better allusion might rather be to *Citizen Kane*, in which Welles’s narrators all agree on the facts of Charles Foster Kane’s life but disagree about what the implications of this biography are for the character of the man who lived it.
in other words, between accounts of her usual daily routine and specific details of that particular day. She discusses at length her careful daily upkeep of the bus, which the town allows her to maintain at her home, and the names she gives to her vehicles (like Boomer and Shoe), a game that made “the ride more cheerful for everyone” and was something “we could all participate in together, which was a value I tried to promote among young people” (6). This care and attention for her charges stands in stark counterpoint to her estrangement from her adult children, which “gives [her] an empty feeling in the stomach when it happens” (8), but it is also reflected in the way she dutifully attends to her invalid husband Abbott, who has been paralyzed by a stroke.

She goes on to walk the unnamed narratee through her morning routine as she drives from house to house, picking up the children “like berries waiting to be plucked” (18). She focuses particular attention on stops to pick up Bear Otto, adopted child of hippie parents Wanda and Hartley, and Sean Walker, a troubled boy whose parents Risa and Wendell run the Bide-a-Wile Motel. Dolores also notes approvingly the maternal comfort Nichole Burnell offers Sean when he doesn’t want to leave his mother’s side, commenting on her good reputation as a babysitter in the town. Finally, Dolores picks up Billy Ansel’s twins, Jessica and Mason, and admires his habit of following behind the school bus on the way to work, waving at his children; for Dolores, “there was always something noble about Billy,” and she praises his strength as a widower and a single father, a Vietnam veteran, and as a pillar of the community (27).
Dolores’s account of the morning leading up to the accident ends where it begins, with the dog “I maybe only thought I saw” (34). At this point, Dolores is “almost sure now that it was an optical illusion or a mirage,” but stands by her reaction nevertheless: as I have always done when I’ve had two bad choices and nothing else available to me, I arranged it so that if I erred I’d come out on the side of the angels. Which is to say, I acted as though it was a real dog I saw or a small deer or possibly even a lost child from the Flats, barely half a mile away. (ibid)

She swerves to avoid it, “wrench[ing] the steering wheel to the right and slapp[ing] my foot against the brake pedal, and I wasn’t the driver anymore, so I hunched my shoulders and ducked my head, as if the bus were a huge wave about to break over me,” and the reader is left both on the literal precipice of the sandpit and the cliffhanging end to her narration (ibid).

The next chapter continues this account from the perspective of Billy Ansel, but before turning to his narration, it is worth pausing on Dolores’s justification of her choice to swerve. Throughout her account, Dolores returns to what she calls her “philosophy of life”: that “since a person’s quality of attention is one of the few things about her that a human can control, then she damn well better do it” (26, emphasis original). While “[o]bviously you can’t control everything”—Dolores notes that it is religion’s job to explain the inexplicable—“you are obliged to take care of the few things you can. I’m an optimist, basically, who acts like a pessimist. On principle. Just in case” (25). This duty to thorough and careful attention is reflected both in her work—in her bus maintenance and driving habits—and also in her care and consideration for the town’s children—in the
way she names her bus to create a sense of the communal values she tries to promote and her sensitivity to their lives. As a result, her attitude toward both the accident and her own culpability is inflected through this categorical imperative to constantly demonstrate deliberate and cautious attention. Indeed, having fulfilled that duty, Dolores is fatalistic about consequences, going so far as to claim that “fixing motives is like fixing blame—the further away from the act you get, the harder it is to single out one thing as having caused it” (10).

Seeing the accident retrospectively through Dolores’s physical and ethical perspective, then, the reader is invited to see her as she sees herself: a woman who may have erred, but on the side of the angels. While Dolores is haunted by the deaths of the children that she clearly cared for deeply, she is secure in her knowledge that the choice she made to swerve was the right one, given the information she had at the time, and is confident that the town of Sam Dent will judge her likewise. The horrible consequences of that decision, and indeed, the fact that the dog she swerved to avoid was probably imagined, are regrettable, certainly, but they do not shake her sanguine sense that she acted as duty compelled her to act, and she is resigned to the consequences of those actions, for the children, the town, and for herself as a potential recipient of the blame.

**Billy’s nihilism**

Billy Ansel’s account picks up where Dolores’s leaves off, reflecting on the fact that “at the moment [the accident] occurred I was thinking about fucking Risa Walker,”
with whom he has been having an affair (37). Like Dolores’s account, however, Billy’s narration soon wanders from the moment of the accident itself in order to reflect on his life leading up to the accident, as well as the condition of the town in its immediate aftermath. Prior to witnessing the deaths of his two children, Billy had already survived two major traumas: his service in Vietnam and the illness and death of his wife Lydia. The former at first seems manageable to Billy; while he is horrified by “all this dying that I saw going on around me” and “couldn’t take the Christian line seriously” when he returns from the war, he still “believed in life” and was able to build a happy home and a successful business in Sam Dent repairing cars (79 – 80). In fact, this compartmentalization is so strong that it is only later in his life—when on a vacation to Jamaica he and Lydia accidentally leave their daughter in a grocery store—that “[t]he Vietnamization of my domestic life” was completed and “[w]hat had been an exception was now possibly the rule” (53).

In the wake of his wife’s death, Billy’s life is fairly routine: he cares for his kids, runs his garage, and regularly has Nichole watch the twins while he slips off to meet Risa. Although the two say that they love each other, Billy supposes that “it was a lie, and I think we both knew it” (40). Rather, the affair provides “respite from our real and very troubled lives” (41)—Billy’s loneliness and his struggles as a single father, Risa’s unhappy marriage and failing motel—and it is able to sustain the two of them until the accident. Because he was behind the bus at the time of the accident, Billy is the only eyewitness and was the first among the people of Sam Dent to begin reclaiming the bodies of the children, including his own, from the frozen water in the sandpit.
In the aftermath of the accident, Billy descends into bleak drunkenness, and his account ends with two encounters. The first is with Mitchell, who is lurking around the bus wreckage at Billy’s garage the night after the funeral when Billy shows up:

I don’t know why I was there, staring with strange loathing and awe at this wrecked yellow vehicle, as if it were a beast that had killed our children and then in turn been slain by the villagers and dragged here to a place we could all come, one by one, and verify that it was safely dead. But I did want to see it, to touch it with my hands, maybe, in a primitive way to be sure that we had indeed killed it.

(81)

Mitchell’s interruption of his atavistic trance infuriates Billy, and when the lawyer broaches the idea of a class action lawsuit and tells Billy that the Ottos and Walkers have already signed with him, Billy threatens to attack him and then storms away. The chapter ends with Billy finding Risa at their usual rendezvous at the Bide-a-Wile, but, repelled by her suggestion that “she had known all along that something like this was going to happen,” he leaves, and from then on “it was as if we never saw each other after that, never saw the people we had once been. . . . From then on, we were simply different people. Not new people; different” (87 – 88).

Billy’s attitude toward the accident is naturally informed by the twin traumas of Vietnam and his wife’s death, and he represents a different ethical perspective on both the event itself and the way the town should grieve in its aftermath. Like Dolores, Billy emphasizes the unpredictability of the event, though he somewhat undermines her own description of her cautiousness by referring to her driving as “not reckless but casual” and
noting that her bus “did not get the same supervision by me as the other school buses got” (38). Billy refers throughout his narration to what he calls “a way of living with a tragedy . . . to claim after it happens that you saw it coming” (ibid.). He rejects this reaction on the part of Risa specifically and the town more generally as “like writing history backward . . . fixing the past to fit the present. Hindsight made over into foresight” (56). Rather than imagining prescient signals of the event or believing that “the accident was not really an accident, that it was somehow caused, and that, therefore, someone was to blame” (73, emphasis original), Billy rejects entirely the notion that there is justice to be done and guilt to apportion.

Instead, he loses himself in “the inescapable and endless reality of it,” even as he helps pull Sam Dent’s children out of the frozen water (70). Billy’s despair at the death of his children grows as he finds that “I could no longer believe even in life. Which meant that I had come to be the reverse, the opposite, of a Christian. For me, now, the only reality was death” (80). In the end, he sees the accident as a negation of the town of Sam Dent itself:

People who have lost their children . . . twist themselves into all kinds of weird shapes in order to deny what has happened. Not just because of the pain of losing a person they have loved—we lose parents and mates and friends, and no matter how painful, it’s not the same—but because what has happened is so profoundly against the necessary order of things, that we cannot accept it. It’s almost beyond belief or comprehension that the children should die before the adults. It flies in the face of biology, it contradicts history, it denies cause and effect, it violates
basic physics, even. It’s the final contrary. A town that loses its children loses its meaning. (78)

“[B]eyond help,” Billy sees the accident as unforeseeable, inexplicable, and finally, utterly negating (76). For him, nihilism is the only possible response to such an event, and attempts to explain, blame, or repair are as meaningless as the town itself has become.

Billy’s revisions of Dolores’s cautious character suggests to readers that her perspective on events may be self-serving, and the series of tragedies Billy has endured and his status as something of a local hero is likely to prompt a great deal of sympathy from Banks’s implied audience. While his nihilistic reaction to the accident is bleak, some readers may see it as endorsed by Banks because it is adopted by such a sympathetic character. But the implied audience is prompted on several occasions to distance itself from Billy, and not only because of his affair with a woman who is “thoroughly married to a friend of mine” and his threat to Mitchell to “beat you with my hands and feet so bad that you pissed blood and couldn’t walk right for a month” (63). Both of these, after all, are the actions of a man who, in the former case, is looking for sexual and emotional comfort as he attempts to raise his children in the aftermath of their mother’s death, and in the latter case, has just left the funeral of these same children.

Instead, it is Billy’s own account of the incident in Jamaica that is likely to trouble readers. The event itself is largely understandable as an example of the human fallibility common to us all; while Banks’s audience may see Billy and Lydia’s accidentally leaving their daughter Jessica in a Jamaican grocery store and driving home as careless parenting,
particularly coming so soon after Billy’s admission that he and his wife spent every morning of their vacation smoking marijuana, his insistence that “it was a goddamn accident” is likely to register as more or less true (53, emphasis original). Or it would, if not for a strange detail in Billy’s story. As they drive home, Billy turns to smile at his children and sees that Jessica is missing. The reader is privy to his internal panic, but strangely, Billy keeps driving until they reach their rented bungalow, three miles away from the village where they left Jessica. It is not clear from Billy’s narration exactly how much time elapses between Billy’s realization and the casual question he directs to his son Mason as they pull into the gate as to whether Jessica is asleep—he mentions that he makes his discovery “[h]alfway up the first long hill” (50)—but it is at least certain that for some non-trivial amount of time, Billy drives in silence in the wrong direction, panicking, but not acting. When Mason points out that Jessica was left at the store, Billy “started to holler. ‘Jesus, Mason! I left her at the store? Why the hell didn’t you say something?’” and shouts at Lydia that “I thought she was sleeping!” But Banks’s readers know better, and his paralysis in the face of Jessica’s disappearance undermines his insistence that “I didn’t do anything wrong, it was a goddamn accident” (52 – 53, emphasis original).

Here in miniature Billy refutes his own later claims about the bus accident in Sam Dent, that it was unpredictable and that blame and culpability are impossible to assign. In this instance, his failure to act further endangers his daughter by leaving her alone in a foreign country longer, and his manufactured anger at Mason for not alerting him to Jessica’s absence incriminates Billy’s own silence after he realizes what has happened.
Like the stress Dolores places on her own mindfulness, Billy’s refusal to see the accident as caused or explicable comes across as self-serving because it exonerates him from his own paralysis and denial, whether those take the form of continuing to drive away from his daughter or his descent into alcoholism and despair. This is perhaps understandable given how many tragedies the man has suffered, but in sharing this otherwise unrelated account of his vacation, he reveals that his nihilism in the aftermath of the Sam Dent accident is a repetition writ large of the paralysis he suffers at the possibility that his daughter has been lost in Jamaica. Because readers are likely to judge this failure to act in Jamaica as an unethical if uncharacteristic display of cowardice, they are likewise positioned to question the ethics of his similar response to the bus accident.

**Mitchell’s causality**

Mitchell’s dramatic monologue follows Billy’s and continues the pattern the two previous chapters have established by simultaneously moving the present action in Sam Dent forward while also flashing back to earlier moments before the accident. In the present, Mitchell arrives in Sam Dent in the days after the accident, looking to assemble a class action lawsuit against the state, the town, and the school board on behalf of the parents of the accident’s victims. The first to sign on to the lawsuit are the Walkers, whom he interrogates to get a sense of the character of other parents in town. Later, he approaches the Ottos and the Burnells, both of whom also agree to have him represent them. Aware that he must establish Dolores’s innocence and lack of culpability in order to
attach guilt to the local and state governments, he approaches her, as well, but is rebuffed when Dolores’s husband Abbott argues that “the true jury of a person’s peers is the people of her town. Only they . . . can decide her guilt or innocence” (151). In order, then, to establish that Dolores was operating the bus safely when it plunged into the sandpit, Mitchell alters his plan to attach Billy to the case; instead, he needs Billy to remain unaffiliated with any lawsuit so that he can testify to Dolores’s safe driving without a jury seeing his testimony as biased or self-serving. Banks’s audience is then given the other side of the encounter between Mitchell and Billy at the garage, which is now revealed to be Mitchell’s attempt to anger Billy, inoculating him against the other lawyers in Sam Dent and ensuring that when the trial comes, he will not be attached to any lawsuits and that his testimony in Dolores’s favor will be seen as unbiased.

Throughout his narration, two facets of Mitchell’s ethical perspective on the accident emerge. The first is his belief, inherent in his profession, that:

There are no accidents. I don’t even know what the word means, and I never trust anyone who says he does. I knew that somebody somewhere had made a decision to cut a corner in order to save a few pennies, and now the state or the manufacturer of the bus or the town, somebody, was busy lining up a troop of smoothies to negotiate with a bunch of grief-stricken bumpkins a settlement that wouldn’t displease the accountants. (91 – 92)

Mitchell insists on this point to all of his potential clients, arguing further that “the only way you can ensure moral responsibility in this society” is to “[m]ake it cheaper” by

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84 Here and throughout, Dolores interprets for Abbott, whose stroke has left him with difficulty speaking. As such, it is never clear whether Dolores’s translations of Abbott’s utterances are in fact accurate, or whether she puts into Abbott’s mouth the things she is reluctant to say herself.
forcing the responsible parties to suffer punitive damages (91). As he points out to a pregnant Wanda Otto, these damages are “not to benefit you in a material way or to compensate you for the loss of your son . . . which can’t be done, but to protect the child you’re carrying inside you now,” and indeed, all of the survivors of the accident and the future children of Sam Dent (118). He also implies as much in his encounter with Billy, and promises Dolores—before she turns down his offer to join the case—that while both she and the town see her as both a victim and the cause of the tragedy, he can tell her whether she’s guilty or not, based simply on what speed she was driving when the accident occurred. Thus contrary to Billy’s nihilism and Dolores’s fatalism, Mitchell’s view of causality and consequentialism insists that the deaths of fourteen Sam Dent children is the explicable effect of a knowable cause and that the agent of that cause can and should be held accountable in order for justice to be served.

Though at first this seems coldly logical, this is not a purely rational ethical perspective, and Mitchell admits as much. From the first words of his account he acknowledges that “[y]es, I’m angry,” a word that recurs throughout his monologue (89). He explains that it is not greed that motivates his work, contrary to typical lawyer stereotypes, but instead a sense of being “permanently pissed off,” a feeling that leads to “the real satisfaction, the true motivation” of his profession: “the carnage and the smoldering aftermath and the trophy heads that get hung up on the den wall. I love it” (91). Mitchell admits as much to his clients, as well, telling Wanda that “my task is to represent [my clients] only in their anger, not their grief” and that his purpose as her legal representation would be “[t]o give your anger a voice, to be a weapon for you” (117). For
Mitchell, justice demands this “special kind of anger,” “what you get when you mix conviction with rage,” as a response to and a cure for injustice, and this single-minded righteous wrath gives him “a brilliant hard-edged clarity . . . an intensity and focus that makes me feel more alive then than at any other time,” in contrast to his normal “days and nights feeling unsure, vaguely confused, conflicted, and aimless” (99, 120 – 21).

If this rage in pursuit of justice seems self-serving, Mitchell acknowledges this, as well, and throughout his investigative and legal work in Sam Dent, another thread emerges in Mitchell’s own personal life that is related to his anger: his estrangement from his daughter, Zoe, a drug addict whose whereabouts are known to Mitchell only when she calls him asking for money. In fact, Mitchell states the connection between his single-minded pursuit of justice and his fractured relationship with Zoe directly:

No, I admit it, I’m on a personal vendetta; what the hell, it’s obvious. And I don’t need a shrink to tell me what motivates me. A shrink would probably tell me it’s because I myself have lost a child and now identify with chumps like Risa and Wendell Walker and that poor sap Billy Ansel, and Wanda and Hartley Otto. (98)

Mitchell’s objection to this line of thinking isn’t that the two things are unrelated, but only that he is not a victim, since “[v]ictims get depressed and live in the there and then. I live in the here and now” (99).

Mitchell relates his professional anger and his personal loss most clearly in a flashback to a vacation with Zoe and his ex-wife Klara when Zoe was an infant. While he waits in his car for the Ottos to consider his proposal, he reflects on his family’s trip to the Outer Banks on the coast of North Carolina. While there, he finds Zoe in her crib
sweating and swollen. He calls the hospital, and the doctor there guesses that the mattress
in her crib is host to a clutch of newborn black widow spiders. The doctor instructs
Mitchell to bring Zoe to the hospital immediately but cautions that he may not be able to
arrive before Zoe’s swelling closes her throat and blocks her airway. The doctor insists
that Mitchell keep Zoe as calm as possible so as to slow the spread of the poison, but he
also instructs Mitchell in how to perform an emergency tracheotomy by cutting into
Zoe’s throat with a pocketknife should her breathing stop.

Mitchell worries aloud to the doctor that he won’t be able to do it, but during the
ride to the hospital, he “was neatly divided into two people—I was the sweetly easy
daddy singing [to keep Zoe calm] . . . and I was the icy surgeon, one hand in his pocket
holding the knife, blade open and ready, the decision to cut unquestioned now,
irreversible” (124). It is this clarity that causes the “powerful equivalence” he feels
between that drive and his first days in Sam Dent, when he ‘felt no ambivalence, did no
second-guessing, had no mistrusted motives—I knew what I did and what I would do
next and why, and Lord, it felt wonderful!’” (ibid.) And it is this clarity that Mitchell sees
as his strongest weapon, both in the car with Zoe and in his legal work: “it turned out that
I did not have to go as far as I was prepared to go. But this is only because I was indeed
prepared to go all the way” (ibid.). Mitchell’s clarity helps him to keep Zoe calm and thus
forestalls the emergency tracheotomy; they arrive at the hospital, put her on an IV, and by
nightfall, all has returned to normal.

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85 The parallel here between Mitchell holding the knife beside his young daughter’s throat and Sethe’s bloody saw on the woodshed floor is uncanny.
This clarity extends to Mitchell’s adult relationship with Zoe in the closing moments of his section when, after returning to his motel room, Wendell gives him a phone message from his daughter. Mitchell calls her back, and Zoe reveals that she attempted to sell her blood in order to get money, only to have it rejected by the hospital. As she puts it, “AIDS, Daddy. . . Welcome to hard times, Daddy” (155). Mitchell promises to return to New York at once with money for her; though he wonders whether or not she is telling the truth, his course of action is clear and he “felt incredibly powerful at that moment, as if I had been waiting for the moment for years” (157). He feels that though “I had for years been tied to the ground, helpless and enraged by my own inability to choose between belief and disbelief” because of his love for her, now:

I was in a position to know the truth—and then to act. Out of desperation, Zoe had freed me from love. Whether she had AIDS or was lying to me, I would soon know. Either way, I was free. She’d played her final card with me; she could no longer keep me from being who I am. Mitchell Stephens, Esquire. (ibid.)

The monologue ends here, and while Mitchell appears in Nichole’s monologue that follows, Banks’s audience never discovers whether Zoe is telling the truth and what Mitchell does with this information. Instead, we are left with a man who, in the face of potential tragedy and loss, is comforted and strengthened by his capacity to act definitively.

What emerges, then, from Mitchell’s account is a strong refutation of Dolores and Billy’s positions on the accident, but also an ethical account that is itself deeply unreliable. Mitchell’s account of his interaction with Dolores goes a long way toward
undermining her presentation of herself as confident that she met the requirements of the duty to meticulous caution and that others will judge her likewise. Instead, Mitchell’s assurance that he can tell her whether she is responsible for the children’s deaths causes her to erupt into tears, and Mitchell understands that while “[d]enial was impossible for her . . . she wanted us to come forward and do the job” of determining her guilt or innocence for her (144). Although Dolores ultimately doesn’t join Mitchell’s lawsuit and instead commits herself to Abbott’s principle that only the town can judge her, her response to Mitchell’s assurances reveals a woman who is psychologically crippled by the undecided question of her culpability. Dolores claims that the cause of the accident is ultimately unknowable, but her attraction to Mitchell’s calculations of blame and innocence undermines her certainty.

Mitchell also stands in opposition to Billy’s nihilism, and in many ways, he is Billy’s mirror image. Both men have lost children in different ways, and both understand the accident through the lens of a traumatic experience that occurred while on vacation. In fact, at one point Mitchell plans to talk to Billy at home but arrives to find him drunk, and, standing outside while Billy looks out the window, Mitchell thinks that “[w]e were like mirror images of each other, but who knows if he saw me at all, or, if he saw me, what he thought he was looking at” (132). Their ethical positions are likewise inversions of each other: Billy’s nihilistic assertions that all possible meaning died with the children and attempts to explain the accident are simply attempts to escape from “the inescapable and endless reality of it” are directly opposed to Mitchell’s angry insistence that there are no accidents and that justice demands that those who are to blame be found and punished.
But Mitchell is also like Billy in that his ethical position is informed as much by his own evasions as his moral philosophy. As appealing as Mitchell’s position might be, particularly to an American audience steeped in a culture of litigation, Banks’s audience can plainly see that his righteous anger and unblinking confidence in the concept of blame is a self-serving attempt to avoid the “inescapable” reality of his own life. If this isn’t made clear by Mitchell’s grotesquely energized reaction to the possibility that his daughter has contracted AIDS, his impromptu contradiction of himself earlier in the chapter underlines this point, an extemporaneous monologue that is worth quoting at some length:

We’ve all lost our children. It’s like all the children of America are dead to us. Just look at them, for God’s sake—violent on the streets, comatose in the malls, narcotized in front of the TV. In my lifetime something terrible happened that took our children away from us. I don’t know if it was the Vietnam war, or the sexual colonization of kids by industry, or drugs, or TV, or divorce, or what the hell it was; I don’t know which are causes and which are effects; but the children are gone, that I know. So that trying to protect them is little more than an elaborate exercise in denial. Religious fanatics and superpatriots, they try to protect their kids by turning them into schizophrenics; Episcopalians and High Church Jews gratefully abandon their kids to boarding schools and divorce one another so they can get laid with impunity; the middle class grabs what it can buy and passes it on, like poisoned candy on Halloween; and meanwhile the inner-city
blacks and poor whites in the boonies sell their souls with longing for what’s
killing everyone else’s kids and wonder why theirs are on crack.

It’s too late; they’re gone; we’re what’s left.

And the best we can do for them, and for ourselves, is rage against what took
them. Even if we can’t know what it’ll be like when the smoke clears, we do
know that rage, for better or worse, generates a future. (99 – 100)

This tirade is Mitchell’s justification for his position that rage is the only ethical response
to a tragedy like the accident in Sam Dent, but in the course of it he reveals
inconsistencies within this position. Despite his assurances to Dolores, Wanda, and others
that questions of guilt and blame are fundamentally knowable, here he is unable to sort
out causes and effects. Further, while he asserts to Wanda that her lawsuit is important in
part because it will help to create a safer world for her unborn child, here he
acknowledges that there is no knowing what kind of future this rage will generate. While
it is perhaps preferable to Billy’s nihilism and defeat, which generates no future at all,
Mitchell’s rant against the ills of society and the loss of a generation exposes the
weaknesses in the position he so confidently asserts elsewhere, while at the same time
revealing that these positions are themselves generated as insulation from the pain and
grief of the tragedy of his own daughter. In this sense, the “Esquire” with which Mitchell
so punctiliously embellishes his name in response to the news of Zoe’s illness is less a
code of ethics than a suit of armor, just as self-serving as Dolores’s insistence on her own
cautions and Billy’s descent into paralysis.
Nicole’s pragmatism

Billy’s emotional and spiritual paralysis is echoed in the next section by Nicole’s physical condition. Her narration begins in the hospital after the accident where she wakes, paralyzed from the waist down and without any memories of the accident itself. Throughout the subsequent narration, she expresses a great deal of anxiety about her father Sam and the way things were before the accident; eventually, Nicole’s monologue reveals that Sam has been sexually abusing her for most of her childhood, and in some ways her injury is a release in that it puts an end to these assaults. In the weeks and months after the accident, however, Nicole recognizes how fundamentally her life has changed, as her participation in beauty pageants and school dances become things of the past. She withdraws entirely, choosing to do her schoolwork at home, and observes as her parents participate in Mitchell’s lawsuit, in part to defray Nicole’s medical expenses but also because of their economic need more generally. Although Nicole is suspicious of their motives and the idea of the suit, Nicole agrees to testify, though she emphasizes that she can recall nothing of the accident itself.

Before Nicole is deposed, however, she overhears a confrontation between Billy and her parents that alters her perspective on these events. Billy tries to convince the Burnells to drop their suit, citing both his own personal investment—he dreads the prospect of a series of subpoenas that will force him to relive the accident repeatedly—and the chaos created in Sam Dent by multiple contradictory lawsuits. Additionally, Billy argues that the inevitable series of appeals will guarantee that the town will never move
past the accident. While the Burnells are not swayed, Nichole is, seeing the lawsuits as a way of ensuring that her parents “didn’t have to face their own pain and get over it” (197). As a result, she formulates a plan that “could force Mr. Stephens to drop the lawsuit. And Daddy would know that I did it. Which would give me a good laugh. And because of what I knew about him, he wouldn’t be able to do a thing about it afterwards” (198).

Nichole bides her time until the deposition, which Mitchell rightly hopes will generate significant jury sympathy for the young beauty queen paralyzed by the accident. The deposition goes as expected at first, with Nichole confirming the details of the morning bus route, including Billy’s regular position behind the bus. But as it progresses Nichole claims to be remembering more, and reflects in an aside that “I really was, which surprised me as much as it was surprising the lawyers” (212). Nichole then says that she remembers being scared by Dolores’s driving, and when pressed further, claims that from her position, she could see that the speedometer read seventy-two miles per hour. The deposition ends soon after, with Mitchell’s lawsuit completely undermined; Nichole’s testimony places responsibility for the accident exclusively on Dolores, whose poverty and sympathy render a lawsuit against her pointless.

Waiting in the car, Nichole imagines a conversation between Mitchell and her father:

Daddy would have concluded by now that I had lied . . . and he would try to tell that to Mr. Stephens. She lied, Mitch, she doesn’t remember anything about the accident, she has no idea how fast Dolores was going. And Mr. Stephens would
point out to him that, Sam, it doesn’t matter whether she was lying or not, the lawsuit is dead, everyone’s lawsuit is dead. Forget it. Tell the others to forget it. It’s over. Right now, Sam, the thing you got to worry about is why she lied. A kid who’d do that to her own father is not normal, Sam.

But Daddy knew why I had lied. He knew who was normal and who wasn’t. Mr. Stephens couldn’t ever know the truth, but Daddy always would. (216, emphasis original)

On the drive home, Nichole confirms that although “[t]hose that don’t know the truth will blame Dolores,” her father knows what she has done, and why: “Suddenly, I saw that he would never be able to smile again. Never. And then I realized that I had finally gotten exactly what I had wanted” (220). Her monologue ends with Nichole and her father agreeing to go to the upcoming county fair with the rest of the family, a new stability reached.

Nichole’s lie does bring an end to the lawsuits and place the blame squarely on Dolores, as we’ll see in the coda. But before examining the consequences of her act, we should pause on her motivations. Her lie is in part motivated by her belief that her parents’ behavior “just wasn’t right—to be alive, to have had what people assured you was a close call, and then go out and hire a lawyer; it wasn’t right” (171). She goes on to assert that even the Ottos’ and the Walkers’ participation in the suit is “understandable, yet it somehow didn’t seem right, either” (ibid.). But her deception also stems from two other factors. First, her decision to lie occurs immediately after she eavesdrops on her parents’ conversation with Billy, a man whom she knows well from regularly babysitting
his children, a man whom she admires and wishes to protect. His pain is the catalyst for her decision; the lawsuit is wrong “[p]urely and in God’s eyes,” she asserts, but also because “it was making Billy Ansel sadder than life had already done on its own, and that seemed stupid and cruel” (197). While she has been uncomfortable with her parents’ lawsuit up until this moment, it is the prospect of Billy’s sadness that prompts her to conceive a plan to end the lawsuit, thereby protecting him from having to testify at all.

Further, her plan also gives her a degree of control over her father, as well as the opportunity to punish him for his abuse in such a way that Sam understands what has happened but is unable to retaliate. Her moving narration about her abuse describes her thoughts of suicide as a means of escape and the even worse times when “I thought maybe I dreamed the whole thing up, dreams are like that, or had imagined it . . . and I’d start to forget that it actually happened, and then I’d feel guilty for being so upset and confused” (174). Further, she sees her family and the entire town as fractured by the lawsuit, but she inflects this through the same language that she uses to talk about her abuse. She refers to “back when Daddy began touching me and making me keep his secret,” but it is only after the accident that “everyone, not just me and Daddy, had secrets. . . . we each had our own lonely secrets that we shared with no one” (198).

Like Billy, whose understanding of the accident is linked to forgetting his daughter in a Jamaican grocery store, and Mitchell, who “connect[s] that terrifying drive to Elizabeth City over two decades ago to this case in Sam Dent now” (124), Nichole admits that
I knew it was all directly connected to what had happened between me and Daddy before the accident, and through that to the accident itself, which had changed me and my view of everyone, and now from the accident to this lawsuit—which had set Mom and Daddy against me, although they didn’t know that yet, and me against everyone. (198)

As with the other narrators of *The Sweet Hereafter*, here we see a response to the accident that is simultaneously a response to another trauma in the narrator’s life. In this case, Nichole’s history of abuse makes her more sympathetic to Billy’s perceived helplessness in the face of the legal system, as well as inclining her to strike back against the father who victimized her.

But while Banks’s implied audience—like Mitchell’s imagined jury—is sure to have an enormous amount sympathy for Nichole, and while her ethical response to the lawsuits as unjust is likely to elicit similar sympathy, the motivation to punish her father undermines this sympathy, particularly coming at the cost of the town’s perception that Dolores, another sympathetic character, was responsible for the death of fourteen children. Rather, here again Banks offers his readers an ethical standpoint that generates compassion in that it emerges organically from the injustices and traumas that a character has suffered, but this psychological need to orient the communal ethical response to the accident through personal and individual traumas also qualifies whatever ethical conclusions are reached. In this case, Nichole’s decision to lie is certainly understandable, and it is successful if you are a fourteen-year-old abuse victim or a broken widower who just wants to get lost in the nearest bottle, but the interests of Dolores, the Ottos, the
Walkers, and even Mitchell himself are undermined by her deception. Thus in telling the story of the Sam Dent accident through these narrators, Banks presents his readers with a series of incompatible and contradictory ethical positions—Dolores’s categorical duty to care and attention, Billy’s nihilism, Mitchell’s faith in causality and the justice of rage, and Nichole’s pragmatic and somewhat utilitarian calculation to lie—but does not resolve the tension between them.

**The sweet hereafter**

The coda to *The Sweet Hereafter*, which returns readers to Dolores’s perspective and is set at the fair mentioned by Nichole, describes the town in the aftermath of the accident but does not resolve this ethical tension. Dolores takes Abbott to his favorite part of the county fair, the demolition derby, in which one of Dolores’s old buses, Boomer, has been entered. In years past, Sam Dent citizens have always been ready to help Dolores carry Abbott’s wheelchair to the top of the grandstand so that he can have his preferred aerial view, but on their first public appearance since the collapse of Mitchell’s trial and Nichole’s testimony about Dolores’s supposed recklessness, the people in the grandstand sit silent as Dolores struggles up the stairs alone. Only Billy, accompanied by a tawdry woman from out of town, steps in to assist Dolores, and as the four of them sit at the top of the grandstand, Dolores reflects that Billy:

had been a noble man; and now he was ruined. The accident had ruined a lot of lives. Or, to be exact, it had busted apart the structures on which those lives had
depended—depended, I guess, to a greater degree than we had originally believed.

A town needs its children for a lot more than it thinks. (235 – 36)

She goes on to ponder the state of the town in the aftermath: the Walkers divorcing with their motel up for sale; the Ottos surviving only due to their new baby; throughout the town, families moving away from Sam Dent to escape the tragedy, which “turn[ed] a community into a windblown scattering of isolated individuals” (236). As for Billy himself, “what frightened and saddened [her] most about him was that he no longer loved anybody. All the man had was himself. And you can’t love only yourself” (237). Finally, right before the derby begins, the Burnells arrive to the applause of the onlookers, who help carry Nichole’s wheelchair into the stands as Billy comments on her status as “the town hero . . . [who] saved this town from a hundred lawsuits” (239). This comment comes as a surprise to Dolores, who is unaware of the content of Nichole’s testimony, just as everyone but Billy is unaware that it is false.

The demolition derby begins, and all of the drivers initially target Boomer, much to the audience’s delight. However, as Boomer survives round after round of punishment, the crowd begins to cheer for it instead, while at the same time Billy confesses to Dolores and Abbott that Nichole’s lie falsely attributed responsibility for the accident to her. Rather than being angry, however, Dolores “felt a great weight . . . lifted from me”:

“You’d expect me to feel angry, maybe, unjustly accused and all that. But I didn’t. Not at all. I felt relieved. And, therefore, grateful. Grateful to Billy Ansel, for revealing what Nichole had done, and grateful to Nichole for having done it” (247, 248). As Dolores

86 The echoes here of Nichole’s “lonely secrets” suggests that her plan did not fully succeed in reuniting the town.
experiences this strange sense of relief, Boomer incapacitates the last remaining car and
the stands erupt in applause and chants, and Dolores reflects that “in the passage of but a
few moments’ time I had come to feel utterly and permanently separated from the town of
Sam Dent and all its people” (253). Unlike the surviving members of the town:

[all of us—Nichole, I, the children who survived the accident, and the children
who did not—it was as if we were the citizens of a wholly different town now, as
if we were a town of solitaries living in a sweet hereafter, and no matter how the
people of Sam Dent treated us, whether they memorialized us or despised us,
whether they cheered for our destruction or applauded our victory over adversity,
they did it to meet their needs, not ours. Which, since it could be no other way,
was exactly as it should be. (254)

With that, Dolores wheels Abbott down the stairs and away from the crowd’s applause,
already planning their move away from the town.

This coda resolves little for the implied audience regarding the ethical stance they
should take in relation to the accident. It is true that one major objection is partially
resolved in that Nichole’s lie, rather than angering Dolores, provides her with the
certainty that Mitchell promised her earlier; while she has been judged guilty in the eyes
of the town, this is a final judgment that frees her from her own internal struggles, in
much the same way that Mitchell is freed by the prospect of his daughter’s illness. But
the communal blame heaped on Dolores, evident in the derby audience’s voracious howls
for Boomer’s destruction, has the unpleasant air of scapegoating, and Banks’s audience is
likely to wonder whether the town’s ability to move on is worth Nichole’s lie and
Dolores’s reputation. Similarly, Nichole’s testimony has freed Billy from reliving the accident in a courtroom, but it has done nothing to ease his pain or pull him back from nihilism and despair.

Ultimately, the competing claims of Banks’s multivocal narrative produce an ethical impasse just as stubborn as the one we saw in *Beloved*. Each of the four competing ethical claims—Dolores’s faith in duty, Billy’s nihilism, Mitchell’s causality, and Nichole’s utilitarian calculus—are all compelling in part because readers are guided to understand how each approach to the accident is informed by and arises from the lived experiences of each sympathetic character. But at the same time, each claim is undermined for precisely the same reason: each character’s ethics are as much a response to their own personal traumas and needs as to the collective disaster, and as such, each is self-serving in its own way. Readers might be tempted to read the fact that Nichole is the character who actually succeeds at putting her ethics into practice as an authorial endorsement of those ethics; after all, the novel ends with Nichole being applauded by the town and Dolores alleviated of the burden of her guilt. But of course her willingness to act does not thereby mark her position as endorsed by Banks, any more than Sethe’s willingness to kill her child or the fact that she actually does so are necessarily endorsements of the murder by Morrison. Instead, readers are left with not an “omniscient . . . objective account” of the meaning of the accident, as Acevedo-Muñoz claims, but a series of competing and ultimately irreconcilable accounts, all struggling to find a way of living in the aftermath of a tragedy, in Dolores’s sweet hereafter.
This, I argue, is the purpose of Banks’s stubborn ethics: to invite the audience to reflect on the necessarily personal and emotional basis of ethics, while also pondering the incommensurability of values produced by these individual bases and how these ethics necessarily conflict when they address themselves to a communal problem. This necessary tension between valuing the personal in the ethical but also underlining the contradictions that arise from this value is the central ethical statement that emerges from Banks’s novel: not a resolution of this tension, but an understanding of its irreconcilability. For Egoyan, then, the challenge is to replicate this same tension for his cinematic audience, but without recourse to the affordances of prose, and specifically in a medium in which the notion of five protracted monologues is antithetical to any sense of visual narrative momentum. As we shall see, he succeeds at recreating—and even enhancing—the ethics of his source material precisely by rejecting formal fidelity and adapting Banks’s rhetoric using cinematic means.

**And everything was strange and new**

Egoyan’s adaptation is successful in many ways, but I will focus here only on the two adaptive innovations that most clearly contribute to the film’s stubborn ethics. The first, as I hinted at above, is a fundamental restructuring of Banks’s narrative framework. Egoyan notes in a brief comment inside the DVD sleeve that “[m]y original wish was to be able to divide the film using [Banks’s] organizing principle,” structuring the film around the characters’ monologues. Unsurprisingly, Egoyan found that organizing a film...
in terms of extended prose monologues turns out to be “an awkward and highly contrived concept,” but one that “proved how far the novel had been deconstructed, only to be put back together in a new and completely organic form.” The problem Egoyan faces, then, is how to adapt Banks’s story to film while still retaining “the spirit and moral center” of the source material—Egoyan’s phrase that I take as more or less synonymous with Banks’s ethical and rhetorical goals.

In response to this problem, Egoyan makes several drastic changes to the narrative. These include cutting several plot events with considerable narrative significance in the novel, including Dolores’s coda at the demolition derby, the story of Billy’s Jamaican trauma, and the repetition of the encounter between Billy and Mitchell at the garage that reveals the meeting to be a manipulation on Mitchell’s part. The result is that much of Dolores’s and Billy’s narrative agency is reduced in Egoyan’s film; both characters participate in the same plot events, and Dolores actually does narrate—here with Mitchell as her narratee—her account of the morning leading up to the accident, but neither character is able to articulate the kind of ethical justification for the positions that they take with respect to the lawsuit. By way of contrast, Mitchell’s and Nichole’s roles as narrating agents are significantly expanded. Much of the film is focalized through Mitchell’s investigation in Sam Dent and is framed with an encounter between Mitchell and a new character—Allison, a childhood friend of Zoe’s—to whom Mitchell tells the story of his traumatic Outer Banks vacation. Nichole, on the other hand, is in Egoyan’s film not a beauty queen but a singer—in other words, not an aesthetic object but a

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87 Note that each of these omissions would certainly be read as gross violations of the source material under a formal model of fidelity.
creative subject—and over the course of the film, her voiceover narration becomes more central until, in Egoyan’s coda, she is narrating events that she did not witness.  

My description of these changes may initially seem to suggest that in significantly restructuring Banks’s formal principles, Egoyan has also significantly reduced the discursive complexity of his story. This is far from the case. Rather than attempting a filmic (but presumably highly uncinematic) version of five individual monologues, Egoyan replaces this discursive arrangement with his own characterized by polychronic narration. This is David Herman’s term for narration that employs “temporal sequencing that is strategically inexact, making it difficult or even impossible to assign narrated events a fixed or even fixable position along a timeline in the storyworld” (212). In other words, Egoyan’s film is structured in such a way that audiences must necessarily struggle with the temporality of events while never actually reaching a demonstrably correct order.

This is not to say that the film is simply chronologically complex, though it certainly is that. The film weaves together at least five different temporal sequences, including: Mitchell’s traumatic vacation, events in Sam Dent before the accident, the day of the accident, Mitchell’s investigation of the accident leading up to Nichole’s testimony, and the encounter between Allison and Mitchell on a plane. These sequences are braided together in an intricate discursive order, and the image track very often switches rapidly back and forth between these sequences, sometimes accompanied by a third temporality

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88 I will address this curious facet of Nichole’s narration further when I discuss Egoyan’s multivalent metaphor below. In addition, Katherine Weese’s work on gender and discourse in the film makes much of Nichole’s shift from character to narrator.

89 This struggle without resolution suggests that this might also be called “stubborn temporality,” but I will stick with Herman’s term here.
represented on the soundtrack.\textsuperscript{90} But this temporal complexity in itself would not constitute polychronic narration. Rather, throughout the film there are individual shots or whole sequences that defy attempts on the part of viewers to place them in a precise temporal location in the story. While Herman persuasively reads this polychronic narration as Egoyan’s strategy for demonstrating “how painful events resist being modeled in the form of a chronological series or linear array” (239), I want to supplement this reading by pointing out how Egoyan’s polychronic narration also extends the stubborn ethics of his source material by offering a cinematic analogue for Banks’s emphasis on the personal and private basis of each character’s ethics.

The example of Egoyan’s polychronic narration I’ll focus on here is the story of Zoe’s spider bite, which Mitchell relates to Allison when they meet by coincidence on a plane. This conversation occurs in November of 1997, according to an information screen on the plane, placing it two years after the accident itself—a calendar in the Bide-a-Wile is open to December 1995 when Mitchell arrives in town—and roughly a year and a half after

\textsuperscript{90} Herman’s detailed figures in \textit{Story Logic} mapping the storyworld chronology and the discursive presentation of these episodes are particularly demonstrative of just how complicated Egoyan’s sequencing is. See 240 – 43.
Nichole’s testimony, which occurs sometime in the summer of 1996.\textsuperscript{91} Immediately preceding Mitchell’s narration, Egoyan’s audience has watched the bus accident itself, an event that goes completely unnarrated in Banks’s novel as Dolores’s monologue stops at the moment of her swerve and Billy’s begins in its aftermath. Egoyan frames the bus’s slow drop through the ice from afar, and both the image of the sinking bus and the sound of the children’s screams are dwarfed by the frozen landscape. (See fig. 27.) This image is unexpectedly followed not by further chaos and panic, but by a calm tableau of a woman, a man, and a small child sleeping on a mattress on the floor. Further provoking the audience’s curiosity is the fact that this repeats the first shot of the entire film, though it is only now explained through Mitchell’s voiceover narration as an image of Mitchell, Klara, and Zoe sleeping on their vacation. (See fig. 28.) As the camera slowly pivots around these figures from above, Mitchell explains to Allison that “every time I go on one of these flights to rescue Zoe, I remember the summer we almost lost her.” As he narrates, the camera returns to the plane, where Allison watches Mitchell as he stares straight ahead and tells his story.

Before proceeding, it is worth noting the temporal complexity in even this short sequence. In less than a minute, the image track moves from the accident in Sam Dent

\textsuperscript{91} Literary conventions would suggest that because the encounter between Allison and Mitchell is the last event to occur, it is necessarily the narrative present, with all other events framed as flashbacks from that time. However, I hesitate to use that term here, both because it would belie the complexity of the film’s temporal interweaving and because the act of Nichole’s final voiceover narration in the coda (examined below) seems to occur after even this so-called narrative present.
backward in time to the image of the family in bed, which is revealed as occurring at some undetermined time in the past and accompanied on the soundtrack first by the extradiegetic music which attended the accident, then by Mitchell’s voiceover narration occurring years after both the accident and the bed image. Further, Mitchell narrates in an iterative mode that suggests that the moment depicted on the image track is only one in a chronologically indistinct series of repeated flights to rescue Zoe. Then, at the moment the image track shifts to the moment of storytelling on the airplane, Mitchell’s narration moves into a flashback to “the summer we almost lost her,” contextualizing the image of the family in bed as an illustration of his story. This temporal complexity is typical of Egoyan’s film, and we’ll see more of it in the following analysis.

Mitchell proceeds to tell his story as in Banks’s novel, and the camera oscillates between static shots of him speaking while Allison listens on the airplane and two flashback images which supplement the image of the family in bed. (See fig. 29.) In the first, Klara is nursing Zoe and crying in panic—a cinematic pietà—while Mitchell’s
voiceover narrates his call to the doctor, who gives him instructions regarding the emergency tracheotomy. After another return to Mitchell’s telling, the second shows Zoe in her father’s arms, the open knife held beside her, as they rush to the hospital. Both of these images exclude Mitchell, suggesting that they represent his visual perspective on the events either as they unfold or as he reimagines them, and the soundtrack contains faint echoes, both on the plane and in the flashback, of the sounds of Klara’s crying and Mitchell’s soft singing. Finally, the camera returns to the conclusion of Mitchell’s narration as he tells Allison that they made it to the hospital, that “I did not have to go as far as I was prepared to go. But I was prepared to go all the way.”

The final moments of this sequence are most interesting in terms of polychronic narration because they occur after Mitchell’s narration ends, but before viewers are returned to the scene of the Sam Dent accident. First, the camera again shows the image of Zoe and the knife, while Mitchell’s lullaby comes to the forefront on the soundtrack. Mitchell’s voice slowly recedes, and curiously, this image then fades into a new image of Klara and Zoe playing in a field, one that viewers have not seen before and that will not be repeated as the film unfolds. (See fig. 30.) The camera pans upward from the grass in the foreground, framing Klara as she lifts the laughing Zoe into the air above her head, and comes to rest finally
on a gray sky. Without cutting, the camera continues to frame this featureless sky for several seconds before Billy Ansel, framed from below, walks into the frame, looks down, and nods, visibly shaken. The following countershot reveals that he is looking down at the bodies of his twins.

Consider the way the sequence works as an example of polychronic narration. It is clear that each flashback image occurs long before the bus accident, Mitchell’s lawsuit, and certainly before Mitchell recounts the story to Allison on the plane. Viewers can also easily place the two images in figure 29 as occurring in a necessary sequence; Mitchell’s narration clearly states that the traumatic ride to the hospital occurred after Mitchell called the doctor, which occurred while Klara was nursing Zoe. The presentation of these events is chronologically complex, but they are easily located by Egoyan’s audience as part of a discrete series and are thus not actually polychronic.

But the images in figures 28 and 30—the frame that separates Mitchell’s story from an accident in another time and place—are distinctly polychronic in that the audience has no way of knowing where on the timeline these events fall. Both the image of the family in bed and the shot of Klara and Zoe in a field could conceivably occur before the spider bite, signifying the pastoral tranquility and sense of safety that is damaged forever, not by the bite itself, but by the trauma of Mitchell’s willingness to “go all the way.” Alternately, these images could occur after the incident of the spider bite, suggesting that these idyllic tableaus are representative of a time where Mitchell could intervene to save his daughter. Rather than emphasizing the permanent break caused by this event—an exile from Eden that is later repeated with Zoe’s drug addiction and AIDS
diagnosis—this reading would frame the spider bite as a temporary disruption of the idyll; here Mitchell’s successful restoration of his family works in contrast to his fundamental inability to save Zoe from her addiction. Or viewers could frame these in the order they are presented, with the bed image occurring before the spider bite and the image in the field reflecting its happy denouement. It is even possible for viewers to reverse this order, placing the first image in the discourse—the family in bed—as the last event chronologically, locating the image of Klara and Zoe in the field as occurring before the spider bite happens.

Of course, the actual point of polychronic narration is that no final order can be established regarding the images that frame Mitchell’s tale. Indeed, I will go a step further than Herman’s reading of the film by claiming the polychronic nature of the images in figures 28 and 30 renders them ambiguous not only in terms of their temporal position, but also in terms of their ontological status. The fact that these events are not locatable in time suggests the possibility that they are not properly story events at all, visual representations not of incidents that occurred, but of the lyric images of domestic tranquility that are products of Mitchell’s imagination. In other words, their function can be seen as not just an impediment to narrative coherence, as Herman argues, but also as a visual representation of Mitchell’s emotions that illustrates the way he thinks about the loss of his daughter, while also connecting his feelings about this event to the accident in Sam Dent through editing. And if these images are not just chronologically but ontologically ambiguous, functioning not as a narrative illustration of the story Mitchell tells aloud but as a lyric representation of his affect, then they produce an effect very
similar to Banks’s dramatic monologues by inextricably connecting Mitchell’s ethical response to the accident in Sam Dent with this traumatic experience in his past.

This, I argue, is how Egoyan achieves the same strong connection between personal experience and ethics that Banks achieves with characters narrating their own experiences. Whereas Banks has Mitchell simply state that “I don’t need a shrink to tell me what motivates me” (98), Egoyan’s editing creates a polychronic effect that communicates this motivation to his viewers in a much more subtle way, denying his audience a chronological relationship the better to emphasize the causal relationship between Mitchell’s traumatic memory, his relationship with his daughter, and his righteous anger in Sam Dent. Indeed, Egoyan’s editing implies that Mitchell himself may not even be aware of this connection; because the bed image is the first image of the movie, unconnected to and only later explained by Mitchell’s story, and because the image in the field goes without any sort of description or remark on Mitchell’s part, it is possible to see these images not as the products of his conscious, logical mind, but instead an illustration on the part of the implied Egoyan of the subconscious associations that underlie Mitchell’s ethical reasoning. When read this way, Egoyan’s polychronic narration not only reproduces Banks’s emphasis on the way our ethics are informed by our personal and individual experiences, but goes further by reminding us that we may not even be fully aware of or able to account for the connection between the two.

Finally, both the chronological and ontological ambiguity of these images enhance Banks’s stubborn ethics by forcing Egoyan’s audience to actually experience the difficulties produced by the unknowable nature of other people’s minds. In Banks’s
novel, the juxtaposition of different character narrators revealed to his readers how the personal basis of ethics leads to conflict precisely because no character is able to fully enter into the lived experience of any other. Characters speak eloquently to their unnamed narratee(s), but they are only able to infer each others’ motivations through their actions. Both Billy and Mitchell speak at length about their traumatic vacations; Dolores emphasizes how her life is built on a foundation of duty; Nichole painfully describes the emotional chaos her father’s abuse causes. But these stories are never shared with each other, which limits each character’s ability to empathize with all of the others and to understand their reactions to the accident. By way of contrast, the dramatic irony inherent in multiple narration ensures that Banks’s audience is able to see what no individual character can. But this is not the case for Egoyan’s viewer. A filmgoer watching *The Sweet Hereafter* is made intensely aware that the images of the Stephens family in bed and Klara and Zoe in the field carry intense personal significance to Mitchell—whether he knows it or not—because these images are set apart from the rest of the narrative though Egoyan’s polychronic narration. Thus the disorientation of Egoyan’s viewer, who is simultaneously made aware of and denied entry to the emotional life that is signified by these images, is more akin to the experience of Banks’s characters than that of his readers. Banks’s novel invites readers to contemplate the way our personal experiences inform our public ethics, but rather than simply illustrating the public conflicts that arise from this personal basis, Egoyan’s film compels viewers to experience the inability to fully enter another person’s mind.
And why I lied he only knew

While the spider bite story is only one of many moments in Egoyan’s film that can be identified as polychronic, I think it sufficiently illustrates my claim that in replacing Banks’s multiple narration with cinematic polychronic narration, Egoyan finds an ingenious solution to the problem of how to represent the centrality of personal experience to ethical reasoning, but also the impossibility of entering into another’s ethical reasoning that this personal foundation creates. Because these images are polychronic, they can be read not only as events that cannot be precisely located on the story’s timeline, but also as brief filmic glimpses into the minds of characters that illustrate the motives—conscious and subconscious—for their outward actions. Indeed, the chronological and ontological ambiguity of Egoyan’s narration goes further than Banks’s novel by forcing readers to experience the inability of human beings to fully enter and comprehend each others’ hearts and minds.

But if this was Egoyan’s only innovation, he would not have fully succeeded in transferring Banks’s stubborn ethics to the screen. Remember that Banks’s multiple narration has two components that lead to the production of stubborn ethics. The first is the emphasis on the personal nature of ethical reasoning, which Egoyan’s polychronic narration addresses. But Banks’s multiple narration also prevents readers from grasping which, if any, of the given ethical stances is endorsed by the implied author. Here I argue that Egoyan develops an extended multivalent metaphor in the form of Nichole’s use, in
voiceover narration, of excerpts from Robert Browning’s *The Pied Piper*. This technique appears throughout the course of the film, and Egoyan guides his viewers to map the figures of the piper, the duplicitous townsfolk, and the abducted children onto different target domains in each instance. In doing so, Egoyan directs his audience to make a variety of mutually exclusive metaphorical interpretations, and, by extension, a variety of mutually exclusive ethical judgments, as well.

The first instance of the Piper motif appears in a scene characterized by parallel editing, with the camera cutting back and forth between Nichole babysitting Billy’s children and reading the poem to them—thus motivating its presence in the storyworld—and Billy and Risa meeting at the Bide-a-Wile to have sex. Nichole reads the following lines aloud from the beginning of the poem:

    Hamelin Town’s in Brunswick,
    By famous Hanover city;
    The river Weser, deep and wide,
    Washes its wall on the southern side;
    A pleasanter spot you never spied;
    But, when begins my ditty,
    Almost five hundred years ago,

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92 The film’s credits change two main characters’ names to “Nicole Burnell” and “Billy Ansell.” Because these differences seem to me immaterial, I will retain Banks’s spelling of “Nichole” and “Ansel” for simplicity’s sake.

93 For his part, Banks has expressed that he wished that the Piper motif had been his own idea (Rayns 61). Steven Dillon seizes on this aspect of Egoyan’s “film/poem” as part of a pattern in twentieth-century film of combining poetry, elegy, and film, putting it in the company of Cocteau’s *Orpheus*, Wenders’s *Wings of Desire*, and Tarkovsky’s *Mirror*. In contrast to my reading of the Piper motif as a multivalent (and therefore ultimately unstable and fluctuating) metaphor, Margarete Landwehr argues that it “serves as a metaphor for the storyteller, whether as a lawyer (Stephens), musician (Nicole), singer (Sarah Polley), novelist (Banks), or filmmaker (Egoyan)” (220).
To see the townsfolk suffer so
From vermin, was a pity.
Rats!
They fought the dogs and killed the cats,
And bit the babies in the cradles,
And ate the cheeses out of the vats,
And licked the soup from the cook’s own ladles,
Split open the kegs of salted sprats,
Made nests inside men’s Sunday hats,
And even spoiled the women’s chats,
By drowning their speaking
With shrieking and squeaking
In fifty different sharps and flats. (Browning 1 – 20)
As they are wont to do, the children interrupt Nichole’s reading at several points to ask what ditty and vermin mean, but as it turns out, this is not the first time Nichole has read them this story. Mason interrupts Nichole’s reading at this point, long before the poem introduces its title character, to ask:

MASON: Did the Pied Piper take the children away because he was mad that the town didn’t pay him?

NICHOLE: That’s right.
MASON: Well, if he knew magic, if he could get the kids into the mountain, why couldn’t he use his magic pipe to make the people pay him to get rid of the rats?

NICOLE: Because . . . because he wanted them to be punished.

MASON: So he was mean?

NICOLE: No, not mean. Just very . . . very angry.

Nichole breaks off here and continues to read, but the camera cuts to the motel room where Billy and Risa make love. By the time the camera cuts back to Nichole, she has finished reading to the children; tucking them in, she changes into a nightgown and waits for Billy to return and her father to pick her up.

We’ll return to this moment at the end of the film, which coincides with the last appearance of the Piper motif, but it is worth pausing here to see how the metaphor is deployed in its first instantiation. Nichole’s interpretation of the Piper as angry as opposed to mean may or may not have support in Browning’s poem, but Egoyan’s audience will never know as the relevant passages in which the Piper reacts to the townsfolks’ attempts to cheat him are never represented in the film. Instead, Nichole’s pensive “very . . . very angry” is likely to prompt Egoyan’s audience to recall instead the scene immediately preceding this one, where Mitchell, convincing the Ottos to join his suit, uses the words “angry,” “anger,” or “mad” six times. He swears to Wanda and Hartley that he will find the responsible parties and “sue for negligence until they bleed,” and he even goes so far as to announce that “[n]ow it’s up to me to ensure moral responsibility in this society,” not unlike the Piper who takes the law into his own hands,
so to speak. If these references aren’t enough to mark Mitchell as the referent of the Piper metaphor, there is even a brief moment on the plane between Allison and Mitchell that is inserted between the scene with the Ottos and Nichole’s reading of the poem; here Mitchell refers to “dragging [Zoe] out of rat-infested apartments”—my emphasis—and virtually spits out that “[e]nough rage and helplessness and your love turns to something else. . . . It turns to steaming piss.”

The juxtaposition between these scenes at the Ottos’ home and on the plane and Nichole’s characterization of the Piper as angry marks Mitchell as the character to whom the metaphor refers. By extension, then, his lawsuit is mapped as a beguiling deception, one that is designed to punish the parents of Sam Dent by metaphorically taking their children away from them. In this instance, the metaphor acts as an ethical critique because it figures Mitchell’s litigious response to the accident as a betrayal on the part of the parents, a temptation to forget the duty of grief they owe their children and give in to rage instead, just as Mitchell himself has. In this sense, Mitchell’s attempts to draw the town into a lawsuit are as self-serving as they are unethical, functioning both to justify his own “rage and helplessness” with Zoe and to draw Sam Dent’s parents into the same emotional morass.

On its own, this use of the Piper metaphor is fairly straightforward, but it is immediately undermined in the following scene. After Billy returns home and gives Nichole some of his wife’s old clothes, she is picked up by her father Sam. Accompanied on the soundtrack by eerie music, the camera cuts to their arrival at home, where Sam gets out and begins to walk not toward the house, but the barn. Nichole emerges from the
car wrapped in a bright red blanket and pauses, hesitant to follow her father as he looks back at her.\textsuperscript{94} In voiceover narration, Nichole’s reading continues:

There was a rustling that seemed like a bustling
Of merry crowds justling at pitching and hustling,
Small feet were pattering, wooden shoes clattering,
Little hands clapping and little tongues chattering,
And, like fowls in a farm-yard when barley is scattering,
Out came the children running.

All the little boys and girls,
With rosy cheeks and flaxen curls,
And sparkling eyes and teeth like pearls,
Tripping and skipping, ran merrily after
The wonderful music with shouting and laughter. (Browning 197 – 207)

The scene then cuts to the barn’s interior, where Nichole and her father recline together on bales of hay, surrounded by candles. (See fig. 31.) As the camera pans across the bales, past the couple, and up into the rafters,\textsuperscript{95} Nichole’s voiceover continues:

\textsuperscript{94} In addition to the explicit comparison to the Piper here, Nichole’s blanket—a piece of costuming that doesn’t appear in the film outside of this scene—also recalls Little Red Riding Hood, menaced by a dangerous predator.

\textsuperscript{95} This camera movement, a slow vertical pan and tilt past two figures, is identical to the shot of Klara and Zoe in the field, suggesting that while this image is not itself polychronic, it may be similarly focalized through a character’s mind and not necessarily representative of an objective reality. Egoyan himself suggests this reading when he comments on the disturbing complicity this image seems to depict, pointing out that “any child who is sexually abused must create some fantasy . . . that will ease the pain of this
When, lo, as they reached the mountain-side,
A wondrous portal opened wide,
As if a cavern was suddenly hollowed;
And the Piper advanced and the children followed
And when all were in to the very last,
The door in the mountain-side shut fast.
Did I say, all? No! One was lame,
And could not dance the whole of the way;
And in after years, if you would blame
His sadness, he was used to say,—
“It’s dull in our town since my playmates left!
I can’t forget that I’m bereft
Of all the pleasant sights they see,
Which the Piper also promised me.
For he led us, he said, to a joyous land,
Joining the town and just at hand,
Where waters gushed and fruit-trees grew,
And flowers put forth a fairer hue,
And everything was strange and new” (Browning 226 – 244)

The image of Sam and Nichole in the barn fades out, and when the image track returns, it depicts the school bus moving through the wide winter landscape. Dolores narrates as

violent and transgressive act” (Egoyan 21). Thus Egoyan suggests that this image is one Nichole has created to protect herself from the less consensual reality.
Egoyan’s audience watches the bus accident unfold, followed by Mitchell’s story of the spider bite, as discussed above.

This sequence is the longest sustained engagement with the Piper metaphor in the film, and as Adam Lowenstein notes, even the DVD chapter title marks this as “The Pied Piper” (76). There is no question here that it is Sam, not Mitchell, who is indicted by the metaphor. The first stanzas describe on the soundtrack the spell the Piper casts over the children to entice them to follow at the precise moment when on the image track an unspoken communication passes between Sam and Nichole as he looks back at her, compelling her to follow him into the barn. This parallel established, the second stanza comments on Sam’s seduction—a deeply disturbing illustration of the inability of a child to consent—through references to “all the pleasant sights . . . which the Piper also promised me.”96 While Egoyan has not yet revealed to his audience that Nichole will be physically paralyzed by the accident, viewers are invited to read the figure of the lame child in juxtaposition with this ambiguous image of what looks like Nichole’s complicity with her abuse. Just as the lame child longs for everything the Piper promised and does not understand that he was in fact spared, Nichole is depicted as complicit in what the audience understands to be the most abject and nonconsensual kind of abuse. Ironically, Egoyan’s audience will come to find what readers of Banks’s novel already know: that it is only through her physical injury that Nichole will escape the clutches of her own Piper.

96 Speaking later to her father on the eve of the deposition, Nichole comments that “I’m wheelchair girl now, and it’s hard to pretend that I’m a beautiful rock star” and reminds him of “that beautiful stage that you were going to build for me. You were going to light it with nothing but candles.” Thus the image of complicity in the barn becomes even more disturbing as Egoyan’s audience is invited to consider an unthinkable quid pro quo: Sam using his daughter’s dreams to surround her with candles and manipulate her to perform in a wholly different way.
Later appearances of the Piper motif continue to refer alternately to Mitchell, leading the town astray, and Sam’s abuse of his daughter. When Nichole is about the gathering momentum for Mitchell’s lawsuit, for example, we hear her read in voiceover:

Fathers, mothers, uncles, cousins . . .

Families by the tens and dozens,

Brothers, sisters, husbands, wives—

Followed the Piper for their lives (Browning 114, 116 – 18)

The line omitted in the voiceover elides the fact that Browning’s words refer here to Hamelin’s rats, the better to make the association between Mitchell-as-piper and the beguiled parents of Sam Dent that his lawsuit leads astray. Or later, as Sam pushes Nichole through the community center to the deposition, we hear again the first four lines from the incest scene quoted above (“When, lo, as they reached the mountainside . . . the Piper advanced and the children followed”), reminding Egoyan’s audience of Sam’s sexual abuse in the moments immediately before Nichole’s testimony.

It is here at the deposition, however, that the Piper metaphor becomes ethically multivalent. After all, if Egoyan simply used the Piper motif to suggest a comparison between Sam’s sexual abuse and
Mitchell’s lawsuit, we would have a metaphor that oscillates between two different target domains, but that through this oscillation suggests only one ethical claim: that Mitchell’s lawsuit is an act of predation on the vulnerable people of Sam Dent, comparable to Sam’s sexual abuse of his daughter and the Piper’s enchantment. But during the scene of the deposition, the Piper motif comes to simultaneously refer to a third target domain: Nichole’s lie. In coming to also refer to this deception—and by extension, to Nichole’s ethical response to the accident—the Piper motif becomes ethically multivalent, referring both to Mitchell’s and Nichole’s opposing ethical claims.

The example I just mentioned, where Sam pushes Nichole through the community center, foreshadows this shift by suggesting Nichole’s own position as the Piper. For while Egoyan’s audience is primed to associate these lines with Sam leading Nichole into the barn, it is hard not to notice that here it is Nichole who advances and Sam who follows. (See fig. 32.) Further, as Sam pushed Nichole past the stage, the odd lighting in the community center may remind viewers of Nichole’s comments in the previous scene about a stage lit with nothing but candles. While the warm ambient lighting around the stage and the lights strung overhead refer only obliquely to Nichole’s imagined stage, they foreshadow, along with the guitar that sits on stage in the background, the masterful act of performance she is about to pull off.97

The deposition proceeds as it does in the novel, interrupted only by another voiceover echoing lines from the incest scene, this time repeating the lines of the lame child who is “bereft / Of all the pleasant sights they see / Which the Piper also promised

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97 Even though the deposition takes place in a room adjacent to the auditorium, several shots of Nichole frame her in such a way to position the guitar over her shoulder as she gives her testimony, emphasizing the performative nature of her lie and associating it with the Piper’s hypnotic music.
me.” As Nichole reads these lines in voiceover, both she and the camera stare at Sam sitting nearby, clearly figuring him again as the thief of Nichole’s innocence. But what follows is far less clear. Nichole tells her lie, claiming to remember that Dolores was speeding at the time of the accident. And then, as Mitchell sits stunned and Nichole again stares at Sam, she reads the following lines in voiceover:

And why I lied he only knew,

But from my lie this did come true:

Those lips from which he drew his tune

Were frozen as a winter moon.

The first line here follows a shot of Mitchell’s stunned face, and the “he” there seems to refer to him. But as Nichole continues, the camera depicts Sam’s lips in extreme close-up, suggesting that it is Nichole’s father who is analogous to the Piper here. The camera then quickly returns to Mitchell, who stammers as the opposing lawyer asks if he has any further questions; here his voice is “frozen as a winter moon,” and the equivalence between Mitchell and Sam is at its most complete. (See fig. 33.)

Again, if this metaphor worked solely to equate Mitchell and Sam, it would serve only to indict Mitchell through comparison to a sexual predator and would not in this sense be ethically multivalent. However, the equivalence between
Mitchell and Sam is misleading for two reasons. First, Egoyan’s audience shares with Nichole the knowledge that she is lying. This act suggests that she, too, is like the Piper, this time leading the parents of Sam Dent away from the truth because of her belief that they have betrayed the memories of their children by pursuing a lawsuit. Confirming the foreshadowing in figure 32, here it is Nichole who knowingly enchants the town with a deceptive performance.

More importantly, though, Nichole does not actually “read” these lines in the sense that she did the others. For although Nichole herself in no way indicates this, either in her visual or vocal performance, these lines appear nowhere in Browning’s poem. Though only the Browning readers among the film’s viewers are likely to realize this immediately, Egoyan’s implied audience is still guided to register that something is off about Nichole’s voiceover here. The iambic tetrameter is too perfect here, compared to the loose meter of other pieces of Browning’s poem Nichole has read, and the fit between the poetic voiceover and the scene’s content is a little too on the nose, with the references to Nichole’s lies and Sam’s and Mitchell’s lips. Further, Egoyan’s audience is likely to be familiar enough with the Hamelin story to know that the Piper’s tune isn’t stopped, by a lie or anything else.

Here, then, the audience can see the Piper metaphor as applying as much to Nichole’s deceptiveness as it does to Sam’s manipulation or to Mitchell’s lawsuit. Indeed, Egoyan’s implied audience is guided here to revise their understanding of the metaphor as a device; while to this point the Piper voiceovers are likely to be read as the implied Egoyan commenting on the content of the image track by juxtaposing it with excerpts
from Nichole’s reading Browning’s poem on the soundtrack—speaking to the audience through Nichole’s voice but over her head, as it were—here Nichole reveals herself to be a character narrator, and an unreliable one at that. To whatever extent Egoyan’s implied audience has accepted the judgments on Mitchell and Sam generated by the Piper metaphor as authorial, they have been misled by the narrating Nichole, who only here tips her hand by injecting a verse of her own into the voiceover. As such, by sensing that these lines don’t fit with the other voiceovers, Egoyan’s implied audience breaks the spell of Nichole’s narration, which they only now realize they have been following all along.

The film ends only a few minutes later. After the conversation between Nichole and Sam on the drive home—about who really knows the “truth”—the camera returns to the frame story, with Allison and Billy saying goodbye after their plane lands and leaving the airport separately. As Mitchell is getting into his car, he sees Dolores in her new job, boarding passengers onto an airport shuttlebus. At this point, Nichole confirms her role as narrator in another voiceover:

As you see her, two years later, I wonder if you realize something. I wonder if you understand that all of us—Dolores, me, the children who survived, the children who didn’t—that we’re all citizens of a different town now. A place with its own special rules, and its own special laws. A town of people living in the sweet hereafter.

“Where waters gushed, and fruit trees grew,
And flowers put forth a fairer hue,
And everything was strange and new.”
Everything was strange and new.\textsuperscript{98}

These lines are accompanied by several more polychronic images—Billy watching the damaged bus being lifted onto a tow truck, lyric shots of Ferris wheels and tilt-a-whirls, presumably from the Sam Dent fair, and accompanying images of a smiling Nichole, framing her from the shoulders up and hiding whether she is in the wheelchair, thereby obscuring where these images fall in the chronology. (See fig. 34.) The film then returns to the night when Nichole read the Piper poem to Billy’s twins. The children asleep, she closes the book and walks out into the hallway of the Ansel house. Standing at the window, she is backlit by what appear at first to be a car’s headlights, although they can be neither Billy’s nor her father’s, given that viewers know that she changes into her nightgown before either arrive. The lights grow brighter until they are blinding, and the film cuts to the credits, leaving the audience with an image that is ontologically and interpretively unclear. (See fig. 35.)\textsuperscript{99}

\textsuperscript{98} I use quotes here to distinguish Nichole’s narration from her quotation of Browning, as this is the first time in the film that the difference between the two is fully apparent.

\textsuperscript{99} While the film’s credits roll, the soundtrack plays a cover of “Courage” by The Tragically Hip, sung by Sarah Polley, who plays Nichole. Given that the diegesis has included both the original version of the song and Nichole’s own version, the appearance of Polley’s (and perhaps Nichole’s) voice after the diegesis of\textit{ The Sweet Hereafter} has ostensibly ended further points to her narration as coming from outside and controlling the story we have seen.
The realization that Nichole herself is a much more significant narrative agent than previously acknowledged pushes the Piper metaphor to its multivalent limit. Egoyan’s audience can easily read Sam and Mitchell as the Piper, the former manipulating and abusing his daughter and the latter misdirecting the town through his lawsuit. But it is clear that Nichole, too, is a Piper; not only has her lie misdirected the town of Sam Dent, but her voiceovers throughout have been revealed to be a covert act of narration, manipulating her audience to judge as unethical the two men whom she directly opposes. Who, then, is led by the Piper? Certainly Nichole and the town of Sam Dent, if we read Mitchell and Sam as Pipers. But when we map the metaphor onto Nichole, both Mitchell and Sam, as well as the town generally and Dolores specifically, become enchanted followers of tune she plays with her lie. Further, the audience is revealed to be similarly enchanted, managing to break free from the spell of the Piper they have been following only when Nichole’s narration is revealed. Even that phrase, “the sweet hereafter,” itself is made stubborn by this multivalence, as it is the place where “everything was strange and new”—in other words, the place that was denied to the lame child in the poem but in which Nichole, the film’s only lame child, currently resides. Thus, just as Egoyan’s polychronic narration guides his implied audience to experience the opacity of other people’s lives and minds, even as it insists on
the importance of these private experiences for public actions, the multivalent metaphor of the Pied Piper invites his audience to examine each way the metaphor can be deployed, noting the way the ethical judgments shift with each different perspective, but disallowing any final authorial judgment on Mitchell, Nichole, or any other character.

In this way, Egoyan finds a cinematic solution to the problem of adapting the novel’s stubborn ethics, which are rooted in Banks’s formal commitment to the affordances of prose in the form of his multiple narration. Indeed, Egoyan’s film goes even further than the novel, for while Banks’s readers, who see more than any individual character does, have dramatic irony on their side, Egoyan’s film forces its audience to actually struggle with the impossibility of knowing fully the experiences of another human being and the ethical conflicts that arise from this impossibility. Further, the success of Egoyan’s film demonstrates that although Demme’s Beloved fails to adapt the stubborn ethics of Morrison’s novel, this judgment is not a referendum on the capacity of film for ethical sophistication or nuance. Rather, my analysis of Egoyan’s The Sweet Hereafter reveals just how subtle a process the adaptation of ethics can be. In so doing, I hope that it demonstrates how valuable a rhetorical approach to fidelity is, as well.
Chapter 7: A Future for Fidelity: Additional Questions, Possible Extensions

The preceding analyses have demonstrated in a variety of ways not only that fidelity is a critical concept that adaptation scholars cannot continue to ignore, but further that by considering when and how adapters strive for rhetorical fidelity—and, equally important, when and how they choose to ignore it, and for what purposes—we can come to a better understanding of both individual source texts and adapted texts, as well as the practice of adaptation itself. Contrary to the story that I used to introduce this dissertation, fidelity is hardly a dead letter but a living, organic phenomenon, resulting from continuous communications between authors, texts, and audiences, that remains a serious concern for adapters and their audiences, and therefore for adaptation studies, as well. The work I’ve done in the preceding chapters represents, I hope, both a rebuttal against those who would declare fidelity off limits as a theoretical concept and an invitation to reconsider the critical possibilities fidelity offers to the field. But I also began with a rejection of the notion of a Grand Unified Theory of Adaptation, and in that spirit, I would like to offer two concluding gestures: first, toward important issues in adaptation theory that my work here does not address, and second, toward areas in which further development of the rhetorical approach will be productive.
First, recall that my analyses have been based upon an approach that considers the text as an act of communication between implied authors and implied audiences, and that the rhetorical approach posits that we can understand the priorities, values, and goals of these implied entities by extrapolating outward from the text itself. As a result, I hope that my readings have demonstrated that rhetorical theory can be a keen tool for understanding how adapted texts work. Importantly, however, this understanding of and emphasis on textual phenomena has also meant that I have focused less on flesh-and-blood authors and audiences or the material culture and sociological aspects of adaptation as a practice. Dudley Andrew directs our attention to such matters in his call for a “sociological turn” in his often anthologized essay “Adaptation,” and I would agree that such inquiry is not only interesting in and of itself, but vital to a complete understanding of adaptation as both an artistic and an economic practice.

For example, while the rhetorical approach has much to offer in terms of understanding the implied author of a given artistic product, its theoretical vocabulary is less well-equipped to deal with the financial and material realities of artistic production, especially when it comes to the astonishing complexity of contemporary film production. For example, in the introduction I gestured at Hitchcock’s adaptation of du Maurier’s novel Rebecca, and the rhetorical approach can tell us much about the relationship between these texts and give us insight into the implied author of Hitchcock’s great film. But relying exclusively on this a rhetorical approach would elide the contentious production of the film, including major disputes between Hitchcock and producer David O. Selznick, disputes that often centered precisely on the issue of fidelity.
This is not to say that the rhetorical approach denies the importance of questions of flesh-and-blood authorship; indeed, my first chapter on autobiographical adaptation addresses itself to the problems posed by a shift in the flesh-and-blood author that the memoir genre depends on for its identity. And it would be interesting to consider the ways in which a text like *Rebecca* is marked by the tension between its competing authors, and the ways this information would influence real viewers. That Maxim’s attempted murder is thwarted at the last moment by Rebecca’s graceless tumble seemed to me on my first viewing to be a strange aesthetic flaw that marred an otherwise tense and dramatic scene; watching *Rebecca* now, it is transparently an attempt to hew as close to du Maurier’s novel as possible, while simultaneously offering the Production Code Administration a reason to give the film its Seal of Approval. But does the latter reading negate the former? Which of my personal experiences is more indicative of the experience of the average moviegoer? Can my extratextual knowledge distance me from the implied audience while simultaneously making me more sympathetic to the scene’s flaws? Indeed, should I still consider Maxim’s aborted murder to be an aesthetic flaw, even if I understand better why the flesh-and-blood authors made the choice that they did? These questions offer opportunities to refine the rhetorical approach in relation to the material realities of Hollywood, addressing how these texts actually come into being and how both texts and audience experience are shaped by the complexity of film production.

Likewise, in focusing on the invitations extended by an implied author to a given text’s implied audience, I have not spent a great deal of time examining the reactions of real flesh-and-blood audiences. I have on several occasions—most explicitly in my
chapter on *Brokeback Mountain*, but also in discussions of *Atonement* and *Beloved*—attempted to explain disagreements in the way real viewers evaluated a film by asking how the rhetorical structures of the text might provoke such disparate readings. But while rhetorical analysis can help us to understand to what extent an adapted text is designed to elicit reactions in its implied audience that are similar to those generated by its source material, but it does not address the further question of whether all, most, or any members of the flesh-and-blood audience actually experience these reactions. For example, I am convinced—and I hope that I have convinced my readers—that the creators of *Brokeback Mountain* designed the text in such a way as to guide their implied audience to consider Jack and Ennis to be characters worth admiring and their relationship a union worth valuing; the entire tragic effect of the movie depends on audience members adopting this position. But my analysis does not say much about the sociological effects of this design: where it was successful, where it wasn’t, and why. My approach has been certainly been interested in the responses of flesh-and-blood audiences—indeed, my work on *Brokeback*, specifically, has been guided by the experience of screening the film in undergraduate classrooms and discussing my students’ responses—but this rhetorical analysis works to illuminate textual designs and authorial purposes without claiming that these designs will achieve these purposes in every given audience encounter, when flesh-and-blood viewers can bring an infinite combination of prior knowledge, impressions, preconceived notions, prejudices, and tastes into the theater with them. For this kind of analysis of real audience reactions, we need precisely the kind of historically-grounded sociological data that Andrew emphasizes; no analysis of the text itself, however rigorous
or sophisticated, will shed light on what actually happens when a given text is put in front of a real audience that may be unwilling, unable, or just uninterested in joining the implied audience.

Further, the intersection between the sociological approach and the rhetorical approach is a site with particular potential for adaptation studies in that it stands to open up other important issues about fidelity. For example, if, as I have demonstrated, we can talk cogently about the varying purposes—including fidelity—that adapters can have in relation to their source material, this information will allow us to consider not only the aesthetic and ethical consequences of these purposes, but also to examine why real authors make the decisions they do, how real audience members react, and what consequences these choices have in the marketplace. For example, it is a commonplace in this sort of study to note how many Hollywood products are adaptations; at the time of this writing, in August of 2011, half of the top ten highest grossing movies so far this year are adaptations. But in saying that, I am making a statement about adaptation as a function of intellectual property rights, not as an aesthetic practice. After all, we would surely expect to find that fidelity means something very different to the loyal fan bases of J. K. Rowling and Marvel Comics than to thirty-somethings already nostalgic for their childhood toys and trips to Disneyland. If we considered each of these texts through the lens of rhetorical fidelity, would we find that there is any correlation between fidelity and profits? Between fidelity and positive or negative reviews? Between fidelity and audience

100 These are *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows Part 2*, *Transformers: Dark of the Moon*, *Pirates of the Caribbean: On Stranger Tides*, *Thor*, and *Captain America: The First Avenger*, adaptations of a young adult novel, a Hasbro toy line, a theme park ride, and two comic book series, respectively. If we include sequels as a form of adaptation—adding *The Hangover Part II*, *Fast Five*, *Cars 2*, and *Kung Fu Panda 2* to the list—only one film in the top ten (*Bridesmaids*) can be considered an original story.
satisfaction? I have spent the preceding pages arguing that fidelity matters; in asking questions like these, the intersection between sociological and rhetorical approaches stands to help us understand how it matters, when, how much, and to whom.

In addition to this intersection between the sociological and the rhetorical, I would also like to gesture at some of the questions that I have not addressed here, questions that provide avenues for further research. First, there is the question of other media. Because this study has been centered on making a fairly radical intervention into and revision of contemporary adaptation theory, I have restricted my corpus rather narrowly to film adaptation, which happens to constitute the focus of adaptation studies. But of course there are a host of different media and different directions in which adaptation can occur, and a full account of a rhetorical theory of adaptation should demonstrate its application to a variety of intermedial transformations. Consider, for example, adaptation that reverses the direction I have focused on here, producing novelizations of cinematic texts. While typically assumed to be inferior texts that exist for commercial rather than aesthetic reasons—though this same superficial objection can often apply to film adaptations—these texts offer an interesting reversal of the traditional focus of adaptation theory. One lesson of this study is that we should approach the aesthetic value of such adaptations with an open mind—and be prepared to find novelizations that more successfully manage their ethical and aesthetic dimensions than their source films. And,

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101 Indeed, intriguing cases do exist here and there. Take, for example, the transcendentally redundant *Bram Stoker’s Dracula: A Francis Ford Coppola Film*, a novelization by Fred Saberhagen and James V. Hart of Coppola’s 1992 adaptation. The same pattern emerges in Peter Lerangis’s novelization of Tim Burton’s 1999 film *Sleepy Hollow*, with a cover that graciously notes that it includes Washington Irving’s original short story. Or, more seriously, consider the case of Arthur C. Clarke’s novelization *2001: A Space Odyssey*, a novel based on a screenplay by Clarke and Stanley Kubrick, which was itself based on a Clarke short story. Clarke later expanded this novelization with three other novels. There is little critical literature on novelizations, but Jan Baetens recent study *La novellisation: Du film au roman* offers a place to begin.
of course, film is not the only narrative medium involved in adaptation. Think of the rich history of stage and radio play adaptations, the role comics have played in providing both source material and adapted texts, and the proliferation of television series based on prior texts. In addition, the seriality of many of these texts opens up another set of worthwhile questions about how an implied author’s design of progression is affected by breaks between episodes, issues, and seasons, or how the need to keep bringing audiences back to the text shapes their rhetorical experiences.

In addition to limiting myself to film adaptations, I have also chosen to focus here on texts that communicate between author and audience in a narrative mode. But what of adaptations and media that are not, or not exclusively, narrative? While I began with Horace’s *ut pictura poesis*, how would the rhetorical approach stack up against pictorial or poetic texts, either as source material or adaptations? Can a rhetorical perspective offer a productive analysis of, say, Bruegel’s *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus* and Auden’s “Musée des Beaux-Arts,” considering the tensions and affinities between the two? In such a case, the question of fidelity mingles with the question of intertextual reference, since Auden is not just representing Breugel’s painting in the poem but directly invoking it in the service of his mediation on suffering. Does it matter if Auden’s purposes here differ from Bruegel’s? Would it matter if these different purposes constitute an appropriation on Auden’s part in the service of his meditation? More generally, what is the relationship between ekphrasis and adaptation and how does a rhetorical approach shed light on that relationship? How do these different modes of expression, the narrative
and the pictorial, impact their audiences, and can the same rhetorical effect be recreated across an even wider transmedial gap than that spanned by verbal and cinematic texts?

Or, to take a somewhat less sophisticated example, consider recent video game adaptations of both Dante’s *Inferno* and Lewis Carroll’s *Alice in Wonderland*. As we might expect, both take a variety of liberties with their source materials; the former asks the player to control Dante as he fights his way through the circles of Hell to rescue Beatrice from Lucifer, while the latter puts the player in control of a mad Alice Liddell as she struggles to regain her sanity by exploring the Wonderland inside her mind, a tragic psychic landscape created in response to her family’s death in a fire that Alice believes she is responsible for. But both also offer strangely specific moments of fidelity, as well, such as when the player controlling Dante finds and absolves Brunetto Latini—receiving in-game “achievement” points for doing so—or when keen-eyed players spot the original Tenniel illustrations as they guide Alice through Wonderland. I expect some readers are cringing at the thought of Dante fighting Death to steal his scythe or Alice in mortal combat against her own guilty conscience in the form of the Jabberwock, but consider the more fundamental shift here. What does the rhetorical approach have to say about adaptations that so fundamentally shift the method of interaction with the medium, changing narrative texts into ludic ones? In what ways can audience experience be said to be transferred to a new medium when the audience is now a participant in the story, making decisions that affect the outcome of the narrative?

Further, readers will notice that my corpus has been selected to emphasize the contemporary moment. The oldest adapted text I deal with is only thirteen years old at the
time of this writing, and even the oldest *American Splendor* comics only go back to 1976. What, then, of adaptation that takes place across a significant historical arc? How can the rhetorical approach work across time to consider the ways in which the contemporary moment of adaptation inflects the transformation of much older texts? I gesture at this in my claim that the politics of the late 1990s inflect the presentation of the 60s and 70s in *Girl, Interrupted*, but adaptations can obviously span a much greater gap in time than a few decades. This becomes a particularly interesting question when we consider the possibility of texts that are adapted and later readapted, such as two novels published in 1955: Graham Green’s *The Quiet American* (first adapted in 1958 by Joseph L. Mankiewicz, then again in 2002 by Phillip Noyce) and Nabokov’s *Lolita* (adapted in 1962 and 1997 by Kubrick and Adrian Lyne, respectively). How do the technological, political, and cultural differences between the middle of the 20th century and the cusp of the 21st change the way these novels are adapted? Moreover, in each case the first film adapts a work of contemporary literary fiction, while the later adaptations view their source materials as canonical literature: how do these historical differences affect what fidelity means and why it matters?

This historical question can be further expanded to consider the central focus of the last decade of adaptation studies: intertextuality. While my emphasis in this study has been exclusively on one-to-one adaptations, to ignore the proliferation of reference, allusion, and adaptation would be to repeat in reverse the error of poststructuralist critics’ wholesale rejection of fidelity. An important avenue for further investigation, then, is whether the rhetorical approach has anything to say about an adaptation’s relationship not
only with its primary source material, but also with the host of other texts with which it may be connected. By focusing on purposes, we can consider how various kinds of intertextuality can contribute to the achievement of those purposes, whether these intertextual allusions take the form reference, revision, or appropriation.

Consider, for example, the long career of Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, first published in 1818. There have been dozens, if not hundreds, of adaptations of this text, including stage plays, a 1910 short silent film by Thomas Edison, the famous Karloff performance in 1931 and the Universal sequels that followed, a film cycle from Hammer Films beginning in 1957, a campy semipornographic adaptation by Andy Warhol in 1973, *Rocky Horror Picture Show* the same year, followed by Mel Brooks’s parody *Young Frankenstein* in 1974, and even Kenneth Branagh’s 1994 *Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein*, an adaptation whose title signals its debt to Coppola’s *Bram Stoker’s Dracula* at least as much as its debt to the 1818 novel. Each of these texts is in dialogue not only with Shelley’s novel but with each other, creating a complex problem to consider when examining the texts from a rhetorical angle. Taking only one example, readers will likely not remember the fact that Shelley’s novel includes no reanimation scene at all; rather the monster is simply a “lifeless thing” in one sentence, and then “[i]t was already one in the morning . . . when, by the glimmer of the half-extinguished light, I saw the dull yellow eye of the creature open” (42). But can we imagine a *Frankenstein* that doesn’t have dark alchemical solutions in jars and crackling electricity and a furious storm that dramatizes the violation of nature that Victor Frankenstein’s experiments represent? Would an adaptation that elided the creation scene be the most faithful adaptation of Shelley’s
novel, or a gross violation of what we all know in our hearts to be the real Frankenstein story? Poststructuralist adaptation scholars have often asked “fidelity to what”; intertextual cases like this one pose interesting questions to the rhetorical approach that warrant continued exploration.

Some of these avenues for further thought, research, and analysis will prove to be dead ends, while others will challenge the rhetorical approach to adaptation to evolve, change, and, well, adapt. In some of these cases, the conception of fidelity that I have theorized in the preceding pages will prove a useful tool, and I have no doubt that in other cases, other theories and lenses will reveal themselves to be more apt. While I hope I have convinced my readers that fidelity is important and can be discussed in a meaningful way, I would be loathe to replace one critical orthodoxy with another. Fidelity is an important part of the conversation we ought to be conducting in adaptation studies, and my work demonstrates one way of talking about this central topic. But intertextuality is hardly a dead letter, and in order to understand the myriad intricate facets of adaptation as an aesthetic and cultural practice, we will need all the tools we can get our critical hands on. With that spirit in mind and with fidelity returned to our critical toolbox, I invite you to join me as we turn the page and find out what comes next.
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