Article E

Adaptations and Post-apocalyptic Atonement

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Introduction

The mental construction of an adaptation text, the sum of all the versions of a story, is partly driven by a preference for completion, order, and normalcy, states of the world that the experience of the alternative narratives may disrupt. Hence, I would argue, adaptations resemble post-apocalyptic imaginations as they foreground the experiences of contradictions and connections, but also of incompleteness, what is lost, and hitherto unknown possibilities that remain to be realized. The connection between the adaptation and post-apocalyptic imagination is made clear by the general description of a post-apocalyptic work of fiction as "a vision of after: after the world has come to disaster, after any tangible social order has been destroyed by fire or hunger or despair" (Kunsa 57). Similarly, film adaptations of celebrated literary works may give rise to feelings of expectations of what is to come, as well as fears of "cannibalisation" (Stam 25) and gradual loss of meaning.

However, to have an adaptational mind-set, I maintain, is equivalent to having a post-apocalyptic approach to coming to terms with the themes of life. In both cases, allowances are made for a consistent oscillation between alternative versions, which may at best produce the experience of entropic balance as a state of normalcy. In the case of literature-film adaptations, the sensation can be particularly intense because audiences' minds may use the fluctuating comprehension of the story versions as a metaphorical reflection of the social conditions of the real world. Through such acts of imagination, the time-space continuum and the borders between various fictional worlds and the social reality may be partially dissolved and crystallized in a post-apocalyptic manner. Adaptations may thus inspire audiences to construe the

experience of alternative, potential developments and self-identities as fluid prototypes for states of normalcy and happy endings.

This article makes the case for a post-apocalyptic view on adaptations, with the underlying question what post-apocalyptic perspectives may add when we consider adaptations as didactic tools in search for the elixir for adult happiness. After outlining the characteristics of post-apocalyptic fiction and imagination, as well as the connection between post-apocalyptic imagination and adaptations, the novel-screenplay-film adaptation *Atonement* (McEwan 2001; Hampton and Wright 2007) serves as an illustrating example.

Apocalyptic Narratives

In general terms, apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic fiction can be defined as speculative fiction about survival and lost community, with events set in a devastated landscape and a possible future. Films and novels in the genre echo sinister prophecies through representations of conquest, war, starvation, death, and darkness, and as a corpora of fiction they repeat the biblical experiences of the fall and the revelation in a seemingly everlasting loop. Undeniably, the mere word *apocalypse* resonates such events of destruction, doom, and the loss of both values and meaning. The persistence, attraction, and growth of the genre are therefore perhaps best explained by the human "desire to bear witness to one's own or one's community's end" (Mazurek 28), although the actual apocalypse might not seem eminent to all in everyday life. For those who believe that nothing follows the end, the emphasis in apocalyptic fiction on the destruction of the earth and its life forms might seem to offer even less, except for the visons of wastelands and a deserted sense of humanity.

Conversely, in the pandemic years of 2020 and 2021, and the everyday culture of fear, with the global news feeds' continuous depictions of the terrors on earth, corporeal tokens of the mythical end are never hard to find. And so, it might be just as

reassuring, as well as acutely frightening, to develop a notion through fictional mental simulations that the end has already occurred, and that the post-apocalyptic imaginations of the future rather concern a re-vision of hope than a fall to come. Accordingly, apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic fiction strongly adheres to the narrative convention of protagonists with mythical qualities who depart from the drab conditions of their normal worlds. They undergo a transformation through a series of trials and ordeals in the realm of the unknown, before they resurrect as masters of all worlds, so that they may potentially solve their own personal problems and heal humankind.

Thus the apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic genre responds to a human need to be prepared for what is to come, but also to link the past, present, and future in order to find an ethical way forward. As James Berger states, "the apocalypse as eschaton is just as importantly the vehicle for clearing away the world as it is and making possible the post-apocalyptic paradise" (6). Hence, in line with the biblical notion of the apocalypse, films and novels in the genre do not just end with a destruction that satisfies our collective fears, Claire P. Curtis argues. The need to simulate the end is also linked to the human desire for purpose and almost any post-apocalyptic fiction "reworks imaginatively how we might live together [and what] really matters about human living" (Curtis 2015, 5). The genre therefore can be said to "reveal our society's larger utopian desires" and pave the way for long-term survival, as the stories commonly promote the idea of an elevated normalcy founded on a reverential relationship to nature, an empowered individuality, and a renewed sense of community (Murphy 234). The function of apocalyptic visions is rarely just to facilitate speculations about eternal afterlife in a religious sense, but to provoke a desire for something better. With a dialectic force, the genre's narratives of devastation "ask us to think through our human commitments and invite us to imagine just worlds deserving of civic love" (Curtis 2015, 5). This is commonly affirmed in the final scenes

of a narrative, as a metaphorical seventh angelic trumpet, like Savannah's words at the end of *Mad Max Beyond Thunderdome* (1985): "there'll come a night when they see the distant light and they'll be coming home." In this context, a post-apocalyptic vision denotes the ethical and thematic orders that are revealed after the apocalypse, or the end of a story: namely the unending reconstitution of relational, narrative meaning and contexts through adaptations.

With the dystopic and visionary approaches to post-apocalyptic imagination in mind, Briohny Doyle argues that post-apocalyptical thinking "both critiques and mourns" what has come before, while it engages in a search for future possibilities (111). Thus, post-apocalyptic imagination neither erases the past through new beginnings, nor does it turn the endings into distinct moral lessons, like most linear narratives do, in spite of any overt declarations at the end of the stories. Instead, the post-apocalyptic vision promotes a non-linear way of thinking, where all elements that may once have appeared to be inseparable or paradoxical, time, and place are dissolved and united, marking not the end of time, but "the end of one time" (Rosen XXIV), so that a new holistic, but always incomplete and fluid conception of the world can be formed.

Doyle also emphasises the interactive, interpretive, and creative processes that post-apocalyptic imagination requires, which introduces an apparent link between the appreciation of post-apocalyptic fiction and adaptations. Moreover, they both have the power to transport the audiences mentally between collapsed, recreated, and expanded worlds. Because the versions of the story worlds of adaptations exist both side by side and as a unity, they bring the past, present, and future together. This is not just a result of any possible cognitive play of causality in the stories, but more importantly adaptations stimulate the knowing audiences to be "conceptually flicking back and forth" (Hutcheon 39) between past texts and further imagined expansions so that ever new wholes may be fashioned. Like post-apocalyptic fiction, adaptations thus invite

audiences to consider what is lost and altered and to regard the unstated possibilities, while realising that the various versions of the world, with their inconsistencies and their regularities, may together constitute one incomplete vision, or many, while each and every version remains isolated at the same time. As McEwan muses in an interview, "there were 10 million ways you could make a … movie out of *Atonement*, the novel would have still remained itself" (2008).

The conflicting perspectives force the adaptation audiences to take on the role of God narrators to assess and pass judgement, with no right answer in sight, to form a resulting, mental adaptation text, a vision of an imagined and fragmented ur-text, to use Sarah Cardwell's notion (26). With a similar view on normalcy, as that brought forth by post-apocalyptic imaginations, adaptations embrace the possibility to merge the past and the opportunities of the future into one narrative, and thus to consider all our tentative narratives about the world and ourselves at once. Thus, the adaptation-minded way of thinking shares an element of reflexivity with post-apocalyptic imagination, which is based on the "persistent, self-reflexive acknowledgment that the post-apocalyptic world exists in a gap between the end of the world and its rebirth, a liminal space disconnected from yet bearing artifacts of the audience's world" (Stifflemire 188). The revelation after each adaptation must therefore be that it allows a work to stay intact as a unity, while forever merged and interconnected with something else, as if demonstrating the post-apocalyptic harmony between individuality and community.

Atonement

Immediately after its publication, the novel *Atonement* was linked to apocalyptic scenarios, both because of the thematization of collapsing worlds and the release date; the first major review appeared the day after the 9/11 events in 2001 (Sexton 49). A few days later, Peter Kemp wrote that *Atonement* was "engrossed not merely by

damage but its aftermath," signaling the link between the story and the apocalyptic state the world was in. In that context, McEwan echoes one of the central ideas of *Atonement*, as he comments on the terrorist attacks in *The Guardian*: "It is hard to be cruel once you permit yourself to enter the mind of your victim. Imagining what it is like to be someone other than yourself is at the core of our humanity." In line with what might be called post-apocalyptic imagination, he suggests that the root to all downfall can be found in the walls that exist between minds, and that the key to a better existence lies in the capacity to exist in a greater and shared consciousness, in contrast to a single-minded outlook.

On the surface, *Atonement* does not conform to the generic, popular definition of post-apocalyptic fiction. The typical genre features are however present in the narrative, with the Second World War as a backdrop instead of an unidentified catastrophic event. Still, most readers and viewers probably rather regard *Atonement* as a three-act melodrama with an epilogue, which tells the war time love story of Cecilia, the 23-year-old daughter of the Tallis house, and Robbie, temporary gardener and the cleaning lady's son. For others still, it is a contemplation on the possibility of making amends and reaching forgiveness. All the same, the narrative is riddled with cataclysmic wartime imagery and some of the novel's scenes, with torn bodies and limbs hanging in trees, were too horrifying to be visualized on the screen. What naturally lingers from Joe Wright's film adaptation is instead an apocalyptic vision from the Bray dunes in France before the Dunkirk evacuation of the allied troops, when the injured Robbie reaches the end of his road back from the wastelands of war and encounters a hellish revelation of humankind's darkest potential. In a five-minute long-shot he is tracked through a landscape where "the Dunkirk soldiers seem to be offered up for death or salvation" (Childs 2008, 152). Bereft of hope, most of the men suffer a similar sense of departure from community and context, like Adam and Eve did immediately after the fall. The best realistic prospect for any survivor at that point

seems to be to find a sheltered corner in which to die from his wounds in peace. Robbie, who has previously suffered expulsion from the normal world of the Tallis estate, passes away in a basement, only to be restored to life in a meagre war time London flat, together with his love Cecilia, and he will, later still, be transfigured into an even higher realm, to make post-apocalyptic resurrection complete.

It is not just *Atonement's* setting, story, and theme, but also the communicative structure that signals the link to the post-apocalyptic genre. The novel, the subsequent screenplay and film, all work with very distinct and sudden shifts in time and place. They all retell several segments from different characters' perspectives, crystallize time further through flashbacks, recollections, and indications that the future is already written, all complemented with a God narrator, who controls the developments, as Blakey Vermeule notes. Nevertheless, there is little preparation, when the story ends, all the versions, for the jump in time to 1999, a year well chosen for the end of time and the disclosure that the story thus far has just been composed of re-constructed memories and alternative facts of a world long since gone, since the narrator reports that Cecilia and Robbie have died and were never reunited. The story the audiences have followed is the novel that Cecilia's sister Briony spent a lifetime writing, to atone through storytelling for the lie that once tore the lovers apart. Yet, due to the multiple narrative layers, the God narrator is in a position to present the lovers with an afterlife and a complete return to community in a second ending, without any apocalyptic instabilities.

With the presence of the omnipotent God narrator, whose controlling role is to pass judgement through the narration, as a signaling element, the structure of *Atonement* is in many respects a post-apocalyptic metaphor. The final ending begs the audience to make judgements and to decide on which story to have faith in, to unearth the thematic essence. However, presented with a "reversal of the diachronic accrual of meaning" (Wells 101), readers and spectators alike are forced to reassess every detail

and the validity of the narration at every point in the story. Hence, *Atonement* illustrates the apocalyptic genre conventions well, as defined by Berger: "Temporal sequences become confused. Apocalyptic writing takes us after the end, shows the signs prefiguring the end, the moment of obliteration, and the aftermath. The writer and reader must be both places at once, imagining the post-apocalyptic world, then paradoxically "remembering" the world as it was, as it is" (6). Similarly, every new element to some extent "restructures the narration of the past, makes it readable in another, new way, so that things which don't make any sense suddenly mean something, but in an entirely other domain" (Zizek 189). Thus, as the story temporarily disintegrates, the narrative complexity unfolds to an apparent apocalyptic structure, and so *Atonement* pushes the audiences to read post-apocalyptically.

Visions of Humanity at the End of the World

As argued above, the repeated call for a post-apocalyptic renewal is arguably provoked by an overwhelming contemporary sensation of what Marcin Mazurek calls "a collective non-community" (74). Among adults in the fluid and postmodern times we live, a developed balance between individuality and conformity is indeed hard to achieve. This is reflected by the main characters in apocalyptic fiction, who above all labor to come to terms with the conflicting values of being an individual and being a part of a social greater whole. The ultimate goal for the characters in apocalyptic fictions, in terms of desire and motivations, is thereby linked to the human drive to develop into mature adults, who can cope with compromising realities. Hence, emerging adults often represent a post-lapsarian departure from community in novels and films, before they find a first path towards a reasonable state of adult happiness. In modern industrial societies, there is no clearly demarcated threshold to adulthood. In that perspective, personal development "becomes a modus vivendi" (Blatterer 70),

and the road to adulthood could be perceived as "an extended and nonlinear process with no clear indication of completion" (Konstam 7).

Readers of Ian McEwan's fiction are familiar with the theme of adulthood. His reputation was initially built on often shocking short stories and novels about collapsing worlds and identities, with children on the verge of adulthood and "the ideas and fears that the young have about 'being grown up'" in the spotlight (Childs 2005, 168). Ultimately, this fear refers to the potential loss of freedom and individuality when the individual is integrated with a greater whole, which is a recurring theme in McEwan's novels. In *Atonement*, the young Briony's self-annihilating realization also represents the concern of many contemporary adults: "the world, the social world, was unbearably complicated, with two billion voices, and everyone's thoughts striving in equal importance and everyone's claim on life as intense, and everyone thinking they were unique, when no one was. One could drown in irrelevance" (McEwan *Atonement*, 36). The claim equally summarizes the threat of apocalyptic nature that surrounds adaptations. As Kamilla Elliot submits, they are repeatedly regarded as "disciplinary bastards, simultaneously no discipline's children and every discipline's children, belonging to none, yet claimed by all. Their position as everybody's child allows for their universal theoretical use and abuse; their position as nobody's child allows for their universal neglect and marginalisation" (683).

Also, the narrator's observation in McEwan's novel that "the self-contained world [Briony] had drawn … had been defaced with the scribble of other minds, other needs" (36) is just as much a comment on the human fear of an apocalyptic, existential annihilation, as on adaptations. Briony's human desire for conditions that allow control over her self-identity can be related to the cult of the *original* text in a universe of intertextual connections. Like the post-apocalyptic mourning of the past, adaptations thus also inevitably return to something that has preceded them, at risk of being seen as "inherently conservative" (Sanders 9) and redundant.

However, in the shadow and light of the apocalypse, "meaning […] has its price. And this price is freedom," as Franco Moretti characterizes the message of the Bildungsroman (63). Once the transfer to the post-apocalyptic state of mind and universal community is made, the loss of individual freedom and worth can be seen in a new light, echoing C.S. Lewis' suggestion in *The Great Divorce* (1946) that the greatest freedom is not that of individual thoughts and actions, but the freedom to adapt and appreciate potential meanings and contexts. If the first path is followed, the immediate aftermath of the apocalypse may lead to despair and disorientation. If the latter is chosen, the possibilities for a reasonably happy life in a state of normalcy may be uncovered.

Yet, because "the primary focus is surviving the event, not surviving the aftermath" (Curtis 2010, 6) in many apocalyptic stories, the effect is that the apocalypse rarely leads to an actual transcendence to a higher existence in fiction. Instead, they present the idea that happiness lies in a reconstruction of the normal world, only with somewhat altered life patterns. Hence, "fictional post-apocalyptic accounts present the useful falsehood that there is a ground—a state of nature—from which we can come together and renegotiate our lives" (Curtis 2010, 6). In such scenarios, the post-apocalypse suggests a *Groundhog Day* opportunity to correct and mature.

In this context, it is worth to recall that the biblical prophecies foreshadow the possibility of a return to a paradisiacal normalcy. Without that vision in mind, it may be provocative to use variations of the term *normal*, especially when it comes to matters of identity and life-stages. To be normal is sometimes perceived as a narrowly limited and confined existential space, which leaves little room for any sense of the developed individuality that both happiness, adulthood, and adaptations are often associated with. The post-apocalyptic normalcy should instead be understood as an ideal, tolerant sphere, which enables individual "social integration as a simple part of a

whole" (Moretti 16). In a sense, the two different understandings of normalcy are linked to the notion of surviving the event with all limitations intact and to being reborn into the afterlife as part of a greater, yet incomplete whole. These alternative perspectives are presented through Robbie's and Cecilia's multiple returns at the end of *Atonement*: first to normal life in a shabby, limiting London flat to a life full of compromises, and then to an alternative normalcy in an eternal, ethical realm.

As the deceitful collapse of the narrative offers Robbie and Cecilia eternal happiness in the story world, *Atonement* illuminates the link between post-apocalypse, imagination, adaptation and vice. The alternative versions of how the story can be comprehended are innumerable, due to the narrator's inconsistent reliability, the internal intertextual references, and the many narrative levels. The concept of truth is thus violated and corrected, as in all adaptations and post-apocalyptic imaginations. Although *Atonement* implies "the impossibility of finding coherent and enduring explanatory systems" it still makes a case for the urgent human need for them, suggesting that "without them, there is nothing against which the self can be measured or defined" (Head 16). So, the postmodern twist which thwarts the narrative is in turn thwarted by the desire for identity and closure. Besides being asked to assume the role of a God replacement and pass judgement, the reader must also engage in an act of subjective idealization and mythmaking in the attempt to re-construct both world and meaning (Albers and Caeners 2009). Accordingly, the postmodern apocalypse entails such a humanization of the deity in the form of imperfect characters like ourselves (Rosen xxiii). Thus, *Atonement*'s twist implies that the supernatural powers to pass eternal judgement and to bring restoration may be regarded as a responsibility and within reach of human capacity. This also applies to the adaptation audience, while it is also asked to assess the parts as alternative entities and as parts of a whole at the same time.

To that effect, the ability to observe, assess, appraise, and imagine are foregrounded in all versions of *Atonement* as a consequence of the characters' search "for coherent structures of meaning and orientation" (Schemberg 7-8). This thematic quest makes the equally post-apocalyptic and adaptational aspects especially relevant for adults in a postmodern world and the so-called post-truth era, when the distinctions between reality and fiction, truth and tales, are not that clear even for grown-ups, particularly concerning issues like ethics and self-identity. For guidance, readers and spectators mentally simulate being the characters in the narratives, their personalities and roles, actions and life patterns, and so efficiently try out alternative futures through "low-cost, low risk surrogate experience" (Dutton 110). So, although most people may claim that they consume stories about the end of the world as entertainment, the main function of apocalyptic works of fiction is arguably to offer possibilities to imagine possible future scenarios.

The Post-apocalyptic Lesson

When they adapted *Atonement*, the screenwriter Christopher Hampton and the director Joe Wright strove to maintain the novel's complex form, structure and lack of "linearity of narrative" (Hampton VI) with "self-contained chunks of narrative, where the focus would shift unapologetically from one character to another" (VII). However, there were reasons to fear a collapse, because of the distinct narrative conventions that so often set novel and film versions of a story apart. While the novel appears to let the reader share the all-knowing narrator's observations and the inner thoughts of different characters, by necessity the screenplay and subsequent film heavily reduce the fictional beings' overt reflections on past discussions and inner thoughts. Due to the director's need, in Wright's words, "to tell the story as economically as possible," without "too much setup," which does not "propel the story forward," the number of secondary characters in the opening scenes in the normal world is also controlled

(2008). Furthermore, Wright wanted, with a film director's mind, "a story told in images, where actors thoughts would have to be readable on their faces," "without voice overs." In addition, he asked Hampton in a Hollywood fashion, after the first draft: "who exactly are we supposed to be rooting for?" (Hampton VI), quite in contrast to the novel's ambition to leave judgement pending.

Naturally, these strategic approaches also affect the communicated ideals that the audience carries with them after the end and the final image. For instance, some of the novel's thematic problematizations of altruism, the absent fathers and the page consuming reports of the casualties of war are among the elements that have been omitted, or severely cut, in the screenplay and film. All such modifications transform the characters and the thematic lessons about life, which they represent, regardless of whether they are considered as post-apocalyptic transformations or the result of post-apocalyptic character expansions in another media form. This is especially true when, as in the case of *Atonement*, readers and spectators have to reconstruct the ethical universe retroactively, even if only one artefact version of the narrative is taken into account, and more so when use is made of the parallel universes of novel, screenplay, and film in that enterprise. The post-apocalyptic moral and imagination thus entails a vision of a possibility to restore a state of being a whole person, a quality which defines the idealizing notion of adulthood (Blatterer), which still seems to constitute a desirable state of being to strive for. The adult completeness, which may only be realized in the utopian post-apocalyptic world, seems to be one of the elements that attracted Wright to directing *Atonement*, as he submits that "Robbie Turner is good. He's the higher self. He's the best we can be" (2008). When it comes to such lessons, beginnings and endings of stories have "privileged positions" (Rabinowitz 300). The openings present the normalities, instabilities, and incompleteness that forebode the apocalypse, and thus also the importance of an increased awareness. Meanwhile, the endings summarize the elixirs of happiness. As Wright reflects, "the purpose of happy

endings" is after all to "give us something to aspire to (2008). They ennoble the human spirit." However, with an adaptational approach, a happy ending is not complete unless there is a return to the beginning, so that origins are united with successions, beginnings with ends. Thus, the two should not just be regarded as the extreme points of a line of development, but as parts of an incomplete non-linear system. In essence, both beginnings and endings deliver necessary components for the understanding of the other and the whole. In a larger context, all the interrelational connections in a narrative add to this picture too.

In all versions of *Atonement*, the characters initially reveal a conflict between idealizations and actual social behavior. The minds and actions of the adults in the Tallis household stress the value of having a meaningful occupation and of conformity to conventions. However, their problem to act responsibly, running a home and keeping a family together, produces severe instabilities, and reveals a lack of intimacy, emotional balance, empathy, and thus an ability to adapt and cooperate. In sum, adult life is simplified to pre-apocalyptic and pre-adaptational patterns with little room to allow any complexities. In a sense, individuality, community, and the natural approach to life, and thus the solid ground for meaning and purpose, are lost.

It is in this environment that the protagonists Robbie and Cecilia appear, as a dialectic pair and thus establish the fundamental questions how we may find a balance between passions and pragmatism, emotions and rationality, conventions, and an awareness of complexity, community and individuality, structure and nature. Robbie illustrates the perfect, conventional adult, especially in the versions for the screen, well adapted to the normalcy of the social environment, with emotions and intimacy pragmatically controlled. His confidence and his awareness of the world exclude the idea that there are problems that cannot be tackled through a practical and rational approach.

Cecilia, with her sensitive emotionality and aesthetic mind, but low self-esteem, presents a counterbalance, although she too has a limited awareness of the complexities of life. Her sense of rationality is controlled by her celebration of the irrational and emotional, and she defies conventions. "It made no sense . . . arranging flowers before the water was in—but there it was; she couldn't resist moving them around, and not everything people did could be in a correct, logical order," she muses (McEwan *Atonement*, 23), thrusting the flowers into the vase to accomplish the "natural look she wanted" (29). Similarly, the screenplay's visions of her, "with an armful of wild flowers, runs through the woods, enjoying the sheer exhilaration of movement" (9) signals her unrest, but even more so the potential for joyous balance. Under the surface both Robbie and Cecilia are impatiently waiting to break away, and when their youthful desire for each other awakes, it signals the fall and the future necessity for their two perspectives – the rational pragmatic and the aesthetic emotional – to merge for harmony to be restored. In the film, the sound of Puccini's *La Bohème* makes us sympathise with the role passion has to play for both the impending apocalypse and the salvation.

The lovers then go through the trials and horrors of war and die in 1940, but, as previously mentioned, the God narrator resurrects them to the normal world, a London home, so that their transfiguration and ascencion to the realm of eternity are made possible. The upheaval of time and the double endings produce two complementing and concluding images in the novel, as well as in the screenplay and film, to illustrate how Robbie and Cecilia unite as what Campell calls "master of the two worlds" (212), full of "grace, i.e., the power of their sustaining substance" (168).

Just before the first end it is established that Robbie and Cecilia lead an independent and structured life, guided by rationality, emotional control, self-acceptance, and a mutual awareness of the complexities of the world. Their life is no longer controlled by superficial conventions, but by compromises for the sake of living

together. The novel, then, turns to Briony's memories of Cecilia and Robbie, "standing side by side on a South London pavement" (McEwan *Atonement*, 370), a recollection of togetherness and simple care, "her sister with Robbie. Their love" (349). After the fifty-year leap in time to Briony's seventy-seventh birthday, she conjures them again through imagination, "still alive, still in love, sitting side by side in the library, smiling" together at the family gathering (372). This afterlife and new beginning can be seen as an expansion of the first ending, as Robbie and Cecilia are restored to a social community, where conventions, loyalty and rationality coexist with, and are perhaps even subordinated to, emotional presence. Their mutual set of adulthood markers are complete and in balance. Through the novel's final imagery of the couple together, which is only followed by the words "It's not impossible. But now I must sleep" (372). Joseph Campbell's conclusion about the elixir to happiness is made manifest:

> The individual … gives up completely all attachment to his personal
> limitations, idiosyncrasies, hopes and fears, no longer resists the self-
> annihilation that is prerequisite to rebirth in the realization of truth, and so
> becomes ripe, at last, for the great at-one-ment. His personal ambitions
> being totally dissolved, he no longer tries to live but willingly relaxes to
> whatever may come to pass in him; he becomes, that is to say, an
> anonymity. (220)

The screenplay's first ending delivers an equally concise imagery to complement the novel: "in the window, CECILIA and ROBBIE are locked in a tender embrace" to complete the embedded story (Hampton 87), with the entire focus on the insular and intimate community of the couple in their home, secure and happy. In the film their withdrawal from the social world is marked by a passionate kiss, to replace the screenplay's more restricted emotions. The regeneration cannot, however, be perfected

until the God narrator appears on the screen. Just as the post-apocalyptic fulfillment means that the individual returns to God, here it is the "adult coming back to the child," Wright explains, and so a full circle of restoration takes place.

The screenplay text finally situates Robbie and Cecilia resurrected on a beach as they "crunch across the pebbles and splash gleefully through the waves, below the towering white cliffs on their way back to their white clapboard cottage" (Hampton 92). Whereas the value of family was repeated in the two endings of the novel, the value of home is here reiterated in the screen idea of the two endings. Again, the film nuances notions unity and substance through grace by adding passion, with a reference to the first presentations of the two individuals. Thus the end of *Atonement* stimulates a return to the beginning of the story, for an understanding of the new whole.

Final Words

By use of *Atonement* I have discussed how the nature of post-apocalyptic imagination generally relates to adaptations. In apocalyptic narratives the initial instablities do not only need to be mended. Like adapations may do, they serve to break apart the simplifying patterns that are often used to understand the world. Post-apocalyptic imagination can thus be compared with Jürgen Habermas' reflection, on the relationship between modernism and post-modernism, that our current cultural project explores the possibility for the human mind-set to fuse the rational with the aesthetic into a tolerating, albeit always incomplete, whole, instead of separating them.

Atonement's structure invites the audience to embrace the post-apocalyptic, non-linear and interconnected complexities of multivariable causalities that also the engagement in adaptations stimulates. It thus demonstrates how the order of distinct conventions, times, places, and minds dissolves and unites through the simplicity of an underlying narrative hyperstructure, which gives way to the revelation and the substance and energy of an adaptational sense of at-one-ment.

I have submitted that a lesson from post-apocalyptic narratives and adaptations is that simplicity should not be confused with simplifications. Nor should novels, screenplays, and films take each other's places after a story has been adapted. In that respect, adaptations refuse simplifications and are post-apocalyptic by nature, as they make inevitable the flickering play of meanings and values that are necessary for balance and a fluid unity to appear. So, adaptations in themselves become meta-didactic excercises, unless we fail to see that post-apocalypse does not just entail division and destruction, but inherently leads to revelation of the unknown as an inevitable condition for life.

In the case of *Atonement,* I have loosely sketched how novel, screenplay, and film also share an overall view on post-apocalyptic restoration, while presenting complementing formulas for the elixir of adult happiness. What makes a post-apocalyptic perspective on adaptations distinct is namely the basically existential thematic approach, since the narrative about the apocalypse and its aftermath has a moral to communicate about what it takes for us to mature as human beings. Compared to single novels, screenplays, and films, adaptations make allowances for the multiple layers of complexities that the imperative themes of our lives and our world often entail.

Yet, "possibly the most dystopian of all scenarios, curiously, is absolute resolution (and therefore, in theory, fully-achieved utopia)," Maria Manuel Lisboa tells us (49), but it is vital to remember that post-apocalyptic fictions do not demand fulfillment, but provoke interrogations. So in response to Robbie's impatient half rhetorical question "how much growing up do you need to do?" (McEwan *Atonement*, 342)*,* Briony concludes after a full life lived that "the attempt is all" and that fiction is there to assist (371). As long as the post-apocalypse is near, there is hope.

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