

# The Spiderwick Chronicles

Dir: Mark Waters, US, 2008

## A review by Alice Mills, University of Ballarat, Australia

*The Spiderwick Chronicles* (2008), directed by Mark Waters, is a somewhat disappointing adaptation of five short fantasy novels for child readers by Tony DiTerlizzi and Holly Black, who were also executive producers for the film. The storyline of the film version, as in the books, offers a variant on a familiar trope: a group of children face and overthrow the supreme threat of a Dark Lord and his supernatural allies. The film takes up only about three-quarters of the books' episodes, in which the three Grace children discover and explore the supernatural dimensions of our world, face monsters and devise ways to save themselves and all other good denizens of earth, natural and supernatural. In reducing the number of episodes, the film also greatly reduces the number of deaths. Forces of evil are gleefully despatched to death in both books and film, but the film entirely loses the moral qualms expressed by the novels' children when they bring themselves to kill for the first time. This act of censorship leaves the film in danger of amounting to little more than a sensationalist quest-and-destroy fantasy.

The overall plot of film and books is the same. Nine-year-old Jared Grace (played by Freddie Highmore) discovers his great-great-uncle Arthur's hidden Field Guide to the world of faerie when his family (Mum, played tearfully by Mary-Louise Parker; sister Mallory, played by Sarah Bolger and Jared's twin, Simon, also played by Highmore) moves to a ramshackle house inhabited by a guardian Brownie (voiced by Martin Short). Opening this book triggers a quest by Faerie's evil inhabitants, led by Mulgarath (a shambling Nick Nolte) to gain possession of it so that they can dominate all other life-forms. Jared convinces his siblings, and eventually also his mother, that fairy folk exist. Inevitably the children prevail, with the help of their great-aunt Lucinda (Joan Plowright's twinkling-eyed wisdom is reminiscent of Rowling's Dumbledore) and her long-lost father Arthur (a cameo role for David Strathairn, who provides the strongest human characterisation in the film).

There are many more echoes of other fantasy novels and films to be found in *The Spiderwick Chronicles*, to the point where its plot and special effects sometimes descend into cliché. Like C. S. Lewis's Uncle Andrew in *The Magician's Nephew* (the prequel to *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*), Uncle Arthur has devised gadgets that open a way between our world and that of the supernatural, with no consideration of the cost to his family. Like Bastian in the film version of *The NeverEnding Story* and also like Harry Potter in the film *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*, Jared is given an exhilarating ride on the back of a magical flying beast, in this case a griffin that is strongly reminiscent of *Azkaban's* hippogriff. Also vividly reminiscent of this Harry Potter film is the climactic battle between the monster and child hero atop the house's capacious roof (the original novel located this last battle on a glorified rubbish dump).

As in *The Lord of the Rings*, forces of evil quest to gain possession of an item of magical power, in this case the book, to use it for supreme ill, while the forces of good attempt to hide

or destroy it; especially Tolkienesque is the scene in which the children try, and fail, to burn the book. The film's evocation of these earlier quests is ill-advised in that its scale is so much smaller. Narnian quests involve the fate of countries and worlds. Tolkien's quest involves the whole of Middle Earth and Harry Potter's actions save the human race: in contrast, the action of *Spiderwick* is all very localised, taking place around the house and within comfortable walking distance of it. The one exception is the children's griffin ride to the realm of the sylphs, a clear candidate for reincarnation as a theme park ride. *Spiderwick's* monsters are almost all small and toad-like. All of this makes it difficult for the film to portray the evil Mulgarath as a credible threat to the world, since his entire army has so much trouble penetrating the defences of a single house.

The film begins strongly, with each of the three child characters given interesting characteristics: Simon is a pet-loving pacifist, Mallory a bossy fencer and Jared sullenly resents his father's absence. Any subtleties of characterisation become lost as the quest proceeds. Simon and Mallory are reduced to the role of helper and eventually vanish from the story (unlike the original book version of events). At the end, it is Jared who is acknowledged as quest-hero and defender of the family, as if it had been he alone who had produced all the clever ideas and brave deeds that defended the family and the world. Such an ending rings as false as the film's assertion that its Dark Lord poses a supreme threat to all of earth's inhabitants.

With a further change to the novels, the director steeps the film's ending in sentimentality. Lucinda Spiderwick, now in her eighties, has longed all her life for her father to return. The books provide a strong resolution to this subsidiary plot, when Arthur momentarily returns from an existence suspended in time to rejoin his beloved daughter in the full knowledge that he will now die, suddenly weighed with all the decades from which his faerie existence has preserved him. In the film version, he does not die; instead, his daughter chooses to join him in suspended time, regressing to her six-year-old self, and the two ascend to sylph-heaven, hand in hand. Not only does this new ending erase all her grief by erasing her years of living in the human world; it also denies the film's truth about how Arthur existed all those years with the sylphs, experiencing no passage of time at all. By this logic, reunited father and daughter will be able to experience only one suspended instant together—arguably a form of living death.

Such a conclusion invites a Freudian reading in which the daughter can be interpreted as fulfilling her Oedipal desire for the total possession of her father's affections. Mother has gone, presumably dead from natural causes, and when Arthur apologises to his child for having neglected her, he calls her his sole treasure: "I lost sight of the magical creature I had." There is no mention of any love for his wife or regret for the grief she may have felt when he disappeared. These Oedipal implications are reinforced in a curious sequence in which father places his youthful ringed hand in his daughter's aged hand, only to have her transform into a child holding his ringed hand in hers. It is far from clear in this rapid sequence whose hand is whose (some reflection on the relative ages of the characters is needed to make sense of it) and the confusion a viewer may well experience gives some weight to the suggestion of a wedding exchange of rings between father and daughter, to the total exclusion of all other human beings for the rest of their existence.

The film also concludes with an Oedipal resolution for Jared and his mother. Jared's father (a brief appearance by Andrew McCarthy) is his son's ideal and Jared struggles to accept the idea that his dad has abandoned the family to live with another woman. Mulgarath almost

succeeds in tricking Jared into giving him the book by disguising himself as ideal dad, but Jared recognises the deception just in time and stabs Mulgarath-dad to death. He is thus given the opportunity to kill dad-as-monster with impunity, indeed with the mother's full approval. At the end of the film, Jared's siblings have virtually disappeared from the action and Jared's mother apologises to him and asks him to stay with her, saying, "Who else is going to protect us?" This sequence unites Jared as a substitute dad with Mum, who embraces him as her new beloved. This Oedipal reading gives psychological grounds for the film's neglect of Simon and Mallory Grace's adventures in the novels. The books' Mallory is just beginning to explore extra-familial sexual relationships, moving beyond Oedipal constraints, and both children's exploits threaten Jared's status as heroic defender.

The two quest resolutions of *The Spiderwick Chronicles*, for Jared and Lucinda, reinforce the domestic nature of this drama. What looked like a rather creaky version of child hero quest against Dark Lord ends up in unqualified endorsement of what might be termed psychological incest, especially in the case of Lucinda and her father. The fantasy quest loses its importance in comparison to the binding love between parent and child. The film's real quest, and the reason why its fantasy adventure is ultimately a disappointment, is not to conquer the Dark Lord and save the world but to supplant the same-gender parent and unite with the opposite-gender parent in Oedipal bliss guaranteed in perpetuity.

# Zulu

Dir: Cy Endfield, UK, 1964

## A review by Frank Carle, University of Oxford, UK

Lieutenant Bromhead: "Sixty! We got at least sixty wouldn't you say?"

Lieutenant Adendorff: "That leaves only 3,940."

(*Zulu*, 1964)

In every violent encounter between alien cultures, history finds one of its most interesting challenges: to represent emotional events from a balanced perspective that takes into account the dignity of both sides without allowing emotional polemics to distort the historical record. Balanced reporting on enemy nations during wartime can be traced at least to the Roman Empire, when Tacitus wrote glowingly of the threatening barbarian hordes in *Germania*:

And yet marriage there is a serious matter...they lead lives of well-protected chastity, corrupted by none of the enticements of public performances... Among a people so numerous, there are extremely few instances of adultery, the punishment for which is prompt (Tacitus, 1999: 84).

Two millennia later the writings of another contemporary historian regarding a different "barbarian horde" would serve as the inspiration for a complex and dramatic film. The bloody exchanges between Imperial Great Britain and the then recently unified Zulu Nation, known as the 1879 Anglo-Zulu war, produced a large number of historical and quasi-historical accounts — many in forms of media not available to Tacitus. But it would be from the pen of Scottish historian John Prebble that the inspiration for one of the greatest war films ever produced would flow.

The British film *Zulu* (1964) remains the most memorable depiction of the Anglo-Zulu war, and arguably of any British conflict. The film is based on the fate of a small contingent of ninety-six British soldiers from the 2nd Battalion, 24<sup>th</sup> (2nd Warwickshire) Regiment of Foot, stationed at Rorke's Drift (Lavell and Payne, 1918: 174). Throughout the day and night of January 22 and 23, these ninety-six men would defend their position from a fierce attack by between 3,000 and 4,000 Zulu warriors (Cannon, 1997: 818). Their successful defense held back a possible Zulu invasion of Natal Colony in British South Africa (Steinberg, 1963: 407). The origins of the film *Zulu* lie in an obscure article by Prebble detailing the battle of Rorke's Drift. Cy Endfield, a blacklisted American director living in exile in England, read the article and approached Prebble to flesh out a script. *Zulu* remains a classic motion picture distinguished by its thirty-first ranking on the British Film Institute's Top 100 British Films of the twentieth century ("The BFI 100," 2003). The film starred Stanley Baker as Lieutenant John Chard and the then unknown Michael Caine in his breakthrough role as Lieutenant Gonville Bromhead.

Primarily, this paper will examine the various personalities and ideologies that influenced the production of this film in an attempt to explain the problematic depictions of British soldier

and Zulu warrior alike. Namely, how did a representation of the action at Rorke's Drift manage to contain seemingly contradictory elements of nationalist and progressive ideology, yet manage to elude definitive categorization as an ideological vehicle for either the leftist or the rightist interpretation of the past? How can a film that was by all accounts an independent collaboration between a Scottish historian, a Welsh actor and a blacklisted American director contain such seemingly contradictory messages? In instances where the film and the historical record part ways, the motives for this departure will be examined and reasons for this departure hypothesized using the questions that follow. Why is religion seemingly marginalized by the ahistorical drunken missionary? Why is the mostly English regiment portrayed as being primarily Welsh? What were the intentions of the production team?

## **Origins and Production**

At this point, we would do well to examine the personalities of those involved in *Zulu's* creation. John Prebble was a Scottish historian with over twenty books to his credit, his most famous works being *Culloden* (1964) and *The Highland Clearances* (1963). Prebble's leftist political leanings are made quite clear in his own autobiography: "The passion we felt made me, like others, members of the British Communist Party" (Prebble, 1993: 14). In *The Highland Clearances*, Prebble sheds more light on his own particular leftist ideological philosophy, clearly influenced by English imperialism in his beloved Scotland (Prebble, 1969: 323).

Stanley Baker co-produced *Zulu* and starred as Lt. John Chard, an officer with a non-aristocratic background who would take practical command of the troops during the battle (Wetta and Curley, 1992: 169). Baker was sympathetic to Welsh causes and had previously collaborated with Endfield in the film *Hell Drivers* (1957). He was an easy convert to Endfield's project when he learned that it would depict the battle of a regiment based out of his native Wales. With a tiny budget of two million dollars, Baker set out to produce his film on-site in Natal.

Cyril Raker Endfield was the director and co-producer of *Zulu*; he became involved with the *Zulu* project during his exile in England. He was best known for the crime drama/thriller *The Sound of Fury* (1951), a motion picture that was highly critical of the "American Dream" (Booker, 1999: 181). Endfield also wrote and directed a 1948 radio play, *The Argyle Secrets*, which blurred the lines between democratic America and fascist Germany with a commentary on class and race relations (Langman, 1995: 297). Later, he was blacklisted by the House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC) for his membership in Yale's Young Communist League during World War II, pronounced-leftist bias in various films, such as the wartime film *Inflation* (1942), and refusing to name other Hollywood communists.

## **Ethnic Groups**

A few very different ethnic groups met at Rorke's Drift in 1879, and the film gave all but one an equitable treatment. The English in the film are represented most prominently in the film by Bromhead's swaggering aristocratic character, and not by the bravery of the mostly English troops that he historically commanded. The fact that the defenders at Rorke's Drift were mostly English was glossed over by the film: "This is a Welsh regiment man, although there are a few foreigners from England in it." In fact, the composition of 'B' company, 24th Regiment, although later based out of Wales, actually contained only a small minority of Welsh defenders in 1879. The most genuinely kind character in the film also happens to be

Welsh, a private named Tommy who constantly worries about the fate of a calf whose mother had died [1] (Morris, 1994: 99). Additionally, at the real battle, a missionary stood watch on a nearby hill as a sentry to warn of the Zulu's approach. However, once again the film makes a slight, yet telling departure from reality, by replacing the religious figure with two Welsh sentries. In one fell swoop, religion finds itself marginalized and the Welsh are lionized as the outpost's first line of defense. Baker was Welsh by birth and Prebble had been stationed in North Wales during much of the Second World War (to say nothing of the suffering of Baker's Welsh ancestors at the hands of the English) and so it seems fair to attribute the film's pro-Welsh tone largely to its producers (Prebble, 1993: 47).

### **Anti-Clerical Themes**

Scholars have noted a glaring irregularity in the film's treatment of religion: "There was a clergyman, the Reverend George Smith, among the defenders; he distinguished himself but is not in the film" (Frase, 1999: 267). Instead of depicting the Reverend's historic role in the battle, Endfield and Prebble choose to insert a fictional drunken coward and his hapless daughter. The film makes its stance on the impracticality of formal religion explicit when the church is requisitioned for use as a field hospital and the altar taken to be used in the construction of the outpost's defenses. When reproached by the Reverend Otto Witt for these actions; Color-Sergeant Bourne (Nigel Greene) retorts, "A prayer is as good as a bayonet on a day like this," further marginalizing religion. Later in the film, it is the Reverend who incites the native contingent to desert the outpost by preaching of "Cain killing his brother Able" as a metaphor for them killing fellow Africans. After he is jailed for this offense, he attempts to convince the young soldier guarding him to desert: "Thou shall not kill...obey the word." While imprisoned, Witt succumbs to the temptation of drink and begins screaming: "He breaketh the bow and snappeth the spear asunder..." At this point the camera pans to Color-Sergeant Bourne manning the outpost's defenses, who finishes Witt's biblical quotation "The Lord of Hosts is with us." This clever bit of editing suggests religion's vulnerability to being interpreted in order to legitimize a variety of actions. This scene is made all the more interesting by a passage from John Prebble's autobiography referencing the century prior to the action at Rorke's Drift: "In a century inspired, directed, and sometimes betrayed by the Old Testament, there was always divine authority to be cited for the destruction of those who were anathemas to Church or State" (Prebble, 1993: 171). As if religion had not already been marginalized enough by the character of Witt, as he is forced into a wagon and sent off with his daughter, he yells back in a drunken stupor: "Death awaits you... You're all going to die!" While the film gives credit to the camp's cook and a medical officer for distributing ammunition along the British lines, the Reverend actually performed this duty. The fact that the film's drunken missionary and all his actions were totally ahistorical, especially when so many other details were faithfully recreated, suggests that Prebble allowed his own anti-clerical feelings to distort the film's representation of the historical record for ideological reasons.

### **Conclusions**

In the midst of this examination, one must not lose sight of the film's overt message: that all people from the British Isles could take pride in the awesome power of Imperial Great Britain during this period of history. Still, the film's unified meaning initially eluded this author; how could the same film seemingly endorse imperialism while simultaneously promoting anti-religious and pro-indigenous nationalist messages? The correlation of several basic facts can be used to distill an explanation for the film's seemingly contradictory messages; Baker

was something of a Welsh nationalist and Prebble sympathetic to Scottish causes. In addition, Prebble harbored anti-clerical feelings that could be traced back to his experiences while living with a Vicar:

It was the thought of that implacable church and its obvious disgust for me ... I had learnt this day that God was... a cut above the class to which we belonged. That day, I think, the painter was loosed from its mooring and my faith began a slow drift into non-belief (Prebble 1993: 96).

Prebble was distressed by the wretched condition of the poor contrasted with the opulence of organized religion. More significantly, Prebble belonged to a generation of socialists tainted by the overly-nationalist ideas that smacked of Stalinist communism. Prebble himself remarked with approval on the shift of the Communist International from the mission of international socialism to Stalin's "socialism in one country" during the 1930s: "...'patriotic peoples nationalism'...here was an English history of which we could be proud, without the shame of industrial greed and imperial growth" (Prebble 1993: 18). In *Zulu*, the producers did not intend the main theme to be the imperialist English triumphant against a colonized race. Instead it was meant to be the colonized Welsh and Scots, who having beaten off a religious threat from a Christian missionary, coming together in a common solidarity despite their national differences. Even the hospitalized anarchist-minded criminal who feigned illness fights alongside his comrades in the end. In order to make this point, the film portrayed the regiment as comprised of mainly Welsh and Scottish soldiers. Baker and Prebble must have envisioned the force at Rorke's Drift not as imperial conquerors, but more as gladiators, forced to fight a fellow colonized race by their imperial masters.

While Prebble seems to have left very little written evidence to explain his contributions to *Zulu*, his opinion on the nearly analogous situation of the Buffalo Soldiers [\[2\]](#) here in the United States lends credence to the above interpretation: "Thus men who were once slaves, commanded by junior officers who were the sons of evicted immigrants or had themselves been dispossessed, were now used to subdue, remove and confine a free people" (Prebble 1993: 140). Here, minority groups, the Irish- and African-Americans, are used by another imperialist power, America, to subdue a native people, Native Americans. Replace the Irish and Africans with Welsh and Scots, the Native Americans with Zulus, and Prebble's above quotation would aptly describe *Zulu's* message.

*Zulu* contains several key ingredients of leftist ideology; the film was anti-imperialist, anti-religion, and pro-minority before these became popular progressive ideas. It is the genius of *Zulu* that the film managed to package seemingly contradictory elements of leftist and conservative ideology together into a popular war film while covertly carrying a progressive message. Indeed, *Zulu* had created a new template for other leftists in the film industry; in order to advertise your message, first attract your audience with action, realism, and a splash of history, at which point your audience will be amenable to slight distortions of said history for ideological purposes. *Zulu's* release signaled the beginning of a shift from traditional industry paradigms to more progressive conventions that would come to dominate the motion picture industry for decades to come, and it did so virtually unnoticed. Our current crop of ideologically motivated war films are a direct consequence of this general movement toward polemic messages in films depicting historical events. In any event, due to *Zulu's* groundbreaking style, the public came to expect realism in war movies. Unrealistic, overly-patriotic John Wayne sanitations of history were on the way out, along with John Ford Westerns that seemed like elaborate musicals in the shadow of *Zulu's* realism, even if this

new realism came at the price of subtle distortions to the truth. Indeed, *Zulu's* progressive messages were expertly shrouded by the fog of war.

## Notes

[1] Interestingly enough, decades earlier, when Shaka Zulu's mother Nandi died, Shaka had ordered the death of all cows under his control so that their calves would suffer his same motherless fate.

[2] The Buffalo Soldiers were African-American soldiers who fought against Native Americans on the 19<sup>th</sup> century American western frontier.

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# I'm Not There

Dir: Todd Haynes, USA, 2007

## A review by Lawrence Taylor

*I'm Not There* (2007), Todd Haynes's kaleidoscopic journey through the life and times of Bob Dylan, is almost impervious to any further plot synopsis, but I shall try.

The oft-discussed story of Dylan's life is told through six deliberately different performances. The first one we are acquainted with is the rambling, restless Dylan, played here by a young black boy, Marcus Carl Franklin. Franklin claims to be Woody Guthrie, the folk singer that Dylan admired most, and he spends his time traveling on trains, spouting worldly rhetoric, and entertaining passers by in his life with song. It is a deft touch by Haynes to make the portion of Dylan where he was most unsure of himself also the actor that resembles him the least of the six.

The next storyline focuses on a young Dylan, this time going by the name of Jack Collins, a folk hero and an activist who feels like he can change the world with his music. This portion is played by Christian Bale, who forces himself into a shell to play the reclusive and timid young folk singer. At the same time, Heath Ledger plays an actor playing Dylan (Collins) in a film version of his life. The film version focuses on Dylan's failed marriage to Sarah Lownds. Ledger does an equally solid job with this dense material as does Bale with his segment of the story, and Bale returns later as Pastor John, representing the time in Dylan's life where he found religion. All of this may seem too convoluted to follow, but it is actually more difficult to explain than to watch. Once you allow yourself to be put into the world of these actors, the switch between actors and the forward momentum the picture builds upon is fairly easy to get into.

And then, there is the meat of the picture, the storyline that everyone has been talking about. It is, of course, the turn by Kate Blanchett as Dylan. Here, she plays Dylan as Jude, the wayfarer wearing, bushy-headed misanthrope that most of us remember. This is when Dylan was trying to escape his own celebrity amidst a circle of friends and drugs. Blanchett is amazing, without a doubt, but it helps that she performs in the most pivotal and interesting time in Dylan's life. Her first appearance as Dylan is at the infamous New England Folk Festival where he went electric and angered his most devoted fans. But this is merely one way in which Dylan defied expectations. As Jude flirts airily with a socialite in a garden, dopes it up with the Beatles, harasses a journalist, and chats it up with poet Allen Ginsburg (David Cross), the tone of the film around Blanchett begins to grow more and more surreal, more dreamlike, as if we are traveling down a rabbit hole and losing any semblance of identity, with Dylan or even the film itself. Images and scenes begin to escape the frame of any sort of reality. Blanchett, hidden behind those signature black wayfarers most of the time, is still able to give the most honest, fulfilling, noteworthy performance of the six as she slumps around, spouting off at the mouth and using those shades to try and hide what everyone thinks they see in him. I especially enjoyed the wordplay between Blanchett and David Cross as Ginsburg. Cross does a spot on impersonation, at least visually, of Ginsburg.

Dylan's music is performed by various artists, but none of them, I believe, are by the actors themselves.

The fifth Dylan is a narrator of sorts, played sparingly by Ben Wishaw, who inserts a few poetic lines throughout the film as we travel along with the rest of the players. And the sixth, and most confounding in terms of style and flow of the film, is played by Richard Gere as Billy, the version of Dylan that became a hermit after his motorcycle accident. It was also no coincidence that at about that time Dylan played Billy the Kid in the Sam Peckinpah film *Pat Garrett and Billy the Kidd* (1973). With everything going in the same direction, the scenes with Gere seem taken out of another film altogether. The circus atmosphere and splashes of color seem to throw everything I had experienced to that point into a fit of uncertainty. But perhaps that was Haynes's idea all along. As the entire point of the film is to show how Dylan, in the face of public perception, would flip everything on its head and become something nobody expected, so Haynes might be doing the same with the structure of his film. Nevertheless, this last segment felt tacked on.

After helming the heartbreaking period drama, *Far From Heaven* (2002), it is quite a departure for Todd Haynes to take on a bit of surreal filmmaking with this picture. While this may be too dense of a film for many to get into, it is sure to be a film that will be revisited periodically from time to time. And, with the variety of techniques, themes, and ideas, it is also sure to be a staple with the more eccentric film studies professors at universities across the country.

What Haynes is attempting with *I'm Not There* may be more admirable than what he has achieved. The screenplay, while invigorating and well conceived, relies too often on poetic speech in order to vault the Dylan mystique beyond humanity. Visually, the film is engrossing, if not always linear. As a whole, the picture feels like a construct of smaller, more interesting pieces that may have worked on their own as a film. However, just as this is nearly impervious to synopsis, it may also be immune from any sort of true criticism regarding the structure and tone. This is the very definition of experimental filmmaking, something you used to see all the time. In recent years, experimental film has not found its footing, but Haynes may be able to change that with this picture. It is also a very personal film about the nature and the lack of identity that hits more than it misses.

# Son of Rambow

Dir: Garth Jennings, UK, 2008

## A review by A. T. McKenna, University of Nottingham, UK

If in possession of a genial disposition, and a couple of hours to kill, you could do a lot worse than take a shuftly at the infectiously affable, but not entirely uncynical, Brit-com, *Son of Rambow* (2008, Garth Jennings). Set in the sunny Thames Valley of the early 1980s, it tells the tale of two misfits who come together to make their own version of *First Blood* (1982, Ted Kotcheff) on a video camera in the hopes of winning the young filmmaker's prize on TV's *Screen Test*.

Will Proudfoot (Bill Milner) comes from a devoutly Christian household and is not allowed to watch television. Having been asked to leave a classroom while his classmates watch a TV programme, he meets Lee Carter (Will Poulter) in the school corridor. Lee is the school's live-wire and trouble-causer who has been thrown out of his own class for, one presumes, refusing to knuckle under in some way. After school, in Lee's garage, Will encounters his first ever movie, *First Blood*, and this experience sets his already febrile imagination ablaze. Subsequently, Lee enlists Will as stuntman on his upcoming film project, thereby capitalising on Will's newly born enthusiastic fearlessness. As the project progresses, their friendship deepens. When their secret project becomes common knowledge in the school, the two former outsiders find themselves inducted into the school's in-crowd and loyalties are tested as Will succumbs to the vertigo occasioned by the empty gestures of fair-weather friends.

Youngsters Milner and Poulter are quite brilliant, each giving a convincing and appealing performance, as do the rest of the young cast. Writer/director Garth Jennings has a perceptive eye for slapstick, bolstered by an understanding of the kind of stupid things kids will do when left to their own devices, and it is here where most of the deep laughs are found. In its best moments, the film is a hearty tribute to the imagination and recklessness of young lads and it is refreshing to see a film which features high school boys who are not sex maniacs. It's also good to see English suburbia portrayed as something other than the bland, conformist, soul crushing "middle-England" as it exists in the Metropolitan mindset. In *Son of Rambow*, our intrepid heroes find their imaginations fired by their surroundings, discovering their own ready-made film sets in the picturesque and the derelict.

The film's temporal setting provides many delights for those given to nostalgia. Pedantic nostalgics will relish the many anachronisms: records not yet released are heard as source music, bikes are secured with D-locks, and that staple of British nostalgia comedy, the Big Mobile Phone, makes an unfeasibly early appearance in the Thames Valley – where it is used to phone Spain. Twice. Additionally, nostalgic linguists can re-live the days when "Jimmy Hill chinny chin" meant "I don't believe you," and "skill" was used as an affirmation of goodness. If, in twenty-odd years time, a similar film is made, it will no doubt be peppered with bewildering and inappropriate uses of the word "random."

*Son of Rambow's* nostalgic feel, however, undermines its strengths. The film presents us with a view of a world in which youngsters could carry knives, create mischief, break bones and use dangerously unstable structures for recreation without having to explain themselves; childhood is presented as a time of freedom and experimentation. Most notably, it depicts a time when a child of 12 or so could pop to the cinema to illegally watch a proscribed film, comfortable in the knowledge that there would not be a stooge on the door demanding to see their papers for proof of age and identity.

Children under 12 are forbidden from seeing *Son of Rambow* unless accompanied by an adult, and it's a shame that a film which pays such warm tribute to the riotous imaginations of unsupervised children should exclude them from showings. Having received a 12A certificate, *Son of Rambow* was re-submitted to the BBFC who stood by their decision to mollycoddle the UK's youth, guarding them against depictions of "dangerous behaviour" and "smoking" (2007). As depressing as this is, it is not only the BBFC who are at fault; by placing such an emphasis on nostalgia, Jennings may have gone some way to alienating the very audience whose spirits inspire the film.

At its worst, *Son of Rambow* is a kids' movie for adults. Aside from nostalgia, the film's attempts to deal with topics of greater "seriousness," such as the protagonists' feelings of abandonment in their domestic lives, are not only jarring but also distract from the film's sense of fun. What is especially frustrating is Jennings's need to labour a point. The boys' respective outsider statuses form the basis of, and provide depth to, their friendship. There are two key scenes depicting their developing relationship – one in which they become blood-brothers and one that sees Lee unleash a furious tirade prompted by Will's disloyalty – both are brilliantly and movingly performed; but this, it seems, is not enough. Jennings is compelled to repeatedly show his director's hand in order to reiterate.

There are unfortunate consequences of this tactic. The film's climax is compromised by unwelcome moments of excruciating sentimentality that sit uneasily with the warm-hearted farce of the sequence. These fleeting glimpses of cynicism are perhaps not enough to wipe the smile from your face or, indeed, dissolve the lump in your throat, but they are irritatingly unnecessary. More worrying, however, is the authoritarian aspect occasioned by the director's refusal to allow the children's performances to speak for themselves. Seemingly fearful that an audience may not take the lead characters' feelings seriously, the director assumes a patrician demeanour, and in seeking to provide affirmation of Lee and Will's depth of feeling, he, conversely, undermines the accomplished performances of Poulter and Milner.

*Son of Rambow* is set in a time when youth culture wasn't being relentlessly co-opted by importunate grown-ups demanding inclusion. Its closest cinematic relative is probably *Gregory's Girl* (1981, Bill Forsythe), a film that wasn't marred by concessions made to the adults in the audience. Upon its release, *Gregory's Girl* could be enjoyed by youngsters without a handholding adult to provide protection through the scenes of brief nudity; I myself, as a mere ten year old, without parent or guardian, braved a screening of this film and the only genuinely disturbing occurrence of the evening came with the unforgivable tedium of the main feature, *Chariots of Fire* (1981, Hugh Hudson). Since then *Gregory's Girl* has been reclassified with a 12 certificate, and whether this was prompted by an over-protective impulse regarding children, or the increasing infantilisation of contemporary adulthood, such encroachments are unwelcome.

Nowadays it is nigh on impossible to find a children's film that does not pander, to some degree, to adult sensibilities; and while such a state of affairs may be pleasing for the adult who has to sit through such films with his offspring, the child is being short changed. With the majority of cinemas situated in places inaccessible to the unaccompanied child, and the continuance of pansyish censorship regulations, children's culture is diluted and compromised in order to accommodate the tastes of the ever-present guardian. *Son of Rambow's* great strength lies in its evocation of the rebelliousness, defiant risk-taking and unfettered imagination of early adolescence; its great weakness is that it pitches these themes over the heads of the generation who inspire them in a placatory gesture that swindles the young.

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# Atonement

Dir: Joe Wright, UK, 2007

## A review by Emily Crawford, Wright State University, USA

Two characters have been brought to life with passion in director Joe Wright's *Atonement* (2007), adapted from Ian McEwan's novel, and come to their end with such deep and vivid poetry and meaning as to demand captivation. This film, for me, shows the nature of a happy ending portrayal, and the art of manipulating, through brilliant storytelling, the emotional reactions of a viewer through a radiance of both "brightness" and "rightness."

The film is constructed with both powerfully passionate performances by McAvoy, Knightly, and three different actresses portraying Briony Tallis's character, and beautiful symbolic imagery that is weaved into each scene. Almost every scene or shot in the film is a painting filled with details that resonate with a palate of brilliant color reflecting the film's themes.

The rhythm of a typewriter opens the film. This will be Briony's theme for the entire movie (played first by young Saoirse Ronan), and her behavior reflects her upbringing. Her steps are also calculated and rhythmic, as if marching to the cadence of her superiors. She knows her place, and who does not "move in the same circle," as her sister Cecilia (Keira Knightley) brings up in a later conversation. She is a writer, and sits up perfectly straight as she types away.

One of the major themes explored in this movie is the suggestion of an obligatory and almost arbitrary life-path that is set before the characters. From the start of the film, it seems that each character is set firmly in their social place, some more aware of it than others. Many details in the movie reflect this idea; lamps going on in succession behind Briony as she walks stiffly down a hallway, three planes flying overhead with their reflections in a very narrow stream, several shots of eyes glaring straight ahead, and many more throughout the movie. Each character carries with them the social standing and expectations from their superiors and the society in which they live, but soon discovers the unpredictable and unforgiving surprises that life always throws at those whose convictions are most rigidly set.

The image of time and future being swayed by the things out of sight is displayed in many ways. In three instances, a character circles another during conversation, showing that this person is in the center of their thoughts and care, but it also places a kind of cage around them; it is hard to ignore a person whose sole concern is yourself, and hard to see past his body, which obstructs everything else from view. The element of being caught off guard or by surprise is shown through many shots of a character first facing away from the camera, and then turning around to face what was not visible before.

Both Briony and Cecilia display their status through their behavior, speech, and clothing, however there were details to Briony's appearance that were particularly interesting to see. Her dress is oversized, and I instantly saw the young girl who has been brought up in a

sterile, protected environment which contributes to her sense of adulthood and maturity, when she is still so young. Her hair too, remains styled and cut the same throughout her life; her childhood choices dictate her life through a never-ending guilt and desperate quest for atonement.

The relationship between Cecilia Tallis and Robbie Turner (James McAvoy), is something that happens very quickly, but richly. A few events are enough to stir up an extraordinary capacity for feeling, and this feeling of progression towards the zenith of a powerful love scene forces the viewer to dive immediately into the deep end, drawn by the strong current of tension and then action.

Briony misinterprets an argument she spies on through her window. Later she reads the letter given to her by Robbie to deliver to Cecilia, which contains a message he did not mean to give; a shockingly crude and sexually explicit message in the eyes of a young girl with such strict upbringing. The letter he thought he'd given to deliver is sitting on his desk, the realization of which leads up to an extremely awkward scene between Robbie and Cecilia. However thoughtless and unintended the mistake, this incident proves to be a catalyst that fuels the passion between the two.

Briony believes she is protecting her sister Cecilia by pinning a hideous crime committed by Paul Marshal (Benedict Cumberbatch) toward the young and impressionable Lola Quincey (Juno Temple), on Robbie. Later in her life, she confesses to her hidden "crush" on Robbie, which had an inevitable effect on her actions at the time. Briony watches, again through a window, at Robbie being taken away from Cecilia and his home. Seeming to peer at her with a very similar expression on her face is the image of the Virgin Mary in stained glass. Briony is held rigidly in her conviction of doing what was justified by her feelings. Her emotionally drained face suggests that she does not yet feel anything of the guilt that she will later learn to acknowledge.

This leads to another strong use of imagery in smoke; Cecilia is surrounded in smoke within Robbie's flashback to that fateful night. Just about every character smokes in the movie, but particularly Cecilia and Robbie. What is at first a mode of relaxation and stress-relief becomes symbolic of the hidden, driving emotions within these socially suppressed characters.

One outstanding example of this, and also the 'set path' view that I offered above, is captured by Robbie trying to write his letter while listening to opera for inspiration, and Cecilia mumbling to herself as she looks in the mirror through a curtain of smoke. She must, just like those she has been brought up around all her life, portray what is expected of her. Robbie must find the appropriate words to express what he wants to say to Cecilia. Appearance and impression is everything. Both feel the pressure and confinement of society in their own ways. His confession of love should be brought about in as elegant and humble a way as possible, but instead is brought about rashly and crudely; a kind of expedient that, as I said before, serves to fuel their growing love into top speed.

Robbie chooses to join the army instead of staying in prison. They've been torn apart, and we meet Briony again, (played by Romola Gara), marching along to her cadence and obeying as she has always obeyed, as a nurse. Overwhelmed by the endless torn and shattered bodies of soldiers around her, she is asked to hold the hand of one soldier while he dies. She has grown and is realizing the full scope of what she has done to the lives of two people very close to

her, never having yet experienced love herself. As she sits with the dying soldier, she offers herself in the most supportive way possible; with her love. Love, for Briony, is something she has only discovered in its full light through the love of those around her, and it will leave a scar in her own heart for the rest of her life.

Perhaps the most visually impressive scene in the film occurs on the beach crawling with soldiers. The one long shot follows Robbie through the nightmare of war and along the way captures many meaningful details from fear and hopelessness in the face of a soldier to a chorus of men emitting their voices across the water and through the surreal, misshapen scene of a Ferris wheel and soldiers on merry-go-rounds; this is reminiscent, to me, of the scene in *Apocalypse Now* (1979) that is haunted with eerie circus music as Martin Sheen walks through hell on earth. Through his time serving in the war he is constantly haunted by Cecilia's parting words and pleas to "come back to me." This torture is expressed visually by Robbie's figure in front of a screen where the showing of two characters in love is projected, the characters' faces overwhelming and overbearing. He often tries to escape into his dreams to think of Cecilia, and in one scene he walks through the grass, dirty and torn. He lifts his helmet off his head and tilts his head back. For a brief moment, the shot brightens and the sounds of birds are heard above everything else, but soon he comes back and is met abruptly with the discovery of rows of people with gun shots to the head, including many children. With this, the 'set path' of life is interrupted by the unexpected.

Just as the characters in the movie are then confronted with the hard fact of life's unpredictability and surprise, the audience is treated to many sudden surprises in the line of the story. For the latter part of the film, the story becomes less linear, and it is through the voice of an aged Briony (played by Vanessa Redgrave), that we are finally shown the full picture. Briony sits in a chair, perfectly straight with her hair short and pulled back by a barrette, and gives an interview, talking of her life's work. When it comes time to talk of her latest, and 'last' novel as she tells the interviewer, she must take a minute to collect herself before beginning. She has written and re-written her true life story many times in the forms of previous novels, but in her last novel she believes that she has offered a work that represents an entire life of striving for some kind of atonement for the lives she destroyed. The audience has been fooled into thinking she had gone to Robbie and Cecilia and apologized some time after Robbie had gone to war, but this is revealed to be an imagined incident, and in fact, she never got the chance to say anything to them. Robbie dies of a disease while away from Cecilia in the war, and Cecilia dies around the same time when her shelter is flooded. The weight of this on Briony's shoulders has essentially frozen her into place, brought into stunning visual demonstration by the sterile, white room to which she retreats, and the identical haircut she keeps through her life, which looks very out of place on a woman of her age.

The final and most powerful part of the story, and the subject I'd like to focus on for the remainder of this essay, is the closing twist. In these scenes, we are asked to engage with complex themes of life, love, regret and tragedy. Many brilliant and symbolically rich films have the structure and presentation to speak for themselves. The ending of recently released film *3:10 to Yuma* (2007) comes to mind. Others, like *Atonement*, are filled to the brim and cascading over the side with artistic touch and awe-inspiring symbolism that is irresistible to transfer into words, because the emotional responses they evoke relate to the kind of epiphanies that many people aspire to realize their whole lives.



Brought back in to finish her interview, Briony begins to reveal to us her process of atonement. In her writing, she dives deep into the events and details of her life, vividly recreated with her skill for writing. The happiness that Robbie and Cecilia could have had haunts her constantly, and it is from this retrospective world that she re-writes their story in her final novel.

Life is made up of decisions, some larger than others. What the later part of this film demonstrates is that the timeline of a person's life never becomes fixed on a certain path, no matter how much we struggle to set it that way. Briony is brought up and prepared for a life in which she must constantly follow and obey. Therefore, as she grows older, she views her discipline as certain strength. At the same time, she struggles with the fact that the one small, emotionally driven decision she made when she was a child has caused a larger and more determinant outcome than all of the discipline and submission she was cultivated with in her childhood. It seems that larger decisions are often easier to alter than the smaller ones. The things we say or do to another we cannot take back; even if an apology is accepted, the memory and scar that was created will always be there. For a decision to go to a certain college, there is always the possibility of transfer or quitting, marriage has the option of divorce, and careers can be brought to ruin by any number of smaller coincidences.

Life is unfair, and an entire world mourning for the wrongful death of a great person will not bring her or him back. No matter what kind of emotional investment we put into another person, it may be absolutely powerless in the face of the seemingly insignificant incident that does not come to full light until the effect it has caused has fully bloomed. A countless number of stories have this premise; that the small incident or factor which ultimately leads to success or defeat, happiness or unhappiness, life or death, is something which is overlooked completely at the crucial point of its influence. The catalyst for the demise or rise of the character's life is often something that she or he does not notice until it has taken effect.

What I love about this film is that it offers a paradox of the phrase, 'love conquers all.' In one sense, as McAvoy is out fighting a war in the world and Knightley fights one of her own within her heart, love is eventually 'conquered' through both of these characters' deaths. But in this way we get to escape the incredible grief of one lover accepting the loss of her or his other. At the same time, the idea of love conquering all is reinforced by the created immortality by Briony of that love in her writing.

Through the visual representation of happiness given to us after the visual representation of death, viewers are able to come away with a lightened sense of tragedy. The work of fiction set within a larger work of fiction offers the last images we see. In this way, Briony's novel becomes larger than life, and restores our joy and satisfaction with the outcome of the film. This ending is what sets the film apart, for me as a viewer, and distinguishes it as evoking a wider scope of emotional responses in its audience than that of more conventional films - satisfying the audience's desire for romantic closure along with the tragedy of the story. Both characters are freed from suffering on this earth, and also live forever in happiness through immortal representation in immortal prose. For my final thought, I'm reminded of the words of Bob Dylan: "We live and we die, we know not why, but I'll be with you when the deal goes down..." (Dylan, 2006).

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