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“somehow the hate has got mislaid”:

adaptation & the end of the affair

“Everything is indeed permitted if God does not exist, and man is in consequence forlorn, for he cannot find anything to depend upon either within or outside himself. He discovers forthwith, that he is without excuse. For if indeed existence precedes essence, one will never be able to explain one’s action by reference to a given and specific human nature...We are left alone, without excuse. That is what I mean when I say that man is condemned to be free. Condemned, because he did not create himself, yet is nevertheless at liberty, and from the moment that he is thrown into this world he is responsible for everything he does. The existentialist does not believe in the power of passion. He will never regard a grand passion as a destructive torrent upon which a man is swept into certain actions as by fate, and which, therefore, is an excuse for them. He thinks that man is responsible for his passion.”

-Jean-Paul Sartre

“I fought belief for longer than I fought love, but I haven’t any fight left.”

-Sarah Miles

As social critics have observed a rise in fundamentalism and tribalism, a rise often tied to the turn of the millennium, English language cinema has seen a concomitant increase in mainstream films with overtly religious content - film being a site in which artists and audiences are working out their considerable anxieties about this ‘new’ assertion of religious values.

The *Harry Potter* films (Chris Columbus, 2001 and 2002; Alfonso Cuarón, 2004; Mike Newell, 2005), *The Passion of the Christ* (Mel Gibson, 2004), *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (2005, Andrew Adamson), *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy (Peter Jackson, 2001, 2002, 2003), *Constantine* (Francis Lawrence, 2005) - all have been alternately praised and taken to task by critics and audiences for their perceived fidelities and infidelities to their source texts. This is hardly news; the discussion of fidelity is, as Dudley Andrew puts it, “the most frequent and most tiresome” approach to examining the issues of adaptation. (Andrew 265) In particular, comparisons between the source text and the film are arguably pointless and distracting to the real business at hand; examination of the film as a self-contained and terminal work.

The notion of fidelity, tiresome as it may be, is still useful, and particularly so when discussing the adaptation of the overtly theological text. Films that take Western Christianity as their implicit and explicit subject matter are not only frequently adaptations of earlier works, but all are of course also overshadowed by their constant consideration as adaptations of the Christ narrative. The notion that these works are intended or could be considered by audiences “on their own merits” is inherently problematic, particularly when the films are

self-consciously positioned, created, and marketed as adaptations. In the case of *Narnia* or *The Passion of the Christ*, for instance, the emphasis in the marketing, critical, and audience discourses is on the supposed transference of a religious ‘message’ to a new medium.

As Andrew himself puts it, “No matter how we judge the process or success of the film, its ‘being’ owes something to the tale that was its inspiration and potentially its measure...Adaptations claiming fidelity bear the original as a signified, whereas those inspired by or derived from an earlier text stand in a relation of referring to the original” (*Ibid* 262). Clearly, on one level these films may seek to be read as closed texts; on another, we can and should view these films not as contained statements or even performed monologues, but as conversational volleys, entries in an on-going dialogue. Considering the films specifically as adaptations can add to our understanding of both works, throwing arguments and assumptions into stark relief.

Neil Jordan’s 1999 adaptation of Graham Greene’s novel *The End of the Affair* can most simply be seen, and has been examined by critics, as an example of what Andrew calls the “borrowing” mode of adaptation. In this familiar mode, the adapter draws on, with varying degrees of specificity, the “material, idea, or form of an earlier, generally successful text” (*Ibid* 264). The adapter chooses a text that has a pre-established audience, as well as a perceived ‘legitimacy’ as a text. A borrowed adaptation depends on universal myths and themes to sustain itself. This model, though, is subject-oriented. It considers the elements of the text, but not those of the adapter, whose own intentions and thematic concerns may converge or diverge from the source. Jordan’s adaptation of Greene’s work is more than simply a filmmaker’s treatment of an appealing text and goes beyond “borrowing”; it is an interesting study in convergence and divergence. George Bluestone’s alternate model of adaptation may be applied here. Bluestone uses the example of two intersecting lines, book and film. Where the two intersect, they are virtually indistinguishable, but as the lines continue, the two get further and further apart (Bluestone 200). In the case of Jordan and Greene, one can imagine their paths not as straight perpendicular lines with a single intersection, but as lines that converge and diverge. Where Jordan’s film converges with Greene’s novel, it illuminates Greene’s take on faith and the limits of human reason. Where the film diverges from Greene’s novel, an entirely different understanding of the narrative emerges. In a way, this pairing offers a ‘case study’ of adaptation.

The End of the Affair is, superficially, the story of a love triangle that unfolds through a series of flashbacks and *mise-en-abymes*. Maurice Bendrix, the narrator, is an atheist and a writer whose relationship with Sarah Miles is marred by his bitter jealousy; Sarah is discontent in her marriage to Henry, a civil servant. Against the backdrop of WWII London, Sarah and Bendrix carry on a long-term affair. During the Blitz, Bendrix is either killed or knocked unconscious by a bomb; believing him dead, Sarah rashly makes a vow to God that she will give Bendrix up forever if God will spare him. When it appears that her bargain has been accepted, Sarah rejects Bendrix without an explanation. Two years later, Bendrix hires a private investigator, believing Sarah to have a new lover. Eventually, he learns of Sarah's vow.

In both film and novel, the past 'catches up' to the present halfway through the story. It is at this point that the plots begin to differ. This difference is significant not only for narrative coherence, but also for its impact on the religious subtext of the piece and its ultimate meaning. Considering the film as a borrowed text, the preservation or disavowal of the themes of the earlier work is worth exploring. It may be useful to establish first the key differences in the two texts (and by key, I mean those that seem significant and illustrative of the adaptation of the theology – and not simply the plot): the nature of the manifest miracle, the figure of the atheist Reverend Smythe, the relationship between Bendrix and Henry, and, of course, Sarah's adherence to her vow.

The first deviation from the novel has to do with the miracle revealed after Sarah's death. In the novel, one of these involves a rationalist preacher, Smythe, with whom Sarah confers. She wants to be reasoned out of her belief; the man fails to convince her, and Sarah wonders if his lack of faith is really anger at God for the preacher's disfiguring birthmark. After Sarah's death, the birthmark miraculously disappears and thus the rationalist is converted. In the film, it is the detective's son who experiences the miracle; his birthmark disappears after Sarah kisses him. Clearly, this requires a different interpretation. The miracle is no longer one of faith conquering reason, but of innocence over sin; Sarah removes the child's blemish as a healing saint might, by virtue of her own moral sanctity.

Jordan, in fact, does away with the figure of Smythe altogether. Ironically enough, the role is conflated with that of the Catholic priest who advises Sarah. This alteration, which would seem on the surface to simply remove the overt intellectual questioning of faith, actually works quite differently to produce a more, not less, secular narrative. In the novel, it is precisely Smythe's arguments against God which ultimately convince Sarah of God's existence; "I had gone to him to rid me of a superstition, but every time I went his fanaticism fixed the superstition deeper." Without doubt, there is no possibility of belief; without her hatred of God, there is no love of God either. Jordan has effectively removed the doubt and the hatred, and in so doing, has removed the crux of Sarah's belief.

In another change to the plot, Jordan's story has Bendrix moving into Henry and Sarah's home before her death, rather than afterwards as Greene wrote it. The adaptive substitution here is one of dynamic weight. The change increases the significance of the relationship between Henry and Bendrix. It also allows, or perhaps



forces, Jordan to show Bendrix's emotions through his interactions with Henry. In the novel, Bendrix has no foil for his anger and so the reader is as confused about the emotions Bendrix is experiencing as he is himself. Greene emphasizes Bendrix's isolation; Jordan, having already reunited Sarah and Bendrix, has taken the story in another direction. An added scene, in which Bendrix apologizes to Henry, again emphasizes the relationship between the men and suggests an alleviation of Bendrix's isolation. Certainly, Greene's Bendrix remains unapologetic and even contemptuous; he hates Henry, as he hates himself. Finally, in the novel, Sarah keeps her vow to God. She promises to give Bendrix up forever in return for his life, believes absolutely that God has interceded, and dies without abandoning her vow. In Jordan's film, Bendrix and Sarah are reunited; Sarah breaks her vow and has time with Bendrix before she dies. It is this change to the ending that has caused some viewers to see the film as a violation of not only the form but also the substance of Greene's novel. Reviewer Stanley Kaufmann goes so far as to say that Jordan is "ravaging the spiritual elements in the novel" and asks why Jordan has bothered to adapt the novel if only to "squeeze and distort" its religious theme (Kaufmann 25). Richard Alleva argues that the change causes the film to fail not only as an adaptation, but as a work of art: it "dissolves Graham Greene's central premise and relieves Sarah of her theological dilemma. And without that dilemma, the story ultimately doesn't make sense, and so it can't be said that the movie even stands on its own merits" (Alleva, 18).¹

Greene only asks the reader to accept that Sarah truly believes in the miracle. He does not ask that the reader himself believe; Sarah's vow is more important than what precedes it. In having Sarah break her vow, Jordan shifts the interest of the film onto the miracle itself. Likewise, the disappearing birthmark is not clouded by any philosophic debate over intellect versus blind faith; it is a pure and simple event.² Jordan engages with the miracle

¹ Not all critics see these changes as destructive or even contradictory to Greene's intended reading. For example, Paul Baumann maintains that Greene's work is open to such an alternative ending, citing the "enigmatic aspects of Greene's fevered and heterodox religious vision." He points out that Sarah is not meant to be a perfect being, even after her salvation (Baumann 16). It is certainly true that Sarah still yearns for what she calls "ordinary human love".

² At the same time, moving the birthmark from another character to that of the boy also alludes to Jordan's earlier film, *The Miracle*

as a magical act, more than a religious act. (Notably, Jordan himself attributes his attitude towards the miraculous to the peculiarities of Irish Catholicism, which he describes as "...more to do with magic – it's a very superstitious set of lessons you learn when you're a child") (Wootton).

Where film and novel do converge is in their presentation of the other 'miracle': Bendrix's presumed resurrection and the ambiguity that surrounds this core event and thereby pervades the narrative. Both Greene's novel and Jordan's film rely on similar structural devices to create an intentionally and overtly ambiguous narrative. The use of first-person narration not only allows them to convey the internal dialogue of Bendrix and to recall a classic convention of the detective novel, but, most of all, the tactic makes Bendrix a self-conscious and active participant in his own conversion, and allows the audience the same self-conscious and active participation. Bendrix is a highly subjective and unreliable narrator and, more unusually, he is also highly aware of his own subjectivity. As Gene Phillips explains in his discussion of the novel, a conventional third person narrator would have made the novel "a pious and pedestrian tale of a mistress who repents and becomes a saint", whereas the subjective quality involves the reader in Bendrix's debate (Phillips 128). Because of the first-person narration, the reader/viewer's knowledge of events is limited; the audience only understands the 'truth' as it unfolds for Bendrix. This is important stylistically, and because it creates sympathy for the jealous and bitter antihero. More essentially, though, it encourages the reader/viewer to experience Bendrix's conversion (from one who doesn't believe to one who believes enough to tell God that he hates him "as though you existed") as he does. The novel ends with Bendrix still uncertain, still doubtful, still full of hate, leaving the reader to deal with this ambiguity.

Jordan preserves this quality to an extent in his adaptation by using limited perspective. Dramatizing Bendrix's internal struggle, however, is left largely up to the voiceover narration and facilitated by a framing device: the film opens with a pan over the typewriter and writing tools; Bendrix begins to type and the narration begins. Presenting Sarah's voice was an easier task, perhaps, due to the device of her diary. Beyond its function in supplying the missing pieces of the plot, the diary also allows Greene and Jordan to articulate the abstractions of Sarah's conversion, and above all, to demonstrate the limits of Bendrix's (and our own) understanding.

Neither novel nor film is structured chronologically; the audience must put pieces of the story together as it is revealed.³ The novel begins with the line "a story has no beginning and no end", and accordingly chooses as its own start a moment two years after the affair has in fact ended. The details of the affair are relayed first through Bendrix's memories and then through his reading of Sarah's diary. This reveals Bendrix's misconceptions,

(1991), in which the main character, a teenage boy, experiences what he interprets as a miracle.

³ Interestingly, Edward Dmytryk's 1955 version of the film undoes this effect; the story is told chronologically first from Bendrix's perspective and then retold from Sarah's; the continual and un-signposted timeshifts are absent.

misconceptions shared, at least on an intellectual level, by the reader. The pivotal point in the story – Bendrix's death or near-death and Sarah's vow – is written into the novel twice. Greene relays, in their words, the event, first as Bendrix experienced it and again as Sarah experienced it.

Jordan follows Greene's lead carefully here, mixing the present with flashback (without transitional cues, simply cutting between various periods in a deliberately uncertain manner) and showing us that critical scene multiple times. On film, Jordan is able to use varying camera angles and movement, along with additional footage, to literally give us a different perspective on the event. The effect is that both the rationalist and the spiritual versions are believable; the scene is ambivalent and the viewer cannot really know whether a miracle has occurred. What is accomplished in the book through Bendrix's ongoing narration is done on film by the visuals of those two scenes alone.

The unreliable narration, fractured chronology, and competing perspectives are not only generic cues – this is, after all, a detective story – but also cues to the narrative's theological intent. If our pursuit of salvation is, as Catholic theology has held, really a pursuit of knowledge, a seeking of moral perfection, then the ultimate goal of this detective story is somewhat loftier than the uncovering of an illicit affair.

Clearly, both Jordan and Greene struggle to find an answer to the dilemma Greene has laid out, the inability of reason to explain or provide meaning to human existence or bring us closer to that perfect moral knowledge. Where the two works diverge incontrovertibly is in how they cope with that dilemma. Jordan chooses a framework of neo-existentialism; Greene defies both the rationalists and the existentialists in what Gorra calls "a return to the pre-modernist conditions of narrative" (Gorra xvii) and in his insistence on faith alone, rather than faith in reason or in the will.

For his part, Jordan uses editing and camera movement to question this notion of certain knowledge; rather, he offers differing perspectives and multiple versions of cataclysmic events. Again, he follows Greene's lead: in the novel, the critical moments on the affair are described first by Bendrix, and then, again, in Sarah's diary, which makes up the middle portion of the novel and casts events in a new light for Bendrix and the reader. Jordan represents this difference in perspective literally. In an early scene, Bendrix and Sarah meet in an old haunt, two years after the sexual relationship has been broken off, for an awkward and (on Bendrix's part) hostile meal. As the two talk about Sarah's marriage, the camera tracks from left to right, tracing a predatory half-circle around the table, until Sarah breaks down and rushes from the restaurant. When, much later, the scene is recounted through the reading of the diary, Jordan changes nothing in the *mise-en-scene*, but reverses the camera movement, which now tracks from right to left. Similarly, the central event of the bomb blast and Bendrix's 'resurrection' is shown in turn from the perspective of both Bendrix and Sarah. Rather than recasting the entire scene, however, Jordan again uses a subtle variation.

Jordan's handling of these scenes would seem to permit both rational and miraculous explanations, turning a spiritual question into an epistemological one. Jordan



seems also to encourage a third reading, one which Greene himself closes off. This is, of course, an elementary psychoanalytical reading. The bomb blast is a moment of trauma, which produces in Sarah a hysterical response. The trauma of the blast is represented not just twice, but yet again at a moment of crisis for Bendrix, becoming a metaphor for his mental state. Jordan's gestures towards this reading seem, if one cannot be permitted to say a violation, at least a radical departure from Greene's position. In short, where Greene offers faith as the non-rationalist explanation, Jordan offers a choice between the magical and the psychoanalytic. God, as anything other than a fictional device, is removed from the narrative.⁴

At the same time, the malevolence of God, and of Sarah and Bendrix's mutual hatred for God, are undermined by Jordan's treatment of the physical Church, a point made by Phillip Kemp in his review of the film. "In the film, the church has become spacious and opulent. The draperies are bright with blue and crimson, the rood screen a glowing expanse of gold. Hazy sunlight streams through the stained glass. This is symptomatic: an awkward, edgy, tormented novel has been upholstered for comfort" (Kemp). Moreover, in Jordan's version, the Church is visually aligned through the lighting and camera angles with Sarah's home; at its

⁴ In adapting the novel, Jordan makes a judgement of the original work and finds it lacking. "If something is finished as a perfect work there is no point in trying to do anything with it. In this case I felt there was something to be done" (Wootton). What is lacking in Greene's novel, according to Jordan, is a measure of humanity. "Greene is great at moral dilemmas...what I needed to do was bring the human drama to the surface and find a way of making the whole thing understandable and believable in human terms" (Sony Pictures). Whereas the novel focuses on the intellectual and philosophical debates of the characters, Jordan focuses on the inexplicable aspects of human feelings. Jordan's declared intent might account for the direction the film takes toward standard melodrama. The appeal of Greene's text to Jordan, it should be noted, is most obvious when the film is considered as a part of Jordan's *oeuvre*. His concerns with the fantastic, with the unity of sex and death, with the motif of the storyteller – while there is not space here to examine these, a more thorough examination of *The End of the Affair* as an adaptation would surely require their consideration. In the context of these other works, Jordan's use of Greene, as well as his divergence from Greene, begins to make sense. Jordan creates stories not about faith and hate, but about magic and empathy.

worst, the Church here is stifling in its conventionality and security, dull and placid like Sarah's marriage to civil servant Henry, but certainly never terrifying, spiteful, or abusive. The god of Greene's *End of the Affair* is not a kind or forgiving god, nor is he a dull and passive god; he is a calculating and possessive outsider who thwarts the couple's efforts to be together.

Jordan's approach may have more appeal, in some ways, to a 'reasonable' viewer, and this may explain why Jordan's film never quite becomes the "diary of hate" that the novel represents. Bendrix's hate cannot be accounted for, nor is it driven, by reason. Even as he realizes, and as Sarah tries to reason with him, that his anger and bitterness will inevitably destroy the human relationship, he is unable to will himself into acting otherwise. Even as he realizes the futility of hating God – "I've got to be reasonable", he tells himself in his despair – Bendrix is driven to a twisted and unwilling faith – "I hate You, God, I hate You as though You existed." Greene has been labelled a Jansenist, a determinist, and an existentialist. In his treatment of Bendrix as a hero who hates, Greene seems not to strictly adhere to any of these positions. Rather, he takes account of what William Barrett calls "the Furies" – like those of Greek mythology, forces that cannot be controlled by rationality or by fate. As Barrett sees it, the existentialists, in their reliance on rationality and will, deny the Furies, and in so doing, fall short of really understanding human morality.

Iris Murdoch has described the modern fictional hero as "behaviourist, existentialist, and utilitarian." His being and morality, his selfhood, are determined by his actions and his expression of his will (Murdoch 8). While this would seem a fairly accurate description of the on-screen Bendrix, Greene's hero is something else. This Bendrix is a man in transition from just this sort of modern hero to another sort, one whose self is not dictated by his external actions or by the exercising of his will. The novel works structurally and thematically as a challenge to rationalism and its limitations.

Murdoch's conception of the sovereignty of good posits that morality and self-determination do not occur only in moments of will-driven action, but equally in the moments "in-between." This suggests that the passivity of a character like Henry, for example, can be moral activity, while Sarah's faith is more essentially moral activity than are her overt actions, and even Bendrix's hateful conversion is a movement towards knowledge and therefore moral goodness. Murdoch argues against the twin notions that morality cannot be an internal and wholly private concept, and that salvation by works is the only possibility. Moreover, reason and will alone cannot determine the morality of one's actions. Accordingly, Bendrix comes to belief in spite of reason, and yet we are not invited to view – in the novel – his belief as delusional or any less intellectually sophisticated than his previous (and even simultaneous) denials.

Bendrix loses control of his destiny, his narrative, and even the literal narrative as belief takes over. In short, he becomes – the novel becomes – unreasonable. At the 'arbitrary beginning' of the tale, Bendrix is the existentialist and utilitarian hero, with no desire for or belief in a transcendent moral authority, only for self-sufficiency and control over his own will. Bendrix is, of course, a writer – for Jordan a convenience that primarily enables a clever framing device, but which carries greater

significance. Bendrix cannot write his own story; when he tries, it gets perverted and reclaimed by the literal intercession of Sarah's diary. A researcher and biographer, Bendrix is incapable of empathy with his characters. What is lacking in Bendrix's life is not only love, but a narrative. In his work Building a Bridge to the Eighteenth Century, Neil Postman argues, as others before him, that we require a transcendent narrative "for without one, we can have no sense of purpose. Without a sense of purpose, we are left with only power as the source of authority" (Postman, 106). Bendrix, like all heroes, becomes a moral being; unlike the hero of reason and will, he does so not by creating his own narrative, but by accepting, however reluctantly, his place in a larger narrative over which he holds little influence.

Naturally, like Bendrix, the majority of the audience for Jordan's film prefers not to believe in the truth of such a narrative. Postman and, I think, Greene, would say that it doesn't matter. As Postman says, "the measure of a narrative's 'truth' is in its consequences" (*Ibid* 110). By the end of the film and the book alike, Bendrix believes, but what matters more to Greene is that he has already begun to live as though he believes, as if there is a transcendent moral authority. This is not to propose that this belief has brought Bendrix any satisfaction, only that his existence has become invested with purpose despite his resistance.

Jordan mistakes this purpose as "love", forgetting that hate can be as purposeful and moral as love. In fact, the novel leaves off before Bendrix has begun to love. Faith and hate come first, and Bendrix has only just attained these; his relationship with God is uncertain and anguished at the novel's close. Bendrix's lack of faith, in Greene's conception, means that he is incapable of love; while his hatred is a precursor to faith. By turning this into a love story, Jordan has in some respects missed the point, a point even Bendrix is able to articulate by the story's end. Michael Gorra, in his introduction to a recent edition, speaks of the novel's tendency to anger its readers. I'd like to suggest that this is more than an incidental tendency or failing, as Gorra casts it, but a strategy to replicate in the reader Bendrix's own feelings of vexation, loss, and rage. By framing Bendrix's transformation to a moral agent as a love story, Jordan alters the film profoundly.

I began this essay by speaking of the divergence of Jordan's adaptation and its significance to the larger question of adaptation. Andrew implores us to consider adaptation "a peculiar form of discourse, but not an unthinkable one...let us use it as we use all cultural practices, to understand the world from which it comes and the one toward which it points" (Andrew 271). Jordan's adaptation – expressing his own thematic concerns and reflecting a fundamental theological shift – points backwards to Greene's moral universe and forward to a new climate of production and reception, and may reveal as much through its divergences as through its points of concurrence. Gorra has called The End of the Affair "the religious novel of a fundamentally secular age" (Gorra xxi). If, as some would like to argue, we are abandoning the secular for a new fundamentalist era, Jordan's film may well be a fundamentally secular film for that religious age. ☺

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