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Mr. Fischer

Understanding Film

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## Joseph Wright IV, Auteur

Joseph Wright IV is a relatively new auteur according to sources like Rotten Tomatoes and Roger Ebert of the Chicago Sun but he already has a style and makes movies that are quite obviously his own. The stories he produces are happy endings with a twist. Take *The Soloist* for example, his latest movie, the two main characters are friends, supporting each other and helping each other but neither wins at the end of the story. The title character is still a soloist, too mentally impaired to ever play before a crowd. The joy of the happy ending doesn't extend into fiction but stops at a believable point that makes the audience feel content. In *Atonement*, the story's happy ending is completely fictional, it is written because the author didn't see a reason to depress her readers. There is a happy ending but it is so closely tied to sadness that there is no victory for true love. Wright's style is more than an unfinished story though. His camera work tells the story as much as his actors, and shots that he uses without dialogue are the most meaningful. Along with his regular troupe of producers and composers, Wright creates movies that carry his voice.

Wright's use of light increases the emotion of a scene. Shots of the actors faces are head on as if from the perspective of another character or from the perspective of a present audience. The light shines only on one side of the face, emphasizing the drama of the moment through the profile of the characters. In *The Soloist*, Wright uses dramatic lighting to explode the sympathy that

the audience has towards the schizophrenic cellist, Nathaniel Ayers, in a flashback. Ayers is shown sitting on the floor, crying in the fetal position with only a sliver of light coming through a shut door illuminating his profile. In this light, the audience can see his tears and hear his sobbing. The angle of this shot focuses the audience on Ayers and his misery without any distracting images.

*The Soloist* shows the history of Nathaniel through random flashbacks. In one of these flashbacks, Nathaniel is playing his cello in his basement. He hears a sound and looks out the window. A car on fire rolls slowly past and the camera comes in on a close up of his face, lit orange by the flames of the passing car. This moment, which occurred during the civil rights movement, frightens the young Nathaniel who goes and grabs his cello again practicing with more fervor than before. This connects his cello and his music to his fear. The music protects him. Without Nathaniel's terrified face seen by the firelight, the connection would be impossible.

In *Pride and Prejudice*, a much lighter film, Wright uses lighting to emphasize moments in between important shots. A long shot of Elizabeth Bennet, the heroine of the story, eyes closed, riding in a carriage, is unimportant to the plot, but emphasizes the confusion and thoughtfulness of the moment. This shot also shows a passage of time of possibly a few weeks or even months. Without the light streaming across her sleeping face, the shot would be uninteresting and not worth the three or five seconds that it is in the movie. Wright's choice to include this shot obviously adds something because this dramatic in-between shot is used in almost every *Pride and Prejudice* music video made by fans and posted on youtube.

In Wright's director commentary that goes along with the movie *Pride and Prejudice*, Wright discusses how he likes to use light. In an introductory scene of the house where the Bennet fam-

ily lives, Wright uses two shots spliced together to portray the house illuminated by sunshine. The two shots, he says, were taken hours apart so that the sun would be streaming through the windows on either side of the house as the main characters walked through them. The purpose of his lighting in this case was to show a warm atmosphere in which the family lived. This use of lighting is not as dramatic as those of the sleeping Elizabeth and the pathetic Nathaniel but it still shows Wright's intention is to use lighting to imply certain emotions.

Wright's movies all have come from books and he follows them in making his movie to a far greater degree of accuracy than some other directors. In *Pride and Prejudice* for instance, he only strays from the novel to increase the drama of the moment. When Mr. Darcy proposes to Elizabeth, it isn't in the house where she is staying, as in the book, it is during a heavy rain underneath roman columns. The rain and heavy breathing of both the characters, from running to get out of the rain, combined with the dark colors and gray background create an environment entirely unsuited to a proposal.

Another time that Wright alters the scenery of the story is at Mr. Darcy's second proposal. This proposal is insanely romantic. Elizabeth has been awake all night, walks out on a foggy early morning and Mr. Darcy comes down to meet her wordlessly. They express their love for

each other and as she kisses his hand, the sun can be seen rising between their heads.



This moment is very different from the novel in which they are on a hike and have been abandoned by her sister, to walk together and stumblingly admit to each other their feelings. The sunrise, another example of Wright's use of light to increase drama, contrasts with the rain in the first proposal and the movie ends its climax and goes into resolution. Wright manages to maintain the plot of the book in each movie without adding or removing any characters or important periods of time.

Time is fluid in Wright's movies. *The Soloist* gives Nathaniel's history in broken pieces. We don't see Nathaniel's schizophrenia until over halfway through the film because this is when we see him in Julliard. Although we know that Nathaniel could be violent, our first view of his violence comes as a shock. Wright uses the shock and adds to it when he combines two bouts of violence by mixing shots of them. One of these scenes, takes place in the current moment of the film while the other takes place when Nathaniel still lived at home with his sister. The fights are identical in the way the victim is helpless as Nathaniel attacks and as both victims try to defend themselves as they are attacked with chairs. The arc of the falling chairs switches the shots so

that the chair the older Nathaniel wields could be the same one that he nearly hits his sister with years earlier. This connection of then and now brings back the reality that Nathaniel is mentally handicapped and that it isn't something that can be cured as easily the audience up to that point has been led to believe. He was the same person years ago and the same demons plague him now.

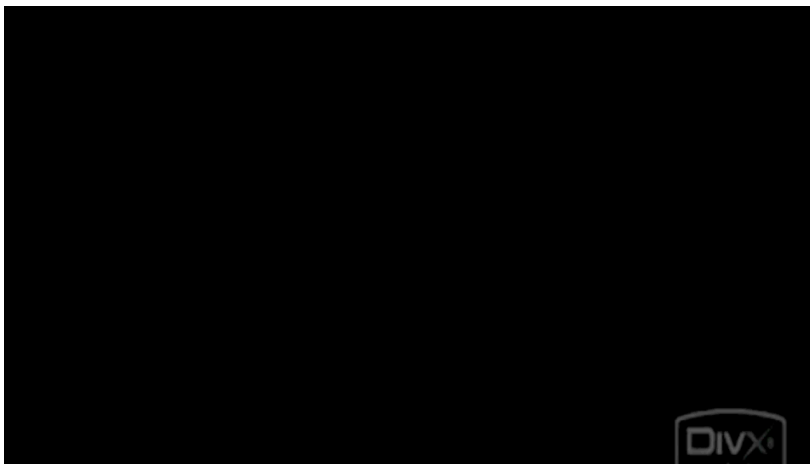
Perspective plays an important role in **Wrights** movies. In *Atonement*, the novel was written from the perspectives of Briony, a thirteen year old girl who sees somethings that she shouldn't, Cecilia, her older sister and Robbie, a young man who works for their father and is in love with Cecilia. Wright takes the idea of split narratives into film as he replays scenes first from one perspective then another so that the audience understands that they are the only ones who know the whole story. Briony's perspective may begin with her at the window while Cecilia's begins with her walking about her room. We see the character and then we see the familiar scene with minute changes in music or whose face is being shown which tells us whose thoughts we are viewing. This is particularly effective in *Atonement* because the story while told by each character as complete truth, is easily misunderstood by the other characters. As things being to fall apart for Robbie and Cecilia, the audience is upset because Briony can't understand what she is doing and Robbie and Cecilia don't know what is about to happen to them. Later in the film, Cecilia and Robbie can't forgive Briony for what she has done which seems harsh because the audience has seen how remorseful she feels. The complex emotions of the movie envelop the audience because of this omniscient and three dimensional view of the characters.

Wright uses perspective, to a lesser extent, in all of his films. In *Pride and Prejudice*, scenes are shown from only one perspective at a time but the changing of perspectives shows the chang-

ing relationships between characters. In the shots below, we see the relationship of Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy progress through the looks they give each other. The first shot is at their first meeting, where Mr. Darcy look is so warning that Elizabeth has to laugh. The second is a shot that shows both the perspectives of Mr. Darcy and Elizabeth as Mr. Darcy hands her into a carriage. The shot of their hands, his squeezing gently on hers, followed by his face watching her and then her face staring after him in confusion shows a lot about how their relationship has progressed from the first time they made eye contact at least on Mr. Darcy's side. The third scene shows Elizabeth's concern about being discovered by Mr. Darcy but it isn't a confused look, she knows now how she feels about him. The final clip is **errest** on Mr. Darcy's side and reassuring on Elizabeth's. Love is evident in this movie quite clearly although there is very little discussion and only a few actual displays of affection by any party. Wright's use of close ups first of one character, then the other builds the relationship in front of the audience.



Wright uses close ups to focus on little things, such as hands, that add to the audiences knowledge of the person who is being shown. In *The Soloist* and *Pride and Prejudice*, when music is being played by a character, Nathaniel or Elizabeth, their hands are shown and then shots of the city (*The soloist*) and Mr. Darcy (*Pride and Prejudice*) so that we see that these shots are what the character is thinking about. These little shots are establishing shots, to show us where the music comes from and whose point of view we are seeing.



The close up of Elizabeth's eyes in the above clip is an in-between scene that changes time and location. The light seen at first is from a flickering candle in her room. This light becomes the light that one might see when looking at the sun with their eyes closed. Next the closed eyes of Elizabeth appear and light flows over them with the shadows of leaves passing across her face indicating movement. The final picture visible above, is in the next scene when we see Elizabeth traveling with her aunt and uncle. Without a transition clip such as this, the time jump and the shift in location would be odd but Wright uses this clip to also demonstrate to us that we are now seeing things in Elizabeth's perspective. A scene where we see someone's eyes and then an object suggests that the person is looking at the object. This scene where Elizabeth's eyes are closed shows us that we are seeing what she is thinking. This time in the story changes Elizabeth and it

is a bit confusing to the audience, seeing a candle and then her eyes then her standing on a cliff unless we consider that the connection is more in what she is thinking than in what she is doing. Wright does an excellent job in making the connections for the audience, showing us in between shots that connect characters to what or who they are thinking about.

In an interview with Rotten Tomatoes, the interviewer commented on the fact that Wright liked to work with the same people. Wright responded “I like working with the same people over and over. It's like a theater company. We all know each other very well. We support each other, we know each other's strengths and weaknesses. It's just important to me. I don't like the jumping of one group of people to another. I like the continuity.” Wright has worked with both Keira Knightly and Tom Hollander twice and has used the same composer in *Pride and Prejudice* and *Atonement*.

Wright uses sound to increase the drama of the moment also. His composer, Dario Marianelli, wrote the score for *Pride and Prejudice* that was nominated for the oscars. In *Pride and Prejudice* the music was a soft background that wound in and out of the film with scenes of various characters playing the piano and balls at which orchestras performed. In *Atonement* the music adds tension. The opening of the movie is the sound of Briony's typewriter clicking. This clicking sound continues in the movie at moments leading to climaxes. The clicking then stops and the background is silent. This occurs right before Cecilia and Robbie make love in the library and as Briony travels to the chapel to confront her cousin who was raped. The clicking begins, increases and then stops in such a way that excites the audience.

*The Soloist* obviously is about the music. Nathaniel plays the music and we see the world through his eyes. We see the city from an arial view, all the beauty of Los Angeles. When Na-



thaniel hears music, we see an explosion of color, the changing of hues as the changing of notes. Wright combines the sound of the orchestra with color and it makes sense when Steve Lopez, Nathaniel's friend, says that he has never loved something the way that Nathaniel loves music.

In each of the three movies, *Pride and Prejudice*, *Atonement* and *The Soloist*, the opening shots don't show the main characters. *Atonement* begins with the clicking of a typewriter, *The Soloist* begins with a spinning bicycle wheel and *Pride and Prejudice* begins with a slow moving shot of a plain during sunrise. These scenes, instead of setting the stage with characters, set the scene with a location or with an object that draws in the audience. When Steve Lopez falls from the bike, and gets rushed to the emergency room, we know we have met our character but the initial spinning of the wheel draws the viewer in.

Wide, establishing shots like the first one in *Pride and Prejudice* are something that Wright uses to change location or set the mood. These shots tend to move but not as much as the tracking shots that Wright is famous for. In *Atonement* there is a six minute long continuous shot that follows Robbie around the beaches of Dunkirk where thousands of soldiers are gathering to be evacuated. In *The Soloist* there is a scene where Steve Lopez and Nathaniel carry Nathaniel's grocery cart from one side of town to the other. Even in *Pride and Prejudice*, Wright managed to use tracking shots on the dancers and on Elizabeth as she walked from her home to where her sick sister was staying. Wright is well known for tracking shots and for his use of locals instead of professional extras.

The mental patients seen in *The Soloist*, are just that, real people with mental disorders. The final shot in the movie is of a party that the actors and the patients had on the final night of shooting. Wright's director commentary at the end was about how different skid row was from

what he had expected and how much he had learned working with these people. In *Atonement* the shot taken at Dunkirk used hundreds of extras who were locals, many whose grandparents had been helping the evacuees or trying to evacuate themselves. In *Pride and Prejudice* the extras at the dances were just local actors. Aside from being a cheap alternative, using nonprofessionals creates a more realistic atmosphere in each of the movies.

The stories of stubborn lovers, a schizophrenic cellist and an ill fated romance may not be the most connected of plots but their respective movies all show the hand of their director, Joseph Wright IV. His use of lighting, close ups and wide tracking shots set the scenes and add emotion to his films. His choice of music has won awards and adds drama. His unresolved stories contradict the common happily ever after scenario of hollywood films, aside from *Pride and Prejudice* which he calls his first happy ending. Wright's first movie was *Pride and Prejudice* in 2005, since then he has made two movies and he has two more in pre-production. In 2008, Wright became the youngest director to have a movie (*Atonement*) open the Venice film festival. Early in his career Wright has already managed to become an auteur.

The reviews I read

### THE SOLOIST

<http://rogerebert.suntimes.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20090422/REVIEWS/904229989/>

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<http://www.rollingstone.com/reviews/movie/20727350/review/27742758/soloist>

### ATONEMENT

<http://www.cinematical.com/2007/09/10/tiff-review-atonement/>

[http://www.bbc.co.uk/films/2007/09/03/atonement\\_2007\\_review.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/films/2007/09/03/atonement_2007_review.shtml)

<http://rogerebert.suntimes.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20071206/REVIEWS/712060301/>

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### PRIDE AND PREJUDICE

<http://rogerebert.suntimes.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20051110/REVIEWS/51019005/1>

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[http://www.bbc.co.uk/films/2005/08/19/pride\\_and\\_prejudice\\_2005\\_review.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/films/2005/08/19/pride_and_prejudice_2005_review.shtml)

The interview I mentioned

[http://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/toronto\\_film\\_festival\\_2007/news/1670913/toronto\\_film\\_fest\\_an\\_interview\\_with\\_atonement\\_director\\_joe\\_wright](http://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/toronto_film_festival_2007/news/1670913/toronto_film_fest_an_interview_with_atonement_director_joe_wright)

You got a C or lower::

You saw three films by the same director and your paper shows me that you know what happened in the films. That's the bottom line. There may not be very much more than plot summary in your paper, but at least you did the work. The paper was probably shorter than the required 4-6 pages (though it could have been long if you went on and on about everything that happened in the movie). There's little or no mention of aesthetic or technical aspects of filmmaking, such as composition of shots, editing techniques, or methods of storytelling.

You got a B:

You did more than summarize the plot. You paid some serious attention to common elements in the films that could characterize the director's style and/or content. Or maybe you didn't find commonalities but you showed some insight into the individual films, how they were constructed or how they developed their themes. You might have shown some evidence of reading about the films (or finding out about the director) and using information from your reading to help shape your ideas.

You got an A.

You not only saw at least three films and showed your knowledge of them, you also used your Film Class knowledge by talking intelligently about some of the aesthetic or technical aspects of the film; you made interesting points about the style and the content of this director and then you backed up those points by commenting on specifics from the films. You may have shown evidence of good background reading to support your ideas. You showed an insight and an effort that deserves to be rewarded and your paper stands out as among the best in this class.