Ian McEwan's *Atonement*: A Virilian Reading

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Abstract

Paul Virilio is the theorist of speed or "dromology". In his terminology acceleration is relevant to time and space. Virtualization is also another seminal concept in his theory which is of course essentially related to his conception of time-space. In this essay, we argue that human perception as pertaining to speed-space and light-space as well as the different versions of reality arising out of different ways of body positioning is one of the major themes of Ian McEwan's *Atonement* (2001). In McEwan's novel both architecture and art mislead Briony. Paradoxically, however, Briony also attempts to overcome her trauma through the art of writing in which several versions of reality emerge out of shattered images of the past. The novel foregrounds issues of art, perception, time-space, speed and their interrelations and as such a Virilian reading would be most relevant.

Keywords: Ian McEwan's *Atonement*, Paul Virilio, art, reality, speed, time-space, virtualization

1. Introduction

Paul Virilio is a contemporary cultural theorist. According to him, Virtualization is a part of "logistics of Discernment" by which he means that the depth of our perception as the result of virtualization is the outcome of velocity in association with space of our presence, which causes an instantaneous condition by the way one regards the world (Armitage, 2001). The idea of the virtual ruling the real world is crucial for understanding the way humans comprehend phenomena. One sees things in totally distinctive ways rather than the conventional ways; the introduction of the accelerated moment overwhelms our present, affects the qualities of length of time and produces a kind of "dromological" perception.

In addition to the dromology of speed and time, in perceiving the objects, the relation of light, whether in form of light-time or light-space, on human ocular system is vital in perceiving the world. "Light, in this context," as Germain notes, "is an immaterial force that illuminates the 'substance' of both time and space." However," he further explains, "when light no longer merely illuminates reality but constitutes it, as in cyberspace, there is a radical alteration in relative motion between the observer and the observed, and thus an equally radical change in the nature of real itself" (2009, p. 77). Thus, this affects the way in which we are aware of ourselves and of the world. "So it is not so much *light* that illuminates things (the object, the subject, the path); it is the constant nature of **light's limit speed** that conditions the perception of duration and of the world expanse as phenomena," says Virilio (*Open Sky* 2003, p. 13; original emphasis).

Virtualization happens when the virtual commands the genuine by the way we comprehend the world. The loss of contact with reality and the phenomenon of the world is limiting as it overshadows man's understanding of actuality. Therefore man's vision of the world that was once primarily constructed by the way of his/her bodily interaction with the world now mainly arises from artificial encounters via technological instruments; hence, a virtual reality replaces the actual one. Virilio describes the process thus:

> Once this happens, disinformation will no longer be concerned solely with dressing up facts. It will also latch on to the reality principle to try to subtly introduce a new type of universe: a *virtual universe*, the ultimate form of an understanding of reality of cosmic proportions in which Newton's universal attraction will be replaced once and for all by the cybernetic domination of thought. (*Art of Motor* 1995, p. 142; original emphasis)

One focal part of Virtualization is "substitution," replaced simulation, which concerns the various types of reality that have appeared following the virtual presentation. Therefore "a mechanism emerges that no longer has to do with simulation (as in traditional art) but with substitution" (Virilio *Vision Machine* 1994, p.47). Large means of perception have produced a large-scale kind of reality that leads to confusion of truth, especially to artists. According to Virilio, the "artist now had a double, a being led astray by representational techniques and their reproductive power, not to mention the circumstances surrounding their occurrence, […]" (Ibid p. 41). As we will see in the following pages, the modality of human perception in the contemporary era is also a central issue in Ian McEwan's *Atonement*.

Atonement (2001) is a novel about a horrific mistake, the consequent need for personal atonement and realizing that need through narration. The story is set in three time periods: England in 1930s, England and France during World War II, and the twenty-first century England. Most critics consider this novel as one of McEwan's best works and the most mature one after *The Child in Time* (1987). For instance, Head believes that it is a "more ambitious work," and McEwan's "greatest achievement to date" (p. 156).The book received many prizes and the film adaptation was also award-nominated.

Though war – a central concept in Virilio's work - is the main background of *Atonement*, the treatment of reality and vision in it in important ways is relevant to Virilio's theorization of virtualization. The question of vision in this novel triggers off the important events of the novel. It is provided in the novel through the medium of architecture -- space organization - and its effect on man's perception. It is the source of ambiguous conception of reality that leads to both error of judgment on the part of the protagonist (Briony) and the reader. Briony's 'atonement' is her long career of writing, in the act of narration, in turning a sad ending into a happy one, in a fictional recreation of reality. The novel transforms actions and events through narration, through what Virilio has termed "aesthetics of appearance".

2. Architecture and Vision in *Atonement*

Architecture in *Atonement* is significant both in regard to functionality and its effects on visuality. The function of the buildings is presented with the description of the interior and exterior space that with the additional aid of light affects the vision of the characters. The functionality of space is magnified in the three major settings: the Victorian-like sturdy, stagnant place (Tallis' Mansion) in the first part, the bunker-like dynamic place (hospital) in the second part, and the preservative historical place (museum) in the third part. Moreover, architecture becomes a mode for other objects that 'appear' with regard to ideology; it also contributes to the themes of war and militarization in the novel.

To Virilio, human experience stems from his/her bodily movement and positioning. Thus, space affects vision and the body at the same time. Architecture functions as a medium through which perception of reality becomes indirect, secondary and even faulty because the world arrives to us in relation to architecture as well as other surroundings (as Hursselian phenomenology also suggests). Therefore, architecture does not just stand in relation to situation but the information absorbed also comes through that medium.

The novel opens with the description of the home and the places the characters are associated with. At the beginning of the novel Brioney arrives at a partial image of the reality of her sister's relation with Robbie. She stands by the window of the second floor of the mansion witnessing her sister's undressing to reach the broken piece of the porcelain near the fountain where Robbie is also around. "She had arrived at one of the nursery's wide open windows, and must have seen what lay before her some seconds before she registered it. It was a scene that could easily have accommodated, *in the distance* at least, a medieval castle" (*Atonement,* p.22; emphasis added). She tries to find explanation for what she has seen, whether a "marriage proposal," or "blackmail, threats?" (*Atonement,* p. 22). The limiting function of architecture in the novel is relevant to virtualization as far as the question of transformation of vision is concerned. Here the distance and the positioning of Briony gives her a wrong impression of the actual happening. The window here is important for it must be the transparent part of the building as the television is the transparent screen that is like a window to the world. Virilio refers to the function of transparency with reference to opto-electronic means, of course: "The transparency of space, the transparency of the horizon of travel, of our itinerary across the world is succeeded by this *cathodic transparency* which is nothing other than the perfect extension of the invention of glass four thousand years ago; an extension of the 'window', that enigmatic object which nevertheless marks the history of urban architecture, from the Middle Ages to the present day" (*Polar Inerita,* 2000, p. 18). However, similar to the silver screen, this medium is misleading here, as elsewhere in the novel, as it contributes to the misperception. As the narrator points out: "there could be no doubt that some kind of revelation occurred. When the young girl went back to the window and looked down, the damp patch on the gravel had evaporated. Now there was

nothing left of the dumb show by the fountain beyond what survived in memory, in three separate and overlapping memories. The truth had become as ghostly as invention" (*Atonement,* p. 24)*.* Unfortunately, reality is totally misunderstood for the received image easily overpowers it.

The window – through the organization of light in space – functions misleadingly for Robbie, who is a more rational character, too. It can be said that Briony's active imagination is partly responsible for her faulty appreciation of a single event; nevertheless, the same happens to Robbie whose view of the familiar place is structured by the light passing through space.

> The scene, or a tiny portion of it, was visible to Robbie Turner through a sealed skylight window if he cared to stand up from his bath, bend his knees and twist his neck. All day long his small bedroom, his bathroom and the cubicle wedged between them he called his study had baked under the southern slope of the bungalow's roof. Above him the framed *rectangle* of sky slowly shifted through its *limited segment of the spectrum*. (*Atonement* p. 44, 45; emphasis added)

The whole sky to Robbie turns into a geometrical figure as the light is conducted in a certain way because of the building's features. The 'rectangle of sky' implies a geometrically symmetrical perception; however, ironically this is a very indirect perception of a whole, experienced through alteration because of the structure of the window. The narrator describes Robbie's other rooms thus: "Like the bedroom and the bathroom, the study was squashed under apex of bungalow's roof, and was little more than a corridor between the two, barely six feet long and five feet wide. As in the two other rooms, there was a skylight framed in rough pine" (*Atonement*, p. 46). What is emphasized is that the windows/skylights are the only apertures through which the inhabitants of the narrow rooms can see the world. This implies the inferior social position of Robbie and his mother and their constrained vision of – access to – the world.

Cecilia also feels alienated with the architecture of the big house in which she lives. Her estimation of – 'vision of' – herself and the world is not certain. She craves to look different but her uncertainty of her looks brings about dissatisfaction. She changes her dress several times to look perfect for the gathering but her vision is inevitably affected by the quality of the light passing through the architectural design of the house. Here is how the scene is described:

> Cecilia stepped out of her bedroom, caught sight of herself in the gilt-frame mirror at the top of the stairs and, immediately dissatisfied, returned to her wardrobe to reconsider [...] But the public gaze of the stairway mirror as she hurried toward it revealed a woman on her way to a funeral, an austere, joyless woman moreover, whose black carapace had affinities with some form of matchbox-dwelling insect[...] Earlier in the day she had seen old Hardman going about the house with a wicker basket, replacing electric bulbs. Perhaps there was now a harsher light at the top of the stairs, for she had never had this difficulty with the mirror there before. Even as she approached from a distance of forty feet, *she saw that it was not going to let her pass*. (*Atonement,* pp. 55-56; emphasis added)

Cecelia feels like a trapped insect. She associates the place with doom. Though the architecture looks not faulty in itself, the feeling of dissatisfaction is linked with the scenery. The nearness or distance of her gaze also affects her feeling about herself and the place. "The drawing room," to which she returns once more to change, "which had transfixed Cecilia that morning with its parallelograms of light was now in gloom, lit by a single lamp near the fireplace. The open French windows framed a greenish sky" (*Atonement,* p. 63). The French window seems to transform the sky color; symbolically, the revealed image is just a portion of the whole picture. It is also intimated that "parallelograms of light" had made a harmonious frame for Cecilia's feelings before and now in its absence she is restless again, her appraisal of her appearance – and of herself -- is uncertain again.

The association of light and the building's design affects the impressions received through that medium of transparent architecture whereby affecting the characters' perception of the events. The dim light of the library makes it difficult for Cecilia to read Robbie's letter. "[S]he saw nothing at all, the only light was from the single green-glassed desk lamp which illuminated little more than the tooled leather surface on which it stood. When she took another few steps she saw them, dark shapes in the furthest corner" (*Atonement,* p. 70). Cecilia thinks that she knows what is going on. Robbie tries to understand the facial expression of Cecelia after she is read the letter. "The silk dress she wore seemed to worship every curve and dip of her lithe body, but the small sensual mouth was held tight in disapproval, or perhaps even disgust. The house lights behind her were strong in his eyes, *making it hard to read her precise expression*" (*Atonement,* p. 75; emphasis added). But the quality of light plus Robbie's and Cecilia's relative positioning make 'it hard to read,' to interpret correctly, what is going on. It is light which makes things visible; ironically, however, the novel associates it with the space and the pace of the events in a way to imply that it can also make things 'appear' disastrously.

"If the categories of space and time have become relative (critical)," says Virilio expatiating on the function of light, "this is because the stamp of absolute has shifted from matter to light and specially to light's finite speed" (*Vision Machine,* 1994, p. 71). McEwan's descriptions of light effects, especially in architectural designs as organized space, frequently reminds one of the impressionist style of writers such as Henry James (Note, for instance, the opening of *The Portrait of a Lady*). However, they also well exemplify the mutual articulations of time and space as theorized by Virilio. Encountering the love-making scene in the library corner, Briony takes the whole event as an assault. It is not her first time though, and many of her perceptions through the first Part are very immediate and partial with regard to architecture and light. Here is an important example of this (she is looking into the room while searching for the lost twins): "The drawing-room French windows still stood wide open to the night. She could see right into the room. And by the light of a single lamp she could see, partially obscured by the hang of a velvet curtain" (*Atonement,* p. 92). Not only the building's interior affects the perceptions of the characters, the exterior space with regard to light is also a major setting when climax of the novel happens. The misrecognition of the face of Lola's attacker is because of the dark near Tallis' mansion. The narrator notes: "These were everyday sounds magnified by darkness. And darkness was nothing-it was not a substance, it was not a presence, it was no more than an absence of light. The bridge led to nothing more than an artificial island in an artificial lake[…]To the others it was no more than a corridor to and from home, a bridge between the bridges, an ornament so familiar as to be invisible" (*Atonement*, p. 93). Considering its symbolic and practical functioning, a bridge is supposed to make connections easier with its stable materiality, but here it seems to be stagnant and even 'invisible'. The last scene of the first Part almost closes with Briony standing by the second floor window seeing the departure of Robbie not quite understanding what is being said is similar to her initial positioning observing the lovers by the fountain. "Robbie half turned, but she could not read his expression" (*Atonement,* p. 105). Hence architecture stands in relation to conceived reality which is mostly immediate, fragmented and uncertain. Architecture is thus associated with the view of the world through the modality of observing and the vision that it produces.

3. Architecture and War in *Atonement*

The second Part of *Atonement* deals with war first and foremost. The horror scenes of war described in the novel take place in the fields, deserted places and a barn. Symbolically, civilization is depicted as having come to an abysmal edge. Robbie moves with the soldiers but seems to get nowhere. In the descriptions of this section the materiality of buildings seem to disappear in the face of the enormity of the war. This leads to lack of stability and protection; no one is safe and no one can be sure to survive. "The battle," says the narrator, "had moved on. By the time they reached the hamlet, it was late afternoon. The place had been completely destroyed and was deserted. Their cousin's house was smashed up, with bullet holes all over the walls, but it still had its roof" (*Atonement,* p. 112). As the pace of the events get faster, the remains of buildings described serve as defending positions and change into bunker-like structures to facilitate movement of the soldiers. As Readhead explains, "the body in motion was present from the very beginning of Virilio's work. The motion of the bunkers, strange as it may seem, was jumping-off point" (2004, p. 40). A good example of this is the hospital transformed in regard to fast-pace war. Briony who is grown up enough is resigned to the change:

> When she was sent on errands, she saw other wards in similar states of preparation. One was already completely empty of patients, and gleamed in spacious silence, waiting […] the wards on the top floor had been closed down completely as a protection against bombing. The operating theaters were now in the basement. The ground-floor windows had been sand bagged, and every skylight cemented over (*Atonement,* p. 153).

In this new building where the underground is supposed to be safe (Note 1), individual identity is vanquished and an orderly strict life of army is imposed. "The uniform, like all uniforms, eroded identity, and the daily attention required-ironing pleats, pinning hats, straightening seams" (*Atonement,* p. 154). This association of identity and space (architecture) or rather the transformed space of wartime is nowhere more clearly stated than the passage describing Briony's feelings while working in the hospital. She, we are told, "had no will, no freedom to leave. She was abandoning herself to a life of strictures, rules, obedience, housework, and a constant fear of disapproval. She was one of a batch of probationers—there was a new intake every few months-and *she had no identity beyond her badge*" (*Atonement* pp. 154-155; emphasis added).

As architecture is associated to the events in relation to the characters' understanding of reality; like media, buildings partly structure perception through their functionality and transparency. Thus architecture functions more vividly when truth -- however provisional -- is revealed in the third Part of the novel. An example of a building, as product of social interactions, preserving its own materiality and those of other objects of stable value is the museum in the last part of the novel. Here harmonious time is associated with reality; the frozen time

and space go hand in hand. Unlike the harsh fast pace of death and life in the hospital building, there is no sense of rush or contest in the museum. As Prior, expounding Virilio's interconnection of time and space in contemporary urban spaces, notes, "the museum is a backward institution to be tallied with libraries and academic instances of a reactionary time-space" (2011, p. 200). Prior further explains that the technologies "have softened, disorganized, and despatialized the city, for Virilio. This new economy of time annihilates urban space by dematerializing its architectural coordinates" (p. 202). Yet unlike the usual state of buildings in modern cities, here in the museum the past remains as history; love remains eternal in the love letters that are preserved in the place. "I decided," says a seventy-seven-years-old Briony, "to make one last visit to the Imperial War Museum library in Lambeth. It suited my peculiar state of mind. The reading room, housed right up in the dome of the building, was formerly the chapel of the Royal Bethlehem Hospital—the old Bedlam. Where the unhinged once came to offer their prayers, scholars now gather to research the collective insanity of war," (*Atonement* p. 201).

In *Atonement* the idea of space is presented in terms of the way it is felt by the characters, especially Briony. In the first Part of the novel the thirteen-year-old Briony experiences the events mostly in her family mansion -- the familiar place she is born in-a state which is mostly associated with stagnation and upper-middle-class snobbish ordered way of life. The young Briony of the second Part is to serve voluntarily in the hospital, the fast rhythm of war needs a dynamic bodily interaction and the new sense of order is inseparable both for the character and the hospital building. The decrepit Briony of the last part of the novel has reached a sense of tranquility which is the outcome of full realization and confession of the truth. In this section the mansion building has the same worn-out look to the old Briony but now she has different feelings: "as the drive cleared a last stand of beeches, the main house came into view. There was no need to be nostalgic*it was always an ugly place. But from a distance it had a stark and *unprotected* look" (*Atonement,* p. 206). To the teenage Briony, the Tallis' mansion with its tall Victorian-like structure, looks sturdy and imposing. The old Briony who has gone through the trauma of war and her betrayal of her sister, however, finds it flimsy and 'unprotected'.

In *Atonement* architecture as organized space stands at the heart of the events; as the characters move, stay fixed or gaze in the buildings, their vision, influenced by the quality of light, is affected. The distance, nearness and the rapidity of the happenings from the standpoint of the characters involved result in unpredictable outcomes. The modality of all this described in McEwan's novel is more or less what Virilio terms "the logistics of perception".

4. Virtualization in *Atonement*

Atonement can be read according to Virilio's theory of virtualization as far as the question of perception of reality is concerned. The visions of the characters are more or less faulty, subjective and fragmented because of the effect of what Virilio calls dromology with regard to light and time in the first Part and speed and time in the second Part of the novel. The instant vision caught in a single moment and the hasty interpretation of that in a sense determines the course of the events and fate of all the characters. The theme of truth is presented in two ways; first, the way the characters see and feel reality, especially in the first two parts of the novel; second as the plot finally unfolds in the final pages of the novel through the technique of delayed decoding. McEwan, then, is concerned with this 'double-ness' or 'duplication' of reality. This is a concerned shared by Virilio in a rather different way. Commenting on the issue of reality regarding his own theory, Virilio in an interview with Carlos Oliveira notes: "We face a *duplication of reality*. The virtual reality and the 'real' reality double the relationship to the real, something that to the best of my knowledge, results in clear pathological consequences" (qtd. in Readhead, 2004, p. 123; emphasis added). He continues, "'to be' used to mean to be somewhere, to be situated, in the here and now, but the 'situation' of the essence of being is undetermined by the instantaneity, the immediacy and the ubiquity which are the characteristics of our epoch" (ibid).

In *Atonement* this instantaneity in a sense is related to the issue of fragmented images which are so pivotal to the novel. In the very opening of the novel, Briony is overwhelmed with the scene she sees through the window in a moment; the scene is, however, open to various interpretations in her mind. However, it is implied that she is half-consciously inclined to interpret the momentary vision in a certain way because of her bias: "Now there was nothing left of the dumb show by the fountain beyond what survived in memory, in three separate and overlapping memories. The truth had become as ghostly as invention" (*Atonement,* p. 24). The fragmented memories continue to haunt her later on when she makes a false accusation – and here the bias is more apparent -- in Lola's attacker's scene. Her memories "would not trouble her so much in the years to come as her fragmented recollection of that late night and summer dawn. How guilt refined the methods of self-torture, threading the beads of detail into an eternal loop" (*Atonement,* p. 99). The guilt continues to torment Briony throughout her life because she knows that she has interpreted the instantaneous moments of perception in a certain way because of her bias. But we should also take note of the circumstances (Can we say mitigating ones for Briony?) under which these moments of perception take place. And the novelist, of course, is keen on

highlighting these circumstances.

In the gothic scene of searching for the lost twins, for instance, lack of light accompanies Briony's losing track of time: "[S]he was witnessing some trick of darkness and perspective. Another second or two, another couple of steps, and she saw that this was not so" (*Atonement* p. 94). The truth in this scene is not only related to time but is also very subjective as the young girl wants to keep it as her own invention. As Virilio suggests, the human ocular system is occupied by virtual means; thus, lack of light seems to play the role of the virtual in the novel. As Germain explains: "In the space-world, where appearing things are corporal and voluminous, phenomena exist by virtue of their being illuminated or bathed in light. The same pertains to time, since time, to recall, is for Virilio nothing other than illuminated matter in motion. It is because light subtends both time and space in the space-world that they are largely shielded from thematization" (2009, p. 76). In the same scene, Briony's compelling desire to identify Lola's rapist is revealing:

> [W]hat she knew was not literally, or not only, based on the visible. It was not simply her eyes that told her the truth. It was too dark for that […] Her eyes confirmed the sum of all she knew and had recently experienced. The truth was in the symmetry, which was to say, it was founded in common sense. The truth instructed her eyes […] So when she said, over and again, I saw him, she meant it, and was perfectly honest, as well as passionate. What she meant was rather more complex than what everyone else so eagerly understood, and her moments of unease came when she felt that she could not express these nuances. She did not even seriously try. There were no opportunities, *no time*, no permission. Within a couple of days, no, within a matter of hours, a process was moving *fast and well beyond her control*. (*Atonement* p. 95; emphasis added)

Once more time factors in the instantaneous events and the fast mode of perception. That is in a sense what Virilio means by dromology. Here what vanishes in favor of time and speed is truth which is narrated as precariously – and disastrously - perceived and interpreted by the 'witness'. Marcus observes that Briony "subsequently finds herself unable to deal with contradiction and imposes an interpretive 'order' on events, which has fatal consequences for those around her" (p. 89). The narrating voice also admits that the truth is obscured: "An idea of great clarity and persuasiveness came from nowhere" (*Atonement* p. 100). In addition, Virilio's theory of virtualization is more concerned with the media. Here it is the media which takes control of the (perceived) images: "Less like seeing, more like knowing. Then she could have left it to her interrogators to decide whether they would proceed together in the name of this kind of vision" (*Atonement* p. 97).

In the second Part of the novel for a while Briony and Robbie become alternately focalizers. This part is mainly about war, anxiety and the struggle to survive in the face of modern warfare. The pace of narration in keeping with the rapidity of the events is fast; the shift from the actual world to the world of fancy in the end (Robbie's loss of contact with reality while passing away) indicates that man's perceptive powers is overwhelmed by the enormity and speed of the events. The mind-numbing succession of scenes of horror occurring one after another overpowers the characters so that they cannot see or hear properly. On the limitation of vision due to speed Virlilio says: "This continual increase in speed has led to the development of a megaloscopy which has caused a real infirmity because it reduces the field of vision. The faster we go, the more we look ahead in anticipation and lose our lateral vision" (*Administration* pp. 36-37). This even drives some of the characters in the novel to/to the verge of mental breakdown.

The horrors wrap all the events in the novel. Human vision is replaced with terror when waiting for the worse to happen (the possible invasion of London by Germans or man's inability to race against the arms in the battle field). Robbie is almost always on the rush in the whole section: "He set off down the path in a hurry, He wanted to get ahead, out of sight" (*Atonement* p. 107). The desire to survive leaves no time for observation: "As they came out of the copse they heard bombers, so they went back in and smoked while they waited under the trees. From where they were they could not see the planes, but the view was fine" (*Atonement* p.108). Modern weaponry is depicted as overpowering: "Ahead of them was the hum of machinery. It grew louder, angrier, and suggested the high-velocity spin of flywheels or electric turbines turning at impossible speed. They were entering a great hall of sound and power" (*Atonement* p. 109). The speed of war is not limited to the frontline; in London the dynamic hospital is haunted with the anxiety of possible attack and ironically this leaves no time for Briony to fantasize: "there would be a war. Their training was being streamlined and accelerated, a new camp was being enlarged to take more recruits […] She mirrored his fears with descriptions of contingency arrangements at the hospital—more beds, special courses, emergency drills" (*Atonement* p. 117). The human body in relation to war is depicted as extremely insecure and fragile. The bombers target men from the air killing scores in a matter of seconds. Robbie sees a child's limbs dangling in trees while he and other soldiers take refuge in a barn: "The stupidity and claustrophobia. The hand squeezing on his throat. Being here, sheltering in a

barn, with an army in rout, where a child's limb in a tree was something that ordinary men could ignore, where a whole country, a whole civilization was about to fall, was better than being there, on a narrow bed under a dim electric light, waiting for nothing" (*Atonement* p. 114). Repeated shocks and horrors result in fragmented hasty observations. Crosthwaite comments that "the intensity and the speed of combat combine to outstrip punctual perception, apprehension, and representation" (2007, p. 54).

The most telling event of this segment with regard to the speed of war, arms and images is the scene in which Robbie rushes along with a woman and a child. Acceleration initially guarantees survival; ironically, however, speed and war form a lethal combination. The woman and her child stay behind, they cannot be fast enough and a bomb kills them: "The hole was perfectly symmetrical inverted cone whose sides were smooth, as though finely sieved and raked. There were *no human signs*, not a shred of clothing or shoe leather. Mother and child had been vaporized" (*Atonement* p. 136; emphasis added). Speed and weaponry annihilate all 'human signs;' and these 'human signs' are not just the material ones – of civilization -- but man's body first and foremost is the most. McEwan's personification of bombers seems to exemplify the greatest fear of Virilio, that of machines and drones replacing man: "High-flying bombers droned above, a steady two-way stream moving into and returning from their target" (*Atonement* p. 136). The relentless nightmare of war does not leave much room for embodied perception; man's mind is numb with repeated machine-generated shocks: "For the living, the end of a Stuka attack was the paralysis of shock, of repeated shocks" (*Atonement* p. 135). In the face of these horrors, Robbie imagines, or rather tries to imagine, a paradise: "But the woods were near, there would be streams and waterfalls and lakes in there. He imagined a paradise. When the rising howl of a diving Stuka sounded again, he struggled to place the sound" (*Atonement* p. 135). But even the vision of 'paradise' is made impossible; Robbie who escapes the bombs dies of an injury while he thinks about the memories of the past.

Part three of *Atonement* is narrated by old Briony. All the events are reported through her observations. The young author of the first section who craved to take control of all images, occasions and events now punishes herself by writing different versions of the story. Until this part the reader would not understand that many of the reported images were not taken from the true reality of the latter sections and they were reported by the naïve Briony. The nice father of the first section is revealed to have had an affair and the protective brother, whom young Briony reported to be taking care of his sick wife in the second Part, now is said to have dumped several women in several marriages. The unfolding of truth is not complete until the last pages of the novel. Before that, the reader would not understand that s/he is deceived by images the implied author dictates. Cecelia and Robbie both die in the final years of the Great War and they could never see each other again. All versions of reality and even some images are revealed to be 'fictions'. The author also reveals her plan to mass publish her invention of reality by the means of the novel in which she eternalizes the dead lovers' love. Therefore, literature here becomes a means to cover truth; literature like cinema makes logic of "representational function of art, that is, its capacity to re-present an image of the world, is replaced by specific mode of 'presentation'" (James 2007, p.111). Art fails to resist virtualization, however, it must be a mode to be "critical or oppositional in relation to contemporary culture of speed, acceleration and virtualization" (Ibid. p.108). Briony tries to stake her authorial power, one which is ironically like media's controlling power. "When I am dead," she says,

> and the Marshalls are dead, and the novel is finally published, we will only exist as my inventions. Briony will be as much of a fantasy as the lovers who shared a bed in Balham and enraged their landlady. No one will care what events and which individuals were misrepresented to make a novel". (*Atonement* p. 211).

A different version of reality is going to manipulate the minds of the implied readers. In the film adaptation of this section old Briony does her confession for the viewers of the televisions as her image is seen in different sized screens. Ironically, both the book version and the film adaptation both seduce the public with what is either partial truth or a totally made one exemplifying the power of media over man's perception that Virilio is so concerned about. Bartram argues that once the worldview is doubled - a "splitting of vision has taken place (or as he [Virilio] puts it, the splitting of reality into the virtual and real)" (2004, p. 294) - man needs to be conscious of both.

The figuration of the media in *Atonement* is not limited to the novel written by Briony but newspapers and telephones are ever-present whenever a disaster happens or is about to happen. Briony's identification of the rape scene is reported to the police by telephone immediately without spending time for a genuine inspection of the matter on the part of the family. Truth is sacrificed in favor (fast communication via telephone). The news of the war is reported 'partially' and biasedly by the newspaper reporters in the front:

> A few of them [wounded soldiers] told Briony they had never even fired a shot. But mostly they were angry with the "brass," and with their own officers for abandoning them in the retreat, and with the French for

collapsing without a fight. They were bitter about the newspaper celebrations of the miracle evacuation and the heroism of the little boats. (*Atonement* p. 180)

Briony gets some general information through the newspapers. "She knew about the breaching of the Maginot Line, the bombing of Rotterdam, the surrender of the Dutch army" (*Atonement* p.158) but there is no mention of the horrendous scenes witnessed by Robbie.

5. Conclusion

Atonement addresses, among other things, the issue of virtualization through war, light and architecture. The postmodern idea of different versions of truth, presented through novelistic metafictional techniques, is treated in terms of speed which in turn pertains to the interface of time and space. As Germain clearly puts it, "when reality is perceived as dependent on speed there emerges the possibility of multiple realities based on variances in the relative motion between the perceiver and the perceived" (2009, p.77). Moreover, the body positioning of the characters in relation to man-made or natural factors of light, the pace of the events, and space (organized or otherwise) forms a virtual world. This virtual world, of which one historical phase is addressed in McEwan's novel, is what Virilio is so concerned with / about "in part because it is reordering our perception of what constitutes reality" (Ibid p.91). McEwan's novel, if we may draw on the semantics of the title word, is in sense about the price man has paid and is paying for the sins of modernity.

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Note

Note 1. However, the novel demonstrates impotency of all human structures in the face of the destructive power of war. Though young Briony of the second Part emphasizes the preparations done to the buildings in case of bombardment, the idea of bunker is debunked in the very ending of the novel, as we get to know that Cecilia is killed in an underground station where she had taken refuge (Atonement p. 211).

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