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Kazuo Ishiguro's TV and Film Scripts

Recipient of numerous cultural and civic accolades, subject of international popular acclaim, at once (parodically) traditional yet delicately innovative, Kazuo Ishiguro is the consummate contemporary novelist. However, a career in literary fiction was not the 2017 Nobel Laureate's first or only artistic ambition. While discussing his most complex and arguably greatest work, *The Unconsoled* (1995), Ishiguro confessed to Charlie Rose that in addition to harbouring lifelong ambitions of being a 'rock and roll star' he also 'wanted to be a filmmaker' (1995).[1] His most conventionally 'realist' narratives, *The Remains of the Day* (1989) and *Never Let Me Go* (2005), have been sympathetically adapted into commercially successful films respectively by the award winning novelist and screenwriter Ruth Prawer Jhabvala, and by the author and director Alex Garland.[2] Although these interpretations are only tenuously 'Ishiguro movies' (given that they were not adapted or written for the screen by him), he has also scripted several pieces intended for television and cinema. In Ishiguro's own estimation, however, the principal virtues of literature and film are somewhat at odds. In conversation with Linda Richards in 2000, he commented that the novel is 'able to explore people's inner worlds much more thoroughly and with much more subtlety' than film, which is predominantly 'a third person exterior form'.[3] He made a similar claim in conversation with Moira Macdonald in 2010, suggesting that the novel can follow 'thoughts and memories, something that I think is difficult to do on the screen', again because film is 'essentially a third-person medium'.[4] Ishiguro's distinction between introspective/subjective first person (text) and external/objective third person (screen), will be the primary focus of this chapter.

An avid fan of world cinema, film has had an indirect but pervasive influence on the psychological and emotional tenor of Ishiguro's writing.[5] In particular, as Rebecca Karni has

[1]Charlie Rose (1995), 'Kazuo Ishiguro', https://charlierose.com/videos/18999.
[2] Harold Pinter was commissioned to write the screenplay for *Remains of the Day*, but after his draft was given to Merchant-Ivory he asked to have his name removed from the credits. Jhabvala's script was nominated for Best Adapted Screenplay Oscar in 1993. Ishiguro's friend and neighbour, Garland read and commented on early drafts of *Never Let Me Go*.
[3] Linda L. Richards (2000). January Interview: Kazuo Ishiguro. *January Magazine.*
[4] Moira Macdonald (2010). Novelist Kazuo Ishiguro on the film adaptation of 'Never Let Me Go'. *The Seattle Times*, October 5th.
[5] So devoted is he to film that he 'has a home cinema […] with special seating and blackout blinds' in his London house (Wroe 2005).

suggested, the 'post-World-War I Japanese film aesthetic' may be said to have 'inspired the unique and subtle self-consciousness' that characterises his fictions.[6] Anni Shen also focuses on the significant influence of Japanese cinema on Ishiguro's novels and the resulting 'amalgam of literary and cinematic techniques'.[7] More directly, and more broadly, the medium's perceived narratological distinctiveness (its 'specificity') inspired the evolution of the formal, structural, and thematic idiosyncrasies that characterise Ishiguro's writing. By his own account, after being 'offered work by the soon-to-be-launched Channel 4', the aspiring author 'rather obsessively' compared his draft teleplay for *A Profile of Arthur J. Mason* (1984), with his recently published debut novel, *A Pale View of Hills* (1982):

> Whole hunks of *A Pale View* looked to me awfully similar to a screenplay – dialogue followed by 'direction' followed by more dialogue. I began to feel deflated. Why bother to write a novel if it was going to offer more or less the same experience someone could have by turning on a television? […] I was determined that my new novel wouldn't be a 'prose screenplay'.[8]

As a response to his own disappointment, while composing his second novel, *An Artist of the Floating World* (1986), Ishiguro 'entered an extended period of experimenting with different ways' to write what were ultimately 'unfilmable novels'.[9] What might an unfilmable novel look like? Presumably, action would be secondary to the compulsive iterative reflections that we see in Ishiguro's novels and short stories, and that tend to be prioritised over any interest in 'events' themselves. While endeavouring 'to find the territory that only a novel can offer', therefore, he also sought to develop a form of screenwriting that would 'work uniquely as a film'.[10] In film studies, so-called 'medium specificity theory' holds that different art forms exploit unique qualities or attributes.[11] Although, as Kamilla Elliott reminds us, recent 'poststructuralist, postmodern, and posthuman theories have effectively dismantled' or at least undermined/destabilised this concept of discrete mediums,

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[6] Rebecca Karni (2015). Made in Translation: Language, 'Japaneseness,' 'Englishness,' and 'Global Culture' in Ishiguro. *Comparative Literature Studies*, vol. 52, no. 2, pp. 318–348 (328).
[7] Anni Shen (2021). Adapting Mizoguchi's *Ugetsu* in Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Buried Giant*. *Adaptation*, 2021; apab010, https://doi.org/10.1093/adaptation/apab010, p. 2.
[8] Kazuo Ishiguro (2005). Thatcher's London and the role of the artist in a time of political change. *The Guardian*, June 24th.
[9] Ishiguro, 'Thatcher's London'. Book Browse (2005). An Interview with Kazuo Ishiguro.
[10] Rose, 'Kazuo Ishiguro'. Book Browse, 'An Interview'.
[11] See, for example, Berys Gaut's explanation that 'for a medium to constitute an art form it must instantiate artistic properties that are distinct from those that are instantiated in other media' (Gaut, *A Philosophy*, p. 287).

Ishiguro's insistence on foregrounding the most resonant distinctive elements of his given form invests his novels and screenplays with their peculiar aesthetic and affective power.[12]

This chapter will focus on Ishiguro's two short teleplays commissioned for Channel 4, *A Profile of Arthur J. Mason* (1984) and *The Gourmet* (1987), and on his feature-length screenplays for *The Saddest Music in the World* (screenplay 1987, film 2003) and the Merchant Ivory production *The White Countess* (2005).[13] I will argue that Ishiguro's films simultaneously highlight and exploit the incompatibility of his characteristic narrative style and the medium of film. Discarding the kind of intimate yet often misleading first-person narrator that works so effectively in his novels, Ishiguro allows concealed ethical and political themes to emerge not as a consequence of unreliable narration, as in the novels, but from disjunctions between moving images, lines of dialogue, stage directions. His films also interrogate those aspects of experience that happen 'inside' the mind – specifically in relation to thoughts in *A Profile*; memories in *The Gourmet*; and imagination in *The White Countess*. By drawing attention to and manipulating film's singular qualities, Ishiguro's screenplays perform a metacommentary on or anatomy of the practice of filmmaking.

Television

A Profile of Arthur J. Mason

Although it has been critically neglected, Ishiguro's first screenplay has much merit. What is perhaps most striking is the TV play's anticipation of the central preoccupations of Ishiguro's later work: questions of romantic and vocational 'regret'; living a 'worthwhile and rewarding' life; and 'an artist's duty towards society' (*AJM* 31, 12).[14] Anticipating *Remains of the Day* in some ways, *Arthur*

[12] Kamilla Elliott (2017). Unfilmable Books. In eds., Julie Grossman and R Barton Palmer, *Adaptation in Visual Culture: Images, Texts, and Their Multiple Worlds*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, pp.101-118 (21).
[13] Kazuo Ishiguro (1984). *A Profile of Arthur J. Mason.* Channel 4; (1986) *The Gourmet.* Channel 4; (1987). *The Saddest Music in the World* (screenplay unpublished and unfilmed). (2005). *The White Countess.* Merchant Ivory Productions. Hereafter citations will be made parenthetically and abbreviated *AJM, G, SM,* and *WC* respectively. Many thanks to Paul McAllister at ScreenOcean for sending me the video of *A Profile of Arthur J. Mason* and of *The Gourmet* from the Channel 4 archive
[14] This trauma persists into *The Unconsoled,* as Hoffman lives in the perpetual (and ultimately groundless) fear that his wife will leave him when she discovers he is not a composer.

J. Mason offers a faux documentary of the eponymous ageing live-in butler, who has been in the service of Sir James Reid for the past thirty-six years.[15] In the public eye after his novel, *The August Passage* – written thirty-eight years previously and 'gathering dust in the drawer' since 1948 – has finally been published to international acclaim, Mason is interviewed by Anna, a 'late twenties, highly educated' aspiring journalist (*AJM* 2). Sir James and his household have suffered a change of fortune and are living as 'antiques, throwbacks' in a small cottage in a once rural but increasingly suburban town (*AJM* 29). A tragically overlooked 'major writer', according to his literary agent Mortimer Crane, Mason is little more than a general dogsbody, required to 'prepare meals, do a little cleaning, a little mending, see to the provisions' (*AJM* 30, 6).[16] Yet, as Barry Lewis has commented, although Mason seems unperturbed by his fortunes, in typical Ishiguro fashion, 'a different picture emerges from the extracts of the book he reads out'; that is to say, Mason's selection of passages from his own novel appear to hint towards various profound regrets for his perceived failures, and for the resulting breakdown of his marriage.[17] Like his literary heir Stevens, if Mason abandons his belief that service 'is no less worthy an activity than that of writing books', he would be admitting to having 'wasted [his] best years and talents' to following the wrong path (*AJM* 31).[18]

Mason's novel, *The August Passage*, appears to be autobiographical, with the protagonist Kathrine encouraging her lover to escape their life of 'daily toil' as servants just as Mason's wife Mary had tried to encourage him. As Mason recalls, Mary 'saw the book as a ticket to a new life – for us and for the children' (*AJM* 21-2). Sadly, after his manuscript was rejected 'by just about everybody' and he abandoned hope of publishing, Mary left with the children (*AJM* 22).[19] Asked whether his fiction is 'Marxist', Mason equivocates, claiming that he fails to 'quite see it that way', only to admit later that the aftermath of World War II witnessed **'**a lot of talk about a new

[15] Directed by Michael Whyte, starring Bernard Hepton as Mason and Cheri Lunghi Anna. Sir James is Sir Henry in the film.
[16] *A Profile* and *The Remains of the Day* share much: in this volume, Vanessa Guignery traces the connection through the Ishiguro archive, held at the Harry Ransom Center.
[17] Barry Lewis (2000). *Kazuo Ishiguro*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, p. 76.
[18] Ishiguro, 'Thatcher's London'.
[19] This trauma persists into *The Unconsoled*, as Hoffman lives in the perpetual fear that his wife will leave him because he is not a composer.

egalitarianism' and about how 'people such as ourselves … would run the country' (*AJM* 8, 25).[20] Much to Anna's frustration, she and we discover that the post-war 'revolutionary figure' *Arthur J.* Mason is not the subject of the interview at all; he is now simply the apolitical, unambitious, loyal 'Mason' (*AJM* 7). Indeed, he barely recognises himself as the book's author; after reading a passage he seems perplexed when asked if he remembers writing it, replying unconvincingly that, 'I suppose I must have written this. Yes, I suppose I do' (*AJM* 12). Such subtle deformations of self constitute the corrosive tragedy of Ishigurian characters such as Etsuko in *A Pale View of Hills*, Ono in *Artist of the Floating World*, and of course Stevens in *Remains of the Day*, who recognise but valiantly resist confronting the changes they have undergone. This enables them to sustain some consolatory – if illusory – continuity in their being through time, and to obscure, however temporarily, personal and professional failures. Radical Arthur J.'s transfiguration into servile Mason, signified by the removal of 'Arthur J.' from his name, frustrates Anna's aspirations to make a film about 'an important man, one the public should be given an insight into' (*AJM* 15). Although that 'important man' no longer exists, in name or fact, Anna inadvertently provides insight into the subject of Mason's book – incremental self-erasure through passivity, self-abnegation through dedication to another's needs – but also the imperceptible yet irrevocable metamorphoses that result in the emergence of unfamiliar, often disappointing selves.

Perhaps his most overtly postmodern effort, Ishiguro's TV play is a faux documentary concerning a 'real' documentary that Anna is endeavouring to make. The opening production note specifies that 'the whole of what follows should actually LOOK like a documentary film (*a la* "The South Bank Show" or "Omnibus")' (*AJM* 0). But if Ishiguro explores film's possibilities in his own first attempt, Anna, in her 'much longed for … stab at making a documentary profile,' seems not to have mastered the form's quasi-scientific disinterest. In one scene she describes Sir James' catatonic uncle, Lord Reid, but despite trying to 'produce the tone of a professional and objective narrator', she 'fails to keep the contempt from her voice' (*AJM* 19). In theory, Anna represents the disinterested

[20] As Setsuko does in *A Pale View of Hills*, Kathrine aspires to move because 'Things are different in America' (*AJM* 10).

external observer which is typical of what Ishiguro describes as the 'third person exterior form'. However, she is unable to mask her own visceral responses to the inert object in front of the lens, and her presence, as a 'modern' woman perplexed, even outraged by Mason's archaic acquiescence, intercedes between camera and study. In the telling rhetoric of Ishiguro's stage directions, the camera is figured as itself disgusted, as it moves insect-like 'slowly all over LORD REID – over his feet, his hands, his neck, his face,' representing a *formal* failure that mirrors Anna's *narratorial* failure (*AJM* 19). The scene reveals nothing of substance about the aged peer because the camera can do little more than scan the surface of the prone body, which remains impervious to the mechanical observer. But those figures that should be invisible to the camera, the author and documentary filmmaker, *are* revealed.

Anna's primitive (by contemporary standards) television camera interferes with its subject merely by virtue of its sheer bulk, as well as the way in which it creates unease in its unprepared subjects. In one farcical scene, Anna defies Sir James's injunctions against filming their private moments, bringing the camera into the dining room, to the discomfort of the self-conscious guests who look 'apprehensively at CAMERA' despite Anna's absurd plea that they 'just go on, just as normal. Just go on talking, don't look this way, just go on' (*AJM* 22-3). Anna's camera attempts to witness without interacting with or altering her subject, in the way that the traditional narrator might: Dickens, in the guise of the spectre-like omniscient narrator, can exploit the permeable textual boundaries between inside and outside to observe the most intimate moments, even thoughts, of his characters (an act of constructive observation masquerading as witnessing).[21] Eventually the camera goes too far, trying not simply to observe *as if* it were a dinner guest, but to occupy the same spatial coordinates and point of view. Ultimately, in Heisenbergian fashion, the means of observation collides with its subject, but in so doing it not only *displays* but also *displaces* the very thing it seeks to reveal, jostling Lord Reid, who 'goes over stiffly and silently, like a manikin, his mouth remaining open' (*AJM* 23).[22] Even were it able to occupy the same space, Ishiguro shows us, the camera would

[21] *U*'s Ryder masters the art of mindreading.
[22] In the film this scene is changed: Mason is nudged and spills trifle onto a guest and Lord Reid simply slides from his chair onto the floor.

be unable to disclose the mind in the manner that a work of fiction can. As we see elsewhere in the play, Anna asks a question but must wait 'while ARTHUR silently follows his thoughts' (*AJM* 27). As the screenplay directs, in the film Anna simply sits opposite and watches a silent Arthur as he attends to his thoughts and memories, the contents of which are implied, or can be inferred, but which remain unexpressed both within the film and screenplay. We might see here evidence for Ishiguro's suggestion that a work of fiction is able to follow 'thoughts and memories' in ways that are 'difficult to do on the screen'. In another scene, attempting to get a reaction from Lord Reid, Anna shouts at his unresponsive face, 'Lord Reid. Are you there somewhere?' (*AJM* 19). These confrontations with the limitations of vision and by implication the film medium, are structural to the form; as George Bluestone observes, film may be able to 'lead us to infer thought' but it 'cannot show us thought directly'.[23] Ishiguro's first screenplay, then, not only acts as a precursor to *Remains of the Day*, but initiates his exploration of the possibilities of fiction and film. The screenplay amounts to a careful interrogation of the distinction between the forms. *A Profile* simply offers a profile, a partial (in both senses) rendering of depthless contours, of the exterior of its subject that also has implications for Ishiguro's later fiction and his often somewhat depthless narrators.

The Gourmet

First broadcast in 1986,[24] Ishiguro's second television commission earned the Chicago Film Festival's 'Golden Plaque for Best Short Film', while the screenplay was published in Granta's *Best of Young British Novelists 43*, because, according to the editors of that volume, 'it reads so effectively on the page'.[25] *The Gourmet* follows a celebrated but jaded epicurean who, having consumed everything (including human flesh), is on what we understand to be a career-capping quest to savour something '*not* of this earth' (*G* 106). We accompany him enduring an evening in a church with London's

[23] George Bluestone (1968). *Novels Into Film: The Metamorphosis of Novels into Cinema*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, p. 48.
[24] Some disagreement exists about first broadcast: Wikipedia 1985; Groes and Veyret suggest May 1986; Wong January 1987; BFI and Granta list 1987;. However, the archived video dates the film to 1986.
[25] Lewis, *Kazuo Ishiguro*, p. xii. Ishiguro, 'The Gourmet', p. 91. Also directed by Michael Whyte and starring Charles Gray as the eponymous connoisseur

homeless, hungrily preparing for the arrival of his fantastic meal, the ghost of a murdered pauper.[26] With its focus on the homeless, *The Gourmet* is arguably Ishiguro's only explicit comment on his political present. As Sebastian Groes and Paul-Daniel Veyret remark, it as 'a politicized, tragicomic gothic tale exposing the social and cultural catastrophe of Thatcherism'.[27] Although the play's political critique is undermined by its farcical concept, Wai-Chew Sim reminds us that the absurdity also serves to illustrate that the 'non-realist features of *The Unconsoled* are not as atypical [of Ishiguro's writing] as they are often taken to be'.[28] Homelessness would have been fresh in Ishiguro's mind after his experiences as a Community Worker in Renfrew, Scotland in 1976, and the West London Cyrenians between 1979-1981. In this discussion, however, I want to focus not so much on politics (which Groes and Veyret cover) as on unpicking the idea of Manley *devouring* and the camera *capturing* the intangible, considering it as a further interrogation of film's possibilities.

Manley's evening among those who come to the church for the more mundane sustenance of bread and beans foregrounds the play's central theme; as his destitute guide David remarks, 'I'm the ghost around here. Could vanish tonight, nobody would notice' (*G* 121). Indifferent to David's plight, Manley explains that in this very church, 'in nineteen hundred and four, a pauper was murdered [because] some human organs were needed for research' (*G* 120). A casualty of the economic inequalities which persist eighty years later, and already a victim of calculated corporeal violence, the ghost of the pauper is the intended object of another ethical transgression. The ghost duly arrives and through Manley's archaic ritual and televisual wizardry, is captured, cooked, and eaten. Manley's alchemical conversion of spirit into flesh in the sanctity of the vestry (into which he and David trespass) subverts the Catholic ceremony of the Eucharist, with its transubstantiation of wine and bread into Christ's blood and flesh. At the crucial moment when the ghost arrives, Manley initially mistakes the visitation for another vagrant, asking him 'kindly to remove yourself from that vicinity'

[26] Waiting for a ghost is also the subject of his short story 'Waiting for J.' (1981)
[27] Sebastian Groes and Paul-Daniel Veyret (2009). Like the Gateway to Another World: Kazuo Ishiguro's Screenwriting. In eds., Sean Matthews and Sebastian Groes, *Kazuo Ishiguro*, London: Continuum, pp 32-44 (38).
[28] Wai-Chew Sim (2010). *Kazuo Ishiguro: A Routledge Guide*. Oxford: Routledge, p. 101.

(*G* 122). However, Manley and David quickly realise that they are in the presence of the anticipated ghost:

> For a fleeting moment, we glimpse the tramp's face, which has changed. It is the face of a dead man–staring, horror-struck, blood on the lips. We only catch this fleetingly, because we immediately cut to: Manley and David, utterly shocked. Manley comes to his senses first.

In this 'fleeting' instant, the tramp undergoes a metamorphosis, from the trespassing vagrant to not simply a ghost but a 'dead man' presumably in the moment immediately following his murder. After we witness and possibly share Manly and David's shock at the gruesome transformation, Manley springs his trap, 'The net covers the camera' as proxy for the ghost before 'the screen goes black' (*G* 123). The screenplay reveals the ghost's spatiotemporally doubled reaction, firstly to the original act of violence in the church in 1904, and secondly to the present threat in 1984. Oddly, the expression of horror which is appropriate for both the past and present assault is different: in the first instance it is the reaction of a corporeal being to its violent death, in the second the echoes of the corporeal in the spiritual faced once more with a perhaps more permanent erasure.

Shortly after his gruesome feast, Manley stumbles from the church looking 'very ill […] clutching his stomach and breathing heavily' as he huddles around a fire with another 'Homeless Man' (in Ishiguro's script the vagrants are an unindividuated mass), who attempts to sympathise, asking 'Overdid it, did we?':

> MANLEY: How could *you* ever understand the kind of hunger I suffer?
> HOMELESS MAN: Well. We all get hungry, don't we?
> Manley gives the homeless man another disparaging look.
> MANLEY: You have no idea what *real* hunger is.

Manley might be accused of cultural insensitivity: the homeless and destitute are perhaps the only ones in a 'wealthy' 'developed' nation to know 'real' hunger. Groes and Veyret view Manley as 'the embodiment of ruthless greed and selfishness, of decadence and excess, which make him blind to the implications of his taboo-breaking behaviour'.[29] But another reading might see Manley more positively. In his instructions for the scene in which the homeless are fed, Ishiguro directs that they should 'appear to be eating only because they know they should, without really caring if they do or

[29] Groes and Veyret, 'Gateway', p. 38.

not' (*G* 113). There are two interpretations of the listless appetite of the homeless: 1) their apparent lack of self-regard *results from* a lifetime of poverty and deprivation; or 2) the homeless lack drive and motivation, and their indifference *results in* their poverty. For Manley, eating – as a metaphor for human desire broadly construed – is a sacred act, as he ponders despairingly and with a relevance beyond nutrition: 'Hunger. The lengths I've gone to satisfy it. Yet it always returns' (*G* 110). Although he performs an act of sacrilege, of desecration within a Christian ethos and site of worship, his own quasi-religious devotion to exotic food supersedes these concerns. In this sense, we might sympathise with his assumption that if all other food has left him *spiritually* under-nourished, a spirit may indeed offer him sustenance. Indeed, the play opens with just such a suggestion, quoting Mathew 25:35: 'I was hungered and ye gave me meat / I was thirsty and ye gave me drink'. The Bible plays on an ambiguity of the spiritual and the bodily here that is also powerfully at work in the Eucharist itself. There is a sense in which Manley sacrifices his life to his pursuit, with a kind of stereotypical or even parodied machismo (he is manly, after all) that contrasts with the homeless David, who, although 'reluctant' to assist, acquiesces with little pressure. Unfortunately, the meal is 'Not quite as extraordinary as one may have expected … A disappointment all in all' (*G* 126). After a life devoted to satisfying an unfathomable appetite, Manley comes to realise what he has always suspected, even feared: that his 'hunger' itself is 'not of this earth'.

In an important moment in *A Profile*, the camera, and the viewer, must simply wait for an answer to Anna's questions as Mason 'follows his thoughts'. Something similar occurs in *The Gourmet*; as night falls in the church and the hour of the ghost's arrival approaches, Manley seeks assistance from David, his temporary companion, in finding the vestry. Sated on bread and beans, David is sleeping in a dormitory bed when Manley wakes him. Confused that Manley has not accepted the meal proffered earlier because he was 'going to dine later', and by his odd insistence that food remains in the Vestry, David initially 'turns over to go back to sleep' (*G* 115). However, he then 'remembers the times *he* has been hungry. Almost immediately, he looks up again at Manley, sighs and begins to get up' (*G* 115). We are invited here to ponder David's capacity for empathy, which is in stark contrast to Manley's 'taboo-breaking' narcissism. But David's memory, like Mason's

'thoughts', are not detectable by the camera, which cannot reveal 'people's inner worlds'.[30] Intriguingly, in these two examples we see that thoughts (Mason) and memories (David), are available to the page but not the screen. A text can expose us to the unedited processes of thought, whereas a camera can merely 'show us characters thinking' but 'cannot show us thought directly'.[31] We may be led by screenplay, direction, and performance to infer specific ideations or mental content, but this remains latent, gestural. This brings us to the paradoxical crux of the TV play itself, its conceit that some form of material nourishment might be gained from the immaterial, whether culinary or cultural.

Feature Length Screenplays

The Saddest Music in the World (1987/ 2003)

If the concerns of Ishiguro's short TV plays are UK-based and somewhat parochial, his later, longer works evidence more global ambitions. According to Veyret and Groes, both *The Saddest Music in the World* (2003) and *The White Countess* (2005) explore hypothetical utopian possibilities in which nations might co-exist in harmony.[32] Investigations of this misguided and ultimately futile ambition occur again in *When We Were Orphans* (2000) and *The Unconsoled* (1995). Originally written for Channel 4 in 1987 alongside *The Gourmet* and *A Profile*, Ishiguro later said that *The Saddest Music* became 'too big for T.V', so that it spent fifteen years circulating amongst directors and producers until it found its way to the celebrated Canadian writer and director Guy Maddin in 2002 (*CKI* 212). As Maddin relates, 'this poor thing had been passed around in the bushes like a big bottle of cheap wine, from Atom Egoyan [Ishiguro's preferred director] to Don McKellar to Bruce McDonald, and so forth'.[33] Maddin recalls that the original 'was set in London and in the present day, which was 1983, but its premise was very strong: that there was this contest co-sponsored by a CNN-like news thing and a distillery that would reward countries for singing the saddest song'.[34] Although Maddin liked

[30] Richards, 'January Interview'.
[31] Bluestone, *Novels into Film*, p. 48.
[32] Groes and Veyret, 'Gateway', p. 32.
[33] Jonathan Ball and Navratil (2004), **'**No Sob Story: Director Guy Maddin and Screenwriter George Toles on Collaboration *The Saddest Music in the World*', https://www.jonathanball.com/guy-maddin-and-george-toles-interview/
[34] Paula Bernstein (2016). Guy Maddin on The Saddest Music in The World and His Interactive Seances. *Filmmaker*, 29th March.

the premise, he and Toles completely rewrote the script. As Gerry Smyth remarks, only the 'original idea remained: namely, the questions of music's ability to embody emotion and the central role it plays in people's emotional lives'.[35] Maddin and Ishiguro tell very different stories about the collaboration. Maddin remembers that 'right up until the moment before he gave permission, Ishiguro didn't like our treatment. He thought it was terrible'.[36] By contrast, Ishiguro remembers that he had 'never seen a filmmaker' like Maddin who was 'a demi-God in the world of avant-garde filmmaking', and was happy to become a script editor for his own script, which retained 'the very essence' of a story about countries competing to produce 'the saddest music in the world' (*CKI* 213). Maddin and Ishiguro agree, however, that all that remained in the film was the central premiss of a brewery-sponsored sad music contest. Shot in black and white in Maddin's characteristic 'imitation of silent' cinema the final film bears little to no relation to the original script.[37] However, *SM* shares with Ishiguro's other works a fascination with the political and redemptive possibilities of art, and with the consolations which might be offered by music which becomes the central motif of his most unfilnable novel, *The Unconsoled.*

The White Countess **(2005)**

Unlike *The Saddest Music*, Ishiguro's second screenplay, for the Merchant and Ivory production *The White Countess*, was used essentially as he intended.[38] Ismail Merchant and James Ivory, who successfully adapted *Remains of the Day* as a feature film (1994), are famous for the lavish production values of upper-middle class period dramas often based on classic English novels such as *A Room with a View* and *Howard's End*. But *The White Countess* was poorly received by viewers and critics, and has even been considered a failure by some.[39] Perhaps this is because, as Justin Chang has remarked, 'Ishiguro's ambitious screenplay stalls in its attempts to blend the intimate and the

[35] Gerry Smyth (2011). 'Waiting for the Performance to Begin': Kazuo Ishiguro's Musical Imagination in *The Unconsoled* and *Nocturnes*. In eds., Sebastian Groes and Barry Lewis, *Kazuo Ishiguro: New Critical Visions of the Novels*. London: Red Globe, pp144-156 (145).
[36] Ball and Navratil, 'Guy Maddin and George Toles'.
[37] William Beard (2010). *Into the Past: The Cinema of Guy Maddin*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, p.20.
[38] Originally asked by Ivory to adapt Junichiro Tanizaki's *The Diary of a Mad Old Man*, but so little of that novel remains that it may as well be coincidental.
[39] Chu-Chueh Cheng (2019). Reframing Ishiguro's oeuvre through the Japanese militarist in *The White Countess*. *Orbis Litter*, 74: 381– 391. https://doi.org/10.1111/oli.12241

historical on the same canvas' – a remarkable failure for an author whose novels so deftly interweave the personal and national.[40] Another shortcoming of *The White Countess* is that it is Ishiguro's most conventional story, lacking the technical strategies which make his work so distinctively powerful. Although crucial plot details are at first occluded before being gradually revealed (in a similar manner to his novels and short stories), and despite the recurrent intrusion of flashbacks and distorted memories so typical of Ishiguro's fictions, the narrative is linear, the relationships both uneventful and lacking the deeply divisive ambiguities facilitated by his complexly narrated fictions. This might be attributable to the fact that, as Ishiguro himself remarks, he was 'writing for a very specific director' (James Ivory), who has a very specific cinematic style and way of working, and felt there was 'no point my writing stuff that he's not going to do' (*CKI* 212). Critics have commented on the connections between *The White Countess* and Ishiguro's other works, noting the way the film returns to the late-1930s Shanghai of *When We Were Orphans*, and to a consideration of the consequences of the 1919 Treaty of Versailles in *Remains of the Day*; and to its interest in multicultural microcosms of bars and cafes that is also in evident in *The Unconsoled*. As Lisa Fluet suggests, the film 'invokes many character-types, plot situations, settings and conflicts developed in his novels […] rearranges the remembered novelistic material in the same way that Ishiguro's protagonists rearrange material from their own pasts'.[41] The screenplay acts a bit like a photo album, parading Ishiguro's familiar themes before the camera. While these intertextual echoes are interesting, I consider the ways in which it manifests Ishiguro's engagement with film as form, by drawing attention to the screenplay's fascination with the senses, particularly sight and sound, and internal experience in the form of imagination.

The White Countess returns to a recurrent theme in Ishiguro's work: war and its aftermath. The script builds on *When We were Orphans*, which Ishiguro had recently finished and for which he had a 'whole lot of research' he had not used (*CKI* 212). Like much of the early sections of *When We were Orphans* which portray Banks' childhood, *The White Countess* takes place in Shanghai's

[40] Justin Chang (2005). Review: The White Countess. *Variety* Nov 27, 2005.

[41] L. Fluet (2007). Introduction: Antisocial Goods. *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction, 40*(3), pp. 207-215 (207- 208).

International Settlement immediately prior to and during the beginning of the second Sino-Japanese War, which was instigated by the Japanese invasion of mainland China in 1937. As Ishiguro has remarked in an interview, 'that entire world stopped instantly when the Japanese moved in'.[42] Ishiguro has a personal connection with the city; his father was born in Shanghai after his grandfather was sent there to set up a Chinese branch of Toyota.[43] Unlike *When We were Orphans*, which divides the action between China and London, very little of *The White Countess* takes place beyond the boundaries of the Settlement, which means, as Cheng remarks, that we see the 'foreignness of the Chinese city and the oddity of the Chinese people [presenting] a Western impression of pre-war Shanghai, in which the cityscape is lively and theatrical while Chinese natives seem inert and irrelevant'.[44] However, this outside perspective seems entirely suited to a film which explores colonialism, invasion, and cultural appropriation.

The film's plot is relatively straightforward: Todd Jackson, a 'distinguished American diplomatist' blinded in a terrorist attack which had killed his daughter (years after another had killed his wife and first child), lives in Shanghai in the late 1930s and creates the 'bar of [his] dreams' after a sizable win at the racetrack (*WC*..).[45] He headhunts his ideal staff, even security, because 'with a good team of bouncers […] you could conduct the place like an orchestra' (*WC*). Most importantly, Jackson seeks a hostess, the titular 'White Countess', Russian émigré Countess Sofia Belinskaya, now a taxi dancer in a run-down club. Again, we see some problematic colonial politics, here, as Jackson works to create his colony (the bar) within the colony (the Settlement) and to port European royalty into an Oriental enclave secured by his 'bouncers'. His vision for the bar is a kind of settlement within the settlement, a further refined micro-instantiation of the ostensibly cosmopolitan international zone, but one over which he would exercise total control with the Countess as figurehead.

[42] Howard W. French (2004). Searching for Scenes From Shanghai's Lost Past. *The New York Times*, 28th November.
[43] Stuart Jeffries (2006). Shanghai Surprise'. *The Guardian* Thu 30th March.
[44] Chu-Chueh Cheng (2020). Shanghai in the White Countess: Production and Consumption of an Oriental City Through the Western Cinematic Gaze. In eds., Lisa Bernstein and Chu-chueh Cheng, *Revealing/Reveiling Shanghai Cultural Representations from the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries*. New York: SUNY Press, pp. 159-178 (163).
[45] Andrew Bennett traces *WWWO*'s figurative use of blinds and blindness in *Kazuo Ishiguro: New Essays*, eds. P. Sloane and K. Shaw (MUP 2022).

However, Jackson realises that without 'political tension' his bar would be no more than 'confection'; so, he and his mysterious acquaintance Matsuda, a 'much feared and loathed' Japanese military official (although Jackson is unaware of this), arrange to introduce 'A few Chinese Reds. Some of their Nationalist enemies, and maybe a few of your countrymen. Maybe some of mine' (*WC*). Like a diplomat, with echoes of Lord Darlington, Jackson assumes somewhat hubristically that he can manage these deep ideological divisions in the tightly controlled confines of the bar. His intentions, as Fluet argues, are seemingly altruistic, or at least benign: the bar is not an escape 'from the terror lurking outside - but rather a figure for, or a portal to, a world in which things might be repaired'.[46] One might indeed see such an endeavour as offering a model for larger spaces of reconciliation. But one might by contrast see a further example of inter-war American geo-political interference facilitated by wealth. Unfortunately, Matsuda has been in Shanghai preparing the way for an invasion. Shortly after *The White Countess* opens, the bombs fall and Jackson is forced to flee the city. The attack is figured in the script not simply as an assault on Shanghai, but on the possibility of a harmonious post-national or post-racial political space, and as such stands as an act of ideological violence.

As we have already noted, the distinction that Ishiguro draws between fiction (introspective) and film (external) is reducible to the fact that, as Bluestone puts it, 'the novel is a linguistic medium, the film essentially visual'.[47] Film relies on the senses, particularly sight and sound, and so its antitheses are blindness and deafness. *The White Countess* plays with the distinction between sight and vision, and the screenplay simply would not work with a sighted Jackson because it would not then be able to develop its central rhetorical conceit. Ishiguro and Ivory recall that the idea of a blind protagonist was added after the film had been cast and shooting had started. Either way, whether preconceived or developing organically, metaphors of vision and sightlessness come to play a prominent role in the symbolic infrastructure of the film. Interestingly, the screenplay was originally adapted from a novel by Junichiro Tanizaki, whose other most renowned work, 'Moumoku Monogatari', is narrated by a blind servant, and there is a possibility that Ishiguro creatively

[46] Fluet, 'Antisocial Gods', p. 233.
[47] Bluestone, *Novels into Film*, p. viii

interwove fruitful elements from each work. Although ocularly impaired, Jackson has a fascination with seeing things, with vision; he tells one character that he has 'everything' in his mind, 'It's all up here…Inside' (*WC…*). Again, by constructing a visual scenario which involves the absence of mental images but the implication of ideations in the character's mind, Ishiguro draws our attention to the limits of film and to the unfilmable. If film can 'show us characters thinking' but not thought, here it can show us a character imagining things but not the thing imagined.[48] While reinforcing the ocular distinction between film and text, the scenario also enables a sustained interrogation of the idea of vision, of sight, foregrounding the capacity of imagination to construct internal 'sights' even in the unsighted. However, where Jackson imagines rather than 'sees' his ideal nightclub in his mind, the viewer is encouraged also to share in Jackson's vision, and in this sense although Jackson's (implied) mental content cannot be visualised on screen, it evokes cognate images in the mind of the viewer.

In conversations with his colleague, Jackson also explores the difference between 'looking' and 'seeing', pointing out that the former may prevent an obstacle to the latter: 'You don't see any of This, do you, Thomas? I mean, you look at This and you see nothing. Nothing. […] You don't.... You don't see... the beauty?' (c 1.24-126). In many ways this is an overused image, of the blind seer, dating back at least to Tiresias. In this scene however, and in the film more generally, the implication is that even if film can render something visually, there is something beyond show (Jackson's ideational deictic 'This') that can only ever be hinted at by the camera. In this sense, Jackson's ethical blindness to the corruption of the Settlement and his own complicity in it enables him imaginatively to sustain an idealised view of a pragmatically unsustainable space that, as Cheng remarks, is already segregated from the wider Chinese community in which the settlement and the bar sit. Jackson unwittingly recreates the colonial enterprise which leads directly to the 'terror' of war which textures the work, as Japan seeks to expand into China. In this sense, Thomas, unable to imagine the micro-utopian space of Jackson's vision because it seems both unrealisable and untenable in the instability of the settlement, has a variety of sight that Jackson does not.

[48] Bluestone, *Novels into Film*, p. 48.

If Jackson remains conceptually and morally 'blind' to the implications of his interference, in constructing these hypothetical political spaces in this and other works, Ishiguro, by drawing on these themes, develops what Rebecca L. Walkowitz calls a 'critical cosmopolitanism', generating 'comparisons not to create equivalences but to notice continuities and mergings among different political circumstances'.[49] Walkowitz suggests that critical cosmopolitanism does not seek to flatten out difference by reducing political and national complexities, but rather to trace points of intersection and shared concerns. For Ishiguro, 1930s Shanghai was 'almost a prototype of the great multicultural cities that we find today: lots of different ethnic groups' and necessarily 'rivalries between outside powers, a great place for gangsters, a drug culture'.[50] While the film examines the 'possibility of creating a utopia where harmony between nations might be established', it is also a failed project (again, not least because it is inherently exclusionary and colonialist in its ambitions). Ishiguro has commented that while researching *When We Were Orphans* he had 'become interested in subjects like the Russians and the Jews' (*CKI* 212). This interest is foregrounded in the screenplay; while travelling through an area of deprivation to visit Sofia, Jackson hears someone shouting at her neighbour, Mr. Samuel Feinstein, 'Jew! Dirty Jewish scum!' (WC…). Jackson, a little naively shocked for a well-travelled diplomat, asks 'Do you have to put up with a lot of that around here?' (WC…). Feinstein asks 'Was someone shouting something bad? I didn't listen. Luckily, I'm hard of hearing […] That kind of thing... after what we've endured, what is it? Nothing. I don't hear it. The children don't hear it' (*WC* 138). Like Jackson, Feinstein feels 'lucky' to not have the use of a sense which might impinge on the more inclusive world he constructs for himself and his children. But Feinstein is selectively deaf, and has become not literally unhearing but rather impervious to the anti-Semitism from which the Jewish inhabitants of the city had attempted to escape. Ishiguro seems to be suggesting that the only way in which harmony can be achieved in multicultural and multi-ethnic spaces is if individuals adapt to prejudice by electively and selectively editing sensory experience.

[49] Rebecca L. Walkowitz (2006). *Cosmopolitan Style: Modernism Beyond the Nation*. New York: Columbia University Press, p. 109.
[50] French, 'Searching for Scenes'.

The White Countess, like *A Profile of Arthur J. Mason* and *The Gourmet*, plays with the senses most associated with film and that give it its 'medium specificity'. Sight and sound are crucial not only to film as an art, but to the possibilities it sustains in distinction to text. If film's strength over literature is its capacity to not simply provide prompts for visualisations but to present scenes themselves, it is also its very reliance on spectacle and those things susceptible to display (objects, actions) which limits its capacity to examine qualia, memory. *The White Countess*, by repeatedly drawing attention to the distinction between ocular vision and vision more broadly construed, interrogates the limits of its own form, while also metaphorically gesturing towards the other varieties of blindness which inhabit the film.

Ishiguro's screenplays have not been met with the acclaim accorded to his literary fiction. His idiosyncratic style of incremental, almost accidental revelation, linguistic ambiguity, repetition with subtle memory-distorted variation, shares more with the introspective possibilities offered by writing. More, what distinguishes and even elevates Ishiguro's fiction writing is his development of a unique and uniquely peculiar narrative voice, one which relies upon varieties of evasion and (self-)deceit which are difficult to render on screen. Returning to his own taxonomy, the confessional stories he tells are more suited to a form that is 'able to explore people's inner worlds' than it is to one which exploits the 'exterior', 'third-person' world.[51] Although scholarship has been interested in finding connections with his fiction, his works for television and film have a significance beyond such references. His films tease-out those things which are impervious to the camera but central to the page: internal states, 'qualia', in the form(lessness) of 'thoughts' (*A Profile of Arthur J. Mason*), 'memories' (*The Gourmet*), and 'imagination' (*The White Countess*). Although it has been delayed by the Covid-19 pandemic, filming is currently under way on *Living*, Ishiguro's English-language adaptation of Akira Kurosawa's 1952 film *Ikiru*. Once more, Ishiguro returns to the Japanese cultural heritage which has had such an influence on his life and work. *Ikiru* has all the essential elements for an Ishiguro work, dwelling on personal and professional regrets, turning points missed, and wrong paths taken. Ishiguro has said that 'The inner story [of *Ikiru*] suggests that it's the responsibility of

[51] Richards, 'January Interview'.

each of us to bring meaning and satisfaction to our life. That even against the odds, we should try to find a way to be proud of, and happy with, the lives we lead [while] struggling to see what our individual contributions can possibly amount to within the broader picture'.[52] It will be enlightening to see how Ishiguro adapts such an iconic work of Japanese cinema to a British cast and setting, with Bill Nighy, stalwart of the quintessentially British cinema, starring as a terminally ill civil servant in post-war London, trying valiantly, like so many of Ishiguro's characters, to make a meaningful contribution to society – or to make amends for a life of inaction and servitude, before his death. It will be interesting here to see how Ishiguro manages the task of adaptation, and the manner in which he translates the film from Japanese socio-cultural and filmic context to a British one will further illuminate his own engagement with film. More, *Living* is evidence that Ishiguro's interest in film and film as form is not simply a casual one, but that it has persisted from the earliest days of his career, and that his work with film and for television has been and continues to be a fruitful and important counterpoint to his more celebrated fictions. Perhaps more scholarly attention, then, should be paid to these kinds of writing which, though exploiting different techniques and sensory experiences, share a great deal.

[52] Andrea Wiseman (2020). Living': Bill Nighy & Aimee Lou Wood To Star In Kazuo Ishiguro Adaptation Of Kurosawa's 'Ikiru' For 'Carol' Producer Number 9 & Rocket Science — AFM. *Deadline* 15th October