

**The Supernatural from Page to Screen: Ambrose Bierce's and Robert Enrico's
*An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge*¹**

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I will only confess to you quite openly that, as I believe, all the horror and terror of which you speak has only occurred in your mind, and the external world of reality has had little share in it.

E. T. A. Hoffmann (1993: 52-3)

The relation between film and literature—particularly the short story and, of course, the novel— is so close that it would be possible to argue that, from the moment that film turned narrative, literature came to live in it. Indeed, literature provided, on the one hand, the first framework within which film made sense, as storytelling in film was understood as an extension of literary narration. Woodrow Wilson allegedly said of *The Birth of a Nation* (DW Griffith 1915) that it was ‘history writ with lightning’ (Lavender 2001), focusing on the realism of the medium and exalting the didactic possibilities of film.

But, on the other hand, the written word soon came to be construed not as complementary to the image, but as its very opposite. For, at the time that cinema was invented, literature was conceived as a means for the expression of the individual and the inner self, whereas cinema, as regards its partly industrial origins, came to be regarded as expressing a collective, social view, and crucially as being closely bound to the representation of reality, given its indexical and iconic nature. What François Brunet has said of photography is also applicable to cinema: ‘... it seemed to run counter to a literary enterprise that defined itself, at least partly, as the expansion of an

individual imagination particularly drawn to invisible truths’ (Brunet 2009: 11). As put by Nobel-laureate Gabriel García Márquez when discussing adaptations of his literary works into films: ‘the problem with cinema is that... it is a mass creative process... the writer is merely one cog in the huge machinery’ (Taylor 2010: 162).²

Although digital filmmaking has rendered obsolete the idea that film is bound to represent reality, and much digital video is now shot for the celebration of the individual, for most of the twentieth century the opposition between literature and cinema continued, with a general view of literature as the superior art and higher form of culture, and of film as an inferior, commercial and generally derivative, if not parasitic, form. In particular, the piece of literature came to be regarded as earlier, and thus ‘original’ and the standard whereby film was to be judged, a good film being the one that most faithfully followed its literary source. It was not until the 1990s that ‘... the fidelity imperative emerged as the arch-villain of adaptation studies, both because of its association with right-wing politics ... and because of its subjective impressionism’ (Elliott 2003: 129). It was also around this time that Robert Stam’s and others’ questioning of originality and the role of the author, on the basis of Mikhail Bakhtin’s notions of dialogic exchange, and on the tenets of postmodernity more generally, allowed for the conceptualization of both a film based on a literary work and the literary work itself to be regarded on equal standing (Stam 1992).

Crucial among those critics who have attempted to gain a better, nuanced understanding of what the differences between the two modes of storytelling are—namely telling and showing (Hutcheon 2006)—is Karl Kroeber. In this chapter I test out Kroeber’s views, outlined below, by contrasting and comparing the short story ‘An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge’ by Ambrose Bierce (1891) and an adaptation of it, the short film *An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge* (*La Rivière du hibou*) written

and directed by Robert Enrico in 1962, with music by Henri Lanoë. As the story and the film deal with the supernatural, they make for ideal case studies.

The Literary and the Cinematic Experience

In his *Make Believe in Film and Fiction*, Kroeber (2006) argues that the former was better suited for conveying interiority and subjectivity, and the latter for external action. He contended that the cinematic and the literary oppose each other in such a way that they bring about diametrically different aesthetic experiences of subjectivity and consciousness, and contrasting perceptions of reality outside oneself. His main thesis has to do with the categories of space, time and perception, both on film and on literature.

On film, according to him, space is all about distance. Reminiscent of Lacanian theories of the formation of the self through the ‘mirror stage’, distance, Kroeber contends, implies a spatial separation between the subject and the object, so cinema is a visual experience that takes place ‘outside’, suggesting a radical distinction between the image on the screen and the viewer’s mind: ‘We literally cannot see anything except at some distance, and to see something is to recognize its separateness from us’ (2006: 6). As regards time, film, he claims, is all about the present and the immediate, bringing one into direct and instantaneous involvement with the world depicted in its perpetual going forward, until the end of the film. He asserts sight is immediate, whereas language requires time. As for visual perception, Kroeber attributes to cinema, which he predominantly conceives of as an act of seeing, the capacity of getting the distinctive expansion and intensification of movements—for instance, thanks to the close up—which the expression *larger than life*, often used to describe images on film, accurately captures.

By contrast, Kroeber argues that the experience of reading takes place ‘inside’: ‘We read for the meaning, not the perceptible actuality of the words on the page, and that meaning takes form entirely within our mind’ (2006: 6). As for the perception of time in literature, written language needs more time to be apprehended, in opposition to the supposed immediacy of the visual mentioned above. And because the experience of reading is individual, it would be unaffected by the restraint of temporal sequences, allowing the narrator to create even timeless oneiric realities.³ As regards perception, Kroeber evokes Mikhail Bakhtin’s tenets, namely that as all words we share carry ‘traces of earlier uses’, there are in effect no ‘original’ words. The use of the same words throughout time would entail what he defines as ‘historical contaminations’, which allows the language to continuously self-re-evaluate. He thus describes the verbal storytelling language as ‘... especially suited for subtle stimulation of changes in self-awareness’ (Kroeber 2006: 7).

In sum, despite its high regard for literature on the basis of its ability to give, as it were, free reign to subjectivity, this perspective nonetheless holds that it is film that is better equipped to depict action, going beyond what painting could do before to suggest movement and to convey, in particular, the instant, and thus the aesthetic of modernity as the fleeting moment, in a more flexible, more fluid way than drama. This would seem to somehow echo the views that some filmmakers, especially those also devoted to writing theory, have had of cinema ‘... as the art among arts, or at least as the most representative art of the century: better endowed than literature to transmit action, overcoming pictorial aporia as regards movement and the instant, and being more flexible and fluid than drama’ (Aumont 2004: 153).⁴

Throughout my analysis of the short story and the film *An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge*, I focus on the different ways that the literary and cinematographic

stories construct a psychic-supernatural reality, involving two plans of reality: what is ‘objectively’ happening, and the subjective reality of the main character, a reality that the audience also gets to share. I argue that, in a sense, and in line with arguments on the literary origins of cinema (Elliott 2003), the film can be understood as embodying the aesthetics of the nineteenth century supernatural literature that it draws from, concerned as it is with death—and with its rendition as a beautiful, beloved woman. It also seems to make the most of the magnification of movement and size of the images to put its narrative across, seemingly providing evidence for Kroeber’s view—although I argue here that so does literature, by different means. And in another sense, the film also crafts a supernatural world that violates all coordinates of time and space in the manner Kroeber ascribed to literature, with exclusively cinematic means. I conclude that while literature and cinema are certainly ‘sister’ and complementary arts—rather than rival—in the end the crucial role is that of the reader and/or the viewer, who authors his or her own story from the words or images afforded, as perception is in both cases highly subjective. In other words, cinema and literature, far from being two so differentiated aesthetic means of apprehending reality, constitute immersing experiences that impel viewers or readers to lose themselves within a rare event that takes place in their psychic dimension, just as in the case of Peyton Farquhar’s incident, the main character in the story and film I am concerned with and to which we now turn.

Subverting Time in Literature and Film

‘An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge’ can be read as a metaphor of the unbearable, a speculation on the experience of agony just a moment before a dramatic death. Taking place during the civil war in the United States (from 12 April 1861 to 9 April 1865),

the tale denounces the dehumanization of war and any ‘civilized’ method of extermination. Bierce’s profoundly critical view turned to the political and historical reality of his country is simply devastating.

The plot for both tale and short film can be summarized as follows. Peyton Farquhar, the owner of a plantation and sympathizer of the Confederates, is about to be hung over the Owl Creek Bridge of the title, in Alabama. Those about to carry out the execution are soldiers of the Federal army. The reader will learn the reason later: a spy, passing himself for a confederate, has deceived him, making him believe that he could destroy the bridge occupied by the Unionists, with the objective of catching him. Mr Farquhar actually was a wealthy plantation owner, from a respected family in Alabama, a slave owner and, like other slave owners, a politician. However, seemingly by miracle, at the very moment the boards that sustain him are set loose so he will fall down and be hanged, the rope around his neck is broken and he falls into the river. He dives into the water and, after a huge effort swimming to avoid being shot, he reaches the opposite shore and goes into the woods. Taken by a fit of euphoria at having so unexpectedly escaped and saved his life, he runs back home to hold his beloved wife in his arms. But at the supreme moment he is reunited with her, his neck is broken on the weight of his body: the happy escape and return home have only taken place in his mind, a supreme act of imagination in only the few seconds that he was in agony over the Owl Creek Bridge.

Not only is the tale a master piece, but the short film it is based on—thirty minutes long—has been described as a ‘classic short film’ (Johnson 2002) in its own right. Directed by the late Robert Enrico, the film *An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge* was released in 1962, and won both the Golden Palm at the Cannes Film Festival, in 1961, and the Academy Award for short film, in 1964. The film begins

with a still image that portrays a public warning ‘prominently placed on a burnt tree trunk’, which somehow synthesizes the director’s outlook of amalgamating in his adaptation literature—a written text—with cinema—its actual image, in such a way that the viewer can *see* it and *read* it at the same time. The warning says: ‘Order. Any civilian caught interfering with the railroad bridges tunnels or trains will be summarily hanged. The 4th of April, 1862’ (Cooper & Dancyger 2005: 20).⁵ We then hear drums, the cry of an owl, a bugle. We see the officer giving orders, feet marching, a sergeant carrying the rope with which the man will be hanged, and then the prisoner himself, in civilian clothes, standing at the edge of the bridge and struggling with what seems to be his very last moments. These first images already allow the viewer to understand the man’s extreme situation. How is the escape conveyed in the tale, in such a way that it seems both possible and fantastic? And how, in turn, is this conveyed in images and sound, given that both Bierce’s text and Enrico’s short film are uncannily silent?⁶ What does this say about perception, interiority and subjectivity? We must return, first, to the issue of time, then magnification of images and finally perception.

Real time and filmic time are of course not necessarily the same, even if film unfolds in time. As Jacques Aumont has put it: ‘...le temps du cinéma, qui mécaniquement est identifiable au temps réel est en fait fort différent, parce qu’il est modulé dramatiquement, et c’est à partir de cette modulation qu’il se construit rythmiquement (en assemblant des éléments de rythme...)’ (time in cinema, which is mechanically identifiable as real time, is in fact quite different, because it is modulated dramatically and from that modulation it is rhythmically built (assembling elements of rhythm...))’ (2011: 96, my translation). In relation to rhythm, the devastating conventional time alluded to by means of the ‘ticking of his watch’

(Bierce 1964: 52), echoes the beats of Farquhar's heart in extreme anguish, inexorably reminding him of the few seconds he still has to think about the safety of his loved ones. By means of the watch, Enrico's adaptation achieves a poignant cinematic recreation of that moment rhythmically—immediately after he is stripped of his watch by his executioners—when he is able to see his beloved wife in a dream-like evocation, suddenly coming to his last call in slow motion, silent, smiling.

In both the written text and its adaptation, conventional perception of time and space collapses in that two realities—indeed two parallel occurrences—take place simultaneously, in a few seconds: the real time of the execution at the very moment the 'sergeant stepped aside' and the prisoner is hanged (Bierce 1964: 52); and another, dream-like reality, parallel to the execution, devoid of time and space, which constitutes Farquhar's escape from the Federal camp. This second occurrence takes place very close to the realm of the supernatural, in the victim's psyche and it is paradoxically the *real* story of both the tale and the short film. This psychic story in turn splits into two different layers of temporality during Peyton Farquhar's agony, once he has fallen 'straight downward through the bridge' (Bierce 1964: 53). First, a mental temporal line, which incorporates thoughts, analytical reflections, concepts and ideas; second, an unconscious pulse, which determines all kinds of extreme emotional states and instinctive reactions, which eventually annihilates the former, the 'intellectual part of his nature' (Bierce 1964: 54). For instance, the moment after he is hanged, 'ages later, it seemed to him', Payton's thought is able to register a strong physical pain upon his neck 'followed by a sense of suffocation'. But this then forces him only 'to feel', 'and feeling was torment' (Bierce 1964: 53-54). Then, instinct—the only means of surviving—allows him *to see*, 'as an idler might observe the feat of a juggler, without interest in the outcome', how his hands tried to untie themselves

(Bierce 1964: 54). It is instinctive reactions that have taken over the intellectual ones. In his adaptation, Enrico resolves these mental and instinctive reactions through the cinematic sequence of the man in desperation under the water trying to free his throat and his hands, and getting rid of his boots. Neither the reader nor the viewer understands this double reality until the unexpected dénouement.

In short, the so-called ‘presentness’ attributed to cinema by Krøber and others, which cinema can supposedly only surmount by means of devices such as flashbacks, flash-forwards, dissolves, image overlaps, distortions, colour filters and similar devices, here simply does not hold, as subjective time, in Enrico’s film, is made present by the narrative itself. The aim is not to render surrealistic scenes of dream, but rather to render ‘reality’ uncanny. Enrico’s short film is structured around a seemingly traditional linear narrative, although certain details indicate that not all is well. One instance is the strange immobility of the soldiers, which, in the light of the unexpected development, seems rather anomalous. Indeed, except for the four soldiers who are on the bridge, nobody moves in the camp: ‘The company faced the bridge, staring stonily, motionless. The sentinels facing the banks of the stream might have been statues to adorn the bridge’, says the narrator (Bierce 1964: 51). Enrico shows us exactly that. Also, when the company fires, it is highly improbable that none of the soldiers would have hit their target; but at this stage of the tale and the film, it is by means of suggesting that the improbable indeed took place that disbelief is avoided. Moreover, the cannon was fired three times, as his executioners were intent to kill Farquhar at all costs, something absolutely unbelievable when considered in retrospect.

Apart from presenting an apparently linear narrative that we later learn never took place in the objective reality, but subjectively, inside the victim’s mind (and

ours) as an alternative, atemporal, psychic reality, there is another way in which the film and the tale challenge conventional notions of temporality. Both start, so to speak, with the end. Following Poe's *Philosophy of Composition*: 'It is only with the *dénouement* constantly in view that we can give a plot its indispensable air of consequence, or causation, by making the incidents, and especially the tone at all points, tend to the development of the intention' (Poe 2006: 543).

Great admirer of Edgar Poe, Charles Baudelaire would remind of Poe's seminal contribution as regards the structure of a work of art: 'All ideas, like obedient arrows, flight to the same goal' (1976 [1852]: 283). In the preamble of his translation of *The Raven*, Baudelaire emphasizes that: 'Everything, in a poem as in a novel, in a sonnet as in a *nouvelle*, must converge on the *dénouement*' (1976 [1859]: 343).

Michel Chion (2007) has argued the climax of a film should be the culminating point of the dramatic progression, involving emotions, dramatization and intensity and it must therefore be located towards the end. After the climax, there can only be scenes of resolution. Bierce's tale is written, according to Poe's theory, pointing towards the *denouement*. In other words, the linear temporal narrative is again subverted here by taking death, or the tale's and film's end, as the *starting point* of the narrative. The devastating meaning of the story only becomes clear to the reader or viewer in retrospect. Thus the argument that time in literature is not subject to actual restraints, but that time in cinema is does not resist close scrutiny. Indeed, when discussing Enrico's short for its artistic merits, it is his ability to portray the subversion of time that most critics comment on:

Jean Bofferty's crystalline cinematography pin-points the details of the soldiers unease, fright and desperation, while Henri Lanoe's [sic] music

remains hauntingly uplifting. Yet, it is Enrico's simple direction that seems to echo so strongly after all of this time. For this film (which is virtually without dialogue but for a few words) offers viewers and film-makers alike something that is so often missing in today's films: a clear, concise story wrapped in a composition of *striking images beating in time*. (Johnson 2002, my emphasis)

And if an earlier generation of critics that were conversant with literary conventions once thought literature was inherently superior and more effective, the newer generations, accustomed to images, are starting to argue the opposite. In the words of blogger Alisa Hathaway:

The elaborateness of the harrowing getaway makes us root for this man whose crimes are unclear. Having not read the original story, I can't imagine how the author builds this tension with nothing but text in his employ, when Enrico can tease us with sights, sounds, *and the defeat of time*. (2011, my emphasis)

With more bloggers joining film criticism academic debates on adaptation are bound to change.

Perception and Magnification

Recent research on the way images are processed in the brain has shown that perception is a complex matter. While visual perception is immediate, it takes places selectively, and some information is lost.⁷ Moreover, regardless of its size, the meaning of a cinematographic image does not solely depend on the image itself, but also on the whole context that surrounds it. The magnification of movements that

Kroeber attributed to cinema is thus, at least at the perception level, of a technical order. The impact of a close-up or a distorting lens will largely depend on the rest of the images in the narrative flow.

On the other hand, in literature, it is certainly possible to magnify movement, and indeed to magnify importance. In Bierce's tale, an essential component of the plot is the image—literary speaking—of Farquhar's wife, that is, his wife as he remembers her. The presence of this character is essential in the story not only because of the strong emotional link with the main character, but also because she ultimately acts as a metaphor for the death that awaits him. In other words her image is magnified, looming large in all the scenes that take place after we first 'see' her, thanks to the narrative structure. What the viewer sees, as much as what the reader reads, is something tremendous in its simplicity: a woman and her husband, the man who is about to be executed, coming together again. During his very short agony, Mr Farquhar evokes his beloved wife three times: when he is about to be hanged, he thinks of his wife and children: 'My home, thank God, is as yet outside their lines; my wife and little ones are still beyond the invader's farthest advance' (Bierce 1964: 52); at night, when walking in the woods, he thinks again of his wife and children: 'By nightfall he was fatigued, footsore, famishing. The thought of his wife and children urged him on' (Bierce 1964: 57); and when he finally arrives home.

Let us now compare and contrast, in the short story and the film, the crucial scene in which the reunion between husband and wife eventually occurs and how this coincides with the man's last breath. In the literary text, the erotic content is extremely subtle, only suggested through two moments in Farquhar's last rendezvous with Eros and Thanatos. One is a brief but powerful description of his wife's beauty and graceful figure when he is approaching his house:

As he pushes open the gate and passes up the wide white walk, he sees a flutter of female garments; his wife, looking fresh and cool and sweet, steps down from the veranda to meet him. At the bottom of the steps she stands waiting, with a smile of ineffable joy, an attitude of matchless grace and dignity. And how beautiful she is! (Bierce 1964: 58)

The other, which connotes a strong but subtle eroticism, is when they are about to fall into each other's arms: 'He springs forward with extended arms. As he is about to clasp her he feels a stunning blow upon the back of his neck; a blinding white light blazes all about him with a sound like the shock of a cannon—then all is darkness and silence!' (Bierce 1964: 58)

Enrico's adaptation greatly benefits from this erotic vein of love and passion.⁸ A highly emotional effect is achieved in the sequence which combines the man running with his arms outstretched towards his wife—indeed towards death—giving himself over to her; and she, moving towards him with her sweetest smile, the whole underscored by a piece of non-diegetic music. It is a piece for solo guitar that contrastingly celebrates the merging of love and life during the instant of Peyton Farquhar's agony. Its rather slow tempo provides the scene with a touch of painful melancholy through its delicate chords and simple structure. Its effect is so powerful that visually the man seems to be running to clasp his beloved 'with extended arms' (Bierce 1964: 58) in slow motion. At the end of the story, when the man has been hanged, the reader will learn that what Peyton Farquhar went through was nothing but his last recollections.

To sum up, what both literary and cinematic texts demonstrate is that, whether in reading or viewing, perception is not infallible, immediacy in both cases being relative and deceiving. Seeing an object requires a perspective, therefore any visualization of the object is fragmentary or partial, not thorough and complete. As Nietzsche famously put it, 'It is our needs that interpret the world; our drives and their For and Against. Every drive is a kind of lust to rule; each one has its perspective that it would like to compel all the other drives to accept as a norm' (McGowan 1991: 71). Making meaning through perception is a subjective operation that requires time for apprehension and interpretation.

Conclusion

In both the literary and the filmic versions of the tale, supernatural atmospheres correspond to a psychic experience. In the hands of both Bierce and Enrico, this psychic reality becomes a supernatural dimension, where an escape from conventional reality—as ephemeral as it may be—is possible. Unlike the reified unworldly ghostly presences we can find in, for instance, the Gothic novel, which are more concrete or *real*, so to speak, than the material world and whose effect ends the moment it shows itself, the internalized supernatural, as seen in the tale 'An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge' and its cinematic adaptation, has a far stronger impact, due to its psychic dimension, that is, the fact that the reader and the viewer are induced to create their own fears. In both literature and cinema this narrative stratagem is extremely effective in overcoming conventional perceptions of time and space. In the words of Vallverdú, 'it seems clear that... seeing is a visual as well as a cognitive process, and both domains, the linguistic and the visual, are not always translatable into one another, having instead a symbiotic relationship subordinated to a semantic of knowledge'

(2009: 107). According to Eisenstein, the cinematographic discourse is based on the association of ideas, and these, in turn, on linguistic connections (Aumont 2011: 43).

Poetry is based on the transformation of given structures into other structures, in the *becoming* of structures and of languages, in the transmutation of languages into languages. In this respect, Aumont states that: ‘The language of reality, based on signs, even if non-verbal, becomes verbal language, and this translation is itself translated into another language, that of the cinema, “written language of reality”, language of the *imagined* reality’ (2011: 95).

To the extent that any reading of a literary text, as well as any glimpse of a cinematographic image, entails an interpretation and an appropriation by the reader/viewer, the act of reading or viewing is itself an adaptation of the source. We all have our own readings, either of a film or a story. And what is the adaptation of a piece of literature but a particular interpretation and appropriation—in other words, an extremely active reading—of a text, a re-creation of the primary source echoing its spirit? In this process the association between word and image is indissoluble, for any cinematographic adaptation, coming from a piece of literature, becomes a written text in the shape of a script before becoming a film. To conclude, I claim it is the reader’s and the viewer’s imagination that is involved both in literature and cinema in equal measure, making the differences between the two media far less relevant than Kroeber and others contend. In Ambrose Bierce’s story, both cinema and literature successfully depict the boundaries of the unbearable of human condition.

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Notes

¹ I am grateful to Armida de la Garza for her feedback on an earlier version of this chapter.

² García Márquez reportedly said he had written his *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (García Márquez 2007) ‘against cinema’ (Taylor 2010: 164).

³ A prime example of this would be Gérard de Nerval’s ‘Sylvie, Souvenirs du Valois’. As a labyrinth of time, in ‘Sylvie’, the amalgamation of cognition and imagination leads to a reality where action and descriptions fluctuate in a timeless dreamlike dimension, which gives the narrator access to a sort of innermost mysticism. This oneiric dimension becomes uncannily supernatural by means of dislocating time, which makes the logic of a linear narrative collapse. Those deep psychic regions are haunted by the memories of a bygone time, so that the past, inhabited by the dead—a number of *fantômes métaphysiques* (metaphysical ghosts) –becomes a vehicle for the re-apprehension of oneself (Nerval 1993 [1853]: 539).

⁴ All translations by the author, unless otherwise stated.

⁵ Except for the date, this sign comes from the short story. It seems that the film director added that date in order to historically contextualize the execution exactly at the middle point between the beginning (12 April 1861) and the end (9 April 1865) of the civil war: 4 April 4 1862. (Although the sign is in the film, in the existing copies it is not clear enough because of film scratches and negative dirt.)

⁶ In fact, in the literary text Farquhar does not speak, but *thinks*. When thinking about his wife, the narrator observes that: ‘... these thoughts, *which have here to be set down in words*, were flashed into the doomed man’s brain rather than evolved from it...’ (Bierce 1964: 52, my emphasis). With respect to the absence of words, silence connotes death, or at least Payton’s instantaneous agony before dying. Jacques Attali,

referring to his concept of noise and music in relation to social life, clearly identifies their opposite: ‘... life is noisy... only death is silent’ (Attali 2001: 11).

⁷ According to this experiment, in a picture showing a river, a goat on the left-hand side and four goats on the right-hand side, the experience understanding both parts of the image is an immediate one. However, when the image depicts one goat on the left-hand side, and say eight on the right, immediate perception does not in fact register this, and all that a viewer would be aware of would be ‘many’ goats (Vallverdú 2009: 106).

⁸ Another adaptation of Bierce’s tale by Brian James Egen with the same title as the text (Egen, 2006), forming part of the collection of adaptations *Ambrose Bierce: Civil War Stories*, dwells on the erotic side of the scene instead. Although he considers this image, twice consecutively, deeply eroticized, he neglects the children. However, he does not consider Farquhar’s recollection of his family and home the moment before being executed.