

Ontological Indeterminacy and Intersubjectivity in Film Adaptations of Post-War English Children's Books

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ABSTRACT

When a novel is adapted as a film, the representation of the relationship between subject and society changes because of spatio-temporal modifications. Ideologies of childhood and hence children's literature underwent major change after 1945, as English society experienced ontological insecurity in response to the ruptures of war. Childhood was perceived as a period of ontological indeterminacy and child development seemed best served by discovery learning in formal education and everyday life. It was also recognised that lack of agency can cause anxiety and trauma. Children's literature began to represent the interiority of pre-adult protagonists, notably by means of third person narration grounded in intradiegetic character focalisation and its representations of positive ideologies of intersubjective selves and social practices. Film adaptations find visual forms to express and transform these ideologies. This study draws upon examples of film adaptation of novels by Mary Norton and Joan G. Robinson.

KEYWORDS: adaptation, ideology, cross-cultural, *Borrowers*, *When Marnie Was There*

Indeterminación ontológica e intersubjetividad en las adaptaciones cinematográficas de libros infantiles ingleses de la posguerra

RESUMEN

Al adaptar una novela al cine, la representación de la relación entre sujeto y sociedad cambia debido a las modificaciones espacio-temporales. Las ideologías sobre la infancia y, por lo tanto, la literatura infantil, se transformaron después de 1945, pues la sociedad inglesa experimentó la inseguridad ontológica provocada por la guerra. La infancia se percibió como un período de indeterminación ontológica y el desarrollo infantil se prestó más al aprendizaje por descubrimiento. También se reconoció que la incapacidad de acción puede causar ansiedad y trauma. La literatura infantil comenzó a representar el interior de los protagonistas, especialmente con la narración en tercera persona basada en la focalización en un personaje y la representación ideológica de la intersubjetividad y de las prácticas sociales. Las adaptaciones cinematográficas hallan formas para expresar y transformar visualmente esas ideologías. Este estudio utiliza ejemplos de adaptación cinematográfica de novelas de Mary Norton y Joan G. Robinson.

PALABRAS CLAVE: adaptación, ideología, transcultural, *Los incursores*, *El recuerdo de Marnie*.

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1. INTRODUCCIÓN

In the thirty years following World War II, British children's literature underwent a profound transformation. Pre-War cultural practices began to be challenged by possibilities of new ways of being. As a reaction to the horrors of war, and especially to the mass destruction and displacement of human lives, humankind was seen to be afflicted with a sense of ontological indeterminacy. As a result, a perception arose that children's literature might serve to foster a society both more self-aware and intersubjective, more empathetic, and more conscious of the evils that humans consciously and unconsciously enact upon others. An impact of this perception on fiction for children coincided with what Pat Pinsent has identified as "an increasing awareness of the potential of children" and the development of a theory of education that is grounded in the nurturing of children's latent qualities and in cultivation of discovery learning rather than a mere imparting of knowledge by a teacher (217). Pinsent draws her examples mainly from award-winning realist fiction, but another wide-reaching consequence was the publication of highly innovative fantasy novels. These novels are characterised by stories expressing such implicitly ideological traits as a sense of a deep past and an emphasis on the nexus of place and expressive culture, especially as perceived through the eyes of a child. More importantly, emphasis on the subjectivity of children led to a transformation of narrative technique in the emergence of a third person narration focused through intradiegetic character focalisation. There is usually only one focaliser, but by the 1970s some authors had begun to practise polyfocalisation: Robert Cormier's *The Chocolate War* (1974), for example, has thirteen focalisers (McCallum 1999, 30). Polyfocalisation "facilitates the construction of speakers in independent subject positions and the representation of a plurality of voices and consciousnesses" (McCallum 1999, 30) and makes a key contribution to the representation of intersubjectivity, the basis of social interaction.

Why character focalisation is largely absent from children's fiction until the mid-twentieth century is a matter of speculation. Its principles had been largely worked out in the early nineteenth century by Jane Austen, and are a normal component of subsequent fiction, but a later association with Modernism perhaps obstructed its adoption into children's literature. Focalisation through a child in modernist narrative implies limitations in perception, cognitive abilities, and linguistic capability (see Salmose 341), but in later children's literature it becomes a facility for cognitive growth, and came to dominate children's fantasy for the rest of the century. It also entered realist fiction in the 1970s and

vied with first person narration as the dominant form.¹ A major effect of intradiegetic character focalisation is to create the narrative illusion that readers have access to the focalising character's active consciousness and can thus attribute a mental state to that character, whereas other characters are slowly unfolded through dialogue. This convention was largely embraced intuitively, as the practice and functions of focalisation in children's fiction did not enter critical discussion until the 1990s.² Thus, the interaction of focalisation and dialogue, usually in conjunction with setting, is central to the formation of subjectivity and intersubjectivity, although these concepts were also unrecognised as elements of children's fiction in the mid twentieth century.

In our everyday world, "an individual's consciousness and sense of identity is formed in dialogue with others and with the discourses constituting the society and culture s/he inhabits" (McCallum 1999, 3). These intersubjective processes are then represented in works of fiction which implicitly or unconsciously aspire to model positive ideologies of self and social practices, or, in short, to model a better world. In much fiction of the period under consideration, what we now recognise as intersubjectivity —the field of intersection between two subjectivities, the interplay between two different subjective worlds (Benjamin 1990, 34)— shapes represented relationships between characters and thereby each subject gradually becomes able to recognise the other person's subjectivity. Mutual recognition between two subjects —the core element of intersubjectivity— functions to enlarge our awareness of the outside and to recognise others as animated by independent, though similar, feelings. Such recognition develops the capacity for attunement and tolerance of difference (Benjamin 33, 37) and thereby naturalises and aligns readers with a world view (an ideology) that values social and economic justice, natural environments, and the particular historical processes that have produced those environments. In short, readers are positioned to identify the world view of the text as their own.

Processes which shape the formation of intersubjectivity may be particular to time and place, however, as they engage with changing societal norms or expectations. When a novel is adapted to another mode, the representation of the relationship between subject and society is apt to change, not only because of different narrative practices but also

¹ Significant post-war examples of intradiegetic focalisation in fantasy which are not discussed here are: Lucy Boston, *The Children of Green Knowe* series (six novels, 1954–1976); William Mayne, *A Grass Rope* (1957); Philippa Pearce, *Tom's Midnight Garden* (1958); and Susan Cooper, *The Dark is Rising* sequence (five novels, 1965–1977).

² Focalisation in children's fiction was first expounded in 1992 by John Stephens in *Language and Ideology in Children's Fiction*, especially Chapter 2.

because of changes in socio-cultural context contingent upon temporal and spatial variations in setting. Such variations are very evident in the processes of adapting novels to films, where large spatio-temporal shifts may be introduced through changes in narrative mode, period and even country. For this study, we will draw upon two examples of film adaptation of novels, Mary Norton's *The Borrowers* (1952) and Joan G. Robinson's *When Marnie was There* (1967). *The Borrowers* has been adapted four times in English language film/TV over the sixty years since its publication (always as *The Borrowers*, in 1973, 1992, 1997 and 2011). The two focus books are the earliest published of a small group of English fantasy novels adapted as Japanese anime films between 2004 and 2017: in this case, *Arrietty the Borrower* (2010) and *When Marnie was There* (Marnie of my Memories, 2014, both directed by Yonebayashi Hiromasa).³ We have selected these adaptations because they are exceptional examples of what Robyn McCallum (2018) argues in relation to *The Borrowers*: "Just as the novels lend themselves to multiple, and at times, conflicting interpretations, the various film adaptations stress variant ideologies of childhood, family and social organisation" (230).

The Borrowers (first in a series of four novels) tells of a Wainscot Society, a family of miniature people who live beneath the kitchen floor of an old manor house. This family consists of a father, Pod, a mother, Homily, and their daughter, Arrietty. Their social practices and assumptions derive from those of the human beings (or 'human beans', as the Borrowers call them) who inhabit the house.⁴ They produce nothing but 'borrow' everything they need from the house and if their presence is detected, they 'emigrate'.⁵ *When Marnie was There* (henceforth *Marnie*), a novel curiously neglected in children's literature scholarship, tells the story of Anna, an asthmatic and emotionally withdrawn adolescent orphan who, readers will eventually deduce, suffers from post-traumatic stress. Sent to the country by her foster parents for the sake of her health, Anna becomes fascinated by The Marsh House, a deserted mansion, and captivated with Marnie, a mysterious girl who seems to live there. By the close, Marnie is revealed to have been an

³ The other adaptations are Diana Wynne Jones's *Howl's Moving Castle* (1986), directed by Miyazaki Hayao, 2004, and Mary Stewart's *The Little Broomstick* (1971), as *Mary and the Witch's Flower*, also directed by Yonebayashi Hiromasa, 2017.

⁴ Borrower names, for example, are borrowed from human artefacts or are misheard human names. Readers are likely to link 'Arrietty' with 'Harriet' (or 'Henrietta'); there is a sly nod to the origin when in recent film adaptations Homily sometimes calls Arrietty 'Etty', a familiar shortening of 'Harriet'.

⁵ Supporting their self-designation is two figurative uses of the verb *borrow*: to make temporary use of something (often immaterial) not one's own, and to adopt something for other than its normal purpose.

emanation or the spirit of Anna's grandmother, retrieved from Anna's earliest, subliminal memories (for example, "It was like trying to remember a dream. She could only remember it—in flashes— when she was not trying" (213)).

Both novels, like much children's fantasy in the post-War decades, engage with the impact of the past upon the present or the parallel configuration of the presence of the past. The presence of the past can be a key element in intersubjective relationships, since intersubjectivity is enabled by social practices and frames of mind, which in turn have been socially produced and carry ideological weight.⁶ Readers may see aspects of the past as components of a schema or frame of mind that should be modified or shed, as the 1950s version of femininity embodied in *The Borrowers'* Homily. Alternatively, engagement with the past can function as a medium for the recuperation of the ontological indeterminacy of the present, as in *Marnie*, in which Anna's mental stability and integration into sociality are realised by the revisiting of her past and thus the alleviation of her post-traumatic stress. By ontological indeterminacy we refer to a disorder of selfhood and wider culture marked by uncertainty and insecurity, which takes the form of an absence of the sense of a stable selfhood grounded in intersubjective relations with others, groups or the environmental milieu. Neither Arrietty nor Anna manifest a form of subjectivity which is, in Venn's words, "relational, emplaced and embodied, existing as a nexus of relations with others and with a lifeworld" (5). Ontological indeterminacy may thus also be instantiated as a perception that the lifeworld, physical or social, is already frighteningly unstable and opaque. We here also use the concept of post-traumatic stress to describe Anna's psychological condition even though we are aware that the concept did not enter psychiatric literature until 1980, with initial reference to war veterans. However, the remark that "an event ends in a 'trauma' if and when the individual is in an emotional state of discomfort resulting from memories of the event" (Gersons and Carlier 743) is an accurate description of Anna's mental and emotional state.

2. ONTOLOGICAL INDETERMINACY AS A NARRATIVE STRATEGY IN FICTION AND FILM

As stated, our focus novels and their subsequent adaptations belong to fantasy literature, which may be set in places radically different from those we know or may include characters or events that are in the very least improbable. Improbability, however, might

⁶ The impact of the past upon the present and the power of memory are most compellingly explored in this period in the novels of Penelope Lively, especially *The Driftway* (1972), *The Ghost of Thomas Kempe* (1973), *The House in Norham Gardens* (1974), and *A Stitch in Time* (1976).

prompt readers to consider different understandings of the world, which might in turn challenge everyday assumptions about the nature of reality. Indeterminacy, on the other hand, challenges the ontological security of the subject. When, in *The Borrowers*, Arrietty first meets the human boy, her simple assumptions about an appropriate body size, the dominant species, and the Borrower economy are shattered. Likewise, Anna's interactions with others in *Marnie* continually question her rejection of all forms of intersubjectivity. In both novels —and even more so in the film adaptations— ontological indeterminacy is an obstacle to the attainment of rightful knowledge about things and events. In *Marnie*, the uncertainty, fuzziness and ambiguity associated with Anna's and Marnie's conceptualisations about what kinds of interactions they have, and how Marnie inhabits their world, turns on what is simultaneously posited and subtracted, especially evident in how one or the other can suddenly disappear from a scene. These disappearances, which make no sense to either character, suggest the event is a product of imagination or time slip, but these are possibilities that are neither proven nor disproven within the novel, whereas the film adaptation makes it clearer that the ontological indeterminacy is produced by gaps in memory or imagination. In Chapter 13 (95–102) Marnie disguises Anna as a beggar girl and brings her into one of her parents' parties to sell flowers; much later, in Chapter 28 (210), an extract from Marnie's diary, written half a century earlier, mentions the incident of the beggar girl. Scilla, Anna's new friend who found the diary, refers to Marnie as "a funny girl" (210) because Scilla is unable to see how elements in the diary connect, but Anna, and readers, can access the fuller version. However, the connection between the two accounts remains an ontological indeterminacy, since there is no explanation in the novel for how Anna imagined the incident before reading the diary nor for how her knowledge of the event is an extended narrative rather than a cryptic diary entry. By piquing reader imagination through this element of irresolution, the novel leads readers to the need to fill narrative gaps, whether logically or speculatively.

The film adaptation of *Marnie* is substantially a reinterpretation of the novel as it is transposed to a multimodal format. Most obviously, the use of flashbacks and dreaming transitions enable viewers to conclude that Anna's apparently realistic encounters with Marnie take place in her mind and are a product of her imagination engaging with submerged, fragmented memories of the childhood reminiscences her grandmother (who was Marnie) told her as bedtime stories ten years earlier. Further, the mode and to some extent the substance of the opening and the close have been revised to replace inner mental processes or conversations in domestic interiors with character interactions. The

opening represents Anna's mental state as a condition of depression or anxiety, foregrounded by her reluctance to show any affection towards her foster mother. The narrative discourse slips amongst extradiegetic narration, character focalisation, and a very early representation in children's fiction of a character demonstrating theory of mind—that is, Anna ascribes mental states to Mrs Preston:

[Mrs Preston] put an arm around [Anna] and kissed her goodbye, trying to make her feel warm and safe and wanted.

But Anna could feel she was trying and wished she would not. It made a barrier between them so that it was impossible for her to say goodbye naturally, with the spontaneous hug and kiss that other children managed so easily, and that Mrs Preston would so much have liked (7–8).

Such discourse fluidity is a challenge for a film remake to visualise, so the film instead creates a scene in which Anna sits in isolation in a playground, in contrast to other children in groups and, reproducing a metaphor from the novel, her voice-over diagnoses her isolation: a subjectivity diminished by a failure of intersubjectivity. This is a conceptual metaphor based on a container, whereby inside is good, and outside is bad, connoting loneliness, delayed socialization, and limited empathy:

everyone else was 'inside' —inside some sort of invisible magic circle. But Anna herself was outside. And so these things [social interactions] had nothing to do with her. (10)

Anna's sense of social isolation is formally resolved near the close of the novel when she arrives at The Marsh House drenched from an exhilarating walk in heavy rain. Mrs Lindsay asks, "Have you been outside in all of this?", and the reply is, "Yes", said Anna and she laughed. "But I'm inside now!" (278). The drawn-out closure of the novel that produces this conclusion depicts a communal reconstruction of Anna's personal history and subjectivity from clues gathered from scraps of information, the memories of others, Marnie's diary, and a postcard depicting The Marsh House. The film's more straightforward approach uses its visual and aural possibilities to embed much of the accumulated information as flashbacks or as memories submerged beneath the level of consciousness, offering viewers hints about the nature of Marnie's being. Among others, there is an image of Anna as a toddler, lying in bed while her grandmother sings a wordless melody, which is the melody Marnie sings as she dances with Anna at the end of the beggar girl episode. In an image from Marnie's funeral, drawn mostly in black and

white, three-year-old Anna clutches a golden-haired doll wearing a sky-blue dress, which is how Marnie most often appears in the older Anna's reconstruction of her past. The visual quotation corrects her erroneous memories of her abandonment. This strategy enables the filmmaker to jettison the last eight chapters of the book and almost all of the story of Anna's intersubjective engagement with the Lindsay family and to hone the novel's late addition of Gillie, a landscape painter who knew Marnie and can tell enough of her story for Anna finally to piece everything together.

Ontological indeterminacy is represented differently in *The Borrowers*, where it is embedded in the narrative frame by means of overtly unreliable narration. Some shifts in the ideological implications of the adaptations of *The Borrowers* may be attributable to the abandonment of any attempt to reproduce the triple narratorial frame of the novel and its effect of throwing all into doubt. An unidentified child narrator reports a story told to a little girl who may be named Kate (and who may be the narrator) by Mrs May, a dependant relative of Kate's family. Mrs May, in turn, got the story from her younger brother, who either witnessed or invented the narrated events, and who is no longer living, having died in a skirmish on the Indian North-West Frontier in around 1900. This chain of unreliable narrators constitutes an acute information uncertainty and functions to mark the novel as an early example of a mid-twentieth century metafictional children's novel—that is, a novel which draws attention to its status as fiction. Metafictional narratives create a distance between readers and the represented events and characters and can thus potentially foster an awareness of the constructed nature of fiction. One consequence of such awareness is attention to theme as a construct. For example, in her preamble, Mrs May attributes a sense of entitlement to the Borrowers: "Everything they had was borrowed; they had nothing of their own at all. In spite of this, my brother said, they were touchy and conceited, and thought they owned the world" (8). This contradictory nature of the Borrowers asserts their constructedness as a micro-image of human beings and thus establishes the potential to understand their shortcomings as characteristic of human beings. The novel has been criticised for various ideological positions grounded in a socially conservative world view, as surveyed succinctly by Robyn McCallum (2018, 227–229): its representations of class and gender have often attracted criticism, although there is no consensus as to which class the Borrowers stand for. They are clearly marked as working class by their language and values, but that has not deterred identifications with the aristocracy or the rentier class (Carpenter and Prichard 1999, 76) because they live off what others produce while producing nothing themselves. Madelyn Travis makes the

helpful observation that Norton conveys mixed messages when dealing with class, and this instability “allow[s] her to comment humorously on a range of aspects of human society in areas such as snobbery, affected speech or tensions between genders and age groups” (188).

It is not surprising that criticism of the Borrowers series responds to these mixed messages from its own ideological positions, as, for example, Andrew O'Malley's dismissal of Norton as “an author clearly invested in representing, cherishing, and preserving a certain vision of the past” (71). Such rejection of values contemporary with the novel's publication in favour of a postmodern metanarrative of cultural progress is consistent with the process whereby the meanings of texts change through the interaction of new and existing cultural and critical paradigms. It is equally unsurprising that the meanings of *The Borrowers* will change through adaptations scattered over a sixty-year period, particularly because of the common practice of replacing the destabilising narrative frame with a more common structure, namely an opening that delineates a protagonist experiencing a state of lack, which is another manifestation of ontological indeterminacy. The novel expresses a clear image of Arrietty's circumscribed life and desire for change, and attributes her state to a lack of fulfilment tied to the production of a gendered subjectivity. When Homily proposes that Pod train Arrietty to borrow, his immediate reaction is, “I never heard of no *girl* going borrowing before” (55, original italics), which seems to reflect an important shift in how young women saw themselves and wanted to be seen after 1945 (Sutcliffe-Braithwaite and Thomlinson 283). Homily pragmatically points out that Arrietty may need to be self-sufficient at some future time, but then undercuts the argument by suggesting it might stop her “hankering ... [f]or blue sky and grass and suchlike” (55), which is obviously metonymic of a desire for subjective agency. The challenge to gendered subjectivity has been sustained throughout the subsequent adaptations of the novel.

Ontological indeterminacy is also an important principle in the way *Marnie* unfolds, both in the 1967 novel and in the film adaptation. It first emerges as a problem of memory, imagination and cultural knowledge in the perceptions and feelings of Anna, the protagonist and only focaliser, when she first sees The Marsh House (25–27). For example, as she stands looking at the house she has a sensation of *déjà vu*, which she describes as “almost as if she were now standing outside of herself, somewhere farther back, watching herself standing there in the water” (27). The indeterminacy here lies in the confusion between perception and memory, so that if Anna is watching herself looking at the house,

she may either be constructing a memory from a mosaic of other memories, as she suspects but adduces the wrong memories, or is experiencing the memory of another person. She also attributes to the house an other-than-human personhood imbued with agency, even sentience: "it seemed to Anna almost as if the house had been expecting her, watching her, waiting for her to turn round and recognise it" (27). The question is partly resolved at the close of the novel where it is revealed that as a small child Anna treasured a postcard of the house identified as the childhood home of her grandmother, but this does not explain her meetings with Marnie in present time. The film offers a version of the same resolution but recontextualised within its truncated ending. At her first viewing of the scene, Anna looking at herself looking at the house is a cinematic point of view metaphor in which the perspective from 'farther back' is that of the camera. It is reproduced in the film (Figure 1), followed by Anna's voice-over, "Why is it that mansion feels somehow familiar?" (00:13:20). The film could have used the shot-reverse shot to present what Anna sees and then her expression while seeing, but instead places Anna within the first shot. The viewer's task to posit an interpretation of the scene is thus emphasised.

Figure 1. 'That mansion feels familiar somehow': *When Marnie Was There*, first sighting of The Marsh House (00:13:00)



The novel overtly introduces the issue of ontological indeterminacy when Anna meets Marnie for the first time:

Anna climbed out [of the dinghy], the girl tied the rope to an iron ring in the wall, and they stood together at the top of the steps, eyeing each other in the half light. This is a dream, thought Anna. I'm imagining her, so it doesn't matter if I don't say anything. And she went on staring and staring as if she were looking at a ghost. But the strange girl was looking at her in the same way.

'Are you real?' Anna whispered at last.
'Yes, are you?'
They laughed and touched each other to make sure. (65)

The passage constructs a thread of uncertainty —half light, dream, imagining, doubted reality— and while the characters set it aside at this moment, by the time Marnie disappears less than two-thirds of the way into the novel, Anna has had numerous intimations that Marnie is a projection of her own mind. Once again, the film adaptation renders this concept more explicitly.

A key scene, which requires extended attention, is when the girls go to a derelict windmill in order to overcome Marnie's fear of the place. While they are on an upper level, darkness falls, a violent storm breaks out and Marnie is too frightened to descend the rickety stairs. Anna falls asleep, and when she wakes Marnie has disappeared. From Anna's perspective, Marnie's disappearance is an apparent betrayal of their deep, intersubjective relationship and, bereft, she runs out into the rain, falls and injures herself. During the closing exposition, Gillie (the painter who knew Marnie) tells the story of Marnie's visit to the windmill, fifty years before Anna's. It is the task of readers to conclude that Anna had heard the story in infancy and had combined memory and imagination to insert herself into it as an abandoned victim. It is significant that this particular resolution becomes available only after Anna becomes capable of intersubjective relationships which are not products of narcissistic anxiety or internal fantasy. The film, produced in an era fully aware of post-traumatic stress, simplifies the task of interpretation by sequencing, montage, and flashback so that primarily visual narrative plays out Anna's recuperation of well-being and mental health. Anna and Marnie go to a disused grain silo, and Marnie intermittently addresses Anna as "Kazuhiko", Marnie's future husband and Anna's grandfather. Anna falls asleep and dreams a montage of two memories: her grandmother singing her to sleep; and Kazuhiko finding Marnie at the silo and leading her out of frame into dazzling white light (a conventional image of the dead entering the afterlife). Anna wakes, sees Marnie has gone, and runs into the rain, crying, "Marnie — you left me behind ... Even you!". A second montage sequence of flashbacks focused on other traumatic experiences now follows: Anna at Marnie's funeral and hence resentment that her grandmother abandoned her through illness and death; distraught Anna in the orphanage; Anna reading the document from which she learns her foster parents receive a government subsidy to support her. Running a fever after her accident at the silo, Anna dreams a final meeting and farewell with Marnie; they promise forever friendship and

Marnie fades into white light again. At this point the film introduces the postcard of The Marsh House, preserved by Anna's foster mother, which is Anna's only tangible infant reminder of Marnie, and a flashback in which Marnie tells baby Anna about the silo incident. That Marnie and Anna both have blue eyes (in a brown-eyed country), a visual motif running through the film, is again highlighted during this flashback. Neither the novel nor the film advances a quasi-clinical diagnosis of Anna's post-traumatic stress, but each suggests in its own way that narrative can be therapeutic to the achievement of subjective well-being by constructing alternative stories that open up other possibilities for understanding, in this case, by bringing post-traumatic stress into consciousness.

3. THE IDEOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS OF INTERSUBJECTIVITY

The ideological implications of intersubjectivity are potentially very wide-ranging across the six adaptations. They are overtly present at the beginning of Chapter 9 of *The Borrowers*, underpinning the first encounter between Arrietty and the Boy. On her first excursion beyond her existence under the floorboards, Arrietty experiences the greatest fear of a Borrower, to be "seen" by a "human bean". The crux of such an encounter pivots on the ideological challenge of understanding the physical, cultural and cognitive threats posed by otherness. What is initially represented, however, is Arrietty's focalisation of being seen and her initial perception that she has endangered herself by transgressing the rules laid upon her by her parents. As Robyn McCallum and John Stephens (2011) suggest, representations of transgression make ideologies visible and seek to redefine or even overthrow them (370). Homily's feminine ideology conforms to what Susan Bordo identifies in the 1950s and early 1960s as "a period of reassertion of domesticity and dependency as the feminine ideal" (170). Her subordination to dominant 1950s cultural narratives regarding marital duty, positioned between compulsion and choice, has often been an object of critical disdain. One of its main functions, however, is to contrast with Arrietty's restlessness and desire to inhabit a larger space, both physically and culturally. Her rebellion against traditional notions of femininity shared by her parents is reproduced throughout the adaptations and is always the catalyst for the (mis)behaviour that transforms her family's life. In the novel, Pod admits that the many intricate gates in their underfloor passages are not designed to keep anything out but to keep Arietty in (48). Because transgression is a driver of change, it is important to examine how far her rebellion changes her own life or whether, as is implicit in the 1973 film, she will continue to be constrained.

At the close of *The Borrowers*, Chapter 8, Arrietty, having transgressively ventured into the outside world, is alarmed by the sudden appearance of something strange: she turned her head and looked sideways ... Startled, she caught her breath. Something had moved above her on the bank. Something had glittered. Arrietty stared.

A primary marker of focalisation is character activity involving perceptual verbs: “looked” and then “stared” indicate that this “something” and what follows, at the beginning of Chapter 9, is attributed to the character’s visual perception and consequent responses. This crucial moment in Arrietty’s personal history is thus presented from her point of view:

It was an eye. Or it looked like an eye. Clear and bright like the colour of the sky. An eye like her own but enormous. A glaring eye. Breathless with fear, she sat up. And the eye blinked. A great fringe of lashes came curving down and flew up again out of sight. Cautiously, Arrietty moved her legs: she would slide noiselessly in among the grass stems and slither away down the bank.

‘Don’t move!’ said a voice, and the voice, like the eye, was enormous but somehow, hushed ...

Arrietty froze. ‘So this is it’, she thought, ‘the worst and most terrible thing of all: I have been ‘seen!’ (74–75)

Other markers of focalisation here are references to Arrietty’s sensory perspective (“Breathless”, “froze”), verbs indicating cognitive processes (“thought”), and the shifts between narration (“the eye blinked”) and perception (“A great fringe of lashes came curving down and flew up again”) and between narration (“Arrietty moved her legs”) and free indirect thought expressing an intention (“she would slide”). The focus of attention on the eye foregrounds both Arrietty’s vulnerability and the shock of the oscillation between similarity and difference which is the essence of Borrower/human otherness. As the two children face their mutual fear of otherness and engage in a dialogue that explores difference beyond the crude contrast of size, they confront a key tenet underpinning hierarchies of race, class and gender, the assumption that one group is innately superior to others. The core of difference is the psychological opposition between ingroups and outgroups: each of the communities, Borrowers and humans, considers the other an outgroup, but intradiegetic focalisation aligns viewers with the Borrowers. Indeed, in the 1992 series, the boy (George), when accused of stealing small things to give to the Borrowers appropriates an assertion by Arrietty that her family doesn’t steal but “borrows” things, thus aligning himself with them. Arrietty’s contention that human beings are dying out because “there wouldn’t be enough stuff in the world to go round” (81)

reflects an anxiety about resource sharing which entered popular belief by the early post-war period (along with the fear of annihilation through nuclear war, later exacerbated by the Cuban Missile Crisis of October, 1962), but because Arrietty is only repeating something Pod has said and stumbles over the words, her assertion is mere ideological hearsay that implies a higher status for Borrowers: "Human beans are for Borrowers — like bread's for butter!" (86). The boy's rejoinder, that it is Borrowers who face extinction and Arrietty will probably be the last, is simply an ideological reversal that asserts human domination of global ecology.⁷ Their dispute has been retained in three of the adaptations (1973, 1992 and 2010), but has the potential to accrue further nuances as social context has undergone major changes. An important, attitude-changing intervention in the 1960s was Rachel Carson's arguments in *Silent Spring* (1962) concerning the often negative effect humans have on the natural world. Her work gave strong impetus to the environmental movement that emerged during that decade. By *Arrietty* in 2010, climate change was becoming a global public issue, so the argument put forward by the boy, Sho, that extinction of species is an inevitable consequence of environmental change, and Borrowers will likewise disappear, is naïve and outdated, and firmly countered by Arrietty's empirical observation that destruction of *her* environment and the attempted extermination of her family are the consequence of human action. The issues have a resonance beyond the story "facts" that the Borrowers are being displaced from their home.

4. BORROWERS AS VERMIN

A recurring motif is that the housekeeper, Mrs Driver, designates the Borrowers as vermin and melodramatically marshals a cat, a rat-catcher with terriers and a fumigation device, and a boy with a ferret to exterminate them. In her view they are, "nasty, crafty, scampy, scurvy, squeaking little ..." (164), and her outrage at their existence is an example of hostility towards an outgroup on the grounds that they compete for resources and because an association is often drawn between disease threats and outgroups ("vermin"). Eva Green et al. (301) cite research findings that identify a link between disease threat and prejudice against outgroups "to the extent that conservatism, autocracy and lack of

⁷ Norton evokes the "last survivor" trope here, a reference to figures who are the last surviving members of a destroyed society or civilisation. The connection is often with indigenous peoples suffering genocide after colonisation by Europeans, but it also resonates with readings of *The Borrowers* which interpret these marginalised beings as migrants displaced by World War II and "living at the margins of the societies of others" (Dubosarsky, 105).

openness are ideological beliefs or traits that have been associated with prejudice" (Green 301). The symbolic association here supports the reading that the Borrowers mirror immigrants who entered the UK during and after World War II.

The attempted extermination is reproduced in all adaptations, although to different degrees and with different motivations, shaped, as ever, by period and cultural context, but the vermin designation is sustained. Near the close of the 1997 film, Pod informs the defeated Potter, "we're not vermin, we're not freaks, and we're not pests — we're Borrowers" (1:30:00). Perhaps the greatest shift produced by distant social context is discernible in *Arrietty*: the housemaid, Haru, is initially a less malevolent character than the over-bearing and malicious housekeeper in the novel or the 1973 and 1992 adaptations, but becomes a xenophobic monster determined to accomplish the extermination once she has confirmed the Borrowers' presence. Whether intended or not, the ideological context is the enduring persecution of outgroup minorities by mainstream Japanese culture (McCallum 2018, 252). As Sara Park (61) observes, "racism is one of Japan's gravest social problems". She comments that, "Historically, the categories of 'foreigner' or 'alien' in Japan have been used to exclude ethnic minority groups who have Japanese nationality — in particular, the long-term resident *Zainichi* Koreans" (65). In contrast, Sho and his Aunt Sadako have a positive conception of the "Little People", although Sadako believes they are not just invisible but no longer in the house. Sadako informs Sho that the beautiful doll house in his room was commissioned by his grandfather as a home for the Borrowers; viewers will deduce that such well-meaning paternalism is misplaced, as is demonstrated in every version when the boy destroys the Borrowers' lives by trying to give them luxury gifts. For viewers who make the connection, *Arrietty* is an attempt to intervene in a Japanese ideology which has attracted the attention of the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (Park 65). Yonebayashi returns to this theme in *Marnie*, where hostile local children emphasise Anna's difference by commenting on the foreignness of her blue eyes. Marnie is European, not Japanese, and the constant motif of blue eyes in the film, especially a sequence with Anna, Marnie, and Marnie's blond, blue-eyed father, is a broad hint about Anna's mixed-race difference. Once again, it is not foregrounded but embedded for viewers to discern. At the close of *Arrietty* the Borrowers leave the house for an unknown destination, guided by Spiller, a young Borrower who has adapted to outdoor life. This ending may seem unsatisfactory, but we contend that it plausibly represents agency and self-determination rather than a vulnerable ghetto existence or a life of subaltern dependence. It is a more definitive

ending than in Norton's novel, whose open, ambiguous ending reasserts narration by a chain of unreliable narrators.

A further ideological shift appears in the 1997 and 2011 films, which are much looser adaptations than the other three, but share a kernel script:⁸ a human who discovers the Borrowers' existence seeks to kill or capture them; the boy living in the house inhabited by the Borrowers befriends Arrietty and helps the Borrowers survive; they reconnect with a large Borrower community; they retain their house; Arrietty finally embarks on a more adventurous life.

Adaptation to another era and to changed cultures entails extensive glocalisation which, in these films, includes both socio-cultural features and narrative conventions to such an extent that they are only recognisable as retellings of *The Borrowers* because of the retained title and because they replicate some "story" components of the pretext and the configuration of main characters. In other words, they remake the *script* but add or substitute different schemas, a process which an audience may not always recognise. For example, the 2011 film appropriates the names of Mrs Driver and Mildeye from the novel(s) and assigns them comparable but also different roles to their namesakes, thus acknowledging that the underlying script is shared. Both films change the setting from a large country house to an urban location. Pinsent makes two pertinent observations about the country house setting. First, many creative works of the post-War period are set in a large house, which she suggests "works metonymically to convey something of the frustration of individuals submerged in a system for which they have no responsibility and within which they have little power" (214). Second, she suggests that these houses "can be seen as metonymic of an England now long past" (218). Both elements have been replaced by families living in suburban houses. These families do not employ servants, and the fragmented family in 2011 —a grandmother, her widowed son-in-law, and his son, James— live in a terrace house in Inner London Hackney and are experiencing mortgage stress. The relocation of the story in time and place has significant ideological implications in that, eschewing a location with a mysterious but historical deep past, it invites viewers to embrace a set of imagined circumstances which affirm and advocate social metanarratives promoting humane behaviours in the viewer's present, whenever that is.

The 1997 film is anchored in the 1950s, but includes artefacts from a wide range of years, from the 1951 Morris Oxford stretch limo owned by the villain, Ociuous P. Potter, to

⁸ In cognitive film theory, a *script* is a kernel framework that is the basis of a narrative, consisting of a reiterated narrative pattern and several recurring images (Lee 2021, 191).

electrical appliances from the 1980s and 1990s, such as a TV remote or a 1990s cell phone. There are American accents but the physical setting is clearly England: the house at the centre of the conflict and named in the aunt's will is situated in Leighton Buzzard (a market town about 40 miles north of London) and some scenes were shot on location in the village of Theale, Berkshire, and at Ealing Town Hall, in London. The jumble of anachronisms precludes a specific temporal context but places events in a period more recent than the novel or preceding adaptations. Arrietty's transgressive behaviour in the early scenes is more marked, although directionless, but attributes her with an energy and inventiveness which she channels during the conflict with Potter.

The 2011 film has strong contemporary appeal, both for children and adults, and its setting in present time and urban space accentuates a representation of intersubjectivity as the pivot for social relationships and mental well-being. Like other adaptations, it employs a cast of highly regarded actors —notably Christopher Eccleston (as Pod), Sharon Horgan (as Homily), Aisling Loftus (as Arrietty), Robert Sheehan (as Spiller), Victoria Wood (as Mrs Driver, the grandmother), and Stephen Fry as Professor Mildeye, the principal antagonist). This cast brings a host of associations which locate the events of the film within contemporary culture, along with more direct allusions. In the opening scene, Pod appears climbing a wall using suction pads, which evokes the image of Spiderman and scenes from Hollywood heist movies such as *Firetrap* (2001). The introduction of a large Borrower community inhabiting a disused section of the London Underground echoes Neil Gaiman's urban fantasy television miniseries *Neverwhere* (1996) and China Miéville's young adult fantasy novel *Un Lun Dun* (2007). The teen rebel Borrower, Spiller (Robert Sheehan), is modelled on famous "bad boys" of film, especially "The Fonze" —the high school dropout played by Henry Winkler in the American sitcom *Happy Days* (1974–1984) — and John Travolta's "Danny Zuko" in *Grease*. These connections set the film apart from other adaptations because it offers a socially convincing sense that its represented events are familiar, are developed from familiar scripts and are in some way real. Their outcomes satisfy common audience expectations. The misdemeanours of Professor Mildeye, who believes in the existence of tiny human beings he calls "Homo Sapiens Reductus" and who traps Pod and Homily, is the dark side of this quasi-reality. He is a buffoon villain, like John Goodman's Ociuous P. Potter in the 1997 adaptation, and audiences accept that in his thirst for fame his willingness to display Pod and Homily naked and then dissect them is an accurate representation of one type of scientific mind because it is a script underlying many films since at least Nicolas Roeg's *The Man who Fell*

to *Earth* (1976) and *E.T.* (1982). Mildeye is a clear example of a person incapable of intersubjectivity, a deficiency shared by his assistant, Jennifer. Attempts to capture the Borrowers in order to sell or display them as a unique species occur in Norton's second and third novels. In *The Borrowers Afield*, Professor Mildeye's predecessor, the Traveller Mild Eye, briefly captures the family and plans to sell them; their fate would be as a display item in one of the "freak" shows so popular in the Victorian period (Bogdan 539–541; Cameron).

As in the novel, the action and thematic significance of the film adaptations hinges on a unique cross-cultural intersubjective relationship between Arrietty and the boy, which they negotiate at their first encounter. Arrietty is the primary focalising character in the novel, as argued above, but visual texts produce this effect by camera angle and distance (see Figure 2) rather than by character mentalising. With the exception of the 1997 film, which uses a horizontal shot-reverse shot that includes both characters and thus foregrounds the size difference and what each sees, the visual representation shows the characters separately and from alternating camera angles. The camera work thus plays with the audience's perception of what is being seen, as a close-up of Arrietty with little or no background contrasts visually with distance shots that contextualise her. These contrasts create a sense of ontological indeterminacy which viewers may not be conscious of, but which facilitates acceptance of the developing intersubjective relationship —and hence the erasure of difference. The 1973 film reproduces the physical data of the novel by a down-up cut from a middle distance down shot of Arrietty lying on the ground to an extreme close-up of the boy's eye looking down at her. In the 1992 adaptation, George's shadow falls on Arrietty so she looks up towards its source. What she sees is a monstrous figure with massive legs and a tiny head, the image having been distorted by the low camera placement. When only Arrietty is in the frame and close up she appears to viewers as "normal" human size, so the shock of monstrosity is delayed until both appear in the same frame. Even then, camera placement can be used to indicate that our perception of reality is affected by how we see and that will in turn affect how we perceive another and experience intersubjectivity.

Figure 2. *The Borrowers* 1973, 1992, 1997: First encounter between Arrietty and the Boy; Left: Horizontal shot-reverse shot (1997); Right, top: Vertical shot-reverse shot (1973); Right, bottom: Rising low angle shot (1992)

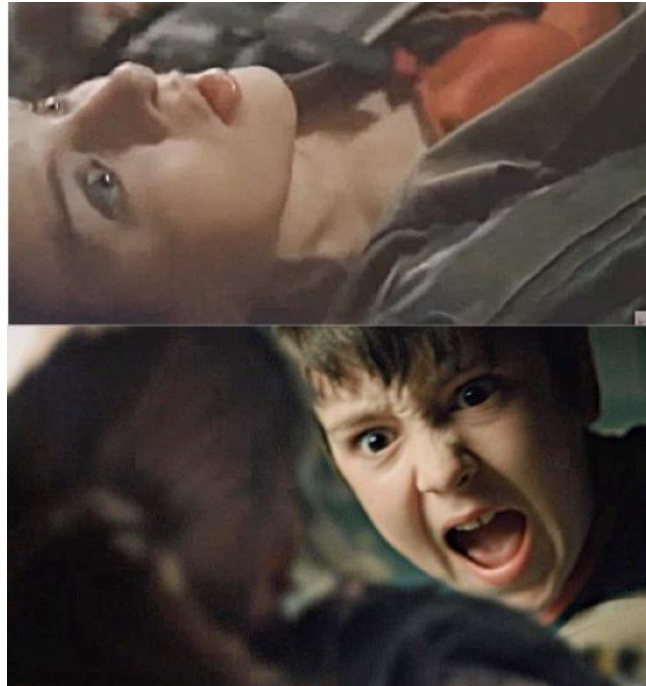


5. ONTOLOGICAL INDETERMINACY AND INTERSUBJECTIVITY

The 2011 film plays very elegantly with perception. At the initial shock of seeing one another in James's dimly lit bedroom, Arrietty turns to flee but runs into the wall and stuns herself. When she recovers, she is lying down and wearing a glazed, astonished expression (Figure 3). Once again, the ontological indeterminacy of the close-up confuses the image: is this a tiny Borrower or a lovely human girl?⁹ She screams and sits up, prompting an answering scream from James, but viewed from behind in silhouette she is the same size. Drawn into a screaming relationship, they are beginning to make an interpersonal connection.

⁹ At sixteen, this Arrietty is the oldest in the adaptations. The others follow the novel and place her at thirteen or fourteen. An older Arrietty is essential for the close of the film, when she leaves home to join the Borrower community in the Underground (Aisling Loftus was twenty at the time of filming).

Figure 3. Arrietty meets James. Top: Arrietty astonished and alarmed. Bottom: Arrietty and James scream at one another.



The ontological indeterminacy of size is sustained throughout this scene (and beyond) and functions to affirm that intersubjectivity trumps difference. Another crucial moment occurs in a conversation soon after:

James: I can't believe she [Mrs Driver] was right. My own little person!

Arrietty: Who are you calling little?

J: Well, you are quite small.

A: No, I'm not. It's you who's ... too big, a great big overgrown giant. We're just the right size.

J: We? There's more of you?

A: I didn't say that. ... You aren't going to eat me?

J: Eat you? What would be the point? ... My name's James.

A: Arrietty.

Although the conversation follows the principle of turntaking, the maxim of relation is not strictly followed. For example, Arrietty ignores the threatening implication of “My own little person” to challenge the comment that she is “little” and thus leads into the argument that size is a matter of point of view. She winds back to the threat with the question about being eaten, which prompts the first verbal intersubjective move, an exchange of names. Soon, two lonely children—a girl who has never met another child and a boy who is bereaved and depressed—begin to play together. The scene in which James catapults

Arrietty from the foot of his bed to the pillow (Figure 4) is an excellent example of the ontological indeterminacy principle we are describing. A framing shot establishes the scale of the participants — “quite small” Arrietty and “giant” James— but when Arrietty lands on the pillow and turns back, the close-up of her excited face fills the screen and matches James’s wordless, happy expression. The filmmakers have used this strategy to create the warmest intersubjective relationship in the Borrower narratives.

Figure 4 (*The Borrowers* 2011). James catapults Arrietty along the bed. Top right: “Can we do that again?”



6. CONCLUSIONS

The novels and the film adaptations discussed here illustrate how central the concept of intersubjectivity became in post-War children's fiction as the basis for subjective well-being and even physical survival in a world of increasing ontological indeterminacy. The ontological insecurity of which this is a manifestation pervades the modern, global world. The discourse strategies that came to prevail in children's literature following the war constitute a major change that saw children and childhood embroiled in the feeling of ontological indeterminacy and the need for a literature that addressed the situation. An emphasis on the subjectivity of children led to a cultivation of the neglected narrative technique of third person character focalisation which drew on readers' theory of mind to map cognitive and emotional flourishing in a context of intersubjectivity. The notion of intersubjectivity entails that to attain subjective well-being—to achieve a better life for oneself and for others—an individual must actively engage with others perceptually, conceptually, and practically (Duranti 16). We suggest that the novels and their adaptations explored here exemplify Alessandro Duranti's claim that “intersubjectivity can constitute an overall theoretical frame for thinking about the ways in which humans

interpret, organize, and reproduce particular forms of social life and social cognition" (17). This frame seems especially applicable to works produced in contexts of social upheaval but also to mark ideological shifts or changes of emphasis across stretches of time. Versions of *The Borrowers* reflect transformations in assumptions about class and gender between Norton's 1952 novel and the 2011 film. This is hardly surprising, but analysis needs to go beyond, for example, a superficial contrast between the stigma of uneducated speech in the novel and the actors' unmarked use of their own various regional dialects in the film, although this modern use of dialect creates an appeal to a very broad audience.

Intersubjectivity is also central to Robinson's *When Marnie Was There*, especially as a means to unravel the mental and emotional plight of the protagonist, Anna. A central character suffering from psychological trauma is an innovative move in post-War children's fiction and similar themes are mainly associated with realist fiction from the 1970s and later. The ontological indeterminacy of *Marnie* is further compounded by genre indeterminacy, in that the novel has the trappings of fantasy but the view from the close indicates it is also a psychological drama. The novel thus belongs to a sub-genre often aligned with fantasy and hence to other innovative novels which engage with darker aspects of childhood experience, such as Catherine Storr's *Marianne Dreams* (1958), a young adult novel which is a profound negotiation between waking and dreaming, and between dream and nightmare.¹⁰ When things or events lack conceptual order or structure due to uncertainty, ambiguity, or undecidability they may generate an indeterminacy which challenges the ontological security of the subject. Fantasy explores a child's experience by engaging both the conscious and unconscious mind and through the ontological indeterminacies of story events evokes, without overt articulation, the schemas, structures and significance of uncomprehended conflicts (see Storr 1970, 32). *Marnie* achieves this outcome very effectively, whereas the film adaptation, probably because of its different mode and reduced story scope, explicates the significance more overtly.

A key catalyst for ideological changes evident in the film adaptations of both novels is the challenge Arrietty and Anna pose for the codes of behaviour young people are expected to conform to. *The Borrowers* novel presents a patriarchal family in which women's work is domestic and girls are discouraged from seeking any form of agency. Arrietty's attempt to take independent action in the first novel in the series stems from her parents' reluctant

¹⁰ That *Marianne Dreams* incorporates elements of psychological horror is attested by its adaptation as the dark fantasy film *Paperhouse* (1988).

decision to allow her to become her father's apprentice and enter a larger world. The ambiguity between her right to freedom and the catastrophe her actions cause persists in the early adaptations and *Arrietty*, but is loosened in the 1997 and 2011 films, in which she gains a more ample subjective agency. Anna's situation is quite different. The pressure she feels is to conform to a social conception of childhood at twelve instead of presenting herself as introverted, unsociable and "not-even-trying" (10). The increasing awareness of the potential of children after World War II, which Pinsent mentions, coincides with an increasing awareness that children can suffer mental trauma and chronic anxiety in response to life circumstances. Anna cannot consciously recognise her condition, but is right to resent being described as "a quiet little thing" (12), an easy way to dismiss her depression. She is fortunate that her first sighting of The Marsh House triggers a forgotten memory that concatenates with other submerged, half-forgotten or misremembered memories and Marnie's diary that lead her to well-being. In the novel, well-being is achieved through social life with the family that has recently purchased and, symbolically, renovated The Marsh House, so that Anna finally conforms to the behavioural norm. The adaptation depicts Anna's success as more personal, achieved with the support of a similar-aged friend, as might be expected in Japan's more private society. The Japanese adaptation of *When Marnie Was There* epitomises the subtle ideological shifts that appear when a text is remade in a different era and culture.

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