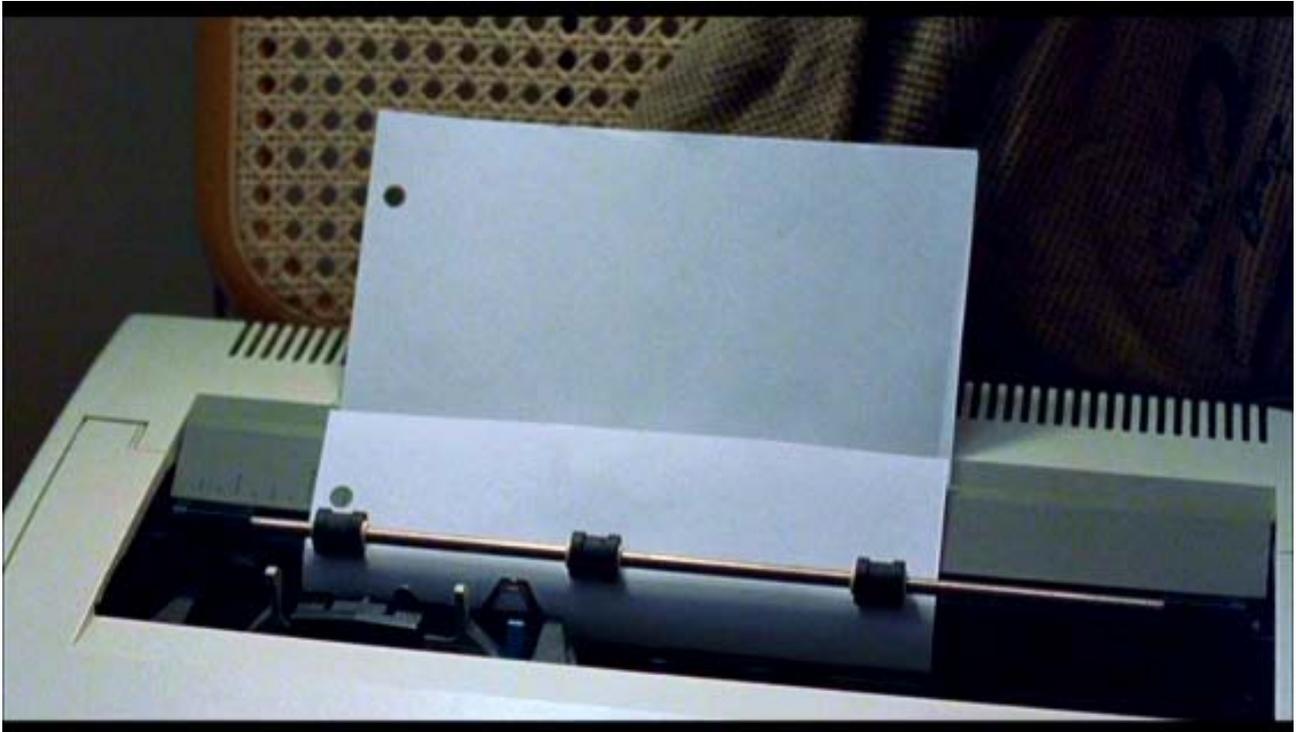


...A Metaphysical Can of  
Worms!



A Poetics of Postmodernism in  
the Works of Charlie Kaufman

## Title Page

Aalborg University  
Department of Languages, Culture and Aesthetics  
English, 2006.

Title: A Metaphysical Can of Worms: A Poetics of Postmodernism in  
the Works of Charlie Kaufman.  
A thesis by: Jesper Holmbach  
Supervisor: Bent Sørensen  
Handed in: February 13th, 2006

Jesper Holmbach: \_\_\_\_\_

This thesis takes up 75,95 standard pages of 2400 characters each per page including spaces and footnotes ( $182.288 / 2400 = 75,95$  standard pages).

Front page image from *Adaptation* (Kaufman 2002)

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## Introduction

‘Boy, I’d love to find a portal into your brain’  
(Kaufman 2002: 4).

Charlie Kaufman is one of the most controversial American screenwriters in recent years and is widely recognized for his work. His movie *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (2004) won an Academy Award for best screenplay, whereas *Being John Malkovich* (1999) and *Adaptation* (2002) have both been nominated in this same category. Kaufman’s popularity might be subscribed to his never-ending attempts to steer away from the conventions that govern the art of screenwriting, which has produced a number of highly peculiar and honest movies. All of Kaufman’s works address the notions of metafiction and parody, which are both key aspects within the postmodern literary production.

This thesis wishes to create a poetics of Charlie Kaufman’s movies by placing these within the realm of postmodern literary theory. The self-reflexive, or the metafictional, element is present in all of Kaufman’s screenplays as they explore the notions of being inside/ outside fiction. Not only do all of his works comment on their own status as fictions, but they also take on a structure that makes the audience question the representational status of the movie they are watching. The destabilizing use of metafiction is often further emphasized through the use of parody, since this device serves as a political commentary to the norms and conventions that govern these modes of representation in Kaufman’s screenplays. Postmodern theorists Linda Hutcheon, Brian McHale and Patricia Waugh all perceive these devices of metafiction and parody as cornerstones within postmodern literary theory, which underline the significance of these terms in relation to this thesis.

A major theme in Kaufman’s movies is the complexity of the human mind as their anti-hero protagonists are always on the brink of an identity crisis. These characters are often struggling to break through the cultural conventions of reality in order to establish their subjectivity. Rob Feld elaborates on Kaufman’s characters: ‘The Freak, the outsider who just can’t fit into this world, plays a crucial and empathetic role in breaking through the false precepts of this new reality in order to find authentic experience’ (Feld 2002: 117). This theme is often brought forward through the use of metafiction and parody in Kaufman’s movies, since they not only depict identity as representation, but also provide a critical perspective onto such perception of the self. Kaufman’s interest in the contemporary subject makes postmodern identity a

common theme in all of his movies.

This thesis seeks to explore the above considerations in relation to the following movies: *Being John Malkovich* (1999, dir. by Spike Jonze), *Adaptation* (2002, dir. by Spike Jonze) and *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (2004, dir. by Michel Gondry). Not only are these three movies by far Kaufman's most celebrated, but they also seem to share the common features of being highly explicit in their use of the postmodern techniques of metafiction and parody. Such representative selection of the scope of Kaufman's artistic production has also meant the exclusion of several others of Kaufman's primary screenplays, namely *Human Nature* (2001) and *Confessions of a Dangerous Mind* (2002). Both of these have the notions of metafiction and parody embedded within their structure, but Kaufman's other three major screenplays appear as greater representatives of these postmodern techniques. Furthermore, the three selected movies are all from different temporal stages in Kaufman's career, which also speaks in favor of their usage as representatives of Kaufman's entire production.

These considerations have led to the following agenda: Firstly, this thesis wishes to discuss the theoretical considerations that occur when establishing a poetics of postmodernism in Kaufman's movies. This section will not only outline and discuss postmodernism as a cultural phenomenon, but also outline the use of metafiction and parody in postmodern literary theory. Secondly, these theoretical implications are to be applied onto the range of Kaufman's artistic production that occupies this thesis. This analytical section will take form in three separate analyses, which are structured in chronological order, starting with *Being John Malkovich*, moving on to *Adaptation* and finally on to *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*. The purpose of these subsections is to analyze the three movies in relation to their use of metafiction and parody, while also to place these movies within the grander scale of postmodernism as a cultural phenomenon. Thirdly, the findings of these analyses are brought together in a concluding section, which seeks to spell out a poetics of postmodernism in Charlie Kaufman's movies.

## Theory

### ***Introduction***

The purpose of this section is to outline the theoretical implications that occur when outlining a poetics of postmodernism in Kaufman's *Being John Malkovich*, *Adaptation* and *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*. This thesis wishes to follow in the footsteps of major literary theorists Linda Hutcheon (1988) and Brian McHale (1987) by drawing on their methods for outlining a poetics for the postmodern. Both of these theorists establish their poetics on the intersection between literary theory and its articulation in literary texts in order for them to pinpoint what constitutes postmodernism and what is contained within it. This thesis uses the notions of postmodernism presented by McHale and Hutcheon as a foundation for the subsequent analytical section, which is then to spell out a poetics of postmodernism in Kaufman's movies. Therefore, this theoretical section will not contain a complete and detailed outline of McHale and Hutcheon's theories on postmodernism, but rather distinguish those theoretical considerations that are relevant for this thesis.

What follows seeks to establish a theoretical background on the use of metafiction and parody. However, before initiating a discussion of these literary terms, it seems relevant to take a step backwards and provide an outline of the notion of postmodernism in order to contextualize the two above devices. Hereafter, this section will turn to the notions of metafiction and parody respectively.

### ***What is Postmodernism, or, the Ontological Dominant***

The cultural movement of postmodernism surfaced about 50 years ago and has expanded ever since. It is a cultural phenomenon that has caused much debate throughout the last five decades, which proves its relevance in the scope of critical methods for analyzing contemporary society. The term itself is present on countless levels that all serve to distinguish the structures of the contemporary world, while these levels also serve to comment on how their frameworks are constructed. Therefore, postmodernism has also been inserted in numerous different contexts, which has caused for many different definitions of the term. This impalpability has led to much critical debate about how we are to perceive the world and how it is expressed through art. Literary theory derives from the literary production and, as shall be pointed out throughout this section, all three of Kaufman's movies express an extensive

overlap between postmodern theory and aesthetic practice. Consequently, it seems relevant to attempt to define postmodernism itself, before explaining its mechanisms.

In his *Postmodernist Fiction* (1987), McHale points out that no historical period ever existed as a graspable 'real' object, but rather that these existed in reality as 'discursive artifacts constructed either by contemporary readers and writers or retrospectively by literary historians' (McHale 1987: 4). Since these historical periods are discursive constructs, they can be constructed in multiple ways producing an infinite number of truths for the reader to choose from and thus depicting the subjectivity of the many truths within any historical period. Consequently, postmodernism, and all other prior literary-historical periods, are not by any means easily defined, since their features change depending on the fields of reference that are to serve as their basis for definition. Therefore, there are also different postmodernisms depending on their different contexts. This thesis will be concerned with theories of postmodernism based on art in terms of literature and architecture.

Postmodernism constitutes the historical period that replaced modernism or perhaps even the historical period that occurred as a counter-movement to modernist poetics. However, both of these claims acknowledge the periodical cyclicity embedded within the term itself. McHale claims that what characterizes postmodernism in relation to modernism is its move from posing epistemological questions (that problematize modes of knowing) to addressing a new agenda of ontological problematics (that problematize modes of being). This distinction not only makes it possible for McHale to mark a change in the literary dominant features, but it also makes it possible for him to produce a postmodern poetics on the basis of such aspects.

The base for McHale's poetics of postmodernist fiction is established by analyzing several borderline cases between modernist and postmodernist novels in order to depict a change in the periodical perception of art. To express this change, he borrows Roman Jakobson's concept of 'the dominant,' being the dominating system or structure that defines how we are to perceive art at a certain period in time (McHale 1987: 6). Thereby, a process of change within the literary field in historical periodicity becomes a change of dominant. The claim of a dominant in any art-form screams for post-structuralist deconstruction. However, as argued above, postmodernism is here defined preliminary as a discursive construction, which makes it self-aware of its own status as one truth among many. Therefore, when McHale argues a dominant within postmodernism, he is also pointing out the many dominants within any text, which differ accordingly to the questions that we as readers ask of the text. Consequently, the

dominant changes proportionally with the questions that we as critics ask of the text. In McHale's poetics, the notion of the dominant is based on questions concerning the change between the epistemological and the ontological point of view within the literary field.

McHale argues that modernism was governed by an epistemological dominant and thereby problematized the notion of knowing since it set out to explore the limitations of knowledge, while also problematizing the process of transforming this knowledge. However, a change of dominant does not happen overnight, which McHale claims by presenting several borderline texts that locate themselves somewhere between the epistemological and the ontological and thus depicting the historical cyclicity of literary periods. As argued above, postmodernism is governed by what McHale terms as the ontological dominant, being a structure that problematizes the modes of being:

'What is a world?; What kinds of worlds are there, how are they constituted, and how do they differ?; What happens when different kinds of worlds are placed in confrontation, or when boundaries between worlds are violated?; What is the mode of existence in a text, and what is the mode of existence of the world (or worlds) it projects...?' (McHale 1987: 10).

Overall, postmodernism exposes as well as problematizes its own ontological boundaries.

The ontological is not what characterizes McHale's poetics as such, but rather what characterizes its thematics. In the quote above, it is argued that postmodern texts distinguish the relationship between the text and the world in order to question how we are to make sense of the world we live in. Thereby, ontology becomes a description of worlds in the plural sense. McHale's poetics consists of several devices used to establish this ontological thematics of which metafiction and parody are important tools.

### ***Politicizing the Postmodern***

For theorist Linda Hutcheon, postmodernism accomplishes more than raising ontological questions, since its main devices of self-reflexivity and parody also add a critical and thus also a political agenda onto contemporary artworks. She argues: 'postmodernism ultimately manages to install and reinforce as much as undermine and subvert the conventions and presuppositions it appears to challenge' (Hutcheon 2002: 1 – 2). This subversive consequence of metafiction and parody is what adds the political agenda onto McHale's notion of the ontological dominant in postmodern fiction.

However, not all theorists agree. Marxist theorist Fredric Jameson believes that the postmodern incorporation of past conventions in terms of metafiction and parody will

ultimately resolve in the downfall of art itself:

‘...contemporary or postmodernist art is going to be about art itself in a new kind of way; even more, it means that one of the essential messages will involve the necessary failure of art and the aesthetic, the failure of the new, the imprisonment of the past’ (Jameson 1988: 1965).

Jameson perceives the devices of metafiction and parody as neither subversive nor political, but rather as empty integrations of past conventions into present structures. He believes this tendency occurred because we have lost our own sense of history through our position as consumers in a capitalist society where change is perpetual and traditions are obliterated. Therefore, according to Jameson, the incorporation of past texts into those of the present becomes nothing more than a nostalgic touch by the dead hand of the past. Jameson’s argumentation is mainly based on postmodernism in architecture, which makes it possible for him to argue the non-presence of critical potential in contemporary art. In what follows, it will be argued that experimenting with the entire notion of representation in postmodernism serves to critically question postmodernism’s own position in art and the cultural codes represented within it. Both McHale and Hutcheon claim that such incorporations of different texts serve to problematize our perception of the world and thus seek to reveal its various frameworks.

Hutcheon acknowledges the importance of representation in postmodernism, as she ascribes a critical potential to this term. In Hutcheon’s *The Politics of Postmodernism* she describes postmodernism as ‘a state of crisis in representation’ (Hutcheon 2002: 29). Instead of defining postmodernism as an ontological dominant thematics, Hutcheon bases her postmodern poetics on this notion of representation and thereby underlines its importance in contemporary art-forms. Postmodernism sees the world as mediated through representations (speech, writing etc.), which argues the subjectivity of any representation. This is what Hutcheon terms as the postmodern paradox as its art-forms acknowledge their status as representations of the world, while they at the same time undermine this notion by questioning the very act of representation. Thereby, representation in postmodernism is a notion that ‘at once inscribes and subverts the conventions and ideologies of the dominant cultural and social forces of the twentieth-century western world’ (Hutcheon 2002:11). These considerations are in many ways in line with McHale’s perception of the ontological dominant, since the main function of representation in postmodernism is to problematize how we are to understand the world and to question how this world is constructed. Thus, there is no longer just one world, but rather a multitude of subjective representations of this world (or any other object for that

matter).

Postmodern art-forms are highly self-aware of their status as representations. However, the representation has not been entirely detached from its referent, 'but rather [...] it now self-consciously acknowledges its existence as representation – that is, as interpreting (indeed as creating) its referent, not as offering direct and immediate access to it' (Hutcheon 2002: 32). Therefore, postmodernism wishes to draw attention to this relationship between objects and their representations, while also producing a self-reflexive commentary onto this relationship. It seems that the text no longer derives its authority from its representation of reality, but rather from its representations of cultural conventions and codes, which define reality in the postmodern world.

The modernist perceptions of identity and the unified self is brought into question when reality is perceived as something that only exists through representation. The self is no longer placed at the centre of our perception of reality, but has moved to a marginal position, since identity too is something that exists only through its representations. This is a rejection of the linearity and causality of *The Bildungsroman* as postmodernist texts deconstruct this perception of identity by outlining the self as representation. Consequently, there seems to be a split between how the individual perceives himself, and how he is perceived by others, which problematizes the notion of the unified subject. These aspects also go against the entire concept of the author, as he can no longer add a fixed meaning onto his works, since the interpretation of these works has become context-dependent and therefore also subjective as any text now holds numerous truths. These considerations are also what have led to Roland Barthes' famous claim that: 'the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the author.' (Barthes 1968:1470). Thus, every text consists of nothing more than representations of past texts and the notion of a fixed meaning, or a fixed identity, have become impossible in the postmodern era.

Both McHale and Hutcheon agree that the two dominant devices in their poetics of postmodernism are those of metafiction and parody. The postmodern art form is highly self-aware of its subversive agenda, since it is an art-form that manifests itself as a 'self-conscious, self-contradictory, self-undermining statement' (Hutcheon 2002: 1). In other words, these art forms are representations of the world, which also question their own status as representations through a self-reflexive meta-discourse. In postmodern literary works, this self-reflexivity often constructs and deconstructs cultural hierarchies and assumptions through the use of

metafiction and parody. Metafiction creates a meta-discourse that works inside the conventions of the novel in order to depict its constructedness and thus explicitly manifests its own status as an artifact. It is therefore a device that serves to flesh out the structure of any narrative, in order to remove all notions of textual hierarchies, since all texts are equally fictitious. Thereby, it also recognizes Derrida's claim that 'there is nothing outside of the text' (Derrida 1968: 1825), since the metafictional novel acknowledges that reality is also a textual, or fictional, construct. At the same time parody comes to serve as a critical commentary to these matters by questioning them in terms of originality and uniqueness. Therefore, parody goes well in hand with metafiction as it operates by pointing out the difference between texts through the use of irony. In postmodernist texts, this is often done by incorporating conventions from past texts into a new context, which points out their differences through the use of irony. As argued above, Jameson does not agree with these considerations as he perceives such incorporations as merely nostalgic relics of the past. However, Hutcheon does acknowledge the critical potential in postmodern art. She believes that postmodernism sets out to explore how subjects create meaning in culture and also how the term is exposing as well as questioning these cultural conventions that constitute contemporary reality. It is these considerations that, according to Hutcheon, make the political an important aspect within the postmodernist period.

### ***Metafiction***

As described above, self-reflexivity is a key feature in the postmodern art forms, since it seeks to erase the boundaries between fiction and reality and thus questions the ontological status of the world we live in. In relation to the literary artistic production, this technique has often been termed metafiction, or, as this term suggests, fiction about fiction. Metafiction is therefore a meta-discourse imbedded within the fictional discourse, which makes it possible for the text to comment on its own status as an artifact. According to Waugh, the use of this device increased during the 1960s, because of an emerging 'cultural interest in the problem of how human beings reflect, construct and mediate their experience of the world' (Waugh in Currie 1995: 41). Metafiction, and social constructivism, take its starting point in a perception of reality as a discursive artifact, meaning that reality only exists through human interaction or through language or text. This argues that there is not just one unique version of reality, but rather unlimited discursively constructed realities, which highlights the subjectivity of how we perceive and understand reality. Therefore, it becomes impossible to depict an objective

representation of reality, since it is perceived differently by each subject and reality thus changes when it is mediated to others. Therefore, metafiction serves to question representation in the literary text. Reality becomes fictionalized and blurs the distinction between the literary text and the world, since they are both understood as discursive artifacts. Metafiction sets out to explore and underline this relationship as it ‘pursues such questions through its formal self-exploration, drawing on the traditional metaphor of the world as a book, but often recasting it in the terms of contemporary philosophical, linguistic or literary theory’ (Waugh in Currie 1995: 41). Keeping this in mind, the study of metafictional texts in general can be a useful field of study in order to learn about how subjective reality is constructed. Waugh elaborates this matter by arguing that: ‘in showing us how literary fictions create its imaginary worlds, metafiction helps us to understand how the reality we live day by day is similarly constructed, similarly “written”’ (Waugh in Currie 1995: 53). Metafiction therefore provides the reader with a tool that lays bare the framework of how we perceive and construct the world we live in.

This metafictional agenda can be seen as a problematization of the notion of ‘mimesis.’ Speech in literary works can, according to Plato, be distinguished through the terms of diegesis and mimesis: ‘diegesis stands for those cases where the poet himself is the speaker and does not wish to suggest otherwise, and mimesis stands for those cases in which the poet attempts to create the illusion that it is not he who is speaking’ (Goering et al 2001: 229). Mimesis is therefore an attempt to create the illusion of reality in a literary work and thus an effort to create a realistic representation of the world. Its soul purpose is to make us believe in the fictional space that unfolds during the reading process and to represent its fictional characters as real as possible. Metafiction subverts this model of representation, since its agenda points to the world as a representation of fiction instead of the other way around. The purpose of metafiction is not to create an illusion of reality, but rather depict how we as human beings construct and perceive this reality. The self-reflexive discourse in a metafictional text is therefore to be seen as a diegetic level that serves to undermine the mimetic representation of the text in question. Thus, metafiction serves to bring forward mimetic representation as a fictional construct.

The metafictional focus in postmodern literature also questions the power structures of contemporary society. This focus dismisses the entire notion of objective representation, since it self-reflexively highlights what Hutcheon terms as ‘*truths* in the plural’ (Hutcheon 1988:

109). This notion goes hand in hand with Lyotard's theories on postmodernism, in which he argues the fall of grand narratives and their prior claim on truth, such as progress, world history etc. The grand narratives of the last two centuries have all been driven by a confidence in progress, but, as Lyotard claims, these universal truths have been increasingly doubted throughout the last 50 years, as: 'Neither economic nor political liberalism, nor various Marxisms, emerge from the sanguinary last two centuries free from the suspicion of crimes against mankind' (Lyotard 1986: 1614). Instead Lyotard claims that the present world is constituted through a plurality of local narratives, meaning the multiple subjective discourses that constitute and make sense of reality. In a world that only exists through discourses, no representation is entitled to more power than any other. Barthes elaborates: 'since to refuse to fix meaning is, in the end, to refuse God and his hypostases – reason, science, law' (Barthes 1968: 1469). Thus, the meta-element in self-reflexive fiction makes it possible for the novel to inhabit a critical stance towards any text that claims to hold an objective account of the truth. Consequently, the meta-element produces a form of resistance towards the perception of truth, while operating from within the form of the novel.

#### The Author as Critic / the Critic as Author

The self-reflexive novel does not only serve to question the relationship between the text and the world, but also to establish a layer of literary meta-criticism onto the fiction that it studies in order to point out the problematic relationship between criticism and literature. Literature has often been considered superior to literary theory, which is a hierarchical relationship that metafiction challenges through the use of Derrida's notions of 'différance' and 'deconstruction.' These matters will be elaborated in the following.

In Ferdinand Saussure's *Course in General Linguistics* from 1916, he argues a need to produce a general study of the nature of language, which he, famously, termed as *semiology* and defined as 'a science that studies the life of signs within society' (Saussure 1916: 962). In his study, Saussure argues that language is a structured system of signs that constitutes the connection between the word and the world. In this system there is the sign (the object), which consists of a signifier (the sound image) and a signified (the concept). These two elements are therefore constitutional of the sign and are thus cultural conventions that the speaker must inhabit in order to master any language. It is the difference in signifier in relation to other signifiers and the difference between signified and other signifieds that separates the sign from other signs. Therefore, the structured system of language is founded

on the differences within that very system:

‘In language there are only differences. Even more important: a difference generally implies positive terms between which the difference is set up; but in language there are only differences *without positive terms*. Whether we take the signified or the signifier, language has neither ideas nor sounds that existed before the linguistic system, but only conceptual and phonetic differences that have issued from the system’ (Saussure 1916: 972).

Saussure’s statement of everything in language as negative is only true when the signifier and the signified are studied separately and therefore not applicable in terms of their totality, namely the sign. When the signifier and the signified join together they become a unit that expresses the sign. This signifier and the signified then establish a connection between sounds and things and the sign thus materializes as a consequence of this system of oppositions, such as masculine/feminine; voiced, unvoiced; inside, outside etc. The explanation of meaning must therefore refer to this system of differences.

French Philosopher Jacques Derrida has questioned this model of difference, because of its static position. Saussure argues that writing is secondary to speech, which is essential to his entire semiotic system. However, Derrida points out that Saussure’s system does in fact treat language as static in terms of temporality, which is a state of language that only exists through writing. This distinction between synchronic (static) and diachronic (dynamic) differences in Saussure is what serves as the foundation for Derrida’s concept of *différance*.

In order for Derrida to illustrate the distinction between synchronic and diachronic differences, he pointed to two extensions of the French word ‘*différer*,’ which can be translated into the two English verbs: ‘to differ’ and ‘to defer.’ This distinction is also found in the two French extensions of the word, namely ‘*différence*,’ which suggests a synchronic distinction or a state of stasis, and ‘*différance*,’ which suggests a diachronic distinction or a process. Even though these nouns are spelled differently, their pronunciations are identical in French, which suggests that the imposed structure of language is something that is constantly changing and thereby should be analyzed in regard to both the synchronic and the diachronic aspect of it.

What consequences does this distinction impose on Saussure’s language system? Derrida elaborates that: ‘Differences, thus, are “produced” – deferred by *différance*’ (Derrida 1972: 66). This quote holds both the synchronic and the diachronic aspect within it as it reveals both Saussure’s aspect of difference and Derrida’s notion of deferment, or, *différance*. As mentioned above, a signifier and a signified go together into a unit that generates the sign, and

both the signifier and the signified are defined by the ways in which their signification are different from other terms. Saussure's language system is thus based on opposition, which argues that when a new unit, or structure, is formed, it immediately suppresses other units as a consequence of this binary structure. Derrida's argument is rather that there is a constant play between significations and the formation of one unit *defers*, or backgrounds, the prior unit. The language system thus reveals a duality in its structure as Derrida's *différance* opens up a backdoor into Saussure's system of difference. Where Saussure's model functioned as a power struggle between units, Derrida's duality reveals that this relationship is more of a play between units, which merely defers other units rather than stand in opposition to these. Thus, *différance* makes it possible for us to be aware of other meanings when these are deferred by the meaning-producing unit in hand. Derrida perceives Saussure's model as imposed on language and where Saussure constructs meaning through differences, Derrida offers deferment, which constitutes a playful system rather than a system of opposition. Therefore, there can never be a fixed meaning in any text or speech, but rather a play between interpretations. Metafiction uses this agenda to point out the numerous readings within any text.

The postmodern novel is not only conscious of its own status as fiction, but also self-conscious about its position as a commentary to past fictions and the traditions which these inhabit. Therefore, 'the relationship between a critical term and its literary object becomes profoundly confused because the literary object itself performs a critical function' (Currie 1995: 1). This aspect confuses the former belief of criticism as something located externally from the text and functioning as an added commentary. This was a perception of theory as secondary to literature, which in the metafictional novel is deconstructed through its incorporation and undecidability of both criticism and fiction. The metafictional novel thus attacks the opposition between criticism and fiction through a recognition of both as interdependent upon each other. Thereby, the notions of 'inside' and 'outside' the novel become erased from the discourses of literary fiction and criticism.

Metafiction has therefore become a method for criticizing past narratological forms, since the novel produces a layer of critique upon these traditional methods. Writers such as John Barth has used this technique to draw attention to what he terms 'the literature of exhaustion' (Barth in Currie 1995: 168) being certain genres and devices within the novel that he believes to have been used up. By self-consciously drawing attention to these used-up techniques in

his fictions, Barth was able to highlight their tiredness, which was the case in his *Lost in the Funhouse* among others. This subversive technique is what Barth finds to be characteristic about postmodernism, which he also terms as the literature of replenishment. Consequently, in the early years of postmodernism this self-referential device was seen as destructive for the entire novel tradition, but, as Barth has shown us, it is a device that also comments on the structures that we use to define reality through. Currie elaborates on this relationship between fiction and criticism:

‘For criticism this has meant an affirmation of literariness in its own language, an increased awareness of the extent to which critical insights are formulated within fiction, and a tendency towards immanence of critical approach which questions the ability of critical language to refer objectively and authoritatively to the literary text. For fiction it has meant the assimilation of critical perspective within fictional narrative, a self-consciousness of the artificiality of its constructions and a fixation with the relationship between language and the world’ (Currie 1995: 2).

The boundaries between criticism and fiction are thus meta-relating as never before, even though these two terms have always been almost inseparable. However, for metafiction to reach its goal, it has to contextualize in criticism, by connecting it to the self-reflexive element in criticism, or, in other words, meta-criticism. Both discourses are thus equally influential upon each other as they are in many ways inseparable, which is often made evident in postmodernism by the fact that the writer and the critic often materialize in one and the same person. Consequently, metafiction’s ontological problematic, besides that of reality and fiction, also serves to question the hierarchical relationship between fiction and criticism.

Metafiction is thus neither strictly fiction nor strictly criticism, but rather a responsibility inherent within the novel to divide attention equally between both the discourse and its representation. Metafiction’s priority lies in the ways in which authors and readers create meaning within discourses. To create meaning within the metafictional text lies not only in its meta-critical element, but also in how the reader makes sense out of the structures that constitute this critique. This is something that Barthes elaborates on, since ‘the reader is the space on which all the quotations that make up a writing are inscribed without any of them being lost; a text’s unity lies not in its origin but in its destination’ (Barthes 1968: 1469). There are thus several layers of criticism within the metafictional text, which argues that metafiction is but one discourse of literary language which co-exists with other equally valid critical interpretations. In other words, metafiction has its own critical commentary to its status as fiction, while it also obtains another layer of criticism as the reader interprets it.

Metafiction appears to be the ultimate device for fictions to raise ontological problematics, which, according to McHale, are what define the postmodern literary field. By blurring the boundaries between reality, fiction and criticism, the technique forces the reader to question how any world is constructed. What follows seeks to provide a more specific account on the use of metafiction in postmodern literature. In the postmodern novel, this is often done through interaction between the boundaries of the text and the world, and through the use and abuse of several narratological levels.

### Constructing / Deconstructing Postmodern Zones

A common trait in postmodern fictions is the slippage between ontological levels in the literary text, which serves to question the relationship between the familiar and the unfamiliar, or, to rephrase, the unstable interrelation between fiction and reality. McHale terms these different levels as zones instead of worlds, which is a useful distinction when navigating through the fictional space of the text as: 'Space here is less constructed than deconstructed by the text, or rather constructed and deconstructed at the same time' (McHale 1987: 45). A simplified method to establish this construction/deconstruction effect would be a story with two zones – the familiar and the unfamiliar. The unfamiliar zone is then placed parallel to a familiar zone, which imitates what we perceive as the 'real' world, and it thereby constructs a ground zero for the reader to navigate from, as he knows its physical environment, boundaries and laws of nature. However, this familiar element is then deconstructed through the initial introduction and the following interaction with the different and somewhat unfamiliar zone, which then serves to question the familiar zone and forces ontological questions upon the text. Often, as the narrative progresses, it becomes difficult for the reader to distinguish between these zones, creating what McHale terms as a flickering effect. It becomes a metafictional device that according to Waugh 'lays bare the linguistic basis of the "alternative worlds" constructed in literary fictions' (Waugh 1984: 100).

McHale lists a number of strategies for this construction and deconstruction of the fictional space, where the notion of interpolation is of much relevance in the context of Kaufman's three movies. It is a strategy that 'involves introducing an alien space within a familiar space, or between two adjacent areas of space where no such "between" space exists' (McHale 1987: 46). A technique rather similar to the above mentioned flickering between zones. It seems that this element of interpolation is located within all three of Kaufman's movies as they all introduce a zone of unfamiliarity onto a familiar zone imitating the real world.

These interrelationships between zones in postmodern texts are often further intertwined through the use of intertextuality and thus raise yet another set of ontological problematics. Intertextuality is the recognition of a relationship between texts, which has its base in the broader context of poststructuralism and thus also postmodernism. Poststructuralism, as well as postmodernism, sees reality as a construction of discourses, or simply as ‘a structure of signs whose significance is constructed by the cultural conventions, codes and *ideology* that happen to be shared by members of a cultural community’ (Abrams 1999: 317). Any literary work is thus made up from countless other cultural texts, which all serve to create a context for the narrative. Not surprisingly, metafiction uses this device self-reflexively, in order to raise further ontological questions as well as to underline this idea of reality as a textual construct.

A common use of intertextuality in postmodern literature is through what McHale terms as ‘transworld identity,’ being a device that borrows one character from one text and inserts it into another. This can be done by adapting one fictional character from one novel to another, or, by adding a real-life person into a fictional text. Currie elaborates, as the ‘internal boundary between extratextual reference to real life and intertextual reference to other literature signifies the artificiality of the fictional world while simultaneously offering its realistic referential possibilities’ (Currie 1995: 4). Such mixing of characters from one text to another distinctly violates the idea of zones mirroring reality. One might ask how is it possible for two characters to interact when they are from two separate texts? McHale terms such transworld identity as an ontological scandal: ‘ultimately its source is ontological: boundaries between worlds have been violated. There is an ontological scandal when a real-world figure has been inserted in a fictional situation, where he interacts with purely fictional characters’ (McHale 1987: 57). This technique of transworld identity thus reveals the notions of character and identity as fictional, while it also questions the entire notion of subjectivity as a general term. Thereby, intertextual characters force ontological problematics onto the text and highlight the fictionality of any zone in postmodern literature.

As argued above, this flickering of ontological boundaries is often caused through playful interaction between narrative levels, which serves to self-consciously reveal and contradict the plot-structure of the text. McHale describes several often used techniques in this communication between zones in postmodern fiction, which functions as a method for raising ontological questions by laying bare the hierarchy between these zones. The first of these is

what McHale terms as *Chinese-box worlds*, being ‘when you perform the same operation over and over again, each time operating on the product of the previous operation’ (McHale 1987: 112). Therefore, the Chinese-box structure consists of narrative frames within narrative frames. In order to distinguish between these layers, McHale terms the outer, or the meta-reflexive, frame as the diegetic level that projects the primary world. Within this narrative frame is another embedded narrative level, which constitutes the secondary hypodiegetic frame present one level down from the diegetic level. The *hypo* prefix is added every time the story goes a level deeper into itself. The second technique is that of the *strange loop phenomenon*, which depicts the present hierarchy of narrative zones by violating their positions in relation to each other. These strange loops in narratives set in unexpectedly by taking the reader back to an earlier point in the narrative but on the wrong narrative level. Thereby, McHale argues that the strange loop serves the purpose of ‘violating and thus foregrounding the hierarchy of ontological levels’ (McHale 1987: 120). The third technique manifests itself by drawing on genre-characteristics in relation to *the fantastic*. McHale argues: ‘in the context of postmodernism, the fantastic has been co-opted as one of a number of strategies of an ontological poetics that pluralizes the real and thus problematizes representation’ (McHale 1987: 75). It becomes a question of ontology as the text often hesitates to explain whether the fantastic elements can be explained as supernatural or whether they should be explained through the laws of nature (or science). This hesitation raises even further ontological issues, since an explanation of numerous (often fantastic) zones are nonexistent.

Postmodernism as a genre is thus explicitly self-conscious about its interest in ontological problematics. In postmodernist fiction, these questions of ontology are very often raised through strategies of metafiction. The following section seeks to direct its focus towards the concept of parody and how it is used in postmodernism as a critical and somewhat political commentary to fiction.

### **Parody**

On a basic level, parody means to incorporate a secondary text into a primary text in order to establish similarity as well as ironic diversity. It is a relationship between past and present texts that allows the present text to comment on its own position in relation to the past text. The etymological meaning of parody derives from the Greek ‘parodia,’ which is normally translated into ‘counter-song.’ If only it was that simple. Hutcheon argues that there is more to

the term than mere opposition, since its prefix – para – has another and somewhat dubious meaning besides than ‘counter’ – namely ‘beside,’ which points to a more equal relationship instead of the one of simple opposition. Consequently, parody becomes more of a critical recontextualization, or what Hutcheon describes as an ‘ironic playing with multiple conventions, this extended repetition with critical difference, is what I mean by modern parody’ (Hutcheon 2000: 7). Irony is the key to such recontextualization as it allows for the two texts to enter a relationship not characterized by opposition, but rather by recognition with a critical, or political, distance.

Throughout the last 50 years, which, broadly speaking, has defined postmodernism, parody has come to function as a major player in the postmodern art forms. As argued in the above, the metafictional element in postmodern fiction serves to point out the text’s own status as fiction. Parody has added a critical, or, what Hutcheon believes as a political, dimension to the metafictional strategy in order to comment on the similarities and dissimilarities between texts. In fact, Hutcheon argues that ‘postmodern parody is a value-problematizing, de-naturalizing form of acknowledging the history (and through irony, the politics) of representations’ (Hutcheon 2002: 90). Metafictional parody thus comes to question the relationship between the present and the past text.

When incorporating past texts into a new context, this trans-contextualization calls for a redefinition of the term of originality itself. It is easy to classify parody as plagiarism, but the ironic element in its incorporation rejects this notion, since the past text becomes redefined as it enters a new meaning through irony and is thereby turned into a hybrid form. However, parody does question the notion of author-creativity. Hutcheon argues that ‘today’s turning to parody reflects what European theorists see as a crisis in the entire notion of the subject as a coherent and continuous source of signification’ (Hutcheon 2000: 4). An aspect mentioned above in relation to Barthes’ declaration of the death of the author and the birth of the subject. However, this is strangely inconsistent with the practice of self-conscious fiction as it often points to a self-awareness of an author. However, this is the method of metafiction as it points out the problematic relationship between the author and his text. Parody is what adds a critical agenda to this problematic and therefore what provides self-reflexive fiction with a perspective to the ‘outside’ world as its devices depict and comment on the framework of reality construction. To parody any text is to question the entire concept of unique individuality, since this act recognizes that any individual is composed through numerous

cultural texts, which has come to constitute identity in the postmodern era. On a grander scale, parody also contests the contemporary capitalist texts of ownership as it uses and abuses already established texts. However, its trans-contextualization serves to insert the text in question into the realm of textual history.

In order to accomplish a successful parody, the reader needs to recognize the parodied text within its new context and also acknowledge how the past text has been changed by the new text. Even though we have to be reminded of these relationships between texts, they still serve to recognize the many cultural texts that are shared within any society. Parody is therefore ‘a sophisticated genre in the demands it makes on its practitioners and its interpreters. The encoder, then the decoder, must effect a structural imposition of texts that incorporates the old into the new’ (Hutcheon 2000: 33). Parody does not impose a textual hierarchy between texts, but rather points out and dramatizes their difference. This is a key concept in Hutcheon’s definition of postmodern parody as it does not seek to impose any ideologies or cultural conventions on the behalf of others, but rather question this textual hierarchy. According to Hutcheon, such dramatization of difference in parody is always driven by irony, which is precisely what adds the concept of critical difference to this trans-contextual relationship. It is often done on playful terms, since the device both constructs and deconstructs this difference and it is therefore up to the reader to evaluate this trans-contextualization.

In the light of Jameson’s views on postmodernism, as mentioned above, it is not surprising that he disagrees with Hutcheon’s definition of parody in twentieth century art-forms. Jameson claims that ‘writers and artists of the present day will no longer be able to invent new styles and worlds – they have already been invented’ (Jameson 1988: 1965). Therefore, Jameson does not perceive parody as trans-contextualization or as deconstruction of textual hierarchies, but rather as an expression of ingeniousness. Postmodernism and its use of parody and metafiction are therefore perceived by Jameson as the end of individualism and personal identity, since he does not acknowledge the political potential within these devices. He believes that parody is widely mistaken for pastiche (imitation) in the contemporary arts and thus disregards the critical aspect in postmodernism. Both of these devices function through the mimicking of other styles and conventions, which are something that Jameson believes can be easily done in relation to modernism, since its artists expressed themselves in unique and unmistakable voices. He goes on to argue that parody serves to mock the styles and conventions of the past through its comparison of past uniqueness onto what is perceived

as *normal* today. It is a method for ridiculing the originality of the styles used by the distinct and individual voices of modernism, which, in the end, will be the downfall of subjectivity. Jameson claims that capitalist consumer society will eventually be over-floated by the fragmentation that is much present in postmodernist art-forms and thus erasing normality once and for all. Therefore, it will no-longer be possible for parody to ridicule the voices of the past, since it merely produces a non-critical representation in terms of pastiche: ‘pastiche is blank parody, parody that has lost its sense of humor’ (Jameson 1988: 1963). Therefore, Jameson believes that stylistic innovation is not present in postmodernism, because pastiche merely incorporates and speaks through the conventions of the past. For Jameson, Parody does not occupy a critical nor political role in postmodernism, but he rather believes that the device is on the verge of downfall as pastiche is about to take over with its incorporation of dead styles, or, ‘to speak through the masks and the voices of the styles in the imaginary museum’ (Jameson 1988: 1965).

Hutcheon believes that it is the ironic element in parody that provides the trans-contextualization with a commentary of critical difference – not to ridicule out of artistic incompetence as Jameson proclaims. Irony and parody both operate on two levels, namely on a foregrounded, primary level and a secondary level operating in the background. The secondary level attains its meaning from its social context at the time it was written, whereas the final meaning of irony and parody is located when these two levels are intertwined in the context of their new hybrid form. Hutcheon acknowledges that these considerations can, at times, make it difficult for the reader to distinguish between parody and other seemingly similar devices such as intertextuality and pastiche. Intertextuality, as mentioned above, is a recognition of the relationship between texts, which, at an onset is also the case in parody. However, the difference lies in the intentionality added on the behalf of the encoder when directing attention towards the similarities in the two texts. Again, irony is what makes out the difference in relation to parody as the collaboration between the two texts establishes a new and hybrid form, which marks the difference between the two. What distinguishes parody from pastiche is also to be found within this hybrid form. Broadly speaking, pastiche means to imitate a style or a period, which is somewhat similar to parody as it also incorporates another text. However, where pastiche involves imitating a whole genre or style, parody involves an often ironic transformation in its relationship to the incorporated texts (Hutcheon 2000: 39). Jameson mostly bases his claims on parody and pastiche in relation to postmodern

architecture, which makes it possible for him to dismiss the critical element in parody and labeling it instead as pastiche, or, a dead incorporation into the new. However, Hutcheon broadens the scope of analysis and enters the field of literary periodicity and cultural textuality. Therefore, she argues that postmodern parody is indeed critical as well as political in its function to question our perception of reality construction.

The link between metafiction and parody has been established earlier in this theoretical section, where it was argued that parody serves as a critical commentary to the cultural constructions and conventions laid bare by metafiction. However, the use of parody in metafiction does serve another purpose as well, since it also functions as a catalyst for literary evolution. Waugh elaborates on this matter: 'In fact, parody in metafiction can equally be regarded as another level of literary change, by undermining an earlier set of fictional conventions which has become automatized, the parodist clears the path for a new, more perceptible set' (Waugh 1984: 64). It seems that Hutcheon would disapprove in Waugh's notion of parody as undermining of earlier conventions, since Hutcheon's point lies in the difference between the past and the present text. According to Hutcheon, the humorous element in parody lies in the hyper-form of trans-contextualization. However, parody as a device to break with literary conventions is without doubt a useful tool in differing from past norms. Where metafiction lays bare the methods of construction in the literary text, parody functions to firstly incorporate an earlier set of literary conventions into the text and later to humorously reveal their differences. Therefore:

'Metafictional parody reveals how a particular set of contents was expressed in a particular set of conventions recognized as "literature" by its readers, and it considers what relevance these may still have for readers situated at a different point in history. It exploits the indeterminacy of the text, forcing the reader to revise his or her rigid perceptions based on literary and social conventions, by playing off contemporary and earlier paradigms against each other and thus defeating the reader's expectations about both of them' (Waugh 1984: 67).

Consequently, the combination of metafiction and parody is not only a matter of literary evolution, but also a matter of literary evaluation in relation to literary history.

The above analytical section has now discussed many of the theoretical considerations that occur when spelling out a poetics of postmodernism. In what follows, this discussion will serve as a point of reference for perceiving Kaufman's three movies in the light of postmodernism. As mentioned in the introduction, the purpose of such analysis is to create a poetics of postmodernism in relation to Kaufman's three movies.

## Postmodernism in *Being John Malkovich*

'Malkovich: You see Maxine. It isn't just playing with dolls.  
Maxine: Oh honey. It is so much more. It's playing with people.'  
(Kaufman 2000: 87)

As the title *Being John Malkovich* (1999) reveals, it is a movie that centers the notion of representation, since 'to be' John Malkovich is in fact to produce a representation of another person. This incorporation in the title serves to question how identity is represented. However, it is also a challenge of the broader frame of narratological structure concerning the relationship between reality and fiction, since the title embeds a 'real' actor within a piece of fiction. To be someone else is to inscribe the textual representation of one character into another, which suggests the presence of parody's subversive and always ironic agenda. Thus, the movie seems occupied with the representation and perception of identity. Every character in *Being John Malkovich* strives for love and recognition, while the movie asks how we as humans can achieve these appreciations.

In *Being John Malkovich*, Craig (John Cusack) is forced to face the fact that he is unable to make a living from his passion as a puppeteer. Craig is then hired as a file clerk at Lester Corp in downtown New York where he not only manages to fall in love with his bored colleague Maxine (Kathleen Keener), but also discovers a secret portal into the mind of famous actor John Malkovich (John Malkovich). Craig soon realizes that the portal can be a means for him to have sex with the beautiful Maxine as well as a means for him to promote his career as a puppeteer. Also, Craig's wife Lotte (Cameron Diaz) discovers the potential of being somebody else, since she too falls in love with Maxine while being inside of Malkovich. Thereby she rediscovers herself as a transsexual. The plot thickens even further as it is revealed that Craig's boss Lester (Orson Bean) for several lifetimes has been moving from body-vessel to body-vessel in order to escape death. Of course he gets furious when this is made evident and therefore fights for his right to Malkovich's body-vessel. Consequently, in most parts of the movie, Malkovich's body-vessel is occupied by other characters and it is only rarely that Malkovich's vessel is embodied by the 'real' Malkovich. The movie thus occupies itself with the ecstasy of recognition and what some people will do to obtain fame. It

expresses these aspects by questioning what is real and what is not in relation to postmodern identity politics through the use of metafiction and parody.

This analysis seeks to explore how metafiction is used in *Being John Malkovich* to draw attention to the frameworks of representation and to point out how these frameworks are criticized by parody in order for the movie to comment on identity representation in postmodern consumerism. These aspects will be pursued by firstly looking into how the narrative structure of the movie embeds these devices and, secondly, how the characters in the movie are used to raise ontological questions about the notion of self and identity.

### ***Narrative Structure in Being John Malkovich***

‘Craig: Do you see what a metaphysical can of worms this portal is?’  
(Kaufman 1999: 36)

The narratological structure of *Being John Malkovich* problematizes mimesis through its use of McHale’s notions of interpolation, strange loop phenomenon and hesitation.

Broadly speaking, the narrative structure of *Being John Malkovich* consists of two zones, being outside and inside John Malkovich’s body-vessel. The outside zone is depicted as a mimetic representation of New York with its place-specific references and numerous scenes of pedestrian activity in downtown New York. However, the specific locations of the Mertin-Flemmer building and the New Jersey Turnpike serve as central spatial points for crossing the borderline into the fantastic zone of John Malkovich’s vessel. These two locations materialize McHale’s notion of interpolation in the movie.

Lester Corp is located on the 7½ floor in the Mertin-Flemmer building, which is a strange story where everything is scaled down to half the size. When travelling to the 7½ floor one has to crack open the elevator doors with a crowbar, which further mystifies this story and compromises our belief in the movie’s mimetic representation of New York. This tendency escalates with Craig’s discovery of the fantastic portal into John Malkovich and marks the introduction of a fantastic zone that runs parallel to the ‘reality’ zone of New York.

The two zones prove to be influential upon each other, which reveals an unstable relationship of ontological levels in the movie. To enter the portal means to be transferred to

another narrative zone of the movie and this is often marked through a change in the camera's point of view. When a character enters Malkovich it is often marked by a reduced perspective, highlighting that the camera is looking out through Malkovich's eye. It is therefore often possible to distinguish between the two narrative strands through the classification of either omniscient or 1. person camera perspective.

The distinction in point of view proves helpful as the two narrative zones intermingle when Malkovich (and the person inside Malkovich) start to interact with other characters on the omniscient narrative level. The vessel body becomes a medium for communication between characters on both narrative zones, and the 'real' Malkovich gets stuck in the middle of it. Lotte falls in love with Maxine when Malkovich (and Lotte) are having dinner with her. In the scene there is a constant shift between narrative levels as the point of view changes when the conversation shifts back and forth. This complex intertwinement of narrative zones is exemplified at the restaurant when Lotte sees Maxine for the first time through Malkovich's eyes: 'Lotte [inside Malkovich]: God, she's beautiful. The way she's looking at me. At him. At us' (Kaufman 1999: 49). Thus, the basis for communication between the two narrative zones materializes in the shape of Malkovich's body. This intertwinement of narrative zones also causes an intertwinement of the representation of identity, since the representation of one character can be compromised by other characters.

From this point onwards the possibilities of interpolation in the movie are explored in every fashion. Malkovich enters his own portal causing a narcissistic meltdown where everyone is Malkovich and speaks Malkovich. Later in the movie, Craig gains total control over Malkovich's body and the vessel then becomes a method for him to earn Maxine's recognition and promote his career as a puppeteer through Malkovich's celebrity status. Furthermore, in an act of desperation, Lotte attempts to kill Maxine, which resolves in a chase into the portal and through Malkovich's sub-consciousness. McHale's concept of interpolation serves not only to underline the mutual influence between the two narrative zones, but also to question the representational frameworks that govern these levels.

McHale's notion of the strange loop phenomenon is also used as a tool to cause interpolation and thus further questions the movie's representational status. In the first half of the movie, Craig expresses his suppressed passions through his puppets, which are then to be lived out in the form of Malkovich's vessel much later in the movie. Craig's opening puppet performance of 'Dance of Despair and Disillusion' and his realization of sexual fantasies

through his puppets are therefore later actualized through Malkovich. When Craig obtains full control over Malkovich's body, he ends up having sex with Maxine and performing his 'Dance of Despair and Disillusion' in real life, but on the wrong narrative level. This is a realization of the narrative strange loop, and such replay on another narrative level creates a sliding effect between zones. It also self-consciously reveals that there has been a shift in identity representation, since Craig used to represent his passions through his puppets, but now is able to represent them through the identity of John Malkovich. In the chapter selection on the DVD version of *Being John Malkovich*, this aspect of the narrative strange loop is self-reflexively underlined as the chapter is entitled 'Dance of Despair and Disillusion (reprise)' (Kaufman, 1999: DVD-chapter 25).

*Being John Malkovich* hesitates to fully explain its fantastic elements that intertwine the two narrative zones. This narrative technique makes the audience question the setting of the movie and its use of mimetic representation. Towards the ending of the movie, Lester illustrates some of the metaphysics that govern the portal, but their origin remain a secret. The hesitation that occurs when explaining only the portal's function and not its origin leaves the movie in a space somewhere between reality and fiction. This foregrounds ontological questions in the movie, which is a problematic that Craig comments upon when having been ejected from the portal for the first time:

'Craig: The point is that this [the portal] is a very odd thing, *supernatural*, for lack of a better word. I mean, it raises all sorts of philosophical questions about the nature of self and the existence of soul. Am I me? Is Malkovich Malkovich? Was the Buddha right, is duality an illusion? I had a molding in my hand, Maxine. But I don't have it anymore. Where is it? Did it disappear? How could that be? Is it still in Malkovich's head? I don't know!' (Kaufman 1999: 36).

*Being John Malkovich* raises these kinds of questions throughout, as it hesitates to explain its fantastic elements entirely. The piece of molding reoccurs when Craig is ejected from Malkovich for the last time, but the movie never gives any clues to what has happened to it. The movie also attempts to explain the origin of the Mertin-Flemmer building's 71/2 floor, which Maxine cynically dismisses immediately after we have heard the story: 'Craig: Moving story, huh? Maxine: Unfortunately, the story's bullshit.' (Kaufman 1999: 15). Such failure to provide the audience with explanations compromises the mimetic representation of New York, which was put forward in the beginning of the movie.

Metafiction's role of blurring the boundaries between fiction and criticism is also present in *Being John Malkovich* as Lotte comments on the ontology of Malkovich's portal after she has

‘experienced’ him for the first time:

‘Lotte: ...I was just thinking, do you think that it’s weird that John Malkovich has a portal? Do you think that it might have some...*significance*, for example?’

Craig: What the hell kind of question is that?’

Lotte: I don’t know. I think it’s sort of sexy that he has a portal though, don’t you think? Y’know, it’s almost vaginal. It’s like he’s got a penis and a vagina. It’s sort of like Malkovich’s feminine side. I like that.’ (Kaufman 1999: 42).

This embedded meta-criticism adds a self-reflexive psychoanalytical reading onto Malkovich and his portal. A reading that later manifests itself in real life as Lotte in fact becomes Malkovich’s feminine side and uses his body to live out her lesbian fantasies. However, the movie also points out that this is not the only reading of Malkovich and the portal, since Craig produces yet another interpretation, namely that of the existence of self and the constitution of soul (Kaufman 1999: 36). Thus, there are multiple readings of Malkovich’s portal, which *Being John Malkovich* self-consciously reveals by its embedded meta-critical discourse on its own position somewhere between fiction and criticism.

In *Being John Malkovich*, the construction of a mimetic representation of New York is deconstructed through the introduction of the fantastic portal into Malkovich’s head. Representation is severely challenged as the ‘real’ world representation is compromised by the fictional representation inside Malkovich’s mind. At a certain point in the movie the distinction between narrative levels even breaks down as the fantastic zone becomes an integrated and influential catalyst in the reality zone. Therefore, this thesis argues that the structure of *Being John Malkovich* is metafictional since it not only compromises its own modes of representation, but also self-consciously comments on these frameworks. The portal becomes the means for every character to gain what he or she wants. It is what drives the plot forward and at the same time what pushes questions of ontology onto the characters and the audience.

## ***Intertextuality in Being John Malkovich***

‘Maxine: No one would ever have to know it’s not him [Malkovich].

Craig [inside Malkovich]: I could use his existing notoriety to launch my puppeteering career.’ (Kaufman 1999: 88)

Intertextuality in *Being John Malkovich* further problematizes representation through its use of transworld-identities and its use of intertextuality in relation to the cultural texts of celebrity characters. Furthermore, intertexts are also used as commentaries to the ontological dilemmas that the movie faces throughout.

*Being John Malkovich* plays with the notion of intertextuality in terms of characters, which, seemingly, causes an ontological breakdown in the representation of identity. The real John Malkovich plays himself in a fictional movie alongside with fictional characters that all coexist in a fictional universe. However, it is notable that the movie distinguishes between John Malkovich and the representation of John Malkovich. This distinction is illustrated through an alteration of Malkovich’s middle name from John *Gavin* Malkovich to John *Horatio Hannibal* Malkovich<sup>1</sup>. Malkovich as a transworld character is thus used as a metafictional device that creates a distinction between identity and the representation of identity.

*Being John Malkovich* is full of brief appearances by famous actors, who are all playing representations of themselves as well. This is another element of transworld identity that further destabilizes the distinction between reality and fiction. For instance, Charlie Sheen plays himself, where he serves as a close friend of Malkovich’s. Furthermore, the documentary on Malkovich holds numerous appearances of celebrities and several interviews with famous actors who all pay their tribute to the fictional Malkovich and his move into puppetry. We see an interview with actor Sean Penn who proclaims that many others will follow the path of puppeteering: ‘Sean Penn: I think that once we all get the courage to follow through on our instincts like Malkovich has, I think that a lot of us will move into puppetry’ (Kaufman 2000: DVD-chapter 27). This further erases the boundaries between fiction and the world as a great number of real life actors are turned into their fictional representations. Again

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<sup>1</sup> This is made evident in the embedded documentary entitled: ‘John Horatio Malkovich: Dance of Despair and disillusionment’ (Kaufman 1999: 91)

identity is brought forward as something that consists only as representation, which argues the fictionality of any projection of the self.

The above mentioned documentary film also reveals a playfulness towards genre expectations, which adds a further metafictional element to the movie. Traditionally, the form of the documentary genre has been established to provide a factual portrait of a certain character or problem. Its characteristic is therefore to provide a truthful representation, which is put in doubt in *Being John Malkovich* as it involves both real and fictive characters who interact with each other. The documentary consists of a biography of the life of John Malkovich before and after Craig has taken control over his body. It thereby mixes factual accounts of Malkovich's career with fictional events occurring after Craig's takeover of Malkovich's vessel. In the beginning of the documentary intertext, Craig in Malkovich reminds us that: 'there's the truth and there are lies, and art always tells the truth, even when it's lying' (Kaufman 1999: 91). The factual and the fictional thus collide in the documentary, while it also plays with our notion of genre expectations in relation to the representation of truth.

The documentary also serves establish Malkovich's fame as a cultural text in *Being John Malkovich*. John Malkovich's iconic status is intertextually embedded in the movie as well, since the cultural text that surrounds his character also haunts him wherever he goes. This text is what depicts Malkovich's celebrity status and is therefore often revealed as shallow and superficial. No one questions Malkovich's position as 'one of the great American actors of the 20th century' (Kaufman 1999: 35), but none of the other characters in the movie are able to specify any of the productions that he has appeared in. Always, his artistic production is referred to as 'that jewel thief movie' (Kaufman 1999: 36) or 'that movie where you played that retard' (Kaufman 1999: 49), whereas the audience, inside Malkovich, witnesses him rehearsing Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard* and Shakespeare's *Richard III*. Both productions are for cultural elitists with a high rate of cultural capital<sup>2</sup>. The intertext of Malkovich as a

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<sup>2</sup> Bourdieu 1979: pp. 1809 – 1814. Bourdieu points out a difference between the high and the low arts through his often materialistic inspired definitions of our ability to understand and interpret culture and its artistic extensions. The difference between mainstream and elitist art can be located through Bourdieu's notion of cultural capital, being the cultural competence that one possesses in order to interpret a work of art: 'A work of art has meaning and interest only for someone who possesses the cultural competence, that is, the code, into which it is encoded' (Bourdieu 1979: 1810).

cultural text is thereby brought forward in the movie as it makes a distinction between Malkovich's real artistic production and the cultural text that surrounds his persona.

Craig is highly aware of the intertextual potential that lies in inscribing himself to Malkovich's cultural text, since he uses it to launch his career as a puppeteer. It appears that a career in puppeteering is only possible for the famous Mantini, but, as Lotte reminds us in the very beginning of the movie, 'not everyone can be Derek Mantini' (Kaufman 1999: 2). However, through the use of Malkovich's body and his iconic status, Craig achieves the recognition that he so longs for. In fact, what was earlier mocked as doll playing is now turned into a recognized artistic practice without any questions asked: 'Larry [Malkovich's agent]: Sure. No problemo. Poof, you're a puppeteer. Heh heh. Just let me make a couple of phone calls' (Kaufman 1999: 91). Consequently, the cultural text of John Malkovich is revealed as more important than his actual artistic production, which highlights the godlike image that surrounds celebrities such as Malkovich.

The above mentioned intertextual reference to Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard* also serves as a comment to what Malkovich has coming later in *Being John Malkovich*. Malkovich is rehearsing Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard* when Maxine phones him for the first time, and the quote then appears as Kaufman's prophecy of the relationship that is to come:

'But what I have been through. I am hungry as the winter. I am sick, anxious, poor as a beggar. Fate has tossed me hither and thither. I have been everywhere. Everywhere. But wherever I have been – every minute, day and night my soul has been full of mysterious anticipation. I feel the approach of happiness. Anya, I see it coming' Kaufman 1999: 46 - 47).

Seconds later the phone rings and their affair takes form. The quote might even be a reference to Lotte, who is 'inside' Malkovich at the time, since she is very much looking to find her place in the world and the recognition from a partner. Later on, Malkovich's rehearsal of Shakespeare's *Richard the III* provides a somewhat more critical perspective to both Craig and Lotte's intentions of using Malkovich as a way to get to Maxine: 'Was ever woman in this humor wooed? Was ever woman in this humor won?' (Kaufman 1999: 64). Thus, the use of the above intertexts serves as artistic commentaries to those alien forces that are taking hold of Malkovich's body.

Therefore, intertextuality in *Being John Malkovich* serves to question representation, while it also serves to meta-critically comment on this agenda. The use of transworld characters problematizes the distinction between reality and fiction, while it also brings forward identity

as representation. The documentary intertext also plays with our expectation of genre, since what appears to be a factional autobiography is revealed as partly fictional, since the audience is made aware of Craig's manipulation of Malkovich's identity text. Furthermore, the documentary inserts John Malkovich's celebrity text into the movie, in which Craig and Lotte inscribe themselves for self-promotion. Also, the intertextual references to Shakespeare and Chekhov both serve as commentaries to the plot structure of the film, which again highlights the metafictional agenda in all of the above intertextual intentions.

### ***Parody in Being John Malkovich***

'...Who the fuck is John Malkovich?'  
(Kaufman 1999: 35)

Parody in *Being John Malkovich* is used to critically comment upon notions of identity and the cultural texts that constitute such. These aspects are brought forward by the metafictional strategies argued above.

As revealed in the title, the immediate parody is on Malkovich and the cultural text of celebrity stardom that surrounds his persona. The perception of Malkovich as a cultural text is made evident on the DVD cover of the movie. Here, Malkovich is not credited alongside the other actors, since he is only mentioned through the movie's title. Thus, the movie is not depicting the real Malkovich, but merely the cultural text that surrounds this character. Therefore, the movie's parodic play centres on John Malkovich, who performs a self-parody on his own status as a cultural text. The 'real' John Malkovich is inserted into a piece of fiction about himself and the difference between factual and fictional representation of his character is portrayed with an often ironic touch. This trans-contextualization takes the public image of Malkovich as a celebrated artist and inserts this perception into the fictive realm of Malkovich's identity that is portrayed in the movie. Here the audience is invited into the private sphere of Malkovich's life where we see him in the shower or sitting at home eating toast or checking his teeth in the mirror. Such insertion of the cultural texts of the great American actor of the 20th century into that of the fictive and private realm, reveals new elements in Malkovich's celebrity cultural text, namely that of the private Malkovich. Thus, the insertion of real-life John Malkovich into Kaufman's fictive universe establishes a parody on celebrity identity in *Being John Malkovich*.

The theory of parody is explicitly laid out in *Being John Malkovich*, since it takes one character text and inserts it into another character text, which again trans-contextualizes the notion of character and identity with an often ironic distance. When Craig has taken control over Malkovich's body, he starts wearing the clothes that Craig would wear and grows long hair resembling Craig's as well as speaking in the same tone of voice as Craig. This provides an ironic depiction of Craig inside Malkovich, since his identity representation remains visible, even when it has been embedded into another character representation. What is ironic about this relationship is that once Craig is Malkovich, his recognition as a puppeteer suddenly grows to enormous heights. Apparently, it is not art itself that matters, but rather the notoriety of the artist. Maxine and Craig elaborate on these matters: 'Maxine: So, is this Malkovich fellow appealing? Craig: Yes, of course, he is a celebrity' (Kaufman 1999: 36). The cultural text of John Malkovich as one of the great American actors of the twentieth century is thereby repeatedly parodied, since no one really knows anything about Malkovich's career, besides that he is a celebrity. As mentioned above, no one can name any of Malkovich's productions, since these are always referred to as 'that jewel heist movie' (Kaufman 2000: 36) or 'that movie where you played that retard' (Kaufman 1999: 49). Thus, the cultural text of Malkovich's celebrity stardom is parodied for its shallowness.

*Being John Malkovich* starts by presenting the frameworks of contemporary identity politics, where the movie marks a distinction between the perception of John Malkovich and how he is perceived by others. However, this distinction is ironically subverted through the use of parody. No one seems to know anything about Malkovich besides that he is famous and has played several parts in movies that they fail to remember. However, *Being John Malkovich* also takes us behind this layer of celebrity gossip and reveals Malkovich from a personal point of view. Here we see Malkovich rehearsing passages from Chekhov and Shakespeare, which introduces a personal side to his cultural persona. Hence, there is an opposition in the movie's representation of identity, namely that of being inside or outside the self. This relationship is established rather fast in the movie, but its oppositional framework of identity becomes widely questioned as Craig, Lotte and Maxine begin to explore this construction through Malkovich's portal.

The portal deconstructs the above oppositional relationship between the self and other's perception of that self. When Craig or Lotte enter Malkovich, they not only expose the structures of the above opposition, but they also use this knowledge as a tool to recast their

own identities. In fact, they are both highly self-aware that Malkovich's body can be a means to achieve the love and recognition that they so desperately seek. Therefore, both of them recreate themselves through Malkovich by inscribing their perception of self into other's perception of Malkovich. This resolves in a parodic subversion of contemporary identity politics, since *Being John Malkovich* deconstructs the identity text of several of its characters. Thus, identity is something that consists only from its representations and *Being John Malkovich* argues that such representations can easily be manipulated.

*Being John Malkovich* also brings forward an extensive parody of the human perception of consciousness and the frameworks that govern this perception. When Lotte chases Maxine into Malkovich's sub-consciousness, we literally enter the Freudian model for consciousness, which consists of the id, the ego and the alter ego. Inside Malkovich's sub-conscious, all of his suppressed traumas are made visible to the audience. The audience sees Malkovich for the first time witnessing his parents having sex, which is a cornerstone in the Freudian theory of the Oedipus complex. In this theory, the young boy is sexually attracted to his mother and then all of a sudden sees his father as a rival when he for the first time witnesses his parents in sexual interaction. Maxine and Lotte's chase continues through Malkovich's sub-consciousness in what appears to be a basement-like environment, which underlines the spatial depiction of Freud's model of consciousness. Here the audience sees Malkovich's traumas of having peed in his pants on the way to school as well as witnessing the adult Malkovich with his face buried in a piece of women's underwear. Thus, the chase serves as a parody of Freud's model of consciousness, which adds a scandalous side to the cultural text of John Malkovich. Consequently, parody is used to point out the many different, and often unknown, aspects of our identities.

Furthermore, the movie produces a parody of another Freudian concept. This occurs when Malkovich enters his own portal, which is a parody of the Freudian notion of narcissism. When Malkovich enters himself and sees the world from inside his own head, everyone looks like Malkovich and are only able to speak the word 'malkovich.' Consequently, this serves as yet another parody of the many frameworks that constitute the contemporary perception of consciousness.

Also, *Being John Malkovich* makes a parodic distinction between humans and animals in terms of consciousness, since it mocks the common belief in the superiority of man. This is a broad humanist assumption that is highly questioned in *Being John Malkovich* as animals

prove to be not only in possession of consciousness, but also to be the only ones who act without a hidden agenda of self-promotion. In the beginning of the movie, Craig tells the monkey Elijah that: ‘You don’t know how lucky you are being a monkey. Because consciousness is a terrible curse. I think, I feel, I suffer. And all I ask in return is the opportunity to do my work and they won’t allow it because I raise issues’ (Kaufman 1999: DVD-chapter 2). Interestingly, the only one who does not ask of anything in return for his actions is Elijah. He suffers from an ulcer due to suppressed childhood trauma, which Lotte is trying to get to the bottom of through psychotherapy. When Craig puts Lotte in a cage alongside with Elijah, the cause of Elijah’s trauma is revealed. Inside the cage, Lotte is struggling to break free, when the camera zooms on Elijah’s head and flashbacks to the day of his capture. The scene depicts men tying up monkeys while another monkey screams wildly. These screams are subtitled as desperate cries to Elijah for help. Elijah desperately tries to untie his father and the rest of the family, but fails and is captured alongside with the rest of them. Therein lies the key to Elijah’s ulcer, namely him being unable to save his family. Untying Lotte makes it possible for him to relive his trauma and thus receive his cure. Adding consciousness and psychotherapy to a monkey is put forward as a parody of how humans use the notion of consciousness to justify their logocentric assumption of man as superior to animals. The only one that operates without an agenda of self-promotion is therefore Elijah, which argues that animals are capable of offering love and recognition to others without getting anything in return. No human being is capable of doing such a thing in the movie and it is therefore a reversal of man’s logocentric perception of superiority to animals.

*Being John Malkovich* also presents a parodic play in terms of the relationship between fictional characters and the cultural texts that surround these actors in real life. In the movie, Lotte is played by actor Cameron Diaz, who is described on the imdb-website as ‘a tall, strikingly attractive blue-eyed natural blonde<sup>3</sup>’ and she is often presented as an object of sexual desire in her movies such as *The Mask* (1994), *My Best Friend’s Wedding* (1997), *There’s Something About Mary* (1998). However, in *Being John Malkovich*, Diaz’ character is an insecure transsexual, who is hardly an object of desire. Consequently, Diaz’s part in the movie serves as a parody of the cultural text of Diaz as an icon of beauty. Therefore, it is not only the notoriety of the ‘real’ John Malkovich that is parodied in the movie, but also the

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0000139/bio>

cultural text that surrounds Cameron Diaz as a young sexy actress.

Neither does the celebrity text of John Cusack escape critical commentary. The imdb-website describes John Cusack as an unconventional hero like most of his characters<sup>4</sup>. In *Being John Malkovich* Craig is indeed unconventional in his methods, but can best be described as a sort of anti-hero. Even though he is a skilled puppeteer, his social talents are almost non-existent and his love life is in ruins in terms of both his relationship to his wife and to Maxine. His only way to gain the status of 'the unconventional hero' is through Malkovich's body, which at first goes as planned, but later fails miserably. Thus, notoriety is questioned throughout *Being John Malkovich*, since it reveals the shallowness of such text through the use of parody.

This parody of our perception of celebrity stardom in *Being John Malkovich* spreads even further. Charlie Sheen also plays the role of himself and is presented as Malkovich's friend. On several occasions Malkovich asks him for advice - especially in terms of Craig's intentions of a hostile takeover. Instead of providing profound guidance to Malkovich's troubles as one would expect of such Hollywood hero, Charlie starts to ramble about the hot sex with Maxine and that Malkovich would be a fool to throw that away: 'Malkovich: Charlie, I don't know anything about the girl. She could be a fucking witch or something. Charlie: that's even better! Hot lesbian witches. Think about it. It's fucking genius' (Kaufman 1999: 70). Malkovich wants to know Maxine's true identity, besides that of a 'hot lesbian witch,' but Charlie reminds him that when it comes to our perception of others, then 'truth is for suckers, Johnny boy' (Kaufman 1999: 71). Parody in *Being John Malkovich* thus comes to criticize our classification of others and how we create such representations.

Parody in *Being John Malkovich* centers on the notions of consciousness and self, while it also comments upon the ways in which these aspects are represented in contemporary society. By subverting the cultural texts of real actors within a fictional environment, it becomes possible for the movie to create a questioning stance to celebrity cultural texts. Also, the model of consciousness are parodied in order to question how this concept is defined in contemporary society.

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0000131/bio>

### ***Sub-conclusion***

This analysis has argued that *Being John Malkovich* depicts a difference between the self and others' perception of self, which is a relationship that becomes entangled through the movie's metafictional strategies. The metafictional creation of several narrative zones projecting several subjective representations of reality make the audience question the movie's ontology. In *Being John Malkovich*, characters are able to suppress and take over the minds of other characters, which makes it possible for the audience to not only to become aware of the opposition between the self and others' perception of that self, but also to question this hierarchy. Therefore, identity in *Being John Malkovich* is something that consists only through its representations and the use of parody reminds the audience that such representations can be easily manipulated. Thus, Charlie Sheen rightly sums up the problematics of *Being John Malkovich*, when he proclaims that in relation to identity, 'truth is for suckers' (Kaufman 1999: 71).

## Postmodernism in *Adaptation*

‘Susan: Adaptation is a profound profession’  
(Kaufman 2002: 40).

Charlie Kaufman’s screenplay *Adaptation* (2002) again revolves around the politics of representation. The title self-reflexively reveals its existence as a representation of another text in a different medium. Therefore, *Adaptation* is concerned with the concept of the narrative as representation throughout. *Adaptation*’s problematization of representation does also concern the notion of character identity, since the movie self-consciously plays with the re-contextualization of the self. *Adaptation*’s metafictional strategy serves to lay bare the frameworks of such trans-representational process, which is then questioned by postmodernism’s parodic agenda. As was also the case in *Being John Malkovich*, *Adaptation* is highly occupied with the postmodern notions of metafiction and parody.

In *Adaptation*, Charlie Kaufman (Nicolas Cage) agrees to adapt Susan Orlean’s (Meryl Streep) *The Orchid Thief*, which is a (real) non-fictional book about orchids and about the simple beauty that lies in the pursuit of our passions. Unable to turn Orlean’s highly fragmented piece of non-fiction into a movie, Kaufman ironically embeds these frustrations within his screenplay, which resolves in a playful struggle between its diegetic levels. One diegetic level follows Susan Orlean as she researches and writes her book on the eccentric orchid poacher John Laroach (Chris Cooper) and his fascination with flowers. Another diegetic level depicts Kaufman as a masturbatory anti-hero protagonist in his stabs at false beginnings and dead ends, while he attempts to turn Orlean’s book into a movie. Reluctantly, he receives help from his twin brother Donald (Nicolas Cage), who has just finished his own screenplay *The Three*. Donald’s script is heavily inspired by the teachings of screenwriter authority Robert McKee (Brian Cox), who is somewhat traditional in his perceptions on screenwriting. Kaufman sets out to escape these clichés, but by following Donald’s and McKee’s advice, he paradoxically ends up cramming in sex, drugs and car-chases in his search for an unconventional ending to his script. Thereby, *Adaptation* intertwines the lives of Donald and Charlie Kaufman with the story of Susan Orlean and John Laroach through an almost constant slippage between its diegetic levels.

This analysis argues that both metafiction and parody are used to draw attention to the many

considerations that the screenwriter faces when adapting between different media, especially in the representation of structure and characters. These aspects will be pursued by firstly arguing the presence of metafiction in relation to narrative structure and characters respectively. Secondly, the analysis will turn to argue how these aspects are humorously parodied in relation to their conventionality.

### ***Narrative Structure in Adaptation***

Kaufman: It's a journey of evolution. *Adaptation*. The journey we all take. A journey that unites each and every one of us'  
(Kaufman 2002: 40).

The narratological structure in *Adaptation* problematizes representation through its use of McHale's notions of Chinese-box worlds, interpolation and the strange loop phenomena.

The narrative structure of *Adaptation* revolves around the lives of four main characters and their failure to adapt to the expectations of their surroundings. At a starting point, these four lives are divided onto several narrative levels. However, as the movie evolves, the faith of our four protagonists unites through an almost constant and often overpowering narrative slippage between levels.

*Adaptation*'s narrative levels are structured through McHale's concept of the Chinese-box phenomenon. As mentioned in the introduction, the movie is both an *Adaptation* and about *Adaptation*, which draws out a spatial hierarchy between its narrative frames. The diegetic frame of this structure consists of Kaufman trying to adapt Orlean's novel into a screenplay. However, the frame within this primary diegetic level is the one of Orlean writing her story, which constitutes a second diegetic level. Within this frame follows the hypodiegetic level, being the mimetic adaptation of *The Orchid Thief*. McHale argues that 'each change of narrative level in a recursive structure also involves a change of ontological level, a change of world' (McHale 1987: 113). Thereby, the Chinese-box structure embedded in *Adaptation* serves to question the ontological status of every scene in the movie. Therefore, *Adaptation* is metafictional in its structure.

In *Adaptation*, Kaufman is having great trouble in adapting *The Orchid Thief*, since its narrative plot is fragmented and almost non-existent. It is a non-fictional book in which Susan Orlean takes on the role of first person narrator, who describes the life of John Laroach in

between countless entries of encyclopedic knowledge on orchids. Thereby, *The Orchid Thief* consists merely of a diegetic narrative level, since the reader is always aware of the author's presence within the space of book. When Kaufman tells his agent Marty about his all-consuming writer's block, it is hinted that Kaufman's problem consists in creating a mimetic adaptation of a book that is diegetic in its form. This paradox is described as Kaufman is having a meeting with his agent Marty:

'Marty: ...it's not only about flowers, right? I mean you have the crazy plant nut guy, right? He's funny. Right?

Kaufman: "There's not...nearly enough of him to fill a book, so Orlean...digresses in long passages." Blah, blah, blah. "No narrative really unites these passages." New York Times Book Review. I can't structure this. It's that sprawling New Yorker shit' (Kaufman 2002: 50).

As Kaufman describes the above passage, he realizes the impossible task to turn a diegetic book into a mimetic movie. In order to create an escape from this paradox, he adds several diegetic levels to *Adaptation*, namely both the main diegetic level of Kaufman struggling to adapt Orlean's book and the diegetic level of Orlean writing *The Orchid Thief*. The hypodiegetic level actualizes what Kaufman and Orlean are writing, and thereby *Adaptation* manages to negotiate the opposition that lies in turning a diegetic book into a mimetic movie. This opposition in narrative technique is further elaborated in the section concerning the movie's intertextuality towards the teachings of Brian McKee, which follows later in this analysis.

The structure of *Adaptation* is therefore used as a metafictional tool to depict its status as representation. These are representations in relation to Laroach's orchid poaching, in relation to Orlean's book that represents these incidents and in relation to Kaufman's representation of *The Orchid Thief*. The problematics of representation are therefore central to *Adaptation* and the constant shifts between narrative frames all serve to further underline this notion. However, it is not only the Chinese-box structure that is projected as fictional, since the fictionality of the entire moviemaking process (and therefore also *Adaptation*), is made evident to the audience. This is made explicit as the audience is brought to the set of *Being John Malkovich*, which is being filmed while Kaufman takes on the job of adapting of *The Orchid Thief* into a screenplay. A hand-held camera is filming the set in 'behind the scenes' documentary style. Credits in the bottom of the screen introduce the audience to first John Malkovich, then to several other members of the film crew. Finally, 'Charles Kaufman

(screenwriter)' is introduced while he is standing awkwardly by himself. By traveling behind the scenes of moviemaking, *Adaptation* depicts the fictionality of such enterprise. Thus, *Adaptation* is highly metafictional in terms of presenting itself and its Chinese-box structure as representation.

*Adaptation* jumps between its diegetic levels without any further notice. However, the shift in voice-over narrators can often indicate these otherwise unmarked slips. As Kaufman is having lunch with Valerie, his voice-over is added onto their conversation in order to comment on the scene. The following scene cuts to the other diegetic frame of Orlean writing her book, which is marked by not just a change in setting, but also through a change in voice-over narrator, since Orlean takes over. When the scene changes to the hypodiegetic frame of Laroach and Susan, yet another voice-over enters as they are listening to a tape featuring a reading of Darwin's theories. Thus, the shifts in voice-over narrators can often be a means to determine shifts within the narratological hierarchy and reminds the audience of the many diegetic levels in the film. Sørensen goes on to argue that these unmarked shifts in voice-over narrators all serve to disorient the audience in relation to the ontological status of the present scene. The shifts in voice-over narrators can therefore be seen as a metafictional technique that projects the fictional world of the movie as a textual construction (Sørensen 2005: 6).

On the main diegetic level it is depicted how Kaufman himself imposes the Chinese-box structure onto *Adaptation*. This is illustrated through McHale's notion of the strange loop phenomenon. In the mist of frustration, we see Kaufman speaking manically into his tape-recorder. He describes the opening scene of him having dinner with Valerie Thomas: 'Kaufman: We open on Charlie Kaufman, fat, old, bald, repulsive, sitting in a Hollywood restaurant, a lovely statuesque film executive. Kaufman, trying to get a writing assignment...wanting to impress her, sweats profusely' (Kaufman 2002: 59). The narrative loop occurs in the scene immediately after. The setting has changed and it seems that some time has passed:

'Later: Kaufman lies on his bed, trying to wrap his head around this new direction. Kaufman (cont'd): Fat bold Kaufman paces furiously in his bedroom. He speaks into his hand-held tape recorder, and says "Charlie Kaufman, fat, bald, repulsive, old, sits at a Hollywood restaurant with Valerie Thomas..."' (Kaufman 2002: 59).

This strange loop introduces the audience to yet another diegetic level that surrounds the primary diegetic level of Kaufman adapting Orlean's book. This is a metafictional strategy, which establishes the entire screenplay of *Adaptation* itself as the outer frame of the Chinese-

box structure.

Later in the movie, interpolation between narrative frames causes the Chinese-box structure to collapse and transforms all of the diegetic frames into one single level. As the Kaufman twins go to New York, Donald initiates contact with Orlean, which serves as the starting point of a massive intertwinement of narrative frames. Donald and Kaufman's lives become entangled with the story of Orlean and Laroach as the twins follow Orlean to Florida and discover some of her deepest and darkest secrets. This constitutes the collapse of the former Chinese-box structure, since it compromises the hypodiegetic level of being a mimetic representation of Orlean's book. Thus, the intertwinement of narrative levels serves as a metafictional technique that underlines *Adaptation's* status as representation.

Therefore, the structure of *Adaptation* is used as a metafictional technique to underline its status as representation. The movie is stuck within the conflict of having to create a mimetic *Adaptation* from a book that is diegetic in its form. As mentioned above, Kaufman solves such paradox by embedding his own struggles with writing the screenplay and thereby adding several diegetic frames to Orlean's story. The movie's massive slippage between these diegetic and hypodiegetic levels serves as a metafictional technique to depict the fictionality of the entire structure of the movie and the craft of moviemaking in general.

### ***Intertextuality in Adaptation***

Intertextuality in *Adaptation* further destabilizes representation in terms of structure and characters. The intertextual influence on structure establishes the metafictional strategy of intertwining fiction and criticism, whereas the intertextual influence on characters serves as a metafictional strategy to question reality and fiction in relation to the movie's representation of identity.

#### Intertextuality and *The Orchid Thief*

'Kaufman: Why can't there be a movie simply about flowers?'  
(Kaufman 2002: 5)

*Adaptation* is self-reflexive in terms of its intertextual relationship towards *The Orchid Thief*,

since it intertwines the relationship between fiction and criticism. The movie's diegetic levels serve as reflections of its adaptational structure, as we follow Kaufman on the diegetic level writing his script and on the other, we experience the mimetic outcome of this artistic process. Thus, the metafictional structure compromises the usual relationship between fiction and criticism, or, the text and the world, since these aspects are no-longer considered as something separate, but rather as something equally fictitious that is embedded within the very same movie.

*Adaptation* centers the representational conflict that occurs when transferring narrative in the form of a novel into a movie. This aspect is underlined through the movie's title, since 'adaptation' is also the term used in criticism for such transferring process. In Brian McFarlane's book: *Novel to Film: An Introduction to the Theory of Adaptation*, he specifically comments on the relationship between novel and film: '...what novels and films most strikingly have in common is their potential and propensity for narrative. And narrative, at certain levels, is undeniably not the only chief factor novels and films based on them have in common but is the chief transferable element' (McFarlane 1996: 13). This idea of narrative as the main transferable object is centered and later deconstructed in *Adaptation*, since the movie ponders the outcome of an adaptation in relation to a book lacking narrative. Kaufman asks rhetorically 'why can't there be a movie simply about flowers' (Kaufman 2002: 5), but gradually realizes that the book has no coherent story, which makes it impossible to adapt. Therefore, in an act of desperation Kaufman adds several other elements of narrative on the hypodiegetic level, which makes it possible for him to accomplish a successful adaptation. It seems that Kaufman also perceives narrative as the main transferable object in the adaptation process.

When Kaufman self-consciously includes other elements of narrative to Orlean's story, he also centers the notion of fidelity in the adaptation process. According to McFarlane, adaptations are often judged in accordance to their level of fidelity between the original novel and the proceeding film. He argues:

'Fidelity criticism depends on the notion of the text as having and rendering up to the (intelligent) reader a single, correct 'meaning,' which the filmmaker has either adhered to or in some sense violated or tampered with. There will often be a distinction between being faithful to the 'letter,' an approach which the more sophisticated writer may suggest is no way to ensure a 'successful *Adaptation*, and to the 'spirit,' or 'essence' of the work' (McFarlane 1996: 8 – 9).

Again, it seems that *Adaptation* agrees with McFarlane. Kaufman sets out with the ambition

of maintaining a high level of fidelity to the original book, but ends up violating almost every aspect of fidelity in this relationship. In the movie, it is clear that Kaufman's intentions were to remain true to the diegetic style of Orlean's book and thus create an orchid art-movie much like the independent productions judged as material for the Sundance Film Festival. Kaufman is rather clear on his intentions of maintaining a high level of fidelity: 'I just don't want to ruin it by making it into a Hollywood thing. You know? Like an orchid heist movie or something, or, y'know, changing the orchids into poppies and turning it into a movie about drug running' (Kaufman 2002: 5). Suggestions are often made for Kaufman to tamper with Orlean's narrative, since Valerie advises him to turn the movie into a romance where Susan and Laroach could fall in love. Furthermore, his agent Marty begs him to make up a crazy story like the one in *Being John Malkovich*. However, Kaufman's goal is to steer away from conventionality, so he denies these attempts: 'I don't want to cram in sex or guns or car chases. Or characters learning profound life lessons. Or growing, or coming to like each other, or overcoming obstacles to succeed in the end. You know? I mean the book isn't like that and life isn't like that. It just isn't' (Kaufman 2002: 5 – 6). Fidelity is a major issue for Kaufman at this point in the movie and he mentions his responsibility to Orlean on several occasions.

As *Adaptation* progresses, Kaufman begins to question *The Orchid Thief's* potential for narrative. Kaufman wants to remain loyal to Orlean's 'sweet, sad insights' (Kaufman 2002: 54) and her colorful metaphors. However, it seems that the notion of fidelity is only an issue when Kaufman accepts Orlean's metaphors at face value. The element of distrust in Orlean's metaphors is severely manifested as Donald questions a specific metaphor in the book. At this point Kaufman has become so lost in his writer's block that he too realizes that 'it's just a metaphor' (Kaufman 2002: 74). It seems that the book's richness in abstract metaphors fulfill what the story lacks in narrative plot, which again agrees the diegetic character of Orlean's book. This aspect is what makes it impossible for Kaufman to create a movie that swears fidelity to *The Orchid thief*. Ironically, the metaphor that Donald questions begins with the line: 'Sometimes this type of story turns out to be something more...' (Kaufman 2002: 74). The movie turns out to be something more. But never in the way that Orlean planned it.

It is therefore clear to Kaufman that narrative fidelity is impossible. However, it seems that he realizes that a more important aspect of fidelity is to remain true to the 'spirit' of *The Orchid Thief*. McFarlane speaks warmly of an intertextual relationship between the movie and its original source: 'Modern critical notions of intertextuality represent a more sophisticated

approach, in relation to adaptation, to the original novel as a 'resource' (McFarlane 1996: 10). It is this intertextual use of Orlean's work that prompts Kaufman's somewhat untraditional success in *Adaptation*.

McFarlane's notion of intertextuality as adaptation becomes a method for Kaufman to capture the essence of Orlean's book, which seems to be found in the pursuit of one's passions. Kaufman acknowledges this 'essence' and intertextually transfers this element into his own adaptation. However, in *Adaptation* this passion revolves around women. This is made evident in the scene depicting Kaufman's sexual fantasies of Susan Orlean. Here we see Kaufman in his bed from a high camera position when Orlean suddenly crawls on top of him and they have sex. As they finish, the scene changes back to Charlie lying alone in bed and looking at Orlean's picture:

'Charlie whispers: I don't know how to do this. I'm afraid I'll disappoint you. You've written a beautiful book. I can't sleep. I'm losing my hair. I'm fat and repulsive.

Orlean: Shhhh! You're not. You're not. Just whittle it down. Focus on one thing in the story. Just find the one thing that you care passionately about ... then write about that' (Kaufman 2002: 55).

Orlean's comment offers him an intertextual transferable element, namely the pursuit of his passion. In other words, it seems that Kaufman finds the one thing that he cares passionately about through his sexual fantasies and his obsession with women in a more general sense. Laroach is passionate about orchids and Orlean wants to know what it feels like to care about something passionately. Kaufman's passion is hinted when he is at the orchid show in Santa Barbara and the audience hears Orlean's voice-over only to be interrupted by Kaufman:

'Orlean (voice-over): There are more than thirty thousand known orchid species. One looks like a turtle. One looks like a monkey. One looks like an onion. One looks like a German Shepard. One looks like...

Kaufman (voice-over): ...a schoolteacher...one looks like a gymnast. One looks like that girl in high school with creamy skin. One looks like a New York intellectual with whom you do the Sunday times crossword puzzle in bed. One looks like a Midwestern beauty queen. One looks like Amelia. One has eyes that dance. One has eyes...

He is sick with adoration for the women, who pay him no mind' (Kaufman 2002: 34).

The acknowledgement of women as Kaufman's passion thus becomes a technique for him to accomplish adaptation and turn Orlean's book into a movie. Both book and movie focus on the pursuit of our passions, which is something created through an intertextual use of the book's main theme. *The Orchid Thief* diverts its attention towards orchids, which proves

unadaptable for Kaufman. Consequently, he writes about his own passion. Women.

*Adaptation's* intertextual relationship to *The Orchid Thief* blurs the boundaries between fiction and criticism. The movie is highly self-aware of the many representational dilemmas that lie in adapting a book into a movie, which manifests itself in all of the movie's diegetic levels where the ontology of such trans-media projections are discussed. Therefore, the primary diegetic level is used as a meta-discourse on the very process of adaptation.

## Intertextuality and Characters

'Kaufman: I've written myself into my screenplay.  
Donald: That's kind of weird, huh?'  
(Kaufman 2002: 60)

Throughout *Adaptation*, the borderline between reality and fiction is further destabilized through McHale's intertextual notion of transworld identity. The ontology of the movie is compromised as 'real' world identities are written into Kaufman's fictional screenplay – including Kaufman himself. This creates what McHale terms as an ontological scandal, since it violates the boundaries between the movie and the world that surrounds it. Furthermore, this metafictional technique serves to problematize the representation of identity in *Adaptation*.

From the very start, *Adaptation* uses transworld identities to question representation. The main protagonist, Charlie Kaufman, is even self-aware of his own status as a transworld character, since he deliberately wrote himself into his own screenplay and thus created a fictional representation of himself. Not only does this relationship blur the boundaries between the writer and his work, it also highly questions the relationship between the real and the fictional borderlines in the movie<sup>5</sup>. This artificiality is made evident in the movie-set scene of *Being John Malkovich*, where the camera stops on Kaufman and he is introduced as 'Charlie Kaufman. Screenwriter.' Unlike John Malkovich in *Being John Malkovich*, it is clear

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<sup>5</sup> In an interview by Rob Feld, Charlie Kaufman comments on his use of transworld characters: 'Take real people, and take the person who really wrote it, and make them into characters, and have the experience of watching them write it be the experience that the moviegoer has. So you are constantly being taken out of the movie. Even though you are watching the movie as a story that plays as a story, there's this constant nagging thing that's, "Is this real, is this not real?" I really like that. [...] So, if you are forcing people to interact with the movie in a new way, then you are forcing them to see different things and their minds to interact. In a way, that's closer than just sitting back and going, "There's that high speed chase, now"' (Feld 2002: 128 - 129). Thereby, Kaufman underlines the fact that his transworld characters are used as metafictional techniques to add ontological questions to his movie.

from Kaufman's appearance that he is in fact merely a representation of Kaufman as he is played by actor Nicolas Cage, whom we know from numerous other productions. It is therefore evident that the Kaufman in *Adaptation* is in fact merely a representation of his 'real' self.

Both Susan and Laroach are 'real' persons. However, they are also characters in *The Orchid Thief* as well as in *Adaptation*. In most of *Adaptation*, Susan and Laroach are present as transworld identities, since they are adapted from Orlean's book. The frameworks of these intertextualities are made evident to the audience as *Adaptation* self-reflexively states its agenda of adaptation. Susan goes to Florida to write a book about Laroach, the eccentric orchid poacher, and she is even introduced to the idea of the book being turned into a movie when it has been written. Thus, both Laroach and Orlean are always aware of the fact that they are in the middle of a fictionalization process:

Orlean: ... and she [Valerie] said, "Oh, Laroach is such a fun character."

Laroach: No shit, I'm a fun character [...] Who's gonna play me?

Orlean: Oh, well, I've gotta write the book first, John. Then, you know, they got somebody to write the screenplay' (Kaufman 2002: 61).

Therefore, both Susan and Laroach are aware of their status as characters in a book and in its following movie adaptation. They are both highly self-aware of their status as transworld identities, since the script lays bare the framework for such ontological trespassing. Furthermore, the notion of character identity is questioned as these representations upon representations argue their fictionality.

There are several famous real-life actors included in *Adaptation*, who are, in fact, playing themselves. In the scenes that revolve around the set of *Being John Malkovich*, Kaufman tries to contact the movie's actors. We see him standing awkwardly on the sideline looking at John Malkovich, who is giving directions to the crew. We also see Catherine Keener and John Cusack both in their costumes as Lotte and Craig, while they are chatting away off-camera in a friendly way, which would be unheard of in *Being John Malkovich*. This use of transworld celebrities helps to establish a mimetic framework that anchors the meta-narrative level within the real world, while it also presents moviemaking as a fictional enterprise. However, Donald's presence breaks down the illusion of this scene being situated in reality, since he is a fictional character. Later, Donald is playing Boogie with his girlfriend Caroline and Catherine Keener, who is playing herself. Over the phone, Donald tells Kaufman that Keener wants to

play Cassie in his script *The Three* and the audience hears Keener teasing Donald in the background. Her presence not only produces a link to *Being John Malkovich*, but also questions the relationship between the movie and the world as it depicts real persons interacting with fictional characters. Furthermore, as the 'real' Keener and the fictitious Donald discuss his screenplay, they question the ontology of moviemaking.

The use and abuse of transworld identities shake the ontological framework of the movie. *Adaptation* plays with the notion of transworld identities through Kaufman, Laroach and Orlean, who are all real persons made fictional in order to question the representational status of identity within the movie.

### ***Parody in Adaptation***

Parody in *Adaptation* questions the conventionality of Hollywood clichés in screenwriting, but is also used to problematize on the movie's representation of character identities.

#### Parody and McKee

'Kaufman: ...Well, who cares what McKee says'  
(Kaufman 2002: 99).

The structure of *Adaptation* is parodic in its relationship to Robert McKee's teachings on screenwriting. The movie's numerous references to McKee are often used to subvert his authority within the screenwriting genre and the movie therefore questions his conventionality.

The parodic references to McKee can be located on almost all narrative frames throughout *Adaptation*. He is only present in a rather small part of the movie, but has such great influence on Donald that McKee's notions are almost extended through him. The presence of these references serve to critically comment on the differences between tradition and innovation in screenwriting. Therefore, Kaufman deconstructs several of McKee's principles as he embeds these in his screenplay and subsequently turns them into innovative devices. It seems that the movie has an embedded opposition located within its structure, since the scenes 1 – 19 are in Kaufman's control whereas scenes 20 – 27 are put in the hands of Donald until Kaufman yet again takes over the last scene after Donald's death (Sørensen 2005: 14). As mentioned above, Kaufman spends most of his scenes creating a truthful adaptation of Orlean's book, in

which he specifically goes against adding conventional plot elements from the thriller genre:

‘...I don’t want to cram in sex, guns or car chases. You know? Or characters learning profound life lessons. Or growing, or coming to like each other, or overcoming obstacles to succeed in the end. You know? I mean the book isn’t like that, and life isn’t like that. It just isn’t. I feel very strongly about this’ (Kaufman 2002: 5 - 6).

As Kaufman goes to McKee’s seminar in New York, he asks McKee for advice on how to end his script. McKee recommends that Kaufman goes against everything that his project has set out to do, namely that:

‘the last act makes the film. Wow them in the end and you got a hit. You can have flaws, problems, but wow them in the end and you’ve got a hit. Find an ending. But don’t cheat. And don’t you dare bring in a *deus ex machina*. Your characters must change. And the change must come from them. Do that and you’ll be fine’ (Kaufman 2002: 70).

As Donald takes over Kaufman’s script, McKee’s recipe for a successful ending is materialized in *Adaptation*. From this point onwards, the movie takes the form of a traditional Hollywood thriller, which causes the formerly established Chinese-box structure to collapse into a single diegetic level. Firstly, as Donald interviews Orlean, he introduces one of several plot twists, namely that a sub-text in her book revealed a physical attraction between Susan and Laroach. This assumption is confirmed throughout the next scenes and the movie is then rapidly turned into a parody of *The Orchid Thief* through the presence of drugs, sex and murder. McKee asks Kaufman to ‘put in the drama’ (Kaufman 2002: 70) and with help from Donald, he does. These plot-twists provide an ironic, and thus also parodic, opposition between the beginning and the end of *Adaptation*.

Such use of parody can also be found in Donald’s ending and its fulfillment of McKee’s strategy for success. This conclusion takes Donald and Kaufman into the Fakahatchee where Susan and Laroach plan to execute them. However, as the twins escape and hide, they re-establish their brotherly love and the profound life lesson is established, namely that ‘you are what you love, not what loves you’ (Kaufman 2002: 98). Nevertheless, minutes later Donald gets shot in the arm and then finally killed in a car accident, whereas Laroach is eaten by an alligator. Ironically, McKee warns Kaufman against the *deus ex machina*, being an unlikely ending that resolves the story’s problems too easily. Thus, the ending of *Adaptation* takes the form of parody towards McKee’s principles.

McKee also specifically warns against the use of the voice-over technique and other such diegetic devices, which is a notion that is parodied throughout the movie. In McKee’s *Story: Substance, structure, style, and the principles of screenwriting*, he writes about the difficulties

of exposition and explicitly reminds his readers of his principle of ‘show, don’t tell’ (McKee 1998: 334). In other words, McKee rejects any notion of diegetic representation in movies as he sees mimesis as the chief narrative form in moviemaking. Therefore, McKee argues that the use of flashbacks, montage and voice-over narration are to be kept at a minimum. Ironically, all three of these techniques are used extensively in *Adaptation* in order to destabilize McKee’s views on the relationship between diegesis (telling) and mimesis (showing). In relation to montage and flashbacks, McKee reminds us that: ‘if we try to force exposition into a film through novel-like free associative editing or semisubliminal flutter cuts that “glimpse” a character’s thoughts, it strikes us as contrived’ (McKee 1998: 342). In other words, these techniques undermine rather than underline the mimetic narrative space, which is exactly what Kaufman’s metafictional agenda sets out to do. Therein lies Kaufman’s critical commentary to the conventionality of screenwriting. This is made explicit as Kaufman answers McKee’s charges with the mother of all flashbacks, namely a montage style flashback starting from the beginning of time onto the present day (Kaufman 2002: 3 + 41). The technique of voice-over narration takes this step even further as McKee, at his seminar, proclaims that ‘God help you if you use voice over in your work, my friends! [...] It’s flaccid, sloppy writing! And any idiot can write voice over narration to explain the thoughts of the character...’ (Kaufman 2002: 67 - 68). Not surprisingly, this startles Kaufman as it has been his primary technique of narration so far. Consequently, as Kaufman starts to follow Donald’s (and McKee’s) advice on structure, the use of voice-over narration is put to a stop in the scenes where Donald influences the script. As Donald dies and Kaufman regains control of the narrative, we see Kaufman in his car after his lunch with Amelia:

‘Kaufman (Voice over): ...I know how to finish the script now. It ends with Kaufman driving home after his lunch with Amelia, thinking that he knows how to finish his script. Shit, that’s voice over. McKee would not approve. How else can I show his thoughts? I don’t know. We’ll, who cares what McKee says?...’ (Kaufman 2002: 99).

This self-reflexive use of voice-over narration highlights the movie’s metafictional form as well as it is performing a parodic commentary towards McKee’s teachings. Thereby, the use of parody towards McKee serves as a critique of the conventionality within the screenplay genre.

## Parody and Characters

‘Donald: The script kind of makes fun of me, huh?’  
(Kaufman 2002: 73)

Charlie Kaufman performs a parodic self-commentary on his own position as a writer of curious screenplays. In the movie, Kaufman lacks self-esteem, sweats profusely around attractive women and reveals himself as highly masturbatory. This self-image ironically plays with the usual perception of the successful writer, since Kaufman is everything but successful in his attempts to adapt Orlean’s book. However, such irony is not only directed towards the cultural text that surrounds Kaufman, but also towards that of actor Nicolas Cage. Cage is well known from his parts in action movies such as *The Rock* (1996) and *Face/Off* (1997), where he takes on the role of the lonesome hero who ends up saving the day. In the role of Kaufman in *Adaptation*, he is precisely the opposite. In the end of the movie, Kaufman produces a parodic commentary to his own status as a character: ‘Kaufman: I wonder who’s gonna play me. Someone not too fat. I like that Gerard Depardieu, but could he not do the accent?’ (Kaufman 2002: 100). Ironically, his character ends up being played by a bold and overweight Nicolas Cage. Thereby, Kaufman uses parody to critically comment on the cultural text that surrounds his identity, being an eccentric screenwriter. He reminds us that identity is only constituted through its representations and that these can be manipulated as one pleases.

*Adaptation* also uses parody to question the cultural texts that surround Susan Orlean and *The Orchid Thief*. In *Adaptation*, Orlean is at first brought forward as a New York intellectual, who writes ‘that sprawling New Yorker shit’ (Kaufman 2002: 50) and makes fun of Laroach as she is having dinner with her husband and her New York intellectual friends. However, in order to come up with an ending for *Adaptation*, Kaufman makes her character engage in sexual intercourse and drug use with her subject. She even repeatedly insists on murdering Kaufman. Therefore, *Adaptation* produces a parody on Orlean as an aesthetic writer and a New York intellectual, since Kaufman ironically manipulates the cultural texts that surround her real life identity. However, *Adaptation* also performs a parody of *The Orchid Thief*. Kaufman is moved by the amount of emotion that is buried within the book, but is unable to adapt it into a movie because of its lack of narrative structure. Consequently, *Adaptation* uses parody to comment on the cultural text that surrounds *The Orchid Thief*,

being a high-art bestseller.

Kaufman's fictional brother Donald is written into *Adaptation* in order to legitimize the movie's use of McKee's conventionality. Donald is a disciple of McKee's teachings and as Kaufman asks him for help to finish his script, such ending becomes very much in the lines of McKee's conventions. Furthermore, Donald's main outline of his screenplay *The Three* is that of a serial killer with multiple personality disorder. However, Kaufman reminds Donald that 'the only idea more overused than serial killers is multiple personality' (Kaufman 2002: 31). Ironically, Kaufman also embeds multiple personalities in *Adaptation*, since Donald and Kaufman are one and the same character. Therefore, Donald is created to legitimize Kaufman's ending, which is heavily inspired by McKee and the stock conventionality of Hollywood clichés. This is further elaborated as Kaufman kills off Donald in order for him to regain control of his screenplay. However, since Donald ends up helping Kaufman with finishing the script, he is also credited as co-author of *Adaptation* in real life. This subverts the notion of transworld characters, since he is a fictional character made real. Thus, Donald further emphasizes Kaufman's agenda of revealing identity as representation, since he embeds a fictional character into the 'real' world.

### **Sub-conclusion**

This analysis has argued that *Adaptation* uses metafiction to draw attention to the problematics of representation, which are present in any narrative trans-contextualization from one media to another. Both structure and character identities are problematized through this questioning stance towards representation.

It has been argued that the plot structure of the movie is used to question mimetic representation in the adaptational process of turning Orlean's highly diegetic and non-fictional book into a movie. In fact, these several diegetic levels provide *Adaptation* with numerous meta-discourses, which all serve to lay bare the notion of moviemaking as a fictional construct. The movie also embeds several meta-discourses that deconstruct the relationship between reality and fiction. Furthermore, this analysis has claimed that such representational dilemmas are humorously parodied in order to critically comment on the many screenwriting clichés present within the extensive production of Hollywood genre movies.

The representation of identity is central to *Adaptation*. Every character in the movie is self-reflexively brought forward as a representation of another character, which underlines the notion of self as a fictional construct. *Adaptation* makes it evident that the identity of any

character can be perceived from several subjective positions, in relation to how this subject is represented. This notion is stressed through the use of parody, which ironically deconstructs the cultural texts that surrounds every character in *Adaptation* - including the writer himself..

## Postmodernism in *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*

‘Clementine: You’ll remember me in the morning. And you’ll come to me and tell me all about us and we’ll start over’  
(Kaufman 2004: 72).

Memory and love serve as main themes in *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*. The movie explores continuity as its protagonist, Joel, relives a two-year long relationship in just one night. Memory and time are thus confused as the audience is brought into Joel’s mind to explore his breakup with Clementine, their relationship and their eventual first kiss. As most parts of the movie consist of memories, the notion of representation is used to question how we perceive and make sense of reality. This analysis argues that *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* uses metafiction to depict reality as representation and, furthermore, that these representational techniques are critically commented upon by the use of parody.

*Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* explores the loss of both love and memory. Having ended their relationship, Clementine (Kate Winslett) decides to get back at her former boyfriend Joel (Jim Carrey) by erasing him from her memory. Something made possible with the help of Lacuna Inc. and the services of Dr. Mierzwiak (Tom Wilkinson). In a moment of desperation and revenge, Joel decides to undergo the same procedure and from this point onwards most of the movie takes place inside Joel’s mind as his memories are relived one by one before they are erased, starting from his latest recollection of Clementine. While undergoing the procedure, Joel realizes the importance of his memories and that if he can not have Clementine in real life, then he can at least have his memories to hold on to. Consequently, the movie occupies itself with Joel and Clementine’s desperate journey through Joel’s mind as fugitives in order to escape closure and erasure. This turns out to be a melancholic and, paradoxically, also often a humorous voyage into Joel’s memory and subconsciousness. The procedure is performed overnight by Lacuna technicians Mary (Kirsten Dunst), Stan (Mark Ruffalo) and Patrick (Elijah Wood) and the plot is further complicated as Patrick informs his colleagues of his newly initiated relationship with Clementine (after her memory has been wiped), which he has accomplished by imitating her relationship with Joel. The story gets even more complex as Stan’s girlfriend Mary realizes that she once had an affair with Dr. Mierzwiak, but had her memory wiped of any recollection of it. Thus, the movie occupies itself with the importance of our memories. This theme is expressed as the

movie brings forward the subjectivity of memories in relation to postmodern identity politics.

The following analysis wishes to explore how metafiction is used to question representation in *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* and hereafter investigate how these strategies are critically commented upon by the use of parody. Such aspects will be considered by firstly looking into how *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* reveals itself as fictional and, secondly, how the movie critically comments upon these fictions in relation to postmodern identity politics.

### ***Narrative structure in Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind***

‘Dr. Mierzwiak: Okay, so tell me what you remember. And we’ll take it from there’  
(Kaufman 2004: 92).

The narrative structure in *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* questions representation through the use of interpolation, strange loop phenomena, hesitation and meta-criticism.

Overall, the structure of *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* consists of two separate zones, namely outside and inside the mind of Joel Barish. These also constitute the familiar and the unfamiliar zones in the movie. Clearly, the zone outside Joel’s mind serves to ground the movie in reality and thus provides it with a mimetic point of reference. The zone inside Joel’s mind is highly unfamiliar in its physical environment and his memories serve as representations of incidents and events that happened in the familiar zone. Thereby, the movie claims its position within social constructivism and its subjective perception of reality and identity.

It is possible to make a distinction between the two zones in relation to point of view, since this narrative technique differs in the movie’s two narrative zones. The familiar zone narrates from an omniscient point of departure whereas the unfamiliar zone depicts the world from a first person point of view. This is the case, since inside Joel’s mind everything is representation of ‘real’ incidents and these events are therefore being acted out as Joel remembers them. Thereby, Joel is not just ‘himself’ in the unfamiliar zone, but also performs the part of Clementine and all the other characters on this zone, since these are representations too. This is made evident by Dr. Mierzwiak on the unfamiliar level, as he makes it clear to Joel that he is unable to stop the erasure process from inside Joel’s head: ‘...I’m just something you’re imagining, Joel. What can I do from here? I’m in you’re head, too. I’m you’ (Kaufman 2004: 62). Everything in the unfamiliar zone thus consists of representation.

Therefore, the unfamiliar zone's use of first person point of view argues a distinct subjectivity in its every method of representing incidents that occurred in omniscience. This is further illustrated when Joel and Clementine are walking at the flea market arguing whether or not Clementine would be a good mother. It seems that the discussion is remembered in every detail, whereas many of the by-passers are only superficially remembered, since their faces are blurred and thus impossible to distinguish from one another. Joel's memory is therefore highly selective as it consists of representations of the familiar zone. However, since Dr. Mierzwiak is erasing Joel's every memory of Clementine, the setting and eventually Clementine disappear into thin air at the end of each memory. Thus, the unfamiliar zone is under erasure. This process is removing memories in representative form important to Joel's identity, which underlines that our memory consists of selective representation. The depiction of Joel's memory as representation is therefore a metafictional strategy to reveal Joel's perception of reality as fictional.

Joel's memory is not only unstable because of its representational status, but also through its rather unstable physical environment due to Lacuna's erasure process. The spatial connections in Joel's mind seem to be created through jumps in memories of Clementine. For instance, as Clementine and Joel are lying on the bed in 'teenage Joel's' room, the bed is all of a sudden relocated onto the snowy beach in Montauk. This instability further underlines the fact that Joel's mind is under erasure. When Joel starts to escape the deleting process, the instability of the environment is made even more visible. This occurs at the memory of their night picnic on the frozen Charles River, which was the moment they fell in love. They are both lying on the ice holding hands, when Joel proclaims: 'I could die right now Clem. I'm just...happy. I've never felt that before. I'm just exactly where I want to be' (Kaufman 2004: 60). At this exact moment, the setting changes to Grand Central Station in New York City and the erasure process moves on to the next memory. Not only is this a spatial impossibility, but as Joel and Clementine start to run to escape erasure, the by-passers around them disappear one by one. The instability of Joel's memories is severely manifested after this point in the movie, since everything starts to disappear into thin air including cars, signs, fences etc. The visible erasure escalates even further in Joel's last memory of Clementine where they break into a house on the Montauk beach and the house literally falls apart. The erasure process of Joel's memory is thus made visible through the physical setting of the unfamiliar zone. This argues the representational status of Joel's memories.

Lacuna is therefore highly influential on the unfamiliar level's plot-structure, which brings forward the presence of interpolation in *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*. This is made evident to Joel as Stan and Patrick are adjusting their equipment after having initiated the erasure process. We see Patrick fiddling with the cables on the familiar level, which distorts the memory that was being erased on the unfamiliar level. Joel's representation is therefore blurred and static noise occurs, which argues the presence of interpolation between the two narrative levels. When the process is back on track, Joel reenters the memory that was just erased, but only as an observer of this memory. Hence, he has relived this memory once before and Patrick's incautiousness distorted this specific memory. The mixtures of memories make Joel ask questions of a metaphysical character in regards to the unfamiliar zone: 'But how am I -- standing here and -- Oh my God, déjà vu! Déjà vu! [...] I'm in my head already aren't I?' (Kaufman 2004: 39). Stan and Patrick's talking are heard through voice-over and as Patrick adjusts the wires even further, we see memories passing by in montage style. Then, Joel's memories get mixed up as he is now physically sitting in a snowy New York street where people (including himself) are passing by him. Consequently, the familiar zone is highly influential upon the plot structure of the unfamiliar level, which serves as a metafictional element to reveal that the narrative structure inside Joel's head is in fact a construct created by the technicians at Lacuna. These considerations emphasize the presence of interpolation. Furthermore, the unfamiliar level thereby establishes a meta-discourse to the plot structure of *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*.

The movie frequently uses McHale's notion of the strange loop phenomenon as a metafictional technique to question the representational status of a particular scene. The two zones are opposed to each other in terms of temporal linearity. As mentioned above, the movie relives a two year relationship in one night and it therefore depicts both a backward and a forward time-stretch. The continuity between memories is starting with Joel's most recent memory of Clementine and then going backwards in their relationship ending up with their first contact and initial attraction. When Joel's memory is being erased, he is sleeping in his apartment, while the stories of Stan, Patrick, Mary and Dr. Mierzwiak take place around him. Thus, the familiar zone operates with a forward temporal linearity that stands in opposition to the backwards temporal movement in the unfamiliar zone. This opposition is made evident through the narrative strange loop, which is used as a method to distinguish between the two narrative zones and their governing frameworks. However, the strange loop

is also used to question the relationship between the two zones and thus problematize the validity of the movie's ontological space. When Stan and Patrick start the procedure, the scene that just took place is replayed in a blurry haze. Joel's conversation with Frank is replayed, and then the scene switches to Rob and Carrie's house and then onwards to Lacuna Inc. This replay is manifested through the strange loop in the narrative structure and it is clear to the audience that they have now entered a different narrative zone. A zone that stands in temporal opposition to the familiar zone<sup>6</sup>.

The narrative strange loop is also what ties the beginning and the end of the movie together. As mentioned above, the narrative structure constantly plays with continuity through its unmarked shifts between zones. The beginning and the end of the movie again use the strange loop to point to this temporal opposition in the two narrative zones. The movie starts off with Joel waking up in his apartment. Outside he finds a major dent in his car and at the train station he impulsively decides to take the train to Montauk. In Montauk, Joel walks on the empty beach while he reads aloud what he has written in his journal: 'Joel: Valentine's Day 2003. First entry in two years. Where did those years go?' (Kaufman 2004: 5). Seconds later, he meets Clementine, whom he believes that he has never seen before and later that night they go on a picnic on the frozen Charles River. When they come back the following morning, Clementine goes to get her toothbrush while Joel waits in the car. Out of nowhere, Patrick knocks at the window and asks Joel what he is doing there, but decides to leave, since to Joel (and the audience) this question does not make any sense<sup>7</sup>. The scene is not elaborated any further at this point in the movie. Therefore, the incident destabilizes the recently constructed ontological framework of Joel and Clementine's newly found love, while it is made clear that *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* is everything but a conventional love story. After Joel's mind has been erased near the end of the film, the opening sequences are replayed in a somewhat shorter version and thus create a narratological strange loop, which provides an

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<sup>6</sup> In an interview of Charlie Kaufman by Robert Feld, Kaufman comments on this temporal opposition: 'The important thing to me was to have their [Joel and Clementine's] relationship play out from end to beginning - so that you see their relationship play out in its worst and best points - and you understand things only in retrospect' (Kaufman 2004: 134). Therefore, it was Kaufman's intention to use this opposition in temporal linearity to provide the audience with a multi-faceted depiction of Joel and Clementine's love affair.

<sup>7</sup> In his article *I Forgot to Remember to Forget*, Nick James describes this scene as 'that Kaufman moment of dislocation,' (James 2004: 17) and thus argues that the incident serves to remove the audience in relation to their narrative expectations.

explanation for Joel's above mentioned rhetorical question at the beach in Montauk. After having witnessed this two year backwards flashback of their relationship, it has become clear what happened to this stretch of time in Joel's life. The incident of Patrick's knock on the car window is also explained, since the audience is made aware that Patrick erased Joel's memory of Clementine and it therefore seems weird for Joel to be outside Clementine's house. Hence, the narrative loop explores the opposition in temporal movement, since it reveals information that can only be answered when having been inside Joel's memories on its backwards journey in time. This strange loop plays with the expectations of the movie's audience by questioning the representational status of the scene they are watching. The unfamiliar zone performs a subjective replay of the familiar zone, which argues interpolation between the two. Therefore, this strange loop ties the two narrative zones nicely together by reminding the audience that reality only makes sense through its subjective representations.

Joel's last memory of Clementine seems to deconstruct Lacuna's method for memory erasure. When Joel leaves the house on the beach, being his first recollection of Clementine, he reminds her that the end is near: 'Joel: I walked out the door. There's no more memory' (Kaufman 2004: 105). Clementine disregards this technicality and whispers: 'meet me in Montauk' (Kaufman 2004: DVD-chapter 17). Since the scene takes place inside Joel's mind, it would be impossible for Clementine to meet him there as the incident only consisted of Joel's representation of Clementine. However, the movie opens with Joel impulsively going to Montauk, where he reunites with Clementine even though he has no recollection of ever seeing her before. Thereby, Lacuna's narrative control of the unfamiliar zone is deconstructed. This metafictional technique breaks down the representational hierarchy between the two narrative zones and the representational status of the entire movie.

*Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* hesitates to fully explain the erasing procedure and Lacuna in general, which makes the movie both reveal and contradict its own narrative framework. The procedure is explained in great detail by Dr. Mierzwiak as mentioned above. The procedure appears simple, but the actual procedure seems to undermine the simplicity and the professionalism that Lacuna tries to establish for its product. This is the case as the technical equipment seems rather low-tech for such a complex procedure, while the behavior of Stan, Mary, Patrick and Dr. Mierzwiak further undermines the professionalism of the clinic. Mary and Stan smoke pot and have sex while performing the procedure, while Patrick steals underwear from Lacuna's clients and Dr. Mierzwiak has an affair with his secretary

Mary. Consequently, the entire atmosphere that surrounds Lacuna seems to destabilize its scientific technique and such contradiction creates an amount of hesitation of fully explaining Lacuna's product. Since Lacuna is the governing power in terms of the unfamiliar zone's plot structure, this hesitation destabilizes their authority of great parts of the narrative plot. Thus, the movie uses hesitation as a metafictional device to question Lacuna's representational authority.

*Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* also embeds a layer of meta-criticism that blurs the boundaries of being inside or outside text. These meta-critical aspects are present throughout, which is manifested especially through Lacuna and their control of Joel's mind. Before Joel undergoes the procedure, the process is thoroughly explained to him:

'Mierzwiak: We'll start with your most recent memories and go backwards -- more or less. There is an emotional core to each of our memories -- if we eradicate this core, it starts its degradation process -- By the time you wake up in the morning, all memories we have targeted will have withered and disappeared. As a dream upon waking' (Kaufman 2004: 38).

This description not only serves to explain the procedure to Joel, but also generally outlines the plot structure of the movie from this point onwards. Joel himself realizes quite fast that he is inside his head and that his memories of Clementine are being erased. As mentioned above, he is aware that his memories are merely representations of reality and that his memories of characters are fictional. Furthermore, on several occasions he comments on his memories, which helps the audience in navigating inside Joel's mind. These are comments like: 'This is the last time I saw you' (Kaufman 2004: 43) or 'I loved you this day. I love this memory. The rain. Us thus hanging' (Kaufman 2004: 66). When Joel escapes into his subconsciousness, he takes on both the role of character and critic. One of these first memories is that of being four years old in his childhood kitchen and 'baby Joel' cries: 'I want my mommy. She's busy. She's not looking at me. No one ever looks at me! I want my mommy' (Kaufman 2004: 68). Joel is acting like a four year old child, but a few scenes later he comments on this scene while still being in the shape of baby Joel: 'I really want her to pick me up. It's weird how strong that desire is.' (Kaufman 2004: 72). Thereby, Joel is performing a double part as he relives this childhood memory, while also being detached from it and thus capable of performing a critical perspective to his egocentric desire. This is further underlined when Joel escapes further into his subconsciousness and his humiliation, where the audience sees him

masturbating, while Clementine is watching: ‘Joel: I don’t like it either, I’m just trying to find horrible secret places to --’ (Kaufman 2004: 80). Not only does this scene produce a humorous image of the main character, it also serves as a meta-critical commentary to the interpretation of Joel’s mind and his suppressed subconsciousness. These considerations blur the boundaries between fiction and criticism.

Thus, the human mind consists of representations. These representations are used in *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* as an image of the ways in which characters make sense of reality and thus also how they use these memories as a basis for self-definition. The movie is therefore highly metafictional in its form, since it self-consciously constructs and deconstructs its own plot structure. From the start, it is clear that Lacuna on the omniscient level is in control of the plot structure inside Joel’s mind. However, the above has argued that the use of interpolation, narrative strange loops and hesitation all serve to create an intertwinement between the movie’s narrative zones, which seems to question Lacuna’s representational authority. It is therefore made clear that reality exists only in its representations and it is the totality of these representations that constitutes our identity.

### ***Intertextuality in Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind***

*Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* is surrounded by several intertexts outside the movie, which questions the boundaries of being ‘inside’ or ‘outside’ fiction. These intertextual references take the form of Lacuna’s TV-commercial<sup>8</sup> and its commercial website<sup>9</sup>.

The DVD-version of *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* includes a Lacuna commercial, which draws heavily on intertextual references to the low-budget TV commercial genre. The commercial features Dr. Mierzwiak in his clinic speaking directly to the camera. Its form makes it a clear intertextual reference to the TV commercial format. Furthermore, the commercial goes to such a great extent to manifest its authenticity that even produces a link to the Lacuna homepage and a reminder that the company accepts all major credit cards. By embedding the commercial, the DVD produces an intertextual reference that goes beyond the realm of the movie. However, Lacuna is a fictional company even though it is anchored in ‘reality.’ Therefore, this metafictional strategy serves to question the representational connections of being inside and outside fiction.

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<sup>8</sup> (Kaufman 2004: DVD-bonus material)

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.lacunainc.com/home.html>

Lacuna's website provides yet another intertextual reference that serves to question its borderline position between fiction and 'reality.' On several occasions, we hear Mary at the Lacuna reception answering questions about their expired 'Home for the Holidays' offer. This offer is described on the Lacuna website:

'Are you dreading the holiday season? Wouldn't it be nice to forget all of your painful holiday memories, and go into this season with a fresh start? Call Lacuna Inc. today and make an appointment for our one time holiday special. Come in before December 15th, and those unpleasant memories can be a thing of the past. Now is the time to enjoy the holiday season again! Hurry, call today, don't let this offer pass you by!!'  
(<http://www.lacunainc.com/promotions.html>).

Again, this self-constructed intertextual text serves to question the representational connections between the movie and the outside world. In fact, the entire website appears to be created for this purpose, since hardly anything on it gives it away as a piece of fiction. It takes the format of any medical website, complete with testimonials, background story and discount coupons to be printed from the website. The domain even holds an evaluation for the user to fill out in order to estimate one's need for the Lacuna's procedure. However, viewing the website in the context of the movie, its professional tastelessness appears ironic, which is underlined through the many slogans that the website holds. Examples would be 'Proudly serving the local community'<sup>10</sup> and 'Discover a new you.'<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, the site even has quotes from scientific journals, which all seem to celebrate the genius of Dr. Mierzwiak and his clinic. The website only holds a couple of leads that give away its fictionality, which take on the form of testimonials from Joel and these link to the official website<sup>12</sup> of *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* and promises an experience of the procedure.

Consequently, the movie creates several intertexts for it to refer to, which serves as a metafictional strategy to question the representational borderlines between 'reality' and fiction.

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<sup>10</sup> <http://www.lacunainc.com/contact.html>

<sup>11</sup> [http://www.lacunainc.com/about\\_history.html](http://www.lacunainc.com/about_history.html)

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.eternalsunshine.com/>

## ***Parody in Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind***

‘Mary (heroically): Mrs. Mierzwiak, it’s true. And it’s not Mr. Mierzwiak’s fault. I’m a stupid little girl with a stupid little crush. I basically forced him into it. I swear.

Hollis: Don’t be a monster, Howard. Tell the girl.’  
(Kaufman 2004: 87)

*Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* uses parody as a tool to critically comment on the notions of identity brought forward in the movie. As argued above, metafiction serves to emphasize and contradict the ontological frameworks of the movie, whereas parody stands as a critical commentary to these structures. Throughout the above analysis, there has been a focus on *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*’s metafictional techniques of illustrating reality as representation and the importance of such subjectivity in order to make sense of reality. The following section wishes to point out how this framework of identity is critically commented upon through the use of parody.

*Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*’s quotations of Pope and Nietzsche take the form of parody in relation to the representational interferences that Lacuna provides, since these quotes undermine the ethics of the erasing process. Thus, these quotes serve as critical commentaries to Lacuna’s products.

Mary’s interest in quotes provides a parodic frame for the entire movie, which sums up its themes of memory and remembrance. The title of the movie is a reference to Alexander Pope’s poem *Eloisa to Abelard*<sup>13</sup>, which Mary quotes: ‘How happy is the blameless Vestal’s lot! The world forgetting, the world forgot: Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind! Each prayer accepted, and each wish resign’d’ (Pope in Kaufman 2004: 85)<sup>14</sup>. Mary addresses the quote to Dr. Mierzwiak and later this appears almost ironic, because of their prior relationship and the fact that she too has undergone the erasing procedure. Immediately after the above, the scene goes into Joel’s mind, where we see a circus parade with lots of elephants walking in line through the New York streets. On the sidewalk, Joel and Clementine are goofing

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<sup>13</sup> <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0338013/quotes>

<sup>14</sup> In his article *Scaling the Debths*, Cooper argues that ‘the film’s title is almost impossible to remember, and that’s part of the movie’s cleverness’ (Cooper 2004: 19).

around as Joel imitates an elephant with the sleeves of his coat and Clementine says: 'I wanna be a great, big, huge elephant with a huge trumpet like that' (Kaufman 2004: 63). Then Clementine is erased and Joel's disappointed face searches the crowds for her. This scene provides an intertextual theme for the entire movie, since Clementine's metaphor of wanting to be an elephant sums up Joel's wish to keep this very memory as it plays with the pun of elephants never forgetting. However, the sadness of Joel's face and the entire atmosphere of the scene stand in opposition to the innocence that Mary's quote supposedly subscribes to forgetting. Therefore, the adaptation of Pope's poem provides a melancholic parody to Lacuna's product, since this appears almost ironic in relation to Joel's experiences with the process.

This argument is further elaborated as Mary quotes Nietzsche to Howard: 'Blessed are the forgetful for they get the best. Even of their blunders.' (Nietzsche in Kaufman 2004: 83). Such prophecy could have been the slogan for Lacuna, as they offer their clients a new start in life without painful memories. As mentioned above, it is ironic when Mary declares her love to Dr. Mierzwiak, only to find out that they actually had an affair, which she forgot as she underwent the procedure: 'Dr. Mierzwiak: we... have a history. I'm sorry. You wanted the procedure done... to get past.' (Kaufman 2004: 87). Her love for Howard is hinted throughout. However, these feelings should have been erased with the rest of her memories. Therefore, the quotes become a critical commentary to the representational interferences that are offered through Lacuna.

*Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* also uses parody to critically comment on Lacuna and their representational interference of identity. Lacuna offers instant bliss in the shape of memory erasure and thus projects consumption as a means for identity construction<sup>15</sup>. While Joel is seated in the Lacuna clinic waiting room, we see other devastated characters sitting around with the artifacts that associate their painful memories such as a dog mugs or bowling trophies. Furthermore, Mary answers the phone and has the following conversation: 'No, I'm

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<sup>15</sup> In his article *I Forgot to Remember to Forget*, James argues: '...the real technologies of the information age have indeed generated anxieties about memory: the instantaneity of communication through cell phones and email may well be having a profound effect on our perceptions. This relates to what many commentators have claimed as a characteristic of postmodern life - the sense of a 'perpetual present' so much instantaneous media fosters, and a corresponding collective amnesia about cultural history' (James 2004: 18). Thus, James perceives such commoditisation of memory erasure as a characteristic of the postmodern.

sorry Mrs. Sobel. You can't have the same procedure done three times in one month. It's just not our policy here. [...] I know it's an emergency and we'll do everything that we can' (Kaufman 2004: DVD-chapter 8). The combination of these artifacts and the phone call is presented as parody in relation to the amount of pain that the procedure has caused on Joel. Thus, Lacuna is supposed to offer its clients instant bliss, but in relation to Joel, the procedure appears to have the opposite effect. These notions of identity as commodities are thereby brought forward as parodic in relation to the sadness that Lacuna's product has forced on Joel.

Lacuna's artificially constructed intertexts also play with this notion of happiness as a product of consumption and thus produce a parody of the medical companies who benefit from such anti-depressives. It is therefore useful to see the Lacuna website in relation to the homepage of much discussed Prozac anti-depressives<sup>16</sup>, since such comparison makes it clear that the Lacuna website is a parody of the Prozac website. The Prozac site is also stuffed with self-assessment tests and embeds full descriptions of the drug's effect on diseases such as Depression, OCD, Bulimia and Panic Disorder. Both websites offer escape through consumerism. However, the 'only' major difference between the two webpages is the fact that one is fictional and the other speaks of a real product. The Lacuna website offers little reference to reveal its own fictionality, but in the light of *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* it comes to stand as a critical commentary towards medical consumerism. Thereby, the Lacuna website produces a parody of the commercial representation that such medicinal companies use in relation to sales promotion.

Parody is also used to comment on the 20th century understanding of the mind in relation to especially psychotherapy. However, it seems that *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* questions this perception, while it also uses psychotherapy to emphasize the importance of past memories in relation to identity construction. This is made evident as Joel and Clementine escape into his subconsciousness:

'Clementine: This is a memory of me. The way you wanted to fuck me on the couch after you looked down at my crotch [...] Well then they are coming here. So what if you take me somewhere else, somewhere I don't belong. And we'll hide there till morning' (Kaufman 2004: 67).

This becomes a journey that goes deep into Joel's adolescent memories of desire and shame. Having entered Joel's suppressed memories, the audience sees Joel being caught by his

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<sup>16</sup> <http://www.prozac.com>

mother while masturbating to a slightly erotic comic book. Hereafter, they escape further down into his subconsciousness, where Joel as a little boy is being bullied into smashing a bird with a hammer. However, it appears parodic when Joel relives these old psychoanalytical traumas as these serve to argue the importance of past memories in relation to our identities. Thus, parody is used in *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* to underline the importance of our past in its entirety.

*Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* also creates a parody of the cultural identity texts assigned to several of the main characters. Joel is a closed and quiet character, who almost seems afraid to reveal his true self to anyone. This role is almost in opposition to many of Carrey's former movies, such as *Dumb and Dumber* (1994) and *The Mask* (1994), where his character seems almost cartoon-like in its slap-stick appearance. This opposition is also found in Clementine's character as it is also the complete opposite of the parts that Kate Winslet usually partakes. She is perhaps most famous for her roles as a member of the British upper class in movies such as *Sense and Sensibility* (1995) and *Titanic* (1997). These roles reveal Winslet's characters as British romantics in the traditional sense, whereas *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* depicts her as highly outspoken in relation to her identity (often marked through her hair color) and her impulsiveness. Furthermore, this opposition is also found within Patrick's persona, who is played by Elijah Wood, whom is perhaps most famously known from his heroic role in *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy. However, in *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* he steals women's underwear and has to pretend that he is someone else in order for him to get a girlfriend. Thus, *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* subverts these celebrity texts as it produces a parodic commentary to these perceptions of identities outside fiction.

Therefore, parody in *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* is used to question our entire perception of the mind and its importance to identity construction. The movie uses parody to remind its audience of the significance that is subscribed to past memories, while parody is also used to critically comment on the capitalist commoditization of the self.

### **Sub-conclusion**

*Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* argues the importance of our memories and thus inserts this notion within postmodern identity politics. The movie is metafictional and parodic in its style as it constantly reminds its audience that reality only makes sense through its representations.

The movie argues two different perceptions of identity, which can roughly be divided into the two narrative zones that are brought forward in *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*. The familiar zone comes to represent a world where identity is something that is controllable and can be altered as one pleases. It is a world that produces methods for erasure of those painful aspects that lie within each and every one of us. However, the unfamiliar zone resists this temptation as it comes to show that reality can only be fully interpreted when you hold sacred your each and every memory.

*Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* critically comments on these aspects of postmodern identity through the use of parody. This device is used to underline the importance of our past memories and is brought forward through an ironic journey into Joel's sub-consciousness where he relives all of his childhood traumas. Also, Lacuna's self-constructed intertexts that surround the movie all serve to provide a parodic commentary to the many medical treatments that our postmodern age offers as a cure to sadness and loneliness. Consequently, *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* does not offer any shortcuts to happiness, but instead reminds the audience of the nostalgic beauty that lies within each of our memories and their importance to identity in the postmodern era.

## Conclusion

‘Ever want to be someone else? Now you can’  
(Kaufman 1999: 44).

Throughout this thesis there has been a focus on the use of metafiction and parody in the three movies: *Being John Malkovich*, *Adaptation* and *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*. As argued in the introduction, the purpose of such analyses has been to spell out a poetics of postmodernism in Charlie Kaufman’s screenplays and the following conclusion seeks to provide such outline.

The devices of metafiction and parody are used to establish a notion of the postmodern subject in all three of Kaufman’s movies. *The Shooting Script* version of *Adaptation* includes the article *Critical Commentary* by Robert McKee, in which he projects Kaufman as ‘an old fashioned modernist,’ who is involved with ‘that grand twentieth-century preoccupation with the Self’ (McKee 2002: 131). However, in the shadows of the preceding analyses, it seems that Kaufman’s preoccupation lies more in relation to *selves* in the plural sense. In all of the three movies, the representation of the self has been laid out as highly textual and thus draws out a multifaceted notion of identity through the use of metafiction and parody. Thereby, Kaufman’s screenplays depict the self from an ontological point of view, which underlines the importance of perceiving a poetics of Charlie Kaufman from within the realm of postmodernism.

These aspects can be applied to the structures of the many cultural texts that constitute and represent postmodern identity. A broad humanist perception of identity is one that depicts the individual as autonomous, whereas identity in the capitalist consumer society has become commodified and thus depicted through its representations and the manipulation of these. Here, the individual is no-longer unique, but something that is pieced together by numerous representations. Hutcheon argues that postmodernism proclaims a decentering of subjectivity:

‘if postmodernism is identified with a ‘decentering’ [...] of the individual, then both humanist and capitalist notions of selfhood or subjectivity will be called into question. But [...] the postmodern involves a paradoxical installing as well as subversion of conventions – including conventions of the representation of the subject’ (Hutcheon 2002: 13).

Such installment and subversion of representation draw on the same principles that Derrida added to Saussure’s theory of binaries. The object of postmodernism is then to map out the structural hierarchy in any representation and later to subvert and destabilize it. In all three of

Kaufman's movies, there is an instalment and later subversion of identity hierarchies, which is something that Kaufman uses self-consciously to criticize these conventional representations. The following will outline these aspects in relation to the three movies.

*Being John Malkovich* starts by presenting the frameworks for contemporary identity politics, where it marks a distinction between John Malkovich's self-perception and how he is perceived by others. Thereby, there is an opposition in the representation of identity, namely that inside and outside the self. This contrast in representations of identity is brought forward and deconstructed through the use of metafiction, since it highlights how identity is represented in *Being John Malkovich*. When Craig or Lotte enter Malkovich's portal, they not only expose the structures of the above opposition, but they also use this knowledge as a tool to recast their own identities. Thus, metafiction in *Being John Malkovich* is used to expose identity as representation and thereby underline a plurality in the notion of self. Parody is then used to make this relationship explicit to the audience, which is manifested through an extensive use of irony. This technique provides a humorous insight to the 'true' identity of John Malkovich as it underlines not only the many selves that constitute his character (Malkovich, Craig, Lotte, Maxine, Dr. Lester, etc), but also illustrates the important psychological occurrences within his identity that have happened throughout his life. These aspects are made especially evident as the audience enters Malkovich's subconsciousness and is inserted into his many childhood traumas. Thus, parody provides a critical commentary to *Being John Malkovich's* depiction of identity, in which the definition of self changes throughout and must therefore be labeled as highly unstable.

*Adaptation* addresses the notions of identity and subjectivity by pointing to the problematics of representing characters in different media. Its Chinese-box structure reveals that every character is a representation of either the perception of their 'real' world self or a representation of this representation in a different media. This aspect is brought forward through the use of metafiction as it self-consciously points out this relationship. Therefore, all characters in *Adaptation* are explicit about the instable depiction of their identity, since they all acknowledge that they have no control of these representations. Hence, *Adaptation* is very straightforward about its textual notion of identity, since the movie inserts fictional characters among representations of 'real' identities to underline every character's status as representation. The movie also addresses the problematic of transferring narrative from one media to another, which is illustrated through Kaufman's constant musings on how to create

such adaptation. Again, these aspects are emphasized through the use of metafiction. Parody in *Adaptation* is used to comment on these representational politics as it manipulates prior representations of characters and thereby ironically reveals fictional aspects of their identities. Centrally, the movie takes the form of self-parody in relation to Charlie Kaufman, since he represents his character as a parody to his cultural text as an eccentric artist. However, this parodic agenda addresses every character in *Adaptation*, since narrative is added to each and everyone's identity text as for instance Susan Orlean who is now able to write extensive drug use and attempted murder on her resume. Consequently, parody in *Adaptation* ironically stresses that identity is something that consists only in its representations.

*Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* occupies itself with the notion of memory, which is not only something that consists entirely of representations, but also something that can be manipulated as one pleases. Hence, the movie brings forward the dilemmas that occur when altering with such representations of our identity. Metafiction in *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* illustrates this notion of a subjective construction of memory. When the audience enters Joel's mind, it becomes evident that this zone is made entirely from Joel's recollection, which underlines its fictionality. This creates an opposition between reality and its representations, which accentuates the fact that reality only makes sense through the individual's entire 'collection' of reality representations. Parody in *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* illustrates the representational challenge that occurs when manipulating with the notion of memory. These aspects are ironically stressed as it is revealed that Mary too had her mind erased because of her prior relationship to Dr. Mierzwiak. Therefore, parody is used to point out that our identity is constituted through a multiplicity of representations that are all important for our perception of self in its entirety. Parody in *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* is therefore used to underline that identity is something that is constituted through countless of representations and that the failure of perceiving the self in its totality compromises the entire notion of personality.

In the light of the above, it is arguable that Kaufman establishes a poetics that uses metafiction and parody as tools to problematize the notion of the postmodern subject. All of Kaufman's three movies point to the fragmentation of identity and underline the multiplicity of selves that constitutes any of his characters. These aspects are further stressed through Kaufman's ever-present play between the identities of his characters and the cultural texts that surround these actors in 'real' life. It seems that this relationship is always parodied in

Kaufman's movies as almost every actor occupies a role that goes against the conventional image of their 'real-life' actor identities. The projection of identity in Kaufman's movies does therefore not limit itself to the borderlines of fiction. Rather, he uses every chance to transgress these boundaries in order to add representations to the identity of himself and his actors. Thus, Kaufman problematizes his notion of the postmodern self in order to impose ontological considerations onto contemporary identity construction.

In the above mentioned *Critical Commentary* by Robert McKee, he argues that the characters of *Being John Malkovich* all 'suffer a claustrophobia of identity' (McKee 2002: 131) and that the film expressed 'the bittersweet wish to be somebody else. But a wish is, of course, only that, a wish' (McKee 2002: 132). This claustrophobia of identity is also present throughout this thesis. However, the above poetics of metafiction and parody makes the wish of becoming somebody else come true. As Kaufman points out the representational status of postmodern identity, he argues that each character consists of numerous selves, which differs in relation to the interpreting subjects. Thus, this thesis has established a poetics that questions the ontology of postmodern identity. It is indeed possible to be somebody else. The question is rather which of your selves that you wish to be?

## Summary

All three of Charlie Kaufman's screenplays *Being John Malkovich*, *Adaptation* and *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* address the notions of metafiction and parody in order to problematize the postmodern perception of self. In order to explore this claim, this thesis maps out a poetics of postmodernism in the works of Charlie Kaufman.

The establishment of such poetics is founded on a theoretical discussion of postmodernism and its narrative devices. This discussion is primarily based on the writings of postmodern theorists Brian McHale and Linda Hutcheon, who both point to metafiction and parody as key aspects in postmodern literary theory. The purpose of metafiction is to lay bare the representational status of any text, whereas parody serves to undermine and subvert these representations. Therefore, the postmodern use of these devices establishes a critical commentary to the representational strategies that are self-consciously brought forward in postmodern fictions. This thesis argues that Kaufman's *Being John Malkovich*, *Adaptation* and *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* all use these devices in relation to postmodern identity politics. The ontological thematics in Kaufman's movies serve to question the nature of the self through metafiction, whereas these ontologies are critically commented upon through the use of parody.

Identity is therefore something that is brought forward as highly subjective in all of the three movies. They all argue that each character text is established from an indefinite number of different readings of these *selves*. *Being John Malkovich* questions the borderlines between reality and fiction by exposing character identity as representation. Not only does the movie inscribe a real character into a fictional movie, but it also creates a distinction between self-perception and other's perception of that self. The introduction of a fantastic portal problematizes this distinction, since it makes it possible for other characters to recast their identities through the body of famous actor John Malkovich. This resolves in a parodic play with the notion of identity, since it is no longer possible to establish any character in relation to their appearance. *Adaptation* explores the notion of recasting narrative from one media to another, but it is made evident rather fast in the movie that this trans-contextualization also involves character identity. The movie explores the notion that every character is a representation of their real self, which argues the fictionality of postmodern identity. These aspects are perhaps best illustrated as Charlie Kaufman produces a form of self-parody as he

writes himself into his own screenplay. It is clear that *Adaptation* depicts a representation of identity, since Kaufman's character is a bald and overweight anti-hero protagonist, who reveals himself as highly masturbatory. *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* occupies itself with the notion of memory and its importance to our identity. The movie projects memory as something that consists entirely of representations, while it also proclaims that these representations (or memories) can be altered as one pleases. Most parts of the movie take place inside the mind of the movie's protagonist, where the disappearing setting makes it evident that memory only consists through its representations as well as it is revealed that these particular memories are under erasure. This resolves in a melancholy parody that argues the importance of our memories in relation to our identity.

These theoretical considerations and analytical findings have spelled out a poetics of postmodernism in the works of Charlie Kaufman. It is a poetics that exposes Kaufman's apparent perception postmodern identity, namely a depiction of the self as something that consists only through its representations. Therefore, any character in Kaufman's three movies consists of numerous selves depending on the interpreting subject.

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### **Films**

*Adaptation* (2002) Dir. Spike Jonze. Perf. Nicholas Cage, Meryl Streep, Chris Cooper. Columbia Pictures.

*Being John Malkovich* (1999) Dir. Spike Jonze. Perf. John Cusack, Cameron Diaz, Catherine Keener. Universal.

*Confessions of a Dangerous Mind* (2002) Dir. George Clooney. Perf. Sam Rockwell, Drew Barrymore, Julia Roberts, George Clooney. Miramax.

*Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (2004) Dir. Michel Gondry. Perf. Jim Carrey, Kate Winslet, Kirsten Dunst, Mark Ruffalo, Elijah Wood. Focus Features.

*Human Nature* (2001) Dir. Michel Gondry. Perf. Tim Robbins, Patricia Arquette. Studiocanal and Fine Line Features.

## **Web**

The Internet Movie Database:

[www.imdb.com](http://www.imdb.com)

Official *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* website:

[www.eternalsunshine.com](http://www.eternalsunshine.com)

Official *Lacuna Inc.* website:

[www.lacunainc.com](http://www.lacunainc.com)

*Prozac* website:

[www.prozac.com](http://www.prozac.com)