ABSTRACT

From an artist's perspective, the American film industry could best be characterized cynically. However, there are anomalies, and among them, Charlie Kaufman stands out. His films offer innovative and sometimes challenging material, and represent freedom and creative breathing room in an otherwise suffocating industry. This presentation will examine two of Kaufman’s films, *Adaptation* and *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, and launch a discussion about the Kaufman brand. Simultaneously, I will seek a better understanding of genre, and will argue that genre can be more than a commercial framework between producers and consumers, or product categories, if you will. The discussion will lastly turn to a contemplation of artistry in contemporary American cinema, where I believe Kaufman has built a reputation as a film auteur, and maintained a high level of artistic integrity.
From an artist’s perspective, the American film industry could best be characterized as cynical. Hollywood and its affiliates are epicentral and probably unavoidable if a filmmaker has an ambitious proposal or grand idea. And, notoriously, Hollywood’s portfolio and spending summaries show a strong preference for glitz, gloss, and glam. Cookie-cutter rom-coms, uninspired sequels, and action-packed summer blockbusters constitute just a part of Hollywood’s creativity-starved output each and every year. By and large, American cinema - even its so-called “indie” scene – appears to be an assembly line rather than an outlet for artistic expression. Perhaps this is unsurprising given the current nature of filmmaking and the relatively huge price of entry. Full-length feature films are practically impossible to self-finance, and the need for resources inevitably gave rise to production and distribution companies who are concerned with the return on investment, not some screenwriter’s high-flying vision. What we end up with, though, are overly-standardized narratives, plots, conflicts, resolutions, visuals, subject matter, all combining in now well-established film clichés. Breaks from these long-running customs are seen infrequently, and seen consistently even less frequently. However, there are anomalies, and among them, Charlie Kaufman stands out. His films offer innovative and sometimes challenging material, and represent an individualistic freedom and creative breathing room in an otherwise suffocating industry. Of course, no man is an island, and the filming teams he worked with deserve their fair share of credit for their fidelity to the script and persuading the studios. This paper will examine two of Kaufman’s films in depth, *Adaptation* and *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, providing background for those two films and ultimately launching a discussion about the Kaufman brand, so to speak. Before that, it still remains to be shown how more orthodox filmmakers can retain an artistic identity when the terms of agreement are not entirely negotiable, when many particulars are somewhat
predetermined. I will propose one possible method of understanding the filmmaker and his/her role in the process, and assess the creative opportunities afforded to him by exploring genres.

THE STATE OF FILMMAKING: GENRE THEORY

Discussion of the film industry is often conflated with, and indistinguishable from, the entertainment industry, where the ideals of artistic films become casual “flicks,” drawing huge audiences and box office revenue through highly targeted advertising, homogeneous cast lists, and clearly defined genres. Nick Redfern, in the *European Journal of American Culture*, refers to these genres as “cultural schemas” resulting from “interactions between producers and consumers”, equating them with “product categories” structurally similar to those found in other goods-and-services industries (Redfern 147). With that understanding of genre, we can more easily theorize how they come about and the necessity of their existence. If Redfern’s conception is right, they are isomorphic modes of communication between Hollywood bigwigs and average moviegoers. To be sure, the upward and downward trends of certain genres and the modifications to those genres over time all seem to support the idea that our thematic interests for film and Hollywood’s corporate interests for film meet in genre. But genre also seems to be more than “giving the people what they want” and a mutually helpful system of product classification; there’s some evidence for this claim in the evolution of certain genres and subgenres, which respond to social, political, and economic facts of the times in an independent way, not always as a consensual agreement between producer and consumer.

In her examination of the zombie subgenre, Nicole Birch-Bayley compares the proto-zombie to its more recent incarnations in films like *28 Days Later* and *Dawn of the Dead*, noting the changes in physical attributes, presentation, and the overall setting of the piece (Birch-Bayley 1139). In a post-9/11 world, the “zombie has functioned in various ways, first as an implicit
cultural undertone marking an era of imperialism and political upheaval, and then proceeding towards an age of cultural anxiety and media monopolies.” It’s an interesting point, that some genres might arise and be sustained by a sociopolitical ethos, and it’s almost certainly applicable to other genres (though perhaps not all) as well. Ideas have consequences, after all. Cinema, on at least some level, is an echo chamber, where attitudes toward public issues resonate. Genres, then, are also mutable entities of their own. In the case of the zombie film, a specific subgenre (zombie) belongs to a broader genre (horror), akin to how the specific issue (a personal but widespread fear of terrorism) belongs to a broader issue (cultural anxiety). The invention and renewed popularity of that subgenre mirrors our present awareness of new and constantly emerging threats in the world. As the threats change, so too do the zombies. Uneasiness in the nuclear age and a fear of other nations were gradually replaced by anxiety against an unknown, non-state enemy with unknown weapons, a group capable of swift assault without prior detection. Likewise, zombies have been transformed from slow-moving, undead hordes, to hyper-mobile, possessed creatures, springing out from shadows and lurking behind corners. Danny Boyle and Zack Snyder’s adaptations of the zombie film reinvented the subgenre and brought it in line with a modern American psyche sensitive to epidemic scares and hometown violence.

Genres and subgenres, then, are not static categories. Before I discuss specific changes inside specific genres, it should be said that discussions of this kind are limited by the semantics of the genre labels, as well as the suppositions we bring about them. For instance, Redfern reports a decline in “crime/thriller” and “drama” categories over the past twenty years at the U.S. box office (Redfern 152). What we have here, as far as I can tell, is speculative quicksand. I do not wish to sink into meaningless speculations about American litigiousness, the de-
romanticization of crime compared to the mid 20th century, or the modern phenomena of technological noise that might be diminishing our interest in cinematic, strictly interpersonal drama. It’s not because these speculations are destined to be meaningless, but rather because the genres in question are nondescript. To illustrate my point, Redfern’s study places the Bourne series in the “crime/thriller” genre, a placement that feels quite forced. Treating drama as a standalone genre creates a whole host of categorical issues. Drama is such a constant that if we were to give it a numerical value, it would be zero. In an equation of genre variables, adding or subtracting drama does nothing to change the solution. When “drama” fades out of the list of top-grossing films, nobody can know what’s fading. In order to discuss the sociological and psychological undercurrents of genre trends, which are undoubtedly operative in any cultural expression like film, we need to slim down genres into subgenres, and try to consider them for themselves, in isolation from their “parent” genres. Postulating about the subgenre of zombie films, as I did previously, is a much more fruitful endeavor than trying to catch the entire horror genre in our analytical net. It’s the permutations of genre that we’re after, not the set of all possible permutations.

Moving along, I’ll now summarize this theory of genre and clarify it with examples. Genres are not only commercial frameworks; they succeed and fail based on their ability to capture the current sociopolitical climate. Some, like romance, contract and expand to include strong-minded female leads. Mystery thrillers like Gone Girl exaggerate the grim realities and growing skepticism of marriage. Independent family dramas like The Kids Are All Right depict a different family dynamic, with lesbian mothers and their children’s sperm donor. Countless other examples illustrate how filmmakers are sometimes the free agents, reshaping genre tropes over time, and finding their niches by interpreting and filtering the “stuff” of genre through their
worldview or into some contextualized worldview. Updating genres with relevant additions also benefits the creative identity of the filmmaker. This constant revitalization through manipulation happens superficially in several ways: to continue with the zombie example, a filmmaker might change the elements of the genre (how zombies look, act, infect), or combine the genre with another (horror-comedy, in the case of Zombieland and Shaun of the Dead). The intent need not be stated and the modifications need not be immediately apparent for the effects to be felt within the subgenre, genre, or industry as a whole. And thus by doing so, filmmakers are able to innovate without rejecting the premises and categorical elements that appease producers and consumers alike, while making their projects seem like low-risk bids to potential investors.

Conversely, the financial prospects in “outlier” films are perhaps more ambiguous, since their performance has been found to depend on the presence or absence of other variables such as “star power”, awards, and critical reception (Redfern 147). One might reasonably include the reputation and devoted following of a key filmmaker in that list.

Woody Allen’s most memorable films are romantic-comedies, but their content is only loosely comparable to the one-dimensional characters and predictable schmaltz of other films from the genre. In Manhattan, a classics featuring himself as the lead, his character is frenetic, self-deprecating, and pitiable, and he has two love interests, both smart and self-sufficient. One recently ended an affair with his close friend, and one is a high school student. His conflicts and dynamics contrast the tropes from other genre selections, and the conclusions are sometimes redemptive, sometimes nihilistic. His inventions inspire and are inspired, and they seem self-conscious. Morris calls it “comic irony,” observing a “sophisticated awareness of theories of comedy” in Allen’s work, and his “subversion of these comic paradigms” that cast attention and aspirations on generic principles (Morris 176). The net result is a self-reflexive and parodic bit of
humor, a common thread in Allen’s films. Taken as a work of comedy, though, Charlie Kaufman’s Adaptation surpasses the subtle shots at genre trappings seen in Allen’s films, and proceeds into total “meta” mayhem.

BACKGROUND ON KAUFMAN AND FILMS

Kaufman is most often mum about his personal life and rare to take interviews, creating an air of mystery that may have a counter-effect of increasing the intrigue about himself and his career details. There is not a wealth of information published about his life; what is published could be summed into a biography of a few paragraphs. The important, readily available information that can be gleaned from his few interviews include the following: he was born in New York City in 1958 before moving to Pasadena, California, and has a wide range of experience in writing (Sragow), though his professional beginnings lie in theater and television. Of the programs he took part in, the highlights are “Ned and Stacey”, and the “Dana Carvey Show,” the latter of which was the womb for many other would-be comedy names like Stephen Colbert, Louis C.K., and Steve Carrell. Kaufman, in one of the longest (and also most dated) biographical pieces on him in Salon, also revealed a fondness for literature, mentioning Franz Kafka and Samuel Beckett. He remarked “one thing I don’t read is screenplays…I try to write mine so that they can be pleasurably read” (Sragow). An explicit aim of his is to “try to create the world of the script and get across your feeling for it and put some ideas in the reader’s head.” Although this interview was released following his film debut, Being John Malkovich, nothing seems to have changed. All of his filmography thus far – save perhaps for Confessions of a Dangerous Mind, a script which he originally penned but later cried foul at George Clooney for drastically editing – has radiated a palpable thoughtfulness. Substance is his style, and subtext is his forte. He often sends his characters through a wormhole of his imagination, eagerly bending
logical, metaphysical, and conventional precepts along the way. Such is especially the case in *Being John Malkovich, Adaptation, and Synecdoche New York*; viewers must either parse reality from fiction, vice-versa, or take on a warped perception of reality altogether. And yet, in the midst of absurdity and the clamor of the situations, the sign of his craftsmanship is his ability to communicate relatively simple ideas that carry intellectual and emotional weight. Not one for neat and tidy conclusions, he said as much on the matter here:

‘I really don’t have any solutions and I don’t like movies that do…I hate a movie that will end by telling you that the first thing you should do is learn to love yourself. That is so insulting and condescending, and so meaningless. My characters don’t learn to love each other or themselves.’ (Sragow).

Michael Gondry and Spike Jonze were loyal creative partners before he put himself at the director helm for *Synecdoche*, and submitted a script to the *Confessions* project. He prized the relationship in another interview after the release of *Eternal Sunshine*, saying, “The usual thing for a writer is to deliver a script and then disappear. That's not for me. I want to be involved from beginning to end. And these directors know that, and respect it” (Arnold). It was a winning strategy for the team. Both *Being John Malkovich* and *Adaptation* received “best screenplay” nominations by the Academy, and netted Kaufman two BAFTAs, according to IMDB. And in 2004, *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* took home the “Best Original Screenplay” Oscar. Critics heaped those three films with praises upon praises; the acclaim was practically universal. The marketability of those films did not exclusively rest on their critical laurels, though it could also ride on the popularity of the leads. *Eternal Sunshine*, for instance, attracted a line-up of A-listers, including Jim Carrey, Kate Winslet, Mark Ruffalo, Kirsten Dunst, and Elijah Wood, all of whom likely took huge pay cuts from the estimated, relatively low budget of the film (Arnold).
It’s perhaps worth making note, in passing, that the actors in Kaufman’s films have likewise been the recipients of prestigious awards.

It’s useful to give a somewhat detailed run-down of the two films to be discussed in this paper, *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* and *Adaptation*. Doing so with respect to brevity is no small feat, but I will try my best, starting with the former. Joel (Jim Carrey) discovers that his recently ex-girlfriend Clementine (Kate Winslet) has undergone a memory wipe to get him out of her head, to skip the healing by nuking the pain. Now a total stranger to her, he becomes outraged and storms to the clinic himself, wanting to do the same thing to her – an emotionally necessary form of retribution. The procedure works in reverse order, beginning with Joel’s most recent memories of Clem and ending with his earliest. This backwardness works against Joel; his experience of the procedure is analogous to recreating a fire just by stoking its embers. Succeeding into better and better memories after bad ones, Joel’s mental image of Clementine gets restored to its former beauty, and he finds himself regretting the decision to have her removed from his mind. In their final moments together, the night they first met, Clementine whispers to Joel “meet me in Montauk.” Joel awakens the next morning, in what’s to him an unexplainable daze, prompting him to go to the shore instead of work. And on the train there is none other than Clementine. They awkwardly attract each other, and spend the rest of their day together. But before long, they each receive mysterious tapes from a memory clinic neither of them has heard. Accompanying the tapes is a letter from an ex-employee from Lacuna Inc. (Kirsten Dunst), who says she’s informing all former patients of the clinic. Joel and Clementine are confused and troubled, listening to their own voice speak unconscionable insults about the other, forecasting the incompatibilities ahead. Clementine turns to leave, but Joel asks her to
stay. When she reasons that the two will only fall into the same perilous rut as they did before, he smiles shyly and says “okay.” She pauses for a moment, and then replies “okay.”

There’s really two stories of *Adaptation*. All that’s really known about the narrative of the non-fictional story is that Kaufman could not adapt Susan Orlean’s *The Orchid Thief*, and instead produced the fictional narrative *Adaptation*. In this partially fictionalized narrative, the one film portrays, Charlie (played by Nicolas Cage) suffers from a severe case of self-doubt and writer’s block. He’s a nervous, sweating, fretting mess, and his commitment to adapting *The Orchid Thief* undermines his relationship with his girlfriend and twin brother, Donald (also played by Nicolas Cage). An interminable series of trial and error draws his focus to himself and his insecurities. By accident, some of this self-deprecation leaks into his screenplay. This horrifies him, and in response he takes the advice of Donald, who only moments ago became a screenwriter himself, and who follows screenwriting wisdom peddled at seminars and how-to books. Charlie is utterly convinced that Donald lacks even a shred of ingenuity, but his carefree optimism and social luck are galling. “You sound like you’re in a cult,” he tells Donald, who replies “No, it’s just good writing technique” (*Adaptation*). But when Charlie feels that he can no longer rely on himself to finish his screenplay, he goes to New York to meet with Susan Orlean. Once there, he attends a screenwriting seminar hosted by Robert McKee, and gets lambasted for his unorthodox vision. Later, they talk cordially in a bar, and McKee reassures Charlie that he needs to “wow them in the end,” and to “find an ending, but don't cheat, and don't you [Charlie] dare bring in a deus ex machina. Your characters must change, and the change must come from them.” (*Adaptation*). So the real Kaufman, the one who wrote the film, took this fictional advice and ran with it. Right after Charlie agrees with McKee, he and Donald uncover dark secrets about Susan Orlean and LaRoche. The brothers get caught spying on them in Florida. Orlean is
now in a criminal affair with LaRoche, and the two are manufacturing a drug out of the flowers. Orlean, in a drug-induced state, wants to kill Charlie. There’s nudity, sex, guns, a car chase, and LaRoche and Donald both wind up dead – Orlean presumably gets jailed for her crimes. Charlie returns home, now filled with hope and encouragement, ready to write the events into his screenplay and to set his life straight. Obviously, many of these details are completely fabricated. The real Kaufman is married and has no such twin brother. But he blended fiction and non-fiction to spawn a Frankenstein film with a mind of its own; *Adaptation* is several layers deep in reflexivity. Charlie Kaufman writes a fictional Charlie Kaufman, then hands him the story-writing, only to have it handed back to him. It’s a dizzying ride through a narrative cul-de-sac.

**CRITICAL ANALYSES OF FILMS**

Directing our analytical attention to *Eternal Sunshine*, we come across an unmistakably Kaufman film with equal brain and heart, rich in contemporary considerations about biotechnology, and the nature of our memories. The title of the film is a line from a poem by Alexander Pope, which Kirsten Dunst’s character blissfully recites before the surprising revelation of her deliberately forgotten romance. This is the film’s conceit, to investigate the “morality of memory,” as Christopher Grau describes it in the *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* (Grau). The early promise of romance between Jim Carrey’s and Kate Winslet’s opposite characters (Joel and Clementine, respectively) degenerates into a battlefield of idiosyncrasies. What first were endearing “isms” about the other became alienating points of contention. While the relationship writhes through a slow and violent death, both undergo a memory-erasing procedure to forget the other in hopes of eschewing heartbreak. We experience the procedure vividly in tandem with Joel, who regrets his decision when he’s forced to relive the memories in his unconsciousness. Alternatively, the film’s investigation can be rephrased as
questions, along the lines of “what else is lost in such a procedure, the removal of which makes us feel queasy? How do we come to know love without at some time becoming acquainted with the pains of love lost? Can we really square this seemingly harmless pursuit of happiness with our ideals of humanity?” Grau paraphrases the dilemma with the recognition that “the sadness the viewers feel with [Joel] is not lifted by the thought that he will eventually be ignorant of the loss” (120).

The meandering narrative, and the intricacy in direction, cinematography, and writing in *Eternal Sunshine*, make for a sublime viewing experience. Although the sense of losing one’s reality bearings is not unusual to have while screening the film, its primary purpose is not to perplex. There seems to be a moderately narrow, philosophical focus couched in the montage of sobering present and stirring, recreated past. And in fact, a quick survey of the literature in film journals supports this statement; most analytic articles about the film, like Grau’s, are philosophical, and expound on the intellectually alluring concept of experience, memory, love, and the connections of those themes. In ethics, one of the many theoretical debates that still ricochets seems to pertain here. It goes like this: suppose there were a “grief pill,” a fast-acting, potent antidepressant that could single out and eliminate an upsetting, recurring sequence of ideas. Then suppose that you are suddenly afflicted with some great tragedy, like the death of a child or other bereavement, over which you deeply mourn and will surely continue to mourn. Should you take the pill, and if so, when? Immediately following the loss? One day later? Two days? I can’t imagine that anybody would ethically defend depression, a more generic grief, since it’s now been identified as a treatable psychological disorder. But certain cases of grief seem too weaved into positive, characteristically human emotions, such that removing the one diminishes the other. What happens to compassion if you don’t share in people’s suffering?
Memory modification, like that in *Eternal Sunshine*, is implicated in this ethical dilemma, and Kaufman’s depiction of the technology does not put these concerns to rest. On the contrary, Lacuna Inc., the name of the clinic in the film, looks exactly the same as a family doctor’s office. The procedure is uncomplicated, mixing some basic behavior psychology (Joel gathering all mementos of Clementine), and neuroscience. This barely qualifies for science fiction, and yet it’s perhaps the most compelling form of the genre.

If Kaufman at all dramatizes the procedure, he does it as it’s experienced by the patient, and not as it’s experienced by the world. There’s no time-traveling, or dystopian future where only the wealthy can afford a memory wipe, or other sweeping fantasy. The science in *Eternal Sunshine* is not socially devastating or transformative writ large. Joel expresses the same incredulity about the safety and effectiveness of the procedure that might be suggested about the audience. No, the science in *Eternal Sunshine* moves silently and slowly, and non-invasively. Instead of presenting a foreign world where such a procedure is commonplace and accepted to a sickening degree, *Eternal Sunshine* presents Lacuna Inc. as the sort of “coming soon to a strip mall near you” type of science, which advances into suburban street corners long before the neighborhood is cognizant of it, or is yet to have a consensus on it.

We might return to the theory on how artists balance the needs of producers and consumers through genre for a moment. Labeling a thematic element, or a package of thematic elements serves the commercial nature of the industry, as mentioned, but genres are more than labels. They are seas of expectations, in some ways, and the real artists – if that term can have anything to do with film – acknowledge and redirect expectations. Kaufman’s films are thought experiments; in *Eternal Sunshine*, he uses a small, very prospective piece of science fiction, Lacuna Inc’s memory modification, to test the resilience of, and uncover more about the essence
of a shared human experience, love. The earlier discussions about interpreting genre, or filtering
genre through a more modern or nuanced worldview, are born out especially (or perhaps most
visibly) in *Eternal Sunshine*. Kaufman is not interested in the space-age thinking of cosmic
grandeur and mystery as might be construed of Kubrick and *2001*, and apparently, neither are
we. Ethical issues in biotechnology are more timely and affecting, because they are unnervingly
local. Public scientific discourse has turned from explaining our planet’s position in our solar
system, the beginnings of the universe, and the possibility of extraterrestrial life, to sequencing
the human genome, dispelling the distinction between mind and body and sometimes free will,
and understanding the objective, observable phenomena that causes or significantly contributes
to our noumenal self, and our experiential wisdom about consciousness and the human condition.

Technology like Lacuna Inc. is seen to be in tension with our subjective accounts of
reality. Religious people call it “playing God” when scientific discoveries encroach on
something ineffable and transcendental. In *Eternal Sunshine*, objectivity and subjectivity collide
in a brilliant spectacle; Joel lies on his bed, unconscious and still, while Lacuna staff clown
around in his apartment and trace his subconscious around his brain, destroying the memories in
its path. Gone are the horrors of lobotomies and electro-shock therapy, where objective harm is
most definitely being administered for some desired change in behavior. Here, Joel is not in any
objective pain, they aren’t electrocuting him or chipping away his frontal lobe with an ice pick,
but the procedure is subjectively torturous. He must experience his memories firsthand again, not
as mental recollections or images, but as familiar, in-person reality. Worse, he must watch in
agony as each one disintegrates and he’s hurled into the next, knowing that this regrettable
journey will likely end and, figuratively, Clementine will not survive it. His hopes and efforts to
the contrary are ultimately in vain. But the narrative does not proceed chronologically, and
during the procedure, we already know Joel and Clementine will meet again, at an agreed upon location in the future.

Grau, in another article, compares the circular narrative and plot to Nietzsche’s eternal recurrence: “If these lovers seem like paradigms of the human condition you can no longer fail to appreciate why Nietzsche thought eternal recurrence was the ethical issue.” (251). To any of those unaware of Nietzsche’s eternal recurrence, the story goes something like this: imagine a demon approaches you, and informs your life is actually a record player, and the needle will never be lifted; you will repeat your life bit-for-bit until the end of time. The ethical translation can be read as something of a categorical imperative – live your life in such a way that this would be the greatest possible news. If the news sends you into a pit of despair, if you have at all any reason to curse the demon, then you have been careless in the strokes you’ve made on the canvas of your life. The ethical goal is to engineer a life worth reliving forever, to treat yourself with pride and dignity, as a well-considered, artistic project of identity. Joel and Clementine are on the verge of a catastrophic replay, which neither of them can detect on their own, or, once alerted by the tapes, cares to prevent. Nietzsche’s demon has convinced them, but not seriously perturbed them enough as to alter their course. Is their sanguine choice to try again really ethical? The final version of the film – the one released to theaters – certainly seems to celebrate the decision. This ending was disappointing for some astute critics who were tantalized by an earlier draft of the script, reportedly adrift on the web, which showed an elderly Joel and Clementine returning to Lacuna for the umpteenth time in order to have their grief erased again (Shepard 127). Here, the quandary is very discernible. Once, and the two are admirable romantics, even humanity’s heroes, having the capacity to change and a renewed hope for a more perfect love. Twice or more, and it’s impossible to maintain the same optimism. To really mull
over the alternate ending, in conjunction with pervasive, comforting ideals about human nature, Joel’s behavior must be appalling to us. Joel begins as a victim of fate, with a rare opportunity to rewrite the past. The turmoil and remorse Joel felt over the procedure will somewhat lessen the consternation we might be harboring toward the procedure in the first place, but not any further. If Joel and/or Clementine makes a lifetime out of erasing their grief in order to keep simulating the original attraction, love, and compassion, they’re not the victims; they’re the perpetrators, and those sentiments are nominal.

The trepidation against biotechnology has always been philosophical in argument, not mainly a demand for safety, low health dangers, or other biological consequences. Surely, it may depend on who’s doing the talking, but what’s terrifying in general about human cloning and genetic manipulation? Only the most ardent proponent of biology would say it’s the shrinking of the gene pool. Really, there is a metaphysical understanding of ourselves with which technology like Lacuna Inc tampers. We carry around the idea of a unitary, nonmaterial self, a sum greater than its constituent parts. It’s more than our bodies, our brains, and our minds, although it has some source and attachment there. And when we watch Clementine get zapped from Joel’s mental past, we see how it’s authenticated by memory. Whose Clementine was removed? Obviously it wasn’t Clementine’s Clementine, but Joel’s Clementine. No other self can actually occupy one’s self. To say it simply, what Joel compulsorily remembers about Clementine – how he pictures her and their time together – was Joel. They were his memories, his imagination, and his imagery. All selves, most vividly ourselves and our closest, most loved companions, can only have a dependent existence. They depend on the synergy and competency of all the minds involved. Grau might be getting it wrong when he remarks “After Joel’s tragic race against the loss of everything that turns out to matter to him—every last memory of Clem—he’s the same
old Joel. That’s the tragicomedy of it” (Holbo 251). Unless Grau means literally the same “old” Joel, a fact that goes without saying, then he misses the mark. How telling it is that Joel’s reconversion to a introverted and plaintive demeanor is a “tragicomedy,” and not a cause to rejoice. What exactly are we to lament over Clementine’s Joel, his spitefulness, jealousy, bitterness, and unguided rage? Better he forget her than let the personal wounds fester, no?

Commit to empathizing with Joel’s ditch attempts at saving Clementine, and you’ll soon value sickness over health. The issue in closer register to our sensibilities, the tragedy of this tragicomedy, is the deliberate, and conscious blow to Joel’s authentic, realized self. The “brain damage” incurred from the Lacuna whitecoats was not “on par with a night of heavy drinking” like they advertised. Clementine’s roots were deep; it’s a wonder why anyone would expect the outcome to be limited to facial recognition and grief alleviation. Uprooting either from the other’s memory reverts them to a former self, but from all indications, that’s probably an improvement. Eternal recurrence is the ethical issue, because the two are likely better off apart. I haven’t verified Shepard’s claim of an earlier draft making its rounds in cyberspace, but if it holds as he says, a warmhearted reaction to the theatrical ending is unwarranted.

It’s not helpful to contest the rightful ending, if only to insinuate that it was the doing of profiteering producers, or to make aesthetic judgments. Shepard does precisely both in his critique of the film when he says that the theatrical ending “feels tonally disconnected from what has preceded it, and...gives the impression that rather than reaching a conclusion, the movie is running out of gas” (Shepard 127). In contrast to the fatalistic approach of the earlier script, the theatrical release does settle on a Hallmark-esque pitch of cuteness that seems partly at odds with Kaufman’s previous resentment for “solutions,” but we can only genuinely fault it if it is logically incoherent with the rest of the film. Being endearing does not alone provide the
sufficient basis for meaningful rebuke, and Kaufman has no reputation for shying away from puzzling or preferring the uplifting. Regardless of how shocking the alleged, earliest ending would have been, it does not necessarily follow from the tumultuous trip through Joel’s memory. Tonally speaking, the alternative ending would have been overtly pejorative of the human experience, and therefore more disconnected from the emotional crescendo of the film’s middle. Beyond that, the theatrical ending is philosophically stimulating and open-ended. There should be a variety of reactions to Nietzsche’s demon, and it’s misleading to definitively argue for eternal return in personal life. Mary, the Lacuna receptionist, demonstrated as much upon learning of her forgotten affair with the chief clinician. Attraction, love, and their inversions are likely not temporal accidents, and may be a facet of some larger, interpersonal reality, but not a binding reality that we must resign to, as Joel and Clementine alternatively did.

*Eternal Sunshine*, as it stands, is essential cinema. The amount of scholarly buzz surrounding it attests to its high level of inquiry into the topics of bioethics, memory, and the rationality of love, among others. These are not peripheral, inductive considerations to the people drama onscreen. Many times the drama itself is peripheral, and a platform for a closer philosophical examination. And, as always, Kaufman only gestures to a set of possible interpretations. The ending is either a creative misfire, a burden by money-minded executives, a straightforward closer, or a provocative tease, no less ruminative than the dense storyline developing it. But as I have shown, the contentment with simplicity probably falls more on the viewer than the film. That is, Joel and Clementine’s reunion should give as much reason to hesitate as to rejoice. Although it has the ample visual flair to compete with other fantasy/sci-fi films, and enough empathy for its characters to survive as a romance, *Eternal Sunshine* excels
past lazy genre categorizations, and should be judged instead by its ambition, and its supreme quality of writing, direction, and production.

Needless to say, Kaufman’s artistic scope transcends genre borders, and sometimes each and every film schema. Adaptation, Kaufman’s third film, and the one before Eternal Sunshine, is a masterclass in controlled lunacy. Just what has been adapted: The Orchid Thief to the big screen? Solipsism as entertainment? Kaufman’s own promotion of himself? If I were tempted to create a tagline for the film, it might be “a perverse vanity project”. Plot summary can be done with the following: Charlie Kaufman, played by Nicolas Cage, is charged with adapting Susan Orlean’s The Orchid Thief into a feature film, and flounders under the assignment. It might be remiss to take Cage’s gauche, wretched, neurotic portrayal of Kaufman as an insight into Kaufman’s own person, but the portrayal probably rings true sometimes, because of the historicity accompanying the story. The film’s catch is its blend of non-fictional aspects with screwy embellishments. The screenplay Kaufman finally submits is likely the script of the movie we just watched, but the living Kaufman forged some of the details. For one, Adaptation Kaufman’s creative struggles are waged with his supervisors, himself, and also his identical twin, Donald Kaufman. Both write screenplays in their shared home, and the scenes when Donald solicits Charlie’s assistance are among the film’s most amusing. The favoritism and cheerfulness Donald enjoys offsets his imbecility and ineptitude at writing a remotely novel idea. Charlie seems annoyed by Donald’s inappropriately good fortune, and dispirited for heeding his advice in his desperation. Donald eventually earns Charlie’s respect, so much so that he is humorously acknowledged in the credit reel – being completely fictional notwithstanding. It’s a fanciful metaphor for the driving need to self-actualize, to compromise between, and unify external and internal complexions. Donald is onscreen Charlie’s brother, but he is not a pretend person to in-
the-flesh Charlie, either. In Kaufman’s eyes (here on referring to the living Charlie), Donald is the archetype of a studio darling who reaps rewards for being an inferior talent. He is the Kaufman Charlie could be, and the one for which there are a great number of incentives to be. But Donald’s insipidity is not a nearby, viable personage for Charlie. He rehashes tired plot twists, like multiple personality disorder in a psychological thriller, and sweeps up the nonsense that Charlie brushes away. Donald’s fame is Charlie’s infamy, and his happiness would feel undeserved to Charlie. As John Stuart Mill might say, better to be Charlie dissatisfied than Donald satisfied. This is the fundamental thing about dignity; it will never willingly trade its lot for another. But Charlie is a troubled man, and lacks Donald’s buoyancy. At the rate Charlie is catastrophizing, it won’t be long before he scrambles himself into oblivion. For Charlie Kaufman, I think, constructing Donald in *Adaptation* was an active kind of symbolism. Kaufman was actually tasked with adapting *The Orchid Thief*, and he seems to be honest in *Adaption* about his inability to faithfully adapt the source material, and the distress it caused him via the hit to his self-image. Donald might have been a heuristic tool, a way to reflect on what Kaufman’s environment wants for him versus what he wants for himself, to understand his relationship to the space of which he’s a part, and in which he’s fulfilled. Donald is a lesser creative mind than Charlie, yes, but he has something to teach Charlie on how to be emotionally autonomous, and Charlie can only hear it when he recognizes and approves of Donald for who he is. Once his search with Donald has achieved its aim, Kaufman has some sadistic fun in disposing of him (spoiler: he ejects him out of a car). Of course, Donald did not die empty-handed. Charlie gave him the ending he would have wanted, complete with a chase scene, a villain, and a deus ex machina.
Kent Jones, a critic from *Film Comment* journal, mimicked the Donald-Charlie dialectic in his own review of the film, stringing in a conversation about the film with his younger brother, also a critic. He had this to say about Donald’s significance: “it’s Donald who finally drives Charlie to take *The Orchid Thief* past its real anti-climactic ending into a meta-climax that begins with Streep’s voice uttering the words ‘Something happened in the swamp that day…’” (Jones, 2003). Then, on how the film breathes adaptation from every pore: “[Charlie] must adapt the book, and he must adapt to the world around him. In order to do both, he must be dragged, kicking and screaming, into the violation business. He must violate the book…[and] his own impossible standards of perfection for himself and everyone around him.” (Jones 25). The irony of it all is in its circular cleverness, that it triumphs by its defeat. Kaufman managed to devise a game that he wins just by playing. He forfeits in the third act, yielding to the Hollywood machine, but does so conspicuously and smugly. He did exactly what Robert Mckee (might have) prescribed, to tell his story flatly and blandly until then, where he should raise the stakes, change the characters by their own volition, and fade to black right when we’re left with some feeling of closure. A peaceful surrender this was not. Kaufman shook Mckee’s hand at the bar, after he imparted the above advice, but it was a kiss of death, not a friendly gesture. The living screenwriter Charlie can manipulate the fictitious meeting as he pleases; the third act sees real Charlie make himself into a marionette (no wonder there’s a penchant for puppetry in *Being John Malkovich*). His written self acts relieved after the conversation with McKee – at last, a (be careful not to mispronounce it, Donald) denouement. As one watches the obvious contrivance of an ending, though, one gets the impression that McKee is eating his own words. Kaufman gets to satirize Hollywood while getting himself off the hook for writing a nonstarter. But there’s a tongue-in-cheek negativity to it too; the implication is announced by Donald when he eerily
states the hypothesis of this paper: “[About McKee] But he says that we have to realize that we all write in a genre, and we must find our originality within that genre. See it turns out, there hasn't been a new genre since Fellini invented the mockumentary...? My genre's thriller, what's yours?” Would it ever have been possible for Kaufman to write the screenplay he had adumbrated to Valerie? Was he the wrong man for the job, and if so, was there even a right man for the job? Kaufman doesn’t wrestle with only himself over how to best adapt The Orchid Thief, he jostles with the whole medium of film. Have the boundaries, or the creative parameters he faces been instituted by Hollywood, or are they embedded in literature, and to be more exact, fiction? Charlie comes into contact with a difficult notion, that there is a hollow potentiality in what he thinks could be his film. It’s wishful thinking in a strange way to want a movie to be made where nothing happens, not an “orchid heist” movie, or a love story, or any shade of conventionality. Kaufman, from the beginning, defined artistry as the privation of any inspiration, as sheer originality. His definition was untenable; he cannot even reconcile to himself what it would take for a movie to not be “artificially plot driven.” As in, a non-film, or a film devoid of human involvement? The desire for a film showcasing the beauty of flowers is logically contradictory. A time lapse of flowers, which is not coincidentally the final clip from the film, does not a film make, because films are simply a human endeavor. They must be recorded, projected, illuminated by pixels, and watched by human subjects. This reality of human handiwork is residual, and intrinsic to every enterprise of human minds, including Kaufman’s storytelling. His “standard of perfection” that Jones remarked on, was to be a superhuman, or a nonhuman creative voice. It’s a glib, dangling proposition of a philosophical kind, that maybe the rules (or “principles”, says Donald/McKee) of story-craft are flexible, or separate from the craftsman. The paradox – an oddity of cognition – is very adequately reviewed
by Timothy Dejong in his piece of scholarship comparing *Adaptation* to Northrop Frye’s theories about literature and structuralism. On the conceptualization of literature: “Literature’s sole origin is the human imagination, and since, for Frye, ‘the human imagination ... is always a form of “lying”—of reconstituting rather than merely representing the world of phenomena—the organizing principles of the literary universe are not identical with those of the world we inhabit’” (DeJong 67). Our imagination, probably with the accomplice of language, has a peculiar way of abstracting from reality a type of quasi-reality, where truth and falsehood in their everyday use do not apply. Northrop Frye seems to believe this is literature’s spell. When an author writes “Death visits us all”, to borrow a simple adage, the statement is only true because we can do some abstraction acrobatics to cull some unrealism from facts of realism. The realistic statement “everybody dies” gets modulated into literary expression in which Death capital “D” knocks on our doors, wears a black shroud, holds a scythe, and abducts us from our daily routines when we are least prepared for his arrival. Fantasy, no doubt, but it must have a counterpart in realism, if realism is what we say it is, namely, all that is real. Enabled by the manifold functions of language and our knack for abstraction, literature and fiction, or folklore, can seemingly tickle the processes behind data deciphering, so that – only arbitrarily and imaginatively – unicorns are real, demons do invade people, and the universe is shaped by a sympathetic, powerful intelligence. Literary truths derive themselves from the logic and rules of language, hence a sort of literary realism that abides by its own laws, and not necessarily the laws of the phenomenal world. Frye, Timothy Dejong writes, notices the trend of fiction over time to “shuttle” between imagination (primarily romance) and a newer response to imagination, reality (or “parody-romance”) (Dejong 71). *Adaptation* has furthered the case to dissolve that dichotomy by making the same step, “parody-realism.” Charlie wrestles with fiction and reality, because the film
medium has an even smaller keyhole for anything other than either. He’s confused by the elusive, quasi-realism of the literary/imaginative world; couldn’t he convey in a film the beauty of flowers, and nothing else? He can certainly say he could, but saying it does not make it real. He’s on a campaign against the stock narrative loosely described as tension-release, but nobody, least of all the screenwriting guru Brian McKee, will supply him with fuel. In Dejong’s view, “[Adaptation.] beneath its seeming navel-gazing the film is, I believe, saying something powerful and profound about the artistic endeavor: that the assumptions we make about the function of literature prove to be a significant, even determining factor in how we perceive and interact with the world around us.” Charlie starts by doubting, or missing the assumptions about literature: whether it can be unromantic, or unimaginative, or fictional and nonfictional simultaneously. He does so out of fear; fear that adaptation precludes the possibility of pure originality. And it does, of course, but it’s because pure originality is itself an idealistic illusion. The opening voiceover in the film asks “Do I have an original thought in my head?” And later, while ominous, atonal-sounding music plays, he has a fleeting feeling of accomplishment when he dictates a way to tie it all together. “Nobody has ever done this before”, he gleefully posits. But as he listens to his recording, his face goes blank, the enthusiasm vanishes. For him, it doesn’t matter whether an evolution sequence has ever been done in a film about flowers, but we can surmise why. Maybe Susan Orlean wouldn’t have done it, and his idolatry of her would prohibit it, or maybe he thinks it’s as hokey as it seems. Visually representing evolution doesn’t give him any creative ownership of the theory, and the purpose of his representation, to unite people with their perceptions of flowers, is contained in the larger theory of naturalism. “I’m a walking cliché”, he’ll come to groan, and he’s not wrong (although overstating it, relatively speaking). “[Frye’s] entire critical system rests on the idea that literature as a whole is governed
by formulaic structuring principles more than by originality” (Dejong 72). He slowly learns the plausibility of this paper’s thesis, that an artist can rightfully be called an artist when his work sits comfortably in a taxonomy of genres, that utmost artistry and commercialization are not mutually exclusive. He can thank literature, and the “romantic imagination”, which “not only makes the world manageable, it enriches our relation to the world around us” (Dejong 83). Genre manages the romantic imagination, and compartmentalizes it into even smaller realms.

*Adaptation* overcomes our assumptions about literature, our often unquestioned urge to find order in disorder, unity in disunity, and to rely on structuralism but never understand it for what it is. The multi-pronged realism that we encounter in literature connotes the denoted, signifies the insignificant, and designates genres amidst a world free from qualitative distinctions. Our romantic imagination is meaning itself, and Kaufman spots the stratum and substratum from afar in *Adaptation*. It’s activity by passivity, evolution as the unfolding of structures by themselves.

To entirely misunderstand *Adaptation* and this analysis, one would effortlessly count it among the ranks of the drama genre. And it is, facilely. But Charlie’s toils establish themselves through their antiestablishment character. He makes his own genre out of his anti-genre headspace. So much that can be affirmed of *Adaptation* is negation, it’s the stuff of antimatter. Joshua Landy writes, it “’meticulously ridicule[s] our demand for stories’… ‘it teaches us to see the beauty in stillness’ … and it’s ‘at a deeper level, the entirely nonnarrative portrait of a never-changing Kaufman’” (DeJong, 2011). Maybe Kaufman deserves to have a new genre named after him, the one he’s conceptually carved out and pioneered in *Adaptation*. Should we name it ourselves, it’s appropriate title would be as “meta” as this discussion has been, and as *Adaptation* is…something like “agenre”, or “Kaufmanism”…

**APPLICATION OF GENRE THEORY**
If we summon up the genre theory developed earlier in this essay one last time, I believe we can use it to measure Kaufman’s creativity. To reiterate, I don’t for a second presume that genre is the only means we have to describe artistic identity in film. I do, however, think it’s among the most accessible methods, and a somewhat precise metric to judge the amount of originality in some filmmaker’s work. It can make originality a potentially tangible, observable property. And originality could well be one of the only tangible bases for a more rational film criticism. Now, I can anticipate some objections to this proposition: some might wager that aesthetic criticism is necessarily non-rational, and therefore my ulterior motive is simply to mask my opinion about Kaufman as something “rational” or “scientific”. I might actually plead guilty to both charges, if they were posed slightly differently. For any criticism to be essentially more than a statement of taste, a triviality that no critic wants to admit to, it must be rationalized, or given the air of a universal rationality. I reckon that criticism can be rational in that sense, but only if it’s by the application of some agreeable standard. Originality is certainly a principle one of those standards. There may be many ways to evaluate originality, and so I proffer this theory of genre to aid in the process.

_Eternal Sunshine_ merges an idiosyncratic love story with an invitation to debate the core tenets of humanity. Should actual history override remembered history? How free ought we be to gerrymander our emotional memory, to redistrict our mind in such a way that neglects real pain but cultivates (artificial?) happiness? The ending asks us to wonder whether self-deceit is deceit at all. Does romantic love defraud our pursuit of happiness? Is it better, then, to just defraud romantic love? Kaufman does not preach to any of these questions, and for good reason. He gets out of the way of his own film, allowing it to maximize its question-begging. In reference to genres, _Eternal Sunshine_ is clearly a bit of sci-fi romance, but it’s neither, conventionally. The
majority of Joel and Clementine’s struggles happen exclusively to Joel (and in his head), while he holds to fleeting glimpses of her and learns to navigate the recesses of his own mind. But the setting and scale of *Eternal Sunshine* blur the lines of science and fiction. And although the romantic narrative follows the classic three-beat rhythm – “love at first sight”, the fall-out, and the reunion – it does so out of order, temporally speaking. The dissolution is the chronological middle, but in the film’s time, it is prior to both the beginning and end. Joel and Clementine, our romantic leads, are anything but complementary. Neither are they immaculate by nature. They are brought together by a curious self-interest, and torn apart when there’s nothing of each other left to be curious about. And if we are delighted by their resolution to take their nightmare for another spin, we need to seriously attempt to understand people’s propensity for change.

Furthermore, perhaps we should take *Eternal Sunshine* as a diatribe against the idealistic, metaphysical, and bulletproof love of other genre romance. There’s nothing hovering above or beyond Joel and Clementine, no imperatives besides the ones they determine themselves. It’s sadomasochistic to cling to, or be comforted by, the type of love depicted in fluffy, weightless Nicholas Sparks novels. That kind of picturesque love is demonstrably just an illusion for Joel and Clementine, but it’s an illusion they’ve seemingly bought into, and it’s an illusion that can be preserved once we’re willing to wipe the evidence against it from our memories.

**FINAL REMARKS**

Kaufman’s screenplays are all adaptations. They adapt postmodern thought into palatable, intelligible stories. He is acutely aware of his philosophical and artistic context, humming along on the newest software, and exporting some bold, rousing, yet intensely watchable films. His passion to outdo has not, and likely will not, be outdone. Brimming with highly-concentrated existential angst, he personalizes his creations with complex characters and
peppy dialogue. The directors he has worked with cooperate and collaborate in buffing out his scripts, and matching the content with a correct aesthetic. *Eternal Sunshine* was a rabbit hole, skydiving through Freudian psychology – Michael Gondry did it visual justice with an ethereal landscape and a chromatic palette of sounds and sights. Kaufman’s works are impressively thorough, masterpieces at the intersection of cerebral and visceral. *Eternal Sunshine* is a quantum leap forward for the sci-fi and romance genres, invigorated by lo-fi effects and private concerns of bioethics. How much importance should we place in genuine moments of happiness, enough to perpetuate a cycle of misery and planned forgetfulness? *Adaptation* turns genre on its head, and exposes our blasé negligence to the dichotomy of storytelling. In regards to the genre theory, Kaufman does not comply without some strain. Our current vocabulary of genre is more or less incapable of framing Kaufman’s default way of mocking both realism and idealism, and scattering a semblance of a familiar plot through uncharted thematic territory. One of the biggest shames of this generation of film is Kaufman’s loss of traction with the right supporters. His next movie is rumored to be animated, and two of his film projects seem to have been scrapped after the poorer-than-average reception to *Synecdoche New York*. So it seems, this impressive gap between his projects – now in its sixth year – is not intentional; he looks to be quite stalled by a lack of support. Obviously, I think the eminence of Kaufman’s record should not relegate him to the anything less than the most privileged screenwriter working today.

**AFTERWORD**

I came to this project for reasons alluded to in the conclusion. To provide some context, I’m a self-identified film nut with a philosopher’s eye for epistemological and ontological problem-solving. I’m very interested in the big questions, and I believe Kaufman phrases several of them succinctly in most of his films. *Adaptation* and *Eternal Sunshine* are beloved films that
have a near-infinite rewatch value. The latter broaches the piercing issues in the philosophy of self and the philosophy of science, and the former moves us closer to a philosophy of film and/or a philosophy of creation. Together, they would easily take two of the slots on my top-five favorite films. In fact, *Eternal Sunshine* is very likely my all-time favorite film, and I couldn’t imagine its rank being downgraded in the future.

During the contemplative process of selecting a topic, I wanted to deal with something not overly academic or scholarly, and obviously something I could enjoy working on over the course of multiple terms. Film still seems to me a quite accessible way to visualize complex philosophical problems, but it’s a capacity that many filmmakers and film watchers seem to not share, or be interested in. I’m not out to ethically fault the industry, or make a pompous elitism out of watching film, though admittedly the relative obscurity of the two films under review and the opening comments could be construed that way. I merely sought a way to make a personal hobby coalesce with my academic career in philosophy, and I thought Kaufman was my ticket to doing so. I was pleased when I began to research journal entries on his films, and saw the type of discussion taking place there. Even though the total number of articles seemed somewhat low, not entirely unexpected given the academic niche of film commentary, the ones that were available were making the kinds of claims I intended to make myself. Even more interestingly, there was a decent range in disciplines, from aesthetic journals, to professional reviews, to more general philosophy journals, to techniques in production, and so on. Furthermore, research into genre theory revealed the Redfern economic study on genre popularity and trends in American cinema. Combined with the artistic theory from Birch-Bayley, I developed a somewhat robust framing device to talk about these films. Understanding a film internally through thematic and philosophical interpretation, coupled with reference to some external fact about modern
filmmaking was how I could span a wide spectrum of critical analysis. Genre was that abstract, yet undeniable external fact about filmmaking, and I tried to stretch my analyses into the major corners of academic discussion. Had I not done so, I seriously doubt I could meet my page requirements while holding interest in this project.

Going forward, there’s still much to be said about Charlie Kaufman. I would like to see some sort of case study on him, perhaps pulled from interviews with the directors, actors, and producers he’s worked beside. As it stands, there’s a real shortage of information about him. It’s possible that he’s regulating his own fame; from what I can tell, he is definitely a quirky, slightly introverted guy. But I am personally worried about the current gap between his films. Unless he has taken a professional sabbatical, the six-year break between Synecdoche and now is alarming. I’ve heard many rumors, some say that after scrapping several screenplays, he’s trying to return to writing for television.

Beyond Kaufman, there is room for more discussion on genres and the categories of creativity. And importantly, I’m interested in linking these theories with theories on the criticism of films, or art criticism in general. At this juncture, I’m agnostic as to whether there should be standards for criticism apart from the quality of writing. But there are many cases about film theory and film criticism that have been as of yet unexplored. In this thesis, I suggested only one main theoretical framework for assessing creative works. However, I am satisfied with the progress I made over the course of this paper, and I thank my director, Judith Brodhead, and my second reader, Stephen Macek, for all of their valuable contributions to my project.
Works Cited


