Adaptation, Metafiction, Self-Creation

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When *Adaptation*, directed by Spike Jonze, was released in cinemas in December 2002, it was greeted with great critical fanfare. The film focuses on the travails of a creatively blocked screenwriter who struggles to adapt a nonfiction book into a Hollywood screenplay, only to end up writing about his inability to write. *Adaptation*’s artful and complex construction was extravagantly praised as an ingenious and fresh device, and the overwhelmingly laudatory reviews repeatedly showered on the film such critical encomiums as “wildly original,” “bold,” “inventive,” “daring,” and “unique.” However, the ending of the movie -- in which the narrative deteriorates into Hollywood boilerplate, complete with car chases, gun battles, and steamy sex -- was deemed a failure by many critics.\(^1\) Few commentators on the film read the ending as anything other than a disappointing sell-out to the hackneyed conventions of classical Hollywood cinema. Fewer still acknowledged *Adaptation*’s metafictive forebears and its place in a long line of stories that ruminate on the capabilities and limitations of narrative art.

This historical and theoretical shortsightedness regarding *Adaptation*’s narrative strategies and its denouement resulted in a critical reception in which the film’s originality was over-hyped and its ending was under-appreciated and generally misunderstood. A consideration of *Adaptation* alongside its cinematic and literary antecedents reveals it to be one of several works that document their

own artistic coming-into-being, thereby engaging in metafictive musings about artistic creation and the nature of narrative. Far from being *sui generis*, *Adaptation* is part of a body of self-creating narratives and, far from being a failure, the film’s ending is an ironic component of its contemplation of the nature of stories and the strategies of mainstream cinema. Placing *Adaptation* alongside earlier exemplars of the form may topple it from its critical pedestal but may concomitantly enhance the film’s perspective on the vexed interplay between narratives and that which they would represent.

The broad category of works that concern themselves with their own modes of discourse -- variously dubbed self-conscious, self-referential, or reflexive narratives -- has been well documented and analyzed. In *Partial Magic*, his seminal study of the history of reflexive novels, Robert Alter offered an overview of fiction that “systematically flaunts its own condition of artifice and that by doing so probes into the problematic relationship between real-seeming artifice and reality”(x). Such fiction includes works ranging from canonical, proto-modernist novels (e.g., Miguel Cervantes’ *Don Quixote*, Lawrence Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy*, Dennis Diderot’s *Jacques the Fatalist and His Master*) to avowedly literary twentieth century fiction (e.g., novels by John Barth, Claude Mauriac, John Fowles, Italo Calvino, Andre Gide) to recent specimens (e.g., works by Dave Eggers, Philip Roth, David Foster Wallace, Julian Barnes). In these fictions, beginnings, middles, and endings proliferate and commingle, and narrative perspectives are often multiple, contradictory, and of questionable reliability. Connection, contingency, and causality of event are no longer the bedrocks of these narratives, as once-upon-a-time is replaced by half-truths and twice-told tales. Alongside plot and characterization are questions and doubts about the very enterprise of narrative, as textual conventions, including coherence and teleology, are defamiliarized and held up for inspection. We are asked to confront simultaneously both the delights of stories and the textual awareness that these stories are being presented and mediated.

Many of these self-conscious works flaunt a metafictive agenda, offering up works that, in Robert Scholes’ words “assimilate all the perspectives of criticism into the fictional process itself” (114). Metafictions hold a mirror up to their own processes and turn their gaze back on themselves, giving us a double vision of both the product of the creator’s endeavors (the story told) and the processes that go into creating that product (the storytelling). These narratives add one more ingredient to the Platonic recipe of mimesis (showing) and diegesis
(telling) by also containing their own exegesis (explaining or analyzing). Indeed, they conflate all three modes, as interpretation and criticism become immanent with fiction. These works are, at once, stories that offer up familiar narrative pleasures, and theoretical contemplations on the purposes and strategies of such stories. The creative process itself is their subject, as they assign themselves the double task of presenting absorbing tales and then challenging the validity of our absorption in fictional constructs.

While they realize the pleasures and rewards of creating ordered visions of our lives, metafictions also recognize the great fiction of fiction: that life can be contained and mirrored within the narrative frame. As Christian Metz wrote, “A narrative has a beginning and an ending, a fact that simultaneously distinguishes it from the rest of the world and opposes it to the ‘real world’” (20). Inevitably, stories reduce and falsify what they purport to replicate. Metafictive works are intent on making us aware of this falsification by foregrounding the difference between the narrative experience, which is literally artful, and life experiences, which lack coherence and design unless we impose them. Whereas the putatively realist work strives to be as mimetic as possible, pretending only to describe and record, and thereby disguising its arbitrariness and incompleteness, metafiction calls attention to these limitations, admitting that it creates and constructs experience as much as it reflects it. In a metafictive work, we are, at turns, pulled centripetally inward by the plot and centrifugally outward by the narratological musings that overlay the events being narrated and thereby acknowledge the artifice of stories. We are simultaneously caught up in the narrative experience and exposed to the ruses of that experience and its questionable correspondence to what it intends to signify.

The digressions, involutions, and multiple perspectives of metafictive works are formal devices aimed at confronting the eternal concern of narrative art: how the fictional world relates to the real world, and how, in Scholes’ words, any narrative “… with its serial nature and its drastically selective bias, can ever yield an exhaustive account either of a narrative event or of the contents at a particular moment of the narrator’s mind” (114). Or, as the narrator of Samuel Beckett’s *The Unnamable* puts it, “For if you set out to mention everything you would never be done, and that’s what counts, to be done, to have done” (118). Stories, because they are ‘done,’ cannot be inclusive enough or manifold enough, a truism that frustrates and, indeed, paralyzes *Adaptation*’s screenwriter protagonist.
Although rife with interruptions, digressions, and adventitious strategies, metafictive narratives don’t necessarily abandon mimetic elements but, instead, encourage contemplation of the power of illusion to absorb and transport us. It is not that these works deny us the pleasures of the text. Instead, by foregrounding their mechanisms and admitting their wiles, these are stories that simultaneously celebrate the delights of storytelling and acknowledge the limits of fiction-making. Paradoxically, in making us aware of their limitations, these fictions, in a sense, begin to overcome them. The most successful draw the reader/viewer both into and out of the text; we are encouraged, at turns, to suspend our disbelief and dive into the story, and then to stand back and consider our immersion in fictional constructs. In the view of these avowedly narrated narratives, the most authentic fiction is that which openly acknowledges its own fictiveness. If all narrators are unreliable, then perhaps those that brandish their unreliability are actually more reliable and less disingenuous than those that do not. Bruce Kawin once explained this phenomenon as a sort of double negative: because the text goes out of its way to remind us that it is only a text, we end up finding it more candid than a mimetic text in its acknowledgement of its constructed status (14).

By laying bare their devices and deceptions, rather than camouflaging them with realist stratagems, these metafictions remind us of the fundamental randomness and arbitrariness of narrative choices, of what Alter called “the stunning arbitrariness of any decision to tell a story in a particular way and the endless possibilities for creating fictional ‘facts’ by telling a story differently” (221). In flaunting their very fictiveness, these deliberations on the ontological status of narrative encourage a figure/ground shift in which the reader or viewer is encouraged to refocus our attention on the narratological strategies, through which the story is mediated. Systemically self-conscious, they contain characters who are often aware that they are characters and a text that, by presenting the processes and pitfalls of creation as well as to the product of those processes, knowingly acknowledges itself as fiction.

Metafictive narrative construction is sometimes dismissed as, at best, cerebral playfulness or self-promoting pyrotechnics. In some critical quarters,

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2 This was the plaint of many of the reviews of Adaptation, which acknowledged its structural cleverness but failed to see any purpose behind it beyond the creators’ self-satisfied flaunting of their inventiveness. The best known attacks on metafiction, penned during the mid-century heyday of the form, came from John Gardner (who claimed that such works were immoral in that they lacked ethical enlightenment) and Wayne Booth (who also expressed uneasiness with what he called the morality of impersonal narration: authors and narrators who refuse to locate themselves conclusively in a fixed constellation of moral coordinates.) See Gardner, John. *On Moral Fiction.* New York: Basic
metafiction’s declared dissatisfaction with mimesis has been misdiagnosed as the death rattle of narrative. But, as Alter pointed out, “For a novelist, in the midst of the evoked fictional life of his novel, to devise a way of saying, ‘Look, I’m writing a novel,’ could conceivably be no more than a mannerism, a self-indulgent game. When such devices are integrated into a large critical vision of the dialectic interplay between fiction and reality, they may produce one of the most illuminating dimensions of the experience we undergo in reading a novel …” (xiv). And as Alter and others have demonstrated, metafiction cannot simply be dismissed as a modernist eccentricity, since its lineage is long and its reach is wide-ranging, from the ficciones of Borges to the failed silences of Beckett and the funhouses of John Barth. In spite of their efforts to exhaust all narrative approaches and to lapse into silence and surrender, and in spite of their admission that they are stymied by the unbridgeable gap between fiction and life, these tales still get told, even in the unlikely guise of a Hollywood movie.

*Adaptation* is an exemplar of a particular type of metafiction in which the narrative charts its own processes of creation. The narratives in question generally center around an artist who is creating a work in which, it turns out, he is a character. The protagonist is presented simultaneously as the putative progenitor of and the major character in the fiction, and the work that he labors to create during the course of the narrative is revealed to be the work that we are experiencing. Thus, although the character is, of course, generated by the text, it appears that the text has to some extent been generated by the character. The autogamous narrative becomes an account of its own birthing process; its own construction becomes both its central plot point and its structural principle. Narrative versions of infinite loops, these works present themselves as continuous and self-generating, as they end with the possibility of their own beginning. Such works are quintessentially reflexive in that they are not just fiction about fiction-making in general; they are fiction about the making of this very fiction that the reader or audience is experiencing. Their gaze turns back on itself, giving us a double vision of both the product of the creator’s endeavors (the story told) and the processes that go into creating that product (the storytelling). This conceit is often dismissed as artful narrative gimmickry, with a plot maze that leads us through labyrinthine twists and turns only to deposit us back where we began. But, at its best, this is a narrative structure that is able to accommodate,
at once, the fundamental pleasures of stories as well as the aesthetic and narratological approaches of post-modern art and theory.

Various critical neologisms have been proposed to describe this narrative phenomenon, all of them necessarily more specific than such generic nomenclature as “self-conscious,” “reflexive,” “self-referential,” or “metafictive.” Andre Gide, a repeat practitioner of this sort of narrative structure, called it *mise en abyme*, an expression deriving from the heraldic escutcheon that contains an image of itself which, in turn, contains an image of itself, and on and on, presumably spiraling into infinity. Linda Hutcheon’s term “narcissistic narrative” describes textual self-involvement but does not necessarily circumscribe the specific format of a work that appears to generate itself. Steven Kelman’s expression “self-begetting” comes closest to homing in on work that creates both itself (the story) and a self (the main character and presumptive storyteller). But the vaguely Biblical overtones of Kelman’s term seem an odd fit for works that proceed from a heretical want of faith in narrative conventions and in the creator as god to his created universe. I propose to use the term “self-creating” as the clearest designation for works that document their own creation and, in effect, comprise their own birth record.

The basic recipe for self-creating narratives involves a frustrated artist figure with a stymied project. As such, they proceed from a sort of aesthetics of failure by presenting themselves as the opus manqué that their central artist character spends the duration of the story trying – and failing – to create. The disparity between the creator’s disordered experiences and the necessarily ordered quality of narrative art is both the central thematic focus and the key structural principle of self-creating stories – not to mention the essence of their involuted endings. As catalogues of artistic blockage, these are stories in spite of themselves in which the central characters’ introspection, irresolution, and awe of the ineffable comprise both subject and method of the works’ narrative design. Christian Metz neatly summed up the paradoxical nature of self-creating narratives by calling them: “powerfully creative meditation[s] on the inability to create” (234.) In other words, although the creator-protagonists feel that their narration is unequal to the story they want to tell, their failures nonetheless result in stories.

In focusing on the creative travails of a singular authorial sensibility, self-creating works seem to remain grounded in the Romantic conceit of the lone artist: an individual narrating persona from whom the work emanates *ex nihilo*. 
But in juxtaposing the textualized artist’s blockage with the nonetheless finished product, many, *Adaptation* among them, embrace post-modern notions of the text not as a discrete entity generated by an individual, but as a dynamic locus of intersecting intentions, codes, and constructions. Such self-creating narratives broaden and compound the idea of authorship by rejecting the notion of a singular, unified creator that speaks through fiction to tell about the world. Instead, they suggest a systemic reflexivity in which the self that creates is not a “who” but a “what:” the system of the text rather than a person within it. Here, the text is no longer seen as a transmission medium through which the creator’s voice is carried but, rather, as a collaborator that generates art alongside the efforts of the embedded, embodied artist. Indeed, the finished product often seems to exist simultaneously because of and in spite of the fictional artist’s exertions. In *Adaptation* and other such self-creating narratives, part of the point is the creator’s lack of absolute jurisdiction over his creation; as the artwork seems to declare its independence from the artist’s control, he is ultimately acknowledged as a mere conduit for a variety of creative forces and traditions.

There are several narratological systems that are useful in codifying and analyzing the conventions of self-creating narratives. Gerard Genette’s classification of types of narrators and narrative levels provides a particularly felicitous approach to the strategies and structures of self-creating narratives. In Genette’s typology, events that occur within the world of the narrative, or diegesis, are termed *diegetic*. Events occurring at the level of the narrating act are considered *extradiegetic*. Genette distinguishes between what he calls heterodiegetic and homodiegetic narration. The former derives from a narrator situated outside

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of the diegesis; the latter, which is the defining attribute of self-creating narratives, derives from a character within the story. Genette points out that there are degrees of homodiegetic narration, so he designates those narrators that are also the protagonist of their story as autodiegetic (245).

Genette goes on to define any shift between two levels of narrative, such as between the diegetic and extradiegetic, as a metalepsis: a disruptive displacement across “a shifting but sacred frontier between two worlds, the world in which one tells and the world of which one tells” (236). Autodiegetic narrators and narrative metalepsis are the core devices of self-creating narratives, which willfully veer between the central characters’ experiences and their internal processing of those experiences. Because the central characters are professional fabulators, that internal processing includes not just their thoughts, dreams, and fantasies, but also their stabs at creation. Metalepsis in self-creating narratives causes intentional confusion about what is actually happening to the character and what he is imagining (Genette terms such confusion transgressive metalepsis.) The boundary between his lived life and his imagined stories is fuzzy and porous. This is particularly true in self-creating films since, as many film theorists have pointed out, film images do not seem narrated in the way that prose fiction is, and the concept of narrative voice (particularly the distinction between first and third person narration) is of limited adaptability to cinematic images. So, without noticeable fluctuations in visual style, it is difficult for an audience to distinguish between those images generated by an assumed extradiegetic source and those seemingly emanating from the mind of the protagonist.

This purposeful blurring of planes of action leads to another of Genette’s ideas: the concept of focalization (189). A focalizer is a character whose point of view defines and limits the narrative perspective. In the case of self-creating films, the story— and the images -- are affixed to and circumscribed by the cen-

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4 Several film theorists have talked about the realist cinema’s denial of enunciation. Noel Carroll, for example writes: “Seen as authorless, the film is taken for reality narrating itself, thereby imbuing what may be ideological with the aura of truth, transparency, and naturalness.” Caroll, Noel. Mystifying Movies: Fads and Fallacies in Contemporary Film Theory. NY: Columbia University Press, 1988. 153.

5 Both Bordwell and Chatman write about the problems of applying Genette’s literary narratological categories to the cinema. Chatman points out that Genette’s distinction between who “tells” and who “sees” the story is complicated in film narrative, since the homodiegetic narrator’s focalization is “after the fact and thus a matter of memory, not of perception. He tells or shows what he remembers having seen.” Chatman, Coming to Terms, 145. But this doesn’t seem to be the case in the self-creating narratives, where we seem to be looking at present tense mental images that are being created on the spot, rather than remembered. I have, therefore, found Genette’s notion of focalization useful.
tral characters’ thoughts, memories, and creations. However, it frequently takes a good amount of film time, or repeated viewings, for an audience to realize this and to decipher which images inhabit which planes of narration. Transgressive metalepsis is a disruptive and anti-realist narrative mannerism and is, therefore, perfectly suited to the metafictional agenda, which gleefully flaunts the fictional work’s constructed nature as a way of calling into question the narrative enterprise itself.

The most prototypical self-creating filmic antecedent of *Adaptation* is Fellini’s *8½*, in which film director and compulsive fabulist Guido Anselmi is thwarted by the difficulty of encapsulating his lived experience into his art work. Although hardly the first self-creating narrative, *8 1/2* is an exemplar of the form. Its strategies have been abundantly analyzed, but a brief review of its self-creating *bona fides* establishes it as a demonstrable precursor to *Adaptation*. It has an autodiegetic creator whose focalizations move osmotically across the porous boundary between his internal and external life, and between past, present, and projected events. Its plot revolves around the apparent failure of an act of creation, and its ambiguous ending suggests the possibility of its own existence even as its creator character despairs of ever being able to realize his artistic ambitions.

In the film’s diegesis, we are privy to the various characters, events, and emotions that Guido considers too unwieldy and complex to contain in a neat, finite work of art. Toward the end of the film, after the symbolic suicide that is apparently the result of his creative frustration, he declares a truce between the limitless complexities of his life and the limited capabilities of his art. At the close of *8 1/2*, Guido seemingly achieves an artistic breakthrough; structuring itself as a circle, the film contains, in its ending, the possibility of its own beginning. Thus, it seems that the story that can now be told is the one we have just witnessed, as *8 1/2* reveals itself to be the elusive work that its protagonist despaired of creating. In a sense, *8 1/2* has it both ways in that it gives us the simultaneous failure and success of the narrative enterprise. Although Guido thinks that he has failed to convert his life into a satisfactorily encompassing movie, Fellini’s finished film succeeds in presenting the audience with a work that at least acknowledges the frailties of fiction.

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Thematic and structurally, *8 1/2* revolves around the essential conundrum of narrative art: How can a single artwork be conclusive and also be inclusive of the multiplicity that inspired it? The answer, of course, is that it cannot. We witness convincing demonstrations of the variance, in volume and complexity, between Guido’s experiences and the creations that grow out of those experiences (although since Guido is the film’s focalizer, we are anchored to his internal point of view, making it difficult to definitively distinguish between Guido’s inner and outer existence.) But rather than surrendering itself to the limitations of fiction, *8 1/2* paradoxically mitigates against its ontological insecurity by dint of its own existence. In choosing to be, rather than not to be, the completed work stands as evidence of the possibility of going beyond creative impasse by demonstrating and then accepting the imperfection, inconclusiveness, and finitude of any creation.

The multilayered, cubist depiction of events in *8 1/2* and its implied circular structure forces us to question its validity as an accurate and adequate record of its protagonist’s experiences and emotions. In so doing, it makes us recognize its value in demonstrating its shortcomings. While arousing our interest in its fictional universe, the film also asks us to contemplate the multiverse that lies beyond the range of the narrative. The tension arising from this tug of war between the narrative pull of fiction and the critical pull of metafiction gives rise to stories that, in effect, transcend their own boundaries. This contradictory status is summed up neatly in Don Fredericksen’s précis of *8 1/2*:

*8 1/2* seems to be about a film that cannot be made, primarily because of a block in Guido’s creativity. But there is an irony in that ‘seeming’ insofar as it becomes clear that while the film which cannot be made is *8 1/2*, that demonstration is the making of *8 1/2*. We thus have the curious case of a film whose subject is its own alleged impossibility. (78)

*8 1/2* is made in spite of its self-proclaimed imperfection and incompleteness and, like *Adaptation*, it presents itself as the filmic realization of its major character’s creative labors. As a work of metafiction, *8 1/2* gives us a character who is both homodiegetic and extradiagetic: simultaneously in a story and also the creator of and commentator on that same story. Christian Metz claimed that, “Fellini’s film is composed of all that Guido would have liked to have put into his film … It is therefore not enough to speak of a ‘film within the film’. *8 1/2* is the film of *8 1/2* being made; the ‘film within the film’ is, in this case, the film itself” (232). Further, like many self-creating narratives, *8 1/2* contains its own hermeneutics. During the course of the film, we are constantly presented
with critiques of the movie that Guido is working on -- as well as, seemingly, of the one that we are watching. Most of these comments come from Guido’s collaborator Daumier, the shrill clarion of Guido’s artistic doom. Daumier finds Guido’s “tender, innocent memories of childhood … completely negative,” and pronounces the film “merely a series of completely senseless episodes.” During the screen tests, Guido is told that, “No actor could breathe life into the banal characters in your script.” Like *Adaptation*, the creator/focalizer’s artistic anxieties become part of the diegesis. But in spite of their self-doubts, these self-creating narratives manage paradoxically to rise out of their own concession that they cannot be made.

Alain Resnais’ *Providence* (1978) provides another cinematic analogue for *Adaptation’s* self-creating narrative. The correspondence is less neat than *8 1/2’s* and the conclusion less definitively self-creating but, in several ways, *Providence* nonetheless illuminates the latter film’s stance toward artistic creation. Whereas Guido arguably achieves some sort of artistic progress and renewal at the end of *8 1/2* (thus enabling the self-creation to begin), the protagonist of *Providence*, like that of *Adaptation*, ends up selling out to artistic falsification and simplification. Instead of continually waging the good fight against artistic compromise, such self-creating protagonists are weary warriors, defeatist and jaded about their own limitations and those of their medium.

In *Providence*, the focalizer through whose sensibility the narrative is sifted is a dying, and creatively stymied, novelist. For the first two-thirds of the film, he spends one long sleepless night concocting, revising, and discarding scenes for his next novel as a way of staving off pain and death. Sequestered in his house, Clive Langham spins a tale that, in the tradition of self-creating narrative, comprises the nucleus of the film that the audience experiences. Since the audience spends most of the film’s duration inside the main character’s head, we have few narrative coordinates beyond his internal life with which to orient ourselves. Unlike in *8 1/2*, it is obvious fairly early on that most of the scenes that we witness are actually taking place inside the novelist’s head. In Genette’s terms, the metalepses are more distinguishable than those in *8 1/2*, due partly to the use of voiceover, in which Clive bewails his artistic -- and bodily -- blockages, and partly to the variant mise-en-scene of the interiorized sequences.

Whereas Guido’s focalization passes fluently between his life as lived and his life as imagined, Clive remains at a god-like remove from the sources of his fiction. A fallible and unbenevolent god, he creates characters in his own image
by foisting onto them all of his fears, insecurities, and pettiness. But since he is severely limited in his powers of discernment and discipline, his fictional material is ever eluding him, slipping away from his grasp and refusing to be solidified into art. The characters in his novel will not docilely cooperate with their creator; they are constantly speaking someone else’s lines or entering the wrong scenes at the wrong times, usurping the control of the artist. Providence unfolds like a cinematic exegesis of post-modern theories of authorship, in which the notion of an all-controlling, authoritarian creator is abjured in favor of the multivalent, unstable text with a life and mind of its own.

Still, in Providence, invented life – fantasies and fictions – is considered preferable to actual life because the artist can seemingly wield authority over his own creations. For Clive, as for his cohorts in self-creation, stories are palliatives to the complexities of life and to the lack of control over one’s own fate. Creating stories allows the author to escape to a world in which he can at least pretend to exercise control over his own and other people’s imaginary existences.

Unlike in 8 1/2, where the death of the artist is a metaphor for creative aridity, here death is literal and imminent. Mortality is the explicit motif, and the effort to immobilize time through fiction writing is a major function of the textualized author’s creative endeavors. Both Clive’s novel and his life derive their sense of direction from an awareness of their respective destinations: the finitude of the narrative and the terminus of death. In both, it is the sense of an ending that endows the middle with meaning. Throughout Providence, there is a pervasive odor of death in both the frame narrative and in the scenes of the novel-within-the film. Further, it seems that rigor mortis has set in for the novel form itself. The lines that the characters mouth are banal, the characters themselves are effete, the settings are mausoleum-like. The film is, in some sense, an elegy for both its central character and his art form.

Resnais has described Providence as “the fight of a man not to die. He uses imagination to continue living. If Clive Langham stopped imagining, his body would turn to dust in a few seconds. His body is in such a state of disintegration that only his head functions” (qtd. in Yakir 6). And function is does – feverishly and relentlessly. The first two-thirds of the film document the inner and outer existence of author Langham during one long, painful, mostly sleepless night. Refusing to submit to the decaying of his body, Clive does not go gently into his pain-racked, memory-ridden night. Instead, he stays up to rage against the living, wreaking havoc with their lives as he rewrites them for his fiction.
This portion of the film takes place on three levels. We see Clive’s waking vigil as he gets drunk, stumbles, falls, defecates, collapses, tries to sleep, and all the while laments his inability to control his body or his mind. He cannot will himself to sleep nor, in those moments when he does doze off, can he prevent horrific scenes from coming into his head. Thus, he rails against his fate with curmudgeonly vigor, trying to combat his body’s frailty with the mettle of his mind. To keep himself alive and amused, and to exorcise the demons of death and exercise control in the only world where he still has any, he composes his next novel, toying with characters, and dialogue. The film intercuts among scenes of Clive in his half-awake, half-drunken stupor and focalizations of both his nightmares and his internally envisioned scenes from his novel-in-progress.

As a self-creating narrative, Providence is more problematical than 8 1/2 because it is a film about a novel being created and that novel is conveyed to us through film images. In other words, it is a visual record of the output of a creator who works in a verbal medium. But what we see is not Clive’s novel adapted or transliterated into film images. Rather, we see his mind’s eye visualizations of scenes from his novel-to-be. This is not the film version of a piece of prose; it is, rather, film images mirroring visual, dramatic mental images and fantasies.

The novel aborning is one of mixed modes, alternating between naturalistic and surreal scenes. Its topic veers from bourgeois angst and adultery to the approach of Armageddon during some future state of siege. The metalepses between Clive’s novel as imagined and his life as lived is signaled partly by Providence’s shooting style and décor. As opposed to the mahogany hues and plush textures of Clive’s surroundings, his characters’ world is one of neutral tones and stony surfaces. Whereas his voluptuary’s room is cluttered, intimate, and, in its way, inviting, their environment is empty, anonymous, and formal. The mannered mise-en-scenes are so excessively sterile and austere that they betoken Clive’s disdain toward his characters and their world. Throughout his imaginings, he delights in his role as god to his fictional universe by gleefully overstating his case: making his son Claud villainously callous, his bastard son Woodford pitifully pathetic, and the worlds through which they move heavy-handedly indicative of those traits.

But Clive’s contest with his characters is one that he cannot win, since it is, in fact, a contest with himself and he is both victim and victimizer. He makes up stories to evade his demons and, like Scheherazade, his sister in self-creation, to
deny death long enough to get himself through the night. But it doesn’t work; pain, fear, guilt, and memory break through the shields of his imagination and his drunkenness. Nightmare visions of all that Clive has tried to avoid worm their way into his consciousness. These images all pertain to violence and death: guerrilla warfare, prowling werewolves, concentration camps, and an emaciated cadaver commingle with his wife Molly’s bathtub suicide. All are counterposed with shots of the obviously dying Clive; it is clear that death has transgressed the boundaries of his novels and his nightmares. In spite of the power of his imagination, Clive cannot defend himself against the state of siege that is going on inside of his body. This is particularly difficult for him since, old sensualist that he is, the body and physicality are the only absolutes in which he has ever believed. But now he is incontinent in both body and mind, unable to control his physical or mental functions from pouring out their portents of death.

 Deliverance from Clive’s increasingly painful vigil comes only with the dawn. In the last third of the film, the field of vision shifts from Clive’s autodiegetic images to Resnais’ extradiegetic ones: a stark reminder of the constructed nature of mimesis. Since Clive has been the film’s focalizer up to this point, it comes as something of a shock when Providence opens itself up to the light of day. Clive, too, seems slightly surprised that, in spite of the dying of his light, he has lived to see the light of another day. It is as if both viewer and character have to blink their eyes a few times when they realize that there is a world outside of Clive’s head. As we soon realize, it is a very different world indeed from the one that we have been inhabiting. Clive dresses for his birthday celebration with his family, while lingering images of Molly dead in the bathtub and of the cadaver on the operating table eventually give way to a blindingly bright, lushly colored view of the expansive estate called Providence. As Clive greets his children warmly, we notice how much they differ from their fictional selves. Woodford, the piteous pariah of Clive’s novel, turns out to be his illegitimate son: a pleasant, mid-mannered astrophysicist. Claud, the heinous villain in Clive’s internal schema, is, like his fictional manifestation, slightly fastidious and self-righteous. But, by day, he is also thoughtful and, contrary to his fictional self, seemingly loving to his wife, father, and half-brother. Only Clive is clearly recognizable from the night before; he is as vulgar, insensitive, bombastic, and bullying with his children as he was with his characters. Late in the afternoon, when Claud reels off his list of key words from his moral language – honesty, scrupulousness, discrimination, protectiveness, tenderness – it is obvious that Clive himself
realizes that he lacks all of these qualities. It is this awareness of his own shortcomings that makes him flee into his fictions; the world that he creates is the only place where he can live with himself.

The much debated camera movement at the end of *Providence* explores the beauty and limits of that world.\(^7\) The shot occurs midway through the discussion of bourgeois values, as the camera tracks out diagonally from the luncheon table and then proceeds on a slow sweep around the walled-in estate. What this shot takes stock of is a beautiful, manicured, circumscribed world. It is Clive’s world: the world of fiction. This fenced-in expanse is a demonstrably limited world but those limits are what provide Clive with a defense against what he, at one point, refers to as “out there in the icy universe.” The fictional universe is, at once, limiting and liberating, and Clive is comfortable within it. He is less comfortable in his life than in his art because it seems that he has failed in all spheres but the one inside of his head. This is the source of the intense wistfulness of the final scene: the awareness that the world of stories and the world “out there” are irreconcilable.

As a self-creating narrative, *Providence* differs from *8 1/2* in its metaleptic strategies. Unlike the latter film, which begins and ends with its central character’s focalization, Resnais’ movie ends by taking us beyond the hermetic, auto-diegetic plane. However substantive the self-creation may seem, it is, after all, a fiction: an imagined world that is revealed to owe its existence to an imaginary creator. *Providence* works its way into a sort of narrative cul-de-sac, in which the ending essentially contradicts the focalization that has come before. This is, in Umberto Eco’s terms, a closed rather than an open ending, since its resolution is unambiguous, in spite of the rampant ambiguity that has come before. Rather than doubling back to its own beginning, as *8 1/2* seems to do, the extradiapeutically presented ending invalidates the story arising from the homodiegesis, insisting that after we have experienced that story’s ending, we cannot possibly believe its beginning. Contrary to *8 1/2*’s concluding suggestion of a capacious art, capable of achieving aesthetic harmony and order, Resnais’ film is about the failures and lies of narrative art.

and Providence are two among many cinematic forerunners to Adaptation’s self-creating agenda. Together these works challenge the critical coro-
nation that crowned Adaptation as unique and unprecedented in its structure. What is perhaps surprising is to find the narrative convolutions and aesthetic posturings of the form in a star-studded Hollywood movie. But with ludic glee, Jonze and screenwriter Charlie Kaufman adapt the self-creating narrative to their purposes and milieu, using – and, occasionally extending -- its conventions to ponder and poke fun at the creative world that they inhabit.

The self-creating lineaments of Adaptation are familiar. The central character is again a successful artist at the early stages of creation who despairs of his ability to engender his new work. He is fixated on the passage of time and his own aging process, and his perceived physical decline functions as a metaphor for his artistic incapacity. Although the textualized screenwriter Charlie Kaufman is adapting someone else’s work rather than creating his own, like Guido and Clive he is stymied by his inability to produce something original and authentic, and exhausted by the impossibility of being artistically exhaustive. As in the earlier films, there is a good deal of transgressive metalesia as Adaptation fluctuates among several planes of action. The extradiegetic presentation of his professional and personal struggles oscillates with the homodiegetic sphere, which includes his script in the making along with its source material, his fantasies, and his dreams (as well as some sequences of indeterminate origin, such as the one that begins with the dawn of time and ends with Charlie’s birth.) But in Adaptation, Charlie is not the only focalizer through whose sensibility the images are seemingly filtered. He has a doppelganger: his identical twin brother Donald, a wannabe screenwriter whose embrace of Hollywood commercialism is the perfect foil for Charlie’s artistic purism, and who is as creatively prolix as Charlie is blocked.

The character of Donald substantially complicates Adaptation’s focalization and metalesia, since there are no obvious visual cues or qualitative changes in the mise-en-scene when Donald’s sensibility takes over. A number of the film’s critics seem to have missed the shift, in the final scenes of the film, to Donald’s focalization, and have instead attributed the potboiler ending to a failure on the

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8 A few of the many examples of cinematic self-creation are Woody Allen’s Stardust Memories, Wim Wenders’ The State of Things, Jean-Luc Godard’s Passion, Chantal Akerman’s The Golden Eighties, Nagisa Oshima’s The Man Who Left His Will on Film, Marcel Hanoun’s Winter and October in Madrid, Andrzej Wadja’s Man of Marble and Man of Iron, Alain Robbe-Grillet’s Trans-Europ Express, Raoul Ruiz’s Three Crowns of the Sailor and Avi Mograbi’s August.
part of *Adaptation*’s creators. But given all that has come before, it is clear that the climax of the film is meant to be understood as the by-product of Donald’s aesthetic sensibility rather than that of Charlie Kaufman, the character within the film, or Charlie Kaufman, the screenwriter of the film. (Whether Donald is a figment of the character Charlie’s imagination or just a figment of the extradiegetic screenwriter’s imagination is not clear.)

Indeed, *Adaptation* has an additional extradiegetic layer that the earlier instances of self-creation lack. Although the character of Guido in *8 1/2* is generally assumed to be an autobiographical portrait of Fellini (who once called the film “sincere to the point of being indecent”), the movie’s only nod to its extradiegetic source is its title; prior to making *8 1/2*, Fellini had made seven features and two episodes in omnibus films (hence the half.) But the creators of *Adaptation* explicitly position the film as not just a self-creating narrative with a textualized creator standing-in for the actual creator, but as the latter’s putative autobiography. They go further than their predecessors in razing the barrier between implied creator and actual creator by giving the film’s protagonist the same name as its screenwriter, and by giving screenwriting credit to both Charlie and Donald (who, in spite of Jonze’s and Kaufman’s coyness in interviews, does not, by all accounts, seem to exist outside of the film.)\(^9\) Other actual personages, including author Susan Orlean, the subject of her book John LaRoche, and screenwriting guru Robert McKee likewise appear as characters in *Adaptation*, further toying with the boundary between fiction and reportage.

The film’s brazen metafictive interchanges between the diegetic and extradiegetic planes are established early on, in the scene where Charlie visits the set of *Being John Malkovich*, the actual Kaufman’s first theatrical film and an earlier experiment with mixing actors playing themselves and fictional characters. As the fictional Charlie gazes at the cast and crew of the film (including actors Malkovich, Catherine Keener, and John Cusack, director Jonze, and cinematographer Lance Acord as themselves), the divide between the diegetic and extradiegetic worlds begins to disintegrate with Pirandellian abandon.

*Adaptation* continues its breach of the demarcation between narrational domains by having the autodiegetic Charlie be aware of his creation’s metafictive status. His initial artistic breakthrough comes midway through the film. Unable to overcome his writer’s block and figure out how to adapt for the screen

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Susan Orleans’ *The Orchid Thief*, he has the inspiration – or, perhaps, the desperation -- to incorporate into his script his inability to write, thereby inserting himself into his own creation. At this point, the audience begins to realize that the scenes involving the events of *The Orchid Thief* are not Charlie’s only focalized stabs at scene writing that we have seen. Rather, the entire film seems to be the product of his mind, derived from his (and maybe partly Donald’s) focalization. The creative process and the creative product fuse to become one and the same. Charlie acknowledges this when he talks about the uroboros, the snake that devours its own tail: “I’m insane … I’m uroboros. I wrote myself into my own screenplay.” In this case, he has doubled back on and devoured his own tale which, like the uroboros, is no longer linear but, rather, coiled. Unlike Guido and Clive, neither of whom explicitly acknowledges himself as a character in, or the inspiration of, his narrative, Charlie understands his binary status as both creator of the fiction and fictional creation. Here, the metafictional acknowledgement happens on the diegetic, rather than the extradiegetic, level.

Although its serpentine involutions may go beyond those of *1/2* or *Providence*, *Adaptation*’s metafictional agenda has much the same purpose. As in the best self-creating narratives, there is a larger intention than mere narrative ingenuity. All three works, along with their metafictive counterparts, pose essential aesthetic and representational questions about artistic intention and control, and about the correspondence between the artwork and that which it would render -- between its grandiose ambitions and its inevitably diminished realization. Charlie complains, at one point, about the difficulty of adapting Susan’s book because it has, “Too many ideas … The reason it matters to care passionately about something is that it whittles the world down to a more manageable size.” This is not too different from Guido’s artistic frustration; although his film’s source is his life, rather than someone else’s book, he is likewise paralyzed because, like Charlie, what he is able to body forth seems stunted compared to what he imagined.¹⁰

The aesthetics of failure that defines self-creating narratives problematizes the mimetic agenda by contradicting the realist impulse to hide its devices and construction. In subverting illusionism and focusing on art as compromised rather than capacious, these works interrogate the canonization of the linear narrative, the glorification of the artist, and the credulity and passivity of the

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¹⁰ In dialogue that could easily migrate from *1/2* to *Adaptation*, Guido declares, “I wanted to make an honest film: no lies, no compromises.”
viewer/reader of conventional narratives. They disturb and defamiliarize textual strategies not simply to be perverse or clever; rather, each, in its way, examines narrative art’s production of pleasure and its relation to both its creators and receivers.

*Adaptation*’s particular focus is, of course, the production of pleasure as manufactured by mainstream, commercial cinema. As a self-creating narrative, its ending is clearly a critique of, rather than a capitulation to, Hollywood conventions. The film pits mindless, visceral thrills and cinematic excess (in the exuberant person of Donald) against ruminative artistic integrity (in the miserable being of Charlie.) When Charlie is first hired to write the screenplay of *The Orchid Thief*, he articulates his intention to remain true to the spirit of the book by, “let[ting] the movie exist rather than being artificially plot driven…No 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.” This catalogue of movie conventions precisely describes the end of *Adaptation*. The portrait of the artist as a middle-aged neurotic suddenly changes course to become a lurid tale of extramarital sex, drug addiction, and murder. Donald’s commercial instincts have hijacked Charlie’s movie. Whether the absurd ending of the film is Donald’s rewrite of Charlie’s script or whether it represents Charlie’s surrender of his artistic principles is both unclear and unimportant. Whoever’s focalization this is, it is incontrovertibly ironic and parodic. Its metafictional purpose is to provoke thoughts about Hollywood formula rather than to exemplify it. Whether the ending should be attributed to Donald or to Charlie, who has knuckled under to Donald’s sensibility, it is a self-satisfied realization of McKee’s earlier advice: “The last act makes the film … wow them in the end and you’ve got a hit.”

The intentions of *Adaptation*’s ending can be clarified by considering them from the standpoint of theories of narrative closure. In Umberto Eco’s schema, the ambiguity and arbitrariness of *Adaptation*’s finale mark the text as open rather than closed; its conclusion, far from offering absolute closure, is open to interpretation. But in order to arrive at this designation, Donald’s ending must be separated out from brother Charlie’s -- and from screenwriter Charlie Kaufman’s. Donald’s focalized denouement (which is, arguably, channeled through Charlie) involves the reunification of the brothers, a pseudo-profundity about passion (“You are what you love, not what loves you”), and, ultimately, the triumphant artistic and romantic breakthrough that has eluded Charlie throughout the film.
Conversely, the ending that originates in the extradiegetic discourse suggests artistic paralysis and compromise, stemming from the demands of Hollywood cinema to get with the program or ditch the project. Donald’s movie comes to a traditionally satisfying, familiar-seeming climax; Charlie’s is incapable of ending. As such, *Adaptation* is simultaneously concluded and inconclusive: at once, Donald’s movie and Charlie’s movie-manqué.

It is because the film’s ending poses such a challenge to the conventional cinema’s pretense of a self-contained and unmediated mimetic world that it has been so widely misunderstood. Richard Neuport’s elaboration of Eco’s distinction between open and closed texts provides a taxonomy and methodology for interpreting *Adaptation*’s narrative consummation, and suggests how the film challenges our sense of an ending. In *The End: Narration and Closure in the Cinema*, Neuport proposes a quartet of categories that ramify Eco’s classification of discursive tactics. In the closed text film, which includes most Hollywood productions, the story and the discourse are resolved at film’s end. The open story film closes the discourse but leaves the conclusion of the events of the story ambiguous. In the open discourse film, which Neuport posits as a sort of platonic ideal of narrative, the storyline resolves itself but the discursive strategies remain inconclusive. Finally, the open text film leaves both story and discourse open, indeterminate, and, literally, inconclusive (32-33).

*Adaptation* is an open text film masquerading as a closed text one. Contrary to appearances, Charlie’s story is not resolved since, like 8 1/2’s, it contorts itself into an infinite loop whose ending points the way to its commencement. And since the homodiegetic focalizers contradict one another and compete for our attention, the discourse remains suspended as well. The story as told by Donald is allowed to end, however implausibly, but Charlie’s story, ever the work-in-progress, is left in medias res. All’s not well that ends well, and the audience is meant to recognize Donald’s as the wrong ending, in that it is a disingenuous resolution to what has come before. But it is perhaps the only possi-

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11 In an interview, Charlie Kaufman explained his intentions: “What I wanted to end up with was a discussion rather than a conclusion.” Quoted in *Rotten Tomatoes*, <www.rottentomatoes.com/m/Adaptation-1118700/about.php>.
13 As Richard Neuport has written, “When the potential for a ‘disappointing’ ending is suddenly followed by an unexpected and tacked-on happy epilogue, which was unmotivated by either the story or
ble ending since Charlie’s film cannot possibly conclude. Like Tristram Shandy, his confrere in self-creation, he feels compelled to supply an on-the-scene, up-to-the-minute narrational chronicle. No matter how fast these autodiegetic narrators write or how much they mention, their narratives can never outpace their lives. Charlie’s final voiceover monologue, spoken as he drives away from a lunch date that ends in mutual declarations of love, is the quintessence of self-creation:

I have to go right home. I know how to finish the script now. It ends with Kaufman driving home after his lunch with Amelia, thinking he knows how to finish the script. Shit, that’s voiceover. McKee wouldn’t approve … Oh, who cares what McKee says; it feels right, conclusive…Anyway it’s done and that’s something. So, Kaufman drives off from his encounter with Amelia filled for the first time with hope. I like this. This is good.

The story writes itself as we watch, while Charlie futilely tries to catch up with the temporal flux. As Genette has written about Gide’s *The Counterfeiters*: “… the temporal (and spatial) interval that until then separated the reported action from the narrating act becomes gradually smaller until it is finally reduced to zero: the narrative has reached the here and the now, the story has overtaken the narrating” (227).

But at the conclusion of Charlie’s uncharacteristic, feel-good declaration, the creators of *Adaptation* cannot resist adding a coda containing some final bits of reflexive irony. The soundtrack culminates with the song “Happy Together,” a title that aptly sums up the simplistic concluding credo of a good number of Hollywood movies (and a song that Donald was intent on including in his movie.) As several writers have pointed out, such climactic movements toward romantic coupling fulfill audience desires, even as they countermand textual indicators of the incompatibility of the couple or the implausibility of the union.¹⁴ Charlie’s eleventh hour conversion to romantic, not to mention artistic, contentment has to be taken as an example of what Douglas Sirk once called the emergency exit: the improbable, last-minute resolution of the vexing issues that have defined the preceding narrative, as filtered through Donald’s sensibility.¹⁵ The final image of *Adaptation* is a deep focus, time lapse shot containing a bed of flowers in the foreground with heavy, and increasingly rapid, traffic behind it. Although this is

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¹⁵ Similarly, David Bordwell has written about the classical film ending as “… a more or less arbitrary readjustment of that world knocked awry in the previous eighty minutes” (159).
an emphatically ambiguous image, it seems to be reinvoking Charlie’s thwarted intent to make a film about flowers, while simultaneously playing with the notion of adaptation to an inhospitable environment. The shot harks back to the film’s punning title which, as the story unfolds, seems to refer less to the process of adapting book to screen and more to the process by which organisms survive in a Darwinian world: specifically, Charlie’s reluctant adaptation to the mores and methods of Hollywood movies.16

The double ending of Adaptation shares attributes with those of both 8 ½ and Providence.17 In its circular structure, which implies the birth of the narrative and the creative accomplishment of the focalizing narrator, it is similar to that of the former film. But its cynicism about the possibility of fashioning a narrative that does justice to its sources and its creator’s ambitions echoes that of Providence. For all its inconclusiveness, the ending of 8 ½, with its evocation of the circus, is celebratory and sanguine in tone. But the ending of Providence, although structurally the most conventional of the three, is also the most despairing about the capabilities of narratives. Rather than ending with the birth of the story, Providence ends with the implied death of the narrator and his narrative. Its elegiac conclusion is less one of celebration than defeat: narratives lie and narrators collude in the deceit — whether cynically, like Clive, or in spite of themselves, like Charlie.

Together the three films present all texts as a sort of adaptation. Whether the original work is a preexisting text or a life, every artist is engaged in the dif-

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16 Resnais also plays with the multiple implications of his title. “Providence” seems to be an ironic designation for Clive’s god-like stance vis-à-vis his characters. His estate is named Providence. At one point, Resnais shows the state house in Providence, Rhode Island: a shot that bears no significance to anything else in the film but seems to function as a sort of visual pun, and an in-joke for those able to get it.

17 Although Guido is a film director, Clive a novelist, and Charlie a screenwriter, the three films tend to elide the formal distinctions between written and filmic creations. In the case of Providence, the images purport to spring full-blown directly from Clive’s imaginings, rather than from an implied metteur-en-scene who visually interprets his words. Whether the focalizations in 8 ½ and Adaptation are meant to be taken as direct visual representations of the characters’ creative ideation or, rather, as the end-product of the collaborative cinematic process is purposefully ambiguous and indeterminate. Edward Branigan divides focalizing narrators into those “who show (present) and those who tell (speak and write)” and points out the “risks dissipating the distinction between narration and focal- ization” (106-7). Although these are useful observations, his, Genette’s and Bordwell’s taxonomies of types of narration go only so far in helping to parse what we see and pinpoint its genesis, since part of the point of these self-creating narratives is to fuse process with product, thereby confusing the issue of whether these images represent privileged access into the focalizer’s mind’s-eye or, instead, the consummation of their imaginings.
The hubris of all three protagonists in thinking they can be original, god-like creators of their fictional universes is contradicted by the films’ endings, which upend artistic vanities and frailties. As self-aware metafictions, these narratives end with a shrug. Peter Brooks’ comment on the thwarted satisfaction afforded by such endings applies perfectly to these works: “When ending comes, it is more in the nature of stalemate than victory … Our most sophisticated literature understands endings to be artificial, arbitrary, minor rather than major chords, casual and textual rather than cosmic and definitive.” He goes on to state that, in experimental fiction, “plot is often something of an embarrassment,” as *Adaptation*’s final, overwrought scenes surely are for Charlie (313-314).

Like many metafictive works, *Adaptation*’s thematized incompletion is more readily understood in retrospect, after repeated viewings, and in comparison with other like-minded works. In this, too, it flies in the face of the doctrine of movies as artless and disposable cultural products, manufactured for audiences comprised of passive and critically callow consumers. As a self-creating narrative, the film requires active spectatorial engagement to discern the direction of its textual signposts. Artful and proud of it, *Adaptation* is that rare Hollywood film in which the hermeneutics are woven into the diegesis with acuity and wit.

**WORKS CITED**


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18. As Roland Barthes claimed, “We now know that the text is not a line of words releasing a single ‘theological’ meaning (the ‘message’ of an Author-God) but a multidimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash.” *Image/Music/Text*. Trans. Stephen Heath. NY: Hill and Wang, 1977 (146).


