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Bókmenntir, Menning og Miðlun

The Art of Adaptation

*The move from page to stage/screen,
as seen through three films*

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HÁSKÓLI ÍSLANDS
HUGVÍSINDASVIÐ

MÁLA- OG MENNINGARDEILD

Big TAKK to ÓBS, "Óskar Helps," for being IMDB and the (very) best

Abstract

This paper looks at the art of adaptation, specifically the move from page to screen/stage, through the lens of three films from the early aughts: Spike Jonze's *Adaptation*, Alejandro González Iñárritu's *Birdman*, or *The Unexpected Virtue of Ignorance*, and Joel and Ethan Coen's *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* The analysis identifies three main adaptation-related themes woven throughout each of these films, namely, duality/the double, artistic madness/genius, and meta-commentary on the art of adaptation. Ultimately, the paper seeks to argue that contrary to common opinion, adaptations need not be viewed as derivatives of or secondary to their source text; rather, just as in nature species shift, change, and evolve over time to better suit their environment, so too do (and should) narratives change to suit new media, cultural mores, and modes of storytelling.

The analysis begins with a theoretical framing that draws on T.S. Eliot's, Linda Hutcheon's, Kamilla Elliott's, and Julie Sanders's thoughts about the art of adaptation. The framing then extends to notions of duality/the double and artistic madness/genius, both of which feature prominently in the films discussed herein. Finally, the framing concludes with a discussion of postmodernism, and the basis on which these films can be situated within the postmodern artistic landscape.

The paper then goes on to analyze *Adaptation*, *Birdman*, and *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* with respect to the light these films can shed on the literary endeavor of adaptation. Finally, the analysis concludes with a brief discussion of a similarly provocative film, Darron Aronofsky's *Black Swan*, and a synthesis of the main points gleaned from placing these three movies in conversation not only with literary and adaptation theorists, but also with one another.

The central thesis of the paper is that adaptations should not be viewed as derivative of, secondary to, or parasites of their source texts; rather, we should celebrate the multifarious ways in which stories, much like species in the natural world, morph and shift and adapt to different environments over time. The more we can embrace the kaleidoscopic lives that a single narrative goes on to live, the richer and more robust our appreciation of stories and the human experience will become.

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Introduction

Screen adaptations of literary and other art works have historically had a troubled relationship with critics and theorists. Filmic adaptations have often been written off as derivative, subpar, or, in the words of Virginia Woolf, “parasitic” (Hutcheon, “On the Art,” 109). Recent scholarship, however, has attempted to vindicate screen adaptation not as a derivative, un-original attempt on the part of Hollywood to cash in on a book’s success, but rather as a robust, multifaceted and multilayered art form in its own right. Such champions of the art of adaptation – among them Linda Hutcheon, Kamilla Elliott, and Julie Sanders – also point out that adaptation is not unique to our materialistic age or culture; even Shakespeare poached his storylines from existing narratives. Further, famed Modernist poet and critic T. S. Eliot wrote extensively about the relationship between new works of art and “tradition,” i.e., the existing canon of literature with which a new text is necessarily in conversation. Hence, Eliot’s famous assertion: “No poet, no artist of any kind, has his complete meaning alone” (4). Instead, the meaning of an artist, and of that artist’s work, stems from the degree to which it engages with the existing body of art. In this way, Eliot helps to undermine the Romantic notion of the artist as a wholly original, wholly innovative creator of that which has never before existed, and instead positions the artist as an heir to and adaptor of a whole body of existing work.

This paper pairs Eliot’s “Tradition and the Individual Talent” with the writings of contemporary adaptation theorists to argue in favor of the creativity, innovation, and agility inherent in the art of adaptation. Specifically, the argument centers on three 21st century films—Spike Jonze’s 2002 *Adaptation*, Alejandro González Iñárritu’s 2014 *Birdman, or: The Unexpected Virtue of Ignorance*, and the Coen Brothers’ 2000 *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*—and explores the ways in which these disparate films each deal with three recurring themes: duality/the double, the “mythconception” (Dietrich 79) of the mad genius, and meta-commentary on the art of adaptation. In the conclusion, the paper turns attention toward a fourth film, Darron Aronofsky’s 2010 *Black Swan*. It should be noted that with the exception of *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* these films are not themselves adaptations; rather, they are stories about, among other things, the process of adaptation.

Adaptation Theory

"Tradition and the Individual Talent"

T. S. Eliot's seminal essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent," originally published in 1919, sets forth two major theses regarding literature and literary criticism: first, that "tradition" is crucial to writing and understanding poetry (and in fact, all literature); and second, that great poetry (i.e., literature) must be "impersonal," distinct from the poet herself.

Eliot begins by redefining the word 'tradition' and arguing for its centrality to literary art and criticism not as censure, but as the canon from which present literature stems. Eliot acknowledges that we "[tend] to insist, when we praise a poet, upon those aspects of his work in which he least resembles anyone else" (2), meaning that we celebrate the components of a poet's work that most strongly deviate from what has been done in the past. But as Eliot argues, this is a mistake on our part, and we would do well to set aside our penchant for the 'new': "If we approach a poet without this prejudice we shall often find that not only the best, but the most individual parts of his work may be those in which the dead poets, his ancestors, assert their immortality most vigorously" (2). It is not novelty alone that makes a poem great; rather it is the way in which the poem engages the past in novel ways.

Tradition, by Eliot's reckoning, represents not an antiquated supply of worn-out verse, but a "historical sense" that perceives "not only the pastness of the past, but of its presence" (3). Artistic creation does not occur in a vacuum, but is rather an interwoven web of influences converging simultaneously in the present moment of the poet. This is why Eliot asserts that "no poet, no artist of any kind, has his complete meaning alone" (4); prior to a writer ever having set pen to page, all of the existing works of literary art already "form an ideal order among themselves" (4). This ideal order is then recalibrated to welcome in and absorb a new work of art, ultimately reaching "conformity between the old and new" (4). Eliot refers to this ever-evolving canon of tradition, this collective literary consciousness, as "the mind of Europe." The poet "learns in time" that the mind of Europe is "more important than his own private mind" (6), and as a poet matures, this expansive literary-historical mind subsumes the private mind of the poet.

This leads Eliot to his second and more contentious claim. In what he calls his "Impersonal theory of poetry," Eliot underscores the critical distinction between poet and poem, and argues that the greater the poet, the greater the separation between her personal life and her art. By Eliot's account, a great poet must "sacrifice" herself to "tradition"—that is, she must give herself over to the special "historical sense" that allows her to perceive the ever-presence of the past. In so doing, the poet evolves from being a mere "personality" to becoming a vessel through which poetry can flow. To illustrate this point, Eliot draws an analogy to chemistry: when a given catalyst combines with certain elements, unique reactions occur. The more powerful a poet's mind, the more capable it is of synthesizing and arranging images, language, and emotion in powerful ways. For Eliot, great poetry does not flow forth from a poet's personality, but from her lack thereof: "Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality" (17). Unlike the Romantics, who celebrated the unique spark of life in each individual, Eliot argues for an "impersonal" theory of poetry that shifts attention away from the poet crafting verse, and towards the verse itself.

Eliot's first argument, about the presence of the past and the reciprocal relationship between "new" literature and tradition, is particularly compelling when applied to the realm of literary adaptation. "Tradition and the Individual Talent" posits that contemporary works are always in conversation with the whole history of literature that precedes them, and nothing is purely new. Therefore, the true test of a literary work lies not in how many novel tricks it can nail, but in the depth and quality of its conversation with the tradition from which it stems. Accordingly, literary adaptations should not be written off as derivative or parasitic, but rather should be examined alongside the tradition to which they are grafted.

Eliot's second argument, regarding the impersonal theory of poetry, is more difficult to swallow. The severing of one's personality from one's art seems unsustainable, unhealthy, and a recipe for a miserable life. It also stems from a Cartesian/masculine notion that the body and emotions should be subjugated to the clear, rational, well-studied mind. A more feminist-inspired discussion might argue for the integration of mind, body, and personality into the work of the artist.

The tension between Eliot's two arguments – the ever-presence of the past, and the impersonal nature of true art – takes center stage in the three

contemporary film adaptations discussed in this paper: Spike Jonze's 2002 *Adaptation*, Alejandro González Iñárritu's 2014 *Birdman, or: The Unexpected Virtue of Ignorance*, and the Coen Brothers' 2000 *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* In what follows, I will use Eliot's theory of the dialogue among past, present, and forthcoming works of art as a lens through which to examine the ways in which these films offer meta-commentary on the process of literary adaptation. Taken together, these films span radically different plotlines, sociocultural and historical contexts, and tones, yet their themes – of the difficulty in adapting great work, of duality and double-ness, of artistic madness and obsession – are strikingly similar. Indeed, in different ways and to different degrees, each of these films depicts a feat of genius, obsessive artistic adaptation, indicating to viewers that far from being derivative or imaginative laziness, the art of adaptation is just as fraught, if not more so, as the art of creating wholly "original" work—the latter of which is, according to Eliot, a flawed notion to begin with.

Arguing Against the "Fidelity" Argument

Adaptation theorists such as Linda Hutcheon, Kamilla Elliott, and Julie Sanders seek in their theoretical postulating to move beyond "fidelity discourse," that is, the tendency for critics to judge the success of an adaptation solely by its fidelity to the source material. The true work of adaptation is much more nuanced and complex than merely miming what has been done in the source material, and indeed, as Hutcheon notes, she and other theorists "take it as axiomatic that adaptations also stand alone as independent works that cannot rely on reference to the one they adapt" (452). In other words, adaptations can, and often should, garner praise independent of their source material, such that even someone who has never read Shakespeare can, for instance, appreciate Baz Luhrmann's 1996 *Romeo and Juliet*.

In the article "On the Origin of Adaptations: Rethinking Fidelity Discourse and 'Success'—Biologically," Hutcheon joins forces with biologist Gary R. Bortolotti to introduce a new "homology between biological and cultural adaptation" (444). Drawing on Darwin's theory of natural selection and 'adapt or die' imperative, the authors argue that like biological adaptation, cultural and artistic adaptation should be viewed as "processes of replication" (444) and evolution. Their main objective here is, as the article's title indicates, to move beyond the fidelity argument and instead generate a way of looking at adaptation that does not rely (solely) on comparisons with the original text. After all, "biology does not judge

adaptations in terms of fidelity to the 'original'; indeed, that is not the point at all. Biology can celebrate the diversity of life forms, yet at the same time recognize that they come from a common origin" (445). Hutcheon maintains that cultural and artistic adaptations should operate in much the same way: "The basic question to be answered in biology has been: why does life exist in such a dazzling array of forms? This is, in fact, what prompted Darwin's investigation into the 'origin of species.' The cultural equivalent might be: why do the same stories exist in such a startling array of forms?" (446). In building this parallel, Hutcheon separates the core story itself (in the case of *Romeo and Juliet*, the story of lovers from warring families destined to death) from the many iterations that story takes within and between different artistic mediums. Perhaps what constitutes true success, she postulates, is not how faithful an adaptation is to its source—especially since the source itself is likely also an adaptation, as is the case with many of Shakespeare's plays—but instead the extent to which an adaptation propagates the core story. In Hutcheon's words: "the degree of fidelity to the 'original' is no longer an issue. What determines an adaptation's success is its efficacy in propagating the narrative for which it is a vehicle" (452).

Similarly, in *A Theory of Adaptation*, Hutcheon describes adaptation, somewhat paradoxically, as "a derivation that is not derivative—a work that is second without being secondary. [An adaptation] is its own palimpsestic thing" (9). The metaphor of a palimpsest is particularly apt here, as adaptations are necessarily layered, inscribed not only with their own independent plot and meaning, but with the markings of the source text(s) on which they are based. Hutcheon further contemplates this rich, nested form of art in her article "On the Art of Adaptation." Therein, she details her attempt to understand why we – as a culture, as critics – often "lament the results of moving from the page to the stage or screen" (109). Such lamenting comes as a surprise to Hutcheon, who positions adaptation and appropriation as central to the history of literature and the history of humankind. If the impulse to adapt is innate (or at least, extremely common throughout human history), then why do so many people view an adaptation as axiomatically inferior to its source story?

Hutcheon offers several possible responses to this query. The first entails the "deeply moralistic rhetoric" around the sanctity and "seniority" of literature over film (109), namely the idea that literature is a superior art form to film and theater. Celebrated novelist Virginia Woolf echoes this disparaging notion, describing film as a "parasite" that "preys" on the "victim" of literature (109).

However, as Hutcheon points out by way of film semiotician Christian Metz, “each medium (like each genre) has different means of expression and so can aim at certain things better than others” (109). A writer will look at a sunset differently than a painter, and a painter differently than a photographer, and a photographer differently than a filmmaker, and so on. A ‘story’, then, is never singular; there are always myriad ways in which it can be told, retold, and evolved.

Importantly, the process of evolution, adaptation, and appropriation draws on most, if not all, of the same faculties as creating an ‘original’ work. Thus, Hutcheon is right to wonder, “When we do all this”—i.e., when we make art—“does it matter whether the narrative we are working with is ‘new’ or adapted?” (110). Still, Hutcheon concedes that shifting a story from page to stage is a “fraught move” that often requires a substantial degree of “compression,” “trimming,” simplifying, and distilling (110). As a result, the filmic or theatrical adaptations of novels can appear ‘dumbed down’ or superficial compared to the original, which further feeds into the notion of adaptations as inferior to source texts.

Of course, it is not only the storyline that shifts from one medium to another; the audience’s engagement with the story shifts as well: “With literature, we start in the realm of imagination [...] We can stop reading at any point; we can reread or skip ahead; we can hold the book in our hands and feel (as well as see) how much of the story remains to be read. But with film and stage adaptations, we are caught in an unrelenting, forward-driving story” (110). This shift is not inherently good or bad, but it is a shift nonetheless. So, too, with the experience of seeing one’s favorite book turned into a movie: once we see the film version, we’ll “never be able to recapture [our] first imagined version of it” (111). Again Hutcheon asks, Is the inability to ‘unsee’ the film version of a book good, bad, both? She questions as well whether there is a limit to what we can call an adaptation. “Where does what we are willing to call an ‘adaptation’ stop?” (111).

The many questions Hutcheon poses throughout this article remind us that like us, she is still searching for answers. But on one point she is emphatic: “Adaptation is not necessarily parasitic. Instead, it is a fundamental operation of the storytelling imagination” (111). This is a riveting claim, and one that forces us to view adaptations not as the work of greedy Hollywood producers, but of the time-honored impulse of the human imagination.

Kamilla Elliott adopts a similar line of argument in her book *Rethinking the Novel/Film Debate*, specifically her “looking-glass model” of adaptation. Elliott

turns to Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* – specifically the idea that Alice is in the dream of the Red King, and the Red King is in the dream of Alice – to argue that source text and adaptation are like mirrors facing one another:

Looking glass figures point to a reciprocally transformative model of adaptation, in which the film is not translation or copy, but rather metamorphoses the novel and is, in turn, metamorphosed by it. Adaptation under such a model is neither translation nor interpretation, neither incarnation nor deconstruction: rather it is mutual and reciprocal inverse transformation that nevertheless restores neither to its original place. (Elliott 217)

Both source material *and* adaptation are bound up in one another and are the vehicles by which each other evolves. Neither the source nor the adaptation emerges from the process of adaptation unchanged; both are impacted, implicated, and in a sense rewritten in the process. Such a model helps to shatter, or make moot, discourse focused solely on fidelity to the original; indeed, the original no longer exists as such once the adaptation has been made. This reciprocal relationship can enable critics to move beyond discussions of how well (i.e., how faithfully) an adaptation replicates its source material, and instead view the source and target works as being in constant, evolving dialogue.

Julie Sanders, in her book *Adaptation and Appropriation*, goes even a step further to say, “my argument would be that it is at the very point of infidelity or departure that the most creative acts of adaptation take place” (24). Like Hutcheon, Sanders argues that adaptation studies should be concerned not primarily with making value judgments about a work's merits, but rather with “process, methodology, and ideology” (Sanders 25). Sanders further echoes the sentiments of Henry Jenkins (2006), who invites theorists to “read less in a linear and more in a networked and connective mode” (Sanders 32). Linking Jenkins' ideas to Charles Darwin's writings about adaptation and natural selection, Sanders notes:

Adaptation has, perhaps, suffered from an over-emphasis in post-Romantic Western culture on a highly singular notion of creativity and genius but is finding new purchase in the era of global circulations and the digital age of reproduction and re-makings. Adaptation and appropriation now provide their own intertexts such that they often perform in cultural dialogue with one another, so perhaps it will increasingly

serve us better to think in terms of complex filtration, and in terms of networks, webs and signifying fields, rather than simplistic one-way lines of movement from source to adaptation. (33)

It is these “networks, webs, and signifying fields” of dialogues and interconnection that make adaptation such a rich, rewarding art form. Similarly to Elliott’s looking glass model of adaptation theory, Sanders notes that it is the “inherent sense of mutually informing play” (34) between source, target, audience, and cultural milieu that make for a rewarding experience. And indeed, she writes, “it is the very endurance and survival of the source text, alongside the various versions and interpretations that it stimulates or provokes, that enables the ongoing process of juxtaposed readings that are crucial to the cultural operations of adaptation, and the ongoing experiences of pleasure for the reader or spectator in tracing the intertextual relationships” (33-34). In other words, what makes adaptations fulfilling and appealing is much more than their fidelity to the source material; they are engaging because they invite the audience into a matrix of connections (and disconnects) among different art forms and cultural markers.

Intertextuality, Meta-Fiction, and Postmodernism

In line with T. S. Eliot’s argument about the nested nature of literary influence, as well as Linda Hutcheon’s, Kamilla Elliott’s, and Julie Sanders’s writings about the matrix of connections among source, adaptation, culture, and audience, *intertextuality* refers to the notion that “no text, much as it might like to appear so, is original and unique-in-itself; rather it is a tissue of inevitable, and to an extent unwitting, references to and quotations from other texts. These in turn condition its meaning: the text is an intervention in a cultural system” (Allen, “Intertextuality”). In other words, works of art consciously and unconsciously reference one another, sometimes via allusion and sometimes via direct quotation. “Intertextuality” thus refers to the interconnection and mutual dialogue among different works of art, which in turn conditions the meaning of those works. On this note, Roland Barthes went so far as to claim that “any text is an intertext” (Barthes in Sanders 2), in the sense that echoes of prior and parallel cultures are always audible in a literary work. Similarly, Julie Sanders argues, “The inherent intertextuality of literature/art forms encourages the ongoing, evolving production of meaning and an ever-expanding network of textual

relations and value-systems" (4). This "ever-expanding network" is one that adaptation capitalizes upon and indeed enriches through its work.

The term "intertextuality" first appeared in the work of Julia Kristeva. As Sanders describes, Kristeva's theory of intertextuality extends beyond literal texts to include all forms of art: "[Kristeva] viewed art, music, drama, dance and literature in terms of a living mosaic, a dynamic intersection of textual surfaces" (5). As textual surfaces intersect and overlap—as is particularly the case in adaptation—they become, in Linda Hutcheon's words, their "own palimpsestic thing" (*TOA*, 9). Their meaning derives not only from one text itself, but rather from all the texts and works of art that intersect, overlap, or lie asymptote to it. Thus, while T. S. Eliot did not use the term "intertextuality," his arguments were much in line with Kristeva's theory: "his notion of the 'individual talent' was that it created new material upon the surface and foundation of the literary past" (Sanders 11). What differs between Eliot's argument and those of later theorists is that whereas "Modernist poetry [...] practiced intertextuality in the form of quotation, allusion, collage, *bricolage*, and fragment," current adaptation theory seeks "to theorize an interrelation between texts which is fundamental to their existence and which at times seems to get to the heart of the literary, and especially the reading, experience" (Sanders 11). This is to say, current adaptation theory, and the adaptations analyzed in this paper, plumbs works for deep, essential instances of intertextuality—ones that exist not at the surface (as may be the case for, say, quotations and allusion) but that form the foundation of the entire work. Such is the nature of adaptation: the ground on which the adaptation rests is its intertextual relationship with the source material. Without the source, there would be nothing to adapt.

For this reason, post-structuralist theorists like Kristeva and Barthes "place a great deal of emphasis on the *between-ness* of the text, the fact that meaning exists between texts rather than inside (as a kind of possession, identity, or secret to be discovered" (Allen, "Intertextuality"). Put differently, "a text's *inside* comes from that field of meaning (cultural discourses) which exists on the *outside*" (Allen, "Intertextuality"). Adaptations therefore not only encourage but also require us to look beyond the work itself to see what meanings exist *between* the adaptation, its source, and whatever other cultural signposts are on its path.

What distinguishes the films discussed in this paper from other works is not necessarily their intertextuality, but rather their self-consciousness. Each of the films selected has a strong metafictional bent, "hold[ing] a mirror up to their own

processes and turn[ing] 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 the product (the storytelling)" (Levinson 158). This embrace of the metafictional, and of transparency of creation, situates these films firmly in the postmodernist camp, in the sense that they allow viewers behind the scenes, as it were, to dismantle the notion that stories are neat, tidy entities. The creative process is inherently messy, perhaps all the more so in the case of adaptation. Thus, the characters in these films grapple not only with surface-level plot obstacles, but with the whole notion of creation itself by "engaging in metafictional musings about artistic creation and the nature of narrative" (Levinson 158). Indeed, one of postmodernism's defining characteristics is that "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" (158). The postmodern takes nothing for granted, adopting a "questioning stance" toward "the conventions of narrative" and creation (Hutcheon, "A Poetics" 106). Such a stance is evident in the metafictional techniques employed by these films, because they seek to draw back the curtain, as it were, and grant viewers a look at the artifice of the work.

One of the many "paradoxes" of postmodernism is that it "signals its dependence by its *use* of the canon, but reveals its rebellion through its ironic *abuse* of [the canon]" (Hutcheon "A Poetics" 130). Whereas for the modernists intertextuality served to situate a work within the existing canon and/or prove that the present pales in comparison to the past, postmodern intertextuality serves instead to rewrite the past in light of new knowledge and cultural concerns. Such is certainly the case in the adaptations discussed in this paper: the films engage with canonical works like Homer's *Odyssey*, Tchaicovsky's *Swan Lake*, and Raymond Carver's "What We Talk About When We Talk About Love," not to glorify these works, but rather to critique and in a sense rewrite them. After all, as Elliott's looking glass theory asserts, adaptation and source undergo reciprocal rewriting and reimagining.

The metafictional element present in each of the films discussed results in an increasingly layered and robust web of meaning. Indeed, by taking "the creative process itself [as] their subject," these films "assign themselves the double task of presenting absorbing tales and then challenging the validity of our absorption in fictional constructs" (Levinson 159). This "double task" is far from arbitrary; in fact it is firmly rooted in and coterminous with the process of adaptation, which is

inherently double in that it contains both an adaptation and a source (among many other references and intertexts). For this reason, the impulse toward metafiction in these films can be seen not only as indicative of the directors' postmodern lean, but more compellingly as part and parcel of the art of adaptation.

Duality/The Double

Just as an adaptation contains within it the adaptation and its source, and just as postmodern methods of narrating contain both the fiction and the meta-awareness of that fiction-making process, so too do these films dramatize the 'dual' nature of adaptation in a postmodern era via their characters and plotlines. In Spike Jonze's (2002) *Adaptation*, themes of duality and the double occur via the Kaufman twin characters, the dual timeline of the plot, the protagonist's outer world as contrasted with his inner monologue, and the notion of 'true' art as opposed to Hollywood fodder. Alejandro G. Iñárritu's (2014) *Birdman* follows a similar approach, featuring not only the protagonist but also his alter-ego, and pitting screen against stage, film against theatre, Hollywood against Broadway. Darron Aronofsky's (2010) *Black Swan* captures duality in the nature of the adaptation of *Swan Lake*: the prima ballerina must play both the light and dark roles of the swan. Duality in the film is driven home by the protagonist's doppelganger, a fellow ballerina who is as dark and carefree as the protagonist is light and contained. Finally, the Coen brothers' (2000) *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* contrasts high and low culture, poking fun at both along the way.

As Gordon Slethaug points out in his book *The Play of the Double in Postmodern American Literature*, the impulse toward duality in literature is neither entirely postmodern nor entirely American; consider, for instance, Robert Louis Stevenson's *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* or Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Double*. In contemporary literature, we find a "rich variety of meanings attached to the sign of the double, which has been used to illustrate the desire for unity in the human personality and spirit but now signals double purposes, fragmented understandings, and self-parody in all life and literature" (Slethaug 2). Such "double purposes," fragmentation, and "self-parody" are all features of postmodern literature. Indeed, recently, argues Slethaug, the double in American literature has shunned the notion of a single, unified Cartesian self in favor of exploring "a divided and discontinuous self in a fragmented universe" (3). Further,

Its mission is to decenter the concept of the self, to view human reality as a construct, and to explore the inevitable drift of signifiers away from their referents. [The double] assumes that the human being is a locus of contradictions in a reality of conflicting discourses and discursive practices. This formalist, performative position displaces the mimetic stance, values artifice over verisimilitude, and esteems the autotelic and self-referential in fiction. In recognizing previously marginalized modes of narration and depictions of characters, it confirms the split sign, the split self, and the split text (Slethaug 3-4).

In each of the films considered in this paper, we see clearly this sense of “splitting”—not only in the characters and plot beats, but also in the tendency toward postmodern meta-commentary on fiction and, in these cases, the art of adaptation. Just as “human reality” is being portrayed as a “construct,” so too is the “artifice” of artistic creation exposed and, in many ways, celebrated for its transparency. These films certainly position “the human being [as] a locus of contradictions in a reality of conflicting discourses and discursive practices,” as evidenced by the splitting of characters in two and the fraught process of artistic adaptation they undertake. As Slethaug elaborates,

People are themselves, then, not whole beings but ‘strange empirico-transcendental doublets,’ simultaneously experiencing and conceptualizing, living and speaking in no systematic, binary fashion. Captives of conflicting impulses, cultural processes, and discursive practices, they try, without much success, to characterize themselves as ‘one,’ though recognizing inherent polarities: heart and soul, good and evil, mind and body. To recognize the self as ‘two-of’ or possibly many more than two-of is to engage in ‘the world’s play at the level of its decentering’ (Slethaug 25).

The films in question in this paper do not posit a single, unified self—nor a single, unified film or story. Rather, their interest is in fragmentation, evolution, and the change from one thing to another (i.e., the process of adaptation). All four films make psychological fragmentation concrete by introducing literal doubles – in the form of a twin, an alter-ego, a doppelganger – into the story. In so doing, the films make concrete the notion that people, much less works of art, are far from the neat, tidy, self-contained entities we once assumed and hoped they were. Rather, people, like works of art, contain multitudes and evolve ceaselessly.

Artistic Madness/Genius

Creative genius and mental madness have long been linked in the minds of scholars, artists, and culture writ large. Though the extent to which creativity overlaps with mental illness is up for debate, history offers many examples of the tortured artist, ranging from Vincent Van Gogh, to Ernest Hemingway, to Virginia Woolf, to Wolfgang Amadeus. The list reels on. To be sure, contemporary psychologists like Arne Dietrich bemoan the lack of solid empirical evidence backing the claims about the correlation between creative genius and mental madness. She sees “tales from the insanity zone” as “nuggets of pure gold for the true believer in the unlock-your-infinite-creative-potential movement” and notes that “there is no sign that this kettle is going off the boil anytime soon,” because after all, “Hollywood can’t get enough of it” (1). Indeed, the four films considered in this paper all embrace what Dietrich calls the “mythoconception of the mad genius”—the notion that creativity is often, and perhaps necessarily, coterminous with some degree of psychological madness. From *Adaptation’s* Charlie Kaufman, to *Birdman’s* Riggan Thomson, to *O Brother, Where Art Thou’s* Ulysses Everett McGill, the protagonists in these films are tortured souls, driven by their thirst for creative magnitude yet disillusioned by the gap between their desired and their actual creations.

Scholars James C. Kaufman, Melanie L. Bromley, and Jason C. Cole take a slightly less acerbic approach to the topic of artistic madness/genius, arguing that on the upside, “creativity may be one of the few arenas in which mental illness” may be seen as an asset rather than a liability deserving of social stigma (150). When it comes to “success in the arts or other creative endeavors,” mental illness “has been shown in a more positive (if idealized) light” (150). One could indeed argue that the films in discussion here idealize and feed into the notion that great art demands at least some degree of madness from its creator: Charlie Kaufman is tormented by incessant self-doubt in *Adaptation*, Riggan Thomson is haunted by his creative alter ego in *Birdman*, ballerina Nina deteriorates into horrific, violent hallucinations in *Black Swan*, and Ulysses Everett McGill, though a more comical character than the rest, nonetheless comes equipped with a host of verbal tics and an obsessive desire to, in Odyssean fashion, return home. What is illuminating for the purposes of this paper—aside from the fact that “the image of the mad genius or tormented artist persists in media, popular culture, and psychology” (Kaufman, Bromley, and Cole 150)—is the way in which this

fetishizing of artistic genius/madness coincides with other common themes of these films, namely, duality/the double and meta-commentary on the art of adaptation.

Although from a psychological standpoint, the theory of the mad artist may not make much sense, it nonetheless persists in the popular imagination and in the films discussed in this paper. Dietrich notes, "Standing tall at the top of the hierarchy of needs, creative imagination and expression is the hallmark of a well-adjusted, self-actualizing, fully functioning person" (3). However, these are certainly not the types of characters viewers encounter in the four films featured here. Far from "well-adjusted, self-actualizing, [and] fully functioning," these characters seem to be hanging on by a thread, desperate to achieve a worthwhile artistic endeavor for the sake of *becoming* well-adjusted, self-actualized, and fully functioning. The "selves" portrayed in these films are not whole, but fractured; such is the nature of postmodern artistic consciousness. However, it is worth noting that the supposed link between creative output and mental illness is not a postmodern phenomenon. Quite the contrary. Scholar Adrienne Sussman traces this theory back to the 4th century B.C., when "the connection between 'divine' inspiration and altered mental state had already been made, prompting Plato to expound in the dialogue the Phaedrus: 'Madness, provided it comes as the gift of heaven, is the channel by which we receive the greatest blessings...Madness comes from God, whereas sober sense is merely human'" (21). Thus, what the filmmakers in question here render is not a trendy, nouveau-Hollywood trope, but rather an impulse that has existed in human consciousness for millennia.

Chapter 1: *Adaptation*

1.1 Background

Spike Jonze's 2002 film *Adaptation* follows the trials and travails of a Hollywood screenwriter, Charlie Kaufman (who, incidentally, exists in real life and wrote the screenplay for this very film, *Adaptation*), as he attempts to adapt Susan Orlean's nonfiction book *The Orchid Thief* from the page to the screen. Kaufman soon encounters enormous difficulty in writing the screenplay as he realizes that Orlean's book essentially has no plot. He also struggles with debilitating self-doubt, anxiety, depression, and lack of self-esteem, all of which contribute to his writer's block. To make matters worse, his (fictional) twin brother Donald who decides on a whim to become a screenwriter like Charlie, yet suffers from none of Charlie's anxieties or doubts. Donald attends a screenwriting seminar held by Robert McKee, who purports to have a foolproof formula for writing the perfect script. Charlie hates McKee and everything he stands for, preferring instead to create 'real,' original art on his own. Yet Charlie remains stuck. Not until Donald, the more outgoing and sociable of the twins, poses as Charlie and interviews Susan Orlean does Charlie get the break he needs to figure out the screenplay.

Suspicious of Orlean's responses during the interview, Charlie and Donald follow her to Florida, where she meets with John Laroche, her clandestine lover and orchid-poaching protagonist of *The Orchid Thief*. When the brothers spy Orlean and Laroche snorting a mind-altering powder ground from the ghost orchid (which the pair also happen to be harvesting in a greenhouse in Laroche's backyard), a life-or-death chase ensues, and the foursome end up at the swamp, where Orlean intends to kill the brothers. In attempting to escape, Charlie and Donald's car collides head-first with a truck, ejecting Donald from the passenger seat and killing him almost instantly. Distraught, Charlie scurries back into the swamp to hide, but is spotted by Orlean and Laroche. While wading through waist-high swamp water in pursuit of Charlie, Laroche is ripped to shreds by an alligator. Orlean gets arrested, and in the final scene of the film, Charlie musters the guts to tell his crush that he loves her, and the two presumably live happily ever after—a (deliberately) perfect Hollywood ending.

To summarize, the film is replete with layers of the real and the imaginary, the primary and the secondary. In scholar Natalia Skradol's words:

First, there were orchids. Real orchids. Then, there was an orchid thief by the name of John Laroche. Also real. Then, there was a real

journalist by the name of Susan Orlean writing an article about this real thief of wild orchids. Then the real Susan Orlean wrote a book about herself writing about the orchid thief John Laroche. Then along came Hollywood agents, and there appeared a film based on the book. Or better still, there appeared a film about a Hollywood screenplay writer, Charlie Kaufman (Nicolas Cage), writing about himself writing about Susan (Meryl Streep) writing about Laroche (Chris Cooper). Then, the real Susan Orlean writes about the film *Adaptation* on her personal web-page. Just like Charlie Kaufman in the beginning of the film, one feels incapable of untangling the knots of the endless 'abouts'. There are so many 'a-bouts' here they all finally melt together into one long 'aaaaaa . . .', making you dizzy (*Adaptation*, "Adaptation," and Adaptation)

But, suggests Skradol, this "dizzy[ing]" result also suggests that beneath all the layers of meaning on top of meaning on top of meaning, there exists a discernable core—the stalk of the cabbage head, as it were—containing the "real, original Thing" (Skradol, *Adaptation*). However, as I will argue below, the film *Adaptation* is not interested in the "real, original, [capital-T] Thing." In fact, this desire to get to the "true" story—the one that precedes all adaptations and iterations—is not only futile, but also seems to recycle the fidelity arguments against adaptations that contemporary scholars have worked so hard to combat. The chaos of *Adaptation*—the dizzying mash-up of fact and fiction, biography and imagination—is the Thing.

1.2 Duality/The Double

The Kaufman Twins

The most obvious instance of duality and doubling in *Adaptation* is the inclusion of Charlie Kaufman's fictitious twin brother, Donald. Though the two are identical in appearance, their personas could not be more different: Charlie is self-conscious, plagued by anxiety, endlessly self-doubting, and possesses very strong opinions of what qualifies as worthy capital-a Art, whereas Donald is laid back, sociable, a lady's man, a bit oblivious, and has no qualms about cashing in on Hollywood pulp. While Charlie "fights an inferiority complex" and woefully attempts to wrangle Orlean's book into a screenplay, he watches "his less talented twin brother Donald use a formulaic how-to-write-a-script course to make a success of his first screenplay" (Cobb 105). Time and again, Charlie is cast as the brooding, disenchanted artist, while Donald is earnest as a puppy and just happy to be

here. In the words of critic Julie Levinson, Charlie “has a *doppelgänger*: 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” (172).

The notion of identical twins with wholly disparate personalities and dispositions lends itself to several interpretations vis-à-vis the art of adaptation. Identical twins form from the same egg and possess the same genetic material. One can perhaps make a similar argument for an adaptation and its source: they contain the same DNA, the same fundamental units of story. They differ, however, in their phenotypes—that is, the way these genes are expressed in the real world. Charlie and Donald may be impossible to tell apart at first glance, but the moment one makes a hand gesture or opens his mouth to speak, it is clear who is who. Similarly with adaptations and source stories: while on the surface they may look identical—for instance, bearing the same title, plot summary, and characters—they will necessarily be vastly different when brought to life. Extending this metaphor further allows us to consider one of the twins as the source story, *The Orchid Thief*, and the other as the Hollywood adaptation of said story. In this case, Charlie clearly represents the ‘pure,’ artistic-minded creator, whereas Donald represents the formulaic craft and profit-driven motives of Hollywood.

Levinson argues that in the final stretch of the film, the narrative shifts “to Donald’s focalization”: “given all that has come before, it is clear that the climax of the film is meant to be understood as a 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” (173). Levinson goes on to note in parentheses that viewers never know for sure “whether Donald is a figment of the character Charlie’s imagination or just a figment of the extradiegetic screenwriter’s imagination” (173). The important point here is that by the final scenes of the film, “the narrative deteriorates into Hollywood boilerplate, complete with car chases, gun battles, and steamy sex” (Levinson 157)—precisely because the focal point of the narrative has shifted from Charlie’s artistic sensibilities to Donald’s.

On slightly different analysis, Charlie and Donald can be seen as two warring sides of Charlie, the screenwriter. There is the part of him, perhaps the truest part, that idealistically wonders, “Why can’t there simply be a movie about flowers?” (*Adaptation* 05:03:00) to do justice to the beautiful and simple book

about orchids. But there is also the part of Charlie that knows the way Hollywood and the business of movie-making work. He understands that trying to pitch a plot-less film is an oxymoronic mistake. During the first half or so of the film, Charlie chides Donald and refuses to take him seriously. But once Charlie and Donald – the idealistic artist and the realist businessman – join forces to find out what really happened between Orlean and Laroche, the film gains forward momentum and these two seemingly incompatible impulses – toward ‘true’ art and toward good entertainment – begin to work in tandem. Charlie’s fractured self seems to have surrendered to and been subsumed by Donald’s impulse toward easy yet entertaining Hollywood tropes. And yet, Charlie must also watch Donald—his other half—perish just before the end of the film. Perhaps now that Charlie has managed, with Donald’s help, to wrestle a plot-less book into a feature film, he can ‘kill’ the part of him that pandered to Hollywood conventions. Or perhaps more compellingly, Donald’s death is not a tragedy, but a reunion: maybe by the end of the film, Charlie has finally sutured the two parts of himself into a coherent whole. He does, after all, get his Hollywood happily-ever-after ending.

Two timelines

The film’s narrative also fractures in two temporally, moving back and forth between Charlie’s attempt to craft a screenplay out of Orlean’s book, and Orlean’s attempt (about three years prior) to craft a book out of John Laroche’s obsessive pursuit of orchids. The division of these timelines comes full circle by the end of the film, when viewers realize that the film they just watched was, indeed, the adaptation that Charlie was working on throughout the film. The effect is something like a Russian doll, with a story within a story within a story.

But what at first seems like two distinct timelines proceeds over the course of the film to take on a circular, coiled shape. Charlie makes explicit reference to this circularity in his discussion of the ouroboros, the snake that devours its own tail. Charlie “has doubled back on and devoured his own tale which, like the ouroboros, is no longer linear, but rather, coiled” (Levinson 174). The clever wordplay here—tail and tale—are one of many small ways in which the film evidences the immense care with which this adaptation and its many layers of meta-analysis were crafted. Just as Charlie “doubles back on his own tale” by inserting himself into the story (“I’m insane,” he says, “I’m ouroboros. I wrote myself into my own screenplay”), so too does *time* in the narrative double back on itself, in the sense that events depicted early on in the film later reveal

themselves to be part of the adaptation in question. To take one example: very early in the film, Charlie tells producer Valerie that he does not want the adaptation to devolve into a heist movie, or a film about turning orchids into hallucinogenic drugs. At the time, such comments seem hyperbolic, the rants of a man who is overly concerned about shunning Hollywood norms. Yet by the end of the film, these and more conventions come to pass, and viewers realize that the film they have watched to this point is in fact the film Charlie has been struggling to make within the film. The result is appropriately dizzying.

Charlie's Outer World vs. Charlie's Inner Monologue

Adaptation opens with a blank black screen overlaid with audio that the audience soon realizes belongs to the mind of Charlie Kaufman. For "over two and a half minutes," we hear a bodiless, formless, "stream of consciousness voice" (de Zwaan 279). We are thus introduced not to Charlie as a fleshed out character, but instead to the anxieties and obsessions of his interior world. He says:

Do I have an original thought in my head? My bald head?
Maybe if I were happier, my hair wouldn't be falling out. Life is short. I need to make the most of it. Today is the first day of the rest of my life. I'm a walking cliché. I really need to go to the doctor and have my leg checked. There's something wrong. The dentist called again. I'm way overdue. If I stopped putting things off, I'd be happier. All I do is sit on my fat ass. If my ass wasn't fat, I'd be happier. I wouldn't have to wear these shirts with the tails out all the time, like that's fooling anyone. Fat ass. (00:00:20 – 00:00:57)

After another two or so minutes of this neurotic stream of reminders, doubts, and self-deprecating comments, the film flashes to real footage from one of (real) screenwriter Charlie Kaufman's most successful films, *Being John Malcovich*. No one on set seems to know who Kaufman is, though he wrote the screenplay, so he finds himself cast out the back door, standing in the blazing California sun, wondering how he got here. Later, Valerie Thomas, who hired Kaufman to write the screen adaptation of Orlean's *The Orchid Thief*, extols his *Being John Malcovich* script and excitedly proclaims, "Boy, I'd love to find a portal into your brain." Not missing a beat, Charlie responds, "Believe me, it's no fun" (00:04:30).

Therefore, audiences understand within the first few frames of the film that "Charlie's personality constitutes the perspective and the primary voice of the film" (de Zwaan). Indeed, in the context of the movie as a whole, "the lengthy

blank screen acts as a kind of 'foreword' to the film," and primarily serves to: (1) provide a "portal into Charlie's mind"; (2) act as "a corollary of the blank page the writer faces when developing his script"; (3) assert itself as "the *tabula rasa* Charlie needs to create in order to develop an adaptation that has some independence as an artistic creation from Orlean's book"; and (4) remind viewers of the "differences between the media of print and film" (de Zwaan 279-280). By providing this "foreword" to the film, *Adaptation* centers both Charlie's interiority, as happens in literature, and his exterior world, as is typical (and necessary) of film. In other words, one can argue that the divide between Charlie's inner and outer world, and the possibly problematic (at least according to Robert McKee's character in the film) use of voiceover, speaks to the difficulty of bridging literature and film. Literature is concerned with personal thoughts, opinions, and perspectives, and has ample space and form to communicate a character's interiority to readers. Film, by contrast, must rely on forward-moving visual, rather than cerebral, form, so it is typically more difficult to tell the audience what a character is thinking or feeling; interiority must be shown, i.e., externalized. *Adaptation* attempts to give us both worlds: Charlie's stream-of-consciousness inner monologues juxtaposed against a relatively fast-moving external plot.

This point becomes even clearer when audiences realize about halfway through the story that the film they have been watching is, in fact, the film adaptation that Charlie Kaufman has been trying to make of Orlean's book. Charlie's interior monologues, evidencing the gnarled thoughts and doubts of a tortured artist, are not tangential to the film itself; they are part and parcel of it. Thus, in this case, *Adaptation* closes (some of) the gap between literature and film, interiority and exteriority, by centering the bulk of the story on Charlie's inner and outer perspectives, as an author might do via first-person narration or third-person limited point of view.

"True" Art vs. Hollywood Fodder

Part of what makes Charlie Kaufman's project so fraught is that he sets out to eschew all typical Hollywood conventions; "why can't there just be a film about flowers?" he asks (*Adaptation*). When overviewing his plans for the adaptation of Orlean's book, he tells Valerie, a Hollywood film producer, "It's just, I don't want to ruin [the adaptation] by making it a Hollywood product. Like, an orchid heist movie or something. Or changing the orchids into poppies and turning it into a movie about drug running. Y'know?" (*Adaptation*). In return, film producer Valerie

suggests to Charlie that perhaps Orlean and Laroche could fall in love. Thus, Charlie's vision is immediately constricted by the conventions of Hollywood: "He is subjected to the hierarchical structure of the Hollywood film industry where the producer holds power. The screenwriter is an employee, contracted to do a job: that is, write a screenplay that can be made into a high-grossing film" (McMerrin *Agency*).

Meanwhile, at the opposite end of the spectrum, Charlie's brother Donald randomly decides, "I'm gonna be a screenwriter like you!" (*Adaptation*) and proceeds to embrace every tried and true Hollywood cliché there is, from high-speed car chases to flashy murders to a suspect cop with something to hide. Charlie scoffs as his brother's philistine, pre-packaged approach to screenwriting—especially when he learns that Donald is going to New York City to take a screenwriting class with Robert McKee, a man who claims to have a foolproof formula for writing a successful script. For Charlie, who fashions himself a true artist, a man of taste and originality, McKee's premise is blasphemy: "Look," says Charlie, "my point is, those teachers are dangerous if your goal is to do something new. And a writer should always have that goal. Writing is a journey into the unknown, not building a model airplane" (*Adaptation*).

And yet, perhaps unsurprisingly to audiences, Donald's pulpy script is a huge hit, earning him a seven-figure advance while his brother Charlie continues to bang his head against the typewriter in search of a way to tackle this adaptation. But even Donald's formulaic script plays an important role in the film, introducing another set of internalities and externalities to communicate with one another. As McMerrin writes, "The opposition and comparison of these three characters, "Kaufman"-and-Donald (as one composite character), Orlean, and Laroche, is also reflected in Donald's screenplay, *The Three*. Donald's screenplay is about a cop, trying to find a serial killer's latest victim; she becomes his Holy Grail. However, Donald's three characters are, in fact, all the one character, who is suffering from multiple personality disorder" (McMerrin, *Agency*). Of course, in *Adaptation*, Charlie can be argued to suffer from multiple personalities—or to at least try to solve his problems by way of other characters. Likewise, the three main characters related to the adaptation—Charlie Kaufman, Susan Orlean, and John Laroche—each have their Holy Grail, or ultimate goal: Charlie's is a screenplay, Susan's is passion about *something*, anything, and Laroche's is orchids. The interplay between *Adaptation* and Donald's script suggests that perhaps there is more to this fun-loving twin than meets the eye.

Indeed, perhaps, as McMerrin argues, Charlie and Donald are actually two sides of the same coin: Donald is an external expression of part of Charlie's inner world—namely, the part of him that desires to simply conform to Hollywood norms, get his paycheck, and be on his way, happy and carefree all the while. If we take this dual-identity as our premise, then:

The two characters can be seen as separate facets of "Kaufman's" negotiation of *The Orchid Thief* project, and their conversation reflects an internal dialogue of deliberation. By juxtaposing Donald and "Kaufman" as both the subjective (or speaking) self, and the objective (or answering) self, we can follow the internal dialogue that "Kaufman" conducts during the film. This highlights "Kaufman's" concerns and possible choices regarding the project he has undertaken. He questions the task ahead of him and weighs the options available. The easy way forward would simply be to write a repetitive generic Hollywood film, and still get paid a lot of money. But "Kaufman" has ideals, and values his writing as a craft: as creating a literary work. In contrast, Donald finds it easy to write a screenplay by following the accepted cultural order, whereas "Kaufman" has personal (authorial) concerns that he wishes to express. "Kaufman's" specific interests take precedence in his work and can be seen as other orders of reality impinging upon the social order (McMerrin, *Agency*)

McMerrin's language of "negotiating" is apt, as much of the film revolves around Charlie's attempt to convince his brother Donald that creating real art should trump selling out to Hollywood. Through the vastly different perspectives, opinions, and approaches of Charlie and Donald, *Adaptation* "pits mindless, visceral thrills and cinematic excess (in the exuberant person of Donald) against ruminative artistic integrity (in the miserable being of Charlie)" (Levinson 175). And yet, by the final third of the film, Charlie admits that he must revise his approach if he is to complete the screenplay: "he has to reassess his methods, and his options" (McMerrin, *Agency*). As a result, "his deliberations become more conventional, in keeping with the need to accommodate the constraints of the Hollywood cultural structure, and it is here that "Kaufman" must abandon his idealistic approach and allow Donald to take over. "Kaufman" cannot sustain his original concern of staying true to Orlean's book and also maintaining the screenplay structure" (McMerrin, *Agency*). When "Donald takes over," audiences know it: what has up to this point been a film centered on the circular ruminations of a troubled artist suddenly picks up pace and spotlights *plot* rather

than interior monologue. In fact, the film transforms into the very spectacle it set out to critique and avoid, complete with all the conventions Hollywood loves to recycle, and Charlie hates to even speak of: "Orlean and Laroche fall in love, the Ghost Orchid is a potent psychedelic, there are guns, car chases, and death. "Kaufman" as protagonist learns a profound life lesson, and the *deus ex machina* is included, not once, but twice. An unsuspecting Ranger causes a horrific car accident and Laroche gets attacked by an alligator. Ouroboros has been let loose. The characters have turned on themselves and are being deconstructed to death" (McMerrin, *Agency*).

However, whereas many critics have cast the ending of *Adaptation*, with its "deterioration into Hollywood boilerplate," as a "failure," Levinson rightfully disagrees with "this historical and theoretical shortsightedness regarding *Adaptation's* narrative strategies" (157). Yes, the ending of *Adaptation* features all the trappings of "the hackneyed conventions of classic Hollywood cinema"—but it does so for a very particular purpose, namely, to "ruminate on the capabilities and limitations of narrative art" (Levinson 157). Such "capabilities and limitations" will be elaborated further in the next section, on Artistic Genius/Madness.

1.3 Artistic Genius/Madness

Inner voice of artist

Charlie's opening monologue signals to viewers that his is a tormented, second-guessing, generally dissatisfied mind. In the span of a few seconds, he berates himself, bemoans his work, and questions his very existence. In many ways, Charlie conforms to the "Western legend" of the "tortured artist," that is, "the genius who creates great artwork despite (or because of) mental illness" (Sussman 21). However, because the tone of the film is generally comedic, or at least quirky, *Adaptation* does not glorify this legend. Self-deprecation, a key feature of Charlie's inner voice, helps to alleviate any sense that the artist here is being exalted. "Do I have an original thought in my head?" Charlie asks himself, "My bald head?" (*Adaptation*). The inclusion of the second part of this question—"my bald head?"—takes the edge off what might otherwise have been an overly dramatic existential inquiry. It is worth noting as well that nothing in Charlie's opening monologue speaks directly to his artistic work or lack thereof: he is instead razor-focused on his external appearance, that is, his "fat ass," his "bald head," his "pathetic" desire for a "full head of hair," and, finally, his surrender to

the fact that "I'll still be ugly, though. Nothing's gonna change that" (*Adaptation*). Given our discussion thus far, about the art of adaptation and the contrast between Charlie's "true" approach to art and Donald's formulaic approach to writing popular yet vapid pulp, it is worth pointing out that Charlie's ruminations in the film's opening scene seem almost Donald-esque in nature, in the sense that they deal with the surface-level of Charlie's outward appearance. This suggests that, as argued in the previous section, perhaps Donald and Charlie are two halves of the same man, Charlie Kaufman, each competing for center stage.

Part of Charlie's neurosis stems from his inability to "distance himself from his project" (McMerrin, *Adaptation*). This stands in contrast to Charlie's vision of Susan Orlean and John Laroche: "He regards Orlean as the consummate writer, shown comfortably working in her office, in contrast to [himself] hunched over an old typewriter perched on a chair. Laroche is a passionate individual who becomes engrossed in projects, but can then abandon them completely" (McMerrin, *Adaptation*). Interestingly, Charlie, the tortured artist of the film, longs to be more like the 'normal' people he imagines in Orlean's book. He seeks a healthier, more sustainable approach to the creative process, sometimes even seeming envious of his happy-go-lucky twin, Donald. Thus, in a quintessentially postmodern move, the film both reinforces and critiques the myth of the artistic genius. Indeed, as Hutcheon argues, the "paradox of the postmodern" is that "effects two simultaneous moves": "it reinstalls [conventional] contexts [and concepts] as significant and even determining, but in so doing, it problematizes the entire notion of [conventional] knowledge" (*A Poetics*, 89). Such is the case in *Adaptation*: the film "reinstalls" the notion of the legendary tortured artist, even as it turns this notion on its head.

While Kaufman, Bromley, and Cole argue that creativity is "one of the few arenas in which mental illness may be perceived" as a benefit rather than a hindrance (150), this is not the case in *Adaptation*—at least not as pertaining to effective screenwriting. *Adaptation* does not cast mental illness "in a more positive (if idealized) light" (Kaufman, Bromley, and Cole 150); there is very little that audiences envy about Charlie, even despite knowing his track record of screenwriting success. Such success is undercut by one of the opening scenes of the film, in which Charlie is on set for *Being John Malkovich*, a real film that the real Charlie Kaufman wrote the screenplay for. The crewmen on set do not recognize Charlie and tell him to get out of the way. He finds himself shuttled outside through a service entrance, standing alone in a glorified garbage disposal

area. His is not an enviable position by any means. In fact it is Donald—free-wheeling, somewhat vapid Donald—for whom all things seem to come easily. He dates beautiful girls, knocks his first film script out of the park, strikes up easy conversation with all those he meets, and appears to be having a great time along the way. If anything, then, *Adaptation* undermines the myth of the tortured artistic genius and supersedes it with another: the myth of the untalented yet successful artistic practitioner. The screenwriting setting is important in this regard, as Hollywood imposes a “constrain[ing...] cultural order” that places “limitations upon the completion of this”—or any other—“screenplay” (McMerrin, *Adaptation*). Indeed, Donald—the untalented yet successful artistic practitioner—“is that side of Charlie which keeps reminding him that, although he has freedom as a respected screenwriter, there are some aspects of writing for film that cannot be discounted” (McMerrin, *Adaptation*). The film thus parodies both the notion of the artistic genius and the practical constraints of Hollywood.

John Laroche, the “Orchid Thief”

But Charlie is not the only off-beat, potentially mad character in the film. John Laroche, who features prominently in Susan Orlean’s book, is similarly crazed by passion for his art: hunting, capturing, and collecting rare orchids. In the film, Laroche is portrayed as part-white-trash, part-wise-sage, part-mental-patient. His enormous, obsessive passion is, to Orlean, enviable: when at a dinner party her posh, entitled colleagues from *The New Yorker* “make fun of Laroche’s style, manners, and personal hygiene,” Orlean steals away to the bathroom for a minute and reveals, “I wanted to want something as much as people wanted these plants, but it isn’t part of my constitution. I suppose I do have one unembarrassed passion. I wanna know what it feels like to care about something passionately” (21:34-21:53) (Parveen 57). Thus, in contrast to Charlie’s anxiety and neurosis, which is mocked throughout the film, Laroche’s obsessive passion is introduced as another sort of artistic genius—a positive foil to Charlie’s self-defeating *modus operandi*.

For Orlean, however, the attraction is not so much to Laroche’s obsession; rather, she is bedazzled by the orchids themselves—these intoxicating flowers that “draw people so wildly and passionately” to them (Parveen 58). As she remarks in the film (and writes in her book): “If the ghost orchid was really a phantom, it was still such a bewitching one that it could seduce people to pursue it, year after year and mile after miserable mile. If it was a real flower, I wanted

to see one. The reason was not that I love orchids. I don't even especially like orchids. What I wanted was to see this thing that people were drawn to in such a singular and powerful way" (22:12-22:30). Thus, what guides Orlean's inquiry is a longing for that which the tortured artist possesses in excess: passion. But more than artistic passion itself, Orlean wants to understand the *source* of that passion, the identity of the entity that inspires such passion. Of course, Orlean's longing takes a strange, Kaufmanesque turn by the final third of the film, where she and Laroche, now clandestine lovers, have joined forces to farm the ghost orchids for their hallucinogenic properties. The pair have devolved into drug dealers. This again turns the notion of the artistic genius on its head, as these are not people to be lusted after or celebrated, but rather impassioned seekers gone wrong.

1.4 Meta-Commentary on the Art of Adaptation

Metafiction

Adaptation is aptly titled: the film is not only an adaptation of Susan Orlean's *The Orchid Thief*; it is also a film about the process of adapting Susan Orlean's *The Orchid Thief*. The audience's window into Charlie's mind makes clear that he is struggling with how he can and will adapt Orlean's text, especially given that it lacks the essential components of Hollywood success: plot, conflict, character arc. Charlie longs to make a "film about flowers," yet he is constantly constrained not only by the demands of Hollywood conventions, but also by his own desire to be successful and praised (paradoxical pulls that are perhaps best represented by Charlie's fictional twin, Donald).

Indeed, Orlean's book "has no narrative structure, but digresses among Laroche's story, Orlean's personal reflections, the passion orchids inspire in enthusiasts, and the history of orchids and orchid hunters. However, once "Kaufman" has accepted the project, he must begin his process of deliberation and creation, and negotiate his strategy for completing the screenplay" (McMerrin, "Agency"). He takes viewers along with him on this journey, from writer's block to self-deprecation to fantasies about consummating his intrigue about Susan Orlean. At the same time Charlie resigns himself to the fact that he will need to engage his 'inner Donald' in order to turn Orlean's gnarly, rambling, plotless text into a feasible film, *Adaptation* itself takes a turn toward Hollywood conventions. This is one of the many ways in which the film contains not only its ostensible content – Charlie's attempt to adapt *The Orchid Thief* – but also its

product: Charlie's adaptation of *The Orchid Thief*. Though audiences do not know this to be the case from the beginning of the film, it soon becomes clear that the film they are watching is in fact the film Charlie is struggling so hard to make throughout the film. We return to the ouroboros, the snake eating its own tail.

As McMerrin argues in her article "Agency in *Adaptation*":

The film can also be read as the actual writing of the screenplay unfolding on the screen. As "Kaufman" writes it, this is what we see visually. For the first two acts of the film, "Kaufman" succeeds in portraying his thematic concerns with the progress of life, and the necessity of change, and his involvement in the process of screenwriting. In this he stays true to Orlean's book, even including digressive "chapters" where he not only introduces the real characters (that is, the story of the book), but also investigates the history of orchids and the concept of adaptability.

The "history of orchids" and "concept of adaptability" ultimately weave their way into Charlie's screenplay, such that his writing process becomes a mirror for orchids and adaptability. Eventually, Charlie realizes that he cannot remain true to Orlean's text and must deviate in order to write his screenplay. Thus, by the third act of the film, Charlie embodies all the trappings of "the serial killer in Donald's script, who, because he is forcing his victim to eat herself, is also eating himself to death" (McMerrin, "Agency"). As such, "the film begins to consume and kill the characters one by one," and by the third act, Charlie's "Japanese paper ball which, when dropped into water turns into a flower, is a metaphor, where the film turns back on itself. Instead of showing the reality of the book, the book becomes a fiction of the film" (McMerrin, "Agency"). The act of the film "turning back on itself" is a metafictional move, reminding viewers that they are watching a work of artifice, a story that has been constrained and constructed and should not be confused with real life. As *Adaptation* constructs itself, it simultaneously deconstructs the notion of adaptation. Such is, in Hutcheon's words, the "paradox of postmodernism" (*A Poetics* 121).

Indeed, as J. Jaya Parveen reminds us in the article "Adaptation as an Adaptation: A Study of the Movie *Adaptation*," the art of adaptation is a "process of creation [...] that involves both (re)interpretation and then (re-)creation. [...] The movie *Adaptation* re-creates and re-interprets the source text *The Orchids Thief*" (Parveen 54). Although Charlie's initial concern is remaining faithful to Orlean's text, he cannot nail the adaptation until he does away with the fidelity argument and instead concerns himself with reimagining the work through his

own lens of screenwriting. What works for one venue – literature – does not necessarily translate into another media such as film. Charlie must therefore undertake the creative process not of *replicating*, but of “reinterpreting” and “re-creating” Orlean’s work. The fact that he so explicitly reflects on (or rather, obsesses over) this imperative serves as a constant reminder to the audience that he is an artist creating a work of art/artifice—which happens to be the very film audiences are watching. The inherently self-referential nature of this process places *Adaptation* squarely within the postmodern camp, especially with its emphasis on transparency about the practice of constructing a work of art.

The progression of the film can also be seen as a movement away from the “fidelity argument” and toward a broader, more inclusive, less demeaning mode of thinking about and evaluating an adaptation. Charlie begins with a desire to remain faithful to Orlean’s text: “I’d want to remain true to that,” he says, “I’d wanna let the movie exist, rather than be artificially plot-driven. I just don’t wanna ruin it by making it a Hollywood thing” (*Adaptation*). The last thing he wants to write is “an orchid heist movie,” or convert the “orchids into poppies,” or center the film on “drug-running.” He wants to know instead why his adaptation cannot “simply be about flowers”—no love affair, no guns, no high-speed car chase, no Big Life Lessons at the end, no Happily Ever Afters. His reasoning is: “The book isn’t like that and life isn’t like that. You know, it just isn’t. And I feel very strongly about this” (03:51-04:49). These remarks are critical to establishing Charlie’s starting point, his ground zero so to speak, at the beginning of the film. He views adaptation as first and foremost about remaining as true as possible to the source text, even if that means abandoning the conventions of one’s genre and medium and perhaps risking complete failure. He would much rather conceive a plotless near-replica of Orlean’s book than he would give her work the typical Hollywood treatment.

In this sense, Charlie resonates with the very critics that theorists like Linda Hutcheon, Kamilla Elliott, and Julie Sanders decry. For instance, in *Adaptation and Appropriation*, Sanders writes, “my argument would be that it is at the very point of infidelity or departure that the most creative acts of adaptation take place” (24). This is a far cry from conventional adaptation theory and analysis, which tends to view the source material as axiomatically superior to the adaptation, and to judge the adaptation by the extent to which it is able to approach the greatness of its source. To take an analogy from philosophy, many critics—and indeed, Charlie at the beginning of *Adaptation*—seem to view the source text as

akin to Platonic forms, and adaptations as akin to the physical world: the latter can at best hope to approximate the former, but always the forms (i.e., source text) will remain superior.

Because *Adaptation* is a movie about, among other things, the art of adaptation, Charlie must over the course of the story change his relationship to and assumptions about that art form. Specifically, he must come around to the realization that, as Sanders argues, adaptation is not about carbon-copying a source, but is rather about “departing” from the source text in order to render a creative work of art that stands on its own merits while also conjuring and being in reciprocal relationship with its source. In the case of *Adaptation*, this entails Charlie cowing to the conventions of Hollywood—which is perhaps not the greatest endorsement of artistic greatness, but serves to simultaneously critique (1) the fidelity argument and (2) superficial Hollywood storytelling devices. At the same time, *Adaptation* puts its subject matter to sage use, discussing the art of adaptation not only through meta-referencing to Charlie’s screenwriting woes, but also through the character of John Laroche and the mythology around these prized orchids, as will be discussed in the next section.

Charlie Kaufman, meet Charles Darwin

Just as literary theorist Linda Hutcheon and biologist Gary R. Bortolotti invoke Darwin’s notion of natural selection in their article, “On the Origin of Adaptations: Rethinking Fidelity Discourse and ‘Success’—Biologically,” so too does the film *Adaptation* look at the art form not only through the lens of narrative, but also importantly through the lens of science—natural selection in particular. Doing so comes (for lack of a better word) naturally to the film, as the orchid content lends itself easily to discussions of adaptation in the natural world. For instance, while discussing orchids with Susan Orlean, John Laroche tells her, “Adaptation’s a profound process. It means you figure out how to thrive in the world” (29:19 - 29:26). Reflecting on her own life and marriage, Orlean says, “Yeah, but it’s easier for plants. I mean they have no memory. You know, they just move on to whatever’s next. But for a person, adapting’s almost shameful. I mean, it’s like running away” (29:27 - 29:39). This is but one instance that illustrates the way *Adaptation* moves deftly between adaptation in the plant/non-human-natural world, and adaptation in the human world. Laroche calls the former a “profound process” by which an organism learns to “thrive” in its environment. But Orlean, thinking of what it means to adapt in mainstream human society, sees the

process as indicative of some sort of flaw, some shortcoming that needs to be remedied. Orlean's proposal here can be taken as a stand-in for that of the literary establishment: an uneasiness about adaptation, or even a repulsion by it. However, as Laroche goes on to argue, and as Charlie Kaufman eventually comes to realize, adaptation—whether in a swamp or on a screen—is indeed a profound and, Hutcheon would argue, *natural* in the sense that “both organisms and stories ‘evolve’—that is, replicate and change” (Bortolotti and Hutcheon 446).

Even in one of the opening scenes of the film, viewers are being primed to associate literary adaptation with biological adaptation. Consider, after all, the following excerpt from Charlie Kaufman's (actual) script:

BRITISH NARRATOR

As natural selection works solely by and for the good of each being, all corporeal and mental endowments will tend to progress towards perfection.

Suddenly, a beat-up white van barrels around a curve. It's followed closely by an old green Ford.

SUBTITLE: STATE ROAD 29, FLORIDA, FIVE YEARS EARLIER

INT. WHITE VAN - CONTINUOUS

John Laroche, a skinny man with no front teeth, drives. The *van is piled with bags of potting soil, gardening junk. A Writings of Charles Darwin audio cassette case is on the seat next to Laroche.

BRITISH NARRATOR

It is interesting to contemplate an entangled bank, clothed with many plants of many kinds, with birds singing...

Laroche tries to contemplate the plants and birds whizzing by. Almost too late, he spots the Fakahatchee Strand State Preserve sign and makes a squealing right onto the dirt road turn-off. The cassette case flies from the seat and half buries itself in an open bag of peat.

The presence of the Darwin cassettes on the seat of Laroche's van, and the fiasco of the cassettes flying from the seat into a pile of soil signals two important moves to the viewer. First, Darwin's theory of adaptation and natural selection will feature in the film and become an important lens through which Charlie's attempt to grapple with literary adaptation can be viewed. Second, albeit perhaps more tenuously, the fact that the cassette case “flies from the seat and half buries itself in an open bag of peat” indicates a return to the soil, a return to nature. Such will be a recurring theme throughout the film: a return to “source”—first in a literal, do-not-deviate-from-the-source-text modus operandi, and later in a more expansive return to the essence, the heart of the work. Indeed, as previously discussed, Charlie is initially driven by an obsession with maintaining “fidelity” to the “source text”: “I'd want to remain true to that,” he says, “I'd

wanna let the movie exist, rather than be artificially plot-driven. I just don't wanna ruin it by making it a Hollywood thing" (*Adaptation*). The underlying assumption here is that by "making [the book into] a Hollywood thing," Charlie would be cheapening it somehow, taking away from its artistic merits. This is a common refrain throughout the history of literary adaptation, with adaptations being vilified as derivative and judged solely by their fidelity to the source text (Bortolotti and Hutcheon). But eventually, *Adaptation* offers another way of considering this art form, and it does so through the work of Darwin—though not without difficulty:

Kaufman paces furiously with his mini-cassette recorder. He's a sweaty mess.

KAUFMAN

... then, after the history of life on the planet, in the last seconds of the montage, we see the whole of human history: tool-making, hunting, farming, war, lust, religion. Yearning. Then, bam! Cut to Susan Orlean writing a book about orchids. And the movie begins.

He rewinds the recorder, presses "play." As he listens, he slowly shifts from unbridled enthusiasm to a bottomless pit of depression.

TAPED KAUFMAN VOICE

We start before life begins. All is silent. We see the first amino acid and show step by step how things mutated, adapted, evolved. This has never been attempted in a movie before. It breaks every rule. This is amazing!

The taped voice continues. Kaufman stares despondently out the window, into the night. The front door bursts open and Donald charges in. Kaufman quickly turns off the recorder.

This short but powerful scene is telling for several reasons. First, the montage Charlie describes, of the "history of life on the planet [...] the whole of human history," and so on, is precisely what viewers of *Adaptation* saw at the beginning of the film. Thus, this is an ouroboros moment, one in which the snake of a movie starts to eat its own tail, as it were. As viewers we realize that the film we have been watching up to this point is, in fact, the film that Charlie is in the process of writing throughout the film. Second, in this metafictional moment where the divide between Charlie's life and the life of the film collapses, we see him invoke images of a Darwinian universe and history. Charlie's adaptation is no longer about orchids, per se, or even about *The Orchid Thief*. Rather, the film is about the process of adaptation itself and, as such, biological adaptation becomes a prism through which to engage with that process.

The primacy of adaptation in the natural world is further underscored when Laroche describes in wondrous terms the elegance of pollination: “There are orchids that look exactly like a particular insect [...] so [the insect]’s attracted to the flower, like a lover. [...] The insect has no choice but to make love to that flower. The flower insists. And this attraction, this passion, is so much larger than either of them. Neither understands the significance of this interaction. Because of it, the world lives” (*Adaptation*). The implication here is of course that the processes of the natural world—adaptation, natural selection, mating—are what sustain life, even unknowingly. Orlean is captivated not so much by the magic of this dance of the natural world, but by the notion of *passion*: to love something so deeply, to cherish something so fully. She envies this quality in Laroche, and she wants to learn it from him and internalize it in her own life. Charlie, too, seems to envy Laroche, not for the man’s passion but for his effortless connection to Darwin’s world.

Chapter 2: *Birdman, or The Unexpected Virtue of Ignorance*

2.1 Background

Director Alejandro González Iñárritu's 2014 film *Birdman, or: The Unexpected Virtue of Ignorance*, acquaints viewers with a past-his-prime former Hollywood sensation, Riggan Thomson, who launches a Broadway adaptation of Raymond Carver's renowned short story, "What We Talk About When We Talk About Love." As Riggan struggles to adapt, direct, and star in this play, he grapples with the voice – and sometimes the looming wingspan – of his former self, Birdman (an obvious nod to "Batman"). The film wrestles with questions like, 'what qualifies as 'real' art?', pitting the theater against and cinema and taking viewers on a quirky, quasi-surrealist journey into Riggan's psyche. Perhaps most impressively, the film is replete with layers of adaptation, allusion, and appropriation. Every choice – from the cinematography, which makes the film look as though it was shot in a single, continuous take; to the invocation of Shakespeare and Spiderman – is intentional, and serves the film's central exploration of what it means to adapt— from page to stage, from Hollywood to theater, from bird to man and back again.

Analyzing *Birdman* through the lens of Eliot's "Tradition and the Individual Talent" helps to blur the line between what is original and what is derivative, and to render a more nuanced view of literary adaptation. Further, devoting special attention to the way in which the film expresses notions of duality/the double, artistic genius/madness, and meta-commentary on the art of adaptation sheds light on the fraught process of breathing new life into an existing work, especially amidst a climate of literary criticism hostile to pop-art and any hint that a work is derivative rather than wholly original.

2.2 Duality/The Double

Riggan and Birdman

Given the nuanced, multi-layered network of connections in *Birdman*, it is little surprise that the film tackles the theme of duality in several different ways. Perhaps most obvious is Riggan's alter-ego, the character Birdman, who bobs at the surface of Riggan's mind throughout the whole movie and occasionally usurps Riggan's – and the viewer's – attention entirely. Crucial to note is that Birdman is not only a fictional superhero Riggan made a name for himself playing; Birdman is also an obvious foil for Batman, whom Michael Keaton famously played in

several of the series' films. Thus, the notion of Riggan's double quickly doubles on itself, creating a square of sorts between the *Birdman* actor, the *Batman* actor, the *Birdman* protagonist, and the *Birdman* protagonist's claim to fame. We can therefore argue that the film *Birdman* grapples with the theme of duality not only within the fictional world of its own story, but also within the "real" world that viewers of the film inhabit.

Indeed, as Peter Bradshaw points out in his review of this "delirious, hallucinatory showbiz comedy," Riggan is trapped between the twin dreams of being famous and being talented; "he doesn't want to renounce his celebrity. He wants to upgrade it, improve it, make it classier" (Bradshaw). In fact, Riggan even "confesses to a horrendous status-anxiety episode while on a plane with George Clooney – like Clooney, Michael Keaton himself played Batman in that pre-Nolan era when superheroes were not quite as ubiquitous as they are now" (Bradshaw). *Birdman* acquaints us with a troubled protagonist who is caught between his past and future selves, his fame and his search for artistic meaning, his success on screen and his probable flop on stage.

Indeed, Riggan struggles not only in his professional acting life, but also in his personal life, most notably in relation to his daughter, Sam, to whom he has historically been negligent, too busy to bother fathering. Working together on the play with Sam is a way for Riggan to attempt to repair their relationship, yet she does not give him much ground to do so. Therefore, Birdman is more than a shadow of Riggan's former self; he is also a symbol of Riggan's deteriorating psyche:

All of Riggan's problems affect his psychological being to a deeper level, which is marked by the Birdman voice in his head and hallucinations of the Birdman figure. From the beginning the voice speaks to him what seems to be his suppressed desires. The voice later on transforms into a figure of a man dressed in a bird suit from head to toe, which is the figure of Birdman role Riggan played twenty years ago. Besides hearing Birdman's voice, Riggan also has hallucinations of him. Just like the voice that speaks whenever Riggan is having an emotional turmoil, Birdman appears when Riggan is also struggling with emotions or having a problem with his consciousness (Sarahtika and Saktiningum 103)

Indeed, then, Birdman is not only a physical and temporal double of Riggan's; he also represents a psychological rift, as will be discussed further in the "Artistic Genius/Madness" section below.

Reality and Fiction

Further, *Birdman* blurs the line between reality and performance in reference to the adaptation of Carver's "What We Talk About When We Talk About Love": "Something in the jittery, crazy dialogue makes it sometimes hard to tell if the characters are talking as themselves, or performing the Carver dialogue" (Bradshaw). This dividing line is particularly blurred by the inclusion of supporting character Mike Shiner (Edward Norton), a mercurial method actor who frequently breaks from his Carver character, drinking actual alcohol on stage, complaining that the gun does not look real, and even attempting to rape his female partner while in character during one of the play's previews. By the play's opening night, Riggan has become so enmeshed in the world of Carver's story and the stakes in doing it justice that he brings a real gun on stage and shoots himself in the face in the final scene. Once the shot fires, any notion of a division between fiction and reality, stage and sidewalk, actor and person, collapses. With it collapses the troubled notion of duality so present throughout the rest of the film.

It is worth considering for a moment why, of all the stories *Birdman* could have selected to adapt to the stage, Riggan chooses Carver's "What We Talk About When We Talk About Love." The story centers on two couples – Mel, Terri, Laura, and Nick – who sit at a table at Mel's house, drinking and discussing, among other topics, love. Each of the characters has a harrowing, slightly disturbing tale of love – everything from physical abuse to stalking to an elderly couple in a car accident. Terri's ex-boyfriend, an abusive man named Ed, allegedly "loved her so much he tried to kill her" (Carver 171). Indeed, Terri maintains that Ed's abusive ways stemmed from love, while Mel and the others refuse to believe this. They debate what love actually means and entails. Eventually it comes to light that Ed killed himself—an act that Terri also sees as stemming from love. As Riggan will later do on stage, Ed shot himself in the mouth. Mel then tells a story of an elderly couple who were severely injured in a car accident: what the aged husband regrets most is that he is unable to see his wife through the eye-holes in the full-body cast he wears. The friends move in and out of the topic of the elderly couple, and Ed, and personal feelings and assumptions about love. The group polishes off a second bottle of gin, and though they discuss plans of going out to dinner, nothing materializes.

In *Birdman*, Riggan stages a version of Carver's story that includes the central elements of Ed and the story of the elderly couple, but also contains more

melodramatic storylines that are not part of the original story. Thus, similarly to Charlie Kaufman's task in *Adaptation*, Riggan needed to take a literary work and adjust it to fit a different medium—in this case, the stage. Doing so required dialing up the drama and plotlines so as to keep the audience engaged in this visual storytelling form. But the question still remains, why Carver? Why "What We Talk About When We Talk About Love?"

The answer contained within the world of the film is that the story, and Carver's work in general, holds special meaning for Riggan because it was Carver who inspired him to become an actor, by watching one of Riggan's performances and passing him a complimentary note written on a cocktail napkin. But thinking beyond the world of the film, this story is symbolic for what it represents in the western canon: Carver is a writer's writer, and this story is as literary as they come. Moreover, the story contains an interesting editorial and publication history: the version readers know today is very different from the story Carver originally wrote and polished himself. Indeed, "What We Talk About When We Talk About Love" was so heavily hacked at Carver's outstanding editor, Gordon Lish, that one must wonder to whom the story truly belongs. This question of ownership of course calls to mind debates about adaptation and the faulty notion that any single artist ever has a monopoly or full proprietorship over a story. As theorists like Hutcheon and Sanders argue, even Shakespeare, pinnacle of English literature, begged, borrowed, and stole from the storytellers who came before him. Thus, Carver's story works magnificently in *Birdman* because it not only conjures the literary/theatrical establishment, but also brings to the fore issues of ownership and adaptation.

Finally, the story lends itself to the blurring of reality and fiction since it is written in Carver's signature "dirty realist" style—a term referring to "the fiction of American authors who write about the dark side of contemporary life," specifically focused on middle-class characters facing harsh circumstances in their ordinary lives (Kita 385). Riggan is reminiscent of a character in one of Carver's stories—a morally ambiguous man who is neither a clear protagonist nor a clear antagonist, but instead exists in the space between the two. As Kita notes, Carver's characters are "exhausted with life" (387), just as Riggan appears. Eventually the resemblance between Riggan and his stage character becomes so uncanny that Riggan shatters any semblance of divide between person and character, reality and fiction, by shooting himself on stage with a real gun, real bullet.

High and Low Art (or, Broadway and Hollywood)

Birdman also constructs a clear division – and animosity – between theatre and film, Broadway and Hollywood. In their article “Hierarchy of Expressive Culture in *Birdman*,” scholars Dhania Putri Sarahtika and Nur Saktiningrum analyze *Birdman* through the lens of Lawrence W. Levine’s theory (1988) of cultural hierarchy. Specifically, they point out that theatre, with its lofty intellectual content and high-priced tickets, still – even after the postmodernist era, which supposedly negated the distinction between highbrow and lowbrow culture – remains a highbrow (or in Levine’s words, an “elite”) form of artistic entertainment. Film, by contrast, with its affordable ticket prices, lack of plot/content “complexity,” and emphasis on “spectacle instead of quality” is considered lowbrow art (Sarahtika & Saktiningrum, p. 101).

Regardless of whether this dualistic distinction holds up in contemporary society, in the world of *Birdman*, the “hierarchy of expressive culture” is alive and well: Riggan is a washed-up Hollywood actor trying to prove his relevance and real talent by taking to the Broadway stage, while one of the film’s antagonists, *New York Times* theatre critic Tabitha Dickinson, is disgusted by the mediocrity, shallowness, and celebrity Riggan threatens to mar the theatre with. Perhaps her fears are well-founded; after all, throughout the film we see repeated reversals of the customary distinction between high and low art. When Riggan stumbles out of a bar and onto a New York City sidewalk, for instance, he encounters a drunk, possibly homeless man swaying with intoxication, reciting Shakespeare’s famous “Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow” soliloquy from *Macbeth*. To place Shakespeare on the sidewalk, as it were, is to take the pinnacle of artistic achievement in the English language and relegate him to the same status as a peddling street performer. Likewise, in the last theatre scene, after Riggan has literally shot himself on stage, we witness a dreamlike, hallucinatory sequence in which superheroes like Spiderman and Times Square regulars like the Naked Cowboy ascend to the Broadway stage, thereby further upending our assumptions about where high and low art belong.

In this way, one of *Birdman*’s themes and prerogatives echoes that of *Adaptation*: the characters operate according to culturally conditioned responses about what qualifies as good, worthy art. In the case of *Birdman*, the issue is not so much that Riggan is attempting to adapt a great work of literature to the stage, but that he is a Hollywood actor trying to make a name for himself on

Broadway. He is, at best, not taken seriously by the theatre establishment (represented by *New York Times* film critic/czar Tabitha Dickinson), and at worst, he is accused of utterly debasing everything Broadway stands for, simply by virtue of his being there. In *Adaptation*, by contrast, a certain “cultural hierarchy” appears to exist within Hollywood itself, and within the relationship between an adaptation and its source. Hence Charlie Kaufman’s desire to eschew Hollywood clichés (even to the point of eschewing basic film-story elements like plot) in favor of an adaptation that remains as faithful as possible to Susan Orlean’s ruminative, reflective original text.

In *Birdman*, Riggan’s emphasis is not so much on maintaining utter fidelity to Carver’s story, but rather carving out a place for himself on stage, without the pomp and circumstance of Birdman’s bodysuit and wings. Still, it is worth noting that just as Orlean’s *The Orchid Thief* held both artistic and personal meaning to Charlie Kaufman, so do the stories of Raymond Carver mean something important to Riggan: in response to Mike Shiner’s (Edward Norton) inquiry about why Carver, “Riggan produces from his wallet a folded cocktail napkin, with a note from the gin-soaked man himself: ‘Thanks for an honest performance—Ray Carver.’” As Halimah Marcus points out, this is “a tidy origin story—this was the moment when Riggan knew he wanted to be an actor—but Mike scoffs. ‘It’s on a cocktail napkin,’ he says. ‘He was drunk.’” (*What Birdman Starring*). Of course, in yet another instance of doubling and reversal in the film, the sentimentality of this gesture is undercut when Mike Shiner essentially steals Riggan’s story and plays it off as his own when talking to a reporter. Even this small moment of poaching and appropriating draws the viewer’s attention once again to the art of adaptation and the question of who owns what story, and whether such ownership is even possible, given the constant state of flux that stories inevitably lend themselves to.

Critics and Creators

Birdman’s distinction between high and low art is most evident in the recurring tension between Riggan, who claims his motives for moving from the screen to the stage are purely artistic, and Tabitha, who sees Riggan as an opportunistic, out-of-touch representation of all that is wrong with Hollywood, actors, and American celebrity culture. More than once, Tabitha asserts her power (and intention) to “kill [Riggan’s] play” (*Birdman*)—an assertion that speaks not only to the disdain of high culture for low culture, but also the fraught relationship between artists and critics. To Tabitha, Riggan is “no actor. [He’s] a celebrity”

(*Birdman*) and as such, he does not deserve the honor of gracing the Broadway stage. Riggan, for his part, sees Tabitha (and by extension, other critics) as nothing more than cowardly labelers of other people's work. In a heated scene at a bar in the lead up to Riggan's opening night, Riggan rips her reporter's notebook from her hand and begins rattling off her notes aloud: "'Callow.' A label. 'Lackluster.' Label. 'Marginalia.' Sounds like you need penicillin to clear that up. None the less... label. All labels. You're a lazy fucker, aren't you?" (*Birdman*) Implicit in Riggan's diatribe is the belief that artists do the true work of interpreting and representing the world, while critics simply sit back and apply arbitrary labels—not truth, but labels—to what they have witnessed.

Meanwhile, Tabitha sees Riggan as a waste of square footage: she says he "took up space in a theater which otherwise might have been used for something worthwhile" (91)—this, despite her admitting to not having "read a word of [Riggan's play] or even seen a preview" (91). Yet, she tells him, "after the opening tomorrow I'm going to turn in the worst review anybody has ever read. And I'm going to close your play [...] Because I hate you. And everything you represent. Entitled. Spoiled. Selfish. Children. Blissfully untrained, unversed and unprepared to even attempt real art. Handing each other awards for cartoons and pornography. Measuring your worth in weekends" (91-92). At the end of this monologue, Tabitha explicitly positions herself as the gatekeeper to success on Broadway: "Well, this is the theater, and you don't get to come in here and pretend you can write, direct, and act in your own propaganda piece without going through me first. So, break a leg" (92). Thus, contained within arguments about high and low culture, art and propaganda, true talent and superficial celebrity, is also a discussion of power. Riggan says this play "cost him everything" (93), whereas Tabitha and her critic cronies "risk nothing of [themselves]" (93) in their reviews. Criticism, Riggan says, costs the critic nothing of his or her identity, livelihood, and sense of purpose, whereas an artist lays all of herself on the line for her work—only to have a snooty journalist like Tabitha preemptively decide to direct the power of her pen toward killing the play Riggan has given his heart, soul, and sanity to.

The dynamic between Riggan and Tabitha is particularly germane to a discussion of adaptation, because Tabitha resists all of Riggan's attempts to adapt, whether that means adapting Carver's seminal story to the stage, or trying to adapt his own career away from superhero mega-flicks and towards more serious art. She considers both forms of adaptation egregious, as does the high-

brow establishment, by extension. Here, the issue at stake is not so much what Hutcheon calls the “fidelity argument,” but rather the question of who has the right in the first place to even attempt to adapt anything, be it their own careers or someone else’s story. To Tabitha’s mind, Riggan is so far from her concept of a true artist, that for him to parade himself on stage, taking “up space in a theater which otherwise might have been used for something worthwhile” (91), is unconscionable. Never mind that on top of his attempt to make it on Broadway to begin with, he also has the audacity to take a story as revered as Carver’s and attempt to adapt it.

However, the film takes an interesting turn in its final push, after Riggan has shot, literally shot, himself on stage: the following day, Tabitha’s review of the play runs on the front page of the Arts and Culture section of the *New York Times* and sings the praises of Riggan’s production: “Thompson has unwittingly given birth to a new form that can only be described as supra-realism. Blood was spilled both literally and metaphorically by artist and audience alike. Red blood. The blood that has been sorely missing from the veins of the American theatre...” (*Birdman*). Therefore, contrary to what the fidelity argument would have us believe, in *Birdman* it is not the play’s fidelity to “What We Talk About When We Talk About Love” that garners its rave reviews; rather, it is the play’s fidelity to the raw, evocative mess of real life that earns Tabitha’s approval—the literal and metaphorical blood. It is fitting, then, that the film’s subtitle/alternative title is also the headline of Tabitha’s review: “The Unexpected Virtues of Ignorance.” Even at the level of title, the film is divided in two, doubled: *Birdman* on one side, Tabitha on the other. In the end, these competing twin forces are what define Riggan’s story, so much so that they title the film.

2.3 Artistic Genius/Madness

Alter-ego

The explosive bar scene between Riggan and Tabitha evidences not only the split between artists and critics, but also another key theme of the film: artistic genius/madness. Riggan tells Tabitha outright that adapting this story to the stage has “cost [him] everything” (93)—his money, his family, his sanity, his fame. Yet she still views him as a trained Hollywood monkey who does not deserve a seat in a Broadway theater, let alone his own play. Reflecting on Tabitha’s vow to destroy his play before she has even seen it, Riggan is visited by

the voice of Birdman, who tells him, "Forget about *The Times*. Everyone else has. So you're not a great actor...who cares?!! [...] You tower over all these theater douchebags. You're a movie star! A Global force! Don't you get it?" (95). No, Riggan does not get it. He has, as Birdman narrates, "spent [his] whole life building a reputation and a bank account, and now they're both blown" (95). But Birdman is unfazed by this: "So what? Fuck it. We make a comeback. Something huge. Take what belongs to us. Take back the spotlight. Magazine covers and billboards. Happy meals with Birdman dolls. Remember that? That's who you are. That's who we are!" (95). The hallucinatory nature of such interjections from Birdman, i.e., Riggan's former self/former character, suggest that part of Riggan does long to take the easy road back to stardom. Crowds would go wild for a "Birdman, Part 4," he knows—and at times the prospect of such fame, power, and renown quite literally makes his feet leave the ground:

BIRDMAN

You glimmered on 3000 screens, over 5
continents, in 47 countries at the same time. You
are ubiquitous. You're a God! You can do it again.
You can soar above all of them.

Riggan suddenly begins to levitate (97)

As Riggan soars through Manhattan in this zany, magical realist scene, he gives himself over to the tug of celebrity and fortune. And yet, throughout the majority of the film, Riggan seems motivated not by the superficial aspects of fame (namely wealth and power), but rather by the deep-seated desire to know that he *matters*, that he is still *relevant*. Consider, for instance, lines scattered throughout the film like, "I don't exist. I'm not even here. I don't exist. None of this matters" (*Birdman*) and "I'm nothing. I'm not even here" (*Birdman*). Riggan's deepest fear as an artist and person is that he is not "real," that he does "not exist." In a particularly powerful scene between him and his daughter, Riggan tells Sam (Emma Stone) that for once, he is "trying to do something that's important [...] to do some work that actually means something" (49). At this juncture, Sam gives voice to Riggan's deepest fears and doubts: "Means something to who? [...] You're doing a play based on a book that was written 60 years ago, for a thousand rich, old white people whose only real concern is gonna be where they go to have their cake and coffee when it's over. Nobody gives a shit about you" (95, emphasis added). But Sam does not stop there; in fact, she proceeds to deliver critiques similar to those levied against Riggan by Tabitha, the

New York Times writer: "And let's face it, Dad, it's not for the sake of art. It's because you just want to feel relevant again [...] You don't even have a Facebook page. You're the one who doesn't exist. And you're doing this because you're scared to death, like the rest of us, that you don't matter. And you know what? You're right. You don't" (50). Here, Sam echoes Riggan's deepest existential plight: the hunch that he no longer *matters*. Sam accuses her father of pursuing this play not for art's sake, but for the sake of his ego and reputation. And Sam is right, to some extent; Riggan's Birdman hallucinations indicate that at least part of him longs to experience the sweet taste of box office success once more.

However, as viewers, we have reason to believe that at his core, Riggan seeks something deeper than fame. He seeks meaning. Indeed, as Bob DeSmith notes in his article "Unexpected Virtue of Ignorance," Riggan is "in search of himself"—a notion driven home by the scene in which Riggan encounters a street performer "declaiming Macbeth's famous lines that begin 'tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow'" (333). It is particularly telling that in this soliloquy, Macbeth concludes: "Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player / That struts and frets his hour upon the stage / And then is heard no more. It is a tale / Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury / Signifying nothing" (Shakespeare). As viewers, we must wonder along with Riggan whether his life is meaningless (DeSmith). In Riggan's attempt to stage Carver's story, there is indeed "much strutting and fretting going on" (DeSmith 333). At the same time as Macbeth's soliloquy prompts viewers to contemplate the significance (or lack thereof) of Riggan's life and work, these lines also implicate us in the same "hour" spent "strutting and fretting [...] upon the stage" (DeSmith 333). We, too, must face the possibility that, as Sam says, nobody gives a shit about us, and in the end we truly do not matter.

The attempt to matter, to make life and work mean something more than the sum of their parts, is what fuels Riggan's creative genius and madness. When we first encounter Riggan, he is in tighty-whitey underwear, seated in meditation, levitating a few feet from the ground. The film thus makes clear from the outset that the rules of artistic creation differ from those of the physical world. *Birdman* uses magical realism—a technique that "combines realism and the fantastic so that the marvelous seems to grow organically within the ordinary, blurring the distinction between them" (Faris 1)—to bridge not only the worlds of art and life, but also Riggan's internal and external preoccupations. Ironically, this washed-up superhero appears to possess many superpowers of his own: levitation, flight, ability to move objects by thought alone. Perhaps, DeSmith wagers, "the film [is

suggesting] that we have within us capacities only hinted at by our capes and birdfeather costumes" (335). And perhaps in opening ourselves up to artistic genius, we must simultaneously enter the realm of artistic madness.

Viewed more psychoanalytically, "the Birdman voice and figure are the manifestations of Riggan's inner desires and emotional conflicts" (Sarahtika and Saktiningrum 103). Because Riggan attempts to "restrain" such desires and conflicts, "they break out in an unhealthy way that damages Riggan's mental stability" (103). Indeed, the presence of Birdman, and his incessant refrain that Riggan should return to Hollywood, where he had it good, seems to indicate that much of Riggan's artistic turmoil stems from the (possibly artificial) divide between screen- and stage acting. Should he bust his chops trying to earn respect in the Broadway theatre circle, or should he instead return to what he knows, Hollywood, and cash in on another *Birdman* sequel? Of course, in addition to the "hostilities of theatre to him," Riggan also wrestles with "family issues, financial issues, and existing insecurities"—all of which cause him to "suffer mentally," and to do so via the uncanny ever-presence of Birdman (Sarahtika and Saktiningrum 103).

Music and Cinematography

In addition to the ever-presence of Birdman throughout the film, one of the most omnipresent manifestations of Riggan's genius/madness is *Birdman's* musical score, which consists of original solo jazz percussive performances as well as classical works by composers such as Mahler and Tchaikovsky. The percussive jazz solos in particular provide an incessant, deliberately grating reminder of the cacophony inside Riggan's mind as he attempts to make meaning of his life. Using only drums and cymbals, jazz musician Antonio Sanchez improvised the score that was, in the words of director Iñárritu, "very loose and organic and from the gut, very visceral and jazzy" (Miller, *How Jazz Drummer*). This "omnipresent 'in your face' *Birdman* score" ultimately "shadows Keaton's internal undoing" (Miller, *How Jazz Drummer*). The score also demands, in a sense, that viewers participate in Riggan's "internal undoing," because we receive no respite from the incessant percussion of the character's mind.

A similar argument can be made about the film's cinematography, acclaimed for its unique lack of cuts and discernable scene-shifts. Indeed, the film is edited to look as though it were all shot in a long, single take, thereby leaving Riggan – and we viewers – with little break from the forward momentum. Like life, the film

propels forward without cuts or takes. This cinematographic choice also blurs the boundary between theatre and film, as the film mimics the only-have-one-chance-to-get-this-right stakes of the theatre. This, too, plays into Riggan's genius/madness, as life rushes forward and he finds himself struggling to keep up and remain relevant.

As Bob De Smith (2015) notes, even people who have not seen *Birdman* have likely "heard about its distinctive technique: the film is shot so as to appear to be one continuous take (except for the opening and ending, where the contrasting style stands in bold relief" (333). This choice of cinematography is especially interesting in the context of discussions of adaptation, because once again it hints at the tension between on the one hand wanting things to stay just as they are, preserved in their original, "sacred" form, and on the other hand, craving the new, the novel. Iñárritu's technique is one of the crowning glories of the film, a point of note for nearly every critic who reviewed *Birdman*. There is something inherently ironic and contradictory, then, about the establishment's competing tugs toward fidelity to the past and amazement at the novelty of the now. Importantly, this cinematic technique in *Birdman* is not a gimmick; it is earned by the content and central concerns of the film: "As the action weaves in and out of rehearsal, performance, and backstage matters, we realize the various actions are one (and live performance and life itself converge in one compelling moment on stage for Riggan)" (De Smith 334). In other words, just as the film reel propels forth in one cutless, breathless sweep, so too do life and mind and stage and performance and rehearsal flow in and out of one another without clear boundaries. This point is of course driven home in the "compelling moment on stage" alluded to in De Smith's parenthetical: the moment when Riggan takes out a real gun and really shoots himself in the head.

What might Iñárritu be driving at through this choice of cinematography and the breathless forward momentum of life it implies? De Smith poses the following questions: "Could the director be suggesting that art is a means for examining life? Or that the stories we tell and the lives we live can hardly be separated? If so, the fact that we are watching actors present a scene (a Shakespearian device!) reminds us that we are part of the drama as well. We are invited to see ourselves on stage (rather, on screen)" (334). Indeed, as we saw in *Adaptation*, this film owes many of its choices to postmodernism—specifically to the impulse to want to remind the audience in novel ways that they are watching a film and that in fact, they are implicated in the action. In blurring the boundary between

Riggan's play, Riggan's life, and Riggan's former glory as Birdman, the film causes us as viewers to reconsider the roles we play in our own lives, and the various stages we walk across.

Perhaps, argues De Smith, "the film's curious seamless" is in fact its "powerful central metaphor": "Our lives are indeed of a piece: our past, our present; our dreams, our nightmares; our successes and failures; these are a single take. They are connected in ways that we talk about when talk about providence. They are held together by He who has knit us together and scattered the stars for good measure. The film doesn't take us all the way there: it hints at meaningfulness and coherence and the opportunity to transcend our limitations. We get to fill in the blanks" (334).

Superpowers

It should be noted, as well, that Riggan's artistic genius/madness takes on an even greater tenor for his apparent superpowers. Even in the very first scene of the film, we see Riggan levitating in his underwear: "When we first see him, he is suspended in midair, and we see him move objects without touching them" (De Smith 333). This power takes on much greater tenor at the conclusion of the film, when Riggan leaps out the window of his hospital room and soars – part bird, part man – through the clouds, presumably finally at home in the world. Indeed, as critic Travis LaCouter writes, "the importance of these powers – real or imagined – is apparent: They are for Riggan the thing beyond the labels, the kernel of his genius and, because he sees drawing upon them as selling out, the source of his great angst" (*First Things*). By this line of reasoning, the powers represent artistic genius, the aspect of creation that cannot be minimized or sullied by labels such as those applied by critics like Tabitha.

Such superpowers also seem to exist beyond the bounds of time—a notion important to Riggan as he feels increasingly obsolete in a tech-dominated world. While it is true that "Riggan's fame as a film star is more 'relevant' in today's world than Mike's as a stage actor" (Sarahtika and Saktiningrum 104) in the sense that contemporary media preserve and make ubiquitous the reputations of Hollywood actors to a much larger degree than they do Broadway thespians, it is also the case that Riggan is technologically impaired, un-hip when it comes to social media and online engagement. His daughter Sam, a millennial, has access to a realm of powers—Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, the like—that are out of Riggan's reach. In Sam's words: "There's a whole world out there where people

fight to be relevant every day. And you act like it doesn't even exist! Things are happening in a place [the Internet, social media] that you willfully ignore, a place that has already forgotten you. I mean who are you? You hate bloggers. You make fun of twitter. You don't even have a Facebook page. You're the one who doesn't exist" (*Adaptation*). The world of social media is as strange and surreal to Riggan as the presence of Birdman and levitating stunts are to the average person.

2.4 Meta-Commentary on the Art of Adaptation

In a postmodern move, *Birdman* also contains ample meta-references to the art of adaptation. The art of adaptation is not only a thematic concern in the film, but also the engine of its plot: the film's sequence of actions revolve around the adaptation of Carver's short story that Riggan attempts to bring to the stage. As previously discussed, this choice of story is anything but arbitrary: Raymond Carver is a writer's writer, an artist's artist, and thus for a washed-up Hollywood actor to choose to adapt this of all stories is bound to make waves among the New York literati. Though not a key plot line in the film, the fact that Riggan must transform Carver's story to suit the stage is an additional source of stress for him, albeit not to the degree that this process plagues Charlie Kaufman in *Adaptation*. Indeed, in *Birdman*, meta-commentary about the art of adaptation focuses less on the specifics of the adaptation itself, and more on what it means for an actor from one domain/genre – in this case, Hollywood superhero stardom – to have the audacity to try to transform his career and adapt his acting chops to a new creative outlet. Much like *Adaptation* drew a hierarchical distinction between Hollywood and high literature, so too does *Birdman* underscore the relative nature of cultural and artistic clout: put simply, Broadway is respected, Hollywood is not. Nowhere is this point made clearer than in the antagonistic relationship between Tabitha and Riggan.

However, the film does not stop there; as previously discussed, Tabitha ultimately comes around to Riggan's performance and Broadway directorial debut, largely because he goes to the unprecedented lengths to actually shoot himself on stage. This point is suggestive about the art of adaptation on two levels. First, as Tabitha argues in her review of the play, a review titled "The Unexpected Virtue of Ignorance," Riggan's performance worked so well precisely because it was so new, because it traversed such uncharted territory on the Broadway stage,

breathing new life into the theatre. Tabitha's emphasis on this "new form" of "supra-realism" characterized by the onstage shedding of real and metaphorical blood echoes what T. S. Eliot wrote over a century ago about the appeal of the new, the novel: we have a "tendency to insist, when we praise a poet, upon those aspects of his work in which he least resembles any one else. In these aspects or parts of his work we pretend to find what is individual, what is the peculiar essence of the man. We dwell with satisfaction upon the poet's difference from his predecessors, especially his immediate predecessors; we endeavour to find something that can be isolated in order to be enjoyed" (Eliot 1). Tabitha (the critic within the film *Birdman*), much like the real-life critics of the film *Birdman*, indeed judges Riggan's work by the "aspects [...] in which he least resembles anyone else." It is the new, the different, the previously-thought-impossible that fascinates her and earns her praise. Similarly with the reception of the film itself: critics across the board honed in on the film's "difference from [its] predecessors"—perhaps most notably, its choices of cinematography and music. We thus hear an echoing between the fabricated critique within the world of the film and the actual critique that took place of the film after its release: in both instances, we find a penchant for the new rather than a preference for fitting the play/film within a lineage of other adaptations and iterations.

Second, Tabitha's embrace of Riggan's extreme, life-threatening (or life-ending, depending on how one reads the film's final scenes) performance hints at the difficulty of adapting—or at least, having one's attempt at adaptation sanctioned by the relevant authorities—within personal or professional life, especially related to creativity. Not until Riggan pulls off a desperate, deranged gesture on stage does Tabitha (and by extension the gatekeepers of high artistic culture) accept that Riggan's attempts to evolve from a Hollywood superhero to 'something more' are anything but a publicity ploy. While it may be true as Bortolotti and Hutcheon (2007) argue in "On the Origin of Adaptations: Rethinking Fidelity Discourse and 'Success'—Biologically" that "both organisms and stories 'evolve'—that is, replicate and change" (446) by their very nature, the process seems much more straightforward and less loaded for an orchid or orangutan than it does for an actor like Riggan. *Birdman* seems to say that the world of theatre and film is quite hostile to personal and professional adaptation, to the point that even Riggan is haunted by hallucinations of his former Birdman self because he, like most people around him, finds it so difficult to believe that he has truly changed and left his Hollywood superhero self behind. Indeed, if

Adaptation wanted to do what Bortolotti and Hutcheon accomplish in their article—namely, using biological adaptation as a metaphor for/analogue to literary adaptation, ultimately showing that both are natural processes that derive their success not from fidelity to an original source, but from its “startling array of forms” (Bortolotti and Hutcheon 446)—then *Birdman* takes a different approach, arguing instead that in common parlance, biological adaptation and social or artistic adaptation are (perhaps unfairly) seen as two profoundly different processes. Characters in the film display no antagonism toward biological adaptation; they do however heavily critique and remain very skeptical of Riggan’s attempt to recreate Carver’s story on stage and to recreate his own career in the process. Such adaptations are not lauded, but rather treated as highly specious.

However, it is worth noting that just as writing *The Orchid Thief* transformed Susan Orlean, and just as adapting the book to the big screen caused Charlie Kaufman to grow and evolve, so too does the process of adapting “What We Talk About When We Talk About Love” to the Broadway stage produce profound changes in Riggan—some good (for instance, his slowly but surely mending relationship to his daughter Sam) and some bad (his deteriorating psychological state). Thus, both *Adaptation* and *Birdman* suggest, rightly so, that undertaking the process of artistic adaptation is not a neutral endeavor; in the process, the artist him- or herself is evolved and transformed as well.

Chapter 3: *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*

3.1 Background

The Coen Brothers' *O Brother, Where Art Thou*, released in 2000, is a contemporary film (allegedly) based on Homer's epic *The Odyssey*. Both the film and the epic begin by invoking the muse, and both follow the journey of a wayward protagonist, Ulysses/Odysseus, as he tries to get home to his wife, Penny/Penelope. Along the way, the protagonist encounters myriad obstacles he must overcome and adversaries against which he must contend, as is standard for a hero's journey. *O Brother's* Ulysses meets iterations of Homer's blind fortuneteller, lotus-eaters, enchanting sirens, a devious one-eyed Cyclops, suitors courting Penelope, and the angry god Poseidon, among others (Flensted-Jensen). But perhaps more interesting than the direct analogies between the two works is the Coen brothers' claim that they have never actually read Homer's epic (Romney, *Double Vision*). Whether the brothers are being sincere or whether they are being tongue-in-cheek, their claim nonetheless raises interesting questions about the process and practice of adaptation. On the one hand, the Coens' appropriation of Homer's tale may seem, to quote Virginia Woolf, "parasitic," in the sense that the film adaptation "preys" on the "victim" of literature (Hutcheon, "On the Art," 109). After all, despite not having read *The Odyssey*, the Coens use its tropes, archetypes, and plot as a rough template for their own film. On the other hand, perhaps a work like *The Odyssey* cannot help but be adapted to a new time and place; as Roland Barthes maintained, "The fundamental character of the mythological concept is to be appropriated [...] There is no fixity in mythical concepts; they can come into being, alter, disintegrate, disappear completely" (Sanders 80). Seen in this light, whether or not the Coen brothers read the source text is a secondary concern; what matters is that their film celebrates what makes myths so essential in the first place: universality and adaptability.

3.2 Duality/The Double

Elliott's "Looking Glass" in Action

If it is true that a filmmaker's opening scene (or an author's opening pages) teach an audience how to engage with the story to come, then the Coens make very clear that *O Brother* aligns with Homer's epic: the film pronounces from the outset that it is based on *The Odyssey*. Immediately thereafter, *O Brother* invokes

the Muse: "O muse!/Sing in me, and through me tell the story/Of that man skilled in all the ways of contending.../A wanderer, harried for years on end...." This invocation clearly harkens back to Homer's epic, as does the name of *O Brother's* main character, Ulysses Everett McGill. Tellingly, however, the Coens select the name Ulysses, the Romanized version of Odysseus, which may indicate to viewers that although the film is based upon *The Odyssey*, the filmmakers have taken considerable liberties in telling their new story. This point is further underscored by the fact that *O Brother's* Ulysses goes by his middle name, Everett. The decisions regarding this character's name capture the dual nature of adaptation: the new work is both like the old, and unlike the old; it alludes to the source material, but is not coterminous with the original (Booker). It is, in short, the same but different. Scholar Linda Hutcheon argues that this interplay between known and unknown, recognizable and surprising, is precisely what makes adaptation so appealing: "The appeal of adaptations for audiences lies in their mixture of repetition and difference, of familiarity and novelty" (Hutcheon, *Theory*, 114).

Unlike *Adaptation* and *Birdman*, which entailed meta-commentary on the art of adaptation, *O Brother Where Art Thou?* displays the fruits of the art of adaptation in action. The Coens' film is thus a powerful instantiation of Kamilla Elliott's "looking glass" model of adaptation, by which the source text and the destination adaptation reflect one another in interesting ways (in this case, maybe in the manner of madhouse mirrors) such that both source and adaptation are deepened and enriched in the process. We see that dual reflective power at work in *O Brother*, where we have, on the one hand, deliberate, explicit conjuring of Homer's epic, and on the other hand, deliberate, explicit shifting, undermining, and parodying of the original text. At every turn, viewers are reminded of Homer's *Odyssey*, yet also disoriented by the massive shifts it has undergone under the Coens' watch. As previously discussed, the main character is named Ulysses, the Romanized version of Odysseus, yet he does not go by this name; everyone calls him his middle name, Everett. In parallel fashion, the *Odyssey* is *present* in the film, but mainly only insofar as the Coen brothers insist that it is. In some ways, it is as if the entire film goes by its middle name, as it were, focused more on conjuring the Depression-era deep South (discussed in greater detail below) than in remaining faithful to Homer's text.

Likewise, Homer's cast of mythical creatures are reflected in the lens of the Coens' distinctive humor, such that parallels between the epic and the film

certainly exist, but in an ironized, parody-rich manner. For instance, where Homer's Odysseus is known for his pride and vanity, Everett expresses these qualities via his obsession with his hair and "Dapper Dan" gel. Governor of Mississippi, Menelaus "Pappy" O'Daniel, is the film's version of the King of Sparta, Menelaus. The Coens cast John Goodman as their version of Cyclops, in this case Daniel "Big Dan" Teague who wears an eye patch and cheats the men out of a chunk of money. And of course, the iconic scene of the white-clad women washing sheets in the river and singing a beautiful, hypnotic melody gestures at Homer's infamous Sirens.

In plot, too, *O Brother* borrows from the *Odyssey*: for instance, whereas in the epic the Odysseus and his men escape death by concealing themselves on the underside of sheep, in the film, Everett and the boys escape persecution by dressing up as Ku Klux Klan members and blending in with a huge cross-burning convention taking place (fitting, given the film's complex, ironical relationship with the deep south). Even more importantly, the engine of the plot revs for the same reason in both the epic and the film: Odysseus/Everett has escaped Calypso's island/prison and wants to journey home to his wife, Penelope/Penny. However, as we will see below, these matching plot points and parallel characters only scratch the surface of what makes *O Brother* a successful, if unconventional, adaptation.

Homer Meets Depression-Era Deep South

One of the ways in which the Coens' film is 'different' and 'novel' is its *mise-en-scène*. Whereas Homer's epic takes place after the end of the Trojan War in the Mediterranean, *O Brother* is set in the deep American South during the Depression Era of the 1930s. The Coens do not set out to bring the Ancient Greek world to modern audiences; rather, their film is steeped in the folksy, sepia-toned mud and swamp of rural Mississippi—a visual effect rendered by color-grading, that is, adjusting the film's relative color levels. What results is a dry, barren Mississippi landscape reminiscent of the Great Depression—despite the fact that the film was shot in the heat of summer when the land was as lush and verdant as ever. By replacing the rich, natural greens with saturated yellows and removing almost any hint of blue from the screen, the filmmakers gave the film a dusty, musty aesthetic in which the sepia-esque color almost becomes a character in its own right. This digital reworking may even be seen as a form of adaptation, in which the source 'text', in this case the natural Mississippi

landscape, is transformed to fit a new set of objectives, namely, conjuring the physical atmosphere of 1930s American South.

This color-grading creates a perfect backdrop for protagonist Everett and his two sidekicks Pete and Delmar, all convicts, to escape from a chain-gang prison and run away from the law as they chase down the treasure that Everett has supposedly buried. The Coens' script gives a sense of the dusty, sweat-drenched existence the men live prior to their escape: "[The men are] in bleached and faded stripes, chained together, working under a brutal midday sun. It is flat delta countryside; the straight-ruled road stretches to infinity. Mounted guards with shotguns lazily patrol the line. The chain-gang chant is regular and, it seems, timeless" (Coen, *O Brother* script). Like the Fall of Troy in *The Odyssey*, the men's escape from prison marks the beginning of their journey home—a journey that, like Odysseus's, is rife with obstacles, ranging from the "pig" Cousin Washington Hogwallop who gives the men up to the authorities to make a quick buck; to the siren-like women washing clothes in a river, luring Ulysses and his friends to the water; to the manipulative 'Cyclops', one-eyed Big Dan, who steals the men's money and kills the toad that is supposedly an animal version of Pete. However, while Homer's epic fully embraces the existence of symbolic, surreal mythical creatures like sirens and Cyclops, *O Brother* keeps both feet planted in reality, such that characters gesture at Homer's mythical beings without sacrificing the realism of the film's setting. For instance, as a parallel to Odysseus' vanity, Everett "shows an almost epic concern with keeping his hair perfectly pomaded in place" (Booker 151). The Coens' characters may be hyperbolic, but they are nonetheless believable and in keeping with the *mise-en-scène* of the film. Hugh Ruppersburg echoes this sentiment, stating, "In a sense the film portrays a parallel universe, a fabulistic world both like and unlike our own" (13).

Thomas Ærvold Bjerre analyzes *O Brother* not as an adaptation of Homer's epic, but rather within the context of Southern literature, culture, and history, arguing that the film contains "many references to Southern literature, particularly William Faulkner and Flannery O'Connor. These references, along with the mosaic of cultural icons from Southern history, serve to create a postmodern fantasy of the South, in which the Coen brothers play out their tale. By fusing tradition with an irreverent sense of history, the Coen brothers succeed in creating something new: a comedic fantasy of the South that stays true to its roots despite its heavy use of clichés" (55). Bjerre is less interested in the film as a modern retelling of *The Odyssey* (especially since the Coens confess—truthfully

or tongue-in-cheek—to never having read the epic themselves), and more interested in its evocation of a “Southern state of mind, in all its historical ambivalence” while still maintaining a postmodern sense of irony, challenge, and playfulness about the very tradition being evoked (56).

By Bjerre’s account, the film is dripping with Southern intertextual references, beginning with the self-conscious likeness Clooney’s character Ulysses Everett McGill bears to Clark Gable; quoting the *New York Times*, Bjerre writes: “Mr. Clooney not only looks like Clark Gable, with his hair slicked against his scalp and his carefully etched Art Deco mustache, but he also gives the kind of detached, matinee-idol performance that used to be Gable’s trademark. Mr. Clooney’s self-conscious line readings and leisurely double-takes are like a wink to the audience. We never forget that, whatever else the script may demand, we’re watching a movie star. That we’re watching a star of the present moment playing, in effect, a star of an earlier age only doubles the fun and adds to our sense of dislocation” (57). This deliberate nod to the audience that they are watching a performance is a quintessentially postmodern move, and one that intersects with our discussion of the art of adaptation. As audience members we are reminded that all creative works entail a deliberate process of artifice: rather than getting swept away in the magic of a story and completely suspending our disbelief, we remain aware of the fact that we are watching an actor play a role. This meta-awareness serves to strip some of the illusory nature of performance away, which in turn helps to dismantle the notion that a work of art is necessarily a wholly original, sacrosanct entity delivered whole and complete from the divine. Instead, works of art are constructions, be they so-called original works or adaptations, and this fact does not detract from their value or success.

But in addition to conjuring Clark Gable and, by extension, *Gone With The Wind*, the Coens’ film also “recalls the Depression-era photographs by Eudora Welty and Walker Evans” (Bjerre 58) along with references to Southern literary works such as Faulkner’s *If I Forget Thee, Jerusalem; Absalom, Absalom!*; *As I Lay Dying*; and “Barn Burning” along with Flannery O’Connor’s “Good Country People” (Bjerre 58-60). Of course, such intertextual allusions are not arbitrary or accidental: they ground the film in a distinctively Southern setting, imbuing it with a distinctively Southern identity to the point that critics like Bjerre can essentially ignore the Homeric components altogether and focus instead solely on the deep, Depression-era South. And of course, the allusions do not stop at great southern films and works of art; pop culture and even the ugly history of the Ku

Klux Klan are included as well, rendering a truly 360-degree sense of immersion in this setting. Importantly, the film creates this sense of immersion in a decidedly postmodern manner, dealing with the “dilemma of the Southern state of mind” by which both “the nostalgia for the Old South and the skepticism for the New South” are illustrated through the three main characters (Bjerre 63). For instance, the material disparity between Everett, Delmar, and Pete, on the one hand, and men like Governor O’Daniel, on the other hand, is palpable, and implies a disconnect between who benefits from the New South and who gets left behind. Importantly, and in keeping with the film’s postmodern ethos, “All these ambivalences - old and new, religion and atheism, black and white - sum up the historical dilemmas that have haunted and continue to haunt the Southern state of mind” (Bjerre 64)—and rather than coming down definitely on any side of an issue, the Coens instead simply underscore the paradoxes and contradictions inherent in the issues at stake.

Irony, Parody, and the Uncanny Coens

Speaking of the Coens’ postmodern modus operandi, it is worth conceding that some scholars see *O Brother* as one big farce, with no sincere footing in *The Odyssey*: “The opening credits claim the film is ‘Based on *The Odyssey* by Homer,’ but like the credit claiming *Fargo* was based on a true story (it wasn’t), that’s a Coen joke” (Ruppensburg 7). Janet Siegal concurs, noting that she “join[s] other scholars in suspecting that the brothers’ claim not to have read the *Odyssey* is just as false and misleading a statement as their previous claim that their hit film, *Fargo*, was based on a true story. Such mythologizing of their process delights fans of the Coen brothers but has been known to lead astray others who seek to define their art” (214). This raises another important question about adaptation, namely: What counts? Linda Hutcheon takes up this query in her work, asking rhetorically, where does adaptation begin, and “where does what we are willing to call an ‘adaptation’ stop?” (“On the Art,” 111). What are the minimum requirements, as it were, for a work of art to be called an adaptation? If *O Brother*’s nod to Homer is just a big ‘Coen joke,’ then are we still to consider the film an adaptation of the epic?

Doubts about the Coens’ motives notwithstanding, there is ample evidence to suggest that the brothers look not only to *The Odyssey* for inspiration, but also to the myth and cultural lore of the deep American South and Depression Era. Indeed, “as is typically the case with the Coens, [*O Brother*] is based on a wide

variety of sources and participates in a number of genres and traditions from both literature and film [...] However, music—particularly traditional Southern and bluegrass music—is what stands out as the cultural background crucial to the texture of *O Brother*” (Booker 151). In fact, the film’s soundtrack proved so intoxicating that it went on to live a life of its own separate from the film and even won a Grammy in 2001 (Menaker). The music, coupled with the sepia-hued color correction, evokes the bygone South, but without the nostalgia that a more serious film might fall prey to. Against this backdrop, *O Brother* grapples with the intertwined nature of ‘old-time’ music and Southern political campaigns, as well as the rise of white populism and fire and brimstone Ku Klux Klan gatherings. But the music also serves as a vital link between *The Odyssey* and the 1930s American South: the Soggy Bottom Boys’ big hit in *O Brother*, “A Man of Constant Sorrow,” implicitly refers to Odysseus, whose name means something to the same effect—a hated man, a man in pain (Ruppersburg). Thus, the decisions the Coens make are anything but arbitrary. And indeed, as Roger Ebert underscores in his review of the film, bluegrass music sits at the heart of *O Brother*, as do “images of chain gangs, sharecropper cottages, cotton fields, populist politicians, river baptisms, hobos on freight trains, patent medicines, 25-watt radio stations, and Klan rallies” (Ebert). The reviewer acknowledges that these elements “don’t exactly add up,” but also concedes that perhaps they are not intended to. After all:

Homer’s epic grew out of the tales of many storytellers who went before; their episodes were timed and intended for a night’s recitation. Quite possibly no one before Homer saw the developing work as a whole. In the same spirit, “*O Brother*” contains sequences that are wonderful in themselves—lovely short films—but the movie never really shapes itself into a whole.

If this is the case, then *O Brother* pays homage to Homer’s epic not only through surface-level decisions about character names and plot points, but also through the very manner in which the story is told: a string of self-contained set pieces that harken back to the oral tradition out of which Homer’s epic arose.

In addition to the obvious references to and reverberations with *The Odyssey*, the Coens’ film also contains other layers of appropriation and allusion—namely in the form of the film’s title, which is lifted from the 1941 film *Sullivan’s Travels*, written and directed by Preston Sturges. The protagonist of *Sullivan’s Travels* is a director who wants to adapt to the screen *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*, a

(fictional) novel about the Great Depression. Despite this nod to the adapted film-within-a-film, the Coens caution viewers against making too much of this connection, because their version of *O Brother* is not intended to mirror what Sullivan's might have been: "It pretends to be a big important movie,' says Ethan, 'but the grandiosity is obviously a joke. It is what it is, it's a comedy'" (Romney). *New York Times* contributor Daniel Menaker underscores *O Brother's* "broad humor," stating that he has to "wonder if the surname of the Homer involved might be Simpson" (Menaker). And yet, as Julie Sanders reminds us, part of the reason artists return to myth time and again is because doing so provides "an accessible code to discuss and communicate complex issues" (87). Although the Coen brothers have denied any intention to make grand political statements in *O Brother*, themes of "the class conflicts between rich elitists and lower class 'salt of the earth' poor people" (Toscano 50) recur throughout the film. To be sure, Joel Coen maintains that "the political undercurrent of the movie functions primarily for dramatic purposes, because the politics are frankly pretty primitive. The bad guys are racial bigots and KKK Grand Dragons, and the good guys are the heroes of the movie. So it's all kind of a story thing" (Romney). Be that as it may, by recasting Homer's epic in Depression Era America, and by championing the antics and good intentions of a trio of poor convicts newly escaped from a chain-gang, the Coens leave open the possibility that *The Odyssey* is being invoked in a new context in order to critique a particular time, place, and social mores via irony and parody.

Scholar Margaret M. Toscano argues that in juxtaposing so many time periods, places, and cultural referent points, *O Brother* "presents an intriguing and unusual case for the question of whether historical accuracy is important in films that use classical antiquity as a direct setting or indirect reference point" (49). Linda Hutcheon poses similar questions in *A Poetics of Postmodernism*—if both the fiction writer and the historian employ imagination, bias, and artifice in crafting their respective works, then to what extent are historical "facts" actually factual? To what extent, if at all, does it matter whether a work that engages with the past remains faithful to extant accounts of the past, particularly since such accounts are necessarily filtered through the consciousness of a necessarily biased historian? In a similar vein, we can ask parallel questions of adaptations: if we dismantle the notion of their ever being one capital-t, capital-s True unadulterated Source text, then the issue of fidelity to source is no longer salient. Such seems to be a point the Coens make in *O Brother*, since without the

invocation of the Muse at the beginning of the film, one might not gather that the film was in any way connected to Homer's epic. Indeed, *O Brother* cannot be called "faithful" to *The Odyssey*, and yet, as Julie Sanders argues, it is precisely at the (many) points of departure from the source text that the film takes on a life of its own and becomes all the more interesting.

Parody is indeed part and parcel of the Coen project: their films "are often idiosyncratic versions – some would call them travesties – of genre film, e.g., *film noir* (*Blood Simple*), screwball comedy (*Raising Arizona*), or gangster film (*Miller's Crossing*), all of them films simultaneously paying homage to their models and functioning as ironic complements to them" (Flensted-Jensen 14). This dance between "paying homage" to the past while also "ironically complement[ing]" what came before is precisely what Hutcheon means by her phrase "the paradox of postmodernism"—the process of simultaneously reinstating the past/convention while also questioning and undermining it. Such is the Coens' specialty.

Reality vs. Fiction

In *Adaptation* and *Birdman*, we witnessed a blurring of reality and fiction; in the former, the "real" life of Charlie Kaufman eventually revealed itself to be the fictional film he was working on throughout the movie itself, and in the latter Riggan's psyche becomes increasingly enmeshed in the mess of both his former Birdman character and the Carver character he now plays on stage. In *O Brother Where Art Thou*, the Coens also blur the line between reality and fiction, though not in the metafictional manner of *Adaptation* and *Birdman*. Put simply, *O Brother* is zany. Between its "broad caricatures" and bold "genrebending," *O Brother* defies easy artistic classification yet also straddles the line between believable and too-weird-to-be-true (Content, Kreider, and White 41). Indeed, because the Coens gesture to Homer's cast without delving fully into the realm of surrealism, *O Brother's* trajectory of events remains wacky-yet-believable. The film thus captures the "double drive" that Julie Sanders identifies in the "mythical appropriation process, which is a simultaneous invocation of the marvelous and the everyday" (83). For instance, *O Brother* reimagines Homer's blind prophet Tiresias as "an old black man who says he works for 'no man' and has 'no name,' echoing Odysseus' famous lines" (Toscano 49). The blind man, a proxy between the 'marvelous' and the 'everyday,' prophesizes that Everett and his companions will encounter numerous obstacles on their journey, but ultimately they will reach

their destination. *O Brother* undertakes similar reimagining with Homer's Cyclops: actor John Goodman fills the role of a sleazy Bible salesman with an eye patch and swindles Everett and the boys for their cash. By replacing the one-eyed mythological monster with an eye-patch-wearing monster-of-a-man, the Coens successfully evoke the Homeric original while also poking fun at it, at the characters, and at themselves.

To poke fun, seems, indeed, like the Coens' primary objective in this adaptation—though they do not limit their parodying to Homer's text, but rather extend it to the South of a certain era as well. In so doing, they simultaneously ground their film in historical events while always skirting the line between what is believable and what is too strange to suspend disbelief and take at face value. Thus, while the manner in which reality and fiction are blurred differs between *Adaptation* and *Birdman* on the one hand and *O Brother* on the other, all three films nonetheless deal, explicitly or implicitly, with the slippery, uncanny slope between the real and the imaginative.

3.3 Artistic Madness/Genius

Soggy Bottom Boys

The Coens' main characters are not artists in the manner of Charlie Kaufman or Riggan Thomson. They are instead accidental artists—protégés ignorant of their talents. Viewers discover this fact after the men escape from prison—after the crew outruns an angry gang of cops and gets baptized by Christians in a river and picks up a black vagabond who claims to have sold his own soul to the devil in exchange for divine guitar-playing abilities—after all this, the men make a pit-stop at a middle-of-nowhere radio broadcast station, where they spontaneously record a song under the band name "Soggy Bottom Boys" in hopes of getting "good money" (*O Brother*). Indeed, when the men walk into the broadcast station, they encounter a rotund white man with a white can, and Everett boldly inquires who the "head honcho is around here."

"I am," replies the man. "Who're you?"

"Well, sir, my name is Jordan Rivers, and these here are the Soggy Bottom Boys out of Cottonelia, Mississippi - Songs of Salvation to Salve the Soul. We hear you pay good money to sing into a can."

[...]

"I'm lookin' for some ol' timey material. Why, people just can't get enough of it since we started broadcastin' the Pappy O'Daniel Flour Hour. So, thanks for stoppin' by, but..."
"Sir," Everett interjects, "the Soggy Bottom Boys have been steeped in ol' timey material. Heck, we're silly with it, ain't we boys?" (*O Brother*)

The men then gather around a can microphone, with the black man who sold his soul to the devil, Tommy, playing guitar behind them. They record an "ol' timey tune" – "Man of Constant Sorrow" – and summarily leave the broadcast station. Unbeknownst to them, the song airs and becomes an immediate hit; they are still on the run from the law, and meanwhile they have become veritable pop culture icons. Not until the very end of the film, when the convicts sneak into a Homer Stokes gala/rally campaign dinner that Everett's wife Penny is attending in their hometown, does the true identity of the Soggy Bottom Boys come to light. In order to enter the gala, Everett and the men disguise themselves as bearded musicians, and when they take the stage, they play the only song that comes to mind – "Man of Constant Sorrow." The crowd raves, and slowly the convicts realize they have become famous while on the run. The politician uses this public opportunity to endorse the wildly popular Soggy Bottom Boys and pardon them of all their crimes and punishments. Through song, dance, and a strange twist of fate, the men are finally free.

Unlike Charlie Kaufman in *Adaptation* and Riggan Thomson in *Birdman*, the Soggy Bottom Boys are not wracked by feelings of inadequacy and self-doubt about their art; the men do not even know they are artists. The film thus seems to endorse, or at least present and poke fun at, a kind of "ignorance is bliss" approach to artistic creation. This viewpoint is underscored by the promotional posters for the film, which depict the three men wading off into the Mississippi swamp, dressed in black-and-white striped prison garb, chains still yolking them together, with small print that reads, "They have a plan. / But not a clue." The effect of the convicts' haphazard rise to overnight fame is perhaps to satirize the notion that artistic genius is inborn, God-given, and requires no conscious effort.

At the same time, the film's portrayal of the convicts' artistic genius and subsequent popularity "expresses a good deal of anxiety about the commercial packaging of culture. Consider the political and commercial exploitation of the Soggy Bottom Boys. (A boy band created only to make money— who could have thought the music industry so cynical?) Buoyed and protected by their commercial success, they become political instruments in Pappy O'Daniel's

reelection campaign" (Seeley 98). And yet, as Seeley contends, the music itself is not parodied in this otherwise dripping-with-parody film: "The film itself [...] presents genuine Southern folk music entirely without irony, as though insisting on the value of authentic culture beyond its commercial worth" (99). By this line of reasoning, the choice to portray the Soggy Bottom Boys' musical genius as innocent and authentic "build[s] a protective showcase for music as something more than mere consumable" and in so doing, "*O Brother* both subverts a Jamesonian view of postmodern culture and resists the commercial cooptation of art. The music's authenticity and rootedness in South culture are uncompromised despite their incorporation in a commercially successful film" (Seeley 99). The upshot of Seeley's argument, then, is that in *O Brother*, nearly everything but music is satirized and parodied. The Coens love "work[ing] at the knot between creativity and commercialism" (Seeley 100), and in many senses the same can be said of the other two films discussed in this paper, *Adaptation* and *Birdman*: all three movies have a complicated relationship with the conventions and materialism of Hollywood. The ironic juxtaposition of the convicts' criminal guilt, on the one hand, and ignorance and innocence about their artistic celebrity, on the other, suggests an attempt on the Coens' part to preserve the authenticity and integrity of true, unadulterated art, even while parodying everything else.

3.4 Meta-Commentary on the Art of Adaptation

The Uncanny Coens, Continued

Of course, at its heart the film is, as the Coens say, a comedy—which is part of what makes it successful in its own right. By taking a tale as old as time and not only adapting it to a new time and place, but also infusing it with their signature quirkiness, the Coens craft a film that stands on its own as a work of art and entertainment while also giving "newly relevant social and cultural geography" to the myth itself (Sanders 87). We see, for instance, the humorous banter between Penny and Everett when he finally returns home and wants to know why his wife told their daughters he was dead:

Ulysses Everett McGill: Why are you tellin' our gals that I was hit by a train?

Penny: Lots of respectable people have been hit by trains.

Judge Hoover over in Cookville was hit by a train. What was I gonna tell them, that you got sent to the penal farm and I divorced you from shame?

Ulysses Everett McGill: Uh, I take your point. But it does put me in a damn awkward position, vis-à-vis my progeny.

This exchange is funny on its own and, for those familiar with *The Odyssey*, forces us to see the relationship between Odysseus and Penelope in a new light. By adapting the essence of Homer's epic to a wildly different time and place, with a markedly different tone and emotional register, the Coens not only succeed in making a new film, but also prompt viewers to remember and reconsider their understanding of *The Odyssey*.

It is this reciprocity between source text and adaptation that makes artistic reimaginings like this one so provocative and fulfilling: one can read *The Odyssey* with no knowledge of *O Brother* and watch *O Brother* with no knowledge of *The Odyssey*, and yet familiarity with both the source and the adaptation enriches the text and the film. This dual reciprocity is precisely what adaptation theorist Kamilla Elliott had in mind when she put forth her 'looking glass model' of adaptation. Elliott turns to Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* – specifically the idea that Alice is in the dream of the Red King, and the Red King is in the dream of Alice – to argue that source text and adaptation are like mirrors facing one another:

Looking glass figures point to a reciprocally transformative model of adaptation, in which the film is not translation or copy, but rather metamorphoses the novel and is, in turn, metamorphosed by it. Adaptation under such a model is neither translation nor interpretation, neither incarnation nor deconstruction: rather it is mutual and reciprocal inverse transformation that nevertheless restores neither to its original place. (Elliott 217)

Applying this idea to the relationship between *O Brother* and the *Odyssey*, the looking glass model argues that adaptation is not a linear move from page to screen, but rather a reciprocal, recursive interplay between both/all forms of the same story—what Elliott calls "mutual and reciprocal inverse transformation that nevertheless restores neither to its original place" (217). In Elliott's argument we thus find important echoes of her predecessor T. S. Eliot's seminal essay, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," wherein Eliot argues that "no poet, no artist of any kind, has his complete meaning alone" (145). Rather, says Eliot, an artist becomes significant always and only in relation to the artists who have come before him, that is, the writers included in the "ideal order" of "tradition" that is then recalibrated to welcome in and absorb a new work of art, such that we strike a "conformity between the old and new" (145). By this account, 'new' art is

always in conversation with the works of art that preceded it, and the past evolves alongside the present. It is not only a new work of art that changes; the whole history of literature changes along with it in order to accommodate a new addition to tradition. Similarly with adaptation: the evolution is not one-sided, but rather occurs holistically, to the source and target works alike.

In this way, the adaptation is quite like the process of memory retrieval: science tells us that each time we conjure up a memory, we 'rewrite' it in light of new information. In other words, memories are not fixed entities sealed away in the file cabinet of our mind, but are rather living, breathing stories that continue to evolve as life goes on. The same might be said of texts. Homer's *The Odyssey*, as a central cultural artifact and facet of our collective memory, will continue to shift and evolve each time we return to it or examine it under a different light. The Coen brothers' *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* therefore raises provocative questions about what it means to adapt a well-known story to a completely new time and place. Does it matter that the filmmakers claim not to have read the original text? Is a myth like *The Odyssey* so ingrained in our collective cultural psyche that the specifics of the source text no longer matter so much as its 'gist'? Are the filmmakers "parasites," as Virginia Woolf would claim, "preying" on the "victim" of great literature? Or are they rather contributing to Eliot's notion of "tradition" in meaningful ways? This paper has argued, as Linda Hutcheon does, that "Adaptation is not necessarily parasitic. Instead, it is a fundamental operation of the storytelling imagination" ("On the Art," 111). A source text and an adaptation are, as Kamilla Elliott sagely posits, like two mirrors facing one another, each reflecting the other in new, slightly unfamiliar ways. *O Brother* is a humorous, stimulating, entertaining film in its own right, and becomes all the more successful when mirrored against Homer's epic.

Conclusion

This analysis has argued that the films *Adaptation*, *Birdman*, and *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* present provocative ways to think about the art of adaptation, specifically the move from page to screen (or stage). Common to all of these films, I have argued, is a focus on duality/the double, artistic madness/genius, and meta-commentary on the art of adaptation itself. These shared motifs make sense, given that these films are all decidedly postmodern: in the case of *Adaptation*, the film the protagonist Charlie Kaufman is toiling over throughout the movie eventually reveals itself to be the film that audiences have been watching; in *Birdman*, we encounter a series of oppositions and reversals, most notably the antagonism between artists and critics and the upending of the high-low art hierarchy; in *O Brother*, we see what Linda Hutcheon calls the “paradox of postmodernism” at work, with the film both instantiating and critiquing not only Homer’s epic, but more importantly the deep Depression-era South.

It is worth noting that to this consideration of three films, a fourth could easily have been added: Darron Aronofsky’s (2010) psychological thriller, *Black Swan*, which traces the journey of a goody-two-shoes ballerina, Nina, who must tap into her dark side if she is to succeed in the dance company’s adaptation of Tchaikovsky’s *Swan Lake*. As the title of the film suggests, the story orients itself around the contrast between light and dark: in the production there is a white swan, who Nina plays beautifully, but also a shadow side, a black swan, that Nina cannot seem to let loose and nail. But when a new ballerina joins the company, bearing an uncanny likeness to Nina, except dark and sensual in all the places Nina is light and innocent, Nina undertakes the obsessive task of merging these two seemingly disparate parts of herself. Over the course of the film, Nina’s psyche deteriorates further and further, such that by the final scene of the performance at the end of the movie, she appears, like *Birdman*’s Riggan Thomson, to have really killed herself on stage.

Black Swan possesses all the common themes discussed in this analysis of three films: the notion of duality/the double, as encapsulated by Nina and Lily, the white and black swans; the idea of artistic madness/genius, by which audiences watch Nina’s psyche deteriorate the further she dives into her lead role(s); and meta-commentary on the art of adaptation, not least the psychological impact of adapting not only a seminal work like *Swan Lake*, but also adapting one’s own personality and bearing to fit a particularly difficult part. It

would be germane for future research on this topic to consider a wider range of films, including but not limited to *Black Swan*.

In *Adaptation*, *Birdman*, and *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* viewers meet protagonists who wrestle consciously with the art of adaptation and the postmodern anxiety often implicit in the process of literary adaptation. In *Adaptation*, Charlie Kaufman sets out to eschew Hollywood conventions and remain as faithful as possible to Susan Orlean's *The Orchid Thief* (thereby dramatizing the somewhat outdated yet still persistent, and persistently problematic, fidelity argument for judging an adaptation). However, he ultimately succumbs to the tug of Hollywood norms, imbuing Orlean's reflective book about flowers with all the trappings of a big-budget blockbuster: steamy romance plotline, high-speed car chase, tragic unforeseen death, and glib life lesson at the end. In this way, the film plays with notions of duality/the double/the derivative vs. originality, literature vs. film, true art vs. pulp fiction, and adaptation in Darwin's wild vs. adaptation in the social sphere. In true postmodern fashion, the film opens up more questions than it answers, leaving readers to contemplate the blurred boundary between reality and fiction, the slippery slope between artistic madness and genius, and the degree of artifice involved in any act of storytelling.

Similarly, *Birdman* acquaints readers with a past-his-prime former Hollywood superhero who, like *Adaptation*'s Charlie Kaufman, wants to transcend the constricting conventions of Hollywood and fashion himself a new identity. Riggan goes about doing so by staging an adaptation of Raymond Carver's famous short story, "What We Talk About When We Talk About Love," and as the film progresses, the line between reality and fiction, street and stage, becomes increasingly difficult to chart. All the while, Riggan is haunted by a ghost of his past, his character Birdman, who wants him to abandon all attempts at adapting (whether the play or his own career) and instead return to Hollywood to cash in on another superhero remake. Meanwhile, the film grapples with, and often upends, assumptions about high and low art, seeming to equalize Shakespeare and Times Square street performers, and putting forth provocative concerns about the relationship between critics and artists. Ultimately the film shows us the paradoxes and perils inherent in the process of adaptation, whether on Broadway or in professional life.

Finally, *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* takes a different approach to discussing the art of adaptation, doing so not in a metafictional way, as in *Adaptation* and *Birdman*, but rather by virtue of the drastic nature of the change from Homer's

The Odyssey to the Coen Brothers' Mississippi Depression-era American South. The "meta" aspect of the film comes through in its outlandish, self-conscious critiques of southern culture and intertextual appeals to high and low literary, cinematic, and pop cultural figures from the American south. Unlike the tortured artists we meet in *Adaptation* and *Birdman*, in *O Brother*, we encounter runaway convicts who quite literally stumble into fame and stardom, of which they remain completely unaware for the bulk of the film. And, whereas *Adaptation* and *Birdman* consciously dramatize some of the art of adaptation's central questions, *O Brother* raises these questions more subtly, causing viewers to wonder whether this film should even "count" as an adaptation of Homer's epic, when the Coen Brothers claim never even to have read the original work and when the film bears mainly superficial plot-based resemblance to Odysseus's famous tale.

Thus, in different ways and to different degrees, these three films, as well as a handful of others that could have been included in the conversation, prompt viewers to take note of common elements like duality/the double and artistic madness/genius while also considering the very act of adaptation itself. As I, with the help of many adaptation and literary theorists, have argued throughout this paper, adaptations should not be viewed as derivative of, secondary to, or parasites of their source texts; rather, we should celebrate the multifarious ways in which stories, much like species in the natural world, morph and shift and adapt to different environments over time. The more we can embrace the kaleidoscopic lives that a single narrative goes on to live, the richer and more robust our appreciation of stories and the human experience will become.

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