

Institute of Art Design and Technology, Dun Laoghaire
Faculty of Creative Technologies

**BEING CHARLIE KAUFMAN:
NAVIGATING ORIGINALITY IN HOLLYWOOD**

by

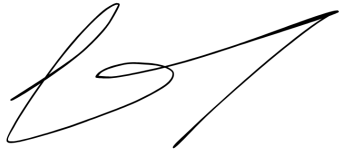
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DECLARATION OF ORIGINALITY

This dissertation is submitted by the undersigned to the Institute of Art Design & Technology, Dun Laoghaire in partial fulfilment of the examination for the BA (Hons) in Film and Television Production. It is entirely the author's own work except where noted and has not been submitted for an award from this or any other educational institution.

Signed,

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of a stylized, cursive 'A' followed by a long horizontal stroke that extends to the right.

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To Cian Brennan and Amy McFarland, I would like to recognise the great deal of emotional support they provided over the last few months.

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INTRODUCTION

For archaeologists and historians, the earliest evidence of storytelling exists on the walls of French caves in Lascaux and Chauvoux, with pictures depicting thirty-thousand-year-old mammals.¹ Film as a medium for storytelling is comparatively young. Despite this, filmmakers are already conforming to the established conventions of production companies like Hollywood to maximise the success of their movies.

This thesis explores the early work of Charlie Kaufman, his relationship with Hollywood and the filmic devices he uses to deliver unconventional narratives to mainstream audiences. Through the analysis of *Adaptation* (2002)², *Being John Malkovich* (1999)³, and *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (2004)⁴, the following chapters offer insight into how the human consciousness is reflected in film, and how portraying this successfully can contribute immensely to each movie's success.

Kaufman moved to L.A in 1991 and, after some brief disappointment during hiring season, was offered a writing position on the sitcom *Get a Life* (1990-92).⁵ Over the next few years, he wrote close to thirty television episodes for various productions, including *The Edge* (1992-93)⁶ and *The Trouble With Larry* (1993)⁷, as well as a handful of his own pilots, none of which gained enough attention for development. During a period of unemployment between cancelled sitcoms, Kaufman began writing *Being John Malkovich*, without any intention for its creation. The film's fruition began with John Malkovich himself enjoying the script before production company Single Cell Pictures bought it two years after its conception. From there, director Spike Jonze, and actors Catherine Keener, John Cusack, and Cameron Diaz, were all drawn to the story's originality.⁸ The primary objective of the following thesis is to explain how Kaufman has

¹ Brown, Tyson. "Storytelling". *National Geographic Society*, 2023.

² Jonze, Spike, director. *Adaptation*. Screenplay by Charlie Kaufman, Columbia Pictures, 2002.

³ Jonze, Spike. *Being John Malkovich*. Screenplay by Charlie Kaufman, Single Cell Pictures, 1999.

⁴ Gondry, Michael, director. *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*. Screenplay by Charlie Kaufman, Anonymous Content and This Is That, 2004.

⁵ Elliott, Chris, creator. *Get A Life*. Elliottland Productions, 1990.

⁶ Mirkin, David, creator. *The Edge*. Mirkinvision, 1992.

⁷ Nicholls, Andrew, creator. *The Trouble With Larry*. Highest Common Denominator Productions, 1993.

⁸ Spadaro, Mick. "Biography". *Being Charlie Kaufman*, 2024.

infiltrated Hollywood and its audience with the development of distinct and original storytelling devices and ideas that accurately portray the subconscious of his characters.

In chapter one, Kaufman's relationship with Hollywood is explored. Through his knowledge of traditional film structure and the Hollywood climate, Kaufman manipulates traditional narrative to supply a film that appeals to both mainstream audiences and art cinema enthusiasts. A movie is very easily defined by its reception. In order to ensure a positive response, Kaufman showcases his ability to write original subject matter and philosophy within the conventional ideals of Hollywood.

In chapter two, elements of subjective narrative in Kaufman's films further explain how he creates realistic characters with whom an audience can relate. Introducing this complicated device alongside fantasy and science fiction results in a more accurate experience of the subconscious than the trance films that came before. Exploring the relationship between Joel and Clementine in *Eternal Sunshine* reveals a more honest depiction of love, which brings this film a refreshingly distinctive quality in comparison to Hollywood's idealistic approach.

Finally in chapter three, multiform films are introduced, and Kaufman himself grapples with the pressure to conform to Hollywood narratives. Further possibilities of science fiction and fantasy are explored in relation to Kaufman's work, and consideration is given to the benefit of films engaging an audience and creating talking points amongst society. Throughout this discussion, the philosophy evident in Kaufman's work is analysed in relation to the topics of each chapter. Small case studies like *E.T.* and *Everything Everywhere All At Once*, along with writings from David Bordwell, Stanislaw Lem, and Ruth Perlmutter, further validate Kaufman's influence on modern cinema and narrative exploration.

CHAPTER I: THE CONTEXT - HOLLYWOOD, FANTASY, AND SCIENCE FICTION

In this chapter, the style and intention of Hollywood films is dissected and explained. From the early 1900s, when movies were used mainly as a form of escapism, to the 1990s, where films with more complex narratives rose to unexpected success, the societal influence over media and its popularity is explored. By analysing the films of Charlie Kaufman, the importance of knowing the current audience becomes clear. This chapter reveals how Kaufman navigates the Hollywood industry in order to tell original stories that audiences love despite their narrative complexity. Using devices like science fiction and Todorov's 'The Fantastic,' Kaufman creates fictional problems that explore his character's inherent flaws and emotions, in such a way that ensures a receptive Hollywood audience.

The classic Hollywood style of filmmaking was developed to achieve a film in which the audience is completely immersed in the reality of characters and story on screen. This type of invisible cinema uses techniques like strict continuity editing to "hide the gap that separates it from reality."⁹ Before the first wave of experimental film in the 1940s, the Hollywood filmmaker's goal was to conceal the fact that what their audiences were watching was in fact fiction. "To be able to escape one's own frustration, for even a brief moment, is very much part of the success of the Hollywood establishment."¹⁰ Characters could become more realistic and therefore relatable, narratives were experienced in a more immersive capacity: the spectator forgets that they are watching a movie.

The Cabinet of Dr Caligari (1920)¹¹ is considered one of the first subjective realist narrative films.¹² Screenwriters Carl Mayer and Hans Janowitz's effort to portray a more realistic depiction of life after the first world made this film different from Hollywood movies at the time. Production design techniques such as the deep shadows painted directly onto the sets create a bizarre and twisted world which is inhabited by the dark subject matter of murder, distrust, and

⁹ Campora, Matthew. *Subjective Realist Cinema: From Expressionism to Inception*. Berghahn Books, 2014, p.53.

¹⁰ D'Aquino, Antonella. "The Self, the Ideal, and the Real. The Artistic Choice of Three Creative Minds: Fellini, Allen, and Kaufman." *Italica*, vol.84, no.2, summer 2007, p.567.

¹¹ Wiene, Robert, director. *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari*. Screenplay by Carl Mayer and Hans Janowitz, Decla-Film, 1920.

¹² Campora, Matthew. *Subjective Realist Cinema: From Expressionism to Inception*. Berghahn Books, 2014, p.53.

manipulation. In this way, the style of subjective realist cinema originated from the need to present a more authentic depiction of life postwar.¹³ Following *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari*, more filmmakers throughout the 19th century started to branch out from the classic Hollywood narrative. These include Alfred Hitchcock and significant figures of the French New Wave like Alain Resnais, who directed *Last Year in Marienbad* (1961)¹⁴, and Jean-Luc Godard, who directed *Pierrot le Four* (1965).¹⁵

American film theorist and historian David Bordwell considers Alfred Hitchcock to be one of the most successful film pioneers of the 1940s with his use of flashbacks, flash forwards, and changes in points of view.¹⁶ *Vertigo* (1958)¹⁷ is praised by American film lecturer and critic Ruth Perlmutter for its use of character doubles and lies disguised as facts and memories.¹⁸ Hitchcock also uses innovative camera techniques like the dolly zoom¹⁹ to portray vertigo in a very realistic sense²⁰, which immerses the spectator in the film regardless of if they have experienced vertigo themselves.

In contrast, Both Resnais and Godard avoid and distort classic Hollywood continuity editing with the intention of confronting their audiences.²¹ They use the medium of film to challenge Hollywood and ensure their audiences do not forget they are watching fiction, preventing spectators from being sucked in to the narrative itself. This harbours the advantage of maintaining in their audiences a more critical and philosophical thinking throughout the film. They are not leading the population to believe one thing or another but rather inviting them to think for themselves about the subject matters they absorb in cinema. Similarly, Woody Allen's

¹³ Campora, Matthew. *Subjective Realist Cinema: From Expressionism to Inception*. Berghahn Books, 2014, p.53.

¹⁴ Resnais, Alain, director. *Last Year in Marienbad*. Screenplay by Alain Robbe-Grillet, Terra Films, 1961.

¹⁵ Godard, Jean-Luc, director. *Pierrot le Fou*. Screenplay by Jean-Luc Godard, Films Georges de Beauregard, 1965.

¹⁶ Bordwell, David. *The Way Hollywood Tells It: Story and Style in Modern Movies*. University of California Press, 2006, p.72.

¹⁷ Hitchcock, Alfred, director. *Vertigo*. Screenplay by Alec Coppel and Samuel Taylor, Alfred J Hitchcock Productions, 1958.

¹⁸ Perlmutter, Ruth. "Memories, Dreams, Screens." *Quarterly Review of Film and Video*, vol. 22, 2005, p.125.

¹⁹ The dolly zoom, or 'zolly' is a camera technique in which the camera zooms in while also being dollied backwards. It creates depth and distortion of both foreground and background. One of the most famous dolly zooms occurs in Steven Spielberg's *Jaws* (1975), as Chief Brody witnesses a shark attack.

²⁰ Campora, Matthew. *Subjective Realist Cinema: From Expressionism to Inception*. Berghahn Books, 2014, p.56.

²¹ Campora, Matthew. *Subjective Realist Cinema: From Expressionism to Inception*. Berghahn Books, 2014, p.2.

film *Annie Hall* (1977)²² comments on LA's preference for Hollywood movies with his protagonist Alvy Singer, who regularly goes to see World War Two documentary film *The Sorrow and the Pity* (1969)²³ with his dates, who would much rather the detachment from reality that Hollywood fiction provides.²⁴

Eventually in the 1990s, films like *Pulp Fiction* (1994)²⁵ - with narratives usually too complex for mainstream audiences - rose to success. This unexpected outcome suggested that the line between art cinema and mainstream commercial media was fading. A film's commercial success is also often linked to its comprehensibility, but since experimental movies were becoming popular, production companies could now greenlight films with complex narratives, confident in their triumph at the box-office.²⁶ In doing so, narrative complexity became a way of marketing some movies as distinct from the traditional Hollywood style²⁷

Through the writing of *Adaptation*, Kaufman learned how to write a film that conforms to a style and narrative expected by the Hollywood audience, while also twisting these aspects into a more groundbreaking philosophical film.²⁸ He then applied this knowledge to *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, which portrays the relationship of Joel Barish and Clementine Kruczynski in a very unconventional manner while still maintaining the structure of a classic Hollywood romantic comedy.²⁹ Using aesthetic techniques like "anachronic temporality, radical spatial disruptions, and causal indeterminacy"³⁰ Kaufman blends art cinema with traditional Hollywood narrative to make an otherwise unreachable film available to the masses, the conclusion of the couple's relationship conforming exactly to what the Hollywood audience expects. "By the end

²² Allen, Woody, director. *Annie Hall*. Screenplay by Woody Allen and Marshall Brickman, A Jack Rollins and Charles H Joffe Production, 1977.

²³ Ophuls, Marcel, director. *The Sorrow and the Pity*. Screenplay by Marcel Ophuls and André Harris, Norddeutscher Rundfunk, 1969.

²⁴ D'Aquino, Antonella. "The Self, the Ideal, and the Real. The Artistic Choice of Three Creative Minds: Fellini, Allen, and Kaufman." *Italica*, vol.84, no.2, summer 2007, p.557.

²⁵ Tarantino, Quentin, director. *Pulp Fiction*. Screenplay by Quentin Tarantino, A Band Apart and Jersey Films, 1994.

²⁶ Campora, Matthew. *Subjective Realist Cinema: From Expressionism to Inception*. Berghahn Books, 2014, p.36.

²⁷ Bordwell, David. *The Way Hollywood Tells It: Story and Style in Modern Movies*. University of California Press, 2006, p.74.

²⁸ More on this in Chapter 3.

²⁹ Campora, Matthew. *Subjective Realist Cinema: From Expressionism to Inception*. Berghahn Books, 2014, p.112.

³⁰ Campora, Matthew. *Subjective Realist Cinema: From Expressionism to Inception*. Berghahn Books, 2014, p.113-114.

of the film, all of the temporal spatial and causal gaps introduced are explained. All of its enigmas are resolved, and the film ends by providing the type of satisfaction expected by viewers of classical Hollywood cinema.”³¹ This perceived ‘happy ending’ fits with ease into Hollywood ideology of the time.³²

Humanity needs fantasy for a myriad of reasons. “The common denominator of all culture is the need to come up with a story, a mythos, to explain the origin of man, his place in the universe, and his relationship to his peers.”³³ This desire for meaning and escape is satisfied with the art of storytelling. Imagination can contribute to solving problems and pondering mysteries. Fantasy can create magic and adventure out of boredom and the mundane. The experience of endless desires suddenly becomes possible. Frankly, “it is through fantasy that we have always sought to make sense of the world, not through reason. It is through the fictive projections of our imaginations based on personal experience that we have sought to grasp, explain, alter, and comment on reality.”³⁴ Spectators can indulge in escapism and subversion of the ordinary. Metaphor assists in widening viewpoints and gaining knowledge of science and society. This grasp for an explanation of the universe and origin of life is part of what brings humanity closer together.

Historian and philosopher Tzvetan Todorov described a narrative structure called ‘The Fantastic.’ This structure includes events in cinema that are intentionally unexplained. It can only occur in a setting where similar events are completely unexpected, in contrast to other fantasy narratives where animals can speak, or time travel is a possibility. The Fantastic can only happen “in a world which is indeed our world, the one we know.”³⁵ Charlie Kaufman employs this technique in *Being John Malkovich*, when his protagonist Craig Schwartz finds a portal into John Malkovich’s head, “unexplained by the natural laws known by the spectator.”³⁶ No reason is given for this portal's existence, which renders the audience unbalanced before facing the need to

³¹ Campora, Matthew. *Subjective Realist Cinema: From Expressionism to Inception*. Berghahn Books, 2014, p.130.

³² McGowan, Todd. *Out of Time: Desire in Atemporal Cinema*. University of Minnesota Press, 2011, p.83.

³³ D’Aquino, Antonella. “The Self, the Ideal, and the Real. The Artistic Choice of Three Creative Minds: Fellini, Allen, and Kaufman.” *Italica*, vol.84, no.2, summer 2007, p.557.

³⁴ Zipes, Jack. “Why Fantasy Matters Too Much.” *The Journal of Aesthetic Education*, vol.43, no.2, summer 2009, p.78.

³⁵ Todorov, Tzvetan. *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*. Cornell University Press, 1975, p.25.

³⁶ Campora, Matthew. *Subjective Realist Cinema: From Expressionism to Inception*. Berghahn Books, 2014, p.60.

accept the situation's circumstances. Kaufman uses this instability to further explore his characters emotions and desires, giving each perspective the space for development. Just like in *Eternal Sunshine*, Kaufman creates a more engaging and philosophical narrative by subverting his audience's expectations and delivering themes and emotions in a very unconventional way. It is the fact that *Eternal Sunshine* is grounded in reality through science fiction that we can relate to Joel and Clementine more successfully. It is more feasible to imagine that memory erasure will be invented and exploited in the future, than it is to believe that there already exists a portal into the mind of John Malkovich.

After the divide between high art and low art became less distinguishable, philosophers became increasingly more interested in mainstream Hollywood films for topics of conversation, whereas previously very few films were considered worthy of being added to the philosophical discussion.³⁷ Modern movies are now capable of contributing to existing philosophical theories, using fiction and fantasy to explore specific possibilities and outline their protagonist's processes. In this way, filmmakers can engage their characters in actual thought experiments and philosophical conversations.³⁸ In *Being John Malkovich*, Kaufman allows his protagonist Craig Schwartz to experience life from another perspective. Along with a handful of other characters - his wife Lotte and co-worker Maxine - the portal allows him access to fifteen minutes of fame and recognition as John Malkovich. By making this portal exist, Kaufman explores the Nietzschean theory that an organism's "most basic characteristic is the attempt to incorporate into themselves and define all that they meet,"³⁹ as well as his view that "unfree will is a mythology: in real life it is only a question of strong and weak wills."⁴⁰ This is evident when looking at Craig's boss, Dr Lester.

Malkovich himself is a very weak-minded individual in the movie. He is indecisive over small decisions like choosing bath towels and allows himself to be manipulated by Maxine on multiple

³⁷ Shaw, Daniel. "On Being Philosophical and "Being John Malkovich"". *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, vol.64, no.1, winter 2006, pp.111.

³⁸ Shaw, Daniel. "On Being Philosophical and "Being John Malkovich"". *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, vol.64, no.1, winter 2006, pp.112-113.

³⁹ Strong, Tracy. *Friedrich Nietzsche and the Politics of Transformation*. University of Illinois Press, 2000, p.234.

⁴⁰ Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Beyond Good and Evil*. C G Naumann, 1886, p.21.

occasions.⁴¹ This makes him the prime subject for being invaded and eventually taken over completely by both Craig and Dr Lester on separate occasions. Craig's strong will and passion for puppetry, guided by his affection for Maxine, make his presence in Malkovich's head overpowering. At the end of the movie, when Dr Lester has inhabited Malkovich for some time, we notice that Malkovich now has adopted Lester's taste in clothes and women. Although Lester enters Malkovich's mind at the same time as a handful of his closest friends, Lester is more prevalent than any other personality because of his incredibly strong will. This subtle and entertaining method of demonstrating Nietzsche's philosophy marks Kaufman's film as both intelligent, and worthy of philosophical analysis. Malkovich's weak mind allows Craig and Lester to be in complete control of his body while they inhabit him.

Fiction can be an immensely powerful tool, especially paired with imagination and metaphor. It has a multi-functional purpose, used as escapism, self-actualisation, and education. It can help people understand philosophical concepts and relate to each other. It can create flawless cities of an ideological reality, or safely provide an otherwise dangerous experience - "a safe fantasy without consequences."⁴² Science fiction has the ability to enhance all of these aspects, while also keeping a story rooted in reality.

Sci-fi dates back to the creation of film itself, originating in films like George Méliès' *A Trip to the Moon* (1902)⁴³, the French film director's debut work.⁴⁴ Since then, there have been two major periods of growth: the 1950s with *The Thing* (1951)⁴⁵ and *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956)⁴⁶, and the 1980s with *Blade Runner* (1982)⁴⁷ and *Alien* (1979)⁴⁸. The conversations that the latter two movies have opened up alone are unprecedented.⁴⁹ In the last century, science

⁴¹ Shaw, Daniel. "On Being Philosophical and "Being John Malkovich"". *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, vol.64, no.1, winter 2006, pp.116-117.

⁴² D'Aquino, Antonella. "The Self, the Ideal, and the Real. The Artistic Choice of Three Creative Minds: Fellini, Allen, and Kaufman." *Italica*, vol.84, no.2, summer 2007, p.569.

⁴³ Méliès, George, director. *A Trip to the Moon*. Screenplay by George Méliès, Star Film Company, 1902.

⁴⁴ More on this in Chapter 3.

⁴⁵ Nyby, Christian, director. *The Thing*. Screenplay by Charles Lederer, Winchester Pictures Corporation, 1951.

⁴⁶ Siegel, Don, director. *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*. Screenplay by Daniel Mainwaring, Walter Wanger Productions, 1956.

⁴⁷ Scott, Ridley, director. *Blade Runner*. Screenplay by Hampton Fancher and David Peoples, The Ladd Company, 1982.

⁴⁸ Scott, Ridley, director. *Alien*. Screenplay by Dan O'Bannon, 20th Century Fox, 1979.

⁴⁹ Freedman, Carl. "Kubrick's "2001" and the Possibility of a Science-Fiction Cinema", *Science Fiction Studies*, vol.25, no.2, July 1998, p.302.

fiction has become a way to explore the cosmos in duality with character emotions, using science to ground these protagonists in reality and make them more tangible to an audience.

Polish science fiction writer Stanislaw Lem describes the difference between science fiction and fantasy quite aptly. Science fiction portrays characters in stories that can be explained rationally by logical events. There are no “inexplicable marvels” or supernatural creatures. In fact, Lem describes that even when events are “totally impossible, a science fiction work may still point out meaningful, indeed rational problems.”⁵⁰ Fantasy on the other hand, contains events that can be described as magical. There is no scientific explanation for the appearance of monsters or wondrous elixirs in this genre.

Both science fiction and fantasy can be considered under two main headings: either playing an empty game or playing a meaningful game. If a story can relate to realistic problems, through metaphor or otherwise, it is playing a meaningful game. If the problems have “no chance at ever being realised,” it is playing an empty game. “Empty games,” according to Lem, “can only please us with the solving of logical puzzles, or intellectual acrobatics.”⁵¹ In the case of a science fiction or fantasy story playing a meaningful game, heightened emotions and a dramatised narrative structure can be achieved in both genres. The characters will inevitably be put under some form of stress that tests their abilities. In *Being John Malkovich*, and *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, Kaufman pushes his characters to their emotional limits. The supernatural portal into Malkovich’s mind challenges Craig with the decision of staying himself or becoming someone else, and the Lacuna company in *Eternal Sunshine* makes Joel question the morality of memory erasure and his responsibility to remember himself and Clementine’s relationship.

Stanislaw Lem also says that we have two kinds of literary fantasy: “final fantasy” and “passing fantasy.”⁵² The presence of dinosaurs in Stephen Spielberg’s *Jurassic Park* (1993)⁵³ does not

⁵⁰ Lem, Stanislaw. “On the Structural Analysis of Science Fiction”. *Science Fiction Studies*, vol.1, no.1, spring 1973, p.28-29.

⁵¹ Lem, Stanislaw. “On the Structural Analysis of Science Fiction”. *Science Fiction Studies*, vol.1, no.1, spring 1973, p.29.

⁵² Lem, Stanislaw. “On the Structural Analysis of Science Fiction”. *Science Fiction Studies*, vol.1, no.1, spring 1973, p.28.

⁵³ Spielberg, Steven, director. *Jurassic Park*. Screenplay by Michael Crichton and David Koepp, Universal Pictures, 1993.

require philosophical or metaphorical analysis. The audience accepts that, through science fiction, this amusement park brims with life from billions of years ago. The narrative of the story then follows the emotional ordeal of how Spielberg's characters react to the chaos provided by the ancient reptilian creatures. This is "final fantasy." Where what is presented shields no hidden meaning, but events are taken as they are for the entertainment of spectators.

Circumstances in "passing fantasy," on the other hand, should not be accepted as they are, but analysed for deeper, more psychological meanings. The transformation of man into bug in Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* (1915)⁵⁴ is not expected to be taken purely as a "fantastic marvel", but intended to be recognised as a device through which sociological ideas can be presented in a more engaging and entertaining way. As Lem says, "only the outer shell of this world is formed by the strange phenomena; the inner core has a solid non-fantastic meaning. Thus, a story can depict the world as it is" - as in *Jurassic Park* - "or interpret the world"⁵⁵ - as in *The Metamorphosis*. Both science fiction and fantasy can be final fantasy or passing fantasy. The exact definition lies in what the filmmaker wants to say with each genre, and whether it is related to realistic problems or rooted completely in the supernatural.

By studying the trends and evolution of Hollywood film narratives and their varied success, this chapter provides evidence of the gradual acceptance of multiform films by a wider audience. From the unexpected popularity of *Pulp Fiction* to Charlie Kaufman's intentional subversion of contemporary film narrative structure, the importance of understanding your target audience is evident. Kaufman's manipulation of conventional themes within unconventional narratives invites questions surrounding the purpose and intention of Hollywood cinema and explains how to move adeptly within the industry. Kaufman uses his knowledge of the cinematic climate to make refreshingly original films in an idealistic Hollywood environment.

⁵⁴ Kafka, Franz. *The Metamorphosis*. Kurt Wolff Verlag, 1915.

⁵⁵ Lem, Stanislaw. "On the Structural Analysis of Science Fiction". *Science Fiction Studies*, vol.1, no.1, spring 1973, p.28.

CHAPTER II: WRITING ACCURATE CHARACTERS

Subjective realism provides a distinctive approach to storytelling, by emphasising each character's individual perspective. David Bordwell describes it as a blend of reality and imagination, exploring the intricacies of the human mind. This chapter examines how subjective realism can impact the portrayal of character, with Kaufman using it to capture the nuances of human experiences with precision and relatability. Using *E.T.* as a case study, this analysis explores the power of metaphor as a narrative tool in science fiction and fantasy. Metaphorical elements woven subtly into the film offer insights into human compassion and tolerance - another method of creating genuine and convincing characters. Kaufman's work, *Being John Malkovich*, employs metaphor to highlight much darker universal concepts like greed and jealousy. By pushing them to their limits, Kaufman reveals his protagonist's inner desires whilst making a more original and engaging film. Authentic portrayal of character also extends to the depiction of relationships on screen. In *Eternal Sunshine*, Kaufman presents a raw and unfiltered depiction of romantic connection. This authenticity contributes significantly to Kaufman's success in infiltrating Hollywood audiences with more unconventional ideas.

“Subjective realism is the trait in which at least one of the film's dual or multiple strands represents the subjective perspective of its central character.”⁵⁶ David Bordwell describes it as filmmaking that “deals with the reality of the imagination . . . as if it were as real as the world before us.”⁵⁷ Ruth Perlmutter describes the stylistic traits of subjective realism in relation to trance films like *Meshes of the Afternoon*.⁵⁸ These include “voyages into interior states of mind” and “stages of sleep which blur the distinctions between dream and reality.”⁵⁹ Oftentimes subjective realist films are set in a world not unlike our own, in contrast to Hollywood films which make use of otherworldly or futuristic settings.⁶⁰

Films that use subjective narrative and other unconventional narrative styles can portray their main characters with more precision than other modes of film, and in doing so make these

⁵⁶ Bordwell, David. *Narration in the Fiction Film*. University of Wisconsin Press, 1985, p.206.

⁵⁷ Bordwell, David. *Narration in the Fiction Film*. University of Wisconsin Press, 1985, p.206.

⁵⁸ Deren, Maya, director. *Meshes of the Afternoon*. Screenplay by Maya Deren, 1943.

⁵⁹ Perlmutter, Ruth. “Memories, Dreams, Screens.” *Quarterly Review of Film and Video*, vol. 22, 2005, p.133-134.

⁶⁰ Campora, Matthew. *Subjective Realist Cinema: From Expressionism to Inception*. Berghahn Books, 2014, p.9.

characters more relatable to an audience. In *Eternal Sunshine*, Kaufman uses subjective realist narrative to portray Joel's memory of his relationship with Clementine. In fact, the multiform narrative film portrays a more authentic version of reality than classical narratives do anyway, especially when it comes to certain types of experiences such as dreams and mental conditions like in *Memento* (2000)⁶¹ and *Mulholland Drive* (2001)⁶².

Eternal Sunshine has two narrative strands. In the first strand we see Joel waking up and impulsively deciding to skip work - a move that he describes in voiceover as very out of character for him to do. He meets Clementine on the beach in Montauk, and later again on the train back where she starts a very forward conversation. From there, the first couple of days of their relationship play out, with Clementine's extroverted character coaxing a very reserved Joel out of his comfort zone. They visit the Charles River, which has frozen over, and Clementine asks Joel to tell her about the stars. Soon after, the film cuts into the future with Joel crying in his car, having ended his relationship with Clementine. It is here that the second narrative strand begins, and eventually follows Joel through his own memories as they are erased. The subjective realist narrative strand in *Eternal Sunshine* helps make the experience of Joel's memory erasure more relatable to the audience. "Most of *Eternal Sunshine* exists inside Joel Barish's head, in the nebulous and the evanescent, the scary blendings and the ludicrous reversals, the anxieties as well as the wish fulfillments of remembrance."⁶³ As the film progresses, the audience becomes increasingly familiar with Joel's brain and adopts it as their own, to experience his emotions as theirs.

Within the subjective realist strand in *Eternal Sunshine*, there are multiple visual transitions between scenes which mimic how our subconscious brains function. Joel walks from a scene where Clementine did not recognise him at her workplace, through a doorway which leads directly to his friends' house where he started recounting this story. A close-up of a letter from Lacuna leads to the next scene which starts with them being printed in reception. Although this

⁶¹ Nolan, Christopher, director. *Memento*. Screenplay by Christopher Nolan, Summit Entertainment and Team Todd, 2000.

⁶² Lynch, David, director. *Mulholland Drive*. Screenplay by David Lynch, Les Films Alain Sarde and Asymmetrical Productions, 2001.

⁶³ Cardullo, Bert. "Review: Falling In and Out of Love, Again." *The Hudson Review*, vol. 60, no.2, summer 2007, p. 300.

type of editing is familiar in other narrative forms, in this instance it transforms the experience from regular continuity editing, to Kaufman and director Gondry's interpretation of how our subconscious functions, especially with how much each shot intrudes on the other. "This blurring of traditional scenic boundaries suggests that no scene - and no memory within the unconscious - is a discrete entity."⁶⁴ These scenes bleeding into each other create a more realistic visualisation of the subconscious - something arguably only the medium of film can produce. As American author Bert Cardullo explains:

Gondry takes *Eternal Sunshine* far past science fiction into cinematic efflorescence. For he shows us, more seductively, more compellingly, than other directors have done, how the freehand juxtaposition of filmic frames can capture on screen the flashes in our minds that slip between the words. He thus indirectly iterates a truism which needs iterating: not only that film is primarily a visual medium, but, more important, that no other artistic medium can capture as well, in motion, serially and cumulatively, the unfettered imagistic workings of the human mind - workings that are beyond, or perhaps above, verbal expression.⁶⁵

Gondry takes film to another level by showing us something that no other medium can provide. With Kaufman's subjective realist narrative strand, an audience can experience his protagonist's emotions far more accurately than any alternative narrative.

Ironically, it is this portrayal of connected memories that pinpoints Lacuna's key fault. If every memory is bound together, the process of selecting specific memories for erasure becomes impossible. "One cannot eliminate Clementine because she is everywhere."⁶⁶ This mirrors a phrase in Alfred Tennyson's poem *Ulysses*: "I am part of all that I have met." With this idea, Tennyson proposes that an individual is shaped by each experience they endure. Without the involvement of Lacuna's chief technician, Mierzwiak, the entire process of Joel's memory erasure would have been a failure. Without Mierzwiak, the technology does not understand how

⁶⁴ McGowan, Todd. *Out of Time: Desire in Atemporal Cinema*. University of Minnesota Press, 2011, p.104.

⁶⁵ Cardullo, Bert. "Review: Falling In and Out of Love, Again." *The Hudson Review*, vol. 60, no.2, summer 2007, p. 302-303.

⁶⁶ McGowan, Todd. *Out of Time: Desire in Atemporal Cinema*. University of Minnesota Press, 2011, p.104.

the unconscious works. Joel's relationship with Clementine influences his other memories so much that they will be forever intrinsically connected.

Metaphor is a powerful device in science fiction and fantasy. Layers are wound around a narrative to engage audiences and introduce talking points about society and relationships. Unbeknownst to them, audiences are taught by more subtle metaphors disguised in action and adventure. Family movies harness the power of reaching populations with messages that often teach generations. Steven Spielberg's *E.T. (1982)*⁶⁷ portrays a society that has "lost contact with the sustaining values of human compassion and tolerance."⁶⁸ Although unclear at first, *E.T.*'s unsavoury depiction of adults warns the American audience of the consequences of growing up without maintaining some semblance of childlike sensitivity and understanding.⁶⁹ The movie is also shrouded in metaphors. Spielberg's protagonist Elliot is miserable because of his father's recent departure from the family home. Feelings of confusion and abandonment manifest in outbursts of anger at his remaining family members, and he retreats to the back garden. Meanwhile, E.T. has also been abandoned by his family, although unintentionally. It is through an unorthodox game of catch that E.T. and Elliot meet for the first time, solidifying E.T.'s role as Elliot's substitute paternal figure.⁷⁰

The distance between E.T. and his family also resembles how far away Elliot's father feels to the young boy. "Elliot's own nostalgic longing for the former more complete family unit he once shared is echoed in E.T.'s interstellar quest for transportation home."⁷¹ E.T.'s quest home physically is as difficult to manoeuvre as Elliot's relationship with his father is to heal emotionally. Similar to Gondry in *Eternal Sunshine*, Spielberg also utilises cinematic tricks to accurately portray his protagonist's perspective. The film is shot from the height of a young boy, providing a very harrowing view of the taller adults in Elliot's world. It is a highly effective strategy to instil his audience with the emotions felt by Elliot as he navigates this story, fearful

⁶⁷ Spielberg, Steven, director. *E.T.* Screenplay by Melissa Mathison, Amblin Entertainment, 1982.

⁶⁸ Magistrate, Anthony. "Innocence Unrewarded: A Note on "E.T." and the Myth of Adolescence." *Science Fiction Studies*, vol.11, no.2, summer 1984, pp.223.

⁶⁹ More on this in Chapter 3.

⁷⁰ Magistrate, Anthony. "Innocence Unrewarded: A Note on "E.T." and the Myth of Adolescence." *Science Fiction Studies*, vol.11, no.2, summer 1984, pp.223.

⁷¹ Magistrate, Anthony. "Innocence Unrewarded: A Note on "E.T." and the Myth of Adolescence." *Science Fiction Studies*, vol.11, no.2, summer 1984, pp.225.

and threatened. It is tricks like these accompanied by strong metaphor that make the movie so relatable to spectators. Experiencing Elliot's point of view so accurately creates a much stronger bond between himself and the audience - a remarkably similar perspective to E.T., at the same height and emotional state as Elliot. Even with limited CGI and 1980s technology, spectators have never felt so in tune with a three-foot extra-terrestrial.

By creating characters to which his audience can relate, Kaufman harnesses the ability to explore philosophy and emotion further than what is normally possible. In *Being John Malkovich*, most of Kaufman's characters are using the portal into Malkovich's mind as a way of being recognised by others. It happens that in order for Craig Schwartz to achieve recognition, he must abandon his previous self and become another.⁷² Despite the heavy metaphor and fantasy elements in the film, spectators can grasp the familiar concept of jealousy, greed, and the desperation to become a better version of themselves. Through Kaufman's characters, *Being John Malkovich* creates an absurd narrative that depicts something universally felt in a uniquely engaging way, and then teaches his audience about the dangers of this kind of desperation. Although Craig does find artistic success in the body of John Malkovich by using his established fame to explore his passion for puppetry, his true self is in fact hidden completely from view. Until Craig decides to leave Malkovich's body, this harmful desire for recognition has erased him. Kaufman has managed to depict how "the struggle for recognition and self-conscious leads to destruction, emptiness, and ultimately solitude."⁷³ When Craig tries to re-enter Malkovich's brain after the portal has expired, he finds himself caught in the subconscious of the portal's next vessel - the love child of his wife Lotte and co-worker Maxine. This only proves the destructive effects of greed, as Craig can only look on without influence over the child's actions, a powerless puppeteer stuck in limbo. Conversely, by abandoning their desire for recognition, Lotte and Maxine find love and peace together.

Films can give audiences otherwise unreachable experiences without risk. "We are allowed, for a short while, to live those things we fear."⁷⁴ Science fiction films in particular allow us to

⁷² Young, William. "Otherwise Than "Being John Malkovich": Incarnating the Name of God". *Literature and Theology*, vol.18, no.1, spring 2004, pp.96.

⁷³ Young, William. "Otherwise Than "Being John Malkovich": Incarnating the Name of God". *Literature and Theology*, vol.18, no.1, spring 2004, pp.106.

⁷⁴ Byars, Jackie. "Symposium on "Alien"". *Science Fiction Studies*, vol.7, no.3, winter 1980, pp.280.

“participate in the fantasy of living one’s own death and more the death of cities, the destruction of humanity itself.”⁷⁵ Films can help us come to terms with mortality by depicting destruction and death. Science fiction, through metaphor or otherwise, can assist us in defining exactly what being human is. British philosopher Stephen Mulhall argues that one of the most powerful aspects of *Blade Runner* is the fact that it encourages the audience itself to philosophise on what it is to be human.⁷⁶ American professor of philosophy Daniel Shaw recounts that “the subgenre of science fiction that deals with robots and cyborgs characteristically raises such questions.”⁷⁷ Fiction can be a powerful tool to help us understand the world around us, but also assists in the journey of deep self-discovery.

With Kaufman’s original portrayal of character comes a very honest portrayal of relationships as well. When Joel and Clementine are looking at the stars on the frozen Charles River, Joel cannot provide the name of a real constellation but instead decides to make one up. Although this is not what Clementine asked for initially, her enjoyment of the conversation indicates that Joel has still responded in a way that Clementine is satisfied with. “What triggers her love for him is precisely the imperfection of his response.”⁷⁸ Like the image of the large, healed crack in the ice visible on the cover of the film, Joel’s answer is not pristine, but it does allow hope for a more stable union of the two.⁷⁹ There is a level of consistency in Joel and Clementine’s characters that makes the union and departure of their relationship more realistic. Their character traits portrayed in their last fight are the same traits which drew them together to begin with. It is revealed later in the movie that the beginning scenes of Joel skipping work to visit Montauk were actually the day after his memory erasure. Chronologically the first time he meets Clementine is on that same beach with a group of friends, where the two scope out an abandoned house in the evening. Joel shies away from Clementine when she suggests staying the night - “his timidity cannot accommodate her open displays of enjoyment that flaunt convention.”⁸⁰ This is echoed in their interaction when Clementine arrives home from a night out where it is strongly suggested that

⁷⁵ Sontag, Susan. *Against Interpretation and Other Essays*. Picador, 1966, p.212.

⁷⁶ Mulhall, Stephen. “Picturing the Human (Body and Soul): A Reading of *Blade Runner*.” *Film and Philosophy 1*, 1994, pp.87-104.

⁷⁷ Shaw, Daniel. “On Being Philosophical and “Being John Malkovich”.” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, vol.64, no.1, winter 2006, pp.111.

⁷⁸ McGowan, Todd. *Out of Time: Desire in Atemporal Cinema*. University of Minnesota Press, 2011, p.88.

⁷⁹ McGowan, Todd. *Out of Time: Desire in Atemporal Cinema*. University of Minnesota Press, 2011, p.89.

⁸⁰ McGowan, Todd. *Out of Time: Desire in Atemporal Cinema*. University of Minnesota Press, 2011, p.91.

she has been unfaithful. Joel is too dull for Clementine, and her spontaneity and extroversion are incompatible. François Ozon's film *5x2* (2005)⁸¹ has a similar narrative structure to *Eternal Sunshine*. The protagonists Gilles and Marion's relationship is played out in reverse chronological order. It ends with divorce and starts at a beach resort where their relationship began. Like *Eternal Sunshine*, the inherent flaw is introduced in their first encounter, with Gilles abandoning his current girlfriend to court Marion instead. It is with the addition of science fiction that Kaufman found an intriguing way of rooting this idea in a reality closer to the one we experience daily. Introducing the Lacuna Corporation to erase unwanted memories opens the film up to philosophy as well as portraying the relationship in a more realistic and non romanticised manner.

Lying on the ice for the first time with Clementine, Joel shows true vulnerability, admitting "I could die right now, Clem. I'm just. Happy. I've never felt that before. I'm just exactly where I want to be."⁸² This pivotal moment for Joel and Clementine is shown to us for the first time as it disappears. In a visual metaphor, the perfect moment vanishes as Joel defines it,⁸³ with the lake turning into the side of the road and Clementine sliding away into the darkness. This moment is later mirrored when one of Lacuna's employees, Patrick, steals Joel's notebooks to seduce Clementine himself. On the frozen lake, Patrick repeats the same words and Clementine bolts - they are no longer authentic. "Patrick knows that he is saying what Clementine wants to hear. In contrast, when Joel says the same words, she hears his desire, his uncertainty about her desire and about how she'll respond to what he says."⁸⁴ With these two visuals, Kaufman and Gondry describe just how fragile love really is, and it is through science fiction that this metaphor can be fully realised.

In summary, Kaufman's use of the science fiction and fantasy genres allows him to portray the intricacies of human experience with precision. His protagonists, while subjected to supernatural portals and fictional scientific processes, overcome obstacles with authentic emotions that make

⁸¹ Ozon, François, director. *5x2*. Screenplay by François Ozon and Emmanuèle Bernheim, Fidélité Productions, 2005.

⁸² Gondry, Michael, director. *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*. Screenplay by Charlie Kaufman, Anonymous Content and This Is That, 2004

⁸³ McGowan, Todd. *Out of Time: Desire in Atemporal Cinema*. University of Minnesota Press, 2011, p.94.

⁸⁴ McGowan, Todd. *Out of Time: Desire in Atemporal Cinema*. University of Minnesota Press, 2011, p. 95-96.

a Hollywood audience sympathetic to their struggles. It is this imaginative blend of reality and absurdity that makes spectators more receptive to Kaufman's emotive characters.

By representing the subconscious with such precision, Kaufman's scripts take full advantage of film as a medium. His use of subjective realism and metaphor has a significant impact on character portrayal, allowing him to explore the intricacies of human experience with more accuracy than traditional narrative structure. Compounded by his authentic depiction of love and relationships in *Eternal Sunshine*, Kaufman suggests that it is authentic human emotions in film that earns critical acclaim and audience appreciation.

CHAPTER III: NARRATIVE STRUCTURE

As films are primarily a form of entertainment, a movie that successfully engages its audience will thrive in the box office. This chapter explores the potential of multiform films as a method of matching the spectacle of blockbuster productions, mirroring George Méliès techniques of employing trick films to astonish audiences. It was Méliès who first realised the potential of film as a medium for captivating storytelling, and Kaufman who grapples with the dilemma of pandering to a Hollywood audience in his film *Adaptation*. The following chapter explores the intricate balance between these industry expectations and unconventional narrative choices. By investigating philosophical and societal problems, Kaufman also uses film as a form of discussion. Opening conversations on the exploration of memory, love, and the human condition, Kaufman's films reflect the universal desire for community and conversation. Successfully introducing this to a Hollywood audience proposes a future where movies become the key to enlightenment. Kaufman's use of science fiction transcends storytelling and becomes a tool for contemplation and personal reflection on relationships and human nature.

Multiform films “use complex narratives to create a type of cinematic pyrotechnics that seek to compete with the spectacle employed in the blockbuster.”⁸⁵ Comparisons can be drawn from this to George Méliès' use of trick film to astonish audiences, taking advantage of film's potential as a medium. As Todd McGowan puts it in his book *Out of Time (2011)*, “The film that did not engage the unconscious of spectators would soon be left with none.”⁸⁶ However, it is also important to realise the limits and advantages that come with particular mediums. Oftentimes, it is necessary for film writers and directors to have a realistic idea of who the movie they are creating is for, and how successful it can be because of this. American professor Daniel Shaw explains that Hollywood films are prone to being “shoehorned into a model that does not really fit, especially when profound depth readings are proposed for pieces of mass entertainment that cannot sustain them.”⁸⁷ In *Adaptation*, Kaufman writes himself as the main protagonist as he tries to adapt Susan Orlean's book *The Orchard Thief (1998)*,⁸⁸ about horticulturist John Laroche and

⁸⁵ Campora, Matthew. *Subjective Realist Cinema: From Expressionism to Inception*. Berghahn Books, 2014, p.9.

⁸⁶ McGowan, Todd. *Out of Time: Desire in Atemporal Cinema*. University of Minnesota Press, 2011, p4.

⁸⁷ Shaw, Daniel. “On Being Philosophical and “Being John Malkovich””. *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, vol.64, no.1, winter 2006, pp.111.

⁸⁸ Orlean, Susan. *The Orchard Thief*. Random House, 1998.

his foraging of the illusive ghost orchid. He uses the movie as a platform to discuss the confines to Hollywood writing.

Adaptation's protagonist, Charlie Kaufman, grapples with the realisation that in order for a movie to be commercially successful, it needs to conform to certain standards of narrative comprehensibility and interest. In conversation with his producer, Charlie argues towards filmmaking without the grandeur of car chases and murder, because that is not a realistic depiction of life. Despite this awareness, "Charlie's attempt to adapt a book on nature into a Hollywood screenplay will result in his own adaptation as a screenwriter to the Hollywood system, and will lead him to write precisely the kind of ending to his screenplay that he originally set out to avoid,"⁸⁹ including a high speed car chase, and the murder of Orlean's original muse, John Laroche.

The death of Laroche at the end of *Adaptation* is Kaufman's admission that Hollywood is not at all interested in a realistic portrayal of life, but rather chooses to dramatise reality into an unrecognisable extreme. Laroche represents the closest thing to reality, Orlean is one step away from it, and Charlie is the missing link between reality and Hollywood. The swamp in which Laroche dies at the end is a metaphor for the creative conflict experienced in attempt to adapt Orlean's story in the first place, since at that point the story is so far away from the original experiences of Jon Laroche that it becomes indistinguishable from a classic Hollywood movie.⁹⁰ Near the beginning of the movie, Charlie meets with his Hollywood producer to argue that Orlean's book lacks the narrative necessary to adapt it into a film. The producer's response, instead of recognising the value of Orlean's chosen medium of literature, is to encourage Charlie to simply make up a narrative. As American lecturer Antonella D'Aquino describes, "Charlie has been given artistic freedom, but during the process of adapting the book to the screen he will learn a profound lesson. Charlie will realise how difficult it is to "dramatise a flower" and, most

⁸⁹ D'Aquino, Antonella. "The Self, the Ideal, and the Real. The Artistic Choice of Three Creative Minds: Fellini, Allen, and Kaufman." *Italica*, vol.84, no.2, summer 2007, p.569.

⁹⁰ D'Aquino, Antonella. "The Self, the Ideal, and the Real. The Artistic Choice of Three Creative Minds: Fellini, Allen, and Kaufman." *Italica*, vol.84, no.2, summer 2007, p.575.

of all, he will understand what the purpose of movies really is.”⁹¹ Instead of honouring the integrity of the story, Hollywood tends to prioritise its potential for success.

American film lecturer and critic Ruth Perlmutter explores how narratives can be used to portray character trauma in her article *Memories, Dreams, Screens* (2005). The films she mentions “make use of dreams and memories to express the tension between remembering and repressing an unacceptable past. The repression often takes a neuro-pathological form, in that the films tend to be driven by characters with either hysterical transference or a psychological ailment like amnesia. They hide behind these psychic maladies in an effort to seek a new identity or escape into alternative selves.”⁹² Unlike *Memento* and *Mulholland Drive*, Kaufman’s use of subjective realist narrative in *Eternal Sunshine* is for the portrayal of something science fictional - the voluntary loss of memory. Kaufman has used science fiction in order to describe Joel and Clementine’s relationship from the end to the beginning. Although the structure is necessary in *Memento* and *Mulholland Drive* because of the protagonists’ respective mental conditions, Kaufman instead uses it by choice to his own advantage. By creating the Lacuna Company, he tells a story about much more than just the invention itself.

The voluntary memory erasure in *Eternal Sunshine* raises a multitude of philosophical questions. One idea that prevails throughout the movie is the philosophy of Nietzsche's “Eternal Yes.” This proposes that when faced with the decision to reincarnate with the same hardships and depressions along with the accompanying pleasures of life, the answer will always be “Yes.” It is after he professes to pure happiness with Clementine on the frozen Charles River that Joel has his “Nietzschean epiphany: he decides he wants to keep all of his memories and stop the procedure altogether.”⁹³ That one moment of pure happiness is worth all of the previous difficulties in the relationship. From this moment on, Joel desperately tries and fails to stop the procedure. It is this sweet spot of the yearning for love and struggle against hopelessness that Kaufman presents with the help of science fiction and subjective realism.

⁹¹ D’Aquino, Antonella. “The Self, the Ideal, and the Real. The Artistic Choice of Three Creative Minds: Fellini, Allen, and Kaufman.” *Italica*, vol.84, no.2, summer 2007, p.562.

⁹² Perlmutter, Ruth. “Memories, Dreams, Screens.” *Quarterly Review of Film and Video*, vol. 22, 2005, p.125.

⁹³ Campora, Matthew. *Subjective Realist Cinema: From Expressionism to Inception*. Berghahn Books, 2014, p.128.

This is also achieved in Kwan and Scheinert's film *Everything Everywhere All at Once* (2022).⁹⁴ Despite protagonist Evelyn's cluelessness when it comes to her own daughter, as soon as she realises Joy faces actual danger, she overcomes her misunderstanding and fear to make Joy realise that despite feeling hopeless, it is the trivial things in life that make it worth living. This echoes Albert Camus' philosophy on the meaning of life, mentioned in his book *A Happy Death* (1971),⁹⁵ "should I kill myself or have a cup of coffee?" We have the freedom to construct meaning from mundane events. Having a cup of coffee often is not revolutionary, but it is a small thing that gives meaning to an otherwise minuscule event. In both *Eternal Sunshine* and *Everything Everywhere*, characters are thrust into extreme situations almost to test the limits of their faith in humanity and in themselves. They portray the desperation of humanity to hold onto life and each other. It is the use of science fiction in both cases that makes the emotion much more sincere and powerful.

At the end of Joel's memory erasure, when its success is inevitable, his last conversation with Clementine also reflects Nietzsche's "formula for greatness for a human being ... love of fate: that one wants nothing to be different."⁹⁶ Clem says, "This is it, Joel. I'm going to be gone soon. What do we do?" He replies, "Enjoy it."⁹⁷ This is also reminiscent of the couple's choice to re-embark on their relationship despite knowing its previous failure. The risk is worth it because of how they feel in that moment - inherently good. There is a focus in the present because it is the present where life happens. We have nowhere else to go, life is inevitable, enjoy it.

Movies often have the ability to tap into our own subconscious, "bringing light to unpleasant truths. Art can therefore be an important instrument for self-analysis. Indeed, fiction can enable the discovery of selfhood."⁹⁸ In encountering the subconscious on such an intimate level in *Eternal Sunshine*, we can solve the enigmas in our own lives as Joel scrambles to recollect the memories in his head. With interpreting a film comes the possibility of discovering meaning and

⁹⁴ Kwan and Scheinert, Daniel, directors. *Everything Everywhere All At Once*. Screenplay by Daniel Kwan and Scheinert, A24, 2022.

⁹⁵ Camus, Albert. *A Happy Death*. 1971.

⁹⁶ Nietzsche, Friedrich. *On the Genealogy of Morality*. Cambridge Texts, 1887.

⁹⁷ Gondry, Michael, director. *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*. Screenplay by Charlie Kaufman, Anonymous Content and This Is That, 2004.

⁹⁸ D'Aquino, Antonella. "The Self, the Ideal, and the Real. The Artistic Choice of Three Creative Minds: Fellini, Allen, and Kaufman." *Italica*, vol.84, no.2, summer 2007, p.558.

purpose. The characters that Kaufman has created so realistically can become devices for our own understanding self-actualisation.

Author Julie Driver explores how voluntary memory erasure like that in the Lacuna Company can hurt those who wish to be remembered. “One way to harm a person is to fail to fulfil that person’s desires.”⁹⁹ Near the start of the film, Joel experiences this from his perspective when Clementine fails to remember him in Barnes and Noble. This deep hurt reveals to spectators their responsibility and moral obligation to remember others who are or once were close to us.

Returning to *E.T.*, we see the bond between boy and alien progress throughout the movie to the point where they are spiritually connected through emotions. Elliot is faced with the choice of turning E.T. in to the authorities for examination or rejecting “the most important foundation upon which his society is grounded - science.”¹⁰⁰ With the knowledge that E.T. would be likely dissected upon capture, Elliot chooses the latter. This is a powerful display of defiance against the authorities, who are often seen as inherently good and trustworthy. *E.T.* creates a world in which adults are an evil presence against the perseverance of kindness and compassion. Young audiences who watch *E.T.* are introduced early on to the possibility of corrupt authority.

Looking at *Eternal Sunshine*, we realise that the Lacuna Company has a key vault - its misunderstanding of how the subconscious works. It could be argued that this is exactly what the Lacuna company wants. Instead of ensuring customers are truly satisfied, keeping them in a loop of consumerism is generating more income for Lacuna. If the company took extreme care with each customer to guarantee their consistent happiness, the need for Lacuna would cease to exist, and the company would have destroyed itself.¹⁰¹ Kaufman’s creation of the Lacuna incorporation provides an opportunity to talk about philosophical terms and to debate the role of capitalism in society.

⁹⁹ Driver, Julie. *Memory, Desire, and Value in Eternal Sunshine*. Routledge, 2009, p.82.

¹⁰⁰ Magistrate, Anthony. “Innocence Unrewarded: A Note on “E.T.” and the Myth of Adolescence.” *Science Fiction Studies*, vol.11, no.2, summer 1984, pp.224.

¹⁰¹ McGowan, Todd. *Out of Time: Desire in Atemporal Cinema*. University of Minnesota Press, 2011, p. 98-99.

When talking about *Eternal Sunshine*, Kaufman is hesitant to classify it as science fiction. “You know . . . [Being John Malkovich and *Eternal Sunshine*] have supernatural kinds of elements . . . I try not to think of that. I’m interested in downplaying that aspect as much as possible. You just kind of present it and then get on with it.”¹⁰² Despite not classifying *Eternal Sunshine* as science fiction himself, the inclusion of Lacuna’s technology of voluntary memory erasure does categorise the film as such, however subtle this aspect is. Kaufman’s films do not speculate on the wonders of science fiction or technology of a new age. He uses this small idea to further explore the working of our own psyche. It is not the science fiction itself that makes his films so intriguing and philosophical, It is the emotions experienced by his characters put in those impossible situations - what Stanislaw Lem describes as “passing fantasy.”

Although *Eternal Sunshine* is described as a romantic comedy, Kaufman’s science fiction elements create heightened stakes which result in the union of Joel and Clementine at the end even more satisfying than more traditional romantic comedies. The supplied hurdles and distractions do not succeed in hindering the reforming of their relationship, implying that the events themselves “are nothing but tactics used to give the final romantic union a sublime status.”¹⁰³ As stated by French writer Raymond Bellour: in a Hollywood film, a couple “apparently only separate to meet again, to strengthen its image by the test of a dramatised separation.”¹⁰⁴ The difference here is that the ending to *Eternal Sunshine* is a bittersweet one, just like Ozon’s *5x2*. We have just seen the relationship between Joel and Clementine fail miserably and are left with the knowledge that it could all go wrong again. In this way, Kaufman’s film ends with a much more realistic depiction of relationships.

At the end of the film, heartbroken Lacuna employee Mary mails all previous customers their file along with a tape of them explaining why they want their memories erased. After initial confusion and disbelief, Joel and Clementine give the relationship another chance despite their knowledge of previous failure. “You will think of things [about me that you don’t like]. And I’ll get bored with you and feel trapped because that is what happens with me.”¹⁰⁵ Relying on their

¹⁰² Kaufman, Charlie. Interview. Conducted by David S Cohen. 17 February 2016.

¹⁰³ McGowan, Todd. *Out of Time: Desire in Atemporal Cinema*. University of Minnesota Press, 2011, p.83.

¹⁰⁴ Bellour, Raymond. *The Analysis of Film*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000, p.277.

¹⁰⁵ Gondry, Michael, director. *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*. Screenplay by Charlie Kaufman, Anonymous Content and This Is That, 2004.

knowledge instead of memory as they reinstate the relationship inaugurates “a relationship that succeeds . . . through the recognition of its inherent failure.”¹⁰⁶ This exact situation is impossible - we do not have the equivalent of *Lacuna* to learn the lesson Joel and Clementine just experienced. The advantage of science fiction in this way is to create these hypotheticals and allow us to learn from them. The spectator can apply this knowledge to their own relationships going forward, as we learn from the mistakes of fictional characters in the media.

Through science fiction, Kaufman heightens his characters and narratives to a new level of realism and philosophy. In doing so, he allows his audiences the opportunity to experience these conundrums as his characters are. Using techniques like subjective realist narrative while also allowing space for images associated with classical Hollywood to thrive, he creates palatable and engaging movies which are available to Hollywood audiences despite their more unconventional themes and subject matter.

Through this exploration of narrative structure, the importance of film in our society becomes clear. Recognising a movie’s ability to engage large audiences by creating spectacles, reminiscent of George Méliès, opens up a world of possibilities. Kaufman’s popularity can be partly contributed to his original screenplays. By choosing to work with unconventional narrative structures and subvert the established industry rules, Kaufman’s films are refreshing and innovative in comparison to other Hollywood movies that do not experiment with cinematic devices. This position gives Kaufman the opportunity to engage his audiences with philosophical and societal problems, introducing film as not only entertainment, but a platform for meaningful discussions and conversations about the human experience.

¹⁰⁶ McGowan, Todd. *Out of Time: Desire in Atemporal Cinema*. University of Minnesota Press, 2011, p.106.

CONCLUSION

In summary, by studying the films of Charlie Kaufman and his relationship with Hollywood, it is clear that his use of filmic devices such as subjective realism and science fiction deliver narratives that modern audiences appreciate, despite the defiance of traditional story conventions.

Kaufman's initial journey into Hollywood with the creation of *Being John Malkovich* confirms Matthew Campora's argument in his book *Subjective Realist Cinema* (2014)¹⁰⁷ - the unexpected success of films with complex narratives reveals a thirst for engaging and original subject matter. The line between art cinema and mainstream commercial media is indeed fading. Producers at the time were drawn to Kaufman's script because of its refreshing originality. This infiltration of Hollywood audiences can be credited to how Kaufman uses distinctive storytelling devices to portray his character's subconscious in a unique and authentic way.

Throughout this discussion, Kaufman's ability to manipulate traditional film structure is revealed, with his use of subjective realist narratives, science fiction, and philosophy adding depth and realism to his protagonists and their relationships. Kaufman's accurate expression of the subconscious in a creative and engaging way contributes to his refreshingly realistic depiction of love, greed, and jealousy, which in turn are partly responsible for the success of his films. Kaufman has demonstrated his ability to exist within a traditional industry while challenging the established conventions in place there. This success can be credited to his whimsical and absurd narratives and the deep understanding of the human experience evident in his writing.

Comparable to the cave dweller population of Paleolithic France, filmmakers like Kaufman are using storytelling to express emotions and create discussions within their societies. Despite the intentions of these two groups bearing similarities, it is understood that the film community today, in finding increasingly unique and authentic ways to portray the human experience, has come a long way from the simple narratives of the Lascaux cave paintings.

¹⁰⁷ Campora, Matthew. *Subjective Realist Cinema: From Expressionism to Inception*. Berghahn Books, 2014.

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