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True and False
New Realities in the Films of Wes Anderson, Spike Jonze and Charlie Kaufman

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Abstract. The filmmakers of the French *Nouvelle Vague*, in the spirit of post-war modernism, wanted to get at the truth of everyday life, and braved oncoming traffic to capture people living real lives. Since the turn of the millennium, Wes Anderson, Spike Jonze and Charlie Kaufman have taken the opposite track, showing a remarkable tendency to undermine their own representations of reality – often humorously collapsing the boundaries between the actual and fictional worlds. The particular filmmakers never content themselves with simple exercises in mimesis, but instead openly acknowledge the elusive objective of faithfully representing reality: examples include the subversively deceptively Godardian cut-away of a film set in Anderson's *Life Aquatic with Steve Zissou* (2004), the symbiotic relationship between the diegetic writing of two screenplays and the events unfolding around the characters in Jonze's *Adaptation* (2002), and the multiple mise-en-abyme structure of Kaufman's *Synecdoche, New York* (2008). In the course of their films, Anderson, Jonze and Kaufman playfully yet confidently turn our perception of diegetic reality on its head, placing emphasis on the idea of "performance" – as it relates to the characters as well as the films themselves.

Introduction

The late 1950s and the early 1960s saw a handful of French directors setting out to revitalize a film industry whose output, according to them, had become dull and conventional. In the spirit of post-war modernism and heavily influenced by the ideas of André Bazin, the filmmakers of the *Nouvelle Vague* wanted to get at the truth of everyday life, recorded straight onto film. The fictional organically grew out of the real.

Around the turn of the millennium, a few American filmmakers turned representation on its head; their work exhibits an infinitely more complicated

relationship with reality than the cinema of the *Nouvelle Vague*. Alongside a variety of other filmmakers who have made thematically similar contributions, the three individuals who form the focus of this article have most consistently represented a noticeable movement that is slightly absurdist but always rooted in some semblance of everyday life, even whilst admitting that their presentation is a fictional artefact.

These filmmakers are Wes Anderson, Spike Jonze and Charlie Kaufman.

Their films display a tendency to highlight the distance from physical reality, often through metafictional gestures. They also share a certain whimsical quality with the films of the *Nouvelle Vague* and make considerable use of "performance," a theme illustrated in examples throughout this article.

The search for the truth of everyday life has transformed into a search for the truth of the film as constructed fiction. All of this is communicated by means of characters involved in explicitly stated plots and *mise-en-abyme* structures of representation that erase the original, even if the original itself is sometimes fictional.

Usually, fictional events are "true" within the diegesis, but when the diegesis acknowledges itself as artificial (false), a grip on the fictional reality becomes all the more difficult and these worlds may be said to be both true and false.

I shall argue that the golden thread tying these three very distinct filmmakers together is a visible presentation of events as elements of an artistic production. Such a presentation is clearly recognized and promoted by all three directors: Wes Anderson frames his films as theatre productions or as literature; Spike Jonze deals with the bizarre consequences of taking on a role as performer; and finally, Charlie Kaufman's *Synecdoche, New York* revolves around a theatre director and the all-encompassing play about his life.

I will explore the work of these three directors, in this order, while continuously highlighting the similarities in their work that may serve to define them as a movement. The following three sections will delve into the diverse work of Anderson, Jonze and Kaufman, with the primary goal of pointing out that the films do not take themselves too seriously: they are self-referential or explicitly artificial, clearly utilising the representational modes of the other forms of art, but never become self-destructive or create distance between themselves and the viewer.

1. Wes Anderson

With the exception of his very first feature film, *Bottle Rocket*, Wes Anderson's films are instantly recognizable by their visual bright colours, their meticulously constructed images, a general air of synthetic reality and characters with curious

idiosyncrasies. In *Rushmore*, the Herman Blume character wears the same suit throughout the film; the three Tenenbaum children also show a remarkably similar dislike in changing their clothes, whether they are 10 or 30 years old. And inexplicably, in *The Darjeeling Limited*, Jack is always seen barefoot, regardless of the rest of his attire.

There is a stylistic consistency to the visual quality of Anderson's imagery, namely that the images always give the impression more of hyperrealism than of actual reality.

But before we get to Anderson's visuals, it is worth pointing out a moment that seems to encapsulate this director's playful refusal of strict mimesis. It happens one night aboard the Belafonte – Steve Zissou's explorer ship in *The Life Aquatic*. As Zissou walks through the different compartments, the camera pulls back to reveal the entirety of the model ship, cut open to show the interior.

This presentation of the ship as a sham calls to mind a similar shot in Jean-Luc Godard's *Tout va bien*. Not only does Anderson imply that this cutaway model is his doll house to play with as a director, but he has the cheek to wrap up the scene with Zissou stating: "It's all really happening." This is, of course, a blatant audiovisual contradiction that pretends to qualify the transparently artificial as "the real," and the substitution of the real by the fake is already visible. However, since this presentation is integrated into the rest of the film by virtue of its similarity to the very films made by the main character, the effect on the viewer is not one of shock or confusion, in the vein of modernist filmmakers like Godard. Anderson doesn't seek to estrange the viewer, but reveals the artifice of his production in a way that serves to conflate his own film with the films inside the narrative – a postmodernist gesture, instead of a modernist one.

One of the principal threads that run through Wes Anderson's work is a fascination with characters who try to stage productions. *Rushmore* and *The Royal Tenenbaums* have teenage theatre directors and *The Life Aquatic* centres on a documentary filmmaker, Steve Zissou. In a very revealing moment, Zissou describes someone else as his "nemesis," implying that he sees himself as a character performing in a fiction.

In one of Anderson's most recent films, *The Darjeeling Limited*, the character of Jack Whitman writes a story about the journey that he and his brothers have undertaken through the Indian countryside. It is an unfaithful account, but the original events themselves (that constitute the film's narrative trajectory) have a very simulated feel – because of their very obviously controlled appearance – so that even these allegedly original events feel fake. An argument could be made

that Jack Whitman sees his own life as a kind of fiction, like Steve Zissou, or even that he recognizes his own status as a fictional character.

The events, as retold or presented by characters like Zissou and Whitman, are different from the facts, and in this way, the authenticity of representation is brought into question. In fact, there are question marks hanging over the credibility of representations in the films of all three directors discussed in the current article.

Anderson's films epitomize a frame of "spectacle" – the presentation of the material as part of a staged production of sorts. Sometimes the artistic endeavours of some of his main characters feature prominently, like the plays of young theatre director Max Fischer in *Rushmore* or the work of oceanographer/director Steve Zissou in *The Life Aquatic*, but in general the idea of a spectacle also applies to Wes Anderson's films themselves.

The title shot of *Rushmore* reveals itself from behind velvet stage curtains and the presentation of the story in this way implies a performance (or a representation) of events, instead of the events themselves; the diegesis is implicitly set on a stage, book-ended by the opening of the curtains at the start, and the closing of the curtains before the final credits: the so-called "stage" is the world of the film.

The Royal Tenenbaums is the title of a book on loan from the public library, and there is a theatrical touch to the film's opening credits, with an explicit mention of the cast as the "dramatis personae." The same goes for the title shot of *The Fantastic Mr. Fox*, which presents the film as a book, on the cover of which it is clearly stated that it is "based on the novel by Roald Dahl." These references to literature and theatre enhance the viewer's perception of the film as an artistic creation.

And then there is *The Life Aquatic*, whose main character's questionable documentaries have a very staged look and feel about them, and the artifice of these little films extends to Wes Anderson's film itself.

"The Life Aquatic" is also the name of the Zissou film screened at the beginning of Wes Anderson's film, and this confusion between film and film-within-film goes some way towards explaining the simulated look of both. This second-degree fiction (the film-within-the-film) is projected onto a screen that is in fact a large print of a painting – in other words, a copy of a representation.

In another scene, Zissou introduces the viewer to his boat (the Belafonte) by holding up a small model of the boat in front of a painting – a reproduction of the boat. All the while, the cutaway model, already cited earlier in the article, is visible in the background, presenting itself as the original, even though it is clearly fake.

Copies, representations and the problem of the original will play an important part in the screenplays of Charlie Kaufman; Spike Jonze deals extensively with the implosion of boundaries in his first two films as director, both scripted by Kaufman.

2. Spike Jonze

Unlike Wes Anderson's hermetically sealed universes, the diegeses of Jonze's films contain a number of characters that have referents in real life, like John Malkovich or Catherine Keener, or a screenwriter called Charlie Kaufman. The combination of real and fictional elements necessarily complicates matters of reference, especially when some portray themselves, while others don't. The easiest way to cut through this Gordian knot of reference is to read the entire film as fictional and self-contained, despite its supposed connection to an extradiegetic reality.

Spike Jonze's central characters use their skills as puppeteers or screenwriters to gain control over their own story: either they physically become someone else, like Craig Schwartz who takes the physical form of John Malkovich, or they fictionally become someone else, like Charlie Kaufman who becomes the fictional version of himself – the central character in a story he is writing and living at the same time.

In *Being John Malkovich*, once Craig Schwartz manages to possess Malkovich and manipulate him like a puppet, Schwartz is no longer just a puppeteer, but becomes a performing actor in his own right. The film's opening scene, in which a puppet is performing a dance on a small stage, is repeated eighty minutes later, in the flesh via John Malkovich, who is performing on the stage that is the diegesis itself.

This idea of reality as stage, which we noted in Wes Anderson's films as well, will be central to the discussion of Charlie Kaufman's *Synecdoche, New York* which forms the final part of this article.

The double identity of performer and orchestrator is repeated in *Adaptation*:[1] A symbiotic relationship develops between the diegesis of Charlie Kaufman's reality and the fictional world of the screenplay which he is writing during the course of the film, such that it becomes very difficult to evaluate which reality is the source and which is the copy. On top of this, and in spite of the apparent reference to an "original," *it is a fictional original*: there are constant reminders that the origin of the events lies not in reality, but in a screenplay, written and rewritten by a creator.

By means of some self-conscious devices like the use of voice-over narration juxtaposed with a scene in which the use of the voice-over is repudiated as sloppy writing, *Adaptation* makes the viewer conscious of the fact that the film is a fiction.

[1] While the correct spelling of Spike Jonze's film is *Adaptation.*, I have omitted the final full stop for the sake of better legibility throughout the text.

In fact, *Adaptation* contains a number of examples of self-reference and this insistence on the constructed nature of the fictional text is a property of metafiction.

The term "metafiction" is used to refer to a text which makes a deliberate point of being a fictional text. In so doing, of course, the constructed, artificial quality of the production is accentuated.

In *Being John Malkovich*, John Malkovich (who is an actor in real life) plays an actor. But not just any actor: he "portrays himself" (insofar as this is possible) in the fictional world that is the diegesis of this film. Before long, the puppeteer Craig Schwartz manages to control Malkovich, thereby causing three otherwise distinct roles to overlap: the real John Malkovich, the fictional character that is the film's John Malkovich, and Schwartz's own performance channelled through John Malkovich, who performs all of these roles simultaneously.

There is further confusion between fiction and reality, since the film's so-called "documentary" about John Malkovich's life contains many factual errors, including his full name. Sean Penn and Brad Pitt, who are actors earning their living through performance, appear as themselves. These "selves" are, of course, difficult to define, for any actual individual who appears in a fiction film, like *Being John Malkovich*, is necessarily circumscribed by a fictional operator, which results in the production of an entity who is almost identical to the original, but of a different order: fictional, instead of actual. The fictional entity is a counterpart of the actual individual, and they are close enough to be nearly indistinguishable from each other. It is this confusing boundary between the fictional and the actual, and in particular the insistence on the actual even within a fictional framework, that problematizes the meaning of the images in front of us.[2]

The metafictional properties of *Adaptation* are much more overt. Not only does the film comment on the medium of film, with tongue-in-cheek references to voice-overs and car chases while using them, but it revolves around its own making, evolving and recounting this evolution at the same time. In the film, Charlie Kaufman's life starts to reflect the screenplay he is writing, but his explicit use of film terminology draws attention to the overarching film's own status as a fictional artefact.

In Spike Jonze's films, the world of the fiction gradually reveals itself as constructed. Just like in Wes Anderson's films, Spike Jonze's characters hurtle towards an ever more fictional version of themselves. In the process, the fictional framework of the story is openly flaunted.

[2] In this paragraph, I have used the concept of a fictional operator, more thoroughly developed elsewhere, among others by David Lewis and Kendall Walton.

Charlie Kaufman used his first film as director, *Synecdoche, New York*, to explore the theme of metafiction in even greater detail. While it doesn't contain any real-life characters the way Jonze's film does, the questions it raises regarding fictional representation are central to understanding these filmmakers' fondness for blurring the line between original and copy – all of this done within a visibly fictional environment.

3. Charlie Kaufman

Synecdoche, New York, released in 2008, has been Kaufman's sole outing as director and I will consider issues relating to the problem of representation targeted by this film, as well as the undervalued directorial debut of George Clooney: the Kaufman-scripted *Confessions of a Dangerous Mind*.

In short, *Synecdoche, New York* is the story of Caden Cotard, a theatre director who decides to stage a play based on his own life, taking it to its logical conclusion, where this representation should necessarily contain copies of all the elements, including a copy of the representation itself, containing more copies, and so on. The scope of this *mise-en-abyme* is seemingly endless, and when all is said and done, the original has been lost somewhere along the way.

In the film, a cartoon on television features an animated version of Caden – one of many different representations in the film, none of them particularly close to the original, but all representing him nonetheless. This is an important point to make, because in the end, Caden allows an actress to portray him, despite the visible differences in appearance. The success of the representation depends on the performance itself while its relation to the original becomes trivial.

"What would be real?" asks Caden's psychologist, but this is a question that, before long, the viewer struggles to answer, especially when the actors supposedly play themselves. The combination of real objects and their own (or other) representations poses its own problems. When the real tries to interact with the artificial, there is often great misunderstanding, or unsolvable confusion, much like John Malkovich who travels into his own portal and discovers a world populated by different versions of himself. In *Synecdoche, New York*, one scene starts in the real world and immediately repeats itself on stage. The stage version contains at least one character playing herself, but whether this performance is itself "real," "a copy" or altogether fictional, is a question that remains unanswered.

In a sense, representations can become replacements for the real-life objects and when Caden's wife and daughter play themselves in his play, on a kitchen

set that is indistinguishable from his own "real-world" kitchen, original and copy blur into one, and the worlds of life and theatre become tangled up.

Such an equalization of an original with its copy is a cornerstone of the film's handling of representations. This acknowledged conflation of act and representation is a major interest of Charlie Kaufman and visible in other films in which he was involved, most importantly *Confessions of a Dangerous Mind*, directed by George Clooney.

Confessions of a Dangerous Mind is presented in such a way that it deliberately makes the viewer question the reliability of the main character recollecting the events. Time becomes somewhat fluid and is compressed over the course of a single take at multiple points during the film. Clooney's direction touches on the same terrain as two other Kaufman-scripted productions – *Adaptation* and *Synecdoche, New York* – in its willingness to playfully blend reality with fantasy and acknowledge the artifice of the representation. In turn, this recalls Wes Anderson's cutaway of the Belafonte. Clooney's manipulation of space and time reveals itself in two very noticeable ways: firstly, there is a physical merging of two events that are actually separated by time and space, and secondly, events that look like they are true in the story turn out to be merely visual fabrications.

At the beginning of *Synecdoche, New York*, the viewer still has a clear sense of what Caden's immediate world consists of. However, the representation slowly replaces the original and the outside world steadily takes a back seat to the version presented on stage. The natural is eliminated in favour of the artificial. The diegesis becomes opaque and uncertain, but clearly influenced by intradiegetic fictions of its own making.

The film contains a scene where Caden sees a gift, which he had sent to his little girl, lying among some garbage. He takes out a vial labelled "Tear substitute" and once he has administered the liquid into his eyes, he proceeds to break down and cry. Or: he pretends to break down and cry. Thus, attention is drawn to the element of performance, even while the stage on which the performance takes place isn't clear. While the boundary between the film's real and theatrical worlds becomes more and more fuzzy, this particular incident pretends to show an actor portraying a part. However, who the actor is (it might be Caden, or a representation of Caden played by Caden himself), what the part is, and who the audience is, is unclear and deliberately ambiguous.

At the end of the film, Caden's occupation of director is taken over by one of his actresses, and he is directed by this representation of himself. Caden therefore

starts performing as a fictional entity in a world that should be real to him. The scope of these interwoven representations – the one inside of the other, inside of another, but many of them more or less reflecting each other – is complex. Once again, it is difficult to pinpoint what the original is, and what the copy is. It is perhaps no surprise that the first images of Caden in the film are his reflections in a mirror: these representations are superficially faithful to the source, but deficient in diegetic substance. Even so, they largely serve as a substitute for Caden.

When Caden is directed to die, it is not only the character that Caden portrays in the theatre piece, but, as far as we can tell, Caden himself and the film who all expire on command by an audible director. This clearly frames the entire film as a show, a controlled creation.

These three filmmakers behave like proper modernists in reminding us that their films are constructions, but relish this fact with postmodern exuberance by not sticking to the facts. The real is always visibly *fictionally* real.

Conclusion

The films discussed in this paper often humorously collapse the boundaries between different kinds of fictional representation, and make a point of emphasizing the importance of the fake. All three directors have addressed the tricky relationship of representations with their sources and, to various degrees of complexity, their films deal with the problems of creation, representation and identity in a world where originals can hardly be discerned from their copies. These filmmakers don't content themselves with simple exercises in mimesis, but instead openly acknowledge the elusive objective of faithfully representing reality. This recognition of playful construction is of course a hallmark of postmodern cinema, but while a film like *Adaptation* benefits from such a label, I hesitate to define many of the other films by such broad strokes.

Anderson, Jonze and Kaufman won't necessarily continue in this vein, but at the turn of the 21st century, for a while, they were making different films addressing similar kinds of preoccupations about filmic reality. While definitely not general studio fare, their films have moderately sized budgets and big names in the cast; they are quite different from the ground-breaking films made by Godard, Truffaut and company, but just like the French upstarts, these filmmakers bring a critical energy to their storytelling that is difficult to miss.

The films' self-consciousness of being artistic creations and the cheerful acknowledgement of their inherent artifice are visually exemplified by scenes

such as the model set in *The Life Aquatic*, but a number of other examples may be found in nearly all of these films.

The French filmmaker Michel Gondry, who directed two other Charlie Kaufman screenplays (*Human Nature* and *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*), has been left unmentioned in this article, because Gondry – unlike Anderson, Jonze and Kaufman – always makes a clear distinction between his stories' real and imaginary components. He presents the real and the fantastical with clarity – as two separate, distinct spaces that cannot be confused for each other – and thereby he distinguishes himself from the others discussed here.

On the other hand, the American director Steven Soderbergh has, from time to time, subverted the conventional relationship between fiction and reality, just like the other directors discussed in this article. In some ways, his 1996 film *Schizopolis* has much in common with *Synecdoche, New York*'s disintegration of family life in the midst of representations of such domestic mayhem. However, it is *Ocean's Twelve* that would display his most audacious venture into the murky waters of postmodern subversion. In this film, the character of Tess, played by Julia Roberts, is asked to "pretend" she is Julia Roberts the movie star. Much confusion ensues, since the fictional and actual worlds unexpectedly collide: Tess, a fictional character, is playing a real person, Julia Roberts, but at the same time, the viewer knows that it is both true and false that Tess *is* Julia Roberts. This open confrontation between real and fictional, and the dilemma generated by performance on both sides (Julia Roberts performing as Tess; Tess performing as Julia Roberts) perfectly demonstrate what possibilities there are in this kind of storytelling. Soderbergh explored similar themes in the metafictional narrative of a 2002 film called *Full Frontal*. Incidentally, *Full Frontal*'s film-within-a-film is directed by David Fincher (as David Fincher), whose only other appearance as film actor was in *Being John Malkovich*.

The films of Anderson, Jonze and Kaufman revolve around "truth as constructed fiction" rather than the so-called "truth of everyday life" which their predecessors held in such great esteem. Some of their films could themselves be a production staged by the respective main characters, and in some cases they are. They recognize that they are inherently fictional and the explicit nature of the performances reminds us that, often, the originals themselves might be fake. There is also a very definite confusion about what we are actually seeing, and this confusion isn't resolved by a last-minute revelation or plot twist. "True" and "false" are labels that cannot easily be ascribed to the parts of a film, especially when these parts no longer fit into a clearly defined context. Even if, say, the

original were true and the copy false, the difference between the two is no longer evident, and the relevance of such labels is now more dubious than ever before.

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