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HOW META-FILMS CAN SERVE CINEMA
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Film, a comparatively recent art form, has already established a rich history of its own with filmmakers and directors exploring its aesthetic possibilities by constantly looking for new ways to discover new methods and approaches to stretch the potential of the medium to the maximum possible. From the silent era to the emergence of talkies and color pictures, films have already gone through several major changes in form and content in the space of less than half a century. These changes were largely a reflection of how the medium got in terms of how it presents itself and how it is shaped to establish itself as a new art form.

The possibilities seemed without boundaries and filmmakers started exploring how this medium can be used in telling stories, transporting feelings and questioning ideas just as other art forms have done for hundreds and even thousands of years before. Telling conventional narrative stories was naturally the first step in using this medium, either by adapting famous works of literature or original screenplays. What will come afterwards is exploring the possibilities that only a medium that include sound and visuals can offer, through the manipulation of narrative and coming up with new ways to tell a story.

This relentless quest to stretch the medium is one of the reasons that we have now reached the stage where films have created a story rich enough that we now have films about films, aka Meta films. This new kind of films has evolved from being a homage to past works like the Indiana Jones character and its obvious links to action heroes film serials, to becoming a subgenre of its own that is totally aware of its self-reflective nature, such as films like *Scott Pilgrim vs. the World is* (2010).

In this essay, I will discuss the role of meta-reflectivity in film and the different objectives meta-films can achieve. I will look at the different ways films have exposed an awareness of the fact that they are works of fiction and the different purposes for which these works have adopted such approach. Based on these comparisons, I argue that the meta-film subgenre is more than just a last, desperate resort that is adopted in an attempt to escape lack of originality and creativity as John Barths argues: "In a short story entitled "Title," postmodern writer John Barth glumly speculates that art follows a terminal trajectory: from invention and robustness, to crippling self-consciousness to, finally, blankness. When the possibilities of an art form have been exhausted, Barth suggests, the art falls back in on itself, re-imagining previous works until even this exercise grows stale and it fizzles into nothing". It is in fact, a new direction that films can explore to achieve new discoveries. A direction that enables filmmakers to communicate new ideas that are relevant for our time.

Adam Quigley, a film blogger, argues: "We've reached a point where the film medium is being used less and less to communicate stories and ideas about the outside world than it is to relate stories and ideas back to the medium itself". Adam Quigley gives some interesting insight on the meta-film phenomena. This new phenomenon that is very prominent in contemporary cinema does have its subgenres as which I am going to illustrate by studying my primary material for this essay.

The first of the three films that I focus on in this study is Spike Jonze's *Adaptation* from 2002. *Adaptation*, written by Charlie Kaufman - is a film that deals with the struggles a writer is facing when trying to make a film adaptation of a book. The film ultimately reveals that the adaptation he is trying to write is more or less the very film we are watching. Charlie Kaufman and Spike Jonze brings the use of meta-reflection to a new level in order to bring the audience to

the heart of making a film; no simply by portraying the process, but by *including* the audience in that process. The level of self-reflection that Charlie Kaufman injects in his work should serve as a very useful study for why filmmakers have chosen a meta-reflective approach to communicate their message; the purpose of critiquing and commenting on the nature of film and filmmaking.

The second film that I will analyze in this essay is *A Cock and Bull Story* by English director Michael Winterbottom from 2005. The film is based on the famous novel *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentlemen* by Laurence Sterne (1759-1769). The novel was considered impossible to film because of its unconventional narrative style but was adapted by Michael Winterbottom to reflect the narrative strategy of the novel rather than its story. Therefore, *A Cock and Bull Story* is about the actors and other personnel involved in the making of a film playing they are playing their roles during the making of a film bases on Sterne's novel. Steve Coogan, the main character plays himself, the actor Steve Coogan, as well as the Tristram Shandy character he is supposed to play in that film and the character of Tristram's father Walter Shandy. This complex, multi-layered meta-reflection and meta-narrative represent some of the elements of the meta-film subgenre, I am referring here to the instance when the filmmaker is trying to capture the essence of the work he is adapting. A literal adaptation of Sterne's novel would most likely fail and even if it does not, it would never capture the essence of the novel, which is of a self-reflexive nature, questioning and challenging the process of writing a book and conventions of narrative. Michael Winterbottom's approach captures that essence by making a film that questions the same ideas and deals with the same issues, only in a different medium.

The third film I will analyze is *Scott Pilgrim vs. the World* from the year 2010. It was written and directed by Edgar Wright. *Scott Pilgrim vs. the World* is based on a comic book by Bryan Lee O'Malley that tries to play out like a traditional video game. The film is about a kid

who has to fight the seven evil exes of the girl he wants to have a relationship with. A concept that has been around for long enough that any literal adaptation would be no more than a routine action story. However, Edgar Wright, who has a history of making parodies of horror and police subgenres in his past works *Shaun of the Dead* and *Hot Fuzz*, constructs his movie in a tongue-in-cheek manner that parodies the countless past movies of this type. Edgar Wright's film does not simply reference other films of the genre by winking at the audience with cliché lines and predictable plot twists which are elements that are self-reflective, he goes further than that by structuring the whole film in the style of a video game. Edgar Wright recognizes the similarities of the original in terms of format and content to video games and makes the film adaptation a tribute to another medium.

He uses the triangle of the hero, princess and villains that must be defeated, the accomplishment of a quest and changing of settings to give us a picture full of witty references to the video gaming culture with sounds and visuals that bring back memories of iconic games like Super Mario and such. By doing this, Edgar Wright does not reflect on the medium of films in the same way that *Adaptation* or *A Cock and Bull Story* do. Instead he pays a loving tribute to the genre and its quirks, while also satirizing modern culture. He also satirizes another medium bringing the meta-film wave to another territory by not simply reflecting on films but on other forms of media as well.

Using these primary sources will enable me to study three of the main ways films reflect on themselves and question their nature. Spike Jonze/Charlie Kaufman, Michael Winterbottom and Edgar Wright in one way or another follows very similar paths in order to reach very different conclusions and communicate different messages.

In this essay, I will try to respond to the claim that meta-films are a sign that the film medium has reached the end of a terminal trajectory as John Barths argues in his short story. I will do this by showing how films can benefit from being self-reflexive, and how it can serve to open new opportunities of storytelling to give a new dimension to the medium whether what they are reflecting on is other films, games or other mediums. On some occasions it can even function as effectively as any other form of art by giving us something to critique and raising questions about our culture and the nature of our society. In other words, I will argue that film is *not* doomed to become a mockery of itself.

In the first film that I will be studying in this essay, Charlie Kaufman is a writer (played by Nicolas Cage). He is hired to adapt Susan Orlean's book *The Orchid Thief*. The book does not have any real plot or dramatic tension to make a film, which is why Charlie Kaufman wants to give it a faithful adaptation by avoiding the formulaic plotting of the conventional film. He tries to in his words "... present it simply without big character arcs or sensationalizing the story. I wanted to show flowers as God's miracles. I wanted to show that Orlean never saw the blooming ghost orchid. It was about disappointment." Charlie Kaufman has a twin brother named Donald Kaufman. Donald does not share the same idealistic ambitions as his brother. After several desperate and ultimately failed attempts, Charlie succumbs to taking the easy route and follows on the path of his brother by using every cliché and convention in his screenplay from the love affair to the customary car chase.

The description above is not a trivial story of the process of making a film adaptation of *The Orchid Thief;* it is in fact a brief summary of the plot of the movie *Adaptation (2002)* by Spike Jonze. *Adaptation* is written by Charlie Kaufman who is also the main character in the

movie, a character who is struggling to write a film adaptation for a novel that turns out to be the very film we are watching.

These layered levels of intertextuality and self-referentiality make Spike Jonze's film one of the leading examples of the meta-film genre in the last decade. This genre represents films about films; it is films that reference the medium and are aware of its existence. This can be done either by critiquing it and questioning its methods or by simply acknowledging the presence of the audience and communicating with its viewers with different techniques such as breaking the fourth wall.

Charlie Kaufman and Spike Jonze already worked on a similar project with similar themes in their previous collaboration, the film being *Being John Malkovich.* However, *Adaptation* represents a new leap from the writer and director into the realm of meta-film. David Ansen, a film critic for The Daily Beast wrote about Spike Jonze's film:

> This latest collaboration between the real Charlie Kaufman and director Spike Jonze, the creators of *Being John Malkovich,* is an inspired flight of fancy, an oddly poignant examination of the creative process, a rumination on adaptation (orchids to their environment, books to the screen and misfits like Charlie to life) and, in its ultimate irony, a story in which our hero learns a life-altering lesson.

Not only does the film deal with the issues and struggles surrounding the process of writing a film, it also questions the values and steps adopted by filmmakers in their work.

Charlie Kaufman's character in *Adaptation* is a self-loathing, depressed screenwriter; he has grown tired of what he views as the cheap thrills of Hollywood films. He argues that he wants to make a movie simply about flowers, and not one with car chases or drugs and sex: "... Why

can't there be a movie simply about flowers? I don't want to cream in sex or guns or car chases. You know? Or characters learning profound life lessons?" He wants to stay faithful to Susan Orlean's book. Somewhere in the middle of the film that we are watching, we are introduced to Robert McKee who is a screenwriting teacher. Charlie Kaufman goes to one of his seminars in search for inspiration. It is in this seminar and the chat that he then has with Robert McKee afterwards, that Charlie learns that in the real world, there is conflict and sacrifice: "People are murdered every day. There's genocide, war, corruption. Every day ... somebody sacrifices his life to save somebody else". Charlie seems to have missed that realization because of his determination to write something different and original, something that deals with other aspects of life that seems to be overlooked in most stories.

It is at this point that Charlie Kaufman abandons his initial ambition and gives in to the Hollywood machine, as he starts inserting all sorts of dramatic twists and suspense build-up, but no deus ex machina as McKee insists: "don't you dare bring in a deux ex machina!" which refers to a device in storytelling where a seemingly unsolvable problem is suddenly fixed through the intervention of an unexpected new event, object or character. It is also at this point when we start watching the film Charlie is writing. The film is layered in a way that it moves seamlessly with its characters between the original film and the film that Charlie Kaufman is writing.

Going by the definition referenced above of a meta-film, *Adaptation* with its multi layered level of intertextuality by merging text within text certainly qualifies as a meta-film. By the time we reach the third act of the film which includes all the plot and character elements that Charlie Kaufman spent the first two acts of the movie rebelling against or trying to avoid, the movie puts forward the question if it is itself a conscious meta-film or a resignation to the Hollywood regime and formulaic plots and stories. As Frank P. Tomasulo argues:

That tacked-on third act inscribes almost all of the negative plot and character elements that Charlie had railed against throughout the screenplay, thereby putting in question whether *Adaptation* itself is a conscious meta-text that critiques the Hollywood system (and itself) or one that capitulates to Tinseltown's standard shibboleths. (164)

Moreover, this kind of structure allows *Adaptation* to include a lot of elements that make it open for different interpretations concerning the reality of what we are watching. There are several hints throughout the film of it taking place purely in the mind Charlie Kaufman's mind. Against the advice of Robert McKee, he goes on to use narration, we hear Susan Orlean's voice-over from the book being interrupted by Kaufman's mirroring the different their subsequent pre-occupations from monkeys, onions to women. Kaufman also plays with the mind of the audience with reflexive lines of dialogue such as : "In the reality of this movie, where there is only one character" which could be taken to refer to the character of Charlie in the movie we are watching; *Adaptation* or the movie Kaufman is supposedly writing about Susan Orlean's book.

Adaptation includes a lot of elements that make it a meta-film according to the definition given earlier, such as the fact that a large part of it is about the creative process of making a film. In addition to that, it contains frequent blurring lines between reality and fiction within the realm of the movie. This is not simply a witty gimmick for the audience, or a complex puzzle for the viewer to solve in the way thrillers usually play out. The fact of it being a meta-film is a necessary device without which the film can never be what it is. It is as big a part of it structure as the plot, actors, sets...

Charlie Kaufman -the real screenwriter- portrays the writing block that he is facing and the dilemma he is put against as an artist; he follows his instincts and searches for something that allows him to express his vision, or follow the safe route, and simply recycle what works and what is guaranteed. When he shows us the fictional character of his twin brother Donald Kaufman as the happy-go-lucky screenwriter, he is showing us a fantasy alter-ego, a route that Charlie Kaufman wonders about and how it would have been like to take. Arthur Lazerre wrote: "the playoff between the two brothers is surely intended as ego and alter-ego, as two sides of the same conflicted writer battling for control" (168). It serves as a means for Charlie Kaufman to communicate his message which is in this case, his inner dilemma, the struggle within himself of what kind of a writer he is and what kind of a writer he wants to be. Donald Kaufman in the movie represents everything Charlie dislikes about the Hollywood system with his lack of creativity and complete satisfaction with writing tired formulaic material for purely commercially purposes. Charlie, however, is tempted by his alter-ego's carefree nature and wonders if things could be easier if he follows the same path. This contrast is what creates the moral dilemma in his mind.

Viewing the character of the brother Donald Kaufman from that angle makes the conversations between Charlie and his brother all the more revealing, as we are practically invited into the mind of the writer and his inner thoughts. Thoughts that are not exclusive to the creative process or the writer's block, but that include his regrets and insecurities such as this exchange:

Charlie Kaufman: Then, when you walked away, she started making fun of you with Kim Canetti. And it was like they were laughing at *me*. You didn't know at all. You seemed so happy.

Donald Kaufman: I knew. I heard them.

Charlie Kaufman: How come you looked so happy?

Donald Kaufman: I loved Sarah, Charles. It was mine, that love. I owned it. Even Sarah didn't have the right to take it away. I can love whoever I want.

Charlie Kaufman: But she thought you were pathetic.

Donald Kaufman: That was her business, not mine. You are what you love, not what loves you. That's what I decided a long time ago.

This dialogue from the movie between the two brothers is the perfect illustration of how different the brothers are. It also works perfectly to showcase the double nature and two side of Charlie Kaufman character and personality if we look at Donald Kaufman as an alter-ego of his brother as stated above.

Other exchanges are wonderfully ironic in how they are mirrored within the movie as Charlie Kaufman wrestles with his ideals of writing a screenplay free from conventional plot elements:

Donald Kaufman: I'm putting in a chase sequence. So the killer flees on horseback with the girl, the cop's after them on a motorcycle and it's like a battle between motors and horses, like technology vs. horse.

Charlie Kaufman: And they're still all one person, right?

In this last exchange, we are given an insight into the ego part of Charlie Kaufman, the part that finds those plot elements pathetic and ridiculous. It also shows us that since it is crossing his mind, it is a definite consideration.

The conflicts that Charlie Kaufman presents us with, and the way he invites the audience to be part of his brain by sharing his thoughts and struggles can shrewdly be represented in the meta-filmic form that *Adaptation* adopts. He is a writer who wants to offer an insight to how he writes and he shows this to the audience by including the process of making the work within the final work.

Returning to Frank P. Tomasulo remark about the third act and how it is either a sign that *Adaptation* is a conscious meta-film or a capitulation to the standard formula of the Hollywood machine, and considering the examples above, it is clear that no matter what the answer is, Charlie Kaufman and Spike Jonze succeeded in creating an inventive, and intelligent film about films and Hollywood. As Frank P. Tomasulo puts it: "Indeed, few movies exhibit so frankly the dialectical marks of their artistic and industrial production as the paradoxical *Adaptation*".

Adaptation might have ended on the same note as the very films it is critiquing but it does this in a way that tells us that we can still find originality in how stories are told and how artists can express themselves in the film medium.

The second work in this essay is based on Laurence Sterne's novel *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentlemen.* It is a novel that has long been considered impossible to transfer to the film medium. The novel is characterized by its highly unconventional narrative style, a style that lack some of the necessary elements needed in order to make a film adaptation. The book is basically about the narrator Tristram Shandy and his story. Tristram Shandy attempts to

tell the story of his life since his birth, only he cannot seem to form any coherent story out of his life. He keeps getting distracted by trivial events and misunderstandings which leads to many humorous situations involving other main characters in the story like his father Walter, his mother, his uncle Toby and Toby's servant Trim as well as a populated supporting cast.

Instead of narrating his story, Tristram Shandy ends up discussing trivial things like the influence of one's name, sexual adventures, philosophy and even noses. By the end of the novel, we realize that even though he has been present as the narrator throughout every chapter, we still do not know much about his life.

Laurence Sterne's novel has inspired a lot of discussions since it was released with its first two volumes appearing in 1759. The popularity of the novel made him an overnight celebrity in England in the second half of the eighteenth century. Critics have since disputed about the novel's merits and meanings and especially its uniquely unconventional narrative structure. Although some have put it down as a failure, other critics lauded its style and pointed it is necessary to communicate its ideas about epistemology and evaluating the significance of events. ". . Sterne's associational method moves from oddity to expectancy. Repetition allows the reader to recognize that the element of structure represents a way of expressing epistemology, a manner of evaluating the significance of events, and a means of achieving a reality closer to human experience than that achieved by more conventional novelistic treatments of causality" (Spector 53). The style used in Sterne's novel allows it to question the familiar narrative structures and storytelling techniques to a level where it connects more closely to human experiences in terms of how we think about our lives and remember the events that influenced it.

The nature of the narrative in *The Life and Opinions and Tristram Shandy, Gentlemen* and how it refuses to bend to a recognizable shape is what lead to its long lasting reputation as an unfilmable novel. However, in 2005, English director Michael Winterbottom released his vision of a film adapted on Sterne's novel, or to be more precise, a film about making a film adapted on Sterne's novel. *A Cock and Bull Story* starring Steve Coogan and Rob Brydon took on the formidable task of transferring this highly seminal work of literature to the big screen, and just as *The Life and Opinions and Tristram Shandy, Gentlemen* questioned a lot of the conventions and writing and narrative and was marked by an intensely self-reflexive style, Michael Winterbottom's adaptation carried the same style and tone.

Even though films do not necessarily have to capture the essence of their source material, in this specific case, Sterne's novel has too much to say about narration and language to simply ignore. That is why *A Cock and Bull Story* is not about the life of Tristram Shandy just like Laurence Sterne's novel is not about the life of its narrator, but about how he tells it and how he uses language and narrative to make sense of life which is reflected in its structure: ". . . Sterne distrusts language as a means of communication while being at the same time fascinated by its magical powers" (Fritz 151).

That is exactly what Michael Winterbottom tries to achieve in his film. It tries to emulate the tone, the quirks of language by transferring the difficulty the narrator has to tell his story to the film medium. In that sense, as Kuo-jung Chen has argued it can be said that *A Cock and Bull Story* is a parallel to the novel: "The film is a parallel to the original novel rather than a faithful adaptation." Instead of watching Tristram's life, we are watching him trying to tell his life which is the essence of Laurence Sterne's novel.

A Cock and Bull Story starts its mission to parallel Laurence Sterne's novel from the first beginning of the picture. The first scene is an exchange between the two main characters Steve Coogan and Rob Brydon who are playing themselves as well characters in the movie being made within the movie we are watching.

> Rob Brydon: [*Rob shows Steve his teeth*] What do you think? Have a look at the color.
>
> Steve Coogan: I saw the color the last time I looked. It registered.
>
> Rob Brydon: It's what they call "not white." What color would you call it?
>
> Steve Coogan: I would, I'd concur with "not white." I'd go further.
>
> Rob Brydon: I mean, it's not yellow.
>
> Steve Coogan: I, you know, I mean, there's a sliding scale, isn't there, you know.
>
> Rob Brydon: Hint of yellow.
>
> Steve Coogan: I think you're closest to...
>
> Rob Brydon: Barley meadow. Tuscan sunset.
>
> Steve Coogan: You're getting laughs, but it's not making your teeth look any better.

This piece of dialogue that opens the movie does not drive the plot forward. It serves as the first of many interesting reflections on the nature of language which is one of the points that the movie and the novel were trying to communicate. The conversation between Steve Coogan and Rob Brydon on their chairs while having their make-up applied shows the impreciseness of the language we use in our daily lives. They both attempt to describe the color of the teeth going from "not white" to "barely meadow" and "Tuscan sunset". This sort of humorous observations aims to poke fun at our usage of language: "…poignantly divulges the amorphous and unstable nature of language to express the same thing, just as what frequently happens in the novel." By writing such dialogue, Michael Winterbottom is being faithful to the spirit of the novel by

portraying its ideas and essence even without faithfully lifting dialogue from the original material.

The movie then goes on to layered levels of intertextuality by merging scenes from the movie that is being filmed about Tristram Shandy with the personal lives of the actors and crew who are involved in the making of that movie. There is a scene after around twenty five minutes where we see Tristram's father –who is played by Steve Coogan as well- and his reaction to the birth of his son, he runs up to his wife to ask about what she named his son. This scene is immediately followed by Steve Coogan's narration as Tristram Shandy, and this time he reminds us of a piece of information about his father. But in true spirit of the book, his narration takes unpredictable turns and what starts as the telling of something significant about his father is interrupted by our narrator talking about Locke's theory of the Association of ideas, before he finally settles on his point. When narrating this scene, Michael Winterbottom does not simply show us Steve Coogan talking, but he shows us images of what he is talking about by using footage of a dog as an illustration of the theory of the Association of Ideas.

Using unrelated visuals that could simply be transferred through a simple sentence of dialogue perfectly fits into the style of Laurence Sterne's novel in that, just as the narrator in the book gets distracted by the context of the stories he tells, Michael Winterbottom gets distracted by breaking the conventions and showing footage to show what can easily be said through words. Michael Winterbottom uses these kinds of structures to capture the heart of *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentlemen.* He portrays the disjointed way we think about things; we do not remember things in a neat order. When we try to recall an event, we do it in a messy manner and we try to put the thought into coherent language which is chat is often referred to as "Stream of Consciousness" Michael Winterbottom emulates Laurence Sterne in making his

character –Steve Coogan - emulate the novel's character –Tristram Shandy, not - by simply telling us their lives but by telling us how they view and remember their lives.

After the sequence of the Lock scene, we see Steve Coogan as himself this time and a scene where we follow him after filming the previous scene to meet his partner and son. He wants the costume people to take off his nose because he is afraid his son would not recognize him. Such a sequence serves a humorous play on the identity of the actors and the characters they are playing. The scene comes only few minutes after we see Steve Coogan as Tristram Shandy's father witnessing the birth of his child and expressing his views on what his child is going to be named. The director then shows us the actor in an interaction with his real son where he expresses his worry that he might not recognize him because of the make-up he had on previous scene.

Those sequences serve to bring us even closer to an awareness of the line of between the fiction of making movies and the reality of the people making them. It also uses the characters of the movie to illustrate the essence of the novel by using those types of narrative and storytelling techniques.

Michael Winterbottom also intertwines the scenes of the film being made and the scenes of the personal lives of the actors with scenes of the producers and money people viewing the film and discussing the budget, specific sequences as well as other details related to the filming.

A Cock and Bull Story has a movie within the movie we are watching; it has characters breaking the fourth wall and the people in it are totally aware of themselves making the movie we are watching as well as the movie they are making. All these elements fit nicely the concept of

meta-film. This is an intensely self-reflexive film form that uses multiple levels of intertextuality to communicate its essence which is also aesthetics and essence of Laurence Sterne's book.

At the end of film, the producers and main actors gathered in screening room to preview the movie they are working on. Rob Brydon and Steve Coogan engage in another tussle of words that mirrors the opening scene. They argue about who can do a better impersonation of Al Pacino before which Rob Brydon tries to get his rival to touch his head.

Rob Brydon: Just trace with your finger, the actual area.

Steve Coogan: You're actually asking me to do that? Fuckin' hell, mate.

Rob Brydon: Just trace the area.

Steve Coogan: All right, I'll just trace it, from like that. I'm just tickling the area.

Rob Brydon: Oh, I can feel that. That's good. Can you arrange the hair that's there? To cover it?

Steve Coogan: No no no!

Rob Brydon: 'Cause I'm working in the dark.

Steve Coogan: Well I'm not touching your fucking head, Rob.

The rivalry between those two actors mirrors perfectly the implicit rivalry between Tristram Shandy and Uncle Toby in the novel. Just as Tristram and his uncle quarrel throughout the novel, Rob Brydon and Steve Coogan are in intense competition for the lead of the film, their appearance, talents, skill and even the color of teeth or balding heads.

The implicit and almost suppressed rivalry between Tristram Shandy and Uncle

Toby as the main character of the novel is thus explicitly (and often intriguingly)

rendered in the contention between Steve Coogan and Rob Brydon for the leading

role in the film. Early in the film, the audience is confronted with the quarrel

between these two actors, arguing whether there is a leading role or three are co-

leading roles.

This is further mirrored in Tristram's Shandy assertion that he is the hero of his own story, and not his uncle Toby. The film points to this tension through the rivalry between Steve Coogan and Rob Brydon. Steve's insistence on the leading role position is clearly declared after Tristram's story in the film starts "when I said it was a cock and bull story, it was my cock I was talking about, not Uncle Toby's. After all, am I not the hero of my own life?" In another parallel to the novel, it is Steve Coogan who is playing Tristram Shandy in Michael Winterbottom's film that seems insistent on being the lead to the point of condescension.

It is hard to imagine how anyone could have transferred Laurence Sterne's vision to the screen before Michael Winterbottom made *A Cock and Bull Story*. It is a meta-film that uses the opportunities the cinematic medium offers to approach Sterne's material honestly. It does not simply tell the story, it tells it how *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentlemen* tells it, by reflecting on its medium, on language and on life.

The final film I am going to discuss is based on Bryan Lee O'Malley's graphic novel series *Scott Pilgrim*. It has enjoyed a lot of success during the first decade of the twenty first century. It is about a twenty-three year old Canadian boy who is a part-time musician. The boy

named Scott Pilgrim with Ramona Flowers who is an American delivery girl. He must however, defeat her seven deadly exes in order to earn the right to be with her.

The premise of the graphic novel could have easily come out straight from the realm of video games. It has the protagonist and the love interest, with several tasks in the form of seven evil exes. The protagonist has to defeat the seven exes in order to be with his love. This structure of setting up similar yet different tasks for the reward of being reunited with the dream girl is the basis of a lot of video games like Super Mario.

This graphic novel series formula was adapted to the screen by English writer and director Edgar Wright in the form of the motion picture *Scott Pilgrim vs. the World.* Edgar Wright's movie does not veer much from the Bryan Lee O'Malley's graphic book. It has all the main characters; it also retains their personality traits and what they do. *Scott Pilgrim vs. the World* does not however play as a straight movie. It plays as a video game, more precisely a hand-held video game from the 1990s. Aaron Sherman wrote in his blog:

> The first image you see is an 8-bit video game-style rendering of the Universal Pictures logo. This is accompanied by an appropriately retro version of the usual signature theme. From this point on, the movie firmly establishes itself as a movie / video game hybrid, and I expect that audiences will fall into two camps: those who are aware of video game (specifically *console and hand-held* video game) culture who will enjoy the humor and visuals and those who are not and won't.

Everything that comes afterwards in the movie is a visually creative spectacle that pays tribute to a lot of aspects of our modern culture including films and video games.

After the first image of the 8-bit video game-style rendering, we have a musical piece by Scott Pilgrim –who is played by Canadian actor Michael Cera - and the rest of his band. This is followed by an introduction to where Scott Pilgrim lives and who he lives with as well as what he possesses. This introduction is done through little notes that pop up in the screen telling what each object is. The whole sequence is titled on top of the screen "Scott and Wallace's Apartment: Ownership Diagram". This style that is set in the beginning from the first image to the opening credits and the Ownership Diagram sequence establishes the intentions of director/writer Edgar Wright very early on in the picture. He is not simply making another comic book movie; he is making a movie that is totally aware of itself as a comic book adaptation and its audience by acknowledging them repeatedly with references to modern culture from the past two decades.

Unlike the previous two movies that I have discussed in this essay; Spike Jonze's *Adaptation* and Michael Winterbottom's *A Cock and Bull Story,* Edgar Wright is not using self-reflection in his movie to express any statement about media, writing, films or the human condition. What he is doing however, is celebrating a culture saturated by video-games and movies. *Scott Pilgrim vs. the World* in a way represents a common trend over the past decade, the trend of films paying homage to older films and styles. It is almost a resignation to the inability of coming up with new stories or new genres. The three movies use a lot of the same self-reflexive elements even though these elements achieve different purposes. They are three meta-films that use this structure to communicate different things. These elements of self-awareness are the natural next step in film after the medium has existed for so long. Adam Quigley writes in his column:

> To some degree, self-awareness in film has almost become a necessity, since
>
> anybody who's spent a significant portion of their lives watching movies and TV

shows has already grown tired of the stories that most of them are telling. This isn't because the stories are bad per se, but because it's hard to engage in a story when you can predict every move its going to make before it happens. Meta films don't suffer from this problem. When you have films and shows that know they're formulaic, and slyly embrace it, it's easier for movie fans to maintain a personal connection with that material, specifically *because* of their familiarity with it.

As Adam Quigley argues, this self-awareness does not necessarily mean the death of cinema; it simply means a new direction to which the medium is heading. A direction through which filmmakers can recycle old material with audiences presented with the opportunity to reflect and enjoy stories and characters that they have grown up idolizing or formed a nostalgic connection with.

Edgar Wright starts his movie in a structured enough style. He introduces Scott Pilgrim, his band, his roommate, his flat and just about every important detail in his life. The audience even gets a glimpse of what on the music routines of the band. This gives an insight to the kind of people these teenagers are. Even in this introduction, Edgar Wright reveals his tongue-in-cheek style. He does not treat the band's affiliation with the music scene as simply a character trait. He shows it with an exaggerated style through editing and sound technique which is to poke fun at the teenage boys' band culture.

The movie introduces us to the American delivery girl and Scott Pilgrim's first encounter with her. This encounter results in an awkward attempt from Scott to secure a date with the delivery girl. After which, they meet at a club where his band is playing. That is the moment where the outrageousness of the approach of the film is fully established. During the band's

routine, a character named Matthew Patel is introduced in a manner befitting a shooting-up video game. He pops from the screen in the style of an evil caricature from a video game. The manner of this entrance is another reference to what the movies parodies.

What follows is an intentionally comically threatening speech from Matthew Patel directed at Scott Pilgrim. The exchange then is followed by a fight that is overloaded with sound effects from typical video games from the nineties. Floating texts, slow motion shots and cheesy one liners keep popping up on the screen in an as over the top fight scene as you're likely to see on a movie. To cap it off, the fight is interrupted with the following exchange:

> Scott Pilgrim: Wait! We're fighting over Ramona?
>
> Matthew Patel: Didn't you get my email explaining the situation?
>
> Scott Pilgrim: I skimmed it.
>
> Wallace Wells: [*shaking head*] Mm-mm.
>
> Matthew Patel: You will pay for your insolence!

The fight is then finished with a big display of the text "K.O" and the sound of coins hitting the ground which Scott Pilgrim picks up and quips: "Oh, man, 2.40$? That's not even enough for the bus home."

What we have just witnessed at this moment in the picture is basically a video game with real actors who keep reminding us that what we are watching is parody of the genre. In addition to the structure of the film and its obvious references to the gaming world, we have a visual style of floating texts and exaggerated moves and jumps by the actors as well as sound effects that is only seen when playing certain video games. The movie continues on its path with Scott Pilgrim running into more of his love interest's exes. These exes represent different types of cliché evil

characters in comic book, video games or super hero movies. He has to fight them and every fight follows the same pattern as the first one with Matthew Patel with over the top special and sound effects.

By following this approach, Edgar Wright avoids falling into the traps of simply making "another" film about a comic book with heroes and villains. He makes a film about these films and the culture their culture.

> As strange as this all is, it only makes sense that cinema would eventually venture to this point. Once the tropes and conventions of a particular genre/subgenre have been established, all that's left to do is recycle them. This has been true throughout the history of cinema, whether you're looking at the Golden Age of Hollywood during the late '20s-'50s, spaghetti westerns in the mid-'60s, exploitation films in the '60s-'70s, or even more recently, at the popularization of superhero/comic book franchises, video game movies, J-horror remakes, and "torture porn" horror flicks. All it takes is one or two notably successful films from these genres to generate public interest and mark out its territory, and the studios will follow suit with as many replicas as audiences are willing to consume. By the time audiences grow wary of the subgenre, it's often already progressed into parody, followed then by dormancy.

Audiences are familiar now with almost every formula there is. Even though this does not make films that follow a conventional structure a failure, we know what the next twist will be and are aware of how the story is going to develop in a comic book based film. Meta films allow us to look past that and enjoy a movie that speaks not because of its thrills but because it speaks our

language. We become drawn in a nostalgic trip with an old friend to somewhere we are very familiar with.

We do not complain when the story takes a predictable twist or at recycled plot developments at Edgar Wright's *Scott Pilgrim vs. the World* even though its source material is littered with such elements. The film knows that its material is recycled which means he makes his film about the familiarity of the material and uses the audience's love and affection of that material. This allows the target audience to sit back, nod in acknowledgment to all the references and simply enjoy the nostalgia.

Meta-films can be on certain occasions an exercise in repetition and a lazy attempt at recycling safe and formulaic material. However, that is not always the case. It is an approach that can immensely serve the film medium when it is used to communicate the message of the film and not just as a device to justify the recycled material.

Spike Jonze and Charlie Kaufman used this approach in *Adaptation* to express their views on filmmaking and writing. It is a film that brings to us the creative process of making movies as well as critiquing the Hollywood culture of formulaic plots that use dramatic twists and improbable characters learning life altering lessons. In the other film, Michael Winterbottom uses meta-reflection in his movie *A Cock and Bull Story* in an attempt to capture the essence of the book it is based on *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentlemen* by Laurence Sterne. It deals with the concept of narrative and how stories are told. Michael Winterbottom's film reflect on making movies by constantly reminding us of the fact that it is a movie just like Laurence Sterne's novel reflected on writing and storytelling. In the third film, *Scott Pilgrim vs. the World* by Edgar Wright, he takes a familiar plot and characters and uses them in a structure that is aware

of this familiarity. Such approach shifts the main focus from the predictable narrative to an exercise of catching all the references and winks that target audiences have grown fond of from the film medium as well as the video-gaming medium.

These three films show the different ways meta-films can serve a film. They are movies that achieve different objectives from critiquing the medium to paying tribute in an inventive style, and they achieve these objectives by adopting a self-reflexive approach. Writers and artists have used such approach in other medium of arts over many years to great effects. It is only logical that films go through the same procedure as it is an effective tool to achieve a specific level of communication that acknowledges its audience and blurs the lines between the author and the recipient.

Meta- films are not a sign of the doom of creativity in cinema, and they are not the natural end of the medium's cycle of life. They are merely a method that enables the artists of the field to explore new and old territories in contemporary style and from other angles.

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