Postclassical Hollywood/Postmodern Subjectivity

Representation in Some ‘Indie/Alternative’ Indiewood Films

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## Contents

Abstract .................................................................................................................................................. iii
Declaration ............................................................................................................................................... iv
Acknowledgements ............................................................................................................................... v

Introduction ........................................................................................................................................... 1

  Defining the Postmodern ...................................................................................................................... 13
  Postmodernism, Cinema, Hollywood .................................................................................................. 22
  Defining Indiewood ............................................................................................................................ 44
  Subjectivity and the Classical Hollywood Cinema ........................................................................... 52

Chapter 2. Depthlessness in American Psycho and Being John Malkovich ........................................... 61
  Depthlessness, Hermeneutics, Subjectivity ....................................................................................... 63
  American Psycho ............................................................................................................................ 69
  Being John Malkovich ...................................................................................................................... 80
  The Limits of Depthlessness ........................................................................................................... 91

Chapter 3. Fragmentation in Memento and Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind .............................. 105
  Fragmentation, History, Subjectivity ............................................................................................... 108
  Memento .......................................................................................................................................... 114
  Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind ............................................................................................ 124
  The Limits of Fragmentation ........................................................................................................... 135

Chapter 4. Simulation in American Splendor and Adaptation ................................................................. 144
  Representation, Simulation, Subjectivity ......................................................................................... 146
  American Splendor .......................................................................................................................... 153
  Adaptation ....................................................................................................................................... 163
  The Limits of Simulation ................................................................................................................... 172

Chapter 5. Beyond Indiewood: Postmodern Subjectivity in Lost Highway, Mulholland Drive and Inland Empire ......................................................................................................................... 182
  Introduction ..................................................................................................................................... 182
  Depthlessness ................................................................................................................................. 193
  Fragmentation ................................................................................................................................. 207
  Simulation ....................................................................................................................................... 222

Conclusion ............................................................................................................................................ 237

Filmography ......................................................................................................................................... 250
Works Cited ........................................................................................................................................ 255
Abstract

This thesis examines the representation of postmodern subjectivity in what Geoff King calls the “indie/alternative” Indiewood film (Indiewood 38), through a close examination of some particular examples.

In the late twentieth century, Hollywood cinema made a series of excursions into postmodernism and its effects on subjectivity. Scholarship on Hollywood’s ventures into this territory has, historically, focused on the representation of the cyborg in the science fiction films of the 1980s and 1990s and the destabilisation of the “human” that this figure engenders. This thesis argues that, in the late 1990s and early 2000s, some indie/alternative Indiewood films exhibited a similar tendency to explore postmodern subjectivity through experimenting with the representational conventions of the classical Hollywood cinema and the model of subjectivity this has historically supported.

This thesis offers close readings of formal/aesthetic strategies in six indie/alternative Indiewood films: American Psycho (Mary Harron, 2000), Being John Malkovich (Spike Jonze, 1999), Memento (Christopher Nolan, 2000), Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind (Michel Gondry, 2004), American Splendor (Robert Pulcini and Shari Springer Berman, 2003), and Adaptation (Spike Jonze, 2002). I contend that these films not only thematically explore the effects of the postmodern on subjectivity, they also use representational strategies that appear to break with the classical Hollywood cinema’s emphasis on coherence, continuity and verisimilitude, conventions that sustain a model of subjectivity inherited from the Enlightenment. By privileging depthlessness, fragmentation and simulation, the indie/alternative Indiewood films addressed in this thesis appear to construct their characters as postmodern subjects.

It is my argument, however, that the films struggle, in different ways and to varying degrees, to exceed the classical conventions for representing character and subjectivity. I further contend that the limits I have identified in this group of indie/alternative Indiewood films do not represent the boundaries of what the cinematic medium, or even American popular narrative cinema, can represent. Through a detailed examination of Lost Highway, Mulholland Drive and Inland Empire (David Lynch, 1997, 2001 and 2006), I show that it is possible for American popular narrative cinema to mobilise representational strategies that more fully support a postmodern model of subjectivity.

This thesis argues, then, that American popular narrative cinema is capable of exceeding the conventions that support the Enlightenment model. This prompts questions about the persistence of this model in the versions of this cinema produced in Hollywood. The broader concern of this thesis lies not with the postmodern but with the imperative to critique the representational conventions of Hollywood cinema, and to question the model of subjectivity – be it Enlightenment, postmodern or otherwise – that it supports.
**Declaration**

This work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text.

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Signed

Jessica Murrell

6 August 2010
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Introduction

“Film concerns itself with the nature of its own creators.” — Neill Potts (85)

To assert that cinema is concerned with subjectivity is to state an axiom of film studies. To observe, further, that narrative cinema offers us stories about characters — fictional representations of subjects — is a move that seems so obvious as to be almost redundant. If we consider, however, that the ways in which these fictional subjects are represented play an important role in constructing how we view “real” subjects, then this observation becomes rather more significant. Given that narrative cinema — in its popular, Hollywood articulation — is a hegemonic cultural form, its capacity both to reflect and construct the subject is considerable. The impetus for this thesis, then, lies in the imperative to critique how characters are represented in Hollywood cinema, and to question the model of subjectivity that this cinema supports. Representation is by no means neutral; with this in mind, the apparent obviousness of a statement such as Potts’s has some significant ideological implications. The word “nature”, for example, implies that there is something about the creator of a film that is essential. The word “creators” is similarly loaded; it suggests that the subject is both autonomous and located in a space outside of representation. In other words, to say that cinema explores “the nature of its own creators” is to suggest that there is a “natural” subject and that part of its “nature” is its autonomy or its agency to create.

Indeed, the conventions associated with Hollywood cinema, which are notionally “classical”, work hard to convince us that a film’s characters are
autonomous, coherent and whole. It would appear, moreover, that their efforts are largely successful. Take, for example, Jacques Rivette’s essay ‘The Genius of Howard Hawks’, which appeared in Cahiers du Cinéma in 1953 as part of the movement, among Francophone cinéastes, to take Hollywood seriously as an object of intellectual enquiry. Here, Rivette explains that the “heroes” of Hawks’s films — paradigmatically classical films like Only Angels Have Wings (1939), To Have and Have Not (1944), Red River (1948), and Monkey Business (1952) — pursue their goals according to a tenacious logic. This logic, he argues, provides “proof that the body is a coherent whole, harmoniously following the consequences of an action out of loyalty to itself” (131). Moreover, Rivette continues, “[t]he strength of the heroes’ willpower is an assurance of the unity of the man and the spirit, tied together on behalf of that which both justifies their existence and gives it the highest meaning” (131). Rivette’s comments are underpinned by two notions: that the “creator” of the film, in this case Howard Hawks, is an autonomous subject, and that the characters in the films themselves — the “heroes” — are also autonomous and coherent. Rivette’s polemic begins to suggest, then, that the classical Hollywood cinema might support a model of subjectivity inherited from the Enlightenment.

The classical Hollywood cinema’s support of an Enlightenment model of subjectivity is unsurprising if we consider that this cinema was developed as an audio-visual equivalent to the nineteenth-century realist novel, a point that has

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1 The classical Hollywood cinema, as theorised by David Bordwell, Janet Staiger and Kristin Thompson in their influential The Classical Hollywood Cinema, is arguably a totalising concept that conceals the actual diversity of Hollywood production. For this reason, the utility of the term “classical” for scholarship on Hollywood cinema has been vigorously debated. See, for example, Jane Gaines’s Classical Hollywood Narrative, an anthology examining the valences of and problems with the classical paradigm. The concept of the classical Hollywood cinema will be discussed in more detail in Chapter One of this thesis.
frequently been made in the scholarship on Hollywood history. Indeed, the proponents of Marxist/psychoanalytic film theory drew attention to the parallels between nineteenth-century literature and early-to-mid-twentieth-century Hollywood cinema in the 1970s, when the ideological implications both of classical narrative and of the cinematic apparatus were heavily theorised. Yet the alignment of the classical Hollywood cinema with nineteenth-century literary realism, and its support of an Enlightenment model of subjectivity, becomes curious when we consider the historical context in which the cinematic medium emerged. Cinema was a product of modernity; as Walter Benjamin famously observed, the mechanical reproducibility and the movement of the filmed image caused radical changes both in artistic production and spectatorship (215, 231). Moreover, cinema also contributed to the increase in image reproduction in the twentieth century that arguably led to the postmodern turn (Constable 43). The fact that Hollywood cinema developed along classical lines in a context where the various literary and visual modernisms were rejecting classical conventions is a well-noted phenomenon. What I find particularly remarkable here is that this cinema, in using classical representational conventions, purportedly supported an Enlightenment model of subjectivity in a century in which this model was being challenged.

Hollywood cinema’s construction of the subject as individual, autonomous and coherent took place in a context where the material conditions in which subjects lived underwent extraordinary changes. As I will show in Chapter One of this thesis,

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2 See, for example, Altman (25), and Wood (217). As I will explain in detail in Chapter One, the nineteenth-century literary heritage of narrative cinema is frequently posited as a reason why it is difficult to locate a modernist, and, subsequently, a postmodernist, period in Hollywood cinema (Hayward and Kerr 5; Peterson 146).

3 For examples of this canonical film theory, see MacCabe, Mulvey, Metz, and Baudry.

4 See, for example, Friedberg (165).
this prompted paradigm shifts both in established philosophical ideas about
subjectivity, and the literary and artistic traditions for representing this subject. More
than this, cinema is in fact positioned as a major contributor to the increasingly
thorough destabilisation of subjectivity that took place in the twentieth century. For
example, theorists like Norman K. Denzin and Anne Friedberg have argued,
convincingly, that the gazing that takes place in the act of cinema spectatorship is
both central to contemporary society (Denzin) and constructs the viewer as a
postmodern subject (Friedberg). This postmodern subject, it is argued, is depthless,
fragmented, and a product (not a producer) of representation and discourse. I will
address the critical-theoretical construction of postmodern subjectivity, examples of
which are both numerous and notoriously complicated, in detail throughout this
thesis.

The observations made by the proponents of Marxist/psychoanalytic film
theory about the ideological implications of the classical Hollywood cinema’s
representational conventions were part of the significant shifts in critical theory that
accompanied the postmodern turn. These shifts can broadly be described as part of
poststructuralism; it was only in the late 1970s and early 1980s that theorists like
Fredric Jameson and Jean-François Lyotard began to use “postmodern” as a critical-
theoretical term. The cinema the Marxist/psychoanalytic critics were theorising was
not immune to the shifts in cultural production that occurred at this time. Indeed, in
the last four decades of the twentieth century, the continuity of the classical
Hollywood paradigm was (arguably) subject to some major disruptions. These

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5 See Friedberg’s *Window Shopping* and Denzin’s *The Cinematic Society.*
6 See Lyotard’s *The Postmodern Condition* and Jameson’s ‘Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of
Late Capitalism’, which was an early version of an essay that he later expanded into the influential
*Postmodernism.* The multiple valences of the term “postmodern” will be discussed in detail in
Chapter One.
changes began in the late 1960s in the period that is known as the Hollywood Renaissance or the New Hollywood. Here, university-educated filmmakers like Martin Scorsese and Francis Ford Coppola — influenced by the French New Wave and well versed in film history and technique — began to make films, like the seminal *Bonnie and Clyde* (Arthur Penn, 1967), that reworked and challenged classical conventions. This renaissance was interrupted by a second paradigm shift. Notionally caused by the success of two films, *Jaws* (Steven Spielberg, 1975) and *Star Wars* (George Lucas, 1977), this era became known as that of the blockbuster, or the New New Hollywood.

Alongside the well-documented arrival of these two “New” Hollywoods, another American cinema was gathering momentum. The rise of the American independent cinema in the 1980s and early 1990s — and the commercial successes of films like *sex, lies and videotape* (Steven Soderbergh, 1989) and *Pulp Fiction* (Quentin Tarantino, 1994) — ushered in yet another “New” Hollywood, located at the intersection of the American independent cinema with the studio-driven mainstream. Emerging in the mid-to-late 1990s, this relatively recent development in Hollywood, which is only now beginning to be theorised in the academy, has become known as Indiewood.

Taken together, all of these developments in Hollywood  

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7 Examples of work on the “New” Hollywood or the Hollywood Renaissance are numerous. See Kramer, Kolker, Schatz, Lewis, Murray Smith (‘Theses’), Maltby (‘Nobody Knows’), and Elsaesser, Horwarth and King. For anecdotal histories on this period see Pye and Myles, and Biskind (Easy Riders).

8 For examples of scholarship on the blockbuster see Stringer, Wyatt, King (Spectacular), and Buckland (Directed By and ‘Close Encounter’).

9 The rise in the mainstream commercial success of the American “indie” film has been documented in Peter Biskind’s *Down and Dirty Pictures* and James Mottram’s *The Sundance Kids*. Several terms have been mobilised in film studies to discuss some of the products of this cinema (see, for example, anthologies like Nicholas Rombes’s *New Punk Cinema* and Warren Buckland’s *Puzzle Films*) but Geoff King’s *Indiewood, USA* is, to date, the only major piece of scholarship to address them as the products of a discrete industrial location. This thesis, then, contributes to an emerging field that I will map in more detail in Chapter One.
cinema were, in various ways and to varying degrees, “different” to the classical paradigm that Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson argue had persisted in relatively stable form from 1917 up until 1960 (10). In this sense, the three “New” Hollywoods can be read as broadly constituting a postclassical Hollywood cinema.  

Given that the postclassical turn in Hollywood was paralleled by the postmodern turn in society, theory and cultural production, my intention in this thesis is to examine the intersection of postclassicism and postmodernism. I am interested, in particular, in the representation of postmodern subjectivity in postclassical Hollywood cinema.  

Elements of this cinema have certainly displayed a concern with the effects of the postmodern on subjectivity. This has been particularly prominent in the science-fiction films made in the final decades of the millennium; here, the figure of the “cyborg”, as a hybrid of flesh and machine, renders the category of the “human” considerably unstable. The figure of the cyborg as a model for the post-human — in films like Blade Runner (Ridley Scott, 1982), The Terminator (James Cameron, 1984), Terminator 2: Judgment Day (James Cameron, 1991), RoboCop (Paul Verhoeven, 1987), Total Recall (Paul Verhoeven, 1990) and, more recently, The Matrix (Andy and Larry Wachowskis, 1999) — has been heavily theorised. It is my contention, however, that a similar concern with the effects of the postmodern on subjectivity can be seen in another group of films that belong to the third “New Hollywood”, namely, Indiewood. In particular, this tendency to

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10 As with the term “classical”, in using the word “postclassical” to describe late twentieth century Hollywood cinema I acknowledge the contentiousness of the concept, which has engendered spirited debate among film theorists. See, for example, Bordwell (Way Hollywood) and Thompson. 
11 Friedberg argues that the cinema spectator is constructed as postmodern subject “whether or not the style per se is postmodern” (7). While I do not disagree with this, I believe that it is important to examine the representations of subjectivity and to consider the extent to which postclassical Hollywood cinema is able to represent and further contribute to constructing the postmodern subject. 
12 See, for example, Bukatman, Short, Landsberg, Holland, and Pyle. This enquiry into the cinematic representation of the cyborg was part of a broader interest in cyborg and/or “cyber” subjectivity in 1980s and 1990s critical theory, which is exemplified by Donna Haraway’s “A Cyborg Manifesto”.

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thematise aspects of the relationship between postmodernism and subjectivity can be seen in the subcategory of this cinema that Indiewood scholar Geoff King defines as “indie/alternative” (*Indiewood* 38). I contend that these films explore the effects of the postmodern on subjectivity, both thematically and through utilising representational strategies that appear to break with the classical paradigm’s emphasis on coherence, continuity and verisimilitude. This thesis investigates the extent to which indie/alternative Indiewood cinema is able to represent character and subjectivity as postmodern and therefore destabilise or exceed the Enlightenment model.

In order to frame this study, Chapter One establishes the contexts and concepts with which this thesis is concerned. These are: postmodernism, Hollywood, Indiewood, and subjectivity. Starting with a working definition of the postmodern, I then address the relationship of Hollywood to the postmodern. Although this relationship is fraught — and curiously under theorised — I argue that it might be possible to read the postclassical turn in Hollywood as the arrival of postmodernism in a cinematic tradition that, unlike literature, was only intermittently subject to modernist interruptions rather than a sustained modernist period. In this sense, I concur with Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson’s argument that the classical paradigm was able to “assimilate” the technical novelties such as those introduced, for example, in 1920s Soviet cinema (72). Having established the potential for reading postclassical Hollywood as a part of the postmodern, I then address Indiewood as a more recent instance of the postclassical. I will further argue that it is in a sub-category of the Indiewood film — the indie/alternative Indiewood film — that we can see both a thematic engagement with postmodern ideas about subjectivity and,
perhaps more significantly, formal experimentation with the representational
conventions of the classical paradigm. I will then address the category of
subjectivity, and explore, in more detail, the ways in which the classical Hollywood
cinema can be said to support a model of subjectivity inherited from the
Enlightenment. I position indie/alternative Indiewood film as an example of
postclassical Hollywood cinema that is, tendentially, concerned with postmodern
subjectivity. Key examples of indie/alternative Indiewood cinema, I suggest, use
representational strategies that appear to depart from the classical conventions for
representing characters, and from the model of subjectivity the classical Hollywood
cinema has historically supported. Characters in the indie/alternative Indiewood film,
I argue, are constructed in a manner that appears to support a postmodern model of
subjectivity.

My analysis of indie/alternative Indiewood takes the form of three chapters.
Each of these chapters examines two indie/alternative Indiewood films in relation to
one of three key postmodern concepts: Chapter Two examines depthlessness,
Chapter Three looks at fragmentation, and Chapter Four investigates simulation.13 In
Chapter Two, I examine the concept of depthlessness as it is mobilised in
postmodern discourse. I then address how depthlessness functions in two
indie/alternative Indiewood films: American Psycho (Mary Harron, 2000) and Being
John Malkovich (Spike Jonze, 1999). Both films, I argue, can be seen to utilise
representational strategies that emphasise the surfaces of their characters. Chapter

13 Each of these paired analyses includes a film written by Charlie Kaufman and directed by Spike
Jonze or Michel Gondry. I choose not to examine these films as the products of these filmmakers for
two reasons. First, mobilising auteurist methodology in a thesis on postmodern subjectivity is
problematic. Second, while these films may be a paradigmatic example of postmodernism in
indie/alternative Indiewood, I would argue that they are also part of a broader trend toward
postmodernism in this cinema.
Three continues the analysis of the representation of character and subjectivity in the indie/alternative Indiewood film. Focusing on fragmentation, I discuss *Memento* (Christopher Nolan, 2000) and *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (Michel Gondry, 2004), and how the fragmentation of narrative works to represent its amnesiac characters as subjects for whom the continuity of time and history is inaccessible. Chapter Four is the last of my analyses of the indie/alternative Indiewood film. Here, I address the postmodern crisis in representation, and the notion forwarded by Jean Baudrillard that the postmodern is characterised by simulation, or the reproduction of reality without authentic origin. This crisis, I argue, is evident in two indie/alternative Indiewood films: *American Splendor* (Robert Pulcini and Shari Springer Berman, 2003) and *Adaptation* (Spike Jonze, 2002). Here, characters are represented as always already enmeshed in representation in an apparent confirmation of Baudrillard’s claims that, in the postmodern, the signifier is a reproduction of an absent authentic reality.

My analysis of the indie/alternative Indiewood film in chapters Two, Three and Four reveals some significant limits to the postmodern representation of character and subjectivity in these films. In both *American Psycho* and *Being John Malkovich*, the conventional narrative structure leads to the films ultimately remobilising strategies that provide access to character depth, a depth that is denied for the majority of the films’ respective running times. Even though the fragmentation of conventional narrative structure in *Memento* and *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* appears to represent the films’ characters in a manner that supports a postmodern model of subjectivity, the stability of the actor’s body anchors the fragmented subject. Finally, *American Splendor*’s representation of its
protagonist as a series of simulacra is accompanied by an insistence, embedded in the text, that its characters are at least *more* authentic than those ordinarily represented in Hollywood cinema. Even *Adaptation* — which I will argue is the most successfully postmodern of the indie/alternative Indiewood films examined in this thesis — is also accompanied, on an extra-textual level, by its critics’ insistence that the film’s emphasis on the absence of authenticity is, in fact, the original strategy of an auteur. It emerges, then, from Chapters Two, Three and Four that the representation of postmodern subjectivity in these indie/alternative Indiewood films is only ever partial; to varying degrees, all six films (re)mobilise the classical representational strategies that support an Enlightenment model of subjectivity. Moreover, when these films do appear successfully to represent their characters as postmodern, this achievement tends to be lauded, paradoxically, in the critical discourse on the films as the inventive product of creative genius. Like Rivette’s valorisation of the “genius” of Howard Hawks, this reinstalls the model of subjectivity that is challenged in the films.

I remain unconvinced, however, that the limits evident in this select group of films mark the boundaries of what American popular narrative cinema can represent. In Chapter Five, I examine a group of American popular narrative films that are contemporaneous with, yet located outside of, the Indiewood paradigm: *Lost Highway, Mulholland Drive* and *Inland Empire* (David Lynch, 1997, 2001 and 2006). Through a detailed analysis of the representation of character and subjectivity in these films, I show that postmodern representational strategies are not *always* tempered by the inclusion of the conventions associated with the classical paradigm. While the examples of indie/alternative Indiewood cinema that I examine in this
thesis seem unable fully to represent postmodern characters, my analysis of *Lost Highway, Mulholland Drive* and *Inland Empire* shows that American popular narrative cinema need not *necessarily* support the Enlightenment model of subjectivity. Yet, as I will suggest in the conclusion to this thesis, the popular appeal of these films has been limited, raising questions about the extent to which a cinema like indie/alternative Indiewood, which needs to appeal to the broadest possible audience in the segment(s) to which it is marketed, can represent postmodern subjectivity *and* remain commercially viable.

I do not intend, in this thesis, to lament postclassical Hollywood cinema’s incapacity successfully to construct its characters as postmodern subjects. Although I investigate postmodernism with critical seriousness, and examine in detail the ways in which postmodern discourse constructs subjectivity, I do not wish to suggest that the postmodern presents a “good” alternative to the “bad” Enlightenment model (although the political implications of both are not insignificant). What I *do* want to argue is that the persistence of the Enlightenment model of subjectivity in postclassical Hollywood cinema — even in instances of this cinema that appear at least partially to exceed this model — is evidence of this cinema’s difficulty in enacting subjectivity differently.
Chapter One


This thesis examines the representation of character and subjectivity in the indie/alternative Indiewood film. It considers, more specifically, the question of whether or not these films use strategies to represent their characters that support a postmodern model of subjectivity. It is, therefore, concerned with four critical concepts: postmodernism, Hollywood, Indiewood and subjectivity. In order to position this study, then, this chapter will focus on these concepts and the critical contexts in which they have been mobilised. In the first section, I will provide a brief map of the heavily theorised yet indeterminate concept of the postmodern. The second section will examine the relationship of the postmodern both with cinema in general and with Hollywood more specifically. In the third section, I will introduce the concept of Indiewood, a recent phenomenon in Hollywood that is only now beginning to be theorised, creating a new field to which this thesis presents a substantial contribution. I will argue in this section that Indiewood can be understood as part of the postclassical turn in Hollywood that began in the 1970s, and that, like the other developments in late twentieth century Hollywood, it can be productively read as a postmodern cinema. I intend to argue, in particular, that the films positioned on what King calls the “indie/alternative end of the Indiewood spectrum” (Indiewood 38) are not only thematically concerned with the postmodern, they use strategies for representing their characters that appear to support a postmodern model of subjectivity. I will then examine subjectivity, and how the classical Hollywood cinema can be read as supporting a model of subjectivity inherited from the
Enlightenment. This will provide the framework for my textual analysis, in chapters Two, Three and Four of this thesis, of the representation of character in the indie/alternative Indiewood film.

Defining the Postmodern.

“But of course it’s only a story.” — Brian McHale (37, emphasis in original)

What does the word “postmodern” signify? In asking the same question of the words “modern”, “modernism” and “modernity”, Susan Stanford Friedman asserts that “[d]efinitional activities are fictionalizing processes, however much they sound like rational categorization” (493). In the same way, any definition of the words “postmodern”, “postmodernism” and “postmodernity” will also be a fiction. Moreover, as Friedman insists, it will be a fiction that reflects both the perspective of its “makers” and “the spatio/temporal context of [its] production” (497). This particular fiction about the postmodern, then, is told from a twenty-first century perspective, and joins the list of contributions to a story that is now close to three decades, and countless pages, long. In fact, definitional stories about the postmodern are so numerous that, collectively, they form a discrete field of academic inquiry. Even further, as Steven Connor suggests, the debates and conflicts that exist in and between these stories might actually “constitute postmodernism itself” (*Postmodernist Culture* 18). Brian McHale agrees; for him, “postmodernism exists discursively, in the discourses we produce about it and using it” (McHale 1, emphasis in original).
There has never been widespread consensus as to which of the many stories about the postmodern offers the most useful definition. This is indicative of the indeterminacy of the concept; in fact, the refusal of the postmodern to remain fixed, limited, or neatly categorised is one of its defining characteristics. Mike Featherstone writes, in this way, that the postmodern comprises a set of “tendencies toward indeterminacies, the recognition of openness, pluralism, randomness, eclecticism, incoherence, paralogism, intertextuality, [and] the primacy of the many over the one” (Consumer 40, emphasis in original). Friedberg similarly remarks that “the word postmodern has acquired a semiotic instability that almost mimetically reproduces its denotation of indeterminacy” (10, emphasis in original). Such statements are typical of definitional work on the postmodern that emphasises, paradoxically, its evasion of definition.

Regardless of the difficulties that arise out of its self-conscious resistance of definition, the postmodern is a concept that has been extremely important in both academic and popular discourse on and in late twentieth and early twenty-first century culture. For this reason, Jameson asserts, “we cannot not use it” (Postmodernism xxii, emphasis in original). I am not concerned, in this thesis, with the merits of the postmodern. Nor do I intend to labour over definitional debates, which are (more than) well rehearsed and do not require detailed reiteration. However, because this thesis contemplates the capacity for the indie/alternative Indiewood film to represent its characters in a manner that supports a postmodern model of subjectivity, it is necessary for me briefly to review the ways in which the concept of the postmodern has functioned and, in so doing, establish the definition with which I am working in this thesis.
The publication (or, in some cases, the translation into English) of postmodernism’s foundational texts occurred in the late 1970s and early 1980s, with the arrival of Lyotard’s *The Postmodern Condition*, published as *La Condition postmoderne: rapport sur le savoir* in 1979 and translated into English in 1984; Jameson’s article ‘Postmodernism, Or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism’, published as an essay in the *New Left Review* in 1984 and expanded into a book in 1991; and Jean Baudrillard’s *Simulations*, published as *Simulacres et Simulation* in 1981 and translated into English in 1983. Since then, the word “postmodern” has been variously theorised as comprising three separate yet intersecting components: a period, a theory, and a style.

As a period, the word postmodernity has been used to describe the era that, it is argued, arrived with the shift of Western society into late or advanced capitalism. Both Jameson and Lyotard agree that this shift began in the 1950s (Lyotard *Postmodern* 3; Jameson *Postmodernism* 1). Borrowing the term “late capitalism” from Ernest Mandel (*Postmodernism* 3, 35), Jameson has been canonised as the theorist of the cultural effects of this shift.14 He writes:

> Besides the forms of transnational business...[late capitalism’s] features include the new international division of labor, a vertiginous new dynamic in international banking and the stock exchanges (including the enormous Second and Third World debt), new forms of media interrelationship (very much including transportation systems such as containerization), computers and automation, the flight of production to advanced Third World areas, along with all the more familiar social

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14 The addition of the prefix “late”, here, has been the subject of debate in postmodern discourse because it appears to assume capitalism reached a final stage in the second half of the twentieth century. Krishan Kumar notes that Jameson himself is not entirely comfortable with this phrase (*Jameson Postmodernism* xviii; Kumar 115). The inadequacy of “late capitalism” and Jameson’s struggle to find a suitable alternative is evidence of the difficulties inherent in what he describes as: “tak[ing] the temperature of the age without instruments and in a situation in which we are not even sure there is so coherent a thing as an ‘age,’ or zeitgeist or ‘system’ or ‘current situation’ any longer” (*Postmodernism* xi).
consequences, including the crisis of traditional labor, the emergence of yuppies, and gentrification on a now-global scale. (*Postmodernism* xix)

In this sense, postmodernity is linked to the shift from Fordist, industrialised modernity into a postindustrial or post-Fordist society emblematised by the computer. It is also linked to the process of economic and cultural globalisation that took place in the late twentieth century. Postmodernity is the sociohistorical context in which, it is argued, significant changes in philosophy and cultural production also occurred. These changes comprise the second and third components of the postmodern.

As theory, postmodernism is most commonly defined as the rejection of Western philosophy founded on metanarratives. This position is associated primarily with Lyotard, who famously wrote in *The Postmodern Condition* that “[s]implifying to the extreme, I define postmodern as incredulity toward metanarratives” (*Postmodern* xxiv, emphasis in original). For Lyotard, postmodernity is an era in which it is no longer possible to believe in Western civilization’s “big stories”. Although he focuses on scientific discourse, Lyotard’s list of metanarratives also includes: “the dialectics of Spirit, the hermeneutics of meaning, the emancipation of the rational or working subject, [and] the creation of wealth” (*Postmodern* xxiii).

Jameson does not privilege the word metanarrative; at one point, in fact, he criticises Lyotard’s metanarratives, calling them “eschatological schemata that were never really narratives in the first place” (*Postmodern* xi). However, he agrees that the negation of the knowledge structures underpinning and validating these

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15 The socioeconomic concept of postmodernity was particularly vigorously interrogated in the late 1980s and early 1990s, and examples are numerous. See, for instance, Harvey, Kumar, and Crook, Pakulski and Waters.

16 That Lyotard’s position on metanarratives is, paradoxically, a totalising metanarrative has been well noted. This is the fundamental paradox of postmodern theory: that the call to unseat established knowledge structures and emphasise the partiality of all knowledge claims is a totalising knowledge claim.
metanarratives is central to what he calls “postmodernism theory” (Postmodern xi). For Jameson, the postmodern is more fundamentally concerned with the repudiation of the “depth models” — essence/appearance, latent/manifest, authenticity/inauthenticity and signifier/signified — which are associated with Marxism, psychoanalysis, existentialism and semiotics, respectively (Postmodern 12). It is these depth models that are the foundations of Lyotard’s metanarratives.

As theory, postmodernism is closely related to poststructuralism. Both postmodernism and poststructuralism emphasise fragmentation, dispersal of the centre, and critique binaries and absolutes, that is, they are antifoundational. For Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan, postmodernism is, like most of the “posts”, a descendant of poststructuralism; they write that, “in 1979, Post-Structuralism changed names” to “Post-Modernism” (352). Rivkin and Ryan also note, however, that, “as any Post-Structuralist will tell you, when names change, things change” (352). This indicates that the two theories cannot simply be conflated and should be viewed as discrete bodies of theory that overlap at some points and diverge at others. Kumar suggests that the main difference lies in the emphasis of poststructuralism on subjectivity, and the postmodern focus, more broadly, on society, whereas both “go along with the general emphasis on fragmentation and pluralism, and on the absence of any centralizing or ‘totalizing’ force” (132). The matter cannot be resolved, however, by categorising poststructuralism as a philosophy of the subject and postmodernism as a theory of society. A nuanced account of the connections between these two “posts”, while outside the scope of this thesis, would acknowledge that poststructuralism is a highly specified school of philosophy that emerged out of the continental tradition and which theorises subjectivity as a concept abstracted from historical context (even
though poststructuralism emerged from a particular moment in history), and that postmodern theory is concerned with broader historical shifts and cultural formations as well as being (very much) about subjectivity in the context of the late twentieth century.

As a style, postmodernism has been defined as a set of aesthetic characteristics or representational strategies apparent across the arts. Postmodern style emerges from a context in which cultural hierarchies have been dismantled, where, Lyotard suggests, “anything goes” and money becomes the principal marker of aesthetic value (‘Answering’ 76). In other words, postmodernism emerges when the separation of art and commerce disappears; Jameson writes that one of postmodernism’s “fundamental feature[s]” is its “effacement…of the older (essentially high-modernist) frontier between high culture and so-called mass or commercial culture” (Postmodernism 2). Its proponents argue that postmodern style can be found in architecture, art, literature, music, dance, television, and film, but, as James Peterson notes, postmodernism takes a different form in each of these arts. This, he suggests, is “because in each art the modernist tradition has taken dramatically different forms” (141). This point is particularly significant when it comes to theorising the relationship between postmodernism and cinema. This relationship is complicated at best, and I will address it in more detail in the next section of this chapter.

Despite the heterogeneity of postmodernism across the arts, there are several characteristics that can be identified as the elements of postmodern style. These include: pastiche, intertextual allusion, self-reflexivity, quotation, depthlessness, and the fragmentation of form. Cristina Degli-Esposti writes, for example, that
postmodern films utilise “strategies of disruption like self-reflexivity, intertextuality, bricolage, multiplicity, and simulation through parody and pastiche” (4). Similarly, John Hill explains that postmodern style combines “eclecticism, an erosion of aesthetic boundaries, and a declining emphasis upon originality” (97). For him, it is eclecticism that is key to postmodern style, in which “different styles, genres, and artistic conventions, including those of modernism” are recombined (97).

It is important to note, however, that most — if not all — of the features of postmodern style can be found in modernist cultural products; Jameson remarks that “full-blown” postmodernism can be seen in “genealogical precursors” like “Gertrude Stein, Raymond Roussel, [and] Marcel Duchamp” (Postmodernism 4). It is frequently acknowledged that the “post” in postmodernism, designating “after” or “beyond”, does not mean postmodernism is a wholesale rejection of modernism. Rather, the “post” signifies the continuation of modernism in a different historical context, one in which the modern is no longer new and the representational strategies of modernism — and the utopian imperative behind many of these strategies — have been exhausted. Jameson asserts, in this way, that postmodernism arrived when high modernism became canonised or academically institutionalised, a process, he argues, which caused the “younger generation of the 1960s” to “confront the formerly oppositional modern movement as a set of dead classics, which ‘weigh like a nightmare on the brains of the living,’ as Marx once said in a different context” (Postmodernism 4).

It is attitude, perhaps, that is the key difference between the modern and the postmodern. “Postmodernism”, Tim Woods writes, “does what modernism does, only in a celebratory rather than repentant way” (8). Although they share many stylistic
characteristics, postmodernism is viewed as taking a positive attitude towards the loss of certainty that was mourned in modernism. Terry Eagleton, a prominent critic of the postmodern, compares modernism’s “agonizing” immersion in “metaphysical depth and wretchedness” with the “confidently post-metaphysical” postmodernism, which, he writes, “has outlived all that fantasy of interiority” and “embraces instead the mystical positivism of the early Wittgenstein” (‘Capitalism’ 70). The postmodern is conceptualised, in this sense, as representing not so much a shift into a totally different realm of cultural production, but a change in what Raymond Williams calls the “structures of feeling” (132) governing attitudes towards the modern. Yet this difference in feeling is not necessarily unambiguous; Fred Pfeil, for example, conceptualises the postmodern attitude as simultaneously one of “primal delight” and “primal fear” (386), which suggests that, rather than being replaced or superseded, modernist anxiety persists along side the celebratory stance of the postmodern.

The triangular description of the postmodern as an era, a theory, and a style is common in definitional work on the postmodern. It is important to bear in mind, however, that postmodernity, postmodern theory and postmodernism are by no means separate phenomena; as Kumar observes, the postmodern “breaks down the dividing-lines between the different realms of society — political, economic, social and cultural” (102). Jameson takes this even further by arguing that the postmodern moment is one in which everything becomes “cultural”. “[E]verything in our social life”, he writes, “— from economic value and state power to practices and to the very structure of the psyche itself — can be said to have become ‘cultural’ in some original and yet untheorized sense” (Postmodernism 48). Even if this were not the
case, Simon Malpas reminds us that separating historical context, philosophy and art is impractical regardless of the period in question. He argues:

> Given only a moment’s consideration, it should be clear that the simplistic separation of style and context is unworkable: whether it is postmodern or not, artistic work emerges from the world in which it occurs, engages with and comments upon the way things are, and presents alternatives to them. (32)

To extricate theory from that same context is similarly unworkable and problematic. Like art, theory is situated in a particular sociohistorical context, and clearly engages with and criticises “the way things are”. Similarly, theory and style are not separate; the intersection of art and philosophy is a site of reciprocal productivity.

The Hollywood cinema of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries is a space in which the interconnection of the three elements of the postmodern is particularly evident. Hollywood’s products from this period can be read as having emerged from an industry affected by the shift into postmodernity, many of these products exhibit the characteristics of postmodern style, and some directly engage with postmodern theory. I am suggesting in this thesis that the indie/alternative Indiewood film is an example of a cinema that does all three of these things, and that the representation of character in these films might exceed the classical conventions for representing character and the model of subjectivity this supports. Before addressing the concept of indie/alternative Indiewood cinema, however, it should first be acknowledged that to argue that late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century Hollywood cinema can productively be read as postmodern is by no means a simple task. An argument such as this must take into account the specificity both of the cinematic medium and of Hollywood, and their complicated connections with the postmodern. This will be the task of the next section of this chapter.

The complex relationship between postmodernism and cinema, and postmodernism and Hollywood cinema, has proved difficult to theorise with any clarity. The source of this complexity lies in the history of film, which, as a medium for the reproduction of the photographed image and the creation of the illusion of movement through the projection of these images, plays an important role in the history of the modern and the postmodern. Film technology emerged out of modernity; cinema, its “social institution” (Maltby Hollywood 6), functioned (and continues to function) as the emblem of modernity. Murray Pomerance declares that “without cinema, modernity is unthinkable; and without modernity, cinema would not exist” (12). Tom Gunning similarly remarks that “cinema metaphorised modernity”; to ignore this fact, he suggests, is to neglect the significance of cinema both for the avant-garde and for cinema’s first audiences, for whom film was a “novelty” (302). Film technology was, essentially, a machine. Described by Peter Brooker and Will Brooker as “the contemporary of the motor car, the aeroplane, telegraph and other early communications systems of the modernising, and modernist, moment at the beginning of the [twentieth] century” (4), cinema both reflected and helped to construct modern life. Pomerance asserts:

What film could reflect was all the rich confusion of: light and electric stimulation (thus, scientific development), temporary and impenetrable relationship (thus, social mobility and the omnipresence of strangers), alienation of labor from biography and history (thus, the pervasive organization of capitalism and its form of exploitation), and onwardly rushing movement (movement in many directions at once, so that collision, and
then war, were inevitable)—the hallmarks of the modern world.
(12-13)\(^\text{17}\)

Cinema is also, simultaneously, an emblem of the *postmodern*. In fact, cinema played a significant role in the shift from modern to postmodern. As Walter Benjamin famously asserts in ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’, image reproduction technologies change the nature of art, removing its “aura” (215). More specifically, Benjamin posits that the mechanically reproduced, *moving* image also changes the way the viewer *looks* at art. In cinema, Benjamin observes, the image is in constant motion; individual frames move at such a pace that the viewer cannot attend to the image as he/she would a static image like a painting (231).\(^\text{18}\) As Connor puts it, for Benjamin “the constant interruptions of film shockingly disallow any point of rest for the viewer, preventing any easy recognition of a familiar world” (*Postmodernist Culture* 195). Benjamin describes the kind of spectatorship ushered in by cinema as “[r]eception in a state of distraction” (233), a kind of perpetually shifting gaze.

Benjamin’s observations concerning image-reproduction technology, and the changes in the nature of art and its reception, have been taken up by theorists of cinema and the postmodern, who position the gaze at the centre of this relationship. In *Window Shopping*, for example, Friedberg argues that, since its inception, cinema has shaped the gaze to the extent that it constructs the spectator as a postmodern

\(^\text{17}\) See also Charney and Schwartz. It should be acknowledged here that this reflection and construction of modern life was articulated differently in the various national locations in which cinema developed. Compare, for example, Dziga Vertov’s *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929) with its Hollywood counterpart, Charles Chaplin’s *Modern Times* (1936). Vertov’s film articulated the confusion of modernity in a manner that is considerably more extreme than the relatively coherent *Modern Times*.

\(^\text{18}\) The comparison of a tradition of “static” art with the dynamism of the moving image were made as early as 1911; Nicolas Tredell points to Ricciotto Canudo’s observation at this time that the ability of the “cinematograph” to present “mobility in the representation of life” marked it as a significant step away from the tradition of art as about “a stylization of life into stillness” (qtd. in Tredell 17).
subject. For Friedberg, the modern and the postmodern exist on a continuum that is held together by what she calls a “mobilized ‘virtual’ gaze” (2, emphasis in original). This gaze, she argues, is that of the cinema spectator; it is a form of “imaginary flânerie through an imaginary elsewhere and an imaginary elsewhen” (2), a virtual journey through other times and places. Friedberg explains that this gaze was in its nascent stages in the early nineteenth century, when visual attractions such as the panorama and the diorama were popular. This gaze, she argues, intensified in the late nineteenth century, an era marked by the introduction of cinema and symbolised by the Baudelairian flâneur’s travels through the passages of fin-de-siècle Paris. Reinterpreting flânerie in the context of the late twentieth century, Friedberg positions the mall and its ubiquitous annex, the multiplex, as the site of fin-de-millennium flânerie. She describes contemporary cinematic spectatorship as a virtual extension of the experience of strolling through a mall and window-shopping, an experience that elicits a mobilised virtual gaze that was founded in the nineteenth-century rise of the moving image. In this way, Friedberg positions the postmodern as the product of a modern culture of the gaze that intensified with the invention of film. She suggests, therefore, that “cinematic and televisual apparatuses become readable not just as symptoms of a ‘postmodern condition,’ but as contributing causes” (2).

The imbrication of cinematic spectatorship with the modern and the postmodern has also been examined by Denzin, who argues, in The Cinematic Society, that cinema has played a central causal role in the shift from the modern to

19 Friedberg reminds us that the flânéur is a gendered figure. In Baudelaire and Benjamin’s fin-de-siècle Paris, flânerie, a combination of strolling and looking, was a masculine activity in which women functioned as “the objects for consumption, objects for the gaze of the flâneur” (35). Debate over the gaze — who looks and who is looked at — has been central to feminist film theory since 1975, when Laura Mulvey’s ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’ was published.
the postmodern. For Denzin, however, the paradigmatic postmodern subject is not the *flâneur* but the *voyeur*.20 “The voyeur”, he writes, “is the iconic, postmodern self” (1). Tracing the representation of this figure in what he calls the “voyeur’s film” (9), the paradigmatic examples of which are the modern *Rear Window* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1954) and the postmodern *Blue Velvet* (David Lynch, 1986), Denzin argues that cinema has contributed to the construction of a society organised around Foucauldian surveillance. In this “cinematic society”, it is not looking but *being looked at* — or, more precisely, the possibility of being looked at and the way this affects the behaviour of the subject — that is most important.

There are some significant differences in the works of these two theorists. Friedberg, for example, argues that the stylistic categories of modernism and postmodernism are irrelevant to cinema, because cinema constructs spectators as postmodern regardless of the stylistic characteristics of individual films (7). In contrast, Denzin argues that the cinematic gaze moves through four “major historical and aesthetic phases”, from realism to modernism, to late modernism and, finally, to postmodernism (191), and that these can be seen in the parallel development of the voyeur figure in the voyeur film.21 However, the focus of Friedberg and Denzin on the links between the rise of the gaze and the postmodern demonstrates the way in which cinema functions as both invention of and metaphor for modernity, and as medium and icon of the postmodern, or, as Catherine Constable puts it, how cinema

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20 Like the *flâneur*, the voyeur is gendered. In light of Mulvey’s influential and much-debated observations regarding the gaze, Denzin suggests that films that place a woman in the position of voyeur reveal the conventional masculine coding of the gaze by disturbing it; when the woman is given “the power to look”, he asserts, this “unleashes a gaze which disrupts the social order” (140).

holds “dual status as both an icon of modernity and a symbol of the postmodern” (43). This has significant implications for efforts to theorise the relationship of the postmodern both with cinema in general, and, as I will show, with Hollywood cinema more specifically.

Despite the cinematic medium’s role in creating the conditions out of which the postmodern emerged, film studies has largely steered clear of postmodernism (Friedberg 7). M. Keith Booker recently observed that there has been a surprising shortage of “critical treatment[s]” of postmodernism and cinema (Postmodern xvii). This claim would appear to be contentious, given the explosion of work on the postmodern that took place in the 1980s and 1990s. However, as Booker suggests, cinema is most often addressed in work that examines postmodernism as a broader “cultural phenomenon” (Postmodern xviii). Booker points to Jameson’s Postmodernism, Harvey’s The Condition of Postmodernity and Denzin’s Images of Postmodern Society as examples of this “cultural phenomenon” approach.22 Theorising cinema as a part of the matrix of contemporary postmodern culture de-emphasises the specificity of the medium, and fails to offer a useful model of the cinematic postmodern.

On the other hand, the work that does examine cinema as a separate medium has also been limited. As Yvonne Tasker asserts, the word postmodern “still tends to be applied to the popular cinema only in terms of selected films deemed to be, for one reason or another, ‘postmodern’” (215). Tasker argues that Blade Runner is the film most frequently subject to this sort of analysis. A list of the film’s postmodern

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22 Joseph Natoli’s series of books on cinema and postmodern culture — Hauntings, Speeding to the Millennium, Postmodern Journeys, and Memory’s Orbit — are another example of this kind of “cultural phenomenon” approach, which, I would argue, tells us more about the postmodern than it does about cinema.
characteristics, she suggests, would include: the hybrid architecture of its sets; the 
film’s pastiche of film noir; the narrative’s focus on the concept of the human and the 
effects of technology on time and space; and the imbrication of photography, identity 
and memory (225). The “single film” approach is not without its merits; Douglas 
Kellner has convincingly argued that it is only possible to make sense of the multiple 
logics of the postmodern by examining specific cultural products (Media Culture 45). 
Booker notes, however, that many of these kinds of single-film readings have focused 
on films that are “difficult and abstruse”, such as Blue Velvet (Postmodern ix). This 
view is shared by Carl Boggs and Tom Pollard, who observe that postmodern 
readings have focused on “artistically elevated but marginal works quite distant from 
the world of mass audiences and broad societal concerns” (ix).23 In diametric 
opposition to the broad scope of the “cultural phenomenon” approach, the problem 
with the “single film” approach is that it is not broad enough; Booker, and Boggs and 
Pollard assert that the postmodern can be located in a far broader range of 
contemporary (that is, late twentieth and early twenty-first century) Hollywood 
products than these clusters of single-film readings would suggest.

Taken together, the “cultural phenomenon” and “single film” approaches to 
the cinematic postmodern are evidence of the contradictory logic of the postmodern, 
which dissolves the boundaries between individual media at the same time as it 
places emphasis on the partial, localised petit récit. These internal contradictions 
make it very difficult to theorise postmodernism in any of the arts. Boggs and Pollard 
write:

23 See also John Hill (100).
There can be little doubt that postmodern culture, however widely studied, revisited, and debated over the past two decades, is difficult to theorize, in part because of its relative novelty and in part because of a diffuse and fragmentary character rendering linear, structured, categorical schemas apparently obsolete. (xi)

I agree with Boggs and Pollard that the multiple meanings of the postmodern and the myriad ways in which it manifests in contemporary culture make it difficult to posit a broad concept of the cinematic postmodern. However, it may not in fact be productive to attempt to theorise cinematic postmodernism as a category per se. In fact, Jameson insists that postmodernism should not be understood as “one cultural style or movement among others” (Postmodernism 3). For Jameson, not all late twentieth-century cultural products are postmodern but they must all negotiate the phenomenon of the postmodern, which he describes as “the force field in which very different kinds of cultural impulses — what Raymond Williams has usefully termed ‘residual’ and ‘emergent’ forms of cultural production — must make their way” (Postmodernism 6).

In line with this description of the postmodern as a “force field”, Jameson’s work on postmodernism and cinema deliberately eschews taxonomy to focus on the concept of nostalgia or “la mode rétro” as a manifestation of the postmodern in popular cinema (Postmodernism 19). Focussing on films like The Conformist (Bernardo Bertolucci, 1970), American Graffiti (George Lucas, 1973), Body Heat (Lawrence Kasdan, 1981) and Blue Velvet, Jameson identifies an aesthetic trend in (then) contemporary cinema for the “stylistic recuperation” of characteristics associated with particular periods in history — the 1930s, 1940s and, most persistently, the 1950s, an era that Jameson sees as “the privileged lost object of

24 See also Peterson (141).
desire” in this cinema (Postmodernism 19). For Jameson, the nostalgia mode expresses the irretrievability of the past except through aesthetic means; what is recovered in these films is not history, but the cultural stereotypes that connote “pastness” (Postmodernism 19). Moreover, the prevalence of the nostalgia mode is, for Jameson, more than a longing for apparently “simpler” times (whether or not those times actually were simpler), it is in fact a symptom of the postmodern waning of historicity affecting the ability of the inhabitants of postmodernity to represent the present. In other words, Jameson argues that la mode rétro expresses “the enormity of a situation in which we seem increasingly incapable of fashioning representations of our own current experience” (Postmodernism 21).

With the exception of The Conformist, the majority of Jameson’s examples of nostalgia cinema are the products of 1970s and 1980s Hollywood. In fact, prior to asserting that postmodernism is not a stylistic category, Jameson contradictorily describes it as “the first specifically North American global style” (Postmodernism xx). Val Hill asserts, in this way, that “[t]he postmodern cinematic marketplace is dominated by American products” (95). American products from the last three decades of the twentieth century also dominate the academic discourse on postmodernism and cinema, both in its “cultural phenomenon” and “single film” branches. It might be possible, therefore, to read late twentieth-century Hollywood as a postmodern cinema. Although looking for the postmodern in cinema might lead

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25 Jameson has reasserted postmodernism as an American phenomenon (or even as “American cultural imperialism”) in subsequent interviews. See Jameson (‘Stuart Hall’ 114; ‘Danis and Jonsson’ 162; ‘Aravamudan and Khanna’ 208).

26 Of course, postmodernism is not exclusive to American cinema; in fact, the postmodern turn in cinema took place in France’s New Wave, and arguably made its way into American via Bonnie and Clyde, which was originally meant to be directed by François Truffaut. It is unsurprising, in this sense, that the films directed by Jean-Luc Godard, as well as Wim Wenders and Peter Greenaway, have productively been read as postmodern. See Cristina Degli-Esposti’s Postmodernism in the Cinema, in which the question of the cinematic postmodern is considered in relation to cinemas outside America.
us to this conclusion, it appears that in the much larger field of work on late
twentieth-century American cinema, and on the Hollywood cinema of this period
more specifically, the question of postmodernism has been overshadowed by the
question of classicism — specifically, whether the Hollywood cinema of the late
twentieth century constitutes a move beyond or a continuation of the classical
paradigm. This is not to say that we cannot read late twentieth century Hollywood
 cinema as postmodern; indeed, the debate over the classical and the postclassical
would appear, at first glance, quite similar to aspects of the debate over the
postmodern, which is often seen as both a movement beyond and continuation of the
modern in a different context. Before leaping to conclude that postclassical
Hollywood can be viewed as postmodern, however, it is necessary to negotiate the
complicated relationship of the postmodern with the dominant conception of this
 cinema as either classical or postclassical.

Indeed, even before we begin to articulate the place of postmodernism in late
twentieth century Hollywood cinema, it should be observed that the place of
modernism in Hollywood is difficult to find. This would appear to present an
obstruction to the efforts of film scholars to locate the postmodern in this cinema. In
their 1987 introduction to Postmodern Screen (a special issue of Screen) Philip
Hayward and Paul Kerr observe that:

It is all very well identifying a stylistic phase in a specific
medium as postmodern if there is some kind of agreement about
a prior (or even simultaneous) period which could be usefully
and consensually considered to be modern. (5)

Writing a full decade later, Peterson likewise remarks that “[i]n a context that does
not include a meaningful conception of the modern, the meaning of the postmodern is
hard to fathom” (146, emphasis in original). This is not only a problem for Hollywood cinema; the place of modernism in cinema more generally has been a persistent problematic in film studies. Unlike literary or architectural modernism, wherein a “meaningful conception” of modernism exists, cinematic modernism cannot be defined in counterdistinction to the representational strategies of the past because cinema did not exist prior to modernity. As András Bálint Kovács puts it, “cinema did not have an artistic tradition proper to its medium to modernize” (Screening 17).

Without a clear trajectory from the traditional to the modern, it is subsequently difficult to conceptualise the cinematic postmodern. In a useful illustration of this problem, Friedberg compares cinema to architecture, where postmodernism is a specific rejection of a clearly articulated modernist program, which, in turn was a rejection of the emphasis on decoration in Victorian architecture. Architecture, Friedberg explains, has the bombing of the Pruitt-Igoe housing estate as evidence of the “death” of modernism but an equivalent moment in cinema is hard to find. She asks:

Does one assume that the model of the ‘modern’ cinema was the ‘classical Hollywood film’ with its economy of structure, its narrative continuities, its popular appeal, its reduction of metaphor—a sort of refined glass box, efficient in its production of narrative pleasure? If so, what moment or film would instantiate such a dramatic rupture? Did it occur with the narrative bricolage of Orson Welles’s Citizen Kane in 1941? Or earlier—before the classical Hollywood ‘mode of practice’ took hold—in the montage exercises of Eisenstein and Vertov in the 1920s? (160)
As Friedberg suggests, Hollywood cinema is particularly difficult to reconcile with a conventionally conceived modernism. Not only has it been asserted that Hollywood is without “a widespread high modernist phase” (Peterson 142), cinematic modernism has often been articulated against Hollywood cinema.27

The absence of the word “modernism” in the discourse on Hollywood is unsurprising if we consider that the primary product of Hollywood has, since the 1910s, been the narrative film, which, in its early stages, was modelled on the realist novel and the well-made play (Altman 25). In this way, Hollywood’s narrative films drew from the set of representational conventions that were explicitly rejected by modernism.28 Friedberg remarks, in this way, that “[t]he narratological and mimetic conventions that developed as the cinema became a popular mass cultural form are precisely the conventions of representation that modernisms were challenging” (164–65). Michael Wood similarly asserts that “the largest fact about the cinema over the hundred years since its birth is its comfortable embrace of ancient conventions of realism and narrative coherence” (217), which makes it inseparable from its “yearning to become [the twentieth] century’s version of the [nineteenth] century’s novel” (217). Friedberg concludes that “[t]he [classical Hollywood] cinema can be

27 In ‘Film and Modernism’, for example, Wood points to Soviet Montage and German Expressionism as modernist cinemas, and recognises that cinema was a medium particularly favoured by the Surrealists. Ted Perry more emphatically defines the modernist film as one that refuses the conventions of Hollywood cinema. For Perry, the modernist film is “singular”, “unique”, “sui generis” and “unfamiliar” (6), and cannot be understood using the “conventional film-viewing techniques” that “govern the normal universe of film” (5–6). The American avant-garde cinema of the late 1960s and 1970s is also characterised as a key period of modernist filmmaking; many critics view the Structural film movement, in particular, as the high modernist moment in cinema (Peterson 142; M. Smith ‘Modernism’ 407; Carroll ‘Film’ 127, n.2).

28 The imbrication of cinema and realism dates back to the late nineteenth century, when film was viewed as having the capacity exactly to reproduce reality. Denzin remarks that “[c]inema elaborated the epistemology of scientific realism already deeply rooted in American culture” (15). Joel Black also notes that, as it developed, the conception of film as a tool for science was eclipsed by the view that it was “a representational, illusionist medium for the primary purpose of entertainment and the secondary purpose of art” (2). Realism, however, remained central to the notion of cinema as a representational medium; the shift was from viewing film as offering an exact reproduction of reality to film as taking on the appearance of reality.
seen as a ‘modern’ form embodying distinctly anti-modern narratological conventions (closure, mimesis, realism) disguised in ‘modern’ technological attire” (165, emphasis in original). To revise Friedberg slightly, I would suggest that the techniques underpinning the classical Hollywood cinema were in fact modernist. Editing, for example, is inherently fragmented; these modernist tendencies were heavily concealed by representational strategies that sought to render the narrative coherent. In other words, even though cinema was a modern novelty, Hollywood’s assimilation of the conventions associated with nineteenth-century literary realism — despite its mechanically determined techniques being more closely aligned with modernism than with literary realism — makes it difficult to theorise as modernist.

This is why the discourse on Hollywood cinema has focused on the concept of the classical. The alliance of classicism and Hollywood cinema dates back to the early twentieth century, but the concept rose to dominance in the 1980s and 1990s, in the wake of Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson’s *The Classical Hollywood Cinema*. Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson’s extraordinarily influential study begins with the argument that the system that produced the Hollywood film — a system that includes the organization of labour and the development of filmmaking technologies — was fully formed by 1917 and carried through in a relatively stable form until at least

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Miriam Bratu Hansen observes that the term “classical” was applied to Hollywood relatively early in its history — most famously in Bazin’s references to Hollywood as “a classical art” (29; qtd. in Hansen 62), but also in Jean Renoir’s description of the work of Charlie Chaplin and Ernst Lubitsch as “cinematic classicism” (62). Murray Smith draws attention to the fact that the concept of the “classical” also appeared “in journals such as *Monogram* and *Screen* in the 1970s” (‘Theses’ 4), the decade in which film studies emerged as an academic discipline.
1960, the date at which their survey ends. They proceed to argue that the development of the system was paralleled by the creation of a set of conventions, a “group style” that remains “quite constant across decades, genres, studios, and personnel” (3). This “group style” emphasises causation and continuity — in narrative structure, in characters, and in time and space (through both the composition of individual shots and their sequencing in the editing process). In addition to this, the classical group style emphasises verisimilitude, and works hard to erase the textuality of its films by drawing the viewer’s attention away from the “the means of or the context of representation” (M. Smith Engaging 44). The classical group style is so flexible, Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson argue, that it is able to absorb and “assimilate” challenges to its conventions, such as those presented by the (modernist) techniques of German Expressionism and Soviet Montage (72). In other words, the introduction of “modernist” techniques does not permanently destabilise the classical “group style”. Rather, classical Hollywood is able to integrate and conventionalise stylistic innovation without disturbing its fundamental elements. Modernism in Hollywood, then, becomes legible as an interruption (or series of interruptions) to a largely continuous classical paradigm.

In the 1990s, however, the relationship between modernism and classical Hollywood cinema began to be reevaluated, as part of the larger project to expose the

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30 Bordwell et al. describe 1960 as an “arbitrary” end date beyond which the classical Hollywood paradigm persists (10). Thompson’s Storytelling in the New Hollywood and Bordwell’s The Way Hollywood Tells It both examine Hollywood after 1960 and seek to demonstrate that the classical paradigm extends well beyond Hollywood’s purported “Golden Age”. Both works refute the argument that the 1980s, 1990s and 2000s represent Hollywood’s “postclassical” phase. For Thompson, the classical style persists relatively unchanged; for Bordwell, classical conventions remain dominant in contemporary Hollywood cinema, except they are in many cases sped up to create what he calls “intensified continuity” (Way Hollywood 121).
actual imbrication of the hitherto opposed mass culture and modernism. A prominent intervention into this debate is Hansen’s ‘The Mass Production of the Senses’. In this essay, Hansen firstly draws attention to the imbrication of conventionally conceived modernist filmmaking with mass cultural, popular cinema by examining the reciprocal influence of Soviet Montage on early Hollywood and, later, on 1940s Hollywood cinema (61). More significantly, Hansen moves beyond demonstrating the interdependence of mass culture and high modernism by arguing that classical Hollywood can be understood as a form of modernism in its own right. She acknowledges that “the relationship between classical cinema and modernism...has habitually been thought of as an opposition, as one of fundamentally incompatible registers” (62). This opposition, she argues, has depended on a narrow definition of modernism; in relation to cinema, this has been constructed as a “binary conception of film practice as either ‘classical-idealist,’ that is, ideological, or ‘modernist materialist,’ that is, self-reflexive and progressive” (65). If we expand our definition of modernism to include “a whole range of cultural and artistic practices that register, respond to, and reflect upon processes of modernization and the experience of modernity” (60), Hansen insists that we can understand classical Hollywood cinema as what she calls “a cultural practice on a par with the experience of modernity, as an industrially-produced, mass-based, vernacular modernism” (65). Rather than viewing modernism as an interruption to the continuity of the classical paradigm, Hansen asks why this classical paradigm — a category that marginalises nonconforming cinemas such as the spectacle-based melodrama, as well as comedy, horror and pornography (64) — cannot in fact be

31 See Huyssen. In specific relation to cinema see Cinema and Modernism, in which David Trotter examines the “parallel histories” of (early, silent) cinema and literary modernism (3), and the influence of early cinema on the work of James Joyce, T.S. Eliot and Virginia Woolf.
read as a form of modernism. For Hansen, criticism of cinematic modernism in Hollywood need not be restricted to films that are analogous to a conventionally conceived form of modernism, such as 1940s films noir, which has long been recognised as different from the bulk of studio production which Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson claim is where Hollywood’s classical group style is located.\(^{32}\)

The concept of vernacular modernism appears to suggest that it possible to read even the most classical of Hollywood films as modernist. This is the approach taken by Boggs and Pollard. In *A World in Chaos*, the authors situate the classical Hollywood cinema firmly in the context of modernity, and read it as a modernist cinema. The classical Hollywood cinema is modernist, they argue, because it is part of “the intricate web of modernity that includes Enlightenment values, industrialism and urbanism, liberal-capitalist ideology, patriarchy, bureaucracy, and the expansion of technology” (5). What ties this together, they suggest, is “an optimistic view of human progress” (5). With its focus on “linear narratives, standard photographic techniques, a tightly-woven mise-en-scène, and social themes consistent with positive, often mythical views of the American experience”, the realist techniques associated with the classical Hollywood cinema are positioned as part of this optimistic “modernism” (39). This “Hollywood modernist fare”, they argue, includes “Westerns, gangster films, combat movies, detective thrillers, historical dramas and some sci-fi works”, as well as the work of directors like John Ford, Frank Capra and John Huston (5).

\(^{32}\)Film noir — linked via personnel like Alfred Hitchcock, Fritz Lang and Billy Wilder to European modernist movements like German expressionism, surrealism, and existentialism (Naremore *More Than 15*) — has often been positioned as an exceptional example of cinematic modernism manifesting in classical Hollywood. See, for example, Orr, and Rabinowitz. Some critics have gone so far as to herald noir as an exemplar of modernism in general. Wheeler Winston Dixon, for example, describes noir as “the ultimate modernist style” (38).
There are significant differences between the ways in which Hansen, and Boggs and Pollard articulate their arguments yet, in positioning classical Hollywood cinema as a kind of modernism, both Hansen, and Boggs and Pollard appear to solve the problem of locating a modernist period in Hollywood from which postmodernism could be seen to follow. Yet both, I would suggest, are problematic. Hansen’s work, for example, appears to run perilously close to conflating modernity with modernism. While the two are imbricated, they are not coterminous: modernity is an historical period and modernism a set of specific artistic practices that took place in this period. It does not necessarily follow that all products of modernity are modernist. It might be more useful to apply Jameson’s notion of the postmodern as a force-field to the modern; just as all late twentieth-century cultural products must pass through the postmodern, so, too, did early-mid twentieth century cultural products, including the classical Hollywood cinema, pass through the modern. It would also be productive to spend more time analysing specific films to support the contention that we should read the classical Hollywood cinema — a concept which is underpinned by extensive research both on the development of Hollywood as an industry and on specific films produced by this industry — as a form of vernacular

33 This sets aside the possibility that the concept of vernacular modernism in fact represents a destabilisation of cultural hierarchies that is characteristically postmodern. As Peterson suggests, any attempt to theorise “popular narrative cinema” as postmodern encounters the inescapable irony that “[t]he popular cinema inspired a good deal of the art that defined postmodernism, and the features of postmodernism have been features of the popular cinema since that cinema was invented” (146–47). Of course, this brings us back to the inherent similarity of postmodernism to the modernism that preceded it. In this way, studio-era Hollywood contains the seeds that were later to grow into fully fledged postmodernism.
modernism. While Hansen intimates that a useful starting point might be melodrama, slapstick, the musical, or horror (70–71), she does not point to any specific films, or explain why these are not also, like film noir, interruptions to a largely continuous classical paradigm.

Boggs and Pollard, on the other hand, are not short of textual examples that support their contention that the classical Hollywood cinema is a form of modernism. Their list of “Hollywood modernism” includes but is not limited to: *The Birth of a Nation* (D.W. Griffith, 1915), *Intolerance* (D.W. Griffith, 1916), *Way Down East* (D.W. Griffith, 1920), *Stagecoach* (John Ford, 1939), *Mr Smith Goes to Washington* (Frank Capra, 1939), *The Grapes of Wrath* (John Ford, 1940), *It’s a Wonderful Life* (Frank Capra, 1946), *Casablanca* (Michael Curtiz, 1942), *Sands of Iwo Jima* (Allan Dwan, 1949), *From Here to Eternity* (Fred Zinnemann, 1953), *Paths of Glory* (Stanley Kubrick, 1957), and *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (Don Siegel, 1956) (Boggs and Pollard 38, 42, 43, 48, 50). As this list demonstrates, Boggs and Pollard appear to have used “classical” and “modernist” — rather than “modernism” and “modernity” — as if they were coterminous. What is problematic here is the definition of modernism that this assumes. Whereas Hansen works with a nuanced definition of modernism (and in fact argues for the development of a more nuanced definition), Boggs and Pollard appear unequivocally to align modernism with Enlightenment ideology. “Inspired by Enlightenment thinking,” they write, “modernism in all its ideological incarnations advanced a cultural pursuit of truth,

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34 According to Saverio Giovacchini, for example, a modernist moment in classical-era Hollywood took place in the 1930s during President Roosevelt’s New Deal. In *Hollywood Modernism*, Giovacchini examines films like *Confessions of a Nazi Spy* (Anatole Litvak, 1939) as a form of “Hollywood democratic modernism” (1–2), a movement that merged modernist anti-fascist politics with the realist conventions of classical Hollywood filmmaking and, consequently, destabilised the dichotomies modernism/realism, entertainment/politics, and avant-garde/Hollywood (3).

35 For a full account of this “Hollywood modernism”, see Boggs and Pollard (37-73).
knowledge, reason, and progress that gave definition to images of historical transformation” (39). While it is true that these films can be read as supporting Enlightenment ideology — an important point for this thesis that I will address in more detail below — to describe this as modernist is to work with a definition of modernism that is in apparent conflict with the widely accepted understanding of the term as a signifier for a set of artistic practices that rejected classical representational strategies, and expressed a deep ambivalence about the changes that accompanied modernity.

As these examples demonstrate, the relationship of classicism and modernism is fraught. Yet the debate over the place of modernism in Hollywood need not necessarily disrupt the project to locate the postmodern in Hollywood. While literary postmodernism followed a period of modernism that was itself preceded by realism, there is no rule that requires that Hollywood postmodernism follow modernism immediately, without an intervening period of something else (or, in fact, that there be periods of modernism and/or postmodernism in Hollywood at all). A more productive way to theorise the location of postmodernism in Hollywood is to return to Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson’s argument that the classical Hollywood cinema represented a largely continuous period of realism that was only infrequently subject to modernist interruptions. This period of classicism/realism did, as they suggest, persist up until the 1960s, until the studio system began to be dismantled. It was in 1967, with the release of Bonnie and Clyde, that the postmodern representational strategies ushered in by the French New Wave filtered through to Hollywood, marking a more crucial break in the classical paradigm. In this sense, the period in Hollywood that is variously referred to as the “Hollywood Renaissance”, the “New
Hollywood”, and, most tellingly, the “postclassical Hollywood” might be interpreted as postmodern even if it was preceded by a lengthy period of classicism/realism.

Indeed, the term “postmodern” has been linked to the group of classificatory terms that have circulated in the discourse on 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s Hollywood cinema. Peter Kramer, for example, links postmodernism to “post-classicism” (303), and Murray Smith places postmodernism alongside “the New Hollywood, the New New Hollywood, post-classicism, and more indirectly, post-Fordism”, a list that represents the “proliferation of terms” to describe “the nature…of Hollywood cinema” since the 1960s (‘Theses’ 3). Despite this, postmodernism has remained peripheral to this discourse; as Tasker observes, “the two terms [postclassical and postmodern] are rarely brought together” (215). This is possibly because of the problems locating modernism in Hollywood that I have just outlined. However, if we agree, as I have argued we should, that the discourse on postclassical Hollywood and postmodernism need not get bogged down in the question of modernism, this opens up the field of work on postmodernism in postclassical Hollywood. As a way into this research, Tasker offers a useful summary of why the postmodern might be relevant to the study of postclassical Hollywood cinema. She writes:

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36 Although the word “postmodern” often appears in work on postclassical Hollywood, few theorists of postclassical Hollywood examine the relationship between the postmodern and postclassical in detail. In addition to Tasker’s ‘Approaches to the New Hollywood’, Thomas Elsaesser’s ‘Specularity and Engulfment’ is one of the only contributions to the debate over postclassical Hollywood specifically to examine its imbrication with the postmodern on an industrial, stylistic and thematic level. In his early work on the “high concept” film, Justin Wyatt (with R.L. Rutsky) theorises high concept as “an integral element of modernity” (43); in the later High Concept, however, Wyatt appears entirely to abandon his earlier postmodern reading, demonstrating the hesitance of work on postclassical Hollywood to use postmodernism as a conceptual framework.

37 Indeed, reading postclassical Hollywood cinema as postmodern might solve the debate over whether or not the classical “group style” persists into the late twentieth century. This is because the both/and logic of the postmodern allows us to understand the postclassical as signifying both Hollywood’s continuation of and movement beyond the classical paradigm.
Various aspects of new [or postclassical] Hollywood suggest affinities with the critical framework of postmodernism. The irreverent recycling of genres, the prevalence of pastiche and nostalgia, as well as the reciprocal relationship between commercial and art cinemas: all strike a chord with the characteristics of postmodern art. In turn, the reorganization of the American film industry as part of media conglomerates operating across a range of leisure fields, along with the use of independent production companies and freelance employees, clearly relates to some versions of economic/industrial change offered within postmodernism. (225)

Tasker’s comments draw attention to the way in which the industrial changes that occurred in Hollywood’s post-studio era, as well as the stylistic and thematic characteristics of many of the films that emerge from this industry, can all be read as postmodern. In this thesis, I take seriously Tasker’s suggestion that postclassical Hollywood may be interpreted as postmodern. I am particularly interested in how this is worked out in the films themselves, particularly in the representation of their characters and the model of subjectivity this supports. My chief concern is to examine the ways in which postclassical Hollywood, as a postmodern cinema (or group of cinemas) that departs from or reworks the conventions of the classical paradigm, diverges from the conventions governing the representation of characters and the model of subjectivity this supports.

The possibility that postclassical Hollywood cinema reworks the conventions for representing character and subjectivity has not gone unnoticed in film studies. In A Cinema of Loneliness, for example, Robert Kolker examines the formal and thematic experimentation with the representation of heroism in the films of the New Hollywood, or the Hollywood Renaissance, the first group of films produced in

38 See also John Hill (98).
Hollywood’s postclassical era. As Kolker writes, the directors associated with this group of films:

…tried in various ways to come to terms with narrative itself, the story and its telling, and to realize the possibilities inherent in refusing the classical American approach to film, which is to make the formal structure of a work erase itself as it creates its content (9).

This “refusal” of the conventions associated with the classical Hollywood cinema was realised most clearly through the experimentation with the representation of the hero. In the films of the Hollywood Renaissance, Kolker argues, the protagonist is not heroic in the classical sense. The hero — who is almost always male, a patriarchal cinematic convention which is rarely, if ever, challenged in this group of films — is not goal-oriented, he is incapable of overcoming what Kolker describes as “oppressive odds and adversity”; he cannot transcend “the victory of his adversaries” (36).39 According to Kolker, in films like Easy Rider (Dennis Hopper, 1969), M*A*S*H (Robert Altman, 1970), Five Easy Pieces (Bob Rafelson, 1970) and Taxi Driver (Martin Scorsese, 1976), the anti- or unheroic hero wanders without clear goals through a hostile landscape. He continues: “[i]f any of their characters prevails, it is for a while only, and they seem only to prevail in order to make their fall all the more hard” (405).

In Five Easy Pieces, for example, “hero” Robert Dupea (Jack Nicholson) is represented in a series of loosely connected episodes in which he is shown drinking, bowling, fighting with his girlfriend, and working on an oil rig. Even when the film

39 Alice Doesn’t Live Here Any More (Martin Scorsese, 1974) may well be the exception that proves the rule. While this film does have a female protagonist, her trajectory in this film is similar to that of her male counterparts in other films made during the Hollywood Renaissance. Alice (Ellen Burstyn) is goal-oriented but her dream of a new life as a singer is not exactly realised by the end of the film.
appears to develop a narrative trajectory — when Dupea returns to his home to visit his stroke-affected father — no conventional “goals” are achieved. The film ends, moreover, with the decidedly unheroic Dupea abandoning his girlfriend at a rural service station. Noël Carroll argues that a similar overturning of conventional Hollywood heroism is visible in McCabe and Mrs Miller (Robert Altman, 1971). Here, John McCabe (Warren Beatty) is established as what Carroll calls “a likely heir” to screen heroes like Clark Gable or Errol Flynn (“Future” 59) but is revealed throughout the course of the film to be “a bumbling loser” who ends up a “poor, dead slob in the snow” (“Future” 60). The model of heroism displayed in these films is a far cry from the Hawksian version that was celebrated by Rivette.

In the period following the Hollywood Renaissance, Kolker argues, the exploration of (and experimentation with) the representation of the hero disappeared from Hollywood cinema. He writes:

> Those who have since attempted some new explorations move mostly through postmodern territory where film became less a means of exploring the self and the world than of deflating both within images that either lack self-consciousness or mock it by turning inquiry into a sometimes indiscriminate embrace of pop-cultural images. (xiii)

Setting aside the question of whether or not the experimentation with heroism in the films of the Hollywood Renaissance is itself a venture into “postmodern territory”, as well as the broader contention — which I put forward in the introduction to this thesis — that all films can be read as “exploring the self and the world”, I would suggest that this is not the only place in postclassical Hollywood in which a reflexive

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40 While Dupea’s rejection of commitments can be read as heroic from a countercultural perspective, his actions run against the conventions of classical Hollywood heroism.
41 Although Kolker describes the Hollywood Renaissance as a somewhat delayed part of the “modernist response that had occurred throughout the other arts many years earlier” (xiii), I would position it as an early form of postmodernism.
exploration of subjectivity can be discerned. Moreover, it is my argument in this thesis that it is in a more recent development in postclassical Hollywood, the Indiewood film, that we can locate a group of films that continue what Kolker calls the “exploration [of] the self and the world” in the context of the postmodern.

**Defining Indiewood.**

While the postclassical Hollywood cinema is often theorised in terms of two “New” Hollywoods roughly corresponding to the 1970s and the 1980s, the 1990s were also a decade in which another significant change occurred. This change saw the difference between independent and Hollywood cinema narrow significantly, particularly on an industrial level. This merging of the American independent and Hollywood cinemas gave rise to what I would suggest is a third “New” Hollywood, which has come to be known as Indiewood. As a relatively recent development in Hollywood cinema, Indiewood is a new concept in film studies. In this sense, this thesis contributes to an emerging field that I will map in this section.

It is difficult precisely to identify a moment at which the term “Indiewood” emerged — although King notes both that Peter Biskind dates Indiewood’s birth to 1994 (presumably with the release of *Pulp Fiction*), and that the term “gained increased currency” online, on *indieWIRE* (King *Indiewood* 39, n.5). It is reasonable to assert, then, that Indiewood appeared in the lexicon of theorists and historians of

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42 In suggesting the emergence of a third “New” Hollywood, I do not intend to argue that this is the only kind of film made in 1990s and 2000s Hollywood. While the period of experimentation associated with the Hollywood Renaissance was arguably exhausted in the early 1980s with the commercial failure of *Heaven’s Gate* (Michael Cimino, 1980), the second New Hollywood’s primary product — the blockbuster — has gained rather than lost momentum in the 1990s and appears, with the reintroduction of 3D in *Avatar* (James Cameron, 2009), to show no sign of slowing. As King suggests, Indiewood represents a diversification of Hollywood filmmaking practices rather than a complete replacement of the blockbuster or the star-vehicle (*Indiewood* 5–6).
American independent and Hollywood cinema in the mid 1990s. In its early incarnation, Indiewood was used to describe the independent film industry as contemporaneous with, but separate from, the Hollywood system. Emanuel Levy, for example, describes Indiewood as an industry that “runs not so much against Hollywood as parallel to Hollywood” (501). For Levy, this industry occupies the middle ground between low-to-no budget experimental filmmaking and big-budget studio-financed Hollywood cinema. He sees Indiewood as occasionally overlapping with Hollywood, but insists that it retains a separate core audience (505).

Shari Roman also uses Indiewood in the subtitle of Digital Babylon, a study of the rise of digital filmmaking, the Dogme95 “movement” (a term I use advisedly in this context) and its influence on digital filmmakers like Harmony Korine and Mike Figgis. Here, Indiewood appears to function as a signifier for the digital filmmaking sphere as a discrete, independently funded, industry, with the suffix “wood” appearing to signify that this industry as an industry was like Hollywood rather than being tangibly connected with Hollywood in any way. The use of the word “Indiewood” to denote a separate, independent film industry with a separate audience base did not survive; this was, perhaps, because Hollywood’s colonisation of this very industry rendered the notion of separate mainstream and independent industries largely obsolete.

The new meaning of Indiewood — which is the meaning that I take up in this thesis — began to circulate in film studies discourse in the mid-2000s. In The Way

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43 Published in 1999, Levy’s comments were made at a time when the middle ground between these two industries was becoming increasingly populated. In fact, in The Sundance Kids, James Mottram describes 1999 as the annum mirabilis of “indie” cinema (Sundance Kids 255); it is only with the benefit of hindsight that this can be seen as a year in which Indiewood cemented its position as a (relatively) discrete category. See King (Indiewood 191).

44 It should be noted that prior to the 1990s the borders between independent and Hollywood cinema were far from clear. As Chris Holmlund suggests, when it comes to theorising independent cinema in relation to Hollywood, “what’s at stake is a continuum, not an opposition” (3).
**Hollywood Tells It**, for example, Bordwell describes Indiewood as related to major-independent production companies like New Line, whose products lie at the edge of the Hollywood mainstream (*Way Hollywood* 18). Similarly, Yannis Tzioumakis characterises Indiewood as “‘a grey area’ between Hollywood and the independent sector” (247–48), an area which exhibits a “mix of practices associated with the majors with elements associated with independent filmmaking” (265). The most extensive work on Indiewood, however, can be found in King’s *Indiewood, USA*, which is the first major piece of scholarship to examine Indiewood as a discrete kind of postclassical Hollywood cinema.45 King’s work brings substantial clarity to what has been hitherto indeterminate about the word “Indiewood”.

King’s definition of Indiewood is triangular, that is, it is a combination of industrial shifts, marketing strategies, and the characteristics of the films themselves. In an industrial sense, the word Indiewood refers to a specific part of Hollywood: its “speciality” divisions. King writes: “[t]he most clear-cut institutional base of Indiewood is constituted by indie/speciality-oriented distributors and/or producers owned by the major studio companies” (*Indiewood* 4). These distributors and/or producers are either “studio-created subsidiaries…or formerly independent operations taken over by the studios” (*Indiewood* 4). The companies that form the industrial base of Indiewood, then, are: Sony Pictures Classics, Fox Searchlight,

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45 In *Indiewood, USA* King picks up on his work in *American Independent Cinema*, where he suggests that a new, hybrid filmmaking “zone” was created in American industry in the 1990s. This zone, he speculates, is exemplified by the work of Steven Soderbergh, whose work straddles the independent/Hollywood divide (*American* 261).
This industrial location has not always existed; as King observes, Hollywood studios began to create subsidiaries and/or acquire independent organisations after the commercial success of films like *Pulp Fiction* (Quentin Tarantino, 1994) and *The Blair Witch Project* (Daniel Myrick and Eduardo Sánchez, 1999), as well as “the very healthy profit-to-cost ratio of a number of lower-grossing indie features” (*Indiewood* 4). The success of these “indie” films, in other words, suggested to the studios not only that there was a niche market to exploit — the perceived audience(s) of the independent and arthouse cinema(s) — but that the films made for this market sometimes broke free of this niche and reached a much broader audience than was originally expected (*Indiewood* 5), becoming what Alisa Perren calls “indie blockbusters” (30). As Bingham Ray — the co-founder of October Films, which was acquired by Universal Pictures in 1997 — observes:

> I’m not some avant-gardist, I know the difference between something that’s truly experimental and something that’s wholly mainstream, but I’d like to think that somewhere in the middle is a comfort zone where there’s an audience. (qtd. in Biskind *Down and Dirty* 93)

This marketing of films to this “comfort zone”, King argues, has led to changes in the textual characteristics of the films themselves; he defines the Indiewood film as one in which we can see the hybrid combination of “indie” and

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46 Two films I am analysing in this thesis are not strictly the products of the Indiewood industry: *Memento* was produced by Newmarket Films which, at the time of writing, declares on its website its resistance of the trend for successful independent companies to be absorbed into the studio system. Similarly, Lions Gate, also an independent company, produced *American Psycho*. As King suggests, certain films made by both the Hollywood studios and the Independents can also be described as Indiewood products because these films are “designed with potential indie/mainstream cross-over in mind” (*Indiewood* 5, 271). Both *American Psycho* and *Memento* are clearly marketed to the same audience as the Indiewood film, and I therefore position them as Indiewood films in this thesis.

47 The critical and commercial success of *sex, lies and videotape* is also commonly cited as contributing to the turn of the Hollywood studios towards niche-market “indie” production. See, for example, Perren.
“mainstream” representational strategies (Indiewood 5). Although he questions “whether a distinct and identifiable set of norms can be associated with Indiewood as a hybrid location” (Indiewood 2–3), King (following Bordieu’s work on habitus and cultural capital) argues that:

A central characteristic of Indiewood cinema...is a blend comprised of features associated with dominant, mainstream convention and markers of ‘distinction’ designed to appeal to more particular, niche-audience constituencies. (Indiewood 2)

For him, these “markers of ‘distinction’” are evident in unusual narrative structure, unconventional techniques like shot construction and editing, and in quirky characters or situations ordinarily associated with the independent, arthouse, or avant-garde cinemas (Indiewood 2). The Indiewood film retains, however, the “dominant, mainstream convention” of focusing on characters and plot in the service of the viewer’s emotional engagement (Indiewood 35). On a textual level, then, Indiewood can be seen as a Hollywood cinema that departs, at least partially, from the conventions of the classical paradigm. While I agree with King that these films do retain a conventional focus on characters and plot, I am interested in the extent to which what he refers to as “markers of distinction” might in fact extend to the representation of these characters, and, therefore, the model of subjectivity that this supports. I am particularly interested in how character and subjectivity are represented in the films that King describes as “situated at the more indie/alternative end of the Indiewood spectrum” (Indiewood 38), as distinct from its other products: the “youth-oriented” or “pulp/cult” film, and the “quality/prestige” picture (Indiewood 38).
Beyond the broad definition of the Indiewood film as exhibiting, on a textual level, a combination of the classical conventions with “markers of ‘distinction’” (Indiewood 2) or “more and less mainstream ingredients” (Indiewood 23), it is difficult to discern in King’s work a more specific definition of the textual characteristics of the indie/alternative Indiewood film as separate from the “pulp/cult” and “quality/prestige” varieties. Jeffrey Sconce’s work on what he calls the “smart film” — published as an article entitled ‘Irony, Nihilism and the New American “Smart Film”’ in Screen in 2002 — provides a useful place to start theorising this category. Indeed, King suggests that indie/alternative Indiewood films like those written by Charlie Kaufman are marketed as “smart” or “intelligent” (Indiewood 54), and he also observes that Sconce’s work on the smart film “includes titles from the indie and Indiewood sectors” (Indiewood 14). As defined by Sconce, the smart film is:

…an American school of filmmaking that survives (and at times thrives) in the symbolic and material intersection of ‘Hollywood’, the ‘indie’ scene and the vestiges of what cinephiles used to call ‘art’ films (351).

Neither fully “art” nor “indie”, Sconce argues that “‘smart’ films nevertheless share an aura of ‘intelligence’ that distinguishes them (and their audiences) from the perceived ‘dross’ (and ‘rabble’) of the mainstream multiplex” (351). This immediately suggests parallels with King’s category of indie/alternative Indiewood cinema, combining the notion that the films are located at the juncture of Hollywood

48 It should be observed, here, that the term “smart” is problematic. It both implies that cinema has the capacity to “think” and that some films are more intelligent than others. These implications are contentious and difficult to sustain. I do not, however, disagree with King and Sconce that the films they are talking about are marketed as an “intelligent” alternative to the mainstream, and that they have the capacity to be used as cultural capital by cinemagoers wishing to assert their own intelligence (Sconce 352; King Indiewood 14). This is not, however, to say that these are the only kinds of films that have this potential.
with its “others” and that, regardless of whether or not they are in fact materially different to this perceived mainstream, they are marketed as such.

Moreover, Sconce argues, like King, that this marketing strategy can be seen in the films, which largely conform to the “narrative strategies” of classical Hollywood but also exhibit an ironic “sensibility” or “tone” that marks them as separate from the mainstream (351–52). In addition to this “ironic distance” (358), Sconce further suggests that smart films exhibit, in varying combinations and to varying degrees, several key elements. These are:

1) the cultivation of ‘blank’ style and incongruous narration; 2) a fascination with ‘synchronicity’ as a principle of narrative organization; 3) a related thematic interest in random fate; 4) a focus on the white middle-class family as a crucible of miscommunication and emotional dysfunction; 5) a recurring interest in the politics of taste, consumerism and identity. (358)

This leads Sconce to identify the “smart” sensibility in such diverse films as those directed by Todd Solondz, Neil LaBute, Alexander Payne, Hal Hartley, and Wes Anderson, as well as: Very Bad Things (Peter Berg, 1998), Go (Doug Liman, 1999), 2 Days in the Valley (John Herzfeld, 1996), The Ice Storm (Ang Lee, 1997), The Sweet Hereafter (Atom Egoyan, 1997), Safe (Todd Haynes, 1995), Being John Malkovich, and Donnie Darko (Richard Kelly, 2001) (350). While Sconce’s category is not limited to a particular industrial location, and includes films that King specifically positions outside the boundaries of Indiewood, such as those directed by Todd Solondz, I would suggest that what Sconce describes as the “smart” film might in fact provide clarity to the category of the indie/alternative Indiewood film

For King, Solondz’s films, like Happiness (1998), are an example of material that is too “challenging” and potentially alienating to be considered marketable to the indie/mainstream crossover market (Indiewood 21–22, 215).
as one that is marketed as more intelligent than the films produced for the
Hollywood mainstream, and which combines in a particular way the
representational strategies associated with the classical Hollywood cinema and its
various “others”.

What is most productive, for this thesis, about Sconce’s work on the smart
film — which I am reading as broadly applicable to the indie/alternative Indiewood
film — is his suggestion that the postmodern might have some saliency to this
category. In this sense Sconce departs from King. King acknowledges the potential
for reading Indiewood as postmodern — not only in relation to the shift to post-
Fordist production and consumption practices that arguably created both the
industrial conditions and the audience for this cinema (Indiewood 8, 23), but also in
specific relation to Adaptation and the MTV pedigree of its director, Spike Jonze
(Indiewood 55). However, he steers clear of this approach in his work. Sconce, on
the other hand, speculates that the ironic tone or sensibility of the smart film — and
its (a)political effects — might represent a new “politics of postmodern paralysis”
(368).50 He focuses in particular on the question of nihilism and political
(dis)engagement in these films; I would suggest, however, that there is more work to
be done investigating the ways in which postmodernism functions both in the
“smart” film and in the versions of this cinema produced in Indiewood. I am
particularly interested in picking up on the fifth element that Sconce identifies in
smart cinema: the “recurring interest [of these films] in the politics of taste,

50 The postmodern sensibility of smart and/or indie/alternative Indiewood cinema can be traced,
through independent cinema, to the influence of the more experimental end of the spectrum of late
twentieth-century American cinema. Joan Hawkins positions “the more provocative independent films
of [the 1990s]”, like Happiness (Todd Solondz, 1998) and In the Company of Men (Neil LaBute,
1997), as “heavily indebted to [the] downtown cinema and downtown film culture” (90) of the 1980s,
a cinema which “enacts a kind of radical postmodern theory” (94).
consumerism and identity” (358). Even more specifically, I am interested in the last term in this sentence: identity. It is my contention that we can see, in the indie/alternative Indiewood film, a thematic interest in subjectivity in a postmodern context. It is also my contention that these films mobilise representational strategies in regard to their characters that appear to support a postmodern model of subjectivity.

In the following three chapters, I will offer close readings of the representation of character and subjectivity in six indie/alternative Indiewood films. My broader concerns, however, lie with questioning the capacity of postclassical Hollywood cinema to represent a model of subjectivity that is different to the Enlightenment model. As I will show in the next and final section of this chapter, the Enlightenment model of subjectivity is supported by the conventions associated with the classical paradigm.

**Subjectivity and the Classical Hollywood Cinema.**

Since the Enlightenment, and, more specifically, Descartes’s assertion of the *cogito*, a certain model of subjectivity has dominated Western metaphysics. This model positions the subject as a rational, cognisant, coherent individual or “self” that possesses the agency to act upon its encounter with the phenomenal world. As Woods puts it, this “subject is the space demarcated by the ‘I’, understood as a sense of identity, a selfhood which is coherent, stable, rational and unified” (9). “Based upon this sense of individuality”, he continues, “it is believed that people possess agency and can use their capacities to alter, shape and change the world in which they live” (9–10). This model of subjectivity is structured around the stable,
hierarchical separation of a number of important binaries, which include but are not limited to: mind/body, essence/appearance, interior/exterior, and original/copy.

Eagleton argues that this model of subjectivity — which I refer to in shorthand as the Enlightenment model — was never as stable or “conveniently homogeneous” as the twentieth (and, now, twenty-first) century “devotees of heterogeneity” made it out to be (Illusions 79). Nevertheless, this model has become considerably less stable over the course of the last century and into the next one. Put simply, modernity and postmodernity (and modernism and postmodernism) have rendered the model of the Enlightenment subject increasingly insecure. Nick Mansfield asserts in this way that “[s]elfhood is now seen to be in a state of perpetual crisis in the modern West” (2).

The crisis in subjectivity began with the shift to modernity, which placed pressure on the Cartesianism central to the Enlightenment model by subjecting the body to the rigors of the Industrial Revolution. Concomitant shifts in psychology — Freudian psychoanalysis in particular — also mounted a challenge to the Enlightenment model by declaring the subject to be fundamentally split. However, humanism persisted despite these challenges, a humanism which not only viewed the subject as something that existed but also maintained that it was worth struggling to reassert the unity and coherence of the Enlightenment model against the fragmentation to which it was being subjected. Modernist literature, for example, sought to slough off the strictures of nineteenth-century realism and find new (and more adequate) ways of representing subjectivity. Much of this writing was fragmented, but this was viewed as a better way to authentically represent subjectivity. Peter Childs describes these fragmented modernist works as:
...attempt[ing] to render subjectivity in ways more real than realism: to represent consciousness, perception, emotion, meaning and the individual’s relation to society through interior monologue, stream of consciousness, tunnelling, defamiliarisation, rhythm, and irresolution (3).

The goal, here, was to restabilise the subject. Linda Hutcheon writes:

Where modernism investigated the grounding of experience in the self, its focus was on the self seeking integration amid fragmentation. In other words, its (for many, defining) focus on subjectivity was still within the dominant humanist framework, though the obsessive search for wholeness itself suggests the beginnings of what would be a more radical postmodern questioning, a challenging brought about by the doubleness of postmodern discourse. (104)

Hutcheon not only shows the residue of the Enlightenment model in the face of the various modern (and modernist) challenges to it, but also that these challenges intensified in the post-War period, which, I have shown in this chapter, ushered in the postmodern turn evident in the philosophy of this era. Here, poststructuralism, in its various forms, asserted that subjectivity was an effect of ideology (Althusser), constructed through language (Lacan) or disciplinary regimes (Foucault), or, in the case of Deleuze, that the category of the subject should be (almost) entirely abandoned (Mansfield 137).

Although there are differences in the way in which they articulate their challenge to subjectivity, these theories share in common the notion that subjectivity is without essence, and does not precede language, discourse or representation. In this sense, the Enlightenment model was thoroughly unseated. The destabilisation (or “death”) of the Enlightenment model of subjectivity was paralleled, as Kellner observes, by the increasing complexity of modernity in the latter half of the twentieth century. “From the postmodern perspective”, he writes, “as the pace, extension, and
complexity of modern societies accelerate, identity becomes more and more unstable, more and more fragile” (*Media Culture* 233). This fragility is the result of what Kellner calls “the [then] current orgy of commodification, fragmentation, image production, and societal, political, and cultural transformation that is the work of consumer capitalism” (*Media Culture* 258). As I indicated in the first section of this chapter, this is the context in which theorists like Jameson and Baudrillard began to identify concomitant changes in cultural production. Central to the postmodern turn are three key concepts: depthlessness, fragmentation and simulation. I will deal with these concepts in Chapters Two, Three and Four of this thesis, respectively; for now, I want to examine how the classical Hollywood cinema represents character and subjectivity. This will prepare the ground for my examination of the ways in which this may be challenged in the postclassical and/or postmodern paradigm in which, I have argued, the indie/alternative Indiewood film is located.

As I explained in the second section of this chapter, theorists like Friedberg have shown us that the narrative cinema that was developed in America in the first half of the twentieth century was closely aligned with the nineteenth-century realist tradition, despite its placement in a context where various modernisms were challenging this form. This has implications for the model of subjectivity that is supported in the classical Hollywood cinema. As Catherine Belsey asserts, “[s]ubjectivity is a major — perhaps the major — theme of classic [literary] realism” (67). For Belsey, classical realist texts verify the existence of the autonomous subject. “Initially (and continuously) constructed in language,” she writes, “the subject finds in the classic realist text a confirmation of the position of autonomous subjectivity represented in ideology as ‘obvious’” (77). It would be reasonable to
assume, then, that the classical Hollywood cinema, as the analogue of classical realist literature, would also confirm this model of subjectivity.

Film theorists (Colin MacCabe, Laura Mulvey, Jean-Louis Baudry, Christian Metz, and others) made this link in the 1970s, where the intersection of Marxism and psychoanalysis produced some now-canonical texts. In ‘Realism and Cinema’, for example, MacCabe made explicit the link between nineteenth-century literary realism and the popular narrative film (7-11). In ‘Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematographic Apparatus’, Jean-Louis Baudry investigated the effects of the camera — or “apparatus” — and concluded that the filmed image — the “signifier” — both concealed its status as a representation of reality and, in privileging Renaissance perspective and continuity, worked to “assure the setting up of the ‘subject’ as the active center and origin of meaning” (40). In other words, the classical Hollywood cinema’s emphasis on coherent, linear narrative based on causality, continuity and verisimilitude, presents the Enlightenment model of subjectivity, as ideologically “obvious” or “natural”, like the classical realist literature to which Belsey refers.51

Indeed, the classical Hollywood cinema’s support of the Enlightenment model of subjectivity is not only visible in its privileging of the perspective of the spectator and thus confirming her/his centred, autonomous subjectivity, it can also be seen in the conventions used to show characters, or fictional subjects, inside the frame. In Hollywood cinema — and, indeed, in most popular narrative films — this

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51 Marxist/psychoanalytic film theory, of course, is not unassailable — of the many challenges to it, cognitive film theory presents a particularly comprehensive critique (see, for example, Bordwell and Carroll’s Post-Theory). This is not the approach I take in this thesis. While I agree that there are some problems with the way in which the spectator is constructed in the Marxist/psychoanalytic theoretical paradigm, I assume that, when it comes to subjectivity, representation matters. Cultural products, at the very least, sustain particular modes of subjectivity, whether or not subjectivity is only a construct.
invariably includes moving, talking bodies or, to use more problematic terminology, “humans”. As Mulvey observes: “[t]he conventions of mainstream film focus attention on the human form. Scale, space, stories are all anthropomorphic” (9). In cinema, Mulvey suggests:

…curiosity and the wish to look intermingle with a fascination with likeness and recognition: the human face, the human body, the relationship between the human form and its surroundings, the visible presence of the person in the world (9).

Classical Hollywood cinema does not just show us “humans”; these “humans”, are almost always actors portraying fictional (or, in the case of genres like the biopic, fictionalised) characters. As Richard Dyer explains, characters are “fictional beings” (Stars 90), which, in (what he calls) narrative cinema follow a “novelistic” model (Stars 93). According to this model, character is “constitute[d]” by a series of “qualities” (Stars 93). These are: “particularity, interest, autonomy, roundness, development, interiority, motivation, discrete identity, and consistency” (Stars 93).

While Dyer acknowledges that some of these qualities are more difficult to represent in the cinematic medium — interiority, for example, is harder to show in film than in literary texts (Stars 103) — narrative cinema nevertheless works hard to convince us

52 Alfred Hitchcock, James Naremore observes, came to a similar conclusion: namely, that “movies are not about landscapes or horses galloping; they are about the primal desire to watch other humans, stimulated by narrative, montage and camera placement” (Acting 240). This idea can be traced back to earlier film theory; in Theory of the Film, for example, Béla Balázs argued not only that film was capable of a “mighty visual anthropomorphism” (60), but also, more specifically, that its distinguishing feature lay in its capacity to show “the face of man” — or “the physiognomy of things” — in close up (60).

53 For a cognitive-anthropological list of “character attributes” that is strikingly similar to Dyer’s, see Murray Smith’s Engaging Characters. Like Dyer’s list, Smith’s emphasises the individuality, continuity, sentience, emotionality and intentionality of characters (Engaging 21). Smith argues that characters are “constructs formed on the basis of a perceptual and explanatory schema (the person schema) which makes them salient and endows them with certain basic capacities” (Engaging 31). However, Smith explicitly rejects (post)structuralist approaches to character, arguing instead that, while characters are constructs, this “person schema”, while culturally and historically specific, is not. For him, this schema is “constructed out of some material”, namely, the cross-cultural constant of “bodily and mental individuality” (Engaging 24).
that its characters are not only real or authentic, but also autonomous, coherent subjects with thoughts, feelings, and desires. In other words, the conventions for representing character in the classical Hollywood film support the Enlightenment model of subjectivity. For example, conventions such as the close-up and voice-over are used to construct character interiority. Dyer argues that the point-of-view shot, as theorised by Edward Branigan in *Point of View in the Cinema*, also contributes to the construction of the illusion that characters in texts are subjects who are capable of having “points of view” (Dyer *Stars* 121). As Dyer puts it, this is “one of the ways by which the construction of character as an apparently autonomous existence is achieved” (*Stars* 121).54

The construction of character and subjectivity are not only a matter of narrative, framing, editing, and mise-en-scène, it is also a matter of acting. James Naremore considers the significance of the actor in relation to the category of the subject in *Acting in the Cinema*. Here, he asserts, “the job of mainstream acting is to sustain ‘the illusion of the unified self,’ or what Pudovkin called ‘the organic unity of the acted image’” (*Acting* 5). This, he suggests, supports the traditional view of the subject inherited from the Renaissance, or what I am calling the Enlightenment model (*Acting* 5). A particularly good example of this is the dominance, in Hollywood cinema (at least since the 1950s), of a notion drawn loosely from the Stanislavskian method (or Method) of acting, in which “good acting” is viewed as “‘true to life’ and at the same time expressive of the actor’s authentic, ‘organic’ self”

54 There are various other signs, explored by Dyer, by which texts construct the “cultural/ideological values and attitudes” of a character (*Stars* 122), but these are underpinned by the foundational illusion that the character is a coherent, autonomous subject capable of having these values and attitudes in the first place.
Taken together, then, the classical Hollywood cinema’s “group style” and the conventions governing the representation and performance of characters in this cinema, work to sustain the Enlightenment model of subjectivity.

If the classical Hollywood cinema supports the Enlightenment model of subjectivity, it would be logical to posit that the departures from convention that took place in the various postclassical Hollywood cinemas that began in the late 1960s might present a departure from this model. More specifically, given that I have argued, following Tasker, that the postclassical Hollywood might be understood as a part of the postmodern on an industrial, stylistic and thematic level, there is a possibility that the non-conventional representational strategies employed in these cinemas might in fact construct characters in a manner that supports a postmodern model of subjectivity. Focusing on Indiewood as an instance of postclassical (and indeed postmodern) Hollywood cinema, this is the possibility that I will explore in this thesis.

As I will show in the next three chapters, there is, in the representation of character in the Indiewood film — or, more specifically, the indie/alternative Indiewood film — a movement away from coherence in favour of depthlessness, a refusal of continuity in favour of fragmentation, and an emphasis on reality as always

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55 Drawing parallels between Griffith and Stanislavski’s interest in de-emphasising the artificiality of framing and “emotionally charged acting”, Naremore observes that it may be possible to “speak of an intuitive Method that was at work from the beginning, helping to shape the classic narrative cinema” (Acting 198). This suggests that the ideas about subjectivity that became explicit in the valorisation of the Method in the 1950s (and beyond) may have always already been a part of classical narrative cinema.

56 I set aside, of course, the well-theorised notion that the modernist interruptions to the classical paradigm such as that presented by 1940s film noir represent a questioning of Enlightenment ideology that is almost proto-postclassical (and proto-postmodern). Moreover, I do not wish to suggest that the indie/alternative Indiewood film represents a form of counter-cinema, deliberately setting out to challenge the hegemony of the classical paradigm and its ideological effects. Rather, I want to position them as both reflecting and constructing postmodern ideas about subjectivity in a manner that is not intentionally political (although, the representational strategies mobilised in these films do have political implications).
already imbricated with representation. In other words, these films appear to mobilise strategies to represent their characters in a way that supports a postmodern model of subjectivity. However, it is also my contention that there are limits to the representation of character and subjectivity as postmodern in each of these films. These limits impact upon the extent to which they are capable of exceeding the classical conventions for representing their characters and, concomitantly, their capacity to support a model of subjectivity that exceeds the still-dominant Enlightenment one. I begin my analysis of postmodern representation and its limits in the next chapter, with an exploration of depthlessness in *American Psycho* and *Being John Malkovich.*
Chapter Two

Depthlessness in *American Psycho* and *Being John Malkovich*

In Chapter One, I examined the concept of indie/alternative Indiewood cinema. The group of films comprising indie/alternative Indiewood can, I argued, be viewed as part of a postclassical Hollywood cinema that reflects and constructs the postmodern. In this, the first of the three chapters investigating the representation of character and subjectivity in this cinema, I turn to the concept of depthlessness. I begin here because depthlessness is crucial to an understanding of fragmentation and simulation, the other concepts with which I am concerned in this thesis. Depthlessness pervades all aspects of the postmodern: fragmentation is imbricated with the absence of historical depth; similarly, the effacement of the referent that gives rise to simulation can be viewed as rendering the signifier as without depth.

Indeed, the notion that the postmodern is primarily characterised by the absence of depth (or, alternatively, the reduction of everything to surface) is privileged in the academic discourse on the concept. This is due to Jameson’s influential assertion that the “supreme formal feature of all the postmodernisms” is “a new kind of flatness or depthlessness, a new kind of superficiality in the most literal sense” (*Postmodernism* 9). David E. Cooper observes, in this way, that “[t]he slogan of postmodernism might then be Wittgenstein’s dictum, ‘Nothing is hidden’” (70). Postmodern culture is viewed as one of diminished affect or emotional content, giving rise to a shift to theorising subjectivity as surface. This critical-theoretical...

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57 In separately examining depthlessness, fragmentation and simulation in this thesis I do not intend to suggest they are discrete concepts. My concern, rather, is to explore the ways in which Indiewood films differently foreground and problematise each of these interwoven aspects of the postmodern.
deprivileging of depth in favour of the superficial was paralleled by the notion that the rise in image reproduction during the twentieth century rendered subjectivity a matter of the visible.

I will focus in this chapter on two indie/alternative Indiewood films that explicitly approach depthlessness in relation to subjectivity: *American Psycho* and *Being John Malkovich*. *American Psycho* very specifically engages with the purported reduction of subjectivity to surface in its representation of the exemplary postmodern character, Patrick Bateman (Christian Bale). *Being John Malkovich* also considers the significance of the exterior as the locus of subjectivity, but takes a more reflexive approach to the cinematic representation of character as depthless. As I will show, both films utilise postmodern strategies that refuse access to character interiority. There are, however, limits to these representational strategies; in both films, the ending contradicts the postmodern strategies used to represent character and subjectivity as depthless.

In order more fully to examine these limits I will firstly explore the concept of depthlessness in relation to subjectivity. I will then offer a close reading of each film, focusing on the ways in which they represent their characters as depthless. I intend, in the final section of this chapter, to examine the limits to the representation of depthless character, which are evident in both films. It is my argument that these films return, in the end, to strategies for representing their characters that support the Enlightenment model of subjectivity. In so doing, I intend to begin to articulate the central argument of this thesis: that, when it comes to character and subjectivity, indie/alternative Indiewood films do not push postmodern representational strategies as far as the medium will bear. Visible to varying degrees in each of the films, I
believe this tendency is linked to the status of these indie/alternative Indiewood films as the products of a commercial filmmaking industry that limits the extent to which they can diverge from the conventions of the classical Hollywood cinema and the model of subjectivity that this has historically supported.

**Depthlessness, Hermeneutics, Subjectivity.**

In exploring the problematic interplay between interiority and exteriority, *American Psycho* and *Being John Malkovich* are engaged with the notion that the postmodern is an era of diminished depth. In theoretical discourse, the postmodern is positioned as heralding the end of the model of hermeneutic inquiry in which concealed meaning is unveiled through the act of interpretation. As Jameson explains, this lack of depth is both literal and metaphorical; what is lost is “not only visual depth—which was already happening in modern painting—but also interpretative depth, the idea that the object is fascinating because of the density of its secrets, which are then to be uncovered by interpretation” (‘Anders Stephanson’ 45). It signals the end, therefore, of Paul Ricoeur’s “hermeneutics of suspicion”, in which surfaces dissimulate truth (Kellner *Media Culture* 236).\(^{58}\) This does not mean that it is impossible to find meaning, or that we can no longer theorise *anything*; interpretation, rather, becomes a matter of “practices, discourses, and textual play” (Jameson *Postmodernism* 12) instead of a grand unveiling of hidden truths. As I explained in Chapter One, the apparent end to this model of hermeneutics affects the philosophical doxa that form the basis of such inquiry, such as Marxism and psychoanalysis, which, Jameson suggests, rely on the binaries essence/appearance

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\(^{58}\) The anti-hermeneutic project began as early as 1966, with Susan Sontag’s call for the end of hermeneutics in relation to art. See her *Against Interpretation and Other Essays*. 
and latent/manifest, respectively. The Existentialist binary authentic/inauthentic is also problematised (Jameson Postmodernism 12). Neville Wakefield reminds us, however, that the eradication of depth models is not limited to these “isms”; postmodern theory also jettisons the methodological foundations of “structuralism, cultural archaeology and all hermeneutics — in other words, all systems of meaning/understanding that propose some ‘real’ latent content behind manifest appearances” (6).

This “de-legitim[ation]” of “the surface/depth hermeneutic model”, Ian Buchanan observes, is accompanied by a tendency for artworks to jettison this hermeneutic as well, ushering in a fundamental change in “the very nature of content” (90). Indeed, Jameson illustrates his claims for the postmodern as depthless by comparing two artworks produced almost a century apart: Van Gogh’s A Pair of Boots (1887) and Andy Warhol’s Diamond Dust Shoes, 1980 (1980). Van Gogh’s painting, he argues, is imbued with depth or content behind its surface. Following Heidegger, Jameson argues that the worn work boots connote:

…the whole object world of agricultural misery, of stark rural poverty, and the whole rudimentary human world of backbreaking peasant toil, a world reduced to its most brutal and menaced, primitive and marginalized state (Postmodernism 7).

Warhol’s picture, on the other hand, does not conceal anything, which makes it difficult to interpret the painting as anything other than its surface denotation; it is a picture of a collection of shoes and nothing else. As Sontag says of pop art more generally, its content is “so blatant, so ‘what it is,’” that it precludes interpretation
Jameson scholars agree, therefore, that *Diamond Dust Shoes* challenges not only our attempts to find a meaning in the image, but also the concept of meaning in its entirety (Buchanan 91; Roberts 127).

The purported postmodern turn to depthlessness also affects the model of subjectivity that I outlined in Chapter One, in which depth, or interiority, is privileged over surface. The effect of depthlessness on the category of the subject is theorised primarily as an emptying out of emotional content. Turning again to cultural production, Jameson refers to Edvard Munch’s *The Scream* (1893) as a paradigmatic example of the angst of the modernist subject. For Jameson, Munch’s painting shows how this subject externalises authentic emotional interiority; he explains that “the problem of expression is itself closely linked to some conception of the subject as a monadlike container, within which things felt are then expressed by projection outward” (*Postmodernism* 15). Like Van Gogh’s worn work boots, Jameson reads the lines that emanate from Munch’s screamer as the “sonorous…vibrations” of the “absent scream” (*Postmodernism* 14). This scream, in turn, expresses the “atrocious solitude and anxiety” of the alienated modern subject (*Postmodernism* 14).

With the disappearance of the depth models that privilege the interior as the locus of subjectivity goes the kinds of affect that are viewed as the outward expressions of this interiority. For Jameson, alienation and anxiety become

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59 Of course, the interpretation of an artwork as uninterpretable is, paradoxically, an act of interpretation. Moreover, Jameson *does* perform a more conventional interpretive act in his comparison of the shoes in Warhol’s picture with the leftovers from Auschwitz or a dance-hall disaster (*Postmodernism* 8). Indeed, Jameson’s project has been to continue his hermeneutic program in the face of the postmodern by finding a Marxist methodology more adequate to its surfaces and their resistance of conventional interpretation (Jameson ‘Anders Stephanson’ 54).

60 In ‘The Scream Meme’, Mark Dery sees a pointed articulation of this shift in the fate of Munch’s painting, which was transformed, in the 1990s, from a modernist scream to a postmodernist “meme” symbolising fin-de-millennium irony and camp.
inappropriate in the postmodern (Postmodernism 14). “The end of the bourgeois ego, or monad,” he suggests, “no doubt brings with it the end of the psychopathologies of that ego — what I have been calling the waning of affect” (Postmodernism 15). This is about the end of what he calls “hermeneutic emotion, expressing an underlying nightmare state of the world” (‘Anders Stephanson’ 45). Jameson further explains that the waning of affect is really about the “transformation of the depth of psychological affect in that a particular kind of phenomenological or emotional reaction to the world disappears” (‘Anders Stephanson’ 45, emphasis in original).

The concept of “waning affect” has sometimes been interpreted as an argument for the death of feeling altogether, however, as Buchanan observes, this is one of the most poorly understood of Jameson’s concepts (92). For Buchanan, such interpretations fail to recognise that Jameson is working with a notion of affect linked to a particular model of subjectivity: that of the individual or “self-enclosed ego or monad” (93). In this way, Jameson is not suggesting the disappearance of all affect; Adam Roberts expands on this by asserting that Jameson’s “radical thesis” is “not that people like you or I are incapable of feeling anything, but that there has more generally been…a fading-away of emotional content” (124, emphasis mine). What disappears, then, is not emotion per se, but rather the idea that the subject is a container filled with emotions. In fact, postmodernism is very much about feeling. As I observed in Chapter One, the shift in emotional attitude towards modernity is one of the key differences between the modern and the postmodern. In this way, Jameson suggests that postmodernism is characterised by a new kind of affect, “a

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61 Roberts argues that this means the cultural products of the postmodern are ironic and cynical, exhibiting “a modish detachment from feeling anything” (124). He refers to the cinematic tendency towards extremely violent or sexual imagery as an example of this emotional detachment (124). This detachment is also visible in the privileging of irony in the indie/alternative Indiewood film.
whole new type of emotional ground tone” that can be theorised through the concept of the sublime (Postmodernism 6). This new kind of affect, he writes, is “free-floating and impersonal and tend[s] to be dominated by a peculiar kind of euphoria” (Postmodernism 16). The concept of the “intensity” as external and linked to the sublime suggests that it might describe the strength of feeling rather than the quality of feeling. That is, one feels something intensely to a high or low degree; one does not just feel intensity. This kind of affect, Jameson insists, is not cognitive (‘Anders Stephanson’ 45).

The contention that emotion is no longer only cognitively experienced points to one of the consequences of postmodern depthlessness: the deprivileging of the mind. In the postmodern, then, the body — the neglected half of the Cartesian mind/body dichotomy that is central to the model of subjectivity outlined in Chapter One — moves to the centre of discourse on subjectivity. As Julian Murphet concisely explains, in the postmodern, subjects become bodies (‘Space’ 119). Eagleton argues that “[t]his turn to the body sprang partly from a structuralist hostility to consciousness, and represents the final expulsion of the ghost from the machine” (Illusions 70–71). It also “sprang” from broader sociocultural shifts, in particular, the rise of consumer culture and the dissemination of mechanically reproduced images. As Kellner observes, the increasingly media-dominated consumer culture of the post-War era, which, I explained in Chapter One, marked the

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62 There is some overlap, here, with poststructuralist and feminist interest in the body, which reclaims and positively theorises the negatively weighted half of the binary that structures the subject inherited from the Enlightenment. But there are key differences. Again, postmodern theorists seem merely to be observing that this is a cultural effect, whereas feminists and poststructuralists were variously concerned with a series of projects that aimed deliberately to politicise the body and challenge the ways in which it is ideologically coded and theorised.
beginning of the postmodern turn, was one in which one’s exterior became more important than one’s interior (Media Culture 232–33).63

This was theorised with particular vigour in the early 1990s by social theorists. In ‘The Body in Consumer Culture’, for example, Featherstone differentiates between the “inner” and “outer” body, suggesting that consumer culture shifts emphasis to the latter (‘Body’ 171). This movement of significance to the outer body — the exterior — is related to the purported spatialisation of the postmodern and to the primacy of vision in particular, which Jameson argues is one of the major differences between the modern and postmodern. Indeed, Featherstone observes that cinema played a role in this shift: he points to cinema’s image reproduction and dissemination as making people more aware of their external appearance, or outer bodies. He points to Béla Balázs, who “speculated in the early 1920s that film was transforming the emotional life of twentieth-century man by directing him away from words towards movement and gesture” (‘Body’ 179). The emphasis on somatic surface as the locus of subjectivity was the outcome of changes that began to occur well before the term “postmodern” entered critical parlance. Significantly, cinema played a central role in this shift.

The postmodern privileging of surface, then, clearly has an effect on the model of subjectivity that I outlined in Chapter One, and the privileging of interiority that this implies. In this chapter I want to examine how this is dealt with in indie/alternative Indiewood, focussing in particular on the representation of the films’ characters and the model of subjectivity this supports. As I will show, both

63 Well before the postmodern turn, the pressures placed on the body during modernity affected the positioning of mind as the locus of subjectivity, but during this time the mind was still valorised above body. Postmodernism mounts a more thoroughgoing challenge to the stability of the mind; it is the point at which epistemological uncertainty begins to affect the ontological certainty of the cogito (Kilbourn 173).
American Psycho and Being John Malkovich utilise various postmodern strategies to represent their characters as depthless, apparently supporting a postmodern model of subjectivity. However, there are significant limits to both, which I will address in the final section of this chapter.

**American Psycho.**

“Inside doesn’t matter.” — Patrick Bateman

American Psycho opens with a montage that depicts expensive dishes being assembled with precision and carried to the tables of a high-end 1980s New York restaurant. What is noteworthy here is the playful tromp l’oeil of the first shots of this sequence, which, in intertextual reference both to Ellis’s novel and to the slasher genre, transforms the signifiers of horror into the benign duo of raspberry sauce and kitchen knife. Yet this sequence is also an introduction to the film’s concern with postmodern depthlessness. The flatness of these artfully assembled dishes — designed to signify at the level of style rather than substance — is emphasised by the use of an overhead shot, which reduces perspective and depth. American Psycho is the most explicitly postmodern of the indie/alternative Indiewood films to be examined in this thesis. Arriving almost a full decade after the infamous publication of Bret Easton Ellis’s novel, the film emerged at a time when America was experiencing a resurgent consumerism in the wake of the “dot com” economic boom (Eldridge 23; James ‘Sick’ 23; Kauffman 45). Both the written and audio-visual incarnations of American Psycho clearly engage with postmodern depthlessness, and

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64 The publication controversy sparked a vigorous ethical debate that is well documented. See Allué, Brien, Freccero, Mandel, and Messier.
they do so by focussing on its effects on subjectivity through protagonist Patrick Bateman.

In line with my interest, in this thesis, in the representation of character and subjectivity in the indie/alternative Indiewood film, I am concerned in this section with the ways in which the film represents Bateman as depthless. By way of comparison, I will begin with a brief discussion of the novel’s representation of Bateman as a depthless character. I will proceed to examine the representational strategies used to translate the literary representation of Bateman’s depthlessness into the medium of film. The question of written versus audio-visual representation that constitutes the field of adaptation studies is tangential to this thesis, in which I am concerned exclusively with cinematic representation. However, in the case of American Psycho, the difference between the written and audiovisual representations of Bateman may be illustrative of the representational limits of the film. In other words, examining the postmodern representational strategies of the novel against their translation into narrative film may help to illuminate the barriers preventing the representation of depthless subjectivity in American popular narrative cinema. I will address these limits in more detail in the final section of this chapter.

In Ellis’s novel, the representation of Bateman as a depthless character is so comprehensive that it is questionable if the word “character” is even appropriate. Without the extra-textual knowledge provided both by the description of the novel on the jacket cover and by the public discourse on its publication, it is not immediately apparent that Bateman is even American Psycho’s protagonist; for the first three pages his name is not mentioned, nor is it clear that the events are being described from Bateman’s perspective. Instead, the action focuses on Timothy Price. It is not
until mid-way through the sixth page that Bateman uses the first-person pronoun for the first time. Only then do we have confirmation that Price’s actions have been described from Bateman’s point of view. This shift to the “I” of Bateman’s perspective, however, does little to develop him as a conventional character. Ellis confirms that his goal was to have Bateman appear as depthless or devoid of psychological characteristics as possible: “I was writing about a society in which the surface became the only thing…So I wrote a book that is all surface action; no narrative, no characters to latch onto, flat, endlessly repetitive” (qtd. in Freccero 51, ellipsis mine).

In her important work on *American Psycho*, Elizabeth Young presents a productive reading of Bateman as a depthless character. As an extension of the broader stylistic depthlessness of the novel, which she argues is “written as if to be skimmed” (101), Young observes that Ellis deliberately rejects the conventions of realist character construction by paradoxically providing excessive detail about characters’ exteriorities — such as their clothing — that remains exclusively on the surface. In addition to emphasising the depthlessness of the characters, this refusal to penetrate the surface renders them interchangeable (102). Bateman, then, is fundamentally unstable; it is never certain whether he is not also Halberstam, McDermott, Van Patten or (more persuasively) Price, because none of these characters has any distinguishing characteristics. For Young, Bateman is “a cipher, rather than a ‘character’” (103). This is embellished by the affectless tone with which Bateman describes his life, a tone that pervades the novel but which is particularly noticeable in its scenes of graphic torture and mutilation (109), which are
characterised by a “blanket blank” (114). In addition to this persistent representation of Bateman as depthless, the novel also appears to stymie attempts to impose substance from outside; it does this by parodying hermeneutic criticism in its long passages of pop music analysis, which majestically unveil the deeper truths concealed beneath the surfaces of songs by Genesis, Whitney Huston, and Huey Lewis and the News.

The strongest evidence of the success of the book’s representation of Bateman as a depthless character can be found in its critical reception. As Carla Freccero observes, one of the major criticisms levelled against the book was the absence of character depth, or, more specifically, psychological content. She points, for example, to Norman Mailer’s well-known excoriation of the novel on the grounds that Ellis failed to provide Bateman with interiority: “Since we are going to have a monstrous book with a monstrous thesis, the author must rise to the occasion by having a murderer with enough inner life for us to comprehend him” (qtd. in Freccero 52). Mailer condemns Ellis not for having his character fail to express emotion — although Bateman frequently reminds us of his inability to feel anything other than greed, disgust, and “nameless dread” — but for refusing to imbue Bateman with historical depth. As Freccero suggests:

What critics reproach Ellis for is that he precisely does not provide a psychologized narrative of origins, a comforting etiology for his killer’s illness; we do not hear that he was a sexually abused child or that he had a domineering mother. (51)

She observes that Ellis’s work was therefore unfavourably compared to that of Thomas Harris, whose *The Silence of the Lambs* was viewed (somewhat

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65 See also Messier (74, 76).
perplexingly) as more firmly rooted in a “moral framework” (51). In comparison, *American Psycho* ends with Bateman explaining that his repetitive series of murders conceals no motive and has failed to reach a point of closure (52). This is reinforced in the closing paragraph of the novel where Bateman, hearing Halberstam ask “Why?”, is unable adequately to answer this question. After an abortive attempt to explain his actions — which amounts to an Existentialist defence that “I should have done *that* instead of not doing it” (Ellis 399, emphasis in original) — Bateman trails off into “a sigh, then a slight shrug and another sigh” (Ellis 399). This stands in contrast with the ending of the film adaptation, which I will discuss in more detail in the final section of this chapter.

In many ways, the film adaptation successfully replicates the novel’s representation of Bateman as a depthless character. This is demonstrated early in the film, in the scene where Bateman formally introduces himself to the viewer. Here, the camera glides through Bateman’s New York apartment, which is decorated in a monochrome minimalism that is punctuated only by the glossy surfaces of stainless steel and mirror. In voice-over, Bateman tells us his address, name, and age, and, although we are privy to a detailed account of his morning body-maintenance routine, we do not discover anything about the character beyond the exterior, which is crunched, exfoliated, cleansed, and polished in front of the camera. Bateman, therefore, is *literally* but not *psychologically* fleshed out. As if to reinforce this depthlessness, Bateman, in the first of several soliloquies that form the philosophical centre around which the film orbits, articulates his internal vacancy:
There is an idea of a Patrick Bateman, some kind of abstraction, but there is no real me, only an entity, something illusory. And though I can hide my cold gaze and you can shake my hand and feel flesh gripping yours, and maybe you can even sense our lifestyles are probably comparable, I simply am not there.

The refusal of any interiority behind the “entity” we see reflected in the mirror is further emphasised by the shots of Bateman peeling off a clear facial mask that conceals nothing and thus, in its removal, reveals nothing more than that which was already visible behind it. Russell J. A. Kilbourn observes that the use of a mirror to show this revelation is significant. For him, this scene presents an ironic take on the mirror image as a representation of the “exteriorizing of specular self-reflection as the tropological basis for modern subjective interiority” (182). This irony is also visible in another shot in this scene, which shows Bateman staring blankly at his reflection in a framed poster for *Les Mis* — the musical adaptation of Victor Hugo’s *Les Misérables* — that hangs above his toilet. As Jaap Kooijman and Tarja Laine assert, imitating Jameson’s distinction, this shot explicitly contrasts two modes of subjectivity: the suffering subject of Hugo’s novel with the postmodern subject for whom affect is no longer a matter of interiority. “[W]hereas [Victor Hugo’s ‘sublime beggar’] has emotional and psychological depth,” they write, “Bateman is merely a psychic void” (53). The emphasis on Bateman as surface is also supported, here, by the paucity of shots showing Bateman’s subjective point-of-view. The few shots that do provide access to his perspective further emphasise the exterior because they show flattened reflections of Bateman’s body in his apartment’s glossy surfaces.

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66 It is interesting to note, here, that the emotional depth of Hugo’s Cosette is, in fact, already mediated in the film because it is represented on a poster for a musical adaptation of *Les Misérables*. This further reinforces the absence of authentic affect from *American Psycho*. 
Bateman’s depthlessness is further emphasised by the use of close-ups in the film. The close-up, as theorised by Balázs, is conventionally viewed as showing character interiority. Balázs argues in *Theory of the Film* that “[c]lose-ups are often dramatic revelations of what is really happening under the surface of appearances” (56). Particularly pertinent is the facial close-up, in which Balázs argues “‘[w]e can see to the bottom of a soul by means of such tiny movements of facial muscles’” (63). For Balázs, the “microphysiognomy” of the facial close-up is able to show the “profound emotional experiences” that words cannot express (65). As Richard Dyer observes, Balázs “gives expression to a widely held view, namely that the close-up reveals the unmediated personality of the individual” (*Stars* 15). *American Psycho* appears almost obsessively to focus on Bateman’s face, which is frequently shown in close-ups and medium shots. However, in a reversal of the conventional perception of the close-up as a revelation of interiority, these close-ups show Bateman to be expressionless, and merely draw attention to the sweaty sheen that coats his skin, further emphasising the impenetrability of this mask. Moreover, Bateman’s face is often distorted or blurred: when he looks into a stainless steel restaurant menu, for example, or when his face is concealed behind the internal window separating taxi driver and passenger. In other shots, his face is partially covered by such objects as ice-pack masks, sunglasses, and solarium eye protectors. It is not insignificant that in all instances these objects conceal the eyes, which signify most at the level of interiority.

The refusal of the close-ups to show us character interiority is also evident in the first of three scenes in which Detective Kimball (Willem Dafoe) questions Bateman on the disappearance of Paul Allen (Jared Leto). Here, there is a focus,
again, on Bateman’s mildly sweaty face, and the opacity of Kimball’s powdered face. This is coupled by the emphasis on performance. For example, when Kimball enters the room, Bateman stages a one-sided conversation into a disconnected phone receiver, which draws attention to the similarly performed nature of his interactions with Kimball. Kimball, too, appears simultaneously to perform the roles of good cop and bad cop, alternatively suspicious and genial as he stages his interrogation of the suspect. In this way, close-ups highlight the performance of the exterior, further refusing access to character interiority.

Supporting the flatness of the close-up is the way in which voice-over is used in the film. Replicating the novel’s narration, the voice-over narration is in the first-person, which traditionally sustains the illusion that we are accessing character interiority. But, like the close-up, the conventions of the first-person voice-over are refused in American Psycho: not only is the tone blank, the content of these voice-overs also reinforces Bateman’s depthlessness. They do this both directly, in his more self-consciously philosophical soliloquies, and indirectly, in his detailing of banalities such as the location of a restaurant table or the number of stomach crunches required to achieve muscular perfection. As Nicola Rehling observes in ‘Everyman and No Man’, “[Bateman’s] dully delivered voiceover works more to portray his inner-emptiness and chilling postmodern ennui than render him psychologically complex”. Indeed, as indicated in the first of his soliloquies, Bateman’s voice-over becomes so impersonal that he begins to refer to himself as an abstract entity, disavowing his relationship with the construct “Bateman”.

67 The casting of Dafoe in the role of Kimball is important here; Dafoe is a member of the Wooster Group, which is known for its experimental, postmodern approach to performance. Philip Auslander explains that Dafoe’s performances with the Wooster Group are not about giving a role psychological depth, but a reflexive exploration of “his own relationship to the task he is carrying out” (308).
When combined, the flattened close-ups and blank delivery of voice-over combine to emphasise Bateman’s lack of emotion. This is particularly evident in the scene in which Bateman delivers his second philosophical soliloquy. Here, Bateman, having his exterior carefully polished by a beauty therapist, flatly asserts: “I have all the characteristics of a human being: flesh, blood, skin, hair, but not a single, clear identifiable emotion, except for greed and disgust”. In addition to the tonal affectlessness of this assertion, the shot that accompanies this voice-over shows Bateman as expressionless and unmoving, again underscoring the absence of the interiority from which emotion or affect could emanate. Linda S. Kauffman observes, in this way, that the film represents Bateman as dispassionate and disconnected from those around him:

When he has sex, he makes love to his own image in mirrors; he wears a Walkman at work and with his fiancée. His passions are never aroused, even in the sex scenes, and when he dumps his fiancée, he tells her brutally, ‘We have no past, I have nothing in common with you.’ (43)

The absence of affect is further visible when Bateman, incensed by his colleague’s lack of political engagement, launches into a monologue in which he blankly asserts the ethical imperative to alleviate pain and suffering from the world. As David Robinson observes, such political rhetoric only “means” on the surface — in this case, as an “image of thoughtfulness and sophistication” (31).

Both director/screenwriter Mary Harron, and lead actor Christian Bale support the reading of Bateman as a depthless character. Echoing the critical response to the novel, Harron explains that “[p]eople said to me while I was writing [the screenplay], ‘Oh, shouldn’t you say more about his childhood or his family?’ But this isn’t a psychological portrait. He’s a symbol” (qtd. in Sipe 8). She further
explains that she asked her actors to perform their roles as if they were mythological figures rather than psychologically realistic characters (qtd. in Bowen).\(^6\) In line with this, Bale maintains that he did not draw on psychology for his performance. “Bateman”, he explains, “is very different from any character I’ve ever played because of how vacuous he is. His only self-awareness is a complete lack of self. So it’s not like most films where people say dig deep for it, it’s got to be real — here it’s all about surface” (qtd. in Sipe 10). He continues:

I’ve had a few people ask me how I can play this character without something of him lingering in myself. The answer is that it hasn’t because it’s such a pretence, even for him. I’m not trying to do a ‘portrait of a serial killer’ that displays why somebody kills. I think Ellis took clichés from serial killers and put them all together. (qtd. in Sipe 10)

In support of this superficial, nonrealist approach to performance, Nick James draws comparisons between Bale’s portrayal of Bateman and the high camp of *Austin Powers* (Jay Roach, 1997) (‘Sick’ 23). The result is a highly ironic performance of character, which sustains the representation of Bateman as depthless. In addition to this refusal to construct Bateman according to the conventions of psychological realism, the casting of the then relatively unknown Bale as Bateman helps to refuse us access to psychological depth. Well-known actors, or stars, can provide content through their personae, and, as Dyer observes, they tend to “shor[e] up the notion of the individual” (*Heavenly Bodies* 10). Bale’s lack of a familiar or established star

\(^6\) It is important that Harron argues that Bateman is not psychologised because he is a symbol or a myth. There is a difference between saying Bateman has no depth because he is a metaphor for depthless society, and saying he is depthless because it is *subjectivity* that is superficial. Harron’s argument that Bateman’s depthlessness represents that of the 1980s, rather than of subjectivity, is less politically radical because it implies that Bateman would be fully psychologised if he were not a symbol of cultural depthlessness.
persona (at least at the time the film was produced) means we cannot access this kind of substance in Bale’s performance.69

Performance is key to the representation of Bateman as a depthless subject. That Bateman is a “cinematic” character is clear; the novel frequently uses cinematic language, and likens events more directly to cinema. As Bateman explains, “I am so used to imagining everything happening the way it occurs in movies, visualizing things falling somehow into the shape of events on a screen” (Ellis 265). As a film, American Psycho takes this cinematic quality of the novel into intertextual overdrive.70 This intertextual, meta-cinematic quality supports the representation of Bateman as a depthless character because it flattens the exterior/interior dichotomy into a single cinematic surface. As Kooijman and Laine suggest, Bateman’s split identity is flattened in the film through the presentation of both the exterior yuppie and interior serial killer as a “double construction” (47). Both the exterior and the interior, they argue, are constructed out of the signifiers of fashion and popular culture:

…the film version highlights the way in which Bateman constructs his identity as yuppie with the cliché images of consumer goods and pop culture, and the way in which the construction of his identity as serial killer is based on the cliché images of horror and porn films (49).

The killer “within”, then, is not actually within; it is as superficial as Bateman’s external yuppie identity. Extrapolating this to the metaphysics of subjectivity,

69 Leonardo DiCaprio was, at one stage, cast as Bateman (Sipe 9). The character would have signified radically differently had this transpired, because DiCaprio would have brought his boyish star persona with him from his roles in Romeo + Juliet (Baz Luhrmann, 1996) and Titanic (James Cameron, 1997). Although Bale has become more recognisable in the years since American Psycho, it is interesting to note that some of his subsequent roles have continued to foreground surfaces and performativity — most notably as Batman in Batman Begins and The Dark Knight (Christopher Nolan, 2004 and 2008), and as one of Bob Dylan’s alter egos in I’m Not There (Todd Haynes, 2007).
70 For full analyses of American Psycho as a meta-cinematic text, see Robinson, and Eldridge.
Kilbourn writes that this flattening of interior/exterior into a single, depthless surface means that:

…the long-standing inside-outside dichotomy or dialectic fundamental to modern subjectivity is rendered finally moot; the difference between subjective interiority as the locus of the ‘authentic self,’ and misleading ‘inauthentic,’ external appearance, is collapsed—as if it had never existed at all (181–82).

In this sense, when Bateman expresses concern that his “mask of sanity is about to slip”, he is not anxious that he will be discovered as a serial killer but, rather, that the slippage of this mask will reveal the absence of anything behind it. As Baudrillard asserts, “it is dangerous to unmask images, since they dissimulate the fact that there is nothing behind them” (*Simulations* 9).

As I have shown in this section, *American Psycho* appears quite successfully to represent Bateman as a depthless character, thereby supporting a model of postmodern subjectivity. I would suggest, however, that there are limits to this, which I will examine in the final section of this chapter. I turn now to *Being John Malkovich*, another indie/alternative Indiewood film that exhibits thematic concern with the purported superficiality of postmodern subjectivity, and which also represents its characters as depthless.

*Being John Malkovich.*

“It raises all sorts of philosophical-type questions, you know, about the nature of self, about the existence of a soul.” — Craig Schwarz

This comment, made by unemployed, struggling puppeteer Craig Schwarz (John Cusack) in *Being John Malkovich*, illustrates the extent to which this film can be
read as one of the more reflexively philosophical products to have emerged from
Indiewood. The film has been described as “bizarre” (Barker), “experimental” (Dawson 123), “eccentric” (Weinstein and Seckin 28), “inventive” (Shaw 114) and “highly original” (Pappas 43). Although these adjectives tend to efface the extent to which the film conforms to Hollywood conventions (King Indiewood 63), they are a legitimate response to the central conceit of the narrative. Put briefly, Craig discovers a portal behind a filing cabinet on the claustrophobic 7½ floor of a New York office building. This portal appears to transport him into a 15-minute first-person experience of the “sensory stream” (Litch 73) of real-life American stage and screen actor, John Malkovich (played by the “real” John Malkovich). From here, Craig and colleague Maxine (Catherine Keener) begin charging customers for access to the Malkovich portal, and Craig and his wife Lotte (Cameron Diaz) — both of whom develop a romantic interest in the vampish Maxine — use Malkovich’s body as a prosthetic means for obtaining the object of their desire. At the same time, Craig’s boss Dr. Lester (Orson Bean) prepares for Malkovich’s forty-fourth birthday, the precise moment at which he and his elderly cohort will enter the portal and cheat death for a few more decades.

In positing a portal capable of transporting one person into the ontological experience of another person, Being John Malkovich raises questions about consciousness and embodiment, and the relationship between them. It is unsurprising, then, that there is broad consensus among scholars of this film that the

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71 Daniel Shaw argues that Being John Malkovich is “a paradigmatic exemplar of what it is for a film to be capable of doing philosophy” (111, emphasis in original). I have already indicated in Chapter One with regard to the “smart” film that there are significant issues surrounding the agency of film and its capacity to “do” (or “mean”) anything independent of the spectator. It is certainly possible, however, to mobilise a philosophical reading of the film. See, for example, Litch and Ott.
72 Hereafter, I use “real” to refer to the extradiegetic Malkovich.
central philosophical problem with which it is concerned is “identity”, or what I am referring to in this thesis as subjectivity. Although there is a tendency for these kinds of analyses to consider this problem from a largely ahistorical, analytic perspective (see, for example, Litch, Shaw, and Ott), I am interested in how the film engages with this problem in relation to the sociocultural moment in which it is situated. In this sense, I am interested in how *Being John Malkovich* is concerned with the category of the subject as it relates to the postmodern. While there are substantial differences in the ways in which they address it, I will argue in this section that *Being John Malkovich* is concerned with the same problematic as *American Psycho*. Like *American Psycho*, in which psychological realism is eschewed in favour of representing Bateman as a depthless surface constructed out of cinematic signifiers, *Being John Malkovich* explores the conventions for representing character psychology and interiority through the figure of the puppet, a figure that reifies the concept of a body without interiority, consciousness, or emotion. It then extends this to the photographically realistic character, John Malkovich, who is similarly represented as a vessel without interior. This is augmented by the ironic performances of the other characters in the film.

In *Being John Malkovich*, depthlessness, cinema and subjectivity are foregrounded from the opening scene: a puppet show. Here, a stage framed by blue

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73 References to *Being John Malkovich*’s presentation of the problem of “identity” are numerous. In addition to Litch’s description of the film as “a fun romp through the topic of personal identity” (73) and Shaw’s argument that it “undermin[es] accepted philosophical definitions of personal identity” (117), see King (*Indiewood* 65), Booker (*Postmodern* 140), and Repass (33).

74 *Being John Malkovich* can be placed in a tradition of films responding to the virtual world of computers and the Internet, which includes *Blade Runner* and *Total Recall* and was continued in films like *The Matrix*, and *Existenz* (David Cronenberg, 1999). For a reading of *Being John Malkovich* in relation to virtual subjectivity, see Pappas.

75 Since the early nineteenth century, when Heinrich von Kleist’s ‘On the Marionette Theatre’ was published, the puppet has been a site of debate over corporeality and consciousness, especially as it relates to performance. For a discussion of Kleist’s Romanticist theorisation of the marionette in relation to *Being John Malkovich*, see Kley.
velvet curtains parts to reveal a wooden marionette. Accompanied by loud orchestral music, the marionette performs an interpretive dance that appears to exhibit the rage that accompanies the marionette’s dissatisfaction with its reflection in the mirror. At several points the camera cuts to a wider-angled shot, revealing a man, who resembles the marionette, furiously manipulating its movements. Later in the film, when Craig performs the same dance using Malkovich’s body as a puppet, we learn that its title is “Craig’s Dance of Despair and Disillusionment”. In the first puppet show, however, we do not have access to this information. How, then, do we read “despair” and “disillusionment” in the marionette’s performance? The marionette does not speak, nor do we receive any extradiegetic information concerning its emotional state. In addition to the soundtrack, which provides affective tone, we access the marionette’s “thoughts” and “feelings” through the movement of the wooden body, the way this moving body is photographed, and way in which these photographs are edited into a sequence. That is, the puppet’s feelings are constructed out of the combination of the puppet’s bodily movement (gesture, facial expressions, and posture) with film techniques (cinematography, montage, and soundtrack). Feeling, then, is produced on the surface; the strings that create this movement demonstrate that the marionette’s despair and disillusionment are imposed from outside, rather than emanating from an authentic interior space.76

The marionette is a productive metaphor for depthless postmodern subjectivity because it has no interiority or psychological depth; it is all (wooden) “body”. For the postmodernist, David Krasner observes, “the great merit of puppets

76 The absence of voice in the marionette’s performance is significant, because spoken language is one of the primary ways in which we are given access to a character’s “feelings”. The film later undermines the stability of language as a way of accessing meaning when Dr. Lester’s secretary, Floris (Mary Kay Place), misunderstands every word spoken to her.
and marionettes is that they can be made to show how meaning is constructed onto a performance from without, not within” (22). Samuel Weber similarly writes that “[t]he ‘body’ of a puppet, a marionette, is never self-contained, not an organic whole; rather, it reflects impulses that come from without” (319, emphasis in original). In this way, the marionette in *Being John Malkovich* illustrates the way in which character interiority is constructed from the outside, through the representation of the body in its various modes of expression, and the film techniques and conventions that sustain the illusion of character interiority. If we read the marionette as analogous to film character, then the puppeteer, Craig, stands for the actor performing the character, the team of filmmakers who tell the actor how to move, construct the shots in which that movement is captured and edit the shots into a montage and, finally, the spectator, without whom the performance would not mean anything at all.

Having demonstrated the ways in which the illusion of character interiority is constructed and sustained in cinema, the film proceeds to show that its central character, actor John Malkovich, is as depthless as the marionette. Although a commercial film about a relatively marginal celebrity would appear unlikely, both Repass and Shaw observe that the choice to use John Malkovich as the subject of the film was entirely deliberate; Kaufman and Jonze insist that Malkovich was the only actor into which the portal could lead (Repass 30; Shaw 116). As Repass suggests, the filmmakers’ dogged pursuit of the real Malkovich for the central role stemmed from the actor’s screen persona, which is both recognisable yet difficult to define, a

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77 As Andrew Higson explains, the way in which a character is made to mean on screen is a combination of two broad areas. The first is acting, which is a combination of Barry King’s “four levels or categories of acting performance” — “the facial, the gestural, the corporeal (or postural), [and] the vocal” (qtd. in Higson 147). The second area is film conventions: “make-up and dress; *mise-en-scène*, camerawork and montage” (147).
paradoxical combination of the particular and the mysterious that is strengthened by Malkovich’s evasion of the popular press (30). As Shaw puts it, “Malkovich is an enigmatic chameleon, both in his professional and in his personal life” (116). The real Malkovich is not known for playing a type; he has embodied a wide range of roles, from Lenny in Of Mice and Men (Gary Sinise, 1992), to Gilbert Osmond in The Portrait of a Lady (Jane Campion, 1996), and, in the role that is perhaps closest to Being John Malkovich, as a robot in Making Mr. Right (Susan Seidelman, 1987). These roles are tied together by his distinctive face and voice.

The paradoxical vagueness and specificity of the Malkovich persona is evident in Being John Malkovich, where several characters recognise Malkovich but struggle to remember both his name and those of the films in which he has appeared. At one point a man tells him that: “I really liked you in that jewel thief movie”; at another point a “fan” comments: “you were really great in that movie where you play that retard”. Even Craig, who describes Malkovich as “one of the great American actors of the twentieth century”, cannot name any of his films. Both the enigmatic quality of the Malkovich screen persona and the absence of press coverage of his private life create the illusion that there is something behind the Malkovich mask, something hidden beneath the signifier “Malkovich”. As Kaufman states: “there’s something odd and completely unknowable about him. You never really know what’s going on behind his eyes” (qtd. in Shaw 116). This can be seen, for example,

78 Charlie Kaufman and Spike Jonze are similarly enigmatic and chameleon-like. I discuss this in more detail in the final section of Chapter Four.

79 In a recent article published in the Wall Street Journal, film critic David Thomson suggests that John Malkovich is in fact part of a post-Method trend in Hollywood performance, in which “pretending”, replaces the Method’s commitment to “sincerity and emotional truth”. Whether or not the argument for the death of Method acting is a viable one, Thomson’s alignment of Malkovich with a form of acting whereby the performative aspects of character replace realist representation demonstrates the extent to which the Malkovich persona can be read as postmodern.
in Malkovich’s roles as de Valmont in *Dangerous Liaisons* (Stephen Frears, 1988) and Ripley in *Ripley’s Game* (Liliana Cavani, 2002).

It is my contention that the film evokes the particular yet indeterminate signifier that is “Malkovich” in order to demonstrate that there is nothing going on behind his eyes. Like the marionette, Malkovich is represented as a surface that does not conceal an authentic interior but, rather, the absence of content beneath that which manifests on the surface. In the scenes depicting the actor in his “real” life, Malkovich is shown primarily in various stages of performance: practicing lines from Chekov’s *The Cherry Orchard* and in stage rehearsals for Shakespeare’s *Richard III*. When Lotte enters Dr Lester’s shrine to Malkovich, Malkovich’s life is represented as a series of photographs, many of which are stills from films and plays. Malkovich is even given a Shakespearean middle name, Horatio, an allusion to the notably enigmatic and unreadable character in *Hamlet*. This reference further emphasises the depthlessness of the Malkovich signifier. When Malkovich is not in mid-performance, his actions seem to replicate aspects of his screen persona. In his (dangerous) liaisons with Maxine, for example, he is represented as a combination of cold aesthete and sexual predator. Although the real Malkovich insists in interviews that he, John Gavin Malkovich, has no relationship with John Horatio Malkovich — that “he’s not even a cousin once removed” (qtd. in Repass 30) — the film represents Malkovich as “Malkovich” all the way down. Shaw notes that screenwriter Charlie

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80 *The Cherry Orchard* is well known for having been written by Chekov as a comedy and produced by Stanislavski as a tragedy. There is a similar tension in *Being John Malkovich* — and in John Malkovich as an actor — between the ironic and the sincere; Dragunoiu, for example, describes it as a “combination of madcap comedy and serious cultural critique” (2) (see also O’Shea, and Weinstein and Seckin (29)). It is my contention that the film becomes particularly sincere in its closing scenes, which has serious implications for its capacity to sustain the representation of character as depthless. I will address these implications in the final section of this chapter.

81 Similarly, Charlie Sheen’s appearance as Malkovich’s friend, “Charlie Sheen”, is a performance of his roguish persona, which has since been developed in his role as Charlie Harper in the television series *Two and a Half Men* (2003- ).
Kaufman insists that “the only time anyone ever gets a glimpse of the real Malkovich is when (hilariously) Lotte chases Maxine with a gun through his unconscious mind” (115, emphasis in original). Yet even these are psychoanalytic clichés that parody the Freudian model of subjectivity (Dragunoiu 3). Rather than providing us access to an “authentic” Malkovich, this further refuses us access to content behind Malkovich’s eyes.

The absence of content behind the “Malkovich” exterior is perhaps most evident in the scene where Malkovich, having discovered JM inc., takes a trip through his own portal. Here, Malkovich is confronted by a restaurant filled with photographic and linguistic representations of his self. All patrons and staff look like Malkovich, the only word spoken is Malkovich, and the only word printed on the menus is Malkovich. While this scene can certainly be interpreted as a representation of what Kley calls grotesque narcissism and solipsism (31), it also shows that the Malkovich signifier that manifests on the surface is filled with other, equally depthless Malkovich signifiers.

The absence of “content” behind “Malkovich” affects how the experience of “being” John Malkovich is represented. While the portal appears to place visitors inside Malkovich’s head, it does not provide access to the thoughts of Malkovich, but to the sensory experience of being inside Malkovich’s body. Even this sensory experience appears for most occupants to be limited to sight, hearing and touch.\(^{82}\) Moreover, these senses are restricted: vision, for example, is cropped to a narrow rectangle within the screen, and sound is slightly muffled. Furthermore, when both

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\(^{82}\) Sight and hearing are definitely accessible to all visitors of the Malkovich vessel; touch becomes accessible firstly to Lotte, then to Craig. It is unclear throughout the film whether taste and smell are also part of the Malkovich experience. This may be interpreted as a reflexive comment on how our experience of cinema is dominated by sight and hearing. For analysis of the portal as a metaphor for cinematic spectatorship, see Kley (26–27).
temporary and long-term visitors occupy Malkovich, he is still recognised as Malkovich by other characters within the diegesis, including a taxi driver, a restaurant patron, Malkovich’s agent, and Charlie Sheen. Even when Craig takes full control of the Malkovich vessel, it is John Malkovich, not Craig, who is reported to have taken the leap from acting to puppeteering. This is visible in the mockumentary on Malkovich that is inserted into the film. Here, actors, critics and commentators marvel at Malkovich’s decision to channel his “creative vision” into puppetry. At no point is it suggested that another person may be inside Malkovich.\textsuperscript{83} To be John Malkovich, then, is to look like John Malkovich, as illustrated in the film’s promotional poster, which shows members of an audience holding two-dimensional Malkovich masks over their faces.\textsuperscript{84}

Spike Jonze insists that he tried to make the film’s characters and setting as “believable and...as naturalistic as possible” (qtd. in Mount 192). While the setting — which uses a palette of greys, beiges and browns — is certainly drab, I would suggest that this drabness is excessive and that it therefore becomes stylised and loses its naturalistic effect. Similarly, the characters are certainly “naturalistic” on the level of costume and make-up, which is particularly visible in the deglamourisation of Hollywood stars John Cusack and Cameron Diaz. Yet this, too, is so excessive that its realist effects are negated. More than this, the performance of character is far from psychologically realist. The absence of character interiority is not limited to the representation of Malkovich. Like Christian Bale’s Bateman, other characters in the

\textsuperscript{83} It is important, however, that Malkovich comes to resemble his long-term occupants — first resembling Craig and then Dr Lester. This points towards some of the limits to the representation of character as depthless that I intend to address in the next and final section of this chapter.

\textsuperscript{84} This is further emphasised in the DVD’s special features menu, where an image of an arrow pointing to a diagram of a brain is accompanied by text that states: “don’t enter here; there is nothing here”.謎

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film are performed with an ironic tone that refuses psychological realism. John Cusack’s performance of Craig as an angst-ridden artist, for example, is more parodic than naturalistic. As O’Shea observes in ‘Out of His Head’, Craig’s dowdy appearance, his claustrophobic apartment, and his clichéd suffering render Craig “a caricature of the intense philosopher-artist”. Craig is clearly aligned with a model of interiorised, alienated subjectivity; he tells his pet chimpanzee, Elijah: “you don’t know how lucky you are being a monkey, because consciousness is a terrible curse. I think, I feel, I suffer, and all I ask in return is the opportunity to do my work, and they wont allow it, because I raise issues”. The ironic tone of this speech, however, emphasises that Craig is a parody of an alienated subject rather than a psychologically realist character. Craig’s political approach is compared with the postmodern methodology of the more successful Craig Mantini, whose puppeteering work — a televised performance of The Belle of Amhurst featuring a sixty-foot Emily Dickinson marionette — is derided by Craig as “gimmicky” and spectacular. Craig clearly views his own work as more authentic, emanating from his internal suffering. Yet Craig’s more “serious” issue-raising work is a kerbside performance of The Letters of Abelard and Heloise that is far from political and which further emphasises the ironic representation of the character.

The absence of psychological realism is further visible in the dialogue between characters, which is entirely absurd but performed as if it was realistic. For example, Craig’s conversation with Floris is a series of misinterpretations: Schwarz becomes “Juarez”, “my name is Schwarz” becomes “money, Miss Warts”, and the phrase “I said yes” is interpreted as “suggest”. This absurdity continues in Craig’s job interview with Dr Lester. Here, Dr Lester uses very clear enunciation to
apologise for his lack of vocal clarity, bemoaning the loneliness that comes from being trapped in “a tower of indecipherable speech”. At other times, dialogue appears quoted from other sources. After fifteen minutes in Malkovich, for example, Lotte decides she is a “transsexual” and is devastated by Craig’s attempts to “stand in the way of [her] actualisation as a man”. Lotte’s reaction to the Malkovich experience is not per se nonrealist (it is plausible that the sensory experience of another gender would result in such confusion). The fact, however, that she uses the clichéd language of the self-help manual to express her desire for gender reassignment surgery renders the performance nonrealist. This is further evident in the language Dr Lester uses to convey his sexual fantasies to Craig:

Nubile, blonde, wet with desire. Me in leather, a harness if you like, and all eyes, Craig, are upon me as I speak. Ladies, I begin, I am the love god Eros, they like that, I intoxicate you; my spunk is, to you, manna from heaven.

The formal language used to discuss a subject matter lifted from the pages of a Playboy magazine is not conventionally expected to emanate from the authentic interior space of a one-hundred-and-five-year-old man. The effect is one of detachment: with both Lotte and Lester, the authenticity of affect is refused by the ironic tone in which their earnest discourse is presented. This makes it very difficult to see these characters as psychologically realist.

I have argued in this section that Being John Malkovich takes a thoroughly postmodern approach to the representation of character. If there was any doubt about this, it is removed in the mockumentary on Malkovich that appears late in the film. Here, Malkovich, clad in the clichéd black turtleneck of the “artiste”, chastises a student in his Juilliard School master class for manipulating his marionette to suggest
an emotion that does not emanate from the student’s interior space. “You’re making him weep”, he asserts, “but you yourself are not weeping. Don’t ever fuck with your audience”. This is a major reflexive wink at the viewer; by refusing the widely accepted notion that the actor must project emotion from the inside out, *Being John Malkovich* is very much “fucking with its audience”. The film, in its representation of Malkovich as depthless signifier and in the privileging of irony over psychological realism in the performances of the other characters, refuses us access to character interiority. These representational strategies appear to support a model of subjectivity as surface; like *American Psycho*, in *Being John Malkovich*, “inside doesn’t matter” (although, for the majority of the film’s characters, “getting inside” Malkovich appears, paradoxically, to be highly desirable). Yet *Being John Malkovich*, too, ultimately fails to sustain its representation of character as depthless. I will examine these issues in relation to both films in the next and final section of this chapter.

**The Limits of Depthlessness.**

In this chapter, I have demonstrated how *American Psycho* and *Being John Malkovich* represent character and subjectivity as depthless. *American Psycho* uses techniques conventionally associated with character interiority to emphasise the impenetrability of Bateman’s façade. Similarly, *Being John Malkovich* draws attention to character interiority as an illusion constructed out of the movement of the body and the cinematic conventions for showing this body. It, too, highlights the depthlessness of character through its central signifier, “Malkovich”, and through foregrounding absurd dialogue and ironic tone in the performances of the other characters. There are, however, some significant limits to the representation of
character as depthless in both films. In both cases the conventional narrative structure facilitates movement toward an ending in which the conventional strategies for representing character are remobilised. In this section, I will show that American Psycho ultimately represents Bateman as psychologically disturbed, forcing a reading of the film as nothing but psychological content. Similarly, the shifts in tone that come towards the end of Being John Malkovich provide access to affective depth. Although they sustain the postmodern representation of character for the majority of their respective running times, both films ultimately reinstall the Enlightenment model of subjectivity, which is predicated on the interior/exterior dichotomy. This section, then, will begin to illuminate the boundaries of Indiewood’s capacity for representing postmodern character and subjectivity.

American Psycho’s narrative structure marks the limit of its capacity to represent Bateman as a depthless character. In one of relatively few comparative analyses of the novel and film versions of the text, Marco Abel argues that the film moulds Ellis’s flat, repetitive and largely directionless prose into a more conventional narrative; he points to Harron’s comments (in a television interview) that she gave the film “the façade of a plot” (qtd. in Abel 145). But it is not just a plot that is constructed out of the novel’s fragmentary episodes; even Ellis’s novel has a plot, albeit an unconventional one where seemingly endless lists of products and detailed descriptions of banal conversations are punctuated by graphic accounts of torture and murder. Specifically, then, Harron gives the film the façade of a classical Hollywood plot, with the three-part structure advocated by Syd Field. In the first part, Bateman is represented as a successful yuppie and an equally successful

85 See also Cardwell, and Eldridge.
serial killer. This is disturbed, in the second part, by the introduction of a detective into the narrative, which presents the possibility of discovery. In the third and final part, Bateman, exhausted by his attempts to evade punishment, descends into psychosis.

Indeed, Abel argues that the source of the film’s plot lies in its “magnifying” the detective story (142). I would suggest that the scenes with Bateman’s secretary, Jean (Chloë Sevigny), are also structured to create another Hollywood staple: the romance subplot. The possibility of a romance between Bateman and Jean is presented very early in the film, in an awkward exchange over the booking of a romantic dinner. That Jean is in love with Bateman is made clear by the way her glances at Bateman are positioned, and, later, by her more explicit expression of a desire to “make someone happy” during their unsuccessful date. Both the detective and romance aspects of the narrative appear in the novel, but are presented as merely another of the fragmented episodes of Bateman’s experience that, in their isolation and lack of impact on the development of Bateman as a character, actually add to its persistent refusal of conventional narrative development by tantalising the reader with the possibility that these scenes might move the novel out of its relentless repetition. In the film, on the other hand, they are reordered into conventional Hollywood set pieces: the detective plot is stretched from one scene in the novel to three tension-building scenes in the film, and the placement of scenes with Jean throughout the film narrative builds a romance plot. These two aspects — the mystery-to-be-solved and the romance-to-be-consummated — drive the film towards its conclusion, which is markedly different to that of the novel.
In reading the film adaptation as a conventional narrative, Abel focuses on how this limits the affective force of the novel’s alternation of boredom and violence. For Abel, the rendering of the novel’s material into a more conventional cinematic plot makes the novel’s alternation of boring, slow, repetition of trivia with sudden, fast, and extreme violence (143) into an “agreeable”, evenly-paced narrative that, in its familiarity, limits the possibilities for affective engagement with the text (146). As Abel suggests, Harron needed to avoid the same criticism as the novel (141), presumably, with the goal of maintaining the film’s marketability. This was not only about ensuring American distribution by minimising the representation of violence in order to keep the film classification below NC-17, but also providing a pleasurable viewing experience for a relatively mainstream audience. It is difficult to see how the Deleuzian, affective encounter with the text that Abel supports could translate into substantial ticket sales. For Abel, “films…cannot always show what novels can” (150, n.20); I would argue that this is not about the medium per se, but about the representational capacity of American popular narrative cinema. Indeed, commercial concerns not only limit the representation of violence; as I am arguing in this thesis, they also limit the representation of character and the models of subjectivity that this supports. In the same way that Abel asks what a more arthouse, Godardian adaptation of the novel’s violence might look like (151, n.20), it would also be interesting to consider how character would be represented in such a relatively noncommercial film.

I am interested, in this sense, in Abel’s observation that one of the side effects of the film’s conventional narrative structure is that it renders Bateman an “individual, fully psychologized, truthful human agent” (147), that is, the kind of
psychologically realistic subject that is (arguably) absent from the novel. Abel writes:

…the novel relentlessly shows us that identity is nothing but a series of masks, whereas the film insists that underneath the (beauty) mask we see Bateman peel off in front of his bathroom mirror, there exists a ‘true,’ stable identity — even if this identity is described as nothingness, as Bateman’s recognition that ‘There is no real me…I simply am not there’ (151, n.29, emphasis in original).

Abel’s suggestion is extremely useful for my thesis; I agree that it is significant that the film does reorder the novel into a more conventional plot, but to suggest that this alone gives Bateman psychological depth would be to contradict what I have argued in the second section of this chapter: namely, that the film utilises various representational strategies that refuse access to character interiority. The representation of Bateman as “psychologised” in the film is not just about narrative conventions. Indeed, both the detective and the romance plot lines could be viewed as hackneyed Hollywood scenarios that provide further evidence of Bateman’s superficiality. I would suggest, therefore, that it is not so much the conventionalised plot that renders Bateman a “psychologised” character, but that this plot facilitates a progression towards the film’s dénouement. It is only at this point that Bateman is psychologised. In ‘A Conversation about American Psycho’, which appeared on The Charlie Rose Show — the same television interview in which Harron asserts that her screenplay provided the novel with a plot — Bale explains that Bateman “goes from psychopath to psychotic”. I would suggest that the psychotic Bateman only arrives at the end of the film. At the start of the film, Bateman coolly asserts that he is a surface that masks the absence of a real subject, which is largely supported by the techniques
used to represent the character. At the end of the film, however, a dishevelled and
visibly distressed Bateman is shown screaming that he is “a pretty sick guy”.

The film’s dénouement is constructed out of several scenes that make up its
final twenty minutes. In the first, Bateman, after escaping the police in the wake of a
highly improbable shoot-out, leaves a message on his lawyer’s answering machine in
which he confesses to the multiple murders that we have been shown throughout the
film. In the second, Bateman visits Paul Allen’s apartment, which, he has just told
his lawyer, he has used as a storage room for the bodies of his victims (a claim that is
supported by a prior scene in which “Christie” (Cara Seymour) discovers the horrors
that lie within this apartment). When Bateman steps inside the apartment, it has been
whitewashed, and, in a hallucinatory exchange, a real estate agent tells Bateman that
Paul Allen does not live there. In the third scene, Bateman arrives at a bar to meet his
lawyer, who treats his confession as a joke, refuting Bateman’s insistence that he is a
serial killer with the evidence that he recently dined with Paul Allen in London.

These scenes cumulatively suggest that Bateman imagined his serial killings. All of
these scenes appear in the novel, and here too, there is the suggestion that Bateman
imagined his murders (Cardwell 73). The novel, however, is far more ambiguous
than the film. Indeed, Bateman’s psychological instability is evident much earlier in
the novel. For example, Bateman makes reference to “lunch at Huberts” as “a
permanent hallucination” (Ellis 86) before the first episode of violence has even
occurred. In the film, on the other hand, Bateman’s mental instability is presented as
a twist, which makes a reading of the film as a sustained, Caligarian delusion much
stronger. As James asserts: “[i]t’s clear that Harron believes Bateman to be a
fantasist, that he may not in fact have killed anyone except in his own mind” (‘Sick’ 24).86

Sarah Cardwell argues that the subtle shifts in point-of-view in the film’s final act — particularly during the police shoot-out sequence — force us to consider the reliability of Bateman (although she argues that this renders the film fundamentally ambiguous) (79). This contributes to the reinsertion of psychological “depth” into the character, yet I would suggest that this depth is more emphatically reasserted in another crucial scene, which is absent from the novel. Edited in parallel with Bateman’s encounter with his lawyer, this scene shows Jean enter Bateman’s office, where she discovers his diary. Immediately after Bateman’s lawyer rejects his confession, the film cuts to a shot of Jean sitting at Bateman’s desk, where she flips through his diary. The diary is filled with violent drawings depicting the various horrors to which Bateman has ostensibly subjected his victims. Although it is not incontrovertible, it is this scene that makes the delusion twist much stronger than the novel, not only because it caps off a series of scenes that undermine the diegetic

86 The book’s suggestion that Bateman is merely deluded is far more ambiguous because Bateman, as a depthless signifier, is entirely interchangeable with other depthless signifiers that surround him. Murphet makes the useful observation that, in the film, the signifier “Bateman” is stabilised by the fact that Bale embodies the role (American 78). This makes it easier to attribute the events of the narrative to one person. For Murphet, the presence of Bale’s body contradicts the purported absence of Bateman as a subject (American Psycho 78). Murphet argues that this is an indication of the limit of visual representation, which “always forcibly suggests itself as ‘realistic’” (American 79). I would suggest that it is more precisely a marker of the limit of visual representation in American popular narrative cinema, and its imbrication with the conventions of realist representation. As I will show in Chapter Five, bodily continuity does not persist in Lost Highway, Mulholland Drive, and Inland Empire, which has important implications for the capacity of these films to support a postmodern model of subjectivity.
reality of Bateman’s murders, but because it is shown from a perspective other than Bateman’s (in fact, it is the only scene in the film without him in it). 87

As Cardwell observes, the suggestion that Bateman imagined his serial killings — which I believe is made very convincing with the addition of the scene with Jean — forces us to reassess the entire film as a series of delusions or fantasies (79). This is important for this thesis because the rereading process encourages us to imbue the previously depthless character with psychological content. Indeed, if it is true that Bateman imagined it all, we have been privy to Bateman’s interior all along; American Psycho has been nothing but psychological content. The addition of Jean’s discovery of Bateman’s diary, which bolsters the suggestion that we have been watching and hearing the fantasies of a disturbed mind, removes the impact of the film’s final scene, in which Bateman attempts to persuade us that “no new knowledge” can be gained from his confession. Jean’s discovery of the diary, an object that signifies both interiority and textuality, has brought new knowledge to the viewer that, short of entirely explaining Bateman’s actions, renders him considerably less depthless.

87 Kooijman and Laine argue that the film’s inclusion of this female perspective of Bateman softens the character (54). Contra Abel’s argument that the satiric mode of Bale’s performance of Bateman curtails the potential for viewer identification, Kooijman and Laine suggest that this makes the character more endearing to the viewer, instigating the desire to “‘normalize’ him” by “fill[ing] the void of his subjectivity” (54). Indeed, Kooijman and Laine suggest that “it is clear that Bateman has fantasized the chase, as well as the murders, in order to provide himself with an exciting identity as serial killer, desperately trying to retain meaning into his life” (51). Similarly, filmmaker David Cronenberg, who considered directing the film, reads American Psycho as an “existentialist epic” in which:

You invent a world where clothes and money and brand names are the value system and you are in the mind of someone who is locked into that. But inside that mind there is an awareness that it all is meaningless and artificial, completely invented. And the murders, the hideousness, are an attempt to break out of that, to try to shatter it and to connect with something real (qtd. in Kauffman 42). Both these readings “fill the void of [Bateman’s] subjectivity”, by positing an authentic interior subject, separate from the absent “I” that we are presented with for the majority of the film. This subject is just as alienated from the postmodern context in which it is situated as Munch’s screamer is from modernity.
A similar shift from depthlessness to depth occurs at the end of Being John Malkovich. While the film foregrounds character interiority as an illusion constructed out of film techniques, the narrative structure into which these representational strategies are placed ultimately limits this depthlessness. Although Dawson argues that it “go[es] beyond the traditional natural world of modern cinematic realism” (127), King observes that Being John Malkovich also follows a conventional Hollywood narrative structure (Indiewood 63). The narrative unfolds in chronological order, and, like American Psycho, features the conventional three-part structure associated with classical Hollywood, even though the details of this narrative are unusual. It even ends with the romantic union of Maxine and Lotte, which, despite its non-heterosexual articulation, provides the closure of a restabilised, successful romantic relationship, which is underscored by the triangular — or, if we consider Craig’s presence “inside” Emily, quadrangular — family unit displayed in the film’s coda. Like American Psycho, the conventional narrative structure alone does not give the characters depth. As I have argued, both the reflexive representation of interiority as an illusion constructed on the surface, and the absurd dialogue and ironic tone in the representation of character and subjectivity, refuse us access to interiority. Like American Psycho, it is the end of Being John Malkovich that contradicts the postmodern representational strategies used for the majority of the film. Whereas American Psycho ends with a twist that renders the affectless, depthless psychopath an emotionally troubled psychotic, at the end of Being John Malkovich there is a substantial shift away from irony toward sincerity.
As indicated earlier in this chapter, the film’s intertextual reference to *The Cherry Orchard* point to its merging of comedy and tragedy. O’Shea argues that Kaufman’s screenplays (and the films made from them) are marked by the “braiding” of irony and sincerity, or what he calls “bathos” and “profundity”.\(^8^8\) I agree with O’Shea, but I would also argue that the sincere half of this braid comes substantially to dominate the ironic half towards the end of the film. This is brought into sharp relief when we compare the scenes that bookend the film: the title and credit sequences. The scenes are quite similar; both show the body (a wooden marionette in the title sequence and a female child in the credit sequence), and in both cases this body is moving yet constricted. Both are also overlaid with orchestral music. However, the respective tone of each could not be further apart: the marionette’s performance is a parody of white male existential angst that is made comical by the fact that it is being performed by a marionette. In contrast, the child’s fluid movements through the water are entirely devoid of irony, and can be more accurately described as a combination of the elegiac with the uncanny.\(^8^9\)

The transition, in *Being John Malkovich*, from a predominantly ironic tone to a mostly sincere (but still partly ironic) tone comes after Craig assumes permanent control of Malkovich. This shift is temporally marked by the narrative jumping eight months forward in time. Here, Craig-in-Malkovich has found puppeteering success, and Lester and his friends are preparing to enter the Malkovich vessel. I do not wish to suggest that irony disappears from the film altogether; the mockumentary on

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\(^8^8\) King makes a similar distinction between comedy and seriousness (*Indiewood* 66).

\(^8^9\) Indeed, one colleague suggested that this scene is unnerving, a sentiment that is echoed both by Weinstein and Seckin, who call it “perhaps the most truly horrifying scene in the film” (40) and by King, for whom this situation is both “disturbing” and “nightmarish” (*Indiewood* 67, 68). This troubling effect stems both from the idea of being trapped in a body one cannot control, and from the fact that it represents the symbolic violation, by an adult man, of a young girl.
Malkovich’s puppeteering career stands as an obvious example but it can also be seen in Craig-in-Malkovich’s larger-than-life marionette avatar performing a well-received solo in the middle of Swan Lake, and the chase sequence through Malkovich’s unconscious. However, this is overwhelmed by the shift to sincerity. This is primarily visible in the representation of character, and of Maxine in particular.

Maxine is, in many ways, the film’s most depthless character. As Ott puts it, “[t]he essential emptiness of Maxine’s psyche is impressed on us over and over again during the movie” (70). Her depthlessness is not communicated via absurd dialogue or ironic tone; it is visible, rather, in her cold demeanour and her absolute lack of ethical concern — both in her treatment of Craig, and in her unscrupulous conversion of the Malkovich tunnel into a money-spinner. Whereas characters like Craig, Lotte and Dr Lester perform their dialogue with an ironic tone that renders them superficial, Maxine is entirely devoid of affect or interiority, she has no depth whatsoever. With her cold demeanour and propensity to speak only in witty one-liners, Maxine is, in many ways, the character in Being John Malkovich that is closest to American Psycho’s Bateman. Indeed, like Bateman, Maxine suddenly becomes emotional at the end of the film. This shift is marked not only by the absence of one-liners, but also by the fact that most of Maxine’s lines here are sincere expressions of emotion. She apologises, for example, to a marionette that resembles Lotte, and expresses her love for her unborn child. This culminates in Maxine’s reconciliation with the “real” Lotte, to whom she admits her love. Significantly, her display of emotion is not performed with an ironic tone; it is

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90 This not only restores depth to the character, it perpetuates gender stereotypes because it occurs when she is heavily pregnant and thus perpetuates essentialist ideas about femininity.
represented as realist and sincere. This stands in contrast with Malkovich’s warning to avoid “fuck[ing] with your audience”. Indeed, responding to Lotte’s insistence that she “cannot fuck with [her] anymore”, Maxine sincerely assures her that this is not the case. While this does not mean that characters like Lotte, Craig and Dr Lester become any less ironic or superficial, this reversion to the realist conventions governing the representation of character and subjectivity provides access to (the illusion of) “authentic” affective content, an illusion that is explicitly blocked for the majority of the film.

Moreover, this shift to sincerity is accompanied by the reassertion of a Cartesian bias at the end of Being John Malkovich. Here, Craig is trapped inside the “larval” vessel, Emily (Kelly Teacher), and Dr Lester gains control of the “ripe” Malkovich vessel. The fact that Craig and Dr Lester are able to persist inside the respective vessels of Emily and Malkovich renders the body as little more than a container for the mind. Indeed, while he has been “absorbed” by Emily, and is therefore unable to control her, Craig has a separate voice from Emily and appears to persist as a separate entity, despite the absence of a visible body. That the content may be more important than the container has already been established by the fact that the vessel comes to resemble the tourist inside: when Craig takes over Malkovich, for example, Malkovich’s body begins to resemble Craig’s. A similar change happens when Lester commandeers the Malkovich vessel. In both cases there

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91 Several critics have pointed to the film as a representation of theories of homuncular subjectivity (see for example O’Shea, and Ott (63)). This reading is bolstered by the illustration of the science of “vessel jumping” that Dr Lester shows Lotte. This illustration depicts a small body inside the brain of the vessel. However, with the exception of Craig’s querying of the location of a piece of wood he was holding during his first visit to the Malkovich vessel, the location of the body during the Malkovich experience does not appear of much concern in the film. We are never shown the body inside Malkovich, only the voice and goggled perspective of the visitor. While this is not incontrovertible evidence that the visitor has left the “container” of his/her original body behind, it does further suggest that this “container” is both separate from and not as significant as the mind.
is the suggestion that external appearance “reflects”, or is constructed from, the interior. This appears, then, to contradict the film’s representation of character interiority as a superficial construct. Of course, it is possible to argue that this Cartesian bias is just another aspect of the film’s ironic strand;¹⁰³ the changes in Malkovich’s appearance are certainly comedic — he looks ridiculous both as the pony-tailed Craig and as the balding Dr Lester. I would maintain, however, that the pathos of the ending — and its disturbing final images of Emily swimming beneath the surface as a doubling of Craig’s incarceration beneath the surface of her skin — is a sincere affirmation of consciousness as a legitimate curse. Indeed, Craig is ultimately punished for disturbing the coherence of the Cartesian subject. In my view, the film’s ending reaffirms the model of subjectivity that positions the mind as the locus of subjectivity and the body as a container.

Both American Psycho and Being John Malkovich go some way toward representing character as depthless, but in both cases this depthlessness is limited. Marking these boundaries are the aspects of the film that conform to the narrative conventions of classical Hollywood, particularly the kinds of dénouement reached in both, which either force a psychological reading of formerly depthless characters (American Psycho), or combine a clear shift from irony to sincerity with the persistence of a Cartesian bias (Being John Malkovich). It would appear that the retention, in the indie/alternative Indiewood film, of features associated with the classical Hollywood cinema — in this case, narrative structure, closure, and legible affect and sincerity — means that the model of subjectivity supported by these conventions also persists. This is not just about indie/alternative Indiewood cinema’s

¹⁰³ See, for example, Ott (67).
capacity to represent character and subjectivity as *depthless*; even when the narrative is fragmented there are limits to the representation of postmodern character. This will be the focus of the next chapter.
Chapter Three

Fragmentation in *Memento* and *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*

In Chapter One of this thesis, I explored the connections between the postmodern and Hollywood cinema. I focused, in particular, on the notion that, in the late twentieth century, Hollywood moved into a postclassical phase. This phase, I argued, can be understood as coinciding with the postmodern turn. Recent scholarship on postclassical Hollywood has begun to examine the 1990s as heralding the resurgence of narrative complication. In an article — published in the 2006 special issue of *Film Criticism* on what has come to be called “complex narrative cinema” — Charles Ramírez Berg proposes that the movement towards narrative complication in late twentieth and early twenty-first century cinema can be seen as the results of a “Tarantino effect” (6). Although he asserts that this effect can be found in independent, mainstream, and non-American cinema, a significant number of these films are Indiewood products. As Berg puts it, complex (or, more precisely, complicated) narrative was a part of the “need for product differentiation” in the

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93 It should be observed, here, that none of these narratives are inherently complex; rather, the word “complex” is mobilised in this discourse to describe films that depart, to varying degrees, from the narrative conventions of the classical paradigm. Indeed, all cinema narratives are inherently fragmented; the conventions of the classical Hollywood cinema work to conceal the seams that bind it together.
wake of the indie cinema boom (6). Indeed, the emergence of Indiewood itself could be described as an industrial “Tarantino effect”. What is significant about this “effect”, for this thesis, is its connection to the postmodern. A contributing factor to the emergence of this trend in the late 1990s, Berg suggests, is (among other causes) “the fragmenting ‘postmodern condition’ and its revolt against master narratives” (6). In his investigation of the “psychological puzzle film”, a subcategory of complex narrative cinema, Elliot Panek similarly notes that, in the discourse on narratives that depart from the classical paradigm, “unusual narration” is often represented as a critique of “Enlightenment values, specifically the values of order and reason” (67). This critique is central to the postmodern. In this sense, the “Tarantino effect” can also be theorised as a “postmodern effect”, or, more precisely, both an effect and an effector of the postmodern. The fragmentation of the classical Hollywood cinema’s privileging of continuity and causality can be read, more specifically, as a part of the challenge to established ways of thinking about history and time that was central to the postmodern turn.95

My interest in late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century complex (or complicated) narrative cinema lies in the representation of character and subjectivity in the versions of this cinema that are the products of Indiewood. Following my argument, in Chapter Two — namely, that the classical narrative structure of

94 Nick James observes that the more recent “flouting of the classical ABC structure” is also evident in mainstream Hollywood films such as The Butterfly Effect (Eric Bress and J Mackye Gruber, 2004) and 50 First Dates (Peter Segal, 2004), as well as in European and Canadian cinema (‘I Forgot’ 16). This tendency to complicate narrative is also not historically unique. Berg’s taxonomy includes antecedents dating back to the emergence of the medium. In her introduction to the same issue of Film Criticism, Staiger points to Bordwell’s assertion that precedents for the “Tarantino effect” can be found in two discrete periods in Hollywood history, namely, the 1940s (in film noir) and the late 1960s and early 1970s (in the Hollywood Renaissance) (2). The more recent examples of narrative complication, then, speak back both to the classical Hollywood cinema and the moments at which this cinema became more complicated.

95 See Booker (Postmodern 1–46).
American Psycho and Being John Malkovich contributes to limiting the capacity of these films to represent character and subjectivity as depthless — I am particularly interested in how the fragmentation of narrative in Indiewood cinema affects the representation of character and subjectivity. I will examine two indie/alternative Indiewood films in this chapter: Memento and Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind.

In these films, the fragmentation of narrative is integral to the films’ thematic focus on the links between time, memory and subjectivity. Both films can be read as engaging with two related questions: what is subjectivity without history, and, concomitantly, what is identity without memory? Memento does this in the noir mode; as Richard Armstrong suggests, it plays on the noir trope of amnesia by positing a protagonist whose ability to create new memories has been seriously compromised. “Memento”, he writes, is “the logical end game of the amnesic strain of American film noir” (119). Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind also focuses on amnesia but is aligned more closely, through its director Michel Gondry, with the speculative and fantastical traditions in French cinema that were instigated by Georges Méliès. Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind depicts a world in which it is possible selectively to erase unwanted memories.

The idea that the postmodern “end of history” creates a society of amnesiacs has been a feature of the discourse on memory which, Susannah Radstone observes, became an “organising concept” in humanities research in the mid-to-late 1990s (1). As Paul Grainge puts it, “the issue of amnesia has gathered conceptual momentum in

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96 For examples of 1940s amnesia noir, see Brian McDonnell’s entry on Memento in the Encyclopedia of Film Noir (Mayer and McDonnell 282). J. P. Telotte argues that the focus on the instability of subjectivity in amnesia noir was, in its earlier 1940s incarnation, an expression of post-War anxieties (179). For Telotte, the more recent instances of amnesia (neo-)noir, such as Blade Runner and Dark City (Alex Proyas, 1998), are more closely related to the increased ontological instability of the postmodern and the role cinema played in constructing this condition (186). In both instances, the source of the amnesia is the destabilisation of the Enlightenment model of subjectivity, which began with World War I and was revisited in film noir after World War II.
significant strands of postmodern literature” (7). This, he suggests, is particularly visible in America, which is seen to be a postmodern “culture of increasing speed, space and simulacra unable to retain or engage with a meaningful sense of its own past” (7). In this chapter, I will firstly explore the theoretical discourse on the effects of the postmodern on time, history and subjectivity. This will provide the basis for my exploration, in the second and third sections of this chapter, of the way in which fragmentation functions in Memento and Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind and its effect on the representation of character and subjectivity in both films. The final section of this chapter examines the limits both to the films’ representation of their characters as fragmented, and, therefore, to the films’ support of a model of postmodern subjectivity.

**Fragmentation, History, Subjectivity.**

As I have already indicated, the fragmentation evident in Memento and Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind emerges from a postmodern context that has more generally been constructed in popular and academic discourse as fragmented. In 1992, at the peak of the academic debate over the postmodern, Patricia Waugh observed (as part of her feminist critique of postmodernism’s model of subjectivity) that:

> Everyone agrees that Postmodernism is much concerned with fragmentation. Either it sees the world fragmenting or it sets out to discover modes which will fracture and dissolve old and supposedly exhausted unities. (190)

This fragmentation, she suggests, can be seen in the work of Lyotard, Barthelme, Nietzsche, and Jameson, and is also evident in Freud’s model of subjectivity as
fundamentally “split” (191). As Waugh indicates, however, it is not only that a group of theorists set out purposefully to fragment established doxa, but also that the “world” — that is, the socioeconomic framework around which Western modernity was ostensibly organised, including business practices and social relations — was seen as either having disintegrated, or as in the process of disintegrating. These changes in theory and society were both reflected in, and constructed by, cultural production, where traditional modes of narrative and representation were fragmented and recombined to create works that privileged disjunction over continuity and coherence. Carroll, who is critical of the postmodern, explains that, in the popular conception of the postmodern, “[t]he theme of fragmentation runs through contemporary social reality and finds its analogue in postmodern cultural forms” (‘Periodizing’ 149). In all of its conceptual variations, then, the postmodern can be described as a paradigm in which everything is viewed as having fallen to pieces.

As a part of the postmodern emphasis on fragmentation, the metanarrative of history — the way the inhabitants of Western modernity think, write, talk and experience the past, both collectively (as a society) and individually (as subjects) — has undergone rigorous critique. That the concept of history should be the focus of postmodern scrutiny is, for Gianni Vattimo, unavoidable. He asserts:

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97 Carroll does not share this view; he argues that postmodernism is a flawed concept, with three central problems: temporal “coordination” (‘Periodizing’ 149), its “continuation” with modernism (‘Periodizing’ 155), and its status as a “narrative” about the present (‘Periodizing’ 160). He concludes that attempts to designate the contemporary moment from within that moment are impossible; historical narrative, he asserts, can only be written in hindsight (‘Periodizing’ 160). I would suggest that, in a post-millennial world, it is possible to argue that we can theorise postmodernism with historical hindsight, although it is still unclear if or when the shift was made to post-postmodernity. The levelling, by terrorists, of the World Trade Centre in 2001 has been constructed in popular discourse as a pivotal moment when Western (American) society and culture became, if not “post-postmodern”, then certainly “post-ironic”. See, for example, Natoli (Picture).
To imagine that history, as a course of events, keeps going on no matter what we feel about the metarécits we used to believe in would amount to assuming that the specific metarécit that conceives of history as an objective course of events has not been dissolved; or, in other words, that the course of history, as a unitary and continuous course of events, is not ‘simply’ a metarécit but the true description of the very reality of history. Now, this is exactly what the metarécits used to claim and exactly what postmodern consciousness does not believe any more. (134)

Dick Hebdige observes that the postmodern critique of history focuses in particular on the dominant theoretical models, or metarécits, presented by Hegel and Marx, as well as “any philosophy of history (more ‘developed’ or ‘linear’ than, say, Nietzsche’s doctrine of Eternal Recurrence)” (186). As Connor suggests, this critique mounts a challenge to the taken-for-granted ways in which we think about history. “Postmodernism”, he writes, “…announces itself not only as the end of metaphysical philosophy, but also the end of history, or at least of history conceived of as the succession of discrete, knowable moments or periods” (‘Modern’ 185). Rather than literally signalling the end of all history, the references in postmodern discourse to the “end of history” signify the exhaustion of a particular theoretical framework, namely, the teleological model of history as progress toward emancipation or utopia. As Keith Jenkins puts it, in the postmodern the “Eurocentric ideological/social system variants set to provide the vehicles for the universal emancipation of modernity” have (arguably) “either faded enough for us to rethink our earlier assumptions, or have disintegrated enough for us to revise our earlier hopes” (4).

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98 Nietzsche has read as a postmodern philosopher avant la lettre. See, for example, West, and Koelb.
99 Unsurprisingly, this sparked a debate among historians over the validity of the theoretical foundations underpinning the discipline. See Jenkins.
For Jameson, this “end of history” is all about the end of “historical depth” (‘Anders Stephanson’ 45). Clarifying this position, Jameson explains that, in the advanced capitalist era, “historicity and historical depth, which used to be called historical consciousness or the sense of the past, are abolished” (‘Anders Stephanson’ 45). In the postmodern, Jameson argues, the continuity of time and history is disrupted, and “something peculiar happens to historical time” (‘Anders Stephanson’ 45). This is paralleled by the notion that, in advanced capitalism, change occurs at such a rate that the difference between past, present and future becomes diminished. As Connor puts it: “the postmodern period is characterised by an unprecedented simultaneity of historical event and historical narrative, in which events hardly have time to be ‘present’ before being historically ‘re-presented’” (‘Modern’ 184). Scott Lash and John Urry call this “instantaneous” time (242), time that is at once past, present and future, or where everything appears to happen simultaneously rather than in linear succession. Jameson usefully describes this as a shift from the diachronic to the synchronic (Postmodernism 16). In terms of cultural production, Jameson links this shift to synchronicity to what he describes as “the waning of the great high modernist thematics of time and temporality, the elegiac mysteries of durée and memory” (Postmodernism 16). For Jameson, space replaces time as the prevailing mode through which inhabitants of the late twentieth century have “psychic experience” of “daily life” (Postmodernism 16).

Jameson uses the metaphor of schizophrenia to describe this “psychic experience”. Describing schizophrenia as a “suggestive aesthetic model” (Postmodernism 26), Jameson draws from Lacan’s model of the condition as laid out in the 1955 seminar, ‘On a Question Preliminary to any Possible Treatment of
Psychosis’. He describes Lacanian schizophrenia ‘as a breakdown in the signifying chain, that is, the interlocking syntagmatic series of signifiers which constitutes an utterance or a meaning’ (Postmodernism 26). Linking the coherence of the signifying chain, or sentence, with the continuity of (historical) time, Jameson suggests that schizophrenia works as a suitable metaphor for the fragmented temporal experience of the postmodern subject. He writes:

…the psyche of the schizophrenic may then be grasped by way of a twofold proposition: first, that personal identity is itself the effect of a certain temporal unification of past and future with one’s present; and, second, that such active temporal unification is itself a function of language, or better still of the sentence, as it moves along its hermeneutic circle through time. If we are unable to unify the past, present, and future of the sentence, then we are similarly unable to unify the past, present, and future of our own biographical experience or psychic life. (Postmodernism 26–27)

Jameson separates his use of schizophrenia-as-metaphor, from schizophrenia-as-clinical-condition. This metaphor should be read, he argues, as “description rather than diagnosis” (Postmodernism 26). Catherine Prendergast argues that Jameson aestheticises schizophrenia; for him, she asserts, schizophrenia is “always/already artistic, always/already literary, always/already metaphorical” (58). The appropriation of schizophrenia as a metaphor for the postmodern “condition” — whether it is used as a positive or a negative model — is problematic when viewed in light of the actual experience of people with the clinical condition, as Sontag argues in relation to tuberculosis and cancer in Illness as Metaphor. “Only in the most limited sense”, she writes, “is any historical event or problem like an illness” (Illness 87). Jameson appears to anticipate such critique by arguing that he is not attempting to pathologise contemporary culture. “[T]here are” he writes, “far more damaging things to be said about our social system than are available through the use of psychological categories” (Postmodernism 26). Prendergast nevertheless critiques the use of schizophrenia as a metaphor in postmodern theory — by Jameson in Postmodernism, and also by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in Anti-Oedipus and A Thousand Plateaus, where schizophrenia is presented as an alternative to the Oedipal model of subjectivity. For Prendergast, the use of schizophrenia as a metaphor for destabilised, postmodern subjectivity relies on a model of clinical schizophrenia that is drawn from a few “exceptional” cases (55). In other words, the postmodern and poststructural model of schizophrenia appropriates a model of the clinical condition that is far from “ordinary”.

Like his use of schizophrenia as a metaphor, Jameson’s use of “we” is also problematic, primarily because it is unclear who is and is not included in this pronoun. Who, exactly, is he suggesting is schizophrenic? As Peter Brooker puts it, “[w]hat does it mean, quite simply, if ‘we’ do not recognise this experience as ‘ours’?” (24). Brooker reminds us that we must be careful to remember that postmodernism represents a particular (American, white, male) experience, rather than a “cultural universal” (24). The credible suggestion that postmodern subjectivity might be a patriarchal — and speculative — model is reflected in indie/alternative Indiewood’s postmodern films, which are almost exclusively focused on white, American, heterosexual male protagonists.
An important part of this model of subjectivity is the rupture in the continuity of time; for the postmodern subject, Jameson argues, the signifiers of experience fail to make a coherent sentence and what is left is discrete and contained “presents in time” (Postmodernism 27). Jameson writes that, “[w]ith the breakdown of the signifying chain…the schizophrenic is reduced to an experience of pure material signifiers, or, in other words, a series of pure and unrelated presents in time” (Postmodernism 27). As Hebdige explains, Jameson’s schizophrenic subject does not exist outside of or without time, but without the structures that make time meaningful. The schizophrenic, he suggests, is seen as:

…disintegrating into a succession of unassimilable instants, condemned through the ubiquity and instantaneousness of commodified images and information to live forever in chronos (this then this then this) without having access to the (centring) sanctuary of kairos (cyclical, mythical, meaningful time) (194).

The loss of connection between past and present is of central thematic concern in Memento and Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind, in which the fragmentation of the narrative conventions of the classical Hollywood cinema intersects with postmodern ideas about history and time. In particular, both films focus on the fate of the subject within the fragmented temporality of the postmodern. In both films, the fragmentation of narrative reflects and constructs the disintegrating personal history of the protagonists. As I will demonstrate, however, these films do not show us resolutely fragmented characters; there are important limits to the films’ support of a model of fragmented, postmodern subjectivity. In the next two sections of this chapter, I will examine the way fragmentation works in both films, both in relation to narrative and the representation of subjectivity. Then, in the final section, I
will explore the limits and their ideological implications, namely, that the broader implication of the failure of the films to represent their protagonists as wholly fragmented is that the Enlightenment model of subjectivity is not as rigorously interrogated as the medium will bear.

**Memento.**

“Guess I’ve told you about my condition.” — Leonard Shelby

Notorious for its experimental narrative structure, *Memento* has virtually replaced *Pulp Fiction* as the most frequently cited example of postmodern narrative in recent popular cinema.¹⁰² *Memento*’s narrative structure is certainly self-conscious in its fragmentation of the classical Hollywood cinema’s focus on causality and coherence — so much so that it has been aligned with the tradition in art cinema of experimenting with narrative time. Richard Armstrong, for example, places *Memento* alongside *Citizen Kane* (Orson Welles, 1941), *Double Indemnity* (Billy Wilder, 1944), *Last Year at Marienbad* (Alain Resnais, 1951), and *Don’t Look Now* (Nicolas Roeg, 1973) (119). He points to Andrew Spicer’s assertion that the film “push[es] [the] generic fiction [film] close to the radical ambiguity associated with European art cinema” (qtd. in Armstrong 122). Like *Citizen Kane* and *Double Indemnity* before it, *Memento* is an example of an art cinema aesthetic seeping into recent Hollywood cinema, which, King reminds us, is one of the defining features of Indiewood (*Indiewood 2*). That indie/alternative Indiewood films such as *Memento* rehearse the narrative and representational strategies used earlier in cinema history provides

¹⁰² See, for example, Rowe and Wells (87), Fulton et al. (57) and Lacey (85).
further evidence for my argument that Indiewood can be productively theorised as a postmodern cinema. My focus in this section, in particular, is on how postmodern representational strategies are mobilised to represent character and subjectivity.

Although *Memento* is structurally complicated, this obscures the simplicity of the story. *Memento* follows vigilante detective Leonard Shelby (Guy Pearce) on a conventional Hollywood quest to avenge the rape and murder of his wife. The major hurdle preventing Leonard from successfully pursuing retribution is his “condition” — he suffers from anterograde amnesia, a rare form of memory loss in which a person loses the capacity to form new memories. In this case, a blow to the head sustained during an altercation with his wife’s killer(s) is the apparent source of Leonard’s amnesia. As Leonard explains to a motel clerk: “I have no short-term memory. I know who I am, I know all about myself. I just…since my injury, I can’t make new memories. Everything…fades”. More precisely, as Jo Alyson Parker suggests, Leonard *does* make (very) short-term memories, but is unable to retain them for longer than a few minutes at a time (242). In this sense, she explains, his capacity for “memory consolidation” is “impaired” (242). This means that, other than his memory of his pre-trauma life as a married insurance fraud investigator — a memory that becomes increasingly questionable as the film develops — Leonard cannot maintain a sense of his post-trauma past as a coherent sequence of events leading up to the present. In other words, he lives in the perpetual present (although this is a present in which the past looms ironically large). As Leonard puts it: “I can’t feel time”. Thus impaired, Leonard must negotiate life as a series of isolated presents as he struggles to wreak vengeance on those responsible for his wife’s murder, an event that he claims is his last permanent memory.
The formal structure of *Memento*’s narrative is rather more complicated. Although it is famous for unfolding in reverse order, *Memento*’s narrative structure is more than chronological storytelling played backwards. Unlike Martin Amis’s 1991 novel *Time’s Arrow*, or the more contemporaneous rape-revenge film *Irreversible* (Gaspar Noé, 2002), both of which move backwards (over the course of a lifetime in the former, and the course of a single night in the latter), *Memento* is made up of two narrative strands that move in different directions. As I will show, this complicated narrative structure fragments linear temporality, and is very closely related to the film’s representation of character and subjectivity as fragmented. In order to investigate this further, I first need to explain how the narrative is structured, and how it can be theorised as fragmented.

*Memento* is made up of two separate narrative strands: one photographed in colour, and one in black and white. The colour strand moves backwards in reverse chronological order. The black-and-white strand moves forward in chronological order but also contains a series of embedded flashbacks. The two strands eventually join, revealing the events of the black and white strand to be chronologically prior to the final scene from the colour strand.\(^{103}\) In the colour strand, we are given an inverted version of classical Hollywood narrative causality; that is, we see effects before their causes. The film begins with what would ordinarily be the climax of the story: where the ostensible hero, Leonard, defeats apparent villain, Teddy (Joe Pantoliano). This is the point that would ordinarily symbolise the restoration of order and stability, the creation of a new equilibrium out of disequilibrium. It is not unusual for Hollywood films to reveal the outcome of the final act at the beginning

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\(^{103}\) For a detailed analysis of *Memento*’s complicated narrative structure, see Ghislotti.
and then “flash back” to the first act. Anna Kornbluh calls this the “standard Hollywood flashback narrative” (131).104 Memento does not conform to this standard because it continues to move backwards without “flashing back” to the beginning. In a foreshadowing of this unusual structure, the first shots of the film, which comprise the title sequence, literally move backwards. Here, a Polaroid photograph of Teddy’s bloody corpse develops in reverse; the image slowly fades to white and is sucked into the body of the camera. Blood drips toward the body, and a bullet leaves the head of the corpse as the corpse rises from death to life. The bullet returns to the gun in Leonard’s hand as Teddy shouts in protest. In the tradition of title sequences, which, Bordwell reminds us, “usually present information in highly self-conscious and omniscient fashion” (Narration 66), this prepares the viewer for the direction of the colour strand of the narrative.

In the black-and-white strand, Leonard narrates the story of Sammy Jankis (Stephen Tobolowsky), a man he claims to have known in his (Leonard’s) pre-amnesiac life as an insurance fraud investigator. Leonard explains that Sammy was also an anterograde amnesiac but was unable adequately to control it, precipitating a series of events culminating in the accidental murder of his diabetic wife with an insulin overdose. Sammy, Leonard asserts, was subsequently institutionalised — a claim that is reinforced by a shot of Sammy in hospital. This strand is split into two substrands: one takes place in what appears to be the diegetic present, and shows

104 This narrational strategy was frequently used in 1940s films noir such as Double Indemnity. It is also particularly prevalent in Indiewood cinema; two prominent examples, which are contemporaneous with Memento, are Fight Club (David Fincher, 1999) and American Beauty (Sam Mendes, 1999). Both films begin with their respective endings (or close to this point) and the narrative “flashes” back to the first act, shifting the focus of the narrative from the “what” to the “how” of the story. In the case of American Beauty this is how Lester Burnham (Kevin Spacey), who posthumously announces his death at the start of the film, will die; in Fight Club it is whether or not the Narrator (Edward Norton), who is shown with a gun in his mouth at the start, will in fact die.
Leonard in his motel room, on the phone. The second substrand is a series of flashbacks depicting aspects of the “Sammy Jankis” story that Leonard is shown recounting in the first substrand. In addition to working as a device to explain how Leonard can remember that he is an anterograde amnesiac, this story functions for Leonard as a lesson in the importance of the maintenance of a logical “system” to successfully manage the absence of “natural” memory-making faculties.105

The alternation of the colour and black-and-white strands throughout the film means that we can read *Memento* as a temporally fragmented narrative. While the film has been described as excessively linear (Nolan qtd. in Parker 246; Lyons 127), I agree with Adrian Gargett’s description of the narrative as “determinedly non-linear” (para. 7). This is because the alternation of the colour and black-and-white scenes emphasises temporal disjunction rather than linearity. It is only when the two strands are removed from their original context — in the service of criticism or interpretation — that the narrative can be viewed as linear. The fragmentation of the narrative into this “mosaic” form (Gargett para. 7) is significant for the representation of Leonard as a fragmented character. This is because coherent, linear narrative based on causality and continuity reinforces the Enlightenment model of subjectivity that I outlined in Chapter One. The fragmentation of classical Hollywood narrative can be read as a challenge to the Enlightenment model; that is,

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105 As Parker notes, Leonard’s ability to remember he suffers from anterograde amnesia can be viewed as a possible flaw in the film’s logic (242). Phil Hutchinson and Rupert Read suggest that this inconsistency is crucial to the film’s twist: namely, that Leonard’s “forgetting” may in fact be selective. “The heart of the film’s self-deconstruction”, they write, “is this, alluded to though not fully explicated by Teddy in his coruscating speech challenging Leonard: how has Leonard mastered his condition? *How can he know, as a matter of intellectual and historical fact, about his own condition, given that he actually does have such a condition?*” (87, emphasis in original). The “Sammy Jankis” story works to minimize this apparent inconsistency until the end of the film, where it forms part of the evidence for Leonard’s unreliability.
by fragmenting narrative, the coherent, autonomous, stable subject is likewise fragmented.

In her 2004 article on *Memento* and the postmodern critique of rationality and order, Rosalind Sibielski relates the fragmentation of *Memento* to the Jamesonian model of schizophrenia. She observes that the temporally fragmented narrative structure creates a series of “presents in time” that can be read as analogous to the model of temporally fragmented schizophrenic experience described by Jameson. In this sense, she suggests, Leonard can be understood as a representation of the fragmented “schizophrenic” postmodern subject who is unable to “organize the ‘heaps of fragments’ of his own past ‘into coherent experience’” (86). For Sibielski, the “crisis” of fragmented postmodern schizophrenia is also “Leonard’s crisis” (86). This “crisis” is, first and foremost, about signification. More specifically, it is about the connection between signifiers. Sibielski points to Leonard’s collection of Polaroid photographs, which he uses as part of his “system” for navigating his environment, as an externalised representation of Leonard’s subjective disconnectedness. The photographs, she suggests, are a series of signifiers that do not link up into a coherent “chain”. She writes: “Leonard’s inability to ‘unify the past, present and future’ of his own ‘biographical experience’ within the film results largely from the breakdown in the chain of signification comprised by his photographs” (87-8). This is not only because of the (postmodern) unreliability of the photographed image as an undisputable record of reality, but because Leonard affixes captions to his photographs that are continually shifting — they are crossed out, rewritten, and revised in relation to his immediate context. Leonard’s photograph of Natalie, for example, is initially inscribed with the caption “do not
trust her”, which he later crosses out and reinscribes with the words “she has also lost someone. She will help you out of pity”. Describing this as “a process of resignification” (93), Sibielski argues that this means that “any transparent or mimetic relationship between the photographs and their referents” is seriously compromised (88).

It is important to note, however, that the relationship between the photographed signifier and that which it refers to or signifies is closer than in other media; as a visual signifier, the possible referents of a photograph are (arguably) narrower than, say, a written signifier (Monaco 176). For example, the photograph of Leonard’s car gives us more specific details than the written word “car”. I would suggest, then, that the breakdown in Memento is not of the links connecting signifier and signified (or photograph and referent), but between signifiers and their significance to the broader context of Leonard’s life. The collection of photographs, then, is disconnected from meaningful signification for Leonard; each image lacks a stable place in his life. Even Leonard’s hand-drawn map, on which a series of intersecting lines visually connect his Polaroid photographs, is only temporarily stable; Leonard removes and reaffectes the Polaroids at will, illustrating the continual process of resignification that marks Leonard’s daily experience. Leonard’s belief in the stability of his photographs and what they signify is, for Sibielski, an illustration of his dedication to the ideology of the Enlightenment project (89), the failure of which, she argues, is a major thematic concern of the film. I would suggest, however, that there are significant aspects of Memento that do not “fail”, and which

For a similar argument regarding Memento’s challenge to Enlightenment ideology that focuses more particularly on nihilism, see G. Christopher Williams.
work to reinforce the ideology that Sibielski argues is destabilised by and in the film. These will be addressed in the fourth section of this chapter.

The lack of meaningful signification in Leonard’s life is also exhibited in the black-and-white strand, particularly in the scenes of Leonard in various motel rooms. These scenes show us *something*, but their significance in the broader context of the film is unclear. In the first black-and-white scene, for example, Leonard “wakes up” in an ordinary, unexceptional motel room. In voice over, he asks:

So where are you? You’re in some motel room. You…you just wake up and you’re in a motel room. There’s the key. It feels like maybe the first time you’ve been there but perhaps you’ve been there for a week, three months; it’s kinda hard to say. I dunno; it’s just an anonymous room.

The motel room, as anonymous space, is a signifier detached from other signifiers. Leonard knows it is a motel room with a bed, bible, and bathroom; in this sense, what it signifies on a basic, visual level, is not unstable. What *is* unstable is the connection of the signifier “motel room” to the rest of his life; for Leonard, the “how” and “why” of the motel room are missing. In this sense, the motel room works as metaphor for Leonard’s experience of time as a series of disconnected “presents in time”.

The motel room’s status as a symbol of Leonard’s fragmented subjectivity can be extended to the anonymity of the film’s setting. Gritty and industrial, *Memento*’s setting is described by D. Brent Laytham as a “nondescript, menacing city” that is “claustrophobic and confusing” (80), and by Rob Content as an “Anytown” whose motels have “drab and anonymous rooms”, and whose streets are lined with “seedy bars and featureless coffeeshops” (41). The setting is a meaningless space, or at least a space that cannot be made sense of except through generic
signifiers: motel room, bar, coffee shop. As William G. Little observes, “there is absolutely nothing memorable about the place. Like much of the contemporary American landscape, it appears to be stripped of any cultural specificity and historical marking” (77). The anonymity of the setting, and our inability as spectators to locate ourselves geographically except in the most generic sense, emphasises the lack of meaningful signification that structures Leonard’s experience.

This anonymity of the landscape is paralleled by the instability of character names in Memento. At the beginning of the film, it is possible to attain a relatively clear understanding of characters’ names, and the photographed bodies to which they are connected: Leonard is Guy Pearce, Teddy is Joe Pantoliano, and Natalie is Carrie-Anne Moss. The links between name and individual subject, however, disintegrate as the narrative progresses. The names of individuals proliferate into multiple variants: Teddy, we learn, is also John Edward Gammel and John G. Moreover, John G. is applied to at least two people in the film: in addition to Teddy, drug dealer Jimmy Grantz is also labelled as John G., and Teddy insinuates that Leonard has encountered (and possibly murdered) many more John G.’s in his search for the killer. Natalie’s name is similarly unstable; in her first appearance we accept her name is Natalie because it is written beneath her photograph. However, when we reach the scene where Leonard inscribes this caption, there is a note of manipulation in Natalie’s voice when she tells him her name. The scene where Natalie deliberately lies to Leonard in order to elicit his assistance in settling a score with Dodd (Callum Keith Rennie) strengthens the possibility that Natalie is lying, among other things,

107 In The Making of Memento, James Mottram observes that the filmmakers deliberately scouted locations for the film that would be unrecognisable. As production designer Patti Podesta explains, “[w]e were looking for a place you could not place. A no-place. A place that is pervasive, everywhere, but you never look at it, for the most part” (qtd. in Mottram Making 154).
about her name. The unstable connection of Natalie’s name to Carrie-Anne Moss is emphasised by the indeterminacy of Leonard’s photograph of Natalie, which is little more than a silhouette framed by a sunlit window. Here, both signifier and signified are ambiguous, as is their relationship.

The least stable name, however, is Leonard’s. There is, first of all, a clear split between the amnesiac “Leonard”, and “Lenny” the insurance fraud investigator. Leonard actively disavows his connection to the pre-amnesiac “Lenny”; “My wife called me Lenny”, he tells Natalie, “I hated it”. Leonard’s name is more radically destabilised, however, by the suggestion that he may be neither Lenny nor Leonard; he may in fact be Sammy Jankis. For most of the film we believe Sammy to be a separate character from Leonard, however, in a single frame insert of Guy Pearce-as-Leonard over an image of Stephen Tobolowsky-as-Sammy in the closing minutes of the film, the two are explicitly connected. This moment encourages us to interpret Leonard and Sammy as the same person, or, at the very least, that Leonard has confused Sammy’s situation with his own. This brings his entire identity into question. In this sense, the tattoo on Leonard’s hand that tells him to “remember Sammy Jankis” may be a reminder to remember his own identity. In this way, we can no longer be sure Leonard is Leonard, Lenny or Sammy. Leonard is like the coverless novel that his wife is shown reading in one of Leonard’s flashbacks. We know that it is a novel but its name cannot be discerned.

Panek describes the trend for revealing photographically discrete characters to be aspects of the same person as a subcategory of the “psychological puzzle film”, prevalent in Indiewood cinema, which “pull[s] the rug out from under the audience” (72). Although Memento can be included in this subset, the possibility that Sammy is
Leonard (and vice versa) is considerably less explicit than it is in the contemporaneous *Fight Club* and *The Machinist* (Brad Anderson, 2004). In these two films, it is unambiguously revealed that Tyler (Brad Pitt) and Ivan (John Sharian) are externalised, visual representations of the “split” subjectivities of the Narrator and Trevor (Christian Bale), respectively. This has implications for the continuity and coherence of the body, which, I will argue in the final section of this chapter, is one of the only (and most significant) things that *Memento* refuses to compromise.

As I have shown in this section, *Memento* certainly emphasises fragmentation and disconnection over continuity and coherence. It is, in this way, unsurprising that scholars like Sibielski have read its fragmented narrative structure as reducing the film to a series of “presents” that mirrors the model of schizophrenic experience described by Jameson as a “suggestive aesthetic model” for postmodern subjectivity (*Postmodernism* 26). There are, however, limits to the film’s ability to represent character in a manner that supports a model of fragmented postmodern subjectivity. Before I explore these limits in more detail, I will compare *Memento* with *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, which also fragments linear narrative as a way of thematising postmodern ideas about memory and subjectivity.

*Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind.*

“Look at it out here. It’s all falling apart.” — Joel Barish

In what is arguably its most recognisable image, the protagonists of *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* lie on the frozen surface of a river. Beside them, a series of cracks radiate out from a central point of impact. The image of fractured ice
symbolises not only the radical break this couple will make from each other, but also indicates, more broadly, how this film is concerned with the postmodern discourse on the fragmentation of time, history and subjectivity. In their focus on memory loss and their complicated narrative structures, *Memento* and *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* are immediately comparable. There is a significant difference, however, in the ways these two films introduce their amnesiac characters that enables them to explore the effects of the postmodern on subjectivity differently: whereas Leonard has, ostensibly, involuntarily been robbed of his ability to make new memories, *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* represents amnesia as a “condition” for which people are willing to pay. In other words, *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* posits a world in which amnesia has become a commodity, or, as Carol Vernallis puts it, “cosmetic surgery for the brain” (293, n.33). Like *Memento*, *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* also fragments the linear narrative structure conventionalised by the classical Hollywood cinema. As a part of this fragmentation, *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* also employs nonrealist representational strategies to interrupt the continuity of time, space, and identity.

Just as *Memento* works in the noir mode, *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* also exploits and destabilises established generic conventions. At its simplest level, the film is a romantic comedy with a science fiction twist. This twist complicates the standard boy meets girl, boy loses girl, boy gets girl three-act
narrative structure to which the film (largely) adheres (Campora 128). The insertion of memory loss into the equation transforms the narrative into something like: boy meets girl, boy loses girl, boy and girl have each other erased from their respective memories, and boy and girl meet again as strangers, setting the cycle in motion again. Briefly summarised, the story follows the relationship of Clementine Kruczynski (Kate Winslet) and Joel Barish (Jim Carrey). After their difficult break-up, Clementine decides to move on from the relationship by having Joel erased from her memory. To do this she engages the services of Lacuna Inc., a clinic that specialises in the removal of unwanted memories from the brains of its customers. Upon learning of Clementine’s actions, Joel retaliates in kind. The majority of the film depicts the gradual erasure of Clementine from Joel’s memory: both “externally”, as the less-than-professional Lacuna technicians attempt to carry out the procedure, and “internally”, by immersing the viewer in Joel’s interior landscape, which deteriorates as his memories of Clementine are located and removed in reverse-chronological order. The further he travels from his most recent and painful memories of Clementine, however, the unconscious Joel realises he no longer wants completely to forget Clementine, and attempts to halt the process from within his coma. A “chase” ensues, as the Lacuna technicians pursue Clementine through the maze of Joel’s memories.

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108 See also Vernallis (279). The science fiction aspect of *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* — the retro-futuristic interplay of metal-and-wires analogue technology with computerised MRI scanners to locate and erase specific memories — has led some reviewers to place the film as part of the tradition of cyberpunk paranoia about the impacts of technology on memory. This is associated in particular with Philip K. Dick and the various cinematic adaptations of his work. See Kermode (54), James (‘I Forgot’ 16), and Shepard (124). The assertion that there is a direct lineage from films like *Blade Runner* to *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* demonstrates that the latter is very much concerned with postmodern subjectivity, even though it is less recognisably cyberpunk than its forebears.
On a broad level, *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* can, like *Memento*, be divided into two strands that move in different directions. The “memory” strand moves through Joel’s memories of Clementine in reverse order, starting with their break-up and moving through to their courtship. The second, “procedure” strand moves forward in chronological order, showing the (barely competent) Lacuna technicians carrying out the procedure on Joel. This can be viewed as a split between the interior and the exterior. Matthew Campora, for example, calls the film’s two strands the “waking strand” and the “internal-subjective strand” (123, emphasis in original). There are some important differences between *Memento* and *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* in the way in which these strands are separated. Whereas *Memento*’s two strands are visually differentiated through the use of colour and black and white, *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*’s two strands are more ambiguously presented. The more subtle visual difference suggested by Jason Sperb is one of lighting. In ‘Internal Sunshine’, Sperb compares the naturalistic lighting of the “procedure” strand with the increasingly present spotlight in the “memory” strand. This separation is not as easy to discern as *Memento*’s more explicit separation of its strands into opposing colour schemes. Moreover, *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* does not prepare its viewers for its unusual narrative structure, as *Memento* does in its title sequence. In fact, the title sequence of *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* does not arrive until well into the film, so there is no conventional introduction to the film at all, let alone any indication of the direction the narrative will follow (while the dissolving titles can be read as a symbolic
reference to the erasure of memory around which the narrative revolves, this is nowhere near as indicative of narrative structure as *Memento*’s opening sequence).109

In line with this lack of conventional framing, the first scenes of *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* actually trick the viewer, that is, they are constructed in such a way that we are encouraged to read them as comprising a linear narrative when in fact they are a series of temporally disjointed scenes taken from both the “procedure” and “memory” strands. As Campora writes, the opening sequence is characterised by “major unmarked temporal gaps in the sequence that do not become evident until later in the film, giving it what can be described as a false linearity” (123). This “false linearity” is emphasised by the insertion of Valentine’s Day as a temporal marker into the text. The multiple references to Valentine’s Day in this opening series of scenes — by Clementine, by Joel’s neighbour (Thomas Jay Ryan), and by Lacuna’s secretary, Mary (Kirsten Dunst) — provides a sense of temporal specificity that encourages us to read the nonlinear sequence of scenes as if it were linear. Close attention to these references, however, reveals that time is out of joint; how, for example, does Joel’s neighbour know about Clementine given that, in the scene immediately preceding his comments about “McRomance”, Joel and Clementine appear to have met for the first time?

The beginning of *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, then, is confusing at best. Vernallis argues, in this way, that “[t]he film’s baffling opening…leaves viewers with little sense of forward motion” (279), and that it can therefore be viewed as nonteleological (280). The only indication in the first seventeen minutes of

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109 There is one moment of reverse motion in *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* — when Joel moves from the floor to the couch, in his penultimate memory of Clementine. This small stylistic flourish is not as symbolically marked as the reverse motion in *Memento*’s opening sequence.
the film that narrative time might be out of chronological order comes in the form of causally unmotivated action. At the end of the first major sequence, for example — where Joel and Clementine meet (for the second time) at Montauk and then travel to the frozen Charles River for a “honeymoon on ice” — a strange moment occurs. Joel, waiting outside Clementine’s apartment building, is approached by a man who asks: “can I help you?” and “what are you doing here?”. In the immediate context of the scene, these questions do not make sense because they are causally unmotivated: we do not know who this man is or why he is asking these questions. Our sense, as spectators, of linear dislocation is mirrored by Joel’s confusion within the diegesis; like Joel, we are left asking “what do you mean?”.

This is followed by another narrative disjunction: the film’s cut to shots of Joel weeping in his car. Here, day has become night and Clementine has inexplicably disappeared. The effect that we see here — a weeping Joel — appears to be disconnected from the preceding cause: Joel’s romantic success with Clementine. In both cases, we do not know the context for the actions: we do not yet know that the stranger who confronts Joel is Patrick (Elijah Wood), a Lacuna technician who has appropriated mementos from Joel’s procedure in an attempt to woo Clementine. Similarly, we are not aware that, in the “linear” version of the story, Joel’s tears arrive before the opening scenes in Montauk, namely, as Joel drives home to prepare for his procedure. In this sense, *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* can be viewed as more radically fragmented than *Memento*, because it does not establish a clear structural pattern to orient its readers in the way that *Memento* does. It is only later in the film that we can begin to discern the separation of the chronological “procedure” strand and the reverse-chronological “memory” strand. Moreover, once we are used
to this separation, the strands begin to disintegrate. When Joel begins to reject the procedure and flees with Clementine to repressed childhood memories, the reverse-chronological strand leaves its linear groove and begins to jump all over Joel’s memories in a chaotic series of temporal shifts. This shift, Carol Vernallis argues, is “profoundly anti-narrative” (295), or, at least, “opposed” to the kinds of narratives that we are used to seeing in Hollywood cinema.

In addition to disrupting temporal continuity, spatial continuity is also fragmented in *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*. This fragmentation is, paradoxically, achieved by long takes that create what I want to call “impossible coherence”, that is, coherence that does not conform to the rules of realist representation. This impossible coherence is expressed in two ways: the movement of characters within particular scenes, and the transitions between scenes. An example of intra-scenic impossible coherence can be seen in the scene that depicts Joel and Clementine’s final conflict before breaking up. Here, Clementine makes a series of impossible movements: Joel follows Clementine into the bathroom, only to hear and then see her in the kitchen and then at the front door, which she subsequently slams.\(^{110}\) The take is long, emphasising the nonrealist representation of spatiotemporal continuity. This impossible coherence is also evident in the next scene, where Joel follows Clementine onto the street. Again, Clementine appears to make impossible movements. Another long take draws attention to this fragmentation of continuity; the camera pans from right to left and back again as Clementine appears first on the left of frame, then on the right. This is emphasised by

\(^{110}\) It is worth noting that this effect is not the product of digital enhancement. In the DVD commentary, Gondry explains that this illusion was achieved via the combination of a body double and a series of secret doorways through which Winslet could move.
the location of Joel’s car, which also appears to shift from the right to the left of the frame, and then back to the right. Like Joel, who spins in circles trying to locate Clementine, our sense of spatial coherence is disrupted by this representational strategy.

The second way that this impossible coherence manifests is in the linking of scenes that are, in realist terms, geographically separate. For example, when Joel recounts a snub by the amnesiac Clementine to friends Carrie and Rob, a long take shows Joel walking from his memory of the encounter in a bookshop and straight into Carrie and Rob’s dining room. Later, Joel looks up from the set of a Chinese restaurant to see the same bookshop as if it were in the next room. In yet another moment of impossible coherence, the frozen Charles River transitions to Grand Central Station and back again as if these places shared the same geographical (and/or psychic) space. Although there is a cut separating the two places here, the editing nevertheless emphasises continuity: Joel and Clementine lie in the same positions in both locations, and the cuts foreground the spatial contiguity of the frozen river and the floor of the train station. In comparison to Memento, then, which breaks down the connections between signifiers, Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind emphasises the continuity of signifiers that would not conventionally be connected. Both strategies work to emphasise fragmentation but Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind appears to go further than Memento in dismantling the constituting conventions of continuity editing and cinematic realism, revealing the fundamental discontinuity underlying continuity editing.

Indeed, in addition to the foregrounding of impossible coherence, the contents of the frame also begin to break down in Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind.
Mind. This is signalled in the title sequence, where the titles dissolve, and is repeated throughout the “memory” strand. Here, food disappears from Joel’s hands, passengers disappear from the train station, fence posts are gradually “erased” from the image, and the covers of books in the bookshop fade to white like the “undeveloping” Polaroid photograph in Memento. This breaking down of the photographed world is more aggressively emphasised when a car inexplicably falls from the sky, and, at the end of the film, where the beach house at Montauk crumbles around Joel and Clementine.

Sound is also subject to this fragmentation; it is often distorted, muffled, fading, or garbled. Vernallis writes of sound in Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind that:

Words will pop out of the sound texture or move towards inaudibility, rising and falling rapidly. Voices are heavily processed and distorted. We hear an unusually volatile mix of live dialogue, recorded at filming, and looped dialogue, recorded later in the sound studio. These are often spliced together within the same sentence. (288)

Additionally, there are moments when the match between voice and image is broken. When Joel and Clem fight at the flea market, for example, the image of Clementine talking does not exactly match the audio. Fragmentation is further underlined within the dialogue. For example, when Joel and Clementine visit the river for a “honeymoon on ice” at the “start” of the film, Joel asks “what if it breaks?” He later declares to Clementine that “it’s all falling apart”. Clementine also tells Patrick that she feels like she’s “disappearing”, and that her “skin’s coming off”, which signals a

\[111\] Vernallis also observes that, at other moments in the film, diegetically unmotivated sounds encroach into the diegesis: her example is at the start of the film, where “a distant voice that resembles Clem’s calls ‘David’” (287).
breakdown at the level of the body that is marked in the film by her frequently changing hair colours. This reference to somatic disintegration — disappearing, skin coming off — is not fully supported by the photographic representation of the body in *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*. This, I will argue in the next section, is an indication of the limits, in this and other indie/alternative Indiewood films, to the representation of character in a manner that supports a postmodern model of fragmented subjectivity.

The disintegration of spatiotemporal continuity in *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* might emerge out of the postmodern aesthetic associated with MTV, as theorised by E. Ann Kaplan. Vernallis argues, for example, that *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* can be understood as music video.\(^{112}\) For Vernallis, the narrative is “processual” rather than teleological (280). The story orbits around a series of thirty motifs, many more than the ordinary narrative film, which, Vernallis argues, contains between five and seven (280).\(^{113}\) She writes that *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* has “a formal structure based on cycles and nested patterns (plot points, moments of acceleration and deceleration, inset music video sections, loops, repetitions, strings of motifs) and little narrative drive” (285). The narrative, Vernallis continues, can be understood as a series of thematic strands that “function as if they were woven into a music video: material residing within each theme exists apart from material in other themes” (292). What is significant about Vernallis’s reading of *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* as a nonteleological, motif-based music video is her suggestion that this expresses how subjects experience the

\(^{112}\) In fact, Vernallis suggests more broadly that postclassical cinema — what Bordwell describes as “intensified continuity” — can be productively theorised as the introduction of music video aesthetics into narrative cinema (277). This, of course, is another way of theorising the emergence of a postmodern aesthetic in postclassical Hollywood.

\(^{113}\) For a detailed list of motifs see Vernallis (280, n.11).
contemporary world. The “latticework” structure, she suggests, “tell[s] a truth about how we experience people and ordinary life in a late-modern cultural context” (279). While I would question whether this experience is “true” — I would suggest that the idea of a true experience of the postmodern is a paradox — I do think that it is reasonable to speculate that it speaks to the experience of the subject situated in a postmodern context that is constructed as temporally disjointed. This is a paradigm in which spatiotemporal continuity and coherence, and the classical paradigm with which this is imbricated, may simply be irrelevant. What is relevant is the music video, or “video clip” as a reflection of and contributor to postmodern synchronic temporality.

In Memento, there is a systematic fragmentation of form, and the amnesiac is very clearly represented as existing in synchronic temporality. In Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind the fragmentation of narrative is less systematic — in fact, as Vernallis has shown, narrative is arguably secondary to its primarily aesthetic concerns. This privileging of music video aesthetics can also be read as disrupting the continuity of the classical narrative structure, and, by extension, subjectivity. However, there is a significant limit to the fragmentation of spatiotemporal continuity in both films, namely, the continuity of the photographed body. It is to this limit that I now want to turn.

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114 The irrelevance of classical paradigms extends to other Indiewood filmmakers. As Vernallis observes, David Fincher is not interested in the conventions of classical narrative cinema; he “never learned traditional filmmaking”, she writes, “nor does he want to” (278). Charlie Kaufman’s earlier film, Adaptation, is explicitly concerned with the struggle to find an alternative to the classical Hollywood cinema, a struggle that appears imperative for the filmmakers associated with indie/alternative Indiewood. Adaptation will be addressed in more detail in Chapter Four.
The Limits of Fragmentation.

In this chapter I have examined the postmodern representational strategies mobilised in *Memento* and *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*. Both films, I have shown, engage with the discourses surrounding the effects of postmodernism on temporal continuity, and, concomitantly, the model of subjectivity supported by the concept of history as a continuum of past, present, and future. Indeed, Leonard and Joel, as amnesiac subjects who literally cannot remember the past, can be read as representations of postmodern subjects who, in Jameson’s words, have “forgotten how to think historically” (*Postmodernism* ix). In line with this apparent loss of a linear, diachronic conception of time and history, both films foreground fragmentation — of temporal continuity in *Memento*, and spatiotemporal continuity in *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*. I am interested, however, in the extent to which this fragmentation extends to the representation of characters’ bodies. As I will argue in this section, the coherence of the body is, to a certain extent, destabilised by the ways in which the body is photographed in both films. In both *Memento* and *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, however, this fragmentation of character is underpinned by the continuity of the actor’s body. I will explore this limit in this section, which will build on my work, in Chapter Two, on the limits to the representation of character as depthless. I intend, here, to further illuminate the boundaries of indie/alternative Indiewood cinema’s capacity to represent its characters in a manner that supports a postmodern model of subjectivity.

In *Memento*, Leonard is shot in a way that fragments his body. The film achieves this by privileging the close-up, and the extreme close-up. Rarely does the camera pull back further than a medium shot to show us Leonard’s entire body.
Instead, we are show Leonard in a series of close shots, mainly of his face and hands, but also of other body parts, particularly those on which he has tattooed his notes and reminders. This means that our access, as viewers, to Leonard’s body is limited; we are shown pieces from which to construct a picture of the whole. This mirrors the narrative structure, where the temporally disjointed scenes are like puzzle pieces from which we are encouraged to construct a larger story. In this sense, the privileging of close shots could be said to support the representation of Leonard as a fragmented postmodern subject. The only problem here is that all the parts of Leonard’s body that are shown in these extreme close, close and medium shots belong to one particular body: that of actor Guy Pearce. At the same time, then, as it restricts our access to a complete, coherent photograph of the body, the camera’s almost obsessive focus on Pearce’s face also reminds us that we are looking at Guy Pearce. This is consistent through both strands of the narrative; Guy Pearce is both “Lenny” and “Leonard”. The fact that Leonard consistently looks like Guy Pearce is important; it gives spectators something to hold onto, a central, somatically stable character around which the fragmented narrative revolves.

*Memento* does, however, flirt with the destabilisation of Guy Pearce’s somatic stability. The suggestion that Leonard and Sammy may in fact be the same person does suggest that we could also read Stephen Tobolowsky as an embodied representation of Leonard — a possibility that potentially renders Leonard radically fragmented over two discrete bodies. I would argue, however, that the fact that this suggestion is made at the end of the film means that it only retrospectively destabilises Leonard’s bodily coherence. In this way, it is not as disorienting as, say, having Pearce play Leonard in the colour strand and Tobolowsky play Leonard in the
black-and-white strand. For the majority of *Memento*’s duration, then, Guy Pearce’s body anchors Leonard’s mental fragmentation. The significance of the body as a way for us to access continuity and coherence amid fragmentation is mirrored within the film. Here, Leonard uses his body as a way of recuperating a sense of continuity; he tattoos what he perceives to be the undisputed “facts” on his body, a process that he describes as “a more permanent way of keeping a note”. The implication here is that the body is a “permanent” canvas on which to record information.

*Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* also plays with the coherence of the body. This is particularly evident in the “memory” strand, where the disruptions to spatiotemporal continuity are extended to the representation of the body. Faces become blurred or are distorted; bodies disappear from the image; and shots are at times constructed to create the illusion that there are two photographically identical bodies in the same scene. This latter effect is reserved, primarily, for Joel, who is shown at several key moments watching himself inside his own memories. These sequences are similar to those in *Being John Malkovich*, when Malkovich enters his own portal and finds it full of hundreds of photographically identical versions of “Malkovich”. The scale of the body in relation to its surroundings is also subject to the same nonrealist representational strategies in *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*. For example, when Joel hides from Clementine in his childhood memories, he is shrunk, in his adult form, to the size of a child. Like *Memento*, however, the photographed body of the protagonists always resemble Jim Carrey and Kate Winslet, even if the proportions of their bodies are subject to change, or there are multiple versions of Carrey and Winslet inside the same frame. Likewise, at the one point at which Joel and Clementine are not embodied by Jim Carrey and Kate
Winslet — when they become children inside Joel’s repressed memory of animal cruelty — continuity is still emphasised. Both Ryan Whitney-as-Joel and Lola Daehler-as-Clementine wear the same clothing as Carrey and Winslet, and the images of the children are overdubbed with Carrey and Winslet’s voices. It is significant, finally, that Joel’s face is never distorted or blurred, and he never disappears suddenly from the image; even as his memories disintegrate around him, his body does not fall apart.  

It would appear that Memento and Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind are able to fragment the personal histories of their characters but are not prepared to disturb the continuity of the body. It is my argument that what we are seeing in the continuity and coherence afforded by the actor’s body in these films is the extent to which indie/alternative Indiewood, as a commercial cinema, is prepared to go with the fragmentation of its characters. This, in turn, demonstrates the limits of indie/alternative Indiewood cinema’s capacity to support a postmodern model of subjectivity.

Indeed, the fragmented narratives in both films are ultimately about invoking a particular kind of spectatorial pleasure, located in the act of reorganising fragments into a coherent whole. This is no different to the sense-making processes that occur with every act of spectatorship; it is, rather, a difference in the degree of intellectual engagement the film asks of us. As Karen Renner writes, Memento “requires more concentration from viewers than the typical Hollywood movie” (107). Murray Smith

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115 It could be argued, however, that the casting of Jim Carrey as Joel in Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind is relatively more destabilising than having Guy Pearce as Leonard in Memento. Carrey’s career as a physical comedian in films like The Mask (Chuck Russell, 1994) and Liar Liar (Tom Shadyac, 1997) means that, while he embodies the role of Joel for the entire film, there is always the risk that this body will contort into less stable configurations than one would expect, comparatively, from Pearce’s more conventionally masculine “hard body”.

138
calls this “‘architectural’ pleasure” (‘Parallel’ 156), which, he writes, is “pleasure derived from the way that the story is being told to us” (‘Parallel’ 156). Architectural pleasure is beneficial from a commercial perspective simply because it encourages multiple viewings. As Chris Darke suggests, “the real pleasure of Memento lies in its openness to re-viewing and hence to interpretation” (43). Indeed, Renner uses Memento to theorise the relationship between repeat viewings and affect; Memento, she argues, provides “a model for the ways that films may over time condition viewers into having emotional reactions that become increasingly powerful over time” (106). Although the question of spectator cognition and affect is peripheral to this thesis, Renner’s choice of Memento to theorise repeat viewings supports the contention that Memento is a film that people will watch multiple times. In fact, director Christopher Nolan actively encourages multiple viewings of Memento; he claims that “the answers are all there for the attentive viewer, but the terms of the storytelling prevent me from being able to give the audience absolute confirmation” (qtd. in Mottram Making 26). Here, Nolan presents a challenge to the viewer, and hints at the possibility of satisfying the teleological impulse to understand the film.

Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind is also a film that appears to be constructed to encourage multiple viewings. For Vernallis, this is because of the lack of clearly articulated closure in the film. “The film’s enigmatic ending”, Vernallis writes, “and [its] multiple, incommensurable perspectives…nudge the viewer to watch the video again” (296). Vernallis notes that she has “spoken to a good number of people who report loving the film yet needing to watch it again” (297–98). Charlie Kaufman supports this in the DVD commentary, where he observes that the people who “love” the film have watched it multiple times. Indeed, this comment speaks
directly to those who “love” or are at least interested enough in the film to watch it again with the filmmakers’ comments. Indeed, *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* is embedded with visual and aural markers that work as “clues” to solving the film’s complex narrative. On a first viewing, these markers are not noticeable, but become pleasurable on second and subsequent viewings. These markers are particularly evident in the film’s temporally disjointed opening scenes where the dots on Joel’s face, the muffled buzzing sound that signifies the erasure of a memory, and the absence of entries in Joel’s diary all work as pleasing attractions for the repeat viewer.

Moreover, neither film, it seems, is prepared to represent the postmodern waning of historical depth, or the shift from diachronic to the synchronic, as a positive. Indeed, both *Memento* and *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* depict amnesia as unambiguously negative. If we accept that the amnesiac represents the postmodern “schizophrenic” subject, then this model of subjectivity is, in *Memento* and *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, far from the joy or euphoria to which Jameson attributes it (*Postmodernism* 29). In *Memento*, Leonard’s inability to link up the signifiers of his life into a coherent sentence is represented as leading to serious ethical problems. Put simply, amnesia turns Leonard into a serial killer who is systematically exterminating Los Angeles’s population of John G.’s. In a crucial scene at the end of the film, Teddy suggests that Leonard has already killed a number of men that Leonard believed, erroneously or otherwise, to be his wife’s “killer”. Of course, Teddy is, like everyone in *Memento*, unreliable, and as such we cannot be sure his story is accurate, however, we are shown Leonard kill at least two men in the film — Jimmy Grantz and, later, Teddy — which suggests there is some truth to
Teddy’s claims. Leonard is represented as either a victim exploited by Teddy to rid Los Angeles of its drug dealers (and profit financially from this), or as a calculating serial killer using his “condition” as an excuse for his actions. Regardless of whether we view Leonard as unwilling victim or knowing perpetrator, he is still a killer, and the implication is that the absence of memory compromises ethical interaction. In other words, the model of subjectivity that Leonard, as amnesiac, represents, is not a position endorsed by *Memento*.

*Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* also presents memory loss as debilitating. In this sense, the title of *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* can be read as ironic, because the film warns against the technology it imagines rather than promoting the benefits of voluntary mental expurgation. The shots of Joel wandering the snow-swept beach immediately after the procedure are not only symbolic of Joel’s blank mind (Sperb ‘Internal Sunshine’), they also illustrate the figurative lack of sunshine in Joel’s mind. Moreover, Joel’s “random” thoughts that we see him writing in a journal, but are also communicated in voice-over, are self-deprecating, and melancholic. “Today is a holiday invented by greeting card companies to make people feel miserable”, he muses, “I guess I just woke up in a funk this morning”. Overall, the amnesiac Joel does not appear to be a happy person. Likewise, Clementine is represented, post-erasure, as confused and emotionally distressed. “I’m lost”, she declares,

I’m scared, I feel like I’m disappearing. My skin’s coming off. I’m getting old. Nothing makes any sense to me. Nothing makes any sense. Nothing makes any sense.
This lack of “sense”, precipitated by the absence of temporal continuity, is not represented as positive or productive.

The coding of memory loss as negative in *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* is most emphatically displayed, however, in the subplot involving Mary and Dr Mierzwiak (Tom Wilkinson). Mary is initially an advocate of Lacuna Inc; she expresses reverence for Mierzwiak’s ability to “make [people’s ‘sadness and phobias’] all go away”, and supports this by quoting Nietzsche: “blessed are the forgetful, for they get the better even of their blunders”. When she discovers, however, that she has had her memories of an affair with Mierzwiak erased, Mary revises her attitude. In a radical expression of her disgust, she returns all the erasure documents — which, judging from the shots of files and cassettes in her car boot, appear to include detailed procedure reports and taped reminiscences — to Lacuna’s patients so they can start reconstructing their personal histories.

In both films, then, the continuity afforded by the actor’s body is accompanied by the representation of amnesia — that is, of temporally fragmented subjectivity — as either devastating (*Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*) or entirely sinister (*Memento*). In this sense, both *Memento* and *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* can be seen as valorising a model of subjectivity that is much closer to the Enlightenment than it is to the postmodern. In fact, in some of the discourse on *Memento* there appears to be a similar bias. Parker, for example, argues that the film “attempts to provide the audience with an experience analogous to Leonard’s and thus to heighten our understanding of how memory makes us human” (240–41). Lack of memory, then, is viewed as compromising the “human”. This is problematic
because the model of memory Parker works with appears to ignore Leonard’s embodiment, and hence privileges a Cartesian view of subjectivity.

The intersection, in *Memento* and *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, of postmodern representational strategies with Enlightenment ideology provides more evidence of the limits to the capacity of indie/alternative Indiewood to exceed the representational strategies that support the Enlightenment model of subjectivity. In the end, indie/alternative Indiewood films like *Memento* and *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* do not entirely fragment their characters because Indiewood films are underpinned by commercial concerns. I will expand on this argument in my next chapter, where I examine two Indiewood films in which the relationship between reality and representation is a central thematic concern: *Adaptation* and *American Splendor*. 
Chapter Four

Simulation in *American Splendor* and *Adaptation*

In this study of the representation of character and subjectivity in some indie/alternative Indiewood films, I have thus far examined the mobilisation of representational strategies that render character depthless and fragmented. I have concluded, moreover, that these films are limited in their capacity to support a postmodern model of subjectivity. I turn now to the crisis in representation.

Indie/alternative Indiewood films are situated in a context in which the proliferation of images, a proliferation to which cinema undoubtedly contributes, is viewed as having affected reality. This has been paralleled by the critique, in postmodern and poststructural theory, of the structures underpinning representation. Like the emphasis on fragmentation in postmodern discourse, the crisis in representation affects subjectivity, particularly the Enlightenment model of subjectivity, which relies on a stable separation of reality and representation.

In this chapter, I examine two indie/alternative Indiewood films that engage with this problematic: *American Splendor* and *Adaptation*. Both films demonstrate a concern with what happens to authenticity, autonomy and individuality after the difference between reality and representation has purportedly disappeared. Like the other indie/alternative Indiewood films that I have discussed in this thesis, then, they also mobilise postmodern representational strategies to show character. *American Splendor* muddles the separation of real and represented subjectivity in its self-reflexive depiction of the life of “real” American underground comic-book writer,
Harvey Pekar. The film is a generic hybrid that blends the (already hybrid) biopic with documentary. In this film, the insertion of real and fictional representations of Harvey into the same diegetic space complicates the authenticity of the real Harvey. It can therefore be interpreted as working directly with the concept of simulation as theorised by Baudrillard. Similarly, *Adaptation* is a fictionalisation of “real” screenwriter Charlie Kaufman’s struggle to adapt a real nonfiction novel — Susan Orlean’s *The Orchid Thief* — into a feature film. Here, Kaufman inscribes a fictionalised version of his self and a fictional identical twin into the film. Through these twin protagonists, *Adaptation* engages with the status of individuality and authorship in a postmodern context. It questions the position of the subject in relationship to reality, particularly the position of the subject as an authentic point outside of, or prior to, the text.

I have been arguing, throughout this thesis, that indie/alternative Indiewood films are limited in their capacity to support a postmodern model of subjectivity. These limits are not as clearly marked in *American Splendor* and *Adaptation* as they are in *American Psycho, Being John Malkovich, Memento* and *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*. I would suggest, in fact, that *American Splendor* and *Adaptation* demonstrate a relatively successful representation of character as simulacral. However, the capacity of these films to support a postmodern model of subjectivity remains limited. These limits are instantiated differently in *American Splendor* and *Adaptation*. While *American Splendor* utilises strategies which foreground the unavailability of authenticity or originality, there is, within the film, a residual

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116 Although the postmodern dissolution of the separation between reality and representation is the focus of this chapter, I use the word “real” to refer to the Harvey Pekar whose existence (at least) precedes the release of the film.

117 As with Harvey Pekar, I use “real” in this chapter to distinguish the extra-diegetic Charlie Kaufman, who does not appear in the film, from the fictional character played by Nicolas Cage.
support of a model of subjectivity that is founded on authenticity and originality. *Adaptation*, on the other hand, is more successful in its representation of character as simulacral, and, by extension, in its support of a postmodern model of subjectivity. This makes *Adaptation* the least limited of the indie/alternative Indiewood films I have discussed in this thesis. However, the notions of authenticity and originality still re-emerge in relation to this film. As I will show, the popular and academic discourse on *Adaptation* reinstalls the model of subjectivity that is rejected in the film. I begin this chapter by exploring the theoretical discourse around reality, representation and the postmodern. I then address each film and how it deals with the reality/representation nexus, and the apparent collapse of the difference between the two. In the final section, I will discuss the different ways in which these films support a model of the subject as autonomous and authentic.

**Representation, Simulation, Subjectivity.**

The blurring of the line separating fiction and nonfiction in *American Splendor* and *Adaptation* can be seen to respond to, and contribute to perpetuating, the postmodern view that representation is in crisis.\(^\text{118}\) In their 2003 introduction to the special issue of *Semiotica* that examines this purported crisis, Winifred Nöth and Christina Ljungberg observe that it is one in which “signs have lost their power to represent anything” (3). They continue:

\(^{118}\) Although the discourse on this crisis at times appears to suggest that representation and reality might once have been stable concepts, it is important to acknowledge that their relationship has never been secure. The postmodern crisis should be viewed as a more recent development in the history of philosophical inquiry into representation, which can be traced back to Plato’s critique of the simulacrum.
Words become deprived of their referents, images are no longer anchored in reality, the media become more and more self-referential, and the result is a world of virtual or hyperrealities. Texts begin to lose their structural autonomy and ramify in a network of hypertextualities. (3)

This description is typical of postmodern discourse, which is saturated with references to this crisis. As early as 1989, Linda Hutcheon remarked that the idea that representation had “moved into a state of crisis” was a “truism” of postmodern discourse (29). The postmodern, then, is not only characterised by depthlessness and fragmentation, but also by the destabilisation of conventional frameworks for understanding the relationship between reality and our cultural representations of it, frameworks in which reality has priority over representation.

This crisis can be viewed as the product of the intersection of the structural and poststructural critique of linguistic representation and the parallel technological developments in image reproduction and dissemination. The combination of these phenomena is visible in Baudrillard’s work, where the crisis in representation reaches its apogee. Baudrillard’s work is a controversial but extraordinarily influential example of postmodern theory. As Kellner observes, Baudrillard’s “problematic exhibits a taking to the extreme of certain poststructuralist positions about language, reference and the absence of ‘the real’” (From Marxism 90). A complex combination of and progression through sociology, Marxism, post-Marxism, semiotics, and poststructuralism, Baudrillard’s work has been described as an avant-garde challenge to the very idea of theory (Kellner ‘Fin-De-Millennium’
Baudrillard’s biggest contribution to the crisis in representation can be found in his work on the simulacrum. For Baudrillard, late twentieth-century capitalist society is characterised by radical semiurgy, which Kellner defines as “the production and proliferation of signs” (‘Semiurgy’ 127). Influenced by Walter Benjamin and Marshall McLuhan, Baudrillard sees this production and circulation of images as leading to a new phase in the relationship of the image with reality.

In ‘The Precession of Simulacra’ and ‘The Orders of Simulacra’, which were published together in English translation in 1983, Baudrillard deals extensively with the concept of simulation. In the former essay, Baudrillard outlines what he calls “the successive phases of the image” (*Simulations* 11). These are:

— it is the reflection of a basic reality
— it masks and perverts a basic reality
— it masks the *absence* of a basic reality
— it bears no relation to reality whatever: it is its own pure simulacrum. (*Simulations* 11, emphasis in original)

Baudrillard is mostly concerned with the latter three phases. This is evident in ‘The Orders of Simulacra’, where he establishes an historical trajectory from the premodern to the modern, to the postmodern. To these he aligns “[t]hree orders of appearance”: counterfeit, production and simulation (*Simulations* 83). In the first order, the simulacrum imitates reality or nature; Baudrillard’s principal example of this “order” is Stucco (*Simulations* 87–88). This is an order of appearance that relies on the idea of a reality/nature/presence beneath representation. In the second order,

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119 Kellner suggests that Baudrillard’s work “break[s] down the usual academic boundaries and transgress[es] the limits of academic discourse, engaging in a different kind of textual practice and play” (*From Marxism* 94). For this reason, Baudrillard’s detractors have dismissed him as a writer of science fiction that should not be taken seriously as critical theory. However, in light of the interest in Baudrillard that peaked in the late 1980s and early 1990s, Chris Rojek and Bryan S. Turner argue that Baudrillard’s strategic rejection of disciplinary parameters and stylistic conventions is important because it illuminates the limits these conventions place on the way in which the world is theorised (xvi).
which is marked by the industrial revolution and the arrival of mass (re)production, the simulacrum begins to efface reality. Here, the idea of an original no longer matters. Baudrillard writes that “[t]he problem of [the simulacra’s] uniqueness, or their origin, is no longer a matter of concern; their origin is technique, and the only sense they possess is in the dimension of the industrial simulacrum” (*Simulations* 96). The final order is that of simulation. This order is of the postmodern. Here, Baudrillard tells us, the simulacrum is no longer a copy of reality *it is reality*. For Baudrillard, the postmodern is governed by “the code” (*Simulations* 104), and is an era in which the simulacrum precedes reality: “[s]imulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being or a substance. It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal” (*Simulations* 2).

What can be observed in Baudrillard’s schema is a gradual decline in the faithfulness of the image as a representation of reality to the point where there is no longer a reality to represent because the image has replaced it. Simulation is a both/and Moebius strip (Kellner *From Marxism* 83) in which reality and representation merge seamlessly into each other. This is not about the fragmentation of the difference between reality and copy, but about the *implosion* of this difference, of the difference between reality and copy, but about the *implosion* of this difference,

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120 This extension of Plato’s ideas is based on the question of whether there is anything behind the simulacrum. As Carl Plantinga puts it, theorists like Baudrillard move radically beyond Plato’s insistence that “images [are] deceptive appearances that reveal nothing and produce no knowledge”, to “denying the existence of any actuality or reality that may be revealed” (307). In so doing, Baudrillard makes a similar move to Deleuze. Both philosophers work with a concept of the simulacrum as representation without original. The major difference is that Baudrillard appears to chart an historical trajectory of the image over time; the image goes through “phases”, from being a reflection of reality to distorting reality, to concealing the absence of reality, to finally becoming that reality. In contrast, Deleuze posits that the simulacrum is all there has ever been. Critiquing Plato’s idea that there is “a distinction between ‘the thing itself’ and the simulacra” (66), in *Difference and Repetition* Deleuze writes that “[t]hings are simulacra themselves, simulacra are the superior forms, and the difficulty facing everything is to become its own simulacrum, to attain the status of a sign in the coherence of eternal return” (67). In ‘Realer Than Real’, Brian Massumi argues that this is because Deleuze’s goal is to dispose of representation altogether, whereas Baudrillard is nostalgic for the model of representation he sees as having disappeared. I would suggest that it also illuminates the differences between poststructuralism and postmodern theory that I outlined in Chapter One.
or the collapse of the binary into itself. As Baudrillard explains, “[t]his is the ideal form of simulation: collapse of poles, orbital circulation of models (this is also the matrix of every implosive process)” (Silent Majorities 21). This “orbital circulation” of copies without origin can also be understood as a mise-en-abyme. Kellner writes:

As simulations proliferate, they come to refer only to themselves: a carnival of mirrors reflecting images projected from other mirrors onto the omnipresent television screen and the screen of consciousness, which in turn refers the image to its previous storehouse of images also produced by simulatory mirrors. (‘Fin-De-Millennium’ 10)

As I have already indicated, these ideas, and their political implications, are controversial and have been subject to worthwhile criticism. Yet Kellner, one of Baudrillard’s most astute commentators, argues that Baudrillard’s theory of simulation can be understood as an extreme manifestation of a more widely — yet not entirely — accepted poststructuralist position, which emphasises textuality and intertextuality. Kellner compares Baudrillard’s “strong simulacrist” position that “there is nothing outside the simulacrum” with that of Richard Rorty’s “strong textualist”, for whom there is nothing outside the text (‘Semiurgy’ 127). He writes:

Th[e] Baudrillardian universe of simulacra without referents can be seen as an effect of the post-structuralist critique of meaning and reference taken to an extreme limit where the effluence of simulacra replaces the play of textuality or discourses in a universe with no stable structures or finalities in which to anchor theory or politics. (‘Semiurgy’ 131)

There are important differences between Baudrillard’s “simulacrist” position and that of the poststructuralist “textualists” — particularly in relation to politics and agency. In both cases, however, the implosion of the separation of reality and representation affects the theoretical models which require the stability of this binary. This has
significant implications for subjectivity; when the subject becomes an effect of representation not a producer of it, autonomy, authenticity and individuality are compromised. As Natoli explains:

The postmodernist knocks the self out of the control booth by suggesting that we are framed within frames that we ourselves have constructed and out of these frames do we construct the reality that constructs us. (68, emphasis in original)

For Jameson, the disappearance of the autonomous, authentic, individual subject affects (and is affected by) cultural production. He theorises this most forcefully in an early essay on the postmodern, in which he compares modernist and postmodernist literary style. He suggests that the work of modernist writers is characterised by its unique style; his examples are William Faulkner, D.H. Lawrence, Wallace Stevens, Martin Heidegger and Jean-Paul Sartre (‘Consumer Society’ 4). This uniqueness, or “modernist aesthetic”, he continues:

…is in some way organically linked to the conception of a unique self and private identity, a unique personality and individuality, which can be expected to generate its own unique vision of the world and to forge its own unique, unmistakable style. (‘Consumer Society’ 6)

The idea of individual literary style found its analogue in film studies in the concept of the auteur, which was championed in the 1950s and 1960s by the Cahiers du Cinema critics. The contentious and well-debated notion that the director is the main creative agent behind a film and the source of its unique style is, like the idea of
distinctive literary voice that Jameson attributes to modernist writers, underpinned by a concept of the subject as an autonomous, individual that is anterior to the text.\footnote{121}{It is worth noting that auteurist scholarship emerged from France at the same time that poststructuralist theorists from the same country were declaring the symbolic death of the model of subjectivity that underpins the notion of the auteur. Although the figure of the auteur has been subject to much debate, and would appear at odds with the postmodern model of subjectivity, it has endured in both popular and academic discourse on film. The paradoxical notion of the postmodern auteur is relevant to my reading of Adaptation, which I will examine in the third and fourth sections of this chapter.}

For Jameson, the death of this model of subjectivity renders the notion of individual, unique style obsolete. Postmodern style, he argues, can only reproduce or quote other styles. For Jameson, it is not only that modernism reached a point of exhaustion at which there was no longer any new or unique style to discover (an idea which is common in popular discourse on postmodernism) (‘Consumer Society’ 7). Rather, in the postmodern there is no longer a space outside style from which to forge a new one. This leaves the writer no option but to reproduce already existing styles. This reproduction, however, is not parody, but pastiche. For Jameson, parody requires the idea of a linguistic normality that is apparently absent in the postmodern, whereas pastiche is “the wearing of a stylistic mask” that is neutral or blank (‘Consumer Society’ 5). The postmodern writer is always already a textual effect, and therefore cannot access a point outside of representation from which to make an original or unique artistic gesture. As Barthes famously declared, “it is language which speaks, not the author” (143).

The two aspects of this postmodern crisis in representation — simulation and textuality — are evident in American Splendor and Adaptation. I will argue in this chapter that American Splendor is concerned with the status of the authentic subject in a postmodern context where authenticity is compromised. Here, the difference between original and copy is problematised though the representation of the subject
as a series of simulacra. Adaptation is more closely engaged with how this postmodern crisis in representation affects the creative capacities of the artist. By placing the screenwriter inside the diegesis, Adaptation critiques the notion of the authentic, autonomous subject, which is underscored by the splitting of the protagonist into identical twins. It is, therefore, more closely linked with Jameson’s ideas about postmodern cultural production after the “death of the subject”. Both films blur the line between reality and the representation of reality, and challenge the model of subjectivity as authentic, autonomous and individual. However, as I will show in the final section, they also — in different ways — paradoxically support authenticity, originality, and individuality against the postmodern representational strategies they employ. As I have argued throughout this thesis, this is a part of the commercial logic underpinning the indie/alternative Indiewood film, and further illuminates this cinema’s limited capacity to support a postmodern model of subjectivity.

American Splendor.

“I keep tellin’ ya, all of them’s me, man.” — Harvey Pekar

In American Splendor, Harvey Pekar (played here by Paul Giamatti) expresses anxiety about his identity when he asks wife Joyce Brabner (played here by Hope Davis): “Am I a guy that writes about himself in a comic book? Or am I just a character in that book? If I die, will that character keep goin’ or will he just fade away?”. This confusion over the separation of representation and reality demonstrates American Splendor’s concern with postmodern questions about
subjectivity. *American Splendor* is an adaptation of the real Harvey Pekar’s eponymous series of comic books, and the graphic novel *Our Cancer Year*, which he co-wrote with Joyce. Given the autobiographical nature of the *American Splendor* comics, the film purports to tell us Harvey’s life story but focuses, in particular, on his career as the writer of this series. As co-director Robert Pulcini asserts, “[the film is] the story of this guy’s life, and his relationship with comic books, and what they’ve brought him” (qtd. in West, West and Gilbert 41).

What is noteworthy about *American Splendor*, in the context of this thesis, is the way it represents its subject. The film is filled with multiple images of Harvey that exhibit varying degrees of realism. These include the real Harvey (aged in his sixties at the time of filming), three actors’ portrayals of Harvey (Paul Giamatti, Donal Logue and Daniel Tay), multiple drawings (both still and animated) of Harvey by different artists, and one Harvey doll. These representations of Harvey are evidence of what Craig Hight calls “a high degree of reflexivity toward representations of individual identity” (185). This means that the film mobilises strategies that represent character as simulacral, as a copy, or series of copies, without secure or authentic origin. Confirming this postmodern approach, Pulcini states that, in *American Splendor*, they are “playing with the idea of reality versus nonreality, what’s real and what’s not” (qtd. in West, West and Gilbert 42). Accordingly, the narrative is broadly divided into two strands: biopic and
Although this splitting of the film into two strands means there are similarities with the fragmented narratives of Memento and Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind, the reason for the split is different. In Memento and Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind, the dual-strand structure fragments linear narrative time and direction. In American Splendor, the two strands are separated by the fictional and nonfictional representational modes in which they are situated.

The biopic strand tells us Harvey’s life story, focusing in particular on his creation of American Splendor as a document of and antidote to the everyday monotony of his existence as a file clerk in Cleveland, Ohio. Through his underground fame as the writer of American Splendor, Harvey meets and marries Joyce. The obstacle of testicular cancer complicates this apparent discovery of happiness, but Harvey is shown to overcome this through documenting the experience of treatment in the graphic novel that was published as Our Cancer Year. During this time, Harvey and Joyce also become foster parents to Danielle (Madylin Sweeten), the daughter of the novel’s illustrator, Fred (James McCaffrey). The biopic strand ends, therefore, with a cancer-free Harvey and the construction of a nuclear family unit.

The documentary strand consists of interviews — with the real Harvey, and with Joyce and their friend Toby Radloff — which add to and deconstruct the

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122 American Splendor is one of the more generically complicated examples of underground comic book adaptation; it is both similar to, and markedly different from, Crumb (Terry Zwigoff, 1994), a documentary about Harvey’s friend and fellow underground comic star Robert Crumb, and the later Persepolis (Vincent Paronnaud and Marjane Satrapi, 2007) which is an animated adaptation of Satrapi’s autobiographical graphic novel. Berman and Pulcin indicate in an interview with Margaret Pomeranz, included in the DVD extras, that their decision to include a biopic strand in the film was partly motivated by a desire to differentiate themselves from the (relatively) “straight” documentary approach taken by Zwigoff in Crumb.

123 Although Fred is based on Frank Stack, the real illustrator of Our Cancer Year, the real Danielle is not Frank Stack’s daughter; the real Joyce and Harvey asked that this alteration be made to the film (Booker May Contain 145). This demonstrates the processes of fictionalisation that take place in the construction of the biopic, a generic category that I will discuss later in this section.
content of the biopic strand. These scenes operate in Bill Nichols’s reflexive mode of
documentary, in which attention is explicitly drawn to the representational
conventions of documentary and their construction of reality (33). The documentary
strand of American Splendor is supplemented with the inclusion of archival footage
of Harvey’s appearances on The Tonight Show with David Letterman, and Toby’s
stint as MTV’s “Genuine Party Nerd”. There is a clear separation of the biopic and
documentary strands at the level of photography and mise-en-scène: the biopic strand
uses techniques associated with realism: a tobacco filter, location photography, and
realist sets.124 This is contrasted with the documentary strand, which, with its
predominantly white space and sparse mise-en-scène, is more abstract. Despite this
stylistic separation, the biopic and documentary strands are far from discrete. In fact,
these two strands contaminate each other to the extent that to sustain a discussion of
American Splendor as a dual-stranded narrative would be to neglect the film’s use of
postmodern representational strategies.

I want to show, in this section, that the merging of the biopic and the
documentary strands has implications for the representation of character and
subjectivity. Before more closely examining these implications, it is important to
acknowledge that it would be reductive to suggest that the separation of documentary
and biopic has ever been uncomplicated. This is because the broader separation of
cinematic nonfiction and fiction has never been stable. Reductively speaking, it
might be possible to assert that fictional cinema asks us to view the photographed
world as if it were real whereas nonfictional cinema, or documentary, asks us to view
that which is represented as real. As Nichols puts it, “[i]nstead of a world, [in the

124 There is, of course, nothing inherently more realistic about the use of techniques like the tobacco
filter. Cinematic realism is a set of conventions that connote “realness” and persuade us to view the
world of the film as if it were real.
documentary] we are offered access to the world” (109, emphasis in original).

Nichols rightly concedes, however, that there is nothing inherently different about the fiction film and the documentary. He observes that documentaries are texts, which “share all of the attendant implications of fiction’s constructed, formal, ideologically inflected status” (110).125 The postmodern crisis in representation destabilises any separation of documentary and fiction film that may have existed (however tenuously) in the discourse on cinema because in this paradigm both modes are viewed as textual, which means the documentary in fact constructs the reality that it seeks to transparently record (Black 7).

Even more complicated for American Splendor is the fact that the biopic is already a hybrid of fiction and nonfiction. A defining characteristic of the biopic is its focus on the real or actual person; George F. Custen writes in Bio/Pic that the Hollywood biopic is “minimally composed of the life, or the portion of a life, of a real person whose real name is used” (6). Carolyn Anderson and Jon Lupo similarly assert that the biopic is “a film that takes a life story of an actual person as its central narrative” (‘Hollywood Lives’ 92). Yet the biopic is not a documentary; it fictionalises real or actual life. As Glenn Man puts it, the biopic gives us “not real life but reel life—a representation, a fictionalized or interpretive treatment…” (v, emphasis in original).126 In this sense, the biopic is always already hybrid. For Man,

125 For Nichols, however, there are ethical concerns that are particular to the documentary. He also argues that the textuality of documentary does not mean that historical reality does not exist (7). I would suggest, however, that the ways in which we understand this historical reality is inextricably tied to our representations of it. It is difficult, that is, to see how we could access historical reality except as representation. As Jameson explains, “history is not a text, not a narrative, master or otherwise, but…it is inaccessible to us except in textual form” (Political 35, emphasis in original).

126 Pointing to The Straight Story (David Lynch, 1999), Bordwell and Thompson go so far as to suggest that biopics are “wholly staged” (113). The framing of films in this “genre” as (explicitly or implicitly) “true” conceals this staging. The affective power the words “based on a true story” can be seen in their exploitation in “found-footage” horror films like The Blair Witch Project and, to a lesser extent, Cloverfield (Matt Reeves, 2008).
the biopic “encompasses not only other fictional film genres, but the documentary, video self-biographies, television docudramas, and other hybrid forms as well” (vii).

Despite its hybridity, the biopic is not a necessarily postmodern genre, even if it is possible to read its most earnest examples as entirely postmodern in their merging of historical reality and fiction. Biopics are rarely reflexive about the textuality that fictionalisation implies, and, as Anderson and Lupo observe, they are also overwhelmingly sincere, possibly as a part of their striving to convince audiences of their subjects’ lives as film-worthy (‘Off-Hollywood’ 110). In their examination of a trend toward irony in the millennial biopic, Anderson and Lupo position American Splendor as a postmodern biopic. They argue that the multiple representations of Harvey that populate the film mean that it “promises a postmodern dream of the instability of self, and [it] delivers” (‘Off-Hollywood’ 108).127 More than this, the positioning of the real Harvey as a contributor to the construction of his own biopic is what clearly “places American Splendor in the postmodern realm” (‘Off-Hollywood’ 108). What is postmodern about American Splendor is not only that it is reflexive about its status as a fictionalisation of Harvey’s life story, but also that, by merging the biopic and documentary strands, it suggests that this fictionalisation might be all there is. Put simply, American Splendor suggests that there might not be a “real” subject outside of the film.

127 The multiple representations of the subject in American Splendor paved the way for what Anderson and Lupo describe as the “full-scale experimental approach” (‘Off-Hollywood’ 110) of Todd Haynes’s Bob Dylan biopic I’m Not There. Here, six actors, including a woman, an African American child, and various male Hollywood stars, play “characters” intended to embody aspects of the Dylan persona. The multivalent title is significant because it can be interpreted both as emphasising the absence of a unifying “I”, and as implying that there is an authentic “I” that is absent from the film and from the public Dylan persona (presumably, the “real” Robert Zimmerman). Interpreted in this latter sense, I’m Not There paradoxically emphasises authentic subjectivity at the same time as it posits this authenticity as a postmodern impossibility. As I will show in the final section of this chapter, this paradox is also evident in American Splendor and Adaptation.
This merging of reality and representation is evident from the opening sequence, which is constructed to resemble the pages of one of Harvey’s *American Splendor* comics. Here, we are introduced firstly to Giamatti-as-Harvey, then the real Harvey-as-Harvey, then a series of drawings of Harvey that introduce him as “a character in a celebrated underground comic book”. Following this, a black-and-white photograph of the real Harvey tells us that he is “also a real guy”. The merging of the black-and-white photograph of Harvey with multiple graphic representations of this person, and their placement beside each other on the “pages” of the comic, presents reality and representation on a continuum. As Sperb observes, it is significant that the real Harvey is presented as *also* a real person, because it denies the real Harvey a position of priority over the series of representations with which we are bombarded in this sequence. The “[a]lso”, he explains, “…suggest[s] that at least in *American Splendor*, the real Harvey Pekar is not necessarily privileged over the other representations, but is one ‘guy’ among many in the film” (‘Removing’ 131).

This de-emphasising of the priority of the real Harvey is reinforced several scenes later, where the real Harvey, in voice-over narration, asserts that “the guy that’s playin’ me…don’t look nothing like me, but whatever”. The dismissive “whatever” further indicates that the inauthenticity of Giamatti-as-Harvey, as a representation or copy of the real Harvey, is inconsequential because an authentic Harvey might not exist, or, as Sperb puts it, might be “irretrievable” (‘Removing’ 136), rendering immaterial the notion of an accurate rendering of this “real” subject.

The merging of reality and representation continues throughout *American Splendor*. In one of the film’s most frequently examined and clearly postmodern moments, the sound of film moving through a camera intrudes into the biopic, and,
after an audibly marked “cut”, Giamatti-as-Harvey walks out of the biopic set into that of the documentary. Here, the real Harvey and the real Toby — so far as we are assume these photographed figures exist in the world outside the film — are shown standing beside their fictional counterparts, whom we have been told are actors. All four discuss the different (simulated) flavours of gourmet jellybeans. As Anderson and Lupo suggest, this merging of real and representation does not establish a clear line between the two, or guarantee the authenticity of the real Harvey and Toby, but rather demonstrates the textuality of all four. They write:

This sequence acknowledges the artifice of representation (enhanced further by the theatrical staging of the ‘real’ office set the audience has just seen) and points out that the distance between the real and its multiple representations is more a continuum than simply a dichotomy. (‘Off-Hollywood’ 109)

Relating this more directly to the representation of subjectivity, Sperb argues that the shot which shows Giamatti-as-Harvey and Friedlander-as-Toby seated at the rear of the set, watching their nonfictional counterparts discuss loneliness, prompts us to view the real Harvey and Toby as “mythic spectacle” (‘Removing’ 137). This, Sperb suggests, is an example of what is happening in the film more broadly, namely, the multiple representations of Harvey render the “real guy” a postmodern simulacrum without secure origin, rather than guaranteeing his authenticity (‘Removing’ 136). For Sperb, the commingling of multiple representations of Harvey in the film:

…break down any distinction between a copy and an original, and we instead come to believe that Harvey is always already struggling with the ways in which comic books both ‘brought [him] to life’ and fragmented any notion of a fixed, unified self (‘Removing’ 130, square brackets in original).
As Sperb shows, it is not only that there is no “unified” Harvey, but, more significantly, that there is also no “real” or “authentic” Harvey outside of the multiple, textual Harveys represented inside the larger text of the film. For Sperb, however, simulation is only one aspect of *American Splendor* (‘Removing’ 133). Mobilising Deleuze’s description of Plato’s simulacrum as about “dimensions, depths, and distances” (Deleuze qtd. in Sperb ‘Removing’ 125), Sperb argues that the film foregrounds what he sees as the unrepresentable trauma of cancer. He insists that this experience exists outside of the text, despite the film’s suggestion that Harvey might be nothing more than representations (‘Removing’ 128). The argument that there are aspects of Harvey that escape or exceed representation is evidence of a discursive support for a model of subjectivity that is excluded by the film’s representation of the subject as postmodern. I will examine it in more detail in the final section of this chapter.

The idea that there is no authentic Harvey outside of *American Splendor* is underscored by the fact that the film is based on the comic-book representations of Harvey. Pulcini explains, in this way, that he and Berman took the comic books as their source, and approached these texts “as if they were raw footage” (qtd. in West, West and Gilbert 41), thus re-presenting a Harvey that is already a representation. The stylistic choices made by the filmmakers become significant here. The placement of the real Harvey inside the nonrealist space of the documentary scenes, which are constructed to resemble the contents of a comic book panel, emphasises that he exists as the products of these stories, rather than in an authentic reality outside of them. In contrast, the realist aesthetic of the biopic strand is also undermined by the use of framing, *mise-en-scène* and editing to present these
episodes as comic book panels. Comic book intertitles are used both as temporal and narrative markers; this draws attention to the edges of the film frame as if it were the border of a comic book panel and denies the illusion of off-screen reality. More significant are the moments when animated drawings of Harvey intrude into the realist space of the biopic. This happens in the supermarket scene, where an animated Harvey moves out of Giamatti-as-Harvey’s thought bubble to goad Giamatti-as-Harvey into trying his hand at comic writing. This technique is repeated in the train station scene, where multiple animated incarnations of Harvey populate the photographed image. Further disrupting the realism of the biopic is the use of editing techniques such as the wipe and the split screen, which are accompanied by shuffling sounds reminiscent of the turning of a page. These contribute to the construction of the actuality of the documentary and the purportedly realist biopic as comic book, encouraging us to view Harvey as pulled not “from off the streets of Cleveland”, as the comic title pages invariably declare, but “from off” the pages of the comic.

At the start of American Splendor, the young Harvey (Daniel Tay) stands beside a row of children dressed as comic book superheroes — Batman, Robin, Superman and The Green Lantern. Tay-as-Harvey, who is not in costume, announces: “I ain’t no superhero…I’m just a kid from the neighbourhood”. Yet this scene emphasises that Harvey has always been a comic book hero; this is why the film blurs the boundaries between Harvey as a “real” person and Harvey as a comic book character. In merging documentary and biopic, American Splendor offers us a representation of character as simulacral. There are, however, significant limits to this postmodern representation of subjectivity. These limits are embedded in the kind
of comic-book heroism that Harvey represents. This heroism is founded on the authenticity that is refused by the film’s postmodern representational strategies. Before examining this apparent contradiction, I will examine Adaptation, which also deals with the crisis in representation and its effects on constructions of subjectivity.

**Adaptation.**

“I’ve written myself into my screenplay.” — Charlie Kaufman

Prior to proclaiming this act of self-inscription, Charlie Kaufman (Nicolas Cage) declares to his twin brother Donald (also played by Nicolas Cage) that he is the Ouroboros, the snake that eats its own tail. Like Gimatti-as-Harvey’s confusion over whether he is a “real guy” or a comic book character, Charlie is also a writer who cannot work out if he is the producer or product of his own writing. Charlie’s identification with the circularity of the Ouroboros demonstrates Adaptation’s concern with the effects of the postmodern crisis in representation on subjectivity. This is reinforced by the fact that Charlie is, like Harvey, also a fictional character based on the “real guy” who wrote the screenplay for Adaptation. Like American Splendor, Adaptation uses self-reflexive representational strategies to engage with postmodern ideas about reality, originality, and authenticity. However, there are also important differences between the two films. Whereas American Splendor represents its subject as a series of simulacra, Adaptation focuses more explicitly on the crisis in

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128 Although the Ouroboros precedes the postmodern by many centuries, Silviano Santiago writes that “to modern eyes”, it signifies “the rejection of a linear in favor of a circular continuity” (790). As a postmodern signifier, then, the Ouroboros can be linked to Nietzsche’s recuperation of the pre-Christian concept of eternal return, and to the circular logic of the postmodern more broadly. The snake, of course, is also a phallic symbol. The notion of “eating one’s own tail”, then, also evokes autoeroticism. For an analysis of creativity as onanism in Adaptation, see Hilderbrand.
representation as it affects artistic practice. *Adaptation* establishes Charlie as a writer concerned with making an authentic, original artistic gesture, but this is undermined by the film’s foregrounding of everything, including Charlie, as always already enmeshed in representation. This affects Charlie’s position as an autonomous, individual subject and renders the original or authentic artistic gesture impossible to achieve.

Had *Adaptation* been released a decade earlier, Manfred Pfister might have called it “[t]he ideal-type postmodernist…‘meta-text’, that is, a text about texts or textuality, an auto-reflective and auto-referential text, which thematizes its own textual status and the devices on which it is based” (215). As Barbara Simerka and Christopher Wiemer observe, the film is “reflexive by its very nature, a film about film-making—or, to be more precise, a film about film-writing” (92). I have already indicated in my introduction to this chapter that *Adaptation* fictionalises the real Charlie Kaufman’s efforts to adapt *The Orchid Thief*, journalist Susan Orlean’s nonfiction meditation on orchid poaching. In so doing, it follows Charlie in his quest for what he calls “the right approach” to Orlean’s work, jumping backwards and forwards in diegetic time as it shows us multiple adaptations of the material. *Adaptation*’s hyper-reflexive approach to representation makes it difficult to theorise because its circularity threatens to overwhelm the logic of academic argument. As

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129 The film’s title, combined with its subject matter, has made it popular with adaptation theorists. See, for example, Tomasulo and Diehl. I do not intend to replicate this focus here; I am only interested in *Adaptation*’s status as an adaptation of *The Orchid Thief* insofar as it relates to postmodern textuality and the models of subjectivity that underpin the film’s representation of authorship.

130 The real Kaufman describes the film as “pretty accurate in its depiction of my false starts and my confusion” during the writing process (Feld 123; King *Indiewood* 88, n.2). However, as Feld reminds us, Kaufman (along with Jonze) is notorious for his subversive interactions with the media (115–16). In this sense, the question of the film’s relationship with Kaufman’s “real” writing process remains entirely ambiguous. This is in line with the postmodern approach to reality taken in the film.
Skradol puts it, “[t]here are so many ‘a-bouts’ [in Adaptation] they all finally melt together into one long ‘aaaaaa…’, making you dizzy” (ellipsis in original). Although Adaptation’s circularity has led me to as many false epiphanies as Charlie, I believe it is precisely these problems that make it indispensable to this thesis. Of particular interest to me is the way in which the film’s circularity affects the representation of artistic practice and the model(s) of subjectivity underpinning this. It is this aspect of Adaptation that I will endeavour to flatten out in this section.

In exploring the effects of the postmodern on artistic practice, Adaptation splits its protagonist into identical twins: Charlie and Donald. There is broad agreement that Charlie and Donald represent different approaches to screenwriting that are organised around several binaries: high versus low culture, art versus commerce, and originality versus repetition. Kirk Boyle describes Donald as Charlie’s “doppelgänger brother/alter-ego hack” (6), and Juliana de Nooy reads Donald as “the artist’s lowbrow alter ego” (151). Michelle McMerrin suggests that Charlie and Donald can be read as a representation of the artist’s “internal conversation” during the creative process (para. 1, para. 9), and Lexey A. Bartlett similarly argues that the splitting of the protagonist into identical twins demonstrates a kind of mental coping mechanism in the face of stress, the source of which is the commercial pressure placed on the screenwriter (para. 1). Most useful for this thesis, however, is Frank P. Tomasulo’s suggestion that Charlie and Donald’s approaches to creativity represent modernism and postmodernism, respectively. For Tomasulo, “the characters Charlie and Donald Kaufman represent the polar extremes of serious modernist and lighthearted (and lightheaded) postmodernist narrational strategies and
styles” (166). In this sense, the twins represent what Jameson might describe as an opposition between modernist originality and postmodern pastiche.

Charlie’s commitment to modernist artistic practice is evident from the opening moments of the film, where he questions his capacity for originality. “Do I have an original thought in my head”, he asks, “my bald head?”. The dissatisfaction evident in Charlie’s self-deprecating admission that he is “a walking cliché” shows that original thought is his ideal. Moreover, “thought” is also privileged over embodiment here, both in the combination of voice-over with a black screen (which is interrupted only by small titles), and in Charlie’s dissatisfaction with the social requirement for men to be physically attractive. Charlie’s commitment to originality is emphasised when he meets with Hollywood studio executive Valerie (Tilda Swinton) to discuss his adaptation of The Orchid Thief. Here, Valerie praises Charlie for his “unique voice”. In his pitch for the job of adapting Orlean’s work, Charlie expresses his disdain for Hollywood’s “artificial” narrative conventions. For Charlie, the inclusion of sex, guns, and car chases, as well as character growth and narrative resolution would “ruin [the film] by making it a Hollywood thing”; an unoriginal cultural product. Charlie’s alignment with originality is further strengthened when he tells Donald that a writer should always strive towards the new, rather than adhere to prescribed rules or conventions: “a writer should always have that goal”, he maintains. As Simerka and Weimer observe, the film represents Charlie as an auteur who “repudiate[s] Hollywood entertainment genres due to their repetitiveness and lack of verisimilitude” (97). Implicit in the representation of Charlie as an aspiring auteur is that he is an autonomous, individual capable of “original thought”. In this way, Charlie is comparable to the pre-Barthesian Author, who “is thought to nourish
the book, which is to say that he exists before it, thinks, suffers, lives for it, is in the
same relation of antecedence to his work as a father to his child” (145, emphasis in
original).

Charlie’s alignment with a modernist approach to writing is further
emphasised by the fact that his striving towards the new is in the service of more
adequately representing reality. For Charlie, Hollywood’s plot devices and character
arcs artificially simplify the complexity of the real world. “Life isn’t like that”, he
stresses, “it just isn’t”. He tells Valerie that he would like his film to “exist rather
than be artificially plot driven”, and later tells real-life Hollywood screenwriting guru
Robert McKee (played here by Brian Cox) that he wants “to create a story where
nothing much happens, where people don’t change, they don’t have any epiphanies,
they struggle, and are frustrated, and nothing is resolved: more a reflection of the real
world”. Charlie is convinced that there is a reality that escapes Hollywood
narrative conventions, a reality he sees captured in Orlean’s “sprawling” text. David
L. Smith writes, in this way, that:

There is something original in the spirit of its author and
something about life as the book represents it to which Charlie
wants to be true. His worry is whether Hollywood story
conventions, or indeed, any form of narrative art, will be
adequate to the task. (426)

Charlie’s desire to show a reality free from artificial dramatisation could be read as a reference to
Dziga Vertov’s famous diatribe against “the bourgeois fairy-tale scenarios” of “film-drama” in his
Provisional Instructions to Kino-Eye Groups (qtd. in C. Williams 25). What separates Charlie from
Vertov’s modernist project is that he is writing a fiction film. Even if he is looking at a better way to
“script life”, he is still working within the boundaries of bourgeois “film drama” because his film
needs to appeal to bourgeois audience. For King, this is why Adaptation is politically limited in
comparison with more radically reflexive films like Tout Va Bien (Jean-Luc Godard and Jean-Pierre
Gorin, 1972) (Indiewood 54–55, 62). For an analysis of the political limits of Adaptation, see Boyle.
In *Adaptation*, Smith argues, flowers represent life outside of narrative; he compares this with Emerson’s description of flowers as unstoried: “They make no reference to former [flowers] or to better ones…; they exist with God to-day…in the present, above time” (qtd. in D. L. Smith 426, square brackets and ellipses Smith’s). For Smith, Charlie’s goal is not only to reflect the complexity of “real life”, but also to capture that which exceeds representation: a category in which he places “immediacy”, “communion” and “the pure moment of being” (427). In this way, Charlie is aligned with modernism not only because he wants to make an original artistic gesture but also because he is suspicious of Hollywood’s representational conventions and their capacity adequately to represent the complexity of real life.

Charlie’s alignment with modernist artistic practice (and the model of subjectivity underpinning this) is emphasised by its comparison with Donald. Choosing to follow his brother into screenwriting, Donald’s approach to writing is postmodern. For example, he explains to Charlie that McKee “says we have to realise that we all write in a genre, and we must find our originality within that genre”. For Donald, Fellini’s invention of the mockumentary was the last innovation in film genre.¹³² Unimaginatively but plausibly titled *The 3*, Donald’s screenplay is, as Charlie puts it, a pastiche of “every cop movie ever made”. In addition to his serial-killer protagonist suffering from multiple personality disorder, Donald’s screenplay employs the “motif of broken mirrors to show [his] protagonist’s fragmented self”, and includes a popular soundtrack and a climactic chase sequence featuring a car and a horse. He is triumphant when his mother describes *The 3* as a

¹³² Fellini’s responsibility for the inception of the mockumentary is questionable given that it can be traced back at least to the disruptive (and protopostmodern) work of Orson Welles in *Citizen Kane* (Doherty 22). This meta-textual joke is further evidence of Donald’s alignment with the postmodern because it reinforces the absence of artistic originality as an option.
combination of The Silence of the Lambs (Jonathan Demme, 1991) and Psycho (Alfred Hitchcock, 1960), and is similarly pleased when Charlie derisively calls it “Sybil [Danie Petrie, 1976] meets, I dunno, Dressed to Kill [Brian De Palma, 1980]”.

Donald himself is a simulacrum: he is a copy of Charlie who is a copy of the real Charlie Kaufman. Further aligning him with the postmodern is the foregrounding of Donald’s body: he is represented as physically comfortable, gleeful, and someone who reproduces work easily on a computer. In contrast, Charlie is aligned primarily with the mind, is physically awkward, and struggles to produce work on a typewriter.\textsuperscript{133}

Having established this opposition between modernist and postmodernist creative practice, the film proceeds to show Charlie dealing with the fact that the former is untenable. Charlie’s goals — the authentic representation of reality and the original artistic gesture — are undermined by the film’s representational strategies, which foreground the textuality of reality, and, more importantly, of subjectivity. The impossibility of ever showing a reality that “exists” outside of representation is made clear very early on in the film. In the scene following the title sequence, we are shown what appears to be documentary footage from the set of Being John Malkovich. The techniques used here — grainy photography, handheld camerawork, and intertitles — create the impression that this is unstaged \emph{cinéma vérité} footage.\textsuperscript{134} The illusion of nonfiction is undermined, however, when the film cuts to a shot of a man loitering at the back of the set. Although this man is introduced as “Charlie

\textsuperscript{133} The bodily differences between Cage’s portrayal of Charlie and Donald are so marked that it has been considered worthy of movement analysis. See Baron.

\textsuperscript{134} Like the use of the tobacco filter in American Splendor, there is nothing inherently realistic about grainy footage; its realism is determined via the conventions that construct the reality effect at a given historical moment. As Sharon R. Sherman explains, the shaky, grainy black and white images of 1960s \emph{cinema vérité} “somehow added to the notion that one was seeing the unvarnished truth, providing a raw vision of the real thing” (21).
Kaufman, screenwriter”, this is not the real Charlie Kaufman and, for viewers familiar with Hollywood star Nicolas Cage’s appearance, this transforms the scene from documentary to mockumentary. In doing this, it draws attention to the textuality of all nonfictional representational strategies and thereby suggests that reflections of real life in cinema are always already mediated.

This emphasis on textuality continues throughout Adaptation. Simerka and Weimer observe that the film’s very title draws attention to “Charlie’s writing not as original creative work, but rather as the adaptation of pre-existing sources” (93). These sources include Orlean’s book and the texts upon which it is based: her own New Yorker piece, and the Miami newspaper report that was gathered from the courtroom reconstruction of Laroche’s alleged orchid poaching activities in a Florida state preserve (94). As Boyle suggests, “the mise en abyme effect of textuality leads to a seemingly infinite regress of adaptation — the film is an adaptation of an adaptation of an adaptation, ad infinitum” (3). Indeed, this textual mise-en-abyme extends well beyond the multiple stories surrounding Laroche’s exploits. There are references both to other films — Being John Malkovich, Casablanca, Psycho, Sybil, Dressed to Kill, and The Silence of the Lambs — and to written texts, which include: Flowers for Algernon, Story, On the Origin of Species and The Various Contrivances by which British and Foreign Orchids are Fertilised by Insects. Adaptation is also more abstractly connected with other films about screenwriting; Henry Bean finds links with Paris — When it Sizzles (Richard Quine, 1963), and Sergio Rizzo compares it both with earlier examples of postmodern metacinema like The Player (Robert Altman, 1992) and Barton Fink (Joel and Ethan Coen, 1991), and with 8½ (Federico Fellini, 1963) (para. 13). Even flowers do not merely exist; they are
represented as a part of the metanarrative of evolution, which Darwin is heard and seen articulating at several points in the film. By drawing attention to its relationship with these texts, Adaptation demonstrates the naivety of Charlie’s belief that his screenplay could ever just “exist” or present a “more accurate” reflection of reality.

More importantly, the film shows that the subject is also enmeshed in this textuality rather than existing in an anterior reality. Karen Diehl observes that this means Charlie is not in control of his text: “the chronology of narrating and representing is subverted over the entire film: several scenes are first shown and later retold as the character Charlie discusses how he will adapt the book” (101). It is not just that Charlie’s creative work precedes him, but that he is not the only narrative voice in the film. This “endless flood of speaking and writing” (Bean 20) includes Susan, Donald, Valerie, Darwin, Charlie’s agent Marty, and Donald’s girlfriend Caroline (Maggie Gyllenhaal). Thus, Diehl writes, “[a]t the end of [the] film, ascertaining an authorial origin is rendered impossible due to its multiple beginnings, multiple author characters, and narrative additions” (101–02). The film, then, denies Charlie the space and voice with which to make his original artistic gesture. It is not only that he cannot represent a reality that precedes representation, but also that he cannot make any kind of original artistic gesture because to do so requires he be situated in this extra-textual reality, which the film shows to be impossible. Charlie’s status as the Ouroboros, then, undermines his alignment with the model of autonomous, individual subjectivity underpinning modernist artistic practice. Despite this, there is, in the academic and popular discourse on the film, a broad consensus that the real Charlie Kaufman’s work is authentic, inventive, original, and unique. The notion that Adaptation is an original artistic gesture, made by an autonomous
subject, about the impossibility of the original artistic gesture and autonomous, individual subjectivity is deeply paradoxical. I will consider this paradox alongside that of *American Splendor* in the final section of this chapter.

**The Limits of Simulation.**

“I ain’t no showbiz phoney; I’m tellin’ the truth!”—Harvey Pekar

In this chapter, I have examined the postmodern crisis in representation and its effects on the representation of subjectivity in two indie/alternative Indiewood films. In *American Splendor*, the blurring of biopic and documentary is used to foreground Harvey as a series of simulacra without secure reference to an original. In *Adaptation*, the character Charlie is represented as aspiring to be both an auteur and to write an original screenplay. By doing this, the film mobilises ideas about authorship and creativity that are based on a model of autonomous subjectivity, a subject that is shown to be always already enmeshed in the postmodern (inter)textuality of the film. As I have been arguing throughout this thesis, when it comes to character, the indie/alternative Indiewood films do not push their postmodern representational strategies as far as the medium will bear. *American Splendor* and *Adaptation* are similarly limited; despite supporting a model of postmodern subjectivity through these strategies, both *American Splendor* and *Adaptation* reinstall a model of subjectivity as autonomous and authentic. In *American Splendor* this can be seen within the diegesis, and in the critical discourse both on the film and on the real Harvey Pekar’s comic books. *Adaptation*’s support
of the Enlightenment model emerges not in the film itself, but in the discourse surrounding it, which positions the real Charlie Kaufman as an inventive auteur.

Despite its ostensibly postmodern concerns, *American Splendor* is preoccupied with authenticity. The film represents Harvey as simulacral, but at the same time it labours to present Harvey as *more* authentic than most cinematic representations. It does so by establishing an opposition between Harvey and “phony” popular culture. This can be most clearly observed in the scene where Friedlander-as-Toby takes Giamatti-as-Harvey and Davis-as-Joyce to a screening of *Revenge of the Nerds* (Jeff Kanew, 1984). Toby, who identifies as a nerd, explains to Harvey that he feels his identity validated by the film. After seeing the film, Harvey refuses to share Toby’s enthusiasm and draws a symbolic line between Toby’s reality, and the Hollywood reality of *Revenge of the Nerds*. He argues that “those people on the screen ain’t even supposed to be you, man”, and derides the film for its lack of verisimilitude. “This *Revenge of the Nerds* ain’t reality”, he asserts, “it’s Hollywood bullshit, Tobe”. This scene, with its references both to cinema spectatorship and to Hollywood, could be read as a reflexive foregrounding of the textuality of all the characters in the film (Sperb ‘Removing’ 137). I would argue, further, that it also tries to convince audiences that the nerds in *American Splendor* are *more* authentic than those in *Revenge of the Nerds*.

This opposition between Harvey’s authentic reality and the inauthentic world of popular culture is further emphasised in the inclusion of the archival footage of the real Harvey’s appearances on *The Tonight Show with David Letterman*. At one point, Harvey turns to the audience and declares: “I ain’t no showbiz phoney, I’m telling the truth”. Evidently, the real Harvey sees a distinct difference between his
“authenticity” and showbiz “phoneys” like David Letterman. This alignment of Harvey with the authentic — as opposed to all things “showbiz” and therefore (allegedly) “fake” — is confirmed in the real Harvey’s voice-over narration, where he reflects on his and Toby’s short-lived television careers. Here, the real Harvey muses that Toby and himself were “real, salt of the earth people” who “were getting held up and ridiculed as losers in the system”.

This “salt-of-the-earth” authenticity is marked in the film as a combination of working class ordinariness and the negative. Class is central to Harvey’s distinguishing between Toby and the Hollywood nerd: Toby lives in what Harvey describes as “an ethnic ghetto”, whereas the Hollywood nerds are middle class kids who will attend college and eventually transcend their nerdiness. Harvey is also represented as an ordinary, working-class subject. In the title sequence Harvey is introduced as “a nobody guy”, and he later describes himself as “all grown up and goin’ nowhere” and “a nobody flunky” who has “lived in shit neighborhoods [and] held shit jobs”. References to everyday life are supported visually, both in the general shots of industrial Cleveland and in specific quotidian activities. For example, we see Harvey on the toilet, buying day-old bread, shopping at garage sales, and waiting in line at the supermarket. Accompanying this is an emphasis on the negative, which is marked visually by the permanent, misanthropic scowl of Giamatti-as-Harvey. In one scene, James Urbaniak-as-Crumb holds up a particularly unflattering portrait of Harvey and describes it as “pretty scary stuff”. Letterman further reinforces the nexus of the ordinary and the negative by commenting that Harvey looks like “a lotta guys you see sleeping on buses” and “like every police artist sketch I’ve ever seen”. Although the police artist sketch is a composite of
features that could be viewed as a copy without secure origin, the implication here is that, as “scary stuff”, these sketches and those of Harvey are authentic.

The apparent, and relative, authenticity of this ordinariness and negativity is emphasised by its being contrasted with an abstract idea of the mainstream and the popular as extraordinary and falsely positive. For example, when Harvey says he’s “goin’ nowhere” and warns us that he is not “some fantasy figure to save the day”, he reinvokes Tay-as-Harvey’s assertion that he is “just a kid from the neighbourhood”. At the end of the film the real Harvey reiterates this difference, advising us not to “think this is some sunny, happy ending”. As an ordinary, working-class subject, Harvey reminds us that “every day is still a major struggle”, and that the most he can look forward to in life is a “brief window of good health between retirin’ and dyin’”. The filmmakers support the notion that Harvey is more authentic than most Hollywood representations. This can be seen in Berman’s comments regarding the critical reactions to the film. She states:

Journalist after journalist, from various countries, would say to us, ‘Oh, I’m a collector and my wife wants to kill me because I wont throw anything out.’ Or ‘I can relate to his loneliness.’ It seems there’s a little bit of Harvey’s qualities, both good and bad, in many people. It’s kind of a relief from most Hollywood movies where everyone is perfect and looks great. (qtd. in Porton 51)

This alignment of the unattractive with the authentic is underscored by Berman and Pulcini’s comment that Harvey was adamant that they not cast a Hollywood star like Tom Cruise to play him (qtd. in Porton 51).

The notion that Harvey is a site of relative authenticity stems from the discourse on the *American Splendor* comics, which invariably position Harvey as a
marginal or alternative voice of authenticity in an apparently depthless and simulacral mainstream culture. Hight suggests that authenticity has always been a central concern of the *American Splendor* comics, and that there is a tendency for autobiographical comics such as Harvey’s to “focus on a brutal honesty in stories together with an often deliberately unflattering pattern of self-representation” as a way of signalling “the ‘authenticity’ of the work” (182). This authenticity is apparently emphasised through Harvey’s deliberate rejection of and “antagonism towards the mainstream and the popular” (180). In a speech to Crumb in the film, which is comparable to Charlie’s diatribe in *Adaptation* against Hollywood narrative, Harvey explains that his goal as a writer is to depart from the limited scope of superhero comics and turn comic books into an art form, that is, to do for comic books what the French New Wave and Italian neo-realism did for cinema. Harvey expresses a desire to “write…stuff about real life, y’know, stuff that the Everyman’s gotta deal with”. Unlike other comics, he insists, there will be “no idealised shit”, and “no phoney bullshit”. By describing his work as a more authentic representation of the complexity of ordinary life, Giamatti-as-Harvey appears to be trying to convince Urbaniak-as-Crumb (as well as the spectator) that his writing is a more accurate representation of the reality of ordinary life, that is, the kind of complex realism to which Charlie aspires in *Adaptation*.

It would appear, then, that the ideological position of Harvey as authentic is at odds with the postmodern representational strategies employed in the film. So why, then, is Harvey represented as a series of simulacra? Charles Hatfield offers a useful theorisation of this paradox. Like Hight, he acknowledges that authenticity

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135 This is part of a broader push, in the wake of autobiographical comic books such as Harvey’s, for comic books and graphic novel writers and artists to be viewed as auteurs (Beaty 230).
(or, more specifically, fidelity to the mundane) is central to a significant proportion of the underground autobiographical comics that emerged in the wake of *American Splendor* (114). He observes, further, that the unflattering self-representation in these comics — and the implicit intimacy of this — lends these autobiographical texts an air of authenticity (114). Hatfield also sees a tendency in these comic books for the authenticity or truthfulness of self-representation to be undermined by the self-reflexive representation of this “self” as multiple. He argues, however, that these self-reflexive representational strategies, in their patent lack of authenticity, paradoxically claim to be authentic. This reflexive foregrounding of the absence of an authentic, individual subject can be read as “*ironic authentication*” (125, emphasis in original). Ironic authentication, he explains, is “the implicit reinforcement of truth claims through their explicit rejection” (125). The acknowledgement of the absence of an authentic subject, he suggests, paradoxically reaffirms the authenticity of this subject. Thus, the postmodern representational strategies employed by the film might actually support the model of an authentic, individual subject. The concept of ironic authentication might help to explain why the critics who acknowledge the postmodern representational strategies of the film also argue that it offers “an emotional truth less easily portrayed through the representational constraints of documentary” (Hight 187), that it “capture[s] the [postmodern] spirit of the comics on which it is based” (Booker *May Contain* 139), or that it “does not offer a representation of Harvey so much as a sense of Harvey, an indefinable essence” (Sperb ‘Removing’ 124).

In contrast with *American Splendor*, the postmodern emphasis on the absence of authenticity, autonomy and individuality is stronger in *Adaptation*. Indeed, the
absence of authenticity is foregrounded in the strand of the film that offers an “adaptation” of *The Orchid Thief*. This strand follows Susan Orlean (Meryl Streep) on her search for passionate engagement with the world. Here, neither the ghost orchid nor the psychotropic drug that John Laroche (Chris Cooper) extracts from this flower provides Orlean with any lasting sense of fascination or passion, both of which are marked in the film as more authentic than the affective experiences to which she is apparently exposed in her life as one of New York’s cognoscenti.

Indeed, this emphasis on the absence of authenticity extends to the filmmakers, Jonze and Kaufman, who have played with their identities in very postmodern ways. This has not only manifested in the well-known stunt of having Kaufman’s “twin” share screenwriting honours with Charlie.\textsuperscript{136} Rob Feld points, for example, to an interview with the real Charlie Kaufman that was “written entirely by him, as him, but in the voice of writer/director P. T. Anderson” (115, emphasis in original). Spike Jonze takes a similarly ludic (and very postmodern) approach to his identity. Mottram explains, in this way, that Jonze, apparently born Adam Spiegel, has cultivated multiple personae that refuse us access to any form of authenticity (*Sundance Kids* 161). As Mottram indicates, one of Jonze’s more well-known alter-egos is “Richard Koufay”, who stars in Jonze’s music video for Fatboy Slim’s ‘Praise You’ (*Sundance Kids* 161).

Despite this, the popular and academic discourse on *Adaptation* (and on Charlie Kaufman’s entire *oeuvre*) invariably positions the real Charlie Kaufman (and, to a lesser extent, Jonze) as an auteur whose work is original, inventive, unique,
and innovative. For example, Tomasulo calls it “an authentic vehicle of self-expression, a new statement” (176), Bean argues that Kaufman presents a true “alternative” to Hollywood mainstream narrative (21), and Rapfogel gives Adaptation “plenty of points for originality”. Most emphatic, however, is McMerrin, who argues that Kaufman has written an original screenplay about the postmodern absence of originality. She writes:

Charlie Kaufman’s screenplay both encompasses the postmodern and rejects it. Through his writing skill, his unique plot conventions and his character development, he lays bare the contemporary conceptions of reality, filmic reality, and the influence of Hollywood production on both the audience and the screenwriter. He addresses the oppositional: the creative voice and the clichéd utterance; reality and fiction; disappointment and fulfillment; entrapment and freedom; and creates a new totality, a unique film that provides an alternative to the tired screenwriting paradigm. That he has managed to adapt a non-fiction book, insert real people as characters within the film, and write a critically acclaimed screenplay, shows both his skill and craft as a screenwriter and his efficacious agency. (para. 18)

As McMerrin’s description of Kaufman’s “efficacious agency” demonstrates, the critics’ positioning of Kaufman as an inventive auteur supports a model of authentic, autonomous subjectivity that is challenged by the representational strategies employed by the film.

This extra-textual emphasis on Kaufman as auteur might be related to the ways in which indie/alternative Indiewood films like Adaptation are marketed. As King explains, Kaufman’s films are located in a market niche that aims to sell “a particular notion of ‘the creative/artistic’ as a source of product and, consequently, viewer distinction” (Indiewood 57). This viewer distinction hinges on the question of

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137 This focus on the director as auteur is evident in the discourse on Indiewood more broadly. See, for example, Mottram (Sundance Kids), Waxman, Mayshark, and Derek Hill.
whether or not one understands the film’s hyper-reflexive approach to representation (Indiewood 59). More significantly, King observes, these (self-identified) “intelligent” viewers are likely to speak about Adaptation as an “original”, “inventive” or “brilliant” film (Indiewood 60). This, he suggests, “can be taken to suggest something about the self-positioning of the reviewer” (Indiewood 60). That is, the fans of Adaptation use it as a way of distinguishing their own authentic, autonomous, individuality and intelligence. As Skradol observes, as “[i]ntellectual spectators, we are so proud of being able to tell the real from the fake, the Unique from the Commonplace”. In this sense, the ability of the “intelligent” spectator to recognise the reality of the postmodern paradoxically confirms this spectator’s position as an authentic, autonomous subject. Adaptation, then, exists only insofar as it is marketable to viewers who use these films to construct their sense of authentic subjectivity. It could, therefore, be viewed as supporting a model of Enlightenment subjectivity despite its refusal of this model in the representational strategies that it mobilises.

As I have shown in this chapter, the postmodern problematisation of the separation of reality and representation affects the theoretical model of subjectivity as authentic, autonomous and individual. Yet this model persists in American Splendor and Adaptation despite these films using postmodern strategies in their representation of subjectivity. In American Splendor, Harvey, is represented as simulacral, yet the film simultaneously suggests that he is more authentic than most Hollywood representations. In a similar way, Adaptation subverts the author’s position as origin of the text, but the criticism of the film reinstates the cinematic equivalent of this figure, along with the model of subjectivity upon which it rests.
This is not just a matter of the limits of the cinematic medium; it is about the requirement that these films, as commercial products, be marketable. This is what prevents them from more fully testing the limits of the medium and, thereby, supporting a more radically postmodern subject. There are, however, other American popular narrative films that take further the representational strategies used in the indie/alternative Indiewood films that I have discussed in this thesis. This will be the focus of my next, and final, chapter.
Chapter Five

Beyond Indiewood: Postmodern Subjectivity in *Lost Highway*, *Mulholland Drive* and *Inland Empire*

**Introduction.**

I have been arguing in this thesis that the representation of character and subjectivity in the indie/alternative Indiewood film is marked by a paradox. On one hand, the films I have examined engage thematically with postmodern ideas about subjectivity, which they enact through their representational strategies. These films, I have argued, appear to support a postmodern model of subjectivity. On the other hand, these representational strategies are limited in various ways: by the reversion to sincerity in the service of narrative closure, by the persistence of bodily continuity in fragmented narratives, and by the emphasis on characters like Harvey Pekar as sites of authenticity, either in the films or in the discourses surrounding them. The Enlightenment model of subjectivity that I outlined in Chapter One appears, then, to persist in the indie/alternative Indiewood film. I do not wish to suggest, however, that this represents some kind of universal limit point for the cinematic representation of postmodern characters, and, hence, for cinema’s capacity to support a model of subjectivity that exceeds the still-dominant Enlightenment one. In this chapter, I will examine three films — *Lost Highway*, *Mulholland Drive* and *Inland Empire* — as a counterpoint to the study presented in Chapters Two, Three and Four. I will argue that these three films mobilise strategies comparable to those used to represent character and subjectivity in the indie/alternative Indiewood film. It is my contention, however, that there is a tendency for *Lost Highway*, *Mulholland Drive* and, most emphatically, *Inland Empire*, to go beyond the limits of the
indie/alternative Indiewood film discussed previously.\textsuperscript{138} As a result, \textit{Lost Highway}, \textit{Mulholland Drive}, and \textit{Inland Empire} would appear more fully to support a postmodern model of subjectivity. This chapter, then, further illuminates the limits to postmodern representation that I have identified in the indie/alternative Indiewood film, and functions as a preface to my conclusion, where I will consider why the Enlightenment model of subjectivity is so difficult for postclassical Hollywood cinema to exceed.

The popular and academic discourse on \textit{Lost Highway}, \textit{Mulholland Drive}, and \textit{Inland Empire} (and, indeed, on all films directed by David Lynch) is dominated by auteurism, a fact that is only sometimes acknowledged. I would like to be able to resist approaching these films as “Lynchian” but my references to the scholarship on them make it difficult at times not to refer to Lynch.\textsuperscript{139} To attend to these films as the products of an auteur would be to reaffirm the model of subjectivity I am arguing is (mostly) challenged in the films that Lynch has directed. Rather than focusing on these films as part of an artist’s \textit{oeuvre}, I am interested in the historical and industrial context in which these films are situated (and in which the signifier “Lynch” is a marketable brand).\textsuperscript{140} By doing this, we can see some important parallels with the

\textsuperscript{138} It is not my intention, however, to suggest that the strategies used to represent character in indie/alternative Indiewood cinema are neatly paralleled in \textit{Lost Highway}, \textit{Mulholland Drive} and \textit{Inland Empire}, or that they are evident to the same degree in all three films. I also do not wish to suggest that these are the only films that do this. I agree with Murray Smith’s assertion (in relation, specifically, to \textit{Lost Highway}) that “its play with characters...is hardly without precedent” (‘Reasonable Guide’ 158). Given they are embedded in a postmodern context, this is not surprising.

\textsuperscript{139} For this reason, I will not address the many interviews with David Lynch, such as those in \textit{Lynch on Lynch} and \textit{David Lynch: Interviews}. This is not to say that there is no value in the auteurist approach to Lynch. While the concept of the auteur is particularly problematic in a thesis on postmodern subjectivity, it may be that Lynch is worthy of the title. Despite the indisputably collaborative nature of cinema, there is evidence that Lynch, trained (and theorised) as an artist, retains a higher level of control over the content of his films than other directors engaged in making narrative films, often, but not always, to the detriment of their commercial success. For example, he has retained final cut on all films except \textit{Dune} (1984).

\textsuperscript{140} For discussion of the auteur as a marketing tool, see Corrigan (101–136).
films examined in Chapters Two, Three and Four. Firstly, *Lost Highway*, *Mulholland Drive* and *Inland Empire* are contemporaneous with the indie/alternative Indiewood films that I have discussed; *Lost Highway* and *Inland Empire*, which were released in 1997 and 2006 respectively, form bookends at either end of this group.

Secondly while they are not strictly the products of the studio “speciality” divisions that King associates with Indiewood, they *are* the products of hybrid industrial funding that comes from the American independent sector and the European arthouse. They are also marketed, in a similar manner to the indie/alternative Indiewood film, as a “smarter” or more “intelligent” alternative to the Hollywood mainstream. This can be seen, for example, in the marketing campaign for *Lost Highway*, which included a newspaper advertisement featuring a quote from critics Gene Siskel and Roger Ebert giving it “two thumbs down!” This quote was accompanied by the tagline: “two more reasons to see...Lost Highway”, clearly targeting an audience with tastes contrary to the mainstream.

Although the stylistic differences between Hollywood and the various alternatives to it are more difficult clearly to articulate, *Lost Highway, Mulholland Drive* and *Inland Empire* also exhibit a stylistic hybridity that is comparable to that which King identifies as the marker of Indiewood’s difference from the mainstream.

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141 Although *Lost Highway, Mulholland Drive* and *Inland Empire* are not strictly indie/alternative Indiewood films, an earlier film directed by Lynch — *Eraserhead* (1976) — is arguably one of this cinema’s forebears. Positioned by Joan Hawkins as a product of New York’s “downtown” filmmaking scene in the 1970s and 1980s (90), *Eraserhead’s* cult popularity helped usher in the rise of independent cinema in the 1980s and early 1990s. As I have already indicated, Indiewood, in turn, rose out of the successes of American independent production in the 1990s. In the mid-1990s, for example, Wallace declared that: “Lynch has in many ways cleared and made arable the contemporary ‘anti-Hollywood’ territory that Tarantino et al. are cash-cropping right now” (165).

142 *Lost Highway*’s producers include America’s October Films, French company CiBy 2000, and Lynch’s own Asymmetrical Productions. Multiple Hollywood and French production companies funded *Mulholland Drive* in its journey from TV pilot to feature film (see Buckland (132)). *Inland Empire*’s funding was more exclusively European in origin, but still included Asymmetrical Productions and a distribution deal with Canal Plus that was “renegotiated” so that Lynch could handle US distribution of the film (Clarke 16).
This industrial and textual hybridity is emphasised in Lynch scholarship, in which Lynch, and the films grouped under this signifier, are positioned as both mainstream and avant-garde. David Foster Wallace, for example, declared Lynch to have “established himself as the U.S.A.’s foremost avant-garde/commercially viable avant-garde/'offbeat’ director” (149). For Tico Romao, this is evident in the films themselves, which incorporate “the techniques of mainstream filmmaking practice with the formal devices that have come to be associated with the American avant-garde cinema” (60). Greg Hainge similarly emphasises the industrial both/and status of Lynch and his films. The “amazing” thing about Lynch, he writes, is that he has remained “tied to the fringes of major studios and production companies” but also maintained his ability to “make films that consistently exceed the limits of the Hollywood system” (149).

The notion of excess is important for this thesis; as I will argue in this chapter, the strategies used to represent character in *Lost Highway*, *Mulholland Drive* and *Inland Empire* are comparable to those of the films examined in Chapters Two, Three and Four. However, it is my contention that, to use Hainge’s phrase, these strategies “exceed the limits” of classical convention in a way that is more successful than the indie/alternative Indiewood films. For example, the realist illusion of character depth or interiority is *never* reasserted. Likewise, the fragmentation of time and space is more complete, extending at times *to the body*, which makes the films, and their characters, much more difficult to reorder into a coherent whole. Moreover, the ontological instability brought on by the crisis in representation is more comprehensive; to varying degrees, all three films complicate the notion of an authenticity outside of textuality. In this sense, the representation of the characters in
these films would appear more completely to support a model of postmodern subjectivity than indie/alternative Indiewood cinema without falling back on, and thus reaffirming, the Enlightenment model.

In addition to their obvious connection to the same director, *Lost Highway*, *Mulholland Drive* and *Inland Empire*, have been linked in the criticism: Todd McGowan, for example, calls *Lost Highway* and *Mulholland Drive* “companion films” (‘Lost on *Mulholland’ 68), and Roger Clarke refers to *Inland Empire* as “[a]n obvious companion piece to *Mulholland Drive*” (16). Indeed, a cursory examination of the plot of each film reveals many similarities. In *Lost Highway*, protagonist Fred Madison (Bill Pullman), a jazz saxophonist, lives with his emotionally distant wife Renee (Patricia Arquette) in a minimalist Los Angeles house. The Madisons begin to receive videotapes in the mail, which show both the exterior and interior of the house. The final tape they receive shows Fred kneeling beside what appears to be Renee’s dismembered corpse. Although he does not seem to remember having killed Renee, the amnesiac Fred is convicted of her murder. While on death row, Fred suffers from blinding migraines and, during a particularly difficult night, he transforms into (what appears to be) an entirely different person, Pete Dayton (Balthazar Getty). Unable to account for this metamorphosis, the authorities release Pete. Pete returns to his life in the Los Angeles suburbs where he lives with his parents and works at a local garage. Here, Pete meets Alice Wakefield, a gangster’s moll who bears a striking resemblance to Renee (Alice is also played by Patricia Arquette). Pete and Alice immediately instigate a risky affair, with Alice leading Pete through a series of crimes that culminates in a scene at a desert cabin, where Alice disappears and Pete transforms back into Fred. Fred proceeds to hunt down and
kill Mr. Eddy/Dick Laurent (Robert Loggia), the gangster responsible for exploiting Renee/Alice in his porn films. After delivering a message into the intercom at his house, Fred escapes to the highway, pursued by police. The film’s penultimate shot is a close-up of Fred in mid-metamorphosis, the image of his distorted, blurred face suggesting yet another transformation is at hand.

*Mulholland Drive* takes up similar themes to those explored in *Lost Highway*. After some preliminary images of jitterbug dancers, which are followed by an anonymous point-of-view shot moving towards a pillow, we see a brunette woman have a gun pointed at her by the driver of the limousine in which she is travelling. Interrupting this confrontation is a speeding car full of joyriding teenagers, which slams into the limousine. The brunette woman (Laura Elena Harring) stumbles from the wreckage and wanders downhill into the Los Angeles scrub. The woman emerges on Sunset Boulevard, where she beds down in the garden of an apartment complex. The film then shifts focus to Betty Elms (Naomi Watts) an aspiring Canadian actress who arrives in Los Angeles with stars in her eyes (or, more precisely, on her cardigan). Betty discovers the brunette woman in the bathroom of Betty’s aunt’s apartment. Like *Lost Highway*’s Fred, the brunette woman has been rendered amnesiac. Discovering a large sum of money and a blue key in the woman’s handbag, Betty and “Rita” — who appropriates her name from a poster for *Gilda* (Charles Vidor, 1946) hanging in the bathroom — embark on a mission to uncover Rita’s identity, stopping only for Betty to audition for a film. Several vignettes, however, interrupt this narrative. In one, a man (Patrick Fischler) recounts a dream about a demonic presence behind a diner to another man (Michael Cooke) who may or may not be his therapist. In another scene, a hit man (Mark Pellegrino) bungles a
“job” by accidentally shooting several bystanders. In yet another series of scenes, a film director, Adam Kesher (Justin Theroux), battles to retain control of his film and his personal life, which have been complicated, respectively, by Hollywood’s higher powers and his wife’s affair with a pool cleaner. At best, these vignettes are only peripherally connected with Betty and Rita. The scene in the diner, for example, is book-ended by shots of Rita’s sleeping face, suggesting it may be a dream. Similarly, the hit man and his victim (Vincent Castellanos) share a laugh over a “great story” about a “fucking car accident”, which may allude to the crash from which Rita went missing.

Back in the “primary” narrative strand, Betty and Rita’s pursuit of Rita’s identity leads them to a decomposing corpse in a run-down apartment. After this discovery, Rita and Betty visit a nightclub where they witness a midnight performance piece that exposes the cinematic illusion of sound/vision continuity. Here, Betty discovers a blue box in her handbag. At home, the women open the box using the key from Rita’s handbag and, in a scene that echoes Fred’s transformation into Pete in Lost Highway, both Rita and Betty disappear inside the box. After this transition, Betty wakes up with a different name. Betty and Rita are now Diane and Camilla, and their circumstances are entirely different. Diane, it appears, is a bitter, failed actress. A series of flashbacks and/or hallucinations reveal that she is also the jilted lover of Camilla, who is both leading lady for, and fiancée to, Kesher. After a dinner party at which Camilla flaunts her relationships with both Kesher and her new lover (Melissa George) in front of a humiliated Diane, Diane arranges for Camilla to be murdered. The film ends with Diane’s apparent suicide.
Inland Empire continues to engage with the themes that are present in Lost Highway and Mulholland Drive. The narrative, however, is far more complicated. Inland Empire begins with a series of scenes that appear unconnected, as if the film is trying out several ways to start. As one character says (in Polish) during this montage of beginnings: “I look for an opening”. After this, the film appears temporarily to find this “opening”, following Hollywood actress, Nikki Grace (Laura Dern), who lives in a lavish mansion with her Polish husband, Piotrek Król (Peter J. Lucas). A “new neighbour” (listed in the credits as “Visitor #1” and played by Grace Zabriskie) visits Nikki; the visitor recounts two versions of “an old tale”, and prophesies that Nikki will be given a highly desirable part in a new film alongside heartthrob Devon Berk (Justin Theroux). Nikki indeed gets this part; once filming commences, however, director Kingsley Stewart (Jeremy Irons), and his assistant, Freddie (Harry Dean Stanton), reveal that the film they are making, On High in Blue Tomorrows, is in fact a remake of a cursed production, 4/7 (Vier/Sieben). They explain that the film was based on a gypsy folk tale and that it was never finished because its two leads were murdered. It is here that the narrative unravels; as filming of On High in Blue Tomorrows begins, Nikki begins to lose her grip on reality, fusing with Sue Blue, her character in the film, as she stumbles through a cinematic hall of mirrors that appears to include: On High in Blue Tomorrows, 4/7, the making of each of these films, a radio play called Axxon N., and a sitcom featuring anthropomorphic rabbits. Nikki/Sue finally emerges on Hollywood Boulevard, where she is stabbed with a screwdriver and appears to collapse and die, only to get up and walk from this “set” into yet another series of intersecting ontological planes. The film ends in a kind of cinematic meta-space populated by images and characters both
from *Inland Empire* and other films directed by Lynch, and a group of dancing women.

If we examine *Lost Highway*, *Mulholland Drive* and *Inland Empire* alongside each other, it becomes clear that one of the central themes of all three is their concern with subjectivity, or, more precisely, destabilised subjectivity. For scholars of the Lynch oeuvre, this is unsurprising. As Wallace put it: “the theme of multiple/ambiguous identity has been almost as much a Lynch trademark as ominous ambiguous noises on his soundtracks” (150–51). This ambiguity is embedded in the diegeses of all three films, where confusion about subjectivity persists. This can be seen in the recurrence of questions: “What the fuck is your name?”, Fred/Pete is asked in *Lost Highway*; “I don’t know who I am”, laments “Rita” in *Mulholland Drive*; “Who is She? Who is she?” asks an anonymous woman in *Inland Empire*. A common academic response to this central problematic has been to turn to Freud and Lacan, a process Reni Celeste describes as “treating the patient with psychoanalysis” (33). Indeed, there has been a veritable explosion of psychoanalytic criticism on these films. It is not my intention here to debate the validity of these readings. I would, however, suggest that if these films do exhibit psychoanalytic concerns, they do so in a postmodern context. Žižek’s reading of *Lost Highway* which is both Lacanian and postmodern, supports this claim. As Marek Wieczorek asserts in the

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143 Laura Harring, for example, appears in this scene, dressed as if she were Rita/Camilla from *Mulholland Drive*. Also present is a lumberjack who is shown sawing a giant log, which is a clear reference to *Twin Peaks* (1990–1991).

144 Psychoanalytic approaches to *Lost Highway* are primarily Lacanian (see McGowan (‘Finding Ourselves’), Herzogenrath, Žižek, and Caldwell). While McGowan continues this approach with *Mulholland Drive* (‘Lost on Mulholland’), the dominant reading of the film’s two parts as a split between dream and reality has also invited Freudian interpretation (see Lentzner and Ross, Ridgway, McDowell, and Thomas). Even the approach advocated by Martha Nochimson, which explicitly departs from psychoanalysis, still relies on the idea of the unconscious, only this is a Jungian “collective unconscious”, which she suggests should be trusted rather than treated with suspicion (*Passion* 8). One might comfortably predict, then, that the more recently released *Inland Empire* will also be subject to analysis through the critical framework of psychoanalysis.
preface to Žižek’s essay, the conflation, in *Lost Highway*, of Lacanian fantasy and the reality of the symbolic order, or “reality and its fantasmatic support” (x), is what “makes them paradigmatically postmodern” (xi). As Žižek puts it, “this coincidence of opposites…is, in a way, the enigma of ‘postmodernity’ itself” (3). To read these films in Lacanian terms, of course, is already to mobilise poststructuralist ideas about subjectivity that overlap with the postmodern. However, like the other films I have examined in this thesis, I want to suggest that they can also productively be read through more explicitly postmodern theory. Indeed, all three films mobilise representational strategies that render characters depthless, fragmented and simulacral, and can be viewed as supporting a model of postmodern subjectivity as theorised by Jameson and Baudrillard.

Like the indie/alternative Indiewood films I have examined in this thesis, then, *Lost Highway*, *Mulholland Drive* and *Inland Empire* depart from the conventions governing the representation of character in classical Hollywood cinema. This has not gone unnoticed in Lynch scholarship. In ‘Beyond the Threshold of Legibility’, for example, Romao argues that the representation of character in *Lost Highway* can be seen as exceeding the techniques used to represent character that Murray Smith outlines in *Engaging Characters* (Romao 66). As I noted in Chapter One, Smith’s model for character, his “person schema”, includes characteristics that support an Enlightenment model of subjectivity. Romao observes that, in *Lost Highway*, a convention that is central to Smith’s “person schema” is broken: that one actor’s body should correspond to one character, and that this correspondence should be unambiguous (67). The film breaks this convention by having different actors play the same character and by having the same actor play different characters (70).
Embedded in Romao’s title is the suggestion that this represents a movement “[b]eyond the [t]hreshold of [character] legibility” (59). I would suggest that it does not render characters illegible; we can still recognise them as “cinematic depiction[s] of…person[s]” (66) — as distinct from, say, a chair or a telephone. They are just not legible as “persons” according to the definition mobilised by Romao (following Smith). This definition of “person” is underpinned by a set of “rudimentary human attributes” (66), included among which is the spatial and temporal continuity of the body. While the notion of “rudimentary human attributes” is problematic, Romao makes the productive observation that Lost Highway can be read as opening up “metaphysical possibilities” (70). Yet, beyond suggesting that this represents a “destabilisation of identity” (70), he does not closely examine what these “metaphysical possibilities” might be.145 It is my contention that the “possibilities” opened up both by (some of) the representational strategies examined by Romao, and by a range of other techniques that I will outline below, are linked to postmodern theoretical discourse on the category of the subject.

As I will show in this chapter, Lost Highway, Mulholland Drive and Inland Empire engage with the same postmodern themes as those explored in the indie/alternative Indiewood films already discussed: the absence of depth in the postmodern, the fragmentation of historical continuity and hence of memory, and a concern with the status of representation, in particular cinematic representation and its effect both on the diegetic reality inside the films and on the reality the spectators and/or critics inhabit in the world outside the theatre. The important thing, for this

145 The question of subjectivity is peripheral to Romao’s central concerns, which lie with showing that the representation of character in Lost Highway mean that the films directed by Lynch can be understood in relation to the American avant-garde tradition of using strategies that “block” comprehension (60). This, he suggests, is an alternative to the dominant positioning of these films in relation to the European art cinema and Surrealism (60–61).
thesis, is that the representational strategies used to depict character and subjectivity in these films are not limited to the same extent as the indie/alternative Indiewood films already discussed. In what follows, I will examine how each concept — depthlessness, fragmentation, and simulation — works in *Lost Highway*, *Mulholland Drive* and *Inland Empire*, and the ways in which the representation of character and subjectivity moves beyond the limits of the indie/alternative Indiewood films addressed in chapters Two, Three and Four.

**Depthlessness.**

“I am expecting, from you, an Academy Award performance” — Devon Berk, *Inland Empire*

The films directed by Lynch are often criticised for presenting viewers with impenetrable, affectless surfaces and performances that are far from those on which Academy Awards are ordinarily bestowed. *Lost Highway*, *Mulholland Drive* and *Inland Empire* are no exception. Hainge, for example, points to Ebert’s review of *Lost Highway*. Ebert writes:

David Lynch’s *Lost Highway* is like kissing a mirror: You like what you see, but it’s not much fun, and kind of cold. It’s a shaggy ghost story, an exercise in style, a film made with a certain breezy contempt for audiences…What you see is all you get. (qtd. in Hainge 143, ellipses mine)

Wallace supports Ebert’s assertion; he has observed that the films directed by David Lynch have “a cool, detached quality, one that some cinéastes view as more like cold and clinical” (167). As I will show in this section, these films use representational
strategies similar to those mobilised in *American Psycho* and *Being John Malkovich* in order to render character depthless. These are articulated to varying degrees in all three films, yet there is an overall destabilisation of the interior/exterior dichotomies perpetuated in the classical Hollywood cinema’s conventions for representing character.

In *American Psycho*, the close-up of the face — ordinarily a technique used to *provide* (the illusion of) access to character interiority — was mobilised in order to *refuse* access to this interiority and emphasise, instead, that the construct “Patrick Bateman” stopped at the skin. The close-up is also used in *Lost Highway* to draw attention to surface rather than depth. Drawing parallels between the artistic practice of Lynch and the figural processes evident in Francis Bacon’s paintings (as theorised by Deleuze in *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*) (138), Hainge argues that the extreme close-up focuses on parts of the face and body, or the *surfaces* of the parts of the face and the body (namely, lips and skin), reducing bodies to a “pure stylistic function” (146). Hainge suggests that this means we are unable easily to identify with characters, and that, effectively, “character is almost forgotten” (146), or at least the model of character as more than somatic surface.

Anne Jerslev also observes that there is a privileging of the extreme close-up in *Lost Highway*. For Jerslev, “[t]hese ultra close-ups create a kind of perceptual

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146 For further discussion of Bacon, Lynch and Deleuze, see Douglas Smith. For Hainge, Lynch’s films mobilise “techniques normally reserved for painting” in order to connect with the viewer on an affective rather than an intellectual level (142). *Lost Highway* then, appears to provide the opportunity for a Deleuzian affective encounter with the text that Abel argues is lost in the film adaptation of *American Psycho*. Hainge suggests that this affective engagement in *Lost Highway* is what creates a connection with the audience, thereby sustaining the “mass appeal” which Žižek attributes to the films directed by Lynch (Hainge 138). While this may have appeal for academics, and for the so-called “intelligent” audience to whom these films are marketed, I am not so sure that this can be described as “mass”. As McGowan observes, *Lost Highway* has “been largely *without* an audience” (‘Finding Ourselves’ 53, emphasis in original). The popularity (and commercial fate) of *Lost Highway* will be considered, alongside that of *Mulholland Drive* and *Inland Empire*, in the conclusion to this thesis.
disorientation” (151). This is because they “deprive the objects of their precise referentiality and their codification in the world of objects” (153). It is not only that we cannot identify with the characters, then, it is also uncertain at times that what we are looking at is part of a character’s body. Skin could be fabric, or vice versa. In place of depth, Jerslev argues, there is “an almost physical sense of tactile presence or intimacy, of fabrics and surfaces” (151). While this suggests that the depthless image is not necessarily as “cold and clinical” as argued by the cinéastes to whom Wallace referred, it still deprivileges character depth; even if we can identify that which is in extreme close-up as connected to a particular body, we are in “intimate” — yet nevertheless mediated and therefore distanced — contact with the material surfaces of characters rather than with their thoughts or feelings. What this means is that the illusion of character interiority is not supported; our access to Fred and Renee stops at the body or, to return to Ebert’s criticism: what we see is all we get.

Of course, _Lost Highway_ is not comprised only of close-ups and extreme close-ups. The _mise-en-scène_ in the wider shots also contributes to the film’s refusal to sustain the illusion of character interiority. As McGowan observes, there is a curious flatness in the film’s first section, a reduced depth of field that creates the sense that, in Fred’s diegetic landscape, “[e]verything seems to be taking place on the surface, without any depth” (‘Finding Ourselves’ 54). It is not just that the depth of field is diminished; the Madison residence — itself a postmodern quotation of 1940s Art Deco architecture — is devoid of “content” except for a few pieces of furniture. It is, therefore, comparable to Bateman’s apartment in _American Psycho_, although the bright, white minimalism of Bateman’s interiors are, in the Madison home, a darker combination of beige, red and purple tones. Even the furniture
appears more like a collection of abstract museum pieces than functional objects. The absence of “things” in the *mise-en-scène* contributes to the film’s refusal to sustain the illusion that Fred and Renee are “real” people. Indeed, when Fred asks Renee what she will do while he is out performing with his jazz band, it is hard not to share his laughter at Renee’s suggestion that she will stay home and read. Not only does their home appear to be devoid of books, it is difficult to imagine Renee doing anything except slink around the house wearing silk robes. Žižek writes, in this way, that Fred’s world is “‘depthless,’ dark, almost surreal, strangely abstract, colorless, lacking substantial density…with the actors acting almost as in a Beckett or Ionesco play, moving around as alienated automata” (21). Wieczorek explains that, for Žižek, characters in *Lost Highway* are “extraneous[ed]”, alienated not from the world but from *themselves* and rendered “strangely de-realized or de-psychologised persons” (xiii).

The representation of Fred and Renee as Žižek’s “de-psychologized persons” is not just a matter of visual emphasis on surfaces, but also of dialogue. Indeed, there is a marked lack of verbal communication in *Lost Highway*. Although *Lost Highway* appears to be situated in the noir mode, Rose Capp observes that the voice-over that was ubiquitous in classical-era noir is conspicuously absent from this film (55). Unlike *American Psycho*, then, in which voice-over was mobilised in order to emphasise the absence of interiority — or “a single, identifiable emotion”, as Bateman puts it — *Lost Highway* does not even ironically provide this form of access to character interiority. Moreover, the lines that *are* spoken fail to sustain the illusion of character as psychologically realist. Pullman-as-Fred and Arquette-as-Renee deliver their lines with wooden affectlessness, as if the lines were both over-
rehearsed and performed by unaccomplished actors. Celeste notes, in this way, that Fred and Renee “walk about as if their every gesture and word were being recorded” (36), as if the entire interior of the house was covered in the acoustic tiles shown on the walls of Fred’s practice room. The depthless affect of dialogue is further enhanced by the way that these words are recorded; it is not only that Pullman and Arquette speak robotically, but, as Bernd Herzogenrath suggests, that their voices lack resonance. What is missing, he argues, is “the whole spectrum of overtones” that makes “a human voice seem alive”. In his close analysis of sound in *Lost Highway*, Murray Smith observes that this tonal flatness is the result of the “close-miking” of the characters, which, (echoing Jerslev) he writes, “creates an intimacy, but a clinical rather than a sensual one” (‘Reasonable Guide’ 163). In other words, this close-miking removes *sonic* depth, depth that conventionally contributes to classical cinema’s construction of the illusion that we are watching psychologically realistic subjects in a real world, rather than actors moving through a series of theatrical exchanges on a set.

This emphasis on character as surface continues in *Lost Highway’s* second strand, after Fred has “morphed” into Pete. Both McGowan and Žižek argue that Pete’s world is filmed according to the classical Hollywood conventions that sustain verisimilitude. In contrast to the flattened aesthetic of Fred’s world, McGowan argues, there is enhanced depth of field, naturalistic sound, and a full spectrum of colours (‘Finding Ourselves’ 62). As Žižek puts it, “it is in the second part, the staged fantasy, that we get a much stronger and fuller ‘sense of reality,’ of depth of sounds and smells, of people moving around in a ‘real world’” (21). It would be reasonable to assume, then, that characters here are also more “realist”, and therefore
more closely aligned with the Enlightenment model of subjectivity. I would argue, however, that the conventions of classical Hollywood are mobilised in such an exaggerated manner here that they merely replace the literal depthlessness of Fred’s world with the figurative depthlessness of cinematic quotation. Pete, Mr Eddy and Alice occupy their noirish roles so completely that it is difficult to view them as anything other than pastiche. James Naremore explains, in this way, that Pete is a “brooding rebel-without-a-cause”, Mr Eddy “sadistic gangster”, and Alice a reincarnation of Phyllis Dietrichson (More Than 274).

Unlike Fred’s world, where affective content is entirely absent, Pete’s world is one of overstated emotion. Compare, for example, the affectless sex scene between Fred and Renee in the first strand with the excess of affect in the sex scenes between Pete and Alice. The surplus of affect in the latter draws attention to affective content as emanating not from the internal space of the subject, but as the product of cinematic convention (this is later reinforced more explicitly by the simulation of affect in the porn films playing in Andy’s house). The clichéd representation of affective interiority is also visible in the scene where the amnesiac Pete sees Alice for the “first” time. Here, Pete and Alice lock eyes across the garage. This emotionally charged moment of reciprocal recognition is overdetermined by the use of close-ups, slow motion, and Lou Reed’s cover of ‘This Magic Moment’ to construct Pete’s “feelings” for Alice (and vice versa). This transforms the representation of lust-at-first-sight into “lust-at-first-sight”, thereby emphasising the depthlessness of both Pete and Alice. As Mark Mazullo observes, the use of pop and/or rockabilly music in the films directed by Lynch utilises the “banal, clichéd emotional and musical expression” evident in these songs (494). In this sense, the
lyrics to ‘This Magic Moment’ do not so much provide affective content for Pete, as they draw attention to the absence of affective content in the representation of this character.\textsuperscript{147}

Similar strategies are used to represent character in \textit{Mulholland Drive}. It is immediately apparent in the film’s first section — before Betty and Rita become Diane and Camilla — that we are in a world of cinematic cliché. Naomi Watts performs Betty as exaggerated \textit{ingénue}, which is visually signified by her bouncing blonde bob, perky demeanour and preppy outfits. This visual exaggeration is mirrored in the language and tone Betty uses when speaking. Not only do lines like “it’ll be just like in the movies” and “I’d rather be known as a great actress than a movie star” reflexively draw attention to Betty as “actor”, they are also delivered with a heightened enthusiasm that reinforces the superficiality of the character. Rita is similarly superficial; that Rita is a quotation is not only evident in her appropriation of Rita Hayworth’s name, but also in her performance of amnesia, which is a combination of vague utterances and wide-eyed, (dis)ingenuous confusion. It is not surprising, then, that the sex scenes between Betty and Rita and Diane and Camilla mobilise multiple clichés surrounding lesbian sex (Love 126–27), and are marked by an excess of affect similar to that exhibited in Pete and Alice’s trysts in \textit{Lost Highway}, an excess which paradoxically renders these exchanges entirely affectless.

The depthlessness of the two leads in \textit{Mulholland Drive} is underscored by the visual and linguistic/tonal representation of peripheral characters. As Heather K.

\textsuperscript{147}This strategy is repeated in \textit{Mulholland Drive}, where Betty and Kesher lock eyes across the studio, the affect of their soft-lit “magic moment” provided by the saccharine sentiment of Connie Stevens’s ‘Sixteen Reasons’. In \textit{Inland Empire} similar strategies are used to show Nikki/Sue and Devon/Billy, however the pop song is replaced here by the soaring orchestral music of the romantic melodrama.
Love writes, “the film’s universe is populated by a range of ‘walking clichés’” (121). The detectives investigating the limousine crash, like those in *Lost Highway*, speak the language of the police procedural where words are used frugally, as if they were in short supply. Kesher, too, is performed by Theroux as what John Orr calls a “mock composite” of Lynch and his European counterpart Wim Wenders (37), complete with horn-rimmed glasses, all-black attire, and a stubborn refusal to relinquish creative control of his film. The Castiglione brothers who challenge Kesher’s artistic autonomy are also, to paraphrase Charlie Kaufman in *Adaptation*, an audio-visual pastiche of “every mob movie ever made”. Like the exaggerated performances of peripheral characters in *Being John Malkovich*, then, the performances of the peripheral characters emphasises the depthlessness of the central characters in *Mulholland Drive*, refusing the illusion that they are psychologically realist, fictional subjects.

The refusal to sustain the illusion of psychological depth is underscored in the scene where Betty auditions for a film. We are firstly shown Betty rehearsing the scene with Rita. The scene depicts a young woman’s confrontation with an older, sexually predatory man. Here, the acting replicates the clichéd representation of character in the broader film: Rita’s reading is particularly wooden, but Betty’s performance is also overstated. When Betty attends the “real” audition, however, her performance is markedly different. In its comparison with her rehearsal, it appears more adequately to sustain the illusion that we are accessing the character’s authentic interiority. It is not only the performance’s contrast with the rehearsal that makes the audition performance seem more spontaneous, but the fact that it is constructed according to conventions that provide access to authentic interiority, using
techniques like the close-up that are accompanied by Betty’s (ostensibly) uncontrolled breathing and real tears. In his close analysis of this scene, George Toles argues that it demonstrates how “performance...can swiftly confer a sense of identity and a groundedness that have sphinx-like credibility” (2). For Toles, Betty manages to transform what is a “manifestly hollow” scene, which “den[ies] any recourse to an inner life” (3) into a bravura performance of psychological realism. The scene, he continues, elicits the uncritical, emotional engagement of even the most reflexive viewer; we “believe” in Betty as a character despite the fact that we know interiority and affect are a matter of convention, or, as Toles puts it, we engage even though “we understand the limitations—the unembarrassed obviousness—of this kind of acting” (12).

I would argue, however, that the fact that we have already seen the scene rehearsed means that this kind of engagement is at least partially blocked; our knowledge of the lines to be spoken shifts our attention away from the what to the how of the scene, which, regardless of the psychologically convincing performance of Betty and Woody (whose name ironically draws attention to Betty’s earlier, “wooden” performance), nevertheless reminds us that they are performing. Moreover, I would suggest that it is precisely because this psychologically realist performance is presented as a scene embedded inside a broader film that is marked by clichéd performances, that this “realism” is represented as the product of a set of conventions that construct the illusion of character interiority and affect. As Daniel Coffeen suggests, the audition scene merely emphasises that “[f]rom the getgo, [Betty] is acting: there is no ‘real’ Betty or Diane”. In this sense, it recalls the marionette sequence in Being John Malkovich, in which character interiority is...
shown to be imposed not from the authentic interior of the subject, but from outside, on the surface of the body, and in the imposition of film techniques to show this body. Indeed, soon after Betty’s audition, Rebekah Del Rio’s performance of Roy Orbison’s ‘Crying’, in the scene at Silencio, reveals that we cannot be sure that a character’s voice is even that of the photographed body with which it is synchronised. This leaves aside the question of whether this voice is articulating an authentic interiority.

Although Inland Empire’s title appears to mark the film as concerned with “the space within”, it, too, foregrounds the superficial in a similar way to Lost Highway and Mulholland Drive. Indeed, Inland Empire appears to continue the emphasis on abstract surfaces that Hainge and Jerslev see in Lost Highway. This is supported by the use of a relatively low quality or “sub-professional” Sony DSR-PD150 DV camera to shoot the film (Clarke 18), which gives the image a flattened quality. As Anna Katharina Schaffner writes:

[Digital Video’s] grainy, coarse and pixelated visual texture is radically different from [Lynch’s] previous works: static seems to penetrate the picture; the images lack depth, glossiness and sharpness, in a style reminiscent of underground cinematography. (282)

Like Lost Highway, the close-up is privileged in many scenes in Inland Empire, where this technique is used to show the face. Significantly, these faces are often distorted or exaggerated. For example, the woman who visits Nikki at the start of the film is shown in close-up but the image has been distorted by the camera’s close proximity to her face. This strategy is repeated in the scene where a detective (Robert Charles Hunter) interviews a woman (Julia Ormond), who claims that she has been
hypnotised and that she is going to kill someone with a screwdriver. Both the
detective and the woman (who may or may not be Doris Side, Billy’s wife in On
High In Blue Tomorrows) are shown in close-up shots that distort the proportions of
the face. These close-ups draw attention to the skin — the woman’s flaking, dry lips
and the pores on the detective’s face — rather than providing us access to interiority.

At other times in Inland Empire, the close-up is used to conceal the face. In
the opening hotel scene, for example, the characters’ heads have been deliberately
blurred, protecting their identities as if in a news report. At other points, close-ups
are blurred for an unusually long time before coming into focus, forcing us to
contemplate an indistinct image becomes clear exactly what we are looking at. This
happens in the scene at the start of the film, where the man searches for a “way in”.
The scene opens with a shot of one of the men that pulls unusually slowly into focus,
confounding both our expectation of the time it will take for the image to become
clear, and our access to the “content” signified by the face. All of these techniques
refuse the illusion of character interiority.

Nikki/Sue is also frequently shown in close-up in Inland Empire; with
Nikki/Sue however, it is not (only) the angle or clarity of the image that is distorted,
but the facial expression. In a scene from around two-thirds of the way into the film,
for example, Nikki/Sue confronts Devon/Billy in front of his wife and child. Here
Nikki/Sue is clearly distressed, but her facial expression is exaggerated beyond what
would be considered realist in the context of the scene. This draws attention to the
surface of the expression — in this case, Nikki/Sue’s clenched teeth and protruding

148 The convention of blurring the face, often utilised in news reports where the subject’s identity is
protected by law, is a very clear demonstration of the ideological privileging of the face, and not the
rest of the body, as the locus of identity.
lower lip — rather than its affective content. The representation of the face as a mask is explicitly marked several minutes later, where a shot of a painting of a laughing clown face is contrasted with a shot in which Nikki/Sue, lit by a spotlight, runs towards the camera and grins maniacally. Amy Taubin writes that one of the most memorable images from *Inland Empire* is “Laura Dern’s oscillating face” (59), which invokes the similar contortions in Dern-as-Sandy’s face at the end of *Blue Velvet*. It is significant that Taubin refers to Dern rather than Nikki or Sue because it illustrates the extent to which psychological depth is evaded in the film; when we are shown close-ups, we are watching a body in performance, not a realist portrayal of a character.

Indeed, performance is central to *Inland Empire*, in which the narrative, such as it can be discerned, focuses on the making of a film. Like *Mulholland Drive*, the film features a scene in which the signifiers for authentic performance are mobilised in order to demonstrate their constructedness. This scene takes place in a room located somewhere in the upper levels of a derelict building on Hollywood Boulevard. Here, Nikki/Sue sits with a man to whom she recounts, in monologue, her history with a series of abusive men. The scene is located in a grimy setting, connoting “gritty realism”, and the performance is presented as if it were psychologically realist. Like Betty’s audition, the camera focuses on Nikki/Sue’s deglamourised, bruised face as she recounts a narrative that is framed as truth stripped of pretence. Yet Dern’s performance is exaggerated to the point of irony; as J. Hoberman writes, this is “an outrageous tough-girl confession that might be the
world’s most preposterous screen test”. This is heightened by the fact that the man to whom she is confessing her “story” is shown to be expressionless and entirely unaffected by such disturbing material as Nikki/Sue’s graphic description of her gouging of the eye of a would-be rapist. When the man does respond, his lines — “were you, in fact, seeing another man?” — are delivered in a monotone that is entirely devoid of affective content. Taken alongside the other clearly marked performances of the film, Nikki/Sue’s monologue, then, asks us to consider this apparently authentic expression of interiority as equally depthless.

Indeed, the characters in both the diegetic reality in which Nikki is situated, and the film-within-a-film, On High In Blue Tomorrows, are cinematic clichés. As Manohla Dargis observes, the name Nikki Grace “suggests tacky self-invention and a straight-to-video career”. It also refers to Dern’s roles in earlier films directed by Lynch: Blue Velvet and Wild at Heart (1990). Devon is very specifically marked as the “Wild One” in the shots of his helpers clothing him in black leather. Likewise, Kingsley Stewart wears the uniform of the silent era director, complete with neckerchief, beige pants and megaphone. Kingsley, then, references an older Hollywood cliché than the model Kesher embodies in Mulholland Drive; the effect, however, renders him equally depthless because it refuses the illusion that Kingsley is a character and not a caricature. Nikki and Devon’s characters in On High In Blue

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149 This footage is, in a sense, Dern’s screen test for Inland Empire. Nochimson explains that the film evolved from this scene, which Lynch and Dern filmed as a seventy-minute monologue without knowing how or if it would fit into a broader narrative (‘Inland Empire’ 11). This is marked within the scene itself, when Nikki/Sue states: “I don’t really understand what I’m doing here”.

150 Devon’s appropriation of the signifiers associated with Marlon Brando’s Johnny Stabler in The Wild One (Laslo Benedek, 1953) is also an intertextual reference to the use of this same strategy in Wild at Heart, in which Sailor (Nicolas Cage) dons the snakeskin jacket of Brando’s Val Xavier in The Fugitive Kind (Sidney Lumet, 1959). The postmodern irony is particularly pronounced in this case, because Sailor insists at several points in the film that the jacket confirms his authentic, autonomous subjectivity, or, as he puts it, that it “represents a symbol of my individuality and my belief in personal freedom”.

205
Tomorrows are equally depthless. Not only is the film title itself an example of high camp, in the few scenes that are clearly marked as part of the film the dialogue between Sue Blue and Billy Side mobilises the language of the daytime soap opera. In the scene on the porch, for example, Sue does not merely inform Billy that their relationship is doomed to fail, she says: “all I see from this is blue tomorrows”. Later, when Sue joins Billy for a fireside drink, their discourse is equally clichéd; Billy’s “don’t ruin this” is met with Sue’s “there’s nothing to ruin”. Emphasising the depthlessness of these exchanges is the soundtrack, on which a short segment of orchestral music plays in a loop. The looping, here, of the same segment of music further demonstrates that orchestral music is a hackneyed device for constructing the illusion of affective content, which adds to the depthlessness of the characters.

The important thing, for this thesis, about the representation of character and subjectivity as depthless in Lost Highway, Mulholland Drive and Inland Empire is that the films refuse to remobilise the conventions that counteract the postmodern model of subjectivity they support. That is, there is no revelation of an authentic subject beneath the surface, as there is at the end of American Psycho. Both Lost Highway and Mulholland Drive, for example, end with images that suggest a circular return to their respective beginnings: the road in Lost Highway, and the washed-out image of Betty (and Rita) in Mulholland Drive. Neither is ironic performance replaced with the sincerity of emotional realism as it is in Being John Malkovich. Inland Empire, for example, ends with a lip-synched performance of Nina Simone’s ‘Sinner Man’. Like the scene at Silencio in Mulholland Drive, the clear mismatch between the aural track, which is recognisable as Nina Simone’s vocal, and the visual image of the woman (Monique Cash) “singing”, which, for viewers familiar
with the singer, is clearly not Nina Simone, leaves us with a final rejection of the techniques that combine to construct the illusion of character depth. In all three films, we are shown characters whose depthlessness appears to support a postmodern model of subjectivity as surface.

**Fragmentation.**

“I thought of it as playing a broken or dismantled person, with these other people leaking out of her brain.” — Laura Dern on playing Nikki/Sue in *Inland Empire* (qtd. in Lim)

The absence of closure in *Lost Highway, Mulholland Drive* and *Inland Empire* is not surprising given the fragmentation of linear narrative that is evident in each film. Like *Memento* and *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, *Lost Highway, Mulholland Drive* and *Inland Empire* fragment linear narrative. In *Memento* and *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, this fragmentation takes the form of two strands: one chronological, one reverse-chronological. In both, the alternation of these strands renders linear narrative fragmented. The fragmentation of linear narrative is instantiated differently in *Lost Highway, Mulholland Drive* and *Inland Empire*. *Lost Highway* and *Mulholland Drive* have sections (of varying length) that conform to the convention of linear, causally motivated narrative associated with the classical paradigm. These are interrupted by sudden shifts in narrative direction. In *Inland Empire*, narrative linearity is fragmented from the start, although it, too, has a long section that appears legible as a linear narrative. As I indicated in Chapter One, the linear narrative with which the classical paradigm is associated works to sustain the notion that subjectivity is continuous and coherent. By challenging this, the
fragmentation of narrative in these films appears to support a model of postmodern subjectivity.

Although its pace is slowed, *Lost Highway* follows a reasonably linear narrative in both the “Fred” and “Pete” sections. Fred’s section is structured around the mystery of the videotapes (although the linear unfolding of this story is interrupted by a dream sequence and a flashback). Pete’s section, too, is largely linear, replacing the mystery of the videotapes with his affair with Alice (this, too, contains a flashback scene detailing Alice’s history with Mr. Eddy/Dick Laurent). As Jane Stadler puts it, *Lost Highway* “does include scenes and sequences that are intelligible as stories” (18), or at least the kinds of stories we are used to seeing in narrative films.\(^{151}\) The narrative, however, is punctuated by three (il)logical gaps. The first of these gaps comes when Fred metamorphoses into Pete. Apart from a foreboding montage that starts with a series of cinematic signifiers for the paranormal (flickering lights, electrical storm, smoke) and ends with a zoom into a fleshy void, we do not actually see Fred turn into Pete; the image of Pete in Fred’s cell, then, shows us an effect without a logical cause. The second logical gap arrives later in the film, when Pete, having travelled with Alice to a desert cabin, transforms back into Fred. Unlike the first transformation, there is no ominous montage to signal that something “spooky” is about to happen. In a match-on-action sequence, the film cuts from a medium shot of Pete rising to his feet, to a medium-long shot of Fred standing in Pete’s place. It is only after we see Fred in Pete’s place that an orchestral screech on the soundtrack draws attention to this as a rupture in logic. The third logical gap comes after Fred has killed Mr. Eddy/Dick Laurent. Here, Fred returns to

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\(^{151}\) I want to re-emphasise, here, that the fact *Lost Highway* eschews narrative conventions does not mean it is unintelligible as a story but, rather, that it is unconventional.
his house and delivers the message “Dick Laurent is dead” into his intercom. We know this is illogical not only because it was the line that opened the film but also because it was Fred who received the message.

These gaps make it difficult to link Lost Highway’s logic-driven sections into a linear whole. The film is forced into a Nietzschean loop, which, as Celeste explains, rejects Aristotelian logic and thus:

…serves to complicate the traditional notion of time as a forward progression consisting of three dimensions—past, present, and future, as well as the traditional notion of narrative as a self-enclosed structure consisting of plot, drama, and closure (34).

Other critics have theorised this cyclical structure as a Moebius strip, which has two separate strands that are both parallel and continuous with each other (Chion 194; Herzogenrath; Warner 6). As Hainge points out, though, the fact that Fred speeds off into the desert at the end is evidence of the narrative “surpassing” this looped structure (145), which therefore renders “logic and linear time…as broken as the median strip of the road that frames the entire film” (145). I would suggest that, rather than abandoning this explanatory metaphor altogether, we read Lost Highway’s narrative as perforated Moebius strip, which is both parallel/continuous and punctured with holes.

Mulholland Drive’s narrative is also largely linear and coherent; as McGowan writes, “[a]lmost everyone who sees Mulholland Drive…notes that the first part of the film makes a good deal of sense—at least for a David Lynch movie” (‘Lost on Mulholland’ 67). As I explained in the introduction to this chapter, we can discern a primary narrative thread, which is propelled forward in chronological order
by Betty and Rita’s search for Rita’s identity (despite the insertion of the episodes that appear only tangentially connected to the main narrative strand).\textsuperscript{152} There is, however, one central logical gap that disrupts the linearity of narrative. This gap comes when Betty and Rita return to Aunt Ruth’s apartment after discovering a blue key in Betty’s handbag. Here, Betty inexplicably disappears. It is not just that she has left the bedroom; a long take shows Betty placing the blue box on the bed, and then pans to Rita locating the blue key, then pans back to where Betty was standing to show she has vanished. After turning the key in the blue box, Rita too disappears, except she seems to be sucked into the black space inside the box. A fast zoom inside accompanied by a muffled whooshing noise and a shot of the box falling to the floor of the now empty bedroom confirm that Rita has also vanished. This is reinforced by the hitherto absent Aunt Ruth (Maya Bond) inexplicably returning to the room, which is shown to be empty.

Both Betty’s sudden absence from the room and Rita’s disappearance inside a box no larger than a Rubik’s Cube are logical impossibilities. Not only are Betty and Rita’s disappearances marked as ruptures in the continuity of this particular sequence, they also mark their transition into entirely different characters, and therefore signals a gap in the film’s broader logic. Unlike \textit{Lost Highway}, however, there is no second gap; Diane and Camilla fail to “transform” back into Betty and Rita (unless, of course, you read the over-exposed image of the two women that is imposed over the Los Angeles skyline at the end of the film as Betty and Rita). This

\textsuperscript{152} This is not in itself an unusual narrative structure. As Buckland explains, these vignettes are part of a “paradigmatic” form of narrative that is ordinarily used in television serials rather than narrative films, where narrative is ordinarily “syntagmatic”. The paradigmatic narrative structure of the television serial only reverts to syntagmatic narrative over the course of multiple episodes and hence a much longer period of screen time (136). These vignettes, then, establish narrative strands that we may expect to continue — and ultimately be resolved — through the course of the film.
narrative, then, is not a Moebius strip; as Kovács explains, Betty’s transformation into Diane marks the beginning of a section that effectively repeats the narrative of the first two-thirds of the film in inverted form (‘Things’ 168). Kovács argues, in this way, that *Mulholland Drive* replaces causation-driven narrative with repetitive storytelling (‘Things’ 168). Again, this repetitive structure disrupts linearity because it both abandons and repeats in different form the narrative track on which it started.

*Inland Empire* presents the most thoroughgoing challenge to linear narrative, as if the use of digital video in place of film renders obsolete the notion of the continuous unravelling of the film reel.\(^\text{153}\) As I explained in the introduction to this chapter, the film begins with a series of disconnected scenes. The first is a title sequence of sorts. Here, the words “INLAND EMPIRE” are illuminated in a shaft of projector light, and a grainy, black and white image of a needle moving in the groove of a vinyl record introduces us to: “Axxon N., the longest running radio play in history. Tonight, continuing in the Baltic region, a grey winter day in an old hotel”. This is followed by what appears (somewhat illogically, considering it is introduced as a radio play) to be black and white images from *Axxon N*. Here, we see a man and woman, whose heads have been blurred, enter a hotel room. The man orders the woman, possibly a prostitute, to remove her clothes. The next shots appear to show the same woman sitting on the same bed, watching television, except they are presented in colour. The next scene shows a group of anthropomorphic rabbits discoursing in a series of non-sequiturs that are punctuated by canned laughter. This scene is also shot in colour. The final scene shows the two men discussing the search

\(^{153}\) See Amy Taubin’s ‘The Big Rupture’, in which she argues that the use of digital video in films like *Inland Empire* and *Southland Tales* (Richard Kelly, 2006) represents a “radical transformation of the ‘cinematic apparatus’” (54).
for an “opening” or “a way in”. Comparisons could be drawn, here, with *Mulholland Drive*’s “vignettes”; unlike *Mulholland Drive*, however, where the “episodes” all appear to be taking place in the same diegetic reality, the episodes in *Inland Empire* appear to take place on discrete ontological planes, with the aesthetic varying vastly from black-and-white to colour, naturalistic to more theatrical lighting, and from largely realist cinematography to a series of distortions of the image.

*Inland Empire* begins, then, with a series of sequences that are almost impossible to make sense of as a linear narrative. As Taubin puts it, these scenes seem “contiguous…simply because they reside in the selects bin on Lynch’s Avid hard drive” (56). The film temporarily reverts to a linear narrative structure in the strand featuring Nikki and her role in *On High in Blue Tomorrows*, but abandons this relatively quickly. The majority of the film is presented as a series of intersecting scenes that are both internally incoherent and which do not appear to be causally linked to each other. *Inland Empire*’s narrative is “Chinese-box-like” (Schaffner 284), a series of nested texts that, like *Lost Highway* and *Mulholland Drive*, explicitly rejects linear narrative. Indeed, in one particularly reflexive moment, we see a close-up of a watch whose hands are spinning out of control, followed by an elaborate visual metaphor for cinematic spectatorship in which Nikki/Sue gazes through a hole that she has burned in a silk slip.

Despite the differences in the ways that narrative fragmentation is articulated in *Lost Highway*, *Mulholland Drive* and *Inland Empire*, in all three, this fragmentation is accompanied by the breakdown in character and subjectivity. Like *Memento* and *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, this fragmentation is marked, in the films, as the disruption to or absence of memory. In *Lost Highway* and
*Mulholland Drive*, this is specifically marked as amnesia: Fred cannot remember having murdered Renee and Pete similarly insists that he does not remember how he came to occupy Fred’s jail cell, although his friends and family make ominous references to “that night”. In *Mulholland Drive*, Rita claims to have forgotten her name and her identity and cannot remember the circumstance surrounding the car crash responsible for her erased personal history. Although amnesia is not foregrounded as explicitly as it is in *Lost Highway* and *Mulholland Drive*, there are also frequent references to “forgetting” in *Inland Empire*. For example, the “neighbour” who visits Nikki at the start of the film exclaims: “forgetfulness, it happens to us all…I can’t seem to remember if it’s today, two days from now, or yesterday. I suppose if it was 9:45, I would think it was after midnight”. Similar utterances are repeated throughout the film. Nikki/Sue expresses her temporal disorientation with lines like: “it’s a story that happened yesterday, except I know it’s tomorrow”, and “look at me, and tell me if you’ve known me before”. In a particularly reflexive moment, she declares: “I don’t know what was before or after. I don’t know what happened first and it’s kinda laid a mind-fuck on me”. The fragmentation of narrative, then, can be read as mirroring the fragmentation of characters, who have lost the capacity to “think historically”. Like *Memento* and *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, then, it is possible to read these films as thematically concerned with Jameson’s notion that the rupture in temporal continuity and the loss of historical depth renders the subject temporally fragmented or “schizophrenic”.

In Chapter Two, I explored the notion, forwarded by critics like Sibielski, that the fragmentation of narrative in *Memento* represented the fragmentation of
Leonard’s memory into a series of Jamesonian “presents in time”. This was coupled with the failure of Leonard’s Polaroid photographs and their captions to “add up” into a coherent, linear narrative. Although the fragmentation of narrative into a series of “perpetual presents” is not as explicit as it is in Memento, the rupture in the continuity of the amnesiac in Lost Highway, Mulholland Drive and Inland Empire causes a similar breakdown in the relationship between individual photographs and the broader narrative. This can be seen in the connection between bodies (photographs) and names (captions). The stability of this connection is undermined in two ways. Firstly, the same name is attached to multiple, photographically discrete bodies. This is particularly evident in Mulholland Drive, where the caption “Camilla Rhodes” is attached firstly to a photograph of a blonde woman (Melissa George), but is later reattached to the photograph of the brunette woman whom we know as “Rita” (Laura Elena Harring). The name “Diane” is also attached to multiple photographs; firstly it is attached — on a name badge — to the waitress (Missy Crider) who serves Betty and Rita and Winkie’s diner. It is then reattached to the decomposing corpse the women find in the apartment (Lyssie Powell), and, finally, to the blonde woman (Naomi Watts), whom we originally knew as “Betty”. The name “Betty” also reappears on the nametag of the same waitress who was originally “tagged” as “Diane”.

That the image of Naomi Watts is “recaptioned” as Diane points us to the second way in which the connection between bodies and names is ruptured: by having multiple names attached to a single, photographically discrete body. As I pointed out in the introduction to this chapter, Romao describes this as a break with the “one actor/one character” rule that is crucial to Smith’s “person schema”. He sees
evidence of this in *Lost Highway*, where Patricia Arquette plays both Renee and Alice (70). The important break, however, is not between actor and character, but between actor and character *name*. I would argue that Renee and Alice are not different characters; like Kim Novak’s Madeleine and Judy in *Vertigo* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1958), Renee and Alice are basically the same person with different coloured hair. The rupture, then, lies in the fact that the same photographed body — Arquette’s — has *two* captions. This is also visible in *Mulholland Drive*, where Naomi Watts is “captioned” with the names “Betty” and “Diane”, and Laura Elena Harring is both “Rita” and “Camilla”. Again, the rupture is not between actor and character. Betty and Diane, and Rita and Camilla, are basically consistent; except for Rita’s brief appearance in a platinum blonde wig, they do not even change hair colours. Again, the important rupture is between photograph and caption, or actor and character *name*, because it destabilises our sense of the character as coherent and continuous.

In *Inland Empire*, the connection between photograph and caption is also unstable. Laura Dern and Justin Theroux are also “captioned” with two names: Dern is both “Nikki” and “Sue”, and Theroux is “Devon” and “Billy”. This would appear to be more stable given the diegetic explanation that Sue and Billy are characters in *On High In Blue Tomorrows*. The dissolution, however, of the border separating the diegetic reality of *Inland Empire* from the reality of the film within-the-film, means we can never be certain if the image of, say, Dern in a particular scene should be “captioned” with “Nikki” or “Sue” (or both “Nikki” and “Sue”). The characters within the diegesis are also uncertain of how to “caption” each other; in the love scene between Dern and Theroux, for example, Theroux calls Dern “Sue”, but Dern
calls Billy “Devon” and insists that “it’s me, Nikki”. This uncertainty is intensified in
the case of Peter J. Lucas, who plays Nikki’s husband Piotrek, Sue’s husband
“Smithy”, and (possibly) multiple other characters from the narrative strand(s) that
(appear to) focus on 4/7 and its cursed production history. Crucially, it is never
explained that Piotrek is also a character in On High in Blue Tomorrows (or, for that
matter, that he was part of 4/7); at one point Kingsley asks: “Who is playing
Smithy?” and there is no answer. Indeed, when the first “visitor” suggests to Nikki
that her husband may be involved in On High in Blue Tomorrows, Nikki denies this
is the case. The film credits do not even list “Smithy” as a character. It is even less
certain, then, how to “caption” the images of Peter J. Lucas than it is with those of
Dern and Theroux.

The importance of the “caption” is underscored if we observe that the most
unsettling characters in these films are the ones who do not have proper names, and
are therefore (moving) photographs of bodies that are never “captioned”. In all three
films, anonymity is represented as threatening. Lost Highway has the ghoulish
“Mystery Man” (Robert Blake). Mulholland Drive has the grubby-faced “Bum”
(Bonnie Aarons) and the “Cowboy” (Monty Montgomery). Inland Empire has the
“visitors” — both “Visitor # 1”, who calls on Nikki at the beginning of the film, and
“Visitor #2” (Mary Steenburgen), who visits Nikki/Sue at Smithy’s house later in the
film — and the “Phantom” (Krzysztof Majchrzak). Unlike, say, the image of Naomi
Watts, where the caption “Betty” appears relatively stable until it is re-captioned as
“Diane”, in all of these cases the photographed body is never “captioned” (except in

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154 There are parallels here with the name “Alan Smithee”, which has historically been used by
directors (including Lynch, on some versions of Dune) to obscure their involvement in a film.
Smithee, then, is a signifier for anonymity. In this sense, “Smithy’s House” can be interpreted as the
kind of anonymous space similar to the motel room in Memento.
the films’ credits) and is therefore always already unstable. Celeste writes, in this way, that *Lost Highway*’s Mystery Man represents “the Bataillian…excess which undoes and exceeds any system of signification” (35), or Derridean Otherness, which “transgresses signification” (35). This reading of anonymity as in excess of signification could be extended to a discussion of the nameless characters in *Mulholland Drive* and *Inland Empire*. If we compare the fragmentation of character in these films to Leonard’s set of Polaroid photographs in *Memento*, we are left with multiple “photographs” and “captions” whose connections are reorganised through the course of the films, and whose connections to the broader narrative(s), therefore, are considerably unstable.

It is not only the instability of the connection of names and bodies that contributes to the fragmentation of character in *Lost Highway*, *Mulholland Drive* and *Inland Empire*; all three also mobilise the “impossible coherence” that I have argued is evident in *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*. This is visible both in the movement of characters within scenes, and in the transitions between scenes. For example, continuity editing is used to emphasise impossible disappearances of bodies. In *Lost Highway*, for example, after Pete has transformed back into Fred (another kind of impossible coherence I will address below), Alice is shown walking inside the desert cabin, but when Fred follows, she is no longer there; the camera’s sweep of the room confirms this logically impossible disappearance. As I indicated earlier in this chapter, Betty and Rita’s disappearances in *Mulholland Drive* — from the room and inside the blue box, respectively — are characterised by impossible coherence. The illogical disappearance of the body is also present in *Inland Empire*, where the intruder on the set of *On High In Blue Tomorrows* is shown to have
escaped from an enclosed space with no exit, or “disappeared where it’s real hard to disappear”, as Devon puts it. This is later revealed to be doubly impossible, because it is in fact Nikki/Sue who is shown to be the intruder at the same time as she is seen sitting opposite Kingsley and Freddie at the trestle table on the other side of the studio. Indeed, continuity editing is also used to show the same body in two locations inside the same space. This strategy is mobilised in the photograph of Renee and Alice that appears toward the end of *Lost Highway*. It is remobilised in *Mulholland Drive*, when Betty discovers what is in effect her own decomposing body in Diane Selwyn’s apartment (although, like Nikki’s location on both sides of the studio in *Inland Empire*, this is only legible in retrospect as an impossibility). When Diane appears to hallucinate the return of Camilla, there is another brief moment where Diane’s point of view is cut with a reverse shot of Diane, which is also a spatiotemporal impossibility.

This kind of impossible coherence is mobilised more extensively in *Inland Empire*, where noncontiguous geographical spaces are edited together as if they were contiguous. For example, after Nikki/Sue stumbles into Smithy’s house, which is located on the set for *On High in Blue Tomorrows*, shot/reverse-shot editing shows Devon/Billy peering inside from the studio, then Nikki/Sue’s terrified face, then a shot of a sun-lit driveway where we would expect to see Devon/Billy again. Several scenes later, Nikki, still in Smithy’s house, puts her hands over her face, and the reverse shots show these hands being removed to reveal a snow-swept European street.

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155 Of course, that the window in Smithy’s house provides a view into the front yard is not a geographical impossibility; it is entirely commensurate with the rules of realist representation, which dictate that editing sustain the illusion that the set is in fact a real house located on a real street. It is only disruptive because we were originally shown the view from Smithy’s house to be the film studio.
These impossible continuities also extend to the way the body is placed in these spaces. Nikki/Sue is frequently filmed as if her body were located in two spaces inside the frame. This happens, for example, when Visitor #1 tells her “if it was tomorrow, you would be sitting over there”. Here, we see a shot of the visitor’s finger pointing, then a shot of Nikki looking in the direction of this gesture, yet the reverse shot shows Nikki seated on the couch. This is a highly reflexive moment in which the visitor also makes reference to continuity as both founded on the concept of causation (“actions do have consequences”) and an illusion constructed through the editing process (“but then, there is the magic”), which can just as easily be destabilised, as we see in this series of shots. This strategy is also evident in the scene(s) on Hollywood Boulevard that are shown towards the end of Inland Empire. Here, shot reverse-shot continuity editing shows Nikki/Sue on both sides of the street, further fragmenting the coherence of legible three-dimensional space by interrogating editing conventions.

The final way in which impossible coherence manifests is in the use of continuity editing to show the same character fragmenting into different bodies. Romao describes this as using “two different performers [to] play what appears to be the same character” (70). Even though Lost Highway’s Fred and Pete have separate names and lives, and are played by photographically distinguishable actors, we are encouraged to read these characters as continuous with each other. In the first transformation, for example, the constricted space of the jail cell and the guard’s shock at discovering Pete in Fred’s place encourages us to assume that Fred has not simply escaped but that the two men are somehow the same-yet-different. Pete’s head wound also indicates that we are to read him as continuous with Fred because it
links back to the montage leading to his metamorphosis, where he was shown holding his hands over his bleeding head. The second transformation is even more explicitly continuous. Here, the switch from a naked Pete to a naked Fred is represented through a match-on-action cut. Moreover, Fred dresses himself in the clothes Pete was wearing in the previous scene, leaving no space to imagine a logical “swap” has occurred. The fragmentation of character here is significant. Fred’s bodily instability demonstrates his inability to “think historically”. The temporal fragmentation of amnesia, then, is inextricably tied, in *Lost Highway*, *Mulholland Drive* and *Inland Empire*, to varying degrees of disruption to the coherence of the body. In this sense, the characters in these films can be read as more fully supporting a model of fragmented postmodern subjectivity, moving beyond the limits to the representation of this model of subjectivity in *Memento* and *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, where the persistence of the body anchors the temporal fragmentation of the amnesiac.

In arguing that *Lost Highway*, *Mulholland Drive* and *Inland Empire* take further the representational strategies mobilised in the indie/alternative Indiewood films I have discussed, I do not wish to suggest that they do not also ask to be reconstructed in a coherent whole. On the contrary, I would suggest that *Lost Highway*, *Mulholland Drive* and *Inland Empire* surely ask us to mobilise the sense-making faculties we bring to all acts of spectatorship, providing opportunities for Smith’s architectural pleasure, or what David Andrews calls the “pure aesthetic thrill of its intricate formal structures” (25). *Lost Highway*, *Mulholland Drive* and *Inland Empire* tantalise viewers with the possibility that they can be made sense of. This is particularly true of *Mulholland Drive*, which is explicitly marketed as a mystery to
be solved. Printed on the DVD cover, for example, is a list of “David Lynch’s 10 Clues to Unlocking the Thrills of *Mulholland Drive*”, which asks us to “pay attention” to or “notice” particular objects and occurrences in the film, such as the location of a red lampshade or incidents “surrounding the man behind Winkie’s”. The cover also includes a “Synopsis by David Lynch” which divides the film into three parts: “Part One: She found herself the perfect mystery. Part Two: A Sad Illusion. Part Three: Love”. Like Christopher Nolan’s assurances that *Memento* can be unravelled, that “the answers are all there for the attentive viewer” (qtd. in Mottram *Making 26*), these “guides” suggests that there is a way to reorder *Mulholland Drive* into a unified, and coherent whole.

However, given Lynch’s well-documented opposition to the hermeneutic activity surrounding his films — an attitude that can be read as postmodern regardless of his intentions — it is questionable whether the clues and the synopsis are useful or are in fact designed deliberately to stymie attempts to “unlock the thrills” of the film, unless, of course, you define irremediable confusion as “thrilling”.¹⁵⁶ I would suggest that the instabilities I have outlined above — namely, the more thorough fragmentation of the stable connection of names to bodies, and the various ruptures in spatiotemporal continuity — mean that *Lost Highway*, *Mulholland Drive* and *Inland Empire* are much more difficult to reconstruct into a coherent, linear narrative than *Memento* and *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*. How do we account, for example, for the impossible location of Nikki/Sue on both sides of a room, as both observer and observed? Can we explain why Fred’s amnesia

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¹⁵⁶ As Jennifer A. Hudson points out, Lynch is well know for his advocacy of “luxuriating in the unexplained” (19). It is not difficult to imagine this “luxuriating” as being attractive to the so-called “intelligent” consumers of indie/alternative Indiewood cinema.
— his “inability to think historically” — not only means his name but also his body changes into that of a younger man? Not only are characters represented as without depth, they are also considerably fragmented.

**Simulation.**

“I thought this was an original script.” — Devon Berk, *Inland Empire*

The largely irremediable fragmentation of character in *Lost Highway*, *Mulholland Drive* and *Inland Empire* has not stopped the proliferation of solutions to explain these disjunctions. The fragmentation of character in *Lost Highway*, for example, has been interpreted as a “psychogenic fugue”. Murray Smith writes:

…the story can be understood in terms of the condition known as a *fugue*, a term for a psychological dislocation so severe that the sufferer takes on an entirely different character and existence, divorced from and apparently oblivious to their former or ‘normal’ character (‘Reasonable Guide’ 159).

According to this reading, Fred’s transformation into Pete represents a particular kind of amnesia that causes him to begin an entirely different life with a different personal history. Pete’s transformation back into Fred, then, represents the return of Fred’s memory and thus a return to his “real” life. Alternatively, the fragmentation of *Lost Highway*’s protagonist has been read in terms of what Ruth Perlmutter calls “Owl-Creek Syndrome” (127). 157 Like the doomed protagonist in Ambrose Bierce’s short story, in this reading, Fred’s transformation into Pete is “a prolonged extreme-stress

157 Although Perlmutter refers here to *Mulholland Drive* — where this possibility is equally plausible — this reading is more commonly applied to *Lost Highway.*
pre-execution hallucination” (Wallace 158). Thomas asserts in this way that, while we think Fred has “morphed” into Pete, Fred has remained in prison for the entire time (94). He suggests, further, that when Fred “appears to convulse and change shapes and faces behind the wheel of his large automobile, he is in reality in the shuddering throes of death by electrocution” (94). Fred’s bodily discontinuity, then, becomes legible as the product of his imagination. Indeed, the film has more generally been read as a drawn-out fantasy. Patricia Arquette’s interpretation of the film exemplifies this approach. In Arquette’s view, Fred kills Renee out of suspicion that she is unfaithful. As a result, he has a breakdown in which he fantasises an alternative life (where Renee is still alive) but his inability to trust his wife renders this fantasy equally dystopic (Rodley 10; Lynch and Rodley 231–32).

The fragmentation of character in Mulholland Drive has also been pieced back together in the common reading of the first two-thirds of the film as a dream, and the last third a representation of reality as told through the memories of Diane. Thomas explains:

I would hazard that anyone who has made much sense of Lynch’s film has most likely accomplished this feat by recognizing that its first two hours represent an extended dream on the part of the central character, Diane Selwyn (Naomi Watts), while the film’s last segment narrates the ‘actual’ historical circumstances that have informed the dream’s patterns of imagery and that culminate in Diane’s hallucinatory psychotic breakdown (if that is what we should call it) as well as her final hysterical suicide (if, indeed, that is what occurs). (81–82)\(^\text{158}\)

\(^{158}\) See for example McDowell (1037), Lentzner and Ross (102) and Ridgway (45). It should be noted here that Thomas does insist that this is not the only possible reading that can be made of Mulholland Drive (95, n.1).
Andrews observes that this “[o]neiric [r]eadinig” (26) is “psychonaturalistic” (29) because both parts are interpreted as taking place inside Betty/Diane’s mind: the first shows us her dreams, the second her memories and hallucinations. Like Pete, then, this reading views Betty as a product of Diane’s mind.

Although it would seem that Inland Empire’s more irremediably fragmented narrative and protagonist might be impossible logically to explain, attempts have been made in the discourse on the film to restabilise its discontinuities. Nochimson, for example, reads Inland Empire as “a simulacrum of creativity” (‘Inland Empire’ 11), which follows “Nikki’s creative struggles to find her character” (‘Inland Empire’ 13). Taubin similarly writes that: “Inland Empire is an exploration of consciousness, specifically processes of consciousness involved in making a work of art” (56). She further explains that:

One might comfortably read the narrative of Inland Empire as a map of an actor’s explorations in building a character: the alleyways and doorways behind the set are concretizations of imaginary places she visits to gather background; the dredging up of personal memories that might serve the character, and the feeling of being taken over by the character are both routine parts of the process, as is the somewhat scary but oddly pleasurable sense of being two people—the actor and the character—at once. (56)

According to these readings, Inland Empire is, indeed, located in Nikki’s mental landscape, an interpretation that is made explicit in the Italian translation of the film’s title as L’Impero Della Mente (Empire of the Mind). Like those mobilised to explain Lost Highway and Mulholland Drive, this reading restabilises the fragmentation of character by positioning Sue as the product of Nikki’s mind. The important thing for this thesis is that all of these “psychotopographic” (Schaffner 276) readings assume
that the body attached to the mind doing the dreaming, hallucinating, or fantasising is located in an authentic reality: Fred, Diane and Nikki are the real, original subjects, and Pete, Betty and Sue their subordinate, inauthentic “copies”. In all three films, however, the separation of reality and representation is problematised, which means that the separation of an authentic original character is difficult to sustain. As I will show in this section, *Lost Highway*, *Mulholland Drive* and *Inland Empire* engage with the postmodern “crisis in representation”. Like *American Splendor* and *Adaptation*, they represent all their characters as always already enmeshed in a textuality outside of which there is no authentic reality.

The construction of *Lost Highway*’s narrative as a perforated Moebius strip, for example, not only fragments the temporal linearity of narrative, it also undermines the separation of Fred as the authentic original and Pete as the secondary copy. The Moebial loop has no origin and no end, and therefore the two versions of the protagonist exist on a continuum on which neither Fred nor Pete are positioned as original. As Herzogenrath puts it: “the one, as it is, is the ‘truth’ of the other, and vice versa”. This is indicated on the title page of the screenplay for *Lost Highway*, which tells us that, in addition to being a “21st-century noir horror film”, “[a] world where time is dangerously out of control” and “[a] terrifying ride down the lost highway”, the film is also “a graphic investigation into parallel identity crises” (3, emphasis mine). Indeed, both Fred and Pete appear to “remember” things from each other’s lives. Music is central to this; Fred twice hears echoes of This Mortal Coil’s cover of ‘Song to the Siren’, which is later played on the car stereo when Pete and Alice make love for the last time. Similarly, Pete hears Fred’s manic saxophone solo on the radio in the garage.
Significantly, it is representation — in this case, video — that is placed at the centre of Fred/Pete’s parallel ontological instability. Long before Fred transforms into Pete, the stable separation of reality and representation is undermined when the Madisons begin receiving videotapes in the mail. The shots of Fred and Renee watching the tapes make it unclear whether what we are watching is a recording within the diegetic reality of the film. It is unclear, for example, whether Fred actually killed Renee, or whether she is even dead; our first indication that Renee may have been murdered appears on tape, where Fred is shown surrounded by Renee’s dismembered — or literally fragmented — corpse. Although this black-and-white video footage is intercut with a shot of Fred’s face followed by one of Renee’s corpse in full colour — which suggests we are seeing his memory — the reality of this image is questionable. As Schaffner observes, this colour image “appears suspiciously unreal, staged and constructed, Renée’s corpse looks like a dummy, the colours are too glaring, and its authenticity is far from certain” (275). Indeed, this colour image of “reality” appears after the video footage, which not only affords the video priority over this dubious reality, it also suggests that it may in fact be constructing it. This makes it difficult to be sure that the other ostensibly “real” occurrences in the film are not also enmeshed in representation.

Although videos and television screens are privileged aspects of the mise-en-scène throughout *Lost Highway*, the role of the camera in the destabilisation of original and copy is foregrounded in particular at the end of the film. After Fred has reappeared, he enters the cabin searching for Alice, only to find the Mystery Man. Michel Chion argues that the Mystery Man is “quite simply a personification of the camera”, whose presence reminds us that “[t]he characters…are…imprisoned in a
Wielding a video camera as he would a weapon, the Mystery Man walks toward Fred and demands to know his name. As Fred flees to his car, we see both the colour shots of the diegetic reality and the black-and-white video copy of this reality played *alongside each other*. Later, as Jerslev observes, we see a black-and-white video image of Fred and the Mystery Man on a small television *followed by* the exact same shot and movements happening in the diegetic, full-colour reality in which this television is situated. “[T]he camera”, she writes, “presents and represents at the same time” (162). Not only do we see the represented image first; here, the video camera is not even present in the frame. In this sense, Fred and Pete’s both/and Moebial status is comparable to that of Charlie Kaufman in *Adaptation*, who, as the Ouroboros, is represented as both creator *and* product of his writing, bound up in a textuality outside of which there is no authentic reality.

This ontological instability is also present in *Mulholland Drive*. Although it may appear that we are seeing a clear separation of dream and reality, we are really presented with multiple ontological planes that make the distinction between Diane as original and Betty as copy difficult to sustain. As N. Katherine Hayles and Nicholas Gessler explain, *Mulholland Drive* is a “mixed reality” film that emerges from a context in which “the technologies of virtual reality” affect the ways in which narratives are “conceived and created” (497). Although it is not a science fiction film, and does not engage specifically with these technologies, Hayles and Gessler argue that the film’s “mixed-reality effect comes from a narrative sequencing that confuses the distinctions among reality, dream, hallucination, and flashback” (484). Like *Lost Highway*, it is not only that the difference between these multiple levels is obscured, but also that all of them, including the diegetic reality inhabited by Diane, are shown
to be part of a continuum of cinematic representation on which *nothing* can claim authenticity.

We are explicitly shown this in what is probably the most heavily theorised scene of the film, which takes place at club Silencio. In this scene, Rita and Betty watch a master of ceremonies make a series of revelatory statements accompanied by flourishes of a magician’s stick; “*no hay banda!*”, he declares, “there is no band…this is all a tape recording”. “It is all a tape”, he continues, “it is an illusion”. The excessive reflexivity of the Silencio scene — which offers an unveiling of the tricks of the medium that is less surprising than suggested by the histrionic way in which it is presented and by Betty’s convulsive reaction to it — renders the scene almost parodic of this postmodern strategy. Its significance for the film’s apparent division of the narrative into reality and dream, however, is clear; not only does it remind us that everything we have seen to this point is “a sad illusion”, it also works as a preface to the film’s final third. Although it might appear that we are seeing the authentic reality (or, more precisely, the memories of an authentic reality) on which the first section of the film is based, this reality is also enmeshed in representation and cannot be viewed as any more authentic than the “dream” that preceded it. Put simply, Diane’s reality is also “recorded”. The dream can certainly be viewed as cinematic; Ridgway asserts in this way that Betty’s “dream” is “composed…of ([albeit] distorted) elements of *film noir* and melodramatic film” (48). However, the second section of the film, which appears primarily to be comprised of Diane’s memories and/or hallucinations, has the same glossy cinematography of the dream; even the short moments of screen time that appear to take place inside the diegetic present (but which could also be read as Diane’s pre-suicide memories) are
characterised by cliché. They merely replace the narrative of an aspiring actress finding success and love in Hollywood with an equally hackneyed story in which a failed actress seeks revenge on her more successful former lover. The return to the stage at Silencio at the end of the film serves to remind us that it is all recorded. Schaffner suggests, in this way, that “[u]ltimately…Lynch seems to state, nothing in the film is real; no level can ever definitively assume authoritative status, for all is artifice and representation” (282). In this sense, Diane is no more real or authentic than Betty.

*Inland Empire* presents the most sustained problematisation of the difference between the original and the copy. Although it would appear that Nikki is the original (the real actress) and Sue the copy (the actress’s role), the separation between the two is thoroughly destabilised. Reality and representation are always already intertwined in *Inland Empire*. This is marked very early on, when the announcer (William H. Macy) for the television show on which Nikki and Devon appear declares Hollywood to be the place “where stars make dreams and dreams make stars”. This comment can be read, in a broad sense, as a metaphor for the circular relationship between reality and representation that characterises the postmodern. This circularity is played out in the relationship between Nikki and Sue.

After Nikki accepts the role in *On High In Blue Tomorrows*, it does not take long for her ontological stability to be challenged. At first, shots of the set, of film equipment and of Kingsley’s directions, clearly mark the separation of Nikki’s diegetic reality and the intradiegetic reality of *On High In Blue Tomorrows*. There are, however, already indications that the two will blur. For example, when Devon brings Nikki a coffee while they await the preparation of a scene, the accents of the
two actors slip into the Southern drawl of their on-screen counterparts, which, in addition to the fact that they are already dressed in their costumes, makes it hard to discern if we are watching Nikki and Devon or Billy and Sue. It is in the following scene, however, that this instability becomes more pronounced. Here, we watch Nikki/Sue warn Devon/Billy that her husband may be aware of their affair and that he will kill them. Given the scene comes after a number of clearly marked scenes from *On High In Blue Tomorrows*, it would appear that this is yet another scene from the film-within-the-film. However, Nikki/Sue stops midway and declares: “damn, this sounds like dialogue from our script!”. We then hear Kingsley call the cut, and ask: “what the bloody hell is going on?”

Further muddying the diegetic status of this scene is the fact that it is placed *after* one in which Piotrek warns Devon/Billy to stay away from Nikki/Sue. This marks the dissolution of the boundary separating reality from representation: immediately after this, we see the sex scene where, as I explained earlier in this chapter, it is unclear if the participants are Nikki and Devon or Sue and Billy.

Indeed, even before Nikki/Sue accepts the role in *On High in Blue Tomorrows*, her life is already connected with the film: her husband is Polish, the visitor to her home also appears to be Polish and to know a great deal about the film, and her home is very similar to the mansion in which Billy and Doris Side live in *On High In Blue Tomorrows*. Moreover, the apparent “end” of *On High In Blue Tomorrows* — Nikki/Sue’s dramatic death-by-screwdriver on Hollywood Boulevard — does not restabilise the security of Nikki/Sue’s diegetic reality. On the contrary, after the image of Nikki/Sue’s dead body zooms out to reveal the film apparatus, it takes Nikki several moments to get up and walk from this “set”. Like Giamatti-as-
Harvey in *American Splendor*, who is unsure as to whether his death in reality would cause his comic book alter ego to “keep going” or merely “fade away”, Nikki appears confused by her ability to walk away from Sue’s death scene. Indeed, rather than walking off the set into a more stable diegetic reality, Nikki bypasses her trailer and entourage and walks into a movie theatre similar to the one featured in *Mulholland Drive*’s “Silencio” scene. Projected on the screen is an image showing her *inside the theatre watching images showing her inside the theatre* and so on, in endless circularity. Like the scene in *Lost Highway* where Fred’s actions and the video recording of those actions are edited into a continuous sequence, reality and representation are depicted here as a continuum, reminding us that Nikki can make no claim to authenticity.

In all three films, then, the two versions of the protagonist(s) are represented as copies without secure origin. Like *American Splendor* and *Adaptation*, then, even that which is diegetically “real” is always already enmeshed in representation. It has been argued, however, that this situation is not represented positively. As Maria Warner observes in relation to *Lost Highway*:

> When Fred Madison declares, disclaiming the truth of the video record, ‘I want to remember things my way — which is not necessarily the way they happened,’ David Lynch is fingering a contemporary anguish about identity. (10)

This “anguish” appears to centre on what Warner calls film’s “disturbing power to supplant reality” (10). “[P]hotography”, she writes, “is totalising and invasive and distorting, its record of ‘the way things happened’ arbitrary and capricious and coercive; it replaces personal images and inhabits your head and takes it over” (10).
Jerslev similarly writes that *Lost Highway* could be read as a “nightmare” concerning the notion “that, after all, and beyond postmodern euphoria, images constitute the sole reality, a kind of obscene boundless non-referentiality” (161). Jerslev’s comment can be applied to *Mulholland Drive*, where the multiple, intersecting representations culminate in the protagonist’s suicide. They are also relevant to *Inland Empire*, in which Nikki/Sue’s ontological confusion is represented as utterly terrifying.

The positioning of simulation as “nightmarish” or “obscene” might point to a residual nostalgia for the lost certainty of a stable reality outside of representation. Although this can be claimed as a kind of de-valorisation of the postmodern absence of authenticity, there is, nevertheless, no reassertion of “relative authenticity” in *Lost Highway*, *Mulholland Drive* and *Inland Empire*, as there is in *American Splendor*. They are more closely comparable to *Adaptation*, in which the absence of authenticity, originality, or a reality outside of textuality is more complete. Indeed, Lynch’s well-documented tendency to evade explaining his work, except with what Lim calls a “knowing vagueness”, is a tactic that further refuses access to authenticity. This is similar to Jonze and Kaufman’s perpetuation, in the “reality” outside *Adaptation*, of the postmodern refusal of authenticity at play in the film.

Moreover, *Lost Highway*, *Mulholland Drive* and *Inland Empire* share one more significant feature, located in the critical discourse surrounding the films. As with *Adaptation*, aspects of this discourse reinstall authenticity and originality and, therefore, the Enlightenment model of subjectivity that is refused in the films. As indicated in the introduction to this chapter, the criticism on the films directed by Lynch assumes (either implicitly or explicitly) an auteurist position. Wallace has
argued, for example, that “his career makes it clear that he is indeed, in the literal *Cahiers du Cinéma* sense, an auteur, willing to make the sorts of sacrifices for creative control that real auteurs have to make” (154). This sentiment is echoed by Andrews who writes that, “[b]y now, it is apparent that Lynch is an auteur bent on leaving behind an organic body of work” (37). Even some of the criticism that apprehends *Lost Highway, Mulholland Drive* and *Inland Empire* from a poststructuralist perspective — a framework that would appear to render the concept of the auteur problematic — attributes the films to Lynch. Herzogenrath, for example, speaks of *Lost Highway* as “Lynch’s movie”; he therefore attributes the film to a coherent subject despite also arguing that the film shows that “identity is anything but simple, stable, whole”. These auteurist assumptions, whether explicit or implicit, reinstall the notion of the artist as both autonomous and located outside the text. Indeed, Chris Rodley not only suggests that the films directed by David Lynch bear the stamp of an original cinematic voice — evoking Jameson’s “unique, unmistakable style” generated from “a unique self and private identity, a unique personality and individuality” (*Consumer Society* 114) — he also claims that this originality lies in the fact that these films show us an unswervingly authentic picture of Lynch’s “inner” subjectivity. He writes:

…the originality and inventiveness of Lynch’s work comes, first and foremost, from a unusual willingness and ability to access his own inner life. It is as a consequence of the truthfulness with which he brings that inner life to the screen that Lynch has revitalized the medium (ix).

Nochimson, who reads the films directed by David Lynch as revivifying hackneyed Hollywood clichés, also forwards the notion that Lynch is an autonomous
artist capable of making an original artistic gesture. This reading of the films would appear to mobilise Linda Hutcheon’s theory of postmodern poetics as characterised by the parodic installation of conventions in order to denaturalise and politicise their ideological implications (90). However, in an implicitly antipostmodern reading, Nochimson argues that Lynch shows that these cinematic clichés block our access to a deeper “truth” or “reality”. She writes:

Lynch’s works, which consistently recognize clichés for what they are, find the hope for a real offer of something of more permanent value. In a time in which we are bombarded with a sense of meaninglessness and fragmentation, his films are an assertion that this fragmentation is only a surface phenomenon. Lynchian narrative images promoting empathy reveal a fundamental connectedness among people and with the universe. Lynch seeks to avoid the Hollywood trap of creating substitutes for life. Rather, he seeks to use the power of Hollywood to make film narrative a subconscious bridge to real perceptions of life. (Passion 13)

For Nochimson, truth is ordinarily concealed or hidden by “the lies and repressions involved in Hollywood’s pretense of a rationalist form of realism” (Passion 14). In her review of Inland Empire she makes it clear that Lynch’s apparent revelation of the truth concealed by illusion restabilises the Enlightenment model of subjectivity. She reads Inland Empire as a journey from fragmentation to coherence, which shows Nikki “energizing…her life and artistry through inner awareness” (‘Inland Empire’ 14), and ends with a “carnival vision of a radiant inner unity Nikki has achieved” (‘Inland Empire’ 14). Schaffner makes a similar argument; her feminist reading positions Lynch as a Barthesian “demythologiser” (273), and Inland Empire as:
...a long and perilous journey of self-discovery in the course of which [Nikki/Sue] becomes whole, sheds her masks, witnesses the death of her other, inauthentic selves, and fully emancipates herself from the influence of shadowy male forces (her husband, Billy, the director and the Phantom Man (285).

It appears, then, that the critical discourse on *Lost Highway*, *Mulholland Drive* and *Inland Empire* — like that on *Adaptation* — tends to reinstall the Enlightenment model of subjectivity, despite the films explicitly challenging this model. Clearly, cinematic speculation about postmodern subjectivity is not reforming how these critics think; this may point to the limits of cinematic polemic, which appears reluctant to jettison the auteur and the notions of authenticity and originality that underpin this figure.

As I have shown in this chapter, *Lost Highway*, *Mulholland Drive* and *Inland Empire* mobilise representational strategies that are comparable to those used in the indie/alternative Indiewood films discussed in this thesis. Character is represented as both depthless and fragmented without recourse to strategies that reassert depth and/or continuity. Aiding in the fragmentation of character in *Lost Highway*, *Mulholland Drive* and *Inland Empire* is the ontological instability of representation; everything in these films is always already enmeshed in cinema. I have shown, moreover, that these films do not appear to remobilise the representational conventions associated with the classical Hollywood cinema, which, I have argued, support an Enlightenment model of subjectivity. I have also shown, however, that there is a tendency for the critical discourse on these films — either implicitly or explicitly — to reinstall the model of subjectivity that is successfully destabilised in the films. Taking the films independently, however, we are left with characters that
appear successfully to support a postmodern model of subjectivity. This shows that it is possible for American popular narrative cinema to represent its characters in a manner that exceeds or is at least different to the Enlightenment model of subjectivity. This brings me to my conclusion, where I will consider why the indie/alternative Indiewood films I have discussed in this thesis does not push postmodern representation as far as the medium will bear, and the implications of this for subjectivity more broadly.
Conclusion

My chief concern, in this thesis, has been to examine the representation of character and subjectivity in some indie/alternative Indiewood films. I have focused in particular on the tendency for these films to explore postmodern subjectivity and to represent their characters in a way that supports a postmodern model of subjectivity. I began this investigation, in Chapter One, by teasing out the complicated matter of the postmodern and its connection(s) to Hollywood cinema. I suggested that the absence of a discrete modernist period in Hollywood cinema need not stymie attempts to theorise the postmodern in this cinema because it is not necessary that postmodernism be preceded by modernism. This, I argued, clears the way for new research on the nexus of postclassicism and postmodernism, a relationship that has largely been peripheral to the critical discourse on late twentieth century Hollywood cinema. Having established that postclassical Hollywood can be interpreted as postmodern, I then examined Indiewood as a more recent development in this cinema. This led me to outline how the classical Hollywood cinema — and its conventions for representing characters — can be read as supporting an Enlightenment model of subjectivity. I then positioned the indie/alternative Indiewood film as a cinema that demonstrated a tendency, in the late 1990s and early 2000s, to explore the postmodern and its effects on subjectivity. This, I argued, was evident both in the themes of the films and in the postmodern representational strategies mobilised to depict characters.

My analysis of some key examples of the indie/alternative Indiewood film has investigated the extent to which this cinema, as an instance of postclassical Hollywood, is able to represent postmodern subjectivity. It has been my argument
that indie/alternative Indiewood films are unable fully to slough off the conventions that support the Enlightenment model of subjectivity. This leads me to the preliminary conclusion that, while Friedberg may be right in arguing that cinema elicits a gaze that constructs its spectators as postmodern subjects, it is difficult to discern, in instances of postclassical Hollywood cinema like the indie/alternative Indiewood film, a representation of this model of subjectivity that does not at least partially reinstall the Enlightenment model.

I have reached this conclusion after examining six indie/alternative Indiewood films in relation to three key postmodern concepts: depthlessness, fragmentation and simulation. In chapter two, I explored the representation of character as depthless in *American Psycho* and *Being John Malkovich*. *American Psycho*, I argued, attempts to replicate, in film, the depthlessness that is rendered so effectively in Ellis’s novel. Close-up and voice-over — conventionally used to construct the illusion that we are accessing character interiority — are used here to refuse this illusion. These strategies, combined with the efforts of Christian Bale deliberately to avoid performing the character as psychologically realistic, work to privilege Patrick Bateman as surface without depth. I further argued in Chapter Two that *Being John Malkovich*, a more self-consciously “philosophical” instance of indie/alternative Indiewood cinema, also represents its characters as depthless. Using the figure of the marionette as a “body” without interior, the film emphasises that actor John Malkovich is also, like Bateman in *American Psycho*, a mask with nothing behind it. This, I maintained, is further emphasised by the other characters in the film — Craig, Dr Lester, Lotte, and Maxine — who are performed with an ironic tone and excess of affect that further refuses psychological realism.
There are, I have argued, significant limits to the capacity of both films to represent character and subjectivity as depthless. Both films, I suggested, remobilise the conventions for representing character interiority that are associated with the classical Hollywood “group style”. This occurs at the end of both films. *American Psycho*, for example, ends with a twist that encourages us to “psychologise” Patrick Bateman — and retrospectively to read the entire film as the contents of a disturbed mind — despite the film having foregrounded the absence of content behind Bateman’s mask for the majority of its duration. In its final act, *Being John Malkovich* also abandons its ironic foregrounding of its characters as surfaces in favour of a more conventionally realist portrayal of affect. This shift, I suggested, is visible primarily in Maxine’s move from emotional detachment to an outpouring of her “true” feelings for Lotte, a reconciliation that facilitates narrative “closure”. I argued, moreover, that the ending of *Being John Malkovich* reinforces a Cartesian model of subjectivity by having Craig and Dr Lester leave their bodies in favour of prolonged life — as Craig and Dr Lester — inside another “vessel”. This abandonment of the “container” (the body) reaffirms the locus of subjectivity as “content” (the mind).

Contributing to limiting the representation of character and subjectivity as depthless in *American Psycho* and *Being John Malkovich*, then, are the films’ conventional three-part narrative structures. In Chapter Three, I shifted focus to the representation of character and subjectivity in two indie/alternative Indiewood films whose narratives *do not* conform to this conventional structure. In this chapter, I examined the nonlinear narratives of *Memento* and *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* in relation to the fragmentation of the postmodern, and the effects of this
fragmentation on subjectivity. In both films, I showed that the representation of character as amnesiac can be seen to support the model of postmodern subjectivity as temporally fragmented or, in Jamesonian terms, “schizophrenic”. Using Sibielski’s reading of *Memento*, I investigated the narrative’s refusal of temporal continuity and how it constructs Leonard as a postmodern character. I then compared this with *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*. In this film, I argued, the fragmentation of narrative extends to the construction of three-dimensional space, which is marked by moments of impossible coherence. In this way, I demonstrated that the film’s representation of its characters can be read as supporting a model of postmodern subjectivity.

I further argued, however, that the capacity for the indie/alternative Indiewood film to depict fragmented characters is also limited. *Memento* and *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* surely offer us fragmented narratives and amnesiac characters — Jameson’s schizophrenic subjects — but the stability of the actor’s body is evidence of the films’ reluctance fully to fragment character and subjectivity. While Leonard’s experience, in *Memento*, has been broken into a series of present-tense moments that he cannot link up into a continuous, coherent narrative, Guy Pearce’s tattooed “hard body” functions as an anchor for his mental fragmentation. Similarly, Joel’s voluntary erasure of his personal history in *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* may make it difficult for him (at least initially) to recognise former partner Clementine, yet we are able to recognise Joel as Jim Carrey for the entirety of the film. Like Leonard’s tattooed body in *Memento*, Jim Carrey’s (kinetically unpredictable yet nevertheless coherent) body stabilises the fragmentation of character and subjectivity in *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*. I observed,
moreover, that both films represent amnesia as debilitating: Leonard becomes a serial killer and Joel becomes, at best, socially dysfunctional after having had his memories of Clementine erased. If the amnesiac can be read as a representation of Jameson’s postmodern “schizophrenic”, then, the negative representation of this postmodern model of subjectivity can be read as offering ideological support for the notion that a subject is continuous and coherent through time and space, a notion which forms part of the Enlightenment model of subjectivity.

The self-reflexive foregrounding of character as a simulacrum has proved less limited than the representation of character as depthless or fragmented. As I have argued in Chapter Four, both American Splendor and Adaptation convincingly construct their characters as always already enmeshed in representation. American Splendor, an adaptation of the life story of Harvey Pekar as represented in the autobiographical comic book series of the same name, combines the representational strategies of the (already hybrid) biopic with those of the reflexive documentary in order to show its main character, including the “real guy” on which it is based, as a series of simulacra. In other words, American Splendor insists that there is no authentic Harvey outside of the film. Adaptation takes a similar approach to the representation of character and subjectivity in its exploration of authorship and authenticity in the context of the postmodern. The film follows Charlie Kaufman, a fictionalised version of the “real guy”, on his quest to write an original adaptation of Susan Orlean’s The Orchid Thief. Through comparing Charlie’s modernist intent — to make it new, to make it authentic, to make it adequately represent real life — with his twin brother Donald — who copies his brother’s career choice and treats Hollywood history as a repository that he willingly mines for material for his
screenplay — the film shows Charlie’s approach to be untenable. Not only is he situated in a paradigm in which it is impossible to make an original artistic gesture, he is also shown, through the figure of the Ouroboros, to be a product (and not a producer) of his screenplay. To this point, my analysis of American Splendor and Adaptation appears to have shown, then, that the indie/alternative Indiewood film is quite capable of representing simulacral characters.

I remained unconvinced, however, that the Enlightenment model of subjectivity disappears completely from American Splendor and Adaptation. As I have demonstrated, the limits to the representation of character and subjectivity as simulacrum are there but they are relatively partial, and articulated in different ways in each film. In American Splendor, I argued, there is an insistence within the diegesis that Harvey is more authentic than most Hollywood heroes, despite the fact that he is represented as a series of copies without secure origin. I suggested, in fact, that the film uses the strategy of “ironic authentication”, which Hatfield argues is mobilised in the American Splendor comic books (125, emphasis in original). This strategy paradoxically confirms Harvey’s authenticity by foregrounding the absence of authentic subjectivity. This kind of ironic affirmation of authenticity, I have argued, is difficult to discern in Adaptation. In fact, Adaptation emerges as the most uncompromisingly postmodern of the indie/alternative Indiewood films examined in this thesis because its refusal of authenticity is extended in the subversive activities of Charlie Kaufman and Spike Jonze in the “real” world outside the film. Yet the popular and academic discourse on these films paradoxically reinstates the figure that is so successfully refused both in Adaptation and by its screenwriter and director. Like Harvey’s insistence, in American Splendor, that he is more authentic or “salt-of-
the-earth” than most “showbiz phoney[s],” many of *Adaptation*’s critics insist that the refusal of authenticity in the film is, in fact, both an original strategy and evidence of Kaufman and Jonze’s creative genius. This discourse reinstall[s] the aspects of the Enlightenment model of subjectivity that are explicitly challenged in the film.

*Adaptation*’s (relatively, contextually) successful representation of postmodern character and subjectivity prompted me to consider whether the limits that I identified in this group of indie/alternative Indiewood films are evident in American popular narrative cinema more broadly. In Chapter Five, I discussed the representation of character and subjectivity in *Lost Highway*, *Mulholland Drive* and *Inland Empire* — three thematically linked films contemporaneous with indie/alternative Indiewood cinema — to explore the possibility that American popular narrative cinema might be able to exceed the limits of indie/alternative Indiewood. Through examining the representation of character and subjectivity in these three films, I argued that it was, indeed, possible for an American popular narrative film to mobilise representational strategies that render characters depthless, fragmented and simulacral *without* reverting to the classical conventions that support the Enlightenment model of subjectivity. This shows that popular narrative cinema need not *always or necessarily* sustain an Enlightenment model of subjectivity but, rather, that it *chooses* to do so. Yet, like *Adaptation*, aspects of the critical discourse surrounding *Lost Highway*, *Mulholland Drive* and *Inland Empire* — which invariably positions these films as the products of an auteur — have also reinstalled an Enlightenment model of subjectivity despite the films’ refusal of this model.

This leads me, now, to consider why I think the Enlightenment model of subjectivity is so difficult for the indie/alternative Indiewood film to move beyond.
David Lynch, whose films exceed the limits of indie/alternative Indiewood, provides a productive comment with which to begin. He states:

> In studios, more often than not these days, it’s not one person making the decisions: it’s a committee. And if there’s money at risk, their jobs are at stake and they become afraid. So they need to understand what it is they’re going to make. So it decreases the chance for any abstractions. Abstractions are not something you wanna throw money at! (qtd. in Lynch and Rodley 231)

As Lynch reminds us, filmmaking is a business; the products of this business — narrative films — need to make money in order for the business to remain viable.\(^{159}\)

In order to make money (or for its financial backers to be sufficiently confident that it has the potential to make money), a film needs to be marketable to an audience or, to mobilise commercial language, a target market. And when a proposed product departs from convention — becoming what Lynch calls “abstract” — the potential profitability and hence marketability of the product becomes questionable. This does not mean that popular narrative films cannot depart from convention, that “abstractions” will never have money thrown at them, but it does mean that such departures need to be viewed as marketable to a perceived audience (whether or not this audience even exists or, if it does, will access the film).

As King has shown, Indiewood, which rose out of the financial successes of a number of independent films in the 1980s and 1990s, markets its products to the perceived audience of independent cinema with the hope that they will also achieve mainstream crossover success (*Indiewood* 5). King argues that this means Indiewood

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\(^{159}\) This is not just a concern of Hollywood. Even the so-called independent cinema — despite this cinema often being constructed as a noncommercial alternative to the mainstream — is not immune to this requirement. “Some independent films”, King suggests, “have been produced without much concern about their commercial fate, especially at the lower end of the budget scale, but it is easy to over-romanticize an earlier and supposedly ‘purer’ notion of independence” (*American* 56).
films are marked by a stylistic hybridity: they combine the aesthetic strategies associated with the independent and arthouse cinemas with the character-centric narratives associated with the classical Hollywood cinema (Indiewood 2). I have suggested, however, that we can see a similar tension replicated within the representation of character and subjectivity in these films. I have argued, moreover, that this can productively be theorised as a tension between classical and postclassical representational strategies and the respective models of subjectivity these conventions support. While it would be reductive to suggest that the postclassical strategies are designed to appeal to the indie and/or arthouse segment of the films’ target market and the classical strategies to the mainstream segment — especially considering that the boundaries of these abstractly-perceived market segments are difficult to discern — I think it might be possible to argue that the indie/alternative Indiewood films’ incapacity fully to move away from the representational strategies that support the Enlightenment model of subjectivity may have something to do with the “wood” in Indiewood. Put simply: the indie/alternative Indiewood films discussed in this thesis might be limited by the fear of their financial backers that they will lose potential mainstream commercial success.

Lost Highway, Mulholland Drive and Inland Empire, I have argued, are marketed with the same crossover success in mind. Why, then, do they appear more fully to sustain a postmodern model of subjectivity? I would suggest that the status of these films as the products of the “David Lynch” brand — a brand that connotes “weirdness” and, in my opinion, “postmodernism” — might allow them more scope for experimenting with the conventions for representing character and subjectivity than the products of indie/alternative Indiewood. Not only do we expect a Lynch film
to play with conventions, the destabilisation of character and subjectivity also becomes part of the coherent incoherence of the “Lynchean”.

I would further suggest, however, that there is a limit to which this coherent incoherence can be considered marketable – both to the perceived mainstream and independent and/or arthouse audiences. I return, at this point, to Hainge’s observation (via Žižek) that *Lost Highway* has “mass appeal” (Hainge 138). As indicated in Chapter Two, I approach this statement with caution; do Lynch’s films, in fact, have this sort of appeal? In order to formulate a tentative answer to this (largely rhetorical) question, I want briefly to consider the films examined in this thesis in light both of the largest number of theatres in which they were screened in a given week during their theatrical release, and of their domestic box office takings. This may begin to illuminate the extent to which these films could be considered to have “mass appeal”.

According to online database Box Office Mojo, *Lost Highway* showed in a maximum of 337 theatres and grossed $3.7 million; *Mulholland Drive* in 247 theatres with a gross of $7.2 million; and *Inland Empire* was exhibited, at its peak, in 15 theatres and took in $0.9 million at the domestic box office. These figures reveal an interesting pattern, namely: when the conventions governing the representation of character and subjectivity are destabilised, the perceived marketability and commercial success is lessened. *Inland Empire*’s representation of character and subjectivity as postmodern is the most extreme, and the film was also, apparently, the least marketable and popular with American audiences. Conversely, the representation of character and subjectivity in *Mulholland Drive* is the least unstable, and this film was also the most commercially successful in the United States.
Indeed, it is worth contrasting the exhibition patterns and domestic commercial success of *Lost Highway*, *Mulholland Drive* and *Inland Empire* with the indie/alternative Indiewood films discussed in this thesis. The figures are as follows: *American Psycho* 1242 theatres, $15.1 million; *Being John Malkovich* 630 theatres, $22.9 million; *Memento* 531 theatres, $25.5 million; *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* 1357 theatres, $34.4 million; *American Splendor* 272 theatres, $6.0 million; *Adaptation* 672 theatres, $22.5 million. It may be possible to argue, based on these broad figures, that the indie/alternative Indiewood films discussed in this thesis have more “mass appeal” than the films directed by Lynch.

Examining exhibition patterns and domestic box office sales does not, of course, mean we can determine whether or not a film is *profitable*; it does not, for example, take into account the relative costs involved in making, distributing and marketing these films, or the fate of the films in overseas markets, where, as Wallace has suggested, David Lynch’s films have historically been more successful (154). It also does not account for the sales of DVDs and other ancillary items such as soundtracks and screenplays. There are, then, multiple factors that determine the commercial viability of a given film that I have not addressed in this thesis, which has been concerned with textual analysis rather than the commerce of filmmaking. I maintain, however, that it might be plausible to speculate, on the basis of figures such as those presented above, that departures from the conventions for representing character and subjectivity mean a film risks losing its popular appeal. The commercial concerns underpinning *all* instances of American popular narrative cinema, then, make it difficult to imagine cinemas like Hollywood will not continue to support a model of subjectivity inherited from the Enlightenment. This
demonstrates, very clearly, the extent to which commerce has affected and continues to affect the ways in which cultural products like film construct the subject.

In considering the representation of character and subjectivity in some indie/alternative Indiewood films, this thesis has opened up the field to several lines of enquiry. Indiewood, as a recent development in Hollywood cinema, is a category that surely requires further investigation. In addition to King’s pioneering work on this third “New” Hollywood, my work on indie/alternative Indiewood has broken further significant ground but there is plenty of scope for work on, say, the other two subcategories of this cinema, which King describes as “youth-oriented” and “quality/prestige” Indiewood (Indiewood 38). More work could also be done on the representation of character and subjectivity in cinemas outside the Indiewood paradigm, such as other instances of postclassical Hollywood cinema or in popular narrative cinemas outside the North American context altogether. Further work could also be pursued in relation to audiovisual texts that are produced for exhibition in art spaces; while these kinds of products are not immune to commercial concerns, they function differently to the popular narrative cinema(s) produced for exhibition in movie theatres. It would be useful to consider how character and subjectivity — or if character and subjectivity — is represented in these audiovisual texts in order to further interrogate the representational capacities of the cinematic medium and its postfilmic “others”, such as digital video and animation. The question driving this research, moreover, should not be restricted to questions of postmodernism. This enquiry, rather, should ask whether an audiovisual medium like cinema can show any model of subjectivity that exceeds the one inherited from the Enlightenment, a model
that, this thesis has demonstrated, appears difficult for American popular narrative cinema to move beyond.

Indeed, the postmodern has struggled more broadly to exceed Enlightenment ideology. Almost as soon as the concept gained currency, the postmodern was criticised for being politically limited by its incapacity to think beyond that which it apparently negates. This, fittingly, leads this thesis to one final paradox: that the limits to the representation of postmodern character and subjectivity in the indie/alternative Indiewood film might be legible as postmodern. In other words, indie/alternative Indiewood cinema’s tendency simultaneously to challenge and remobilise the representational strategies that support an Enlightenment model of subjectivity is entirely commensurate with the postmodern, which — as a theoretical discourse and a stylistic tendency in advanced capitalist cultural production — remains imbued with nostalgia for lost certainties. The postmodern subject is constructed out of negations; as Patricia Waugh writes, “[i]t is in part the consequence of an inability to rethink a self not premised in some way on the pure idealism of the autonomous subject of Enlightened thought, German Idealist philosophy and Kantian aesthetics” (194). The indie/alternative Indiewood films I have discussed in this thesis, then, are paradigmatically postmodern cultural products, which both reflect and help perpetuate this philosophical stagnation through their inability more fully to test the limits of the cinematic medium by representing, and therefore constructing, subjectivity differently.
Filmography


*Charlie Chan at the Opera*. Dir. H. Bruce Humberstone. Twentieth Century Fox, 1936.

*Citizen Kane*. Dir. Orson Welles. RKO, 1941.


*From Here to Eternity.* Dir. Fred Zinnemann. Columbia, 1953.


*The Grapes of Wrath.* Dir. John Ford. Twentieth Century Fox, 1940.


*It’s a Wonderful Life.* Dir. Frank Capra. RKO, 1946.


Mr Moto’s Last Warning. Dir. Norman Foster. Twentieth Century Fox, 1939.


To Have and Have Not. Dir. Howard Hawks. Warner Bros., 1944.


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