DISASTROUS ARTISTS

THE POSTMODERN METATEXTUAL BIOPIC AS A FILM PHENOMENON:

Metatextuality in the biopic: James Franco as Tommy Wiseau as James Dean

Master's Thesis

Literary Studies: English Literature and Culture, 2017-2018

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July 2 2018

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Introduction

In- and outside of the U.S.A numerous autobiographical films have been produced by both well-known and lesser-known producers. Similarly, there are countless documentaries about filmmakers who are either alive or have already passed away. What is more, there are various films about fictional filmmakers and their struggles or triumphs. Yet, before 1994, there are scarcely any films that concern themselves with presenting aspects of the life of a producer/director alongside the making of one or a few of their specific films. One such biopic is Richard Attenborough's film *Chaplin* (1992) about the controversial and troubled life of Charlie Chaplin. Thus in this sense it can be said to initiate the phenomenon of films about film directors or producers that not only portray the glamour of such a profession, but also show the controversial and unsympathetic nature of the filmmakers themselves. Arguably, this biopic marks the start of an increasing fascination in biographical film with the postmodern notion of metatextuality, a trend that has been continued by Tim Burton and James Franco who directed *Ed Wood* (1994) and *The Disaster Artist* (2017) respectively.

These recent biopics no longer concern themselves solely with their subject's life. Instead, they are films about how films are made of people's lives and about how people film their lives. This is evident from the representation of both Ed Wood and Tommy Wiseau in their respective biopics. Interestingly, both Wood and Wiseau attempt to construct their identity by capturing themselves on film, most notably in *Glen or Glenda* (1953) and *The Room* (2003). However, instead of creating a fixed identity, the act of filming themselves mediates towards a fluent identity. Incidentally, another obvious similarity between Wood and Wiseau is the fact that both are considered quite incompetent filmmakers, though Wood was a prolific filmmaker whereas Wiseau merely created one film. However, Wiseau's *The Room* did achieve wide acclaim for being the

worst film in existence. One BBC article actually places it alongside Wood's *Plan 9 from Outer Space*, stating, "[t]he Room isn't just bad, it's intoxicatingly awful. Not since Ed Wood's *Plan 9 from Outer Space*, a legendary turkey from 1959, has a film been so revered for being so rubbish (Barber 2016).

This thesis will show that the postmodern emphasis on metatextuality in biographical film narratives highlights how in our media-saturated society individual identities are continually being constructed and reconstructed, not only by the individual's seeking to develop a coherent sense of self, but also by the various techniques of mediation that operate in our society to represent identities. By drawing on theories derived from Frederic Jameson, John Storey, and John Hill, I shall offer a reading of these films that explores the ways in which the fluidity and construction of identity are allowed expression. Equally important to this paper is the way in which Burton and Franco engage with their subject matter hereby causing the resultant biopics to contain various levels of metatextuality. Due to the nature of the films created by Wood and Wiseau themselves, both films are concerned with the director of the film and their subjective reality, the biopics both already directly contain a certain level of metatextuality. In turn, *Ed Wood* becomes a film about how Ed Wood was trying to represent himself in *Glen or Glenda*. Yet, even more striking is how Franco's biopic also draws on the existence of Burton's biopic. Hence, two things are at play here *The Disaster Artist* is a film about how Wiseau was trying to represent himself in *The Room*, while effectively also being a film that structurally builds on *Ed Wood* as a postmodern biopic.

Consequently, in the first chapter I will briefly outline the progression of postmodernism first as a cultural condition, then as an art form, and finally as a means of expression in film. In the second chapter, close analysis of both *Glen or Glenda* and *Ed Wood* will show the extent to which Wood was concerned in his films with representing his own subjective experience of his identity and how this mediated identity in turn inspired Burton to create his biopic. It will become evident

that Burton's understanding of Wood identity is also subjective. Burton's biopic is a re-imagining of who Ed Wood was through the lens of his own admiration for Wood. The analysis of *The Room* in chapter three will demonstrate that while both Wood and Wiseau created their films to explore their own identities, Wood's approach differs in the fact that he engaged also with a greater philosophical theme concerning the acceptance of difference in a society structured on conformity to prescribed gender roles. The topic of transvestitism explored in *Glen or Glenda* strongly resonates with Wood, yet, he also propounds certain progressive theories and advocates for a greater tolerance towards those who fall outside the norm. Wiseau's film, on the other hand, does not explore any larger social or philosophical themes, but seems to be a film created solely to project Wiseau's own egocentric worldview to an audience. The narrative and conclusion of his film revolves around all major characters, who frequently proclaim how amazing his character is, mourning for the injustice they have inflicted upon him. Lastly, I will outline the similarities and differences between Wood and Wiseau and between both biopics from which I will formulate a prognosis of the future developments in the genre of parodic biopics.

Chapter 1- Postmodern Methodology and Film

There are a myriad of theories explaining or concerning postmodernism or "the postmodern condition." Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition* can be said to have introduced the field of literary studies to the concept. Seidman explains that according to Lyotard, the most notable characteristic of the postmodern condition is the rejection of metanarratives in Western thinking (Seidman 27). To be precise, it is the unified, universal, progressive "modern" system of though associated with the Enlightenment that Lyotard finds debatable (Seidman 4-5). Hence, his use of the term postmodern directly succeeds the epoch of the Enlightenment. This point will be addressed once more later in this chapter. There are widely divergent scholarly arguments on what constitutes postmodernism or what can rightly be labelled postmodern. Narrowing down the field does yield somewhat more uniform results, as most scholars agree it is important to distinguish between postmodern as a period in time that follows modernity and as an aesthetic style (Constable 1). Likewise, an obvious distinction can be made between the philosophical approach and learning regarding postmodernism and the use of postmodern as a term to describe the creation and formal characteristics of contemporary art. In this sense, postmodernism can be understood to be a form of presenting a specific reality through a painting, sculpture, or film. In this thesis, the focus is mostly on postmodernism as a style of representation in art, specifically in film. The division of this chapter will be as follows: the most prominent scholars on postmodernism will be presented and their views outlined in relation to postmodernism as a theory and as a mode of presenting art. Thus, Jameson, Hill, and Storey, who effectively outlines Lyotard's theories, will be discussed in three sections, namely postmodernism as a condition, as an art form, and postmodern film.

1.1. Postmodernism as a condition

First, I will discuss Storey who provides an excellent overview of the history of postmodernism in relation to popular culture from its emergence in the fifties. In the late fifties and sixties, postmodernism emerged as a reaction against modernism. It is in this regard that the term reactionary postmodernism, as mentioned in the following sections, can be understood. People felt that modernism had lost its edge, as it were, it was no longer considered shocking or scandalous, especially towards the middle class. Instead of being subversive, or being disturbing, the bourgeoisie had now made modernist culture their own (Storey 182). At the same time, one of the core beliefs of the emerging postmodernist culture also developed, namely, the irrelevance of the "distinction between high and low culture" (183). This is truly one of the cornerstones of postmodernist theory. The reason for this development came from the weakening of modernist culture, as stated above, despite modernism originally being against "all things popular" it slowly became accepted into museums and academia and became homogenous with cultural elitism (183). Thus, postmodernism partly emerged as a critique of the elitism of modernism.

Storey provides a brief discussion of Lyotard who had an enormous influence on the debate on postmodernism, not in the least because of his treatise *The Postmodern Condition* (1979). Lyotard is best known for his rejection of universal meta-narratives, which can be best explained as "overarching and totalizing frameworks that seek to tell universal stories" (185). Furthermore, combined with this collapse of meta-narratives comes an increase of voices from the margins "with their insistence of difference" (185). This latter theory is in accordance with the prevalent belief that the postmodern age is one of celebrated difference and diversity. Lastly, Lyotard himself does not hold a positive view of postmodern culture as he feels that it is a "culture of slacking" where nothing holds any value anymore and, interestingly, he considers postmodernism not a resultant next stage of modernism, instead modernism is still developing and transforming (185). Thus,

postmodernism is what occurs between the ‘old’ modernism and a new form of modernism which will soon arise.

Lastly, another notable scholar in the field of postmodernism that deserves mention is Frederic Jameson who propounds his theory on postmodernism in his treatise *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991). In his chapter “Nostalgia for the Present,” Jameson puts forward the idea of facts and historical reality and how often our understanding of a certain period is derived from ‘’its own representation of itself’’ (279-281). It is necessary here to clarify what this idea entails exactly: neither the factual nor the objective reality of a certain period in time exist. There is only this idea of a historical period containing facts and an objective reality that is created by our current reflection on the past. Indeed, Jameson continues to argue that the concept of a period and the understanding people themselves have of their own current period in time “may ultimately have nothing whatsoever to do with its reality” (281). It is precisely this notion that poses such a tremendous difficulty to clearly define and comprehend postmodernism or what falls under the postmodernist heading for our current period as a whole is often understood to be postmodern. He continues to explain the concept of historicity, which he defines as the “perception of the present as history” in order to allow us to defamiliarize our relationship to the present and distance ourselves from it (284). This distancing is necessary in order for us to feel that we comprehend not only the present as it is, but also as something we can date and line up with all the previous periods and give a name to it such as the eighties or fifties. However, as stated before, the way we perceive this period, be it the present or past, and perhaps even strictly compartmentalize it viewing the eighties as something completely different from the nineties, does not necessarily correspond to reality. It is most likely a vision that is comprised of images, thoughts, and ideas of facts all forming a subjective truth.

1.2. Postmodernism as an art form

In terms of viewing postmodernism as an overall aesthetic feature of art, architecture is the field to which much of the earlier debates refer. As such, a rather useful term arises when John Hill in his essay, primarily about postmodernism and film, explains Charles Jencks' views on postmodernist architecture, namely "double coding". Jencks defines this as a combination of modern techniques plus something else—usually a traditional style, and acknowledges that this term may apply to postmodern culture in a broader sense (99). Accordingly, this term will be used throughout this paper when describing certain cinematic features. In the same vein, other common qualities ascribed to postmodernist art are eclecticism, "stylistic promiscuity", appropriation, hybridization, and mixing high and low culture; a practice that emerges from de-differentiation (99). This last concept in particular is an important feature as the breaking down of barriers between high and low culture and art is a central component of postmodernism. One of the key figures supporting this rejection of the high and low art divide is Andy Warhol. He argues that non-commercial, real, art and commercial art are one and the same as the value given to either is wholly dependent on certain social groups. The definition of real art is simply given by the predisposition of "the ruling class of the period" (Storey 183). Subsequently, one way in which this collapse of the high and low art distinction becomes apparent is through the growing appreciation of mass culture products such as low class science-fiction movies, pop music, or advertisements. These works are now being taken serious as something worthy to discuss and analyze, likewise, specifically regarding pop music these works also contain a "new seriousness" (Storey 184).

Additionally, the practices of de-differentiation and mixing of elements are crucial to my analysis of the original films generally being perceived as low art juxtaposed with the biopics being perceived as high art that engages with low art. With respect to popular art, Andreas Hyussen points out that this "may be seen to embody a number of features now commonly associated with

postmodern cultural practice" such as eclecticism which, as stated above, is a key concept of postmodernism, but also "an erosion of aesthetic boundaries", another important characteristic of de-differentiation, and "a declining emphasis upon originality" (Hill 99). This last feature heavily ties in with the notions of appropriation, parody, pastiche, and death of the author that are likewise often linked to postmodern cultural practice.[1]

1.3. Postmodern film

In terms of postmodern film, I briefly discussed Jameson's theories on the subjective reality of the past and historicity in section one in which he states that our understanding of the past is comprised of images and ideas of facts. This ties in with films as these images, in particular, are often generated by the films we watch both specifically set in that period and during that period itself, if this is possible. This brings us to the development of nostalgia films, as Jameson states these are films that train us "to consume the past in the form of glossy images", hereby using the term "postnostalgia" (Jameson 287). While these films do fulfill a certain need for, as he calls it, "image fixation cum historicist craving" the product itself is rather bland and the plot suffers from typification and schematization (287). Thus, it will come as no surprise that a new type of film

[1] Anecdotally, I would like to interject here that one of the greatest examples of popular postmodern cultural practice can be found on YouTube in the form of a webseries titled lasagnacat. This series can be found on the lasagnacat YouTube channel and is directed by Fatal Farm, an initiative comprised of two men who are called "the masterminds behind the cult webseries phenomena" (Blackard). Though the term 'cult' is often bandied around, it seems to be quite fitting in this instance, as it appears to have a substantial fan base and is by no means accepted as mainstream. The videos are incredibly eclectic in style and technique as they present each video in a different style found in popular culture such as Miami Vice or Dragon Ball-Z all the while parodying, or as the creators put it 'paying tributes to' Jim Davis' Garfield comics. Similarly, each video contains various aesthetics, some of which are aesthetically pleasing but all essentially question what this is, what is art, what is humor and proposing as an answer that everything is subjective. One online user remarked how these videos are like a new form of comedy where the joke lies in the fact that they "wallow in the absurdity of their own existence" a phrase that seems equally fitting to describe *The Room* (2003) and its aftermath as will be shown in chapter three. Thus, taken together lasagnacat can truly be considered the ultimate embodiment of the postmodern age regarding entertainment media.

emerged, building on this nostalgia need and combining several styles or genres. Specifically, two genres that from the outset seemed to be antithetical did share an important common feature; both pivoted on certain musical signifiers. These two genres are nostalgia films with their high elegance and high-class dance music and punk films with contemporary rock giving rise to new films that at first told their stories as an allegory of the search and need for this synthesis (Jameson 288).

Jameson gives as examples of this new type of film *Something Wild* (1986) and *Blue Velvet* (1986), indeed, both can be considered a mix between artistic, screwball- or dark comedy and suspenseful ultra-violent (in some parts) thriller all the while maintaining the aesthetics of the eighties. Arguably, *Repo Man* (1984) can be said to be the predecessor of these. With its strange mash-up of punk, sci-fi, comedy, action, and theatre of the absurd inhabited by characters that not only embody their own 80s culture, but also discuss the weirdness of their own time, Repo *Man* can be classified as quite a postmodern film. Indeed, the lack of an ideological center and clear narrative are key-elements of postmodern cinema, coupled with embracing the chaos present in the film it strongly resembles real life since there does not exist one ideological system or orderliness in life either.

In his analysis of both films, Jameson makes an interesting observation that though not exactly relevant for this thesis does pay to bear in mind. In regards to the gothic paradigm of a sheltered woman being terrorized and victimized by an evil male, Jameson labels the gothic genre as an ultimate class fantasy where the dialectic of privilege and shelter are explored through the imagined terror that exists behind the barriers; he calls this the "shower curtain syndrome" in reference to *Psycho* (289). In other words, the luxury of having privileges and being above the lowest class of society is a double-edged sword that may increase anxieties over what lies outside the familiar and protective walls or area. This, in turn, will feed into the idea of there being an "Otherness" into which, as Jameson puts it, "any type of social content can be poured at will" and

is a "very dangerous category" (290). Conversely, Jameson's argument here appears to be somewhat flawed, as the gothic genre can hardly be considered postmodern; furthermore, gothic literature does not explicitly concern itself with the truth of class privilege, but, arguably, places greater emphasis on the exploration of the psychological process that constructs the imagined terrors. Classic examples of this are Poe's "The Tell-Tale Heart," or Lovecraft's "The Hunter of the Darkness" as both texts focus on their protagonists disintegrating relation with reality and subsequent descent into madness.

Returning to Jameson's analysis of the films: because one of the protagonists in *Something Wild* simultaneously represents a gothic villain, the no longer relevant idea of the romantic hero, and a simulation of the fifties all of which are outdated models the film is contingent on creating a new kind of hero. Similarly, the film can be read as "an attempt to construct new categories" through the clashing of these irrelevant elements: combined with having the eighties meet the fifties through the agency of the main female character who resembles the sixties the film tries to replace the "older, historically dated and period-bound (uncontemporary, unpostmodern)" categories (290). Yet, the relatively newness of this process and by trying to identify their own present causes these films to be seen as failed attempts merely reducing their efforts into yet another "recombination of various stereotypes of the past," in doing so, however, they do pave the way for something else (296). With this in mind, a later paper concerning postmodernism and film will now be discussed to try to determine what these new categories could be and what constitutes a truly postmodern film.

The most important aspect of John Hill's argument about postmodern film is his discussion of the ideas of Stuart Hall in relation to the critique of the Enlightenment and humanity's faith in reason as the only valid route to true knowledge. Hall differentiates between "the Enlightenment subject" and "the postmodern subject" (97). The former is based upon the prevalent ideas during

those times that considered all persons to be a perfectly unified, centered reasonable and conscious individual. Hall envisioned the latter as a person with "no fixed, essential or permanent identity" instead, they possess the ability to assume "different identities at different times" (qt. in Hill 97). Thus, this subject has a fluid identity ever prone to change and, perhaps, effortlessly adapt to the situation around them. It is precisely this concept of a postmodern subject that can accurately be applied to both Ed Wood and Tommy Wiseau as individuals and as actors-directors. As we will see in the chapters dealing with Wood and Wiseau respectively, they both seem to lack a strong unified or fixed personality rather they present various identities of themselves through their films, as well as, in their private lives.

One explanation Hill gives for this fragmented nature of identity of the postmodern subject follows through from the weakening of class distinctions that heavily existed in the pre-industrialized era—and were still present, though in lesser degree, in the Industrial Age. As Hill places postmodernism in a socio-cultural context, he explains how class identities have greatly diminished with the onset of modern labor divisions, a higher percentage of white-collar workers, and an emerging service class. He goes on to call this development a move away from "politics of mass movements towards a politics of difference" (98). This blurring of previously clearly defined social hierarchies certainly ties in with the postmodern arguments regarding the increasing value placed on individuality and social identities (Seidman 16). Furthermore, the films produced by the original directors reflect this contingency of identity crisis and fluidity, as well as, the issues surrounding identity politics i.e. the construction and deconstruction of identity.

Discussing postmodernism in relation to film Hill makes a significant observation: due to the omnipresent nature of television, this medium is most commonly associated with the postmodern condition. Whereas postmodern ideas do inform and influence arguments about and analyses of films, this mainly goes for individual films, the medium itself is not inherently

postmodern (98). Which is why there are barely any general or uniform theories on postmodernism and film, though there are countless works on postmodernism as a theoretical framework and as a mode of generating art.

Further complication in developing an all-encompassing theory of postmodern film stem from the inability to classify what exactly constitutes postmodern cinema. Hill distinguishes three main types of concerns having to do with the organization of the film industry, themes present in films of all genres, and the difficulty in assessing the aesthetic features of a film. The reorganization of the film industry and the changes it has undergone has in itself been taken to reflect postmodern aspects as Hollywood went from a state of Fordist mass production, a sign of industrialism ergo modernism, to more flexible independent productions; combined with the perceived blurring of boundaries due to Hollywood incorporating into "media conglomerates with multiple entertainment interests" (100). Thus, one could consider all independent films and the de-differentiation of Hollywood as an institute as embodying, to a certain degree, postmodernism. What is meant by the de-differentiation of Hollywood is that at the start of the twentieth century, studios all had their own specific genre of films that they produced; they stood for a certain brand of films. This progressed into a few larger studios procuring smaller separate studios creating a monopoly, which means that nowadays most studios produce various films in a wide array of genres. A fitting example of this is Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures owning and distributing certain films—ones that they feel should not be associated with Disney due to their mature content—under the Touchstones Pictures label, which coincidentally is the studio with which Burton produced *Ed Wood*. Secondly, certain common themes found in films such as dystopian worldviews or the portrayal of men who have an emotional or mental breakdown can be interpreted as postmodern the first in relation to the postmodern loss of faith in the idea of progress, the latter as a rejection of the "grand narratives surrounding masculinity and patriarchal authority" (100).

This last aspect is very much present in not only the films produced by Ed Wood, but also in Burton's biopic, which emphasize the rejection and defiance of the masculine stereotype. Lastly, many films display certain aesthetics such as eclecticism and disrupt "traditional artistic hierarchies" that are characteristically associated with postmodern cultural practice (100). Evidently, labelling a film as postmodern, considering all the above points, is incredibly difficult, the identification and assessment of these aesthetic features alone, would pose a serious problem, on top of which being able to differentiate between a "real" postmodern filmmaking practice and an earlier "modern" one is quite challenging as well (100). What is more, as Hill states, the difficulty of determining what constitutes postmodern film only increases when the underlying motifs for doing so are taken into account. One of the reasons for deeming a film postmodern could be to then link it to a certain ideology such as the "ideological criticism which has sought to identify the social conservatism of the aesthetic conventions employed by postmodern cinema" or reactionary postmodernism (100). In short, is it quite complicated to accurately determine whether a film can be considered truly postmodern or perhaps only following in the postmodern tradition in one regard or displaying several postmodern features yet not meant to be a reaction against modernism. In spite of this, the following chapters will provide an analysis of Ed Wood's *Glen or Glenda* and Tim Burton's biopic placed against a postmodern framework.

Chapter 2 – Ed Wood and Tim Burton

The cinematic exploration of so-called bad filmmaking was initiated by Tim Burton's biopic of Ed Wood in 1994. Herein the director explores Wood's artistic motives, vision, and his personal life in relation to several of his more well-known films. Though the biopic focuses on three of Wood's films: *Glen or Glenda* (1953), *Bride of the Monster* (1955) and *Plan 9 from Outer Space* (1559), this paper will examine only two works: The biopic—henceforth referred to as *EW*—and Wood's most prominently autobiographical and for this analysis interesting film *Glen or Glenda* (1953)—henceforth referred to as *GoG*. I will provide a more in-depth analysis of the postmodern and identity politics present in each film. Through my analysis of the biopic and *GoG*, I will show that in the latter Wood uses the medium of film to construct a stable sense of self; but the theme of cross-dressing immediately foregrounds the instability of self. Where Ed Wood in *GoG* struggles with the instability of self and concludes with a possible "cure," Tim Burton's film is able to celebrate the instability of identity as it is a 1990s production in which this postmodern idea of identity construction has become mainstream. Furthermore, it will also be interesting to take the history and range of genres of Burton's films into account, especially because this biopic at first glance appears to deviate from his more mainstream films (*Batman, Edward Siccorhands*) in terms of genre.

Consequently, the first section of this chapter will provide a brief synopsis of *GoG* followed by an analysis of the film in terms of the expression and construction of identity placed within a postmodern framework. Subsequently, special attention will be given to the postmodern subject, as explained in the previous chapter, present in this film, in both negative and positive terms. I will argue that Wood himself suffered from identity diffusion, he lacked a strong distinct identity, and instead he was still searching for his own identity, expressing this search through his films in both

an actor and directorial role. The second part will move on to Burton as a director and Burton's biopic. Thus, a brief analysis of the directorial background of Burton will be provided first. In doing so, I will also touch upon what the underlying motives for Burton to produce his biopic are. Then, the vision of Wood adapted and represented by Burton in his biopic will be examined concerning the identity representation that Burton imprints in his version of the original story of Wood, as well as, Burton's reflection of Wood the person and the director-actor; drawing on concepts discussed in the previous chapter such as metatextuality and de-differentiation.

2.1. Glen or Glenda: Wood's progressive vision of transvestitism in the fifties

That Wood wanted nothing more than to share his subjective experience of the world with the general public becomes abundantly clear from the opening of *GoG*. Not only did Wood yearn to show the inner world of man and how he experienced identity with the audience, he also heavily favored to portray certain subject matters e.g. transsexuality and transvestitism, as realistically as possible. Naturally, this emphasis on reality was present to a lesser degree in his other well-known films such as *Plan 9*. However, for a topic as close to his heart as transvestitism, one could argue that nothing but the absolute truth and his personal experiences are what Wood desired to show. This is evident from the title card that opens the film and informs the audience that many of the characters herein are portrayed by real people who are exactly the same in real life. "[A] picture of stark realism …giving you … ALL the fact as they are today" is how it continues and indeed, as will become apparent, Wood endeavored to direct an unbiased and truthful picture on, for those times, quite obscure and controversial topics. Significantly, Wood ends the title card pleading or urging with society to withhold judgement: "JUDGE YE NOT." In a way, by placing this in bold letters as the final message, he presses his case for tolerance and acceptance of transvestitism and transsexuality.

The most visible postmodern themes present in *GoG* are its ideological criticism and defiance of stereotypes. Lyotard's famous definition of postmodernism as a rejection of grand narratives can be broadly applied to include "the grand narratives surrounding masculinity and patriarchal authority" (Hill 100). This is certainly applicable to the film's narrative that greatly emphasizes the rejection and defiance of the traditional masculine stereotype. To illustrate, Wood places male characters in the film that lead regular lives, they have normal jobs and are reputable citizens: from the outset these are all ordinary men they do not draw attention to themselves and they fit in with society. Yet, they all share the same passion, they enjoy wearing women's clothing in the comfort of their own homes and in the street and, most importantly, this does not obstruct their daily lives. There is one male voiceover that narrates all events, however, due to the strange editing and narrative of the film is remains unclear whether the audience must recognize this voice as belonging to the character of the psychiatrist. Thus making it a diegetic voiceover, or if this can be considered as an unseen omnipresent narrator, nondiegetic, since this voiceover does comment upon private thoughts and matters, combined with influencing the audience on how certain characters should be judged (Sipos 234). This narrator then argues two specific points that are quite thought provoking. He first contrasts lounge apparel for men and women arguing that while both sexes work hard throughout the day it is only women that have comfortable indoor clothing. Whereas the clothing for men continues to be rough coarse and starched and the shoes are too similar to tight fitting outdoor shoes. The narrator then states "there is no law against wearing such apparel [lounge clothing] on the street" as long as both sexes can be clearly distinguished. As this is being narrated, the scene moves to a burly and bearded man relaxing in an armchair, wearing a frilly dress and large earrings, and the narrator then asks would happen if this man would walk outside in his outfit (figure 1). By juxtaposing the last part of his sentence on any type of clothing being allowed outside as long as it remains clear that "man is man and woman is woman" with the

image of a hyper-masculine man wearing a dress preconceived stereotypes are questioned and the audience is encouraged to question why the former situation is acceptable yet the latter is not.

Figure 1. Masculine man in dress.

Similarly, in one scene, entirely comprised of stock footage, a dialogue between two factory workers emphasizes what the regular Joe might have to say on the topics of sex change and transvestitism. One man maintains that "it must take a lot of guts to pull a stunt like that" and urges his co-worker to consider how sad and unfortunate it would have been if changing your sex would still have been impossible. He closes with arguing that society should be more lenient towards both transsexuals and transvestites, as well as, trying to understand them as human beings. Though the dialogue does sound overly stylized and artificial, the sentiments expressed herein do seem genuine and it is obvious that Wood solely advocates for greater understanding towards those who are different and fall outside the norm. This latter is another crucial aspect of the collapse of universal

homogenizing metanarratives, as propounded by Lyotard, and the resultant increase of narratives from "voices from the margins, with their insistence of difference" (Storey 185).

Throughout the film, Wood stresses that there is a difference between transvestites, who only want to wear women's clothing, transsexuals, who feel they are born in the wrong body, and homosexuals, those who are attracted to men: "most transvestites do not want to change their lives, their bodies" and "Glen is a transvestite, but he is not a homosexual." Subsequently, the film has tremendous educational values, especially to an audience that hitherto may have had little to no knowledge on these topics. Incidentally, Wood expresses exceptionally progressive ideas, albeit in a rather crude and inept manner, that were confirmed and academically formulated decades later. Indeed, in his 1979 work concerning transvestitism and drag, Peter Ackroyd stressed that for a proper understanding on this subject it is important to realize that transvestitism should not be confused with transsexuality (12-13). Similarly, in the late nineties, Judith Halberstam voices similar sentiments regarding the mistaken notion that masculinity only exists in combination with being a male. In her work that explores the construct of masculinity, in both male and females, while simultaneously debunking myths surrounding this topic she urges for greater recognition of alternative masculinities (1-2). Likewise, concerning transvestites and transsexuals she mentions Marjorie Gaber's notion that these practices challenge the simplistic binary system of gender, and thus are indicative of the "obvious flaws" in this system (25-26).

Wood continues to touch upon insightful and realistic topics as he has characters voice their opinion or knowledge or directly address the audience throughout the film. This latter is quite remarkable as characters or objects interacting with the camera; hereby breaking the fourth wall,

is an often-used trope of postmodern cinema, in particularly during comedy films or series.[2] However, this practice of including the audience was already prevalent during antiquity, in the oldest form of Attic comedy where it was considered a low culture device (Rutherford 68). This breaking of the fourth wall could occur in two different ways. Either the actors themselves could jokingly including the audience during the play, or, during the parabasis the choir would directly face and talk to the audience (Rutherford 63). Whereas it is predominantly used in the comedy genre, Wood's continued use of directing speeches straight into the camera feels slightly out of place in *GoG* as the film was intended to convey a grave and important message.

Bela Lugosi portrays one such character that continuously addresses the audience. He is the Scientist, or Puppet Master, who can be likened to God, and controls everyone's life and utters the iconic phrase "Pull the string! Pull the string!" The Scientist informs the audience that perhaps many startling things only appear to be such because they seem new and sudden, however—as the film will demonstrate—these are not new occurrences at all. From Lugosi addressing the audience in his armchair while looking down on humanity from above, cleverly achieved by using a split screen technique (see figure 2) the film is further narrated by Dr. Alton, the psychiatrist whom both a police officer and Glen seek out for more information and help. Interestingly, Dr. Alton also takes on the role of an omnipresent narrator and, significantly, the audience is once more fully addressed as Dr. Alton opens his recounting of Glen's story with "Only the infinity of the depths of a man's

[2] One of the most prominent examples of this practice being the UK tv-series *The Office* (2001-2003) by looking straight into the camera and including the audience in, what can only be described as, cringey, painful humor the social awkwardness is heightened and the audience is made to feel uncomfortable. This in turn gives rise to an air of parodic or mockumentary style filmmaking where the audience is included in the joke. Noel Carroll explains the incongruity theory of humor, which relies on contradicting elements to invoke laughter or "by means of merely inappropriate transgressions of norms or of commonplace expectation" (154). Indeed, the protagonists often engage in wide inappropriate social interactions that—while they can be constructed as humorous or entertaining can also be considered incredibly off-putting—contribute to the divisive nature of this genre. Nevertheless, the fact that this genre already has its own label, namely, cringey comedy does indicate how popular and widespread it has become.

mind can really tell the story" (see figure 3). This phrase is of great importance since it doubles as a warning to the audience of the rather chaotic narrative that is to come and as the only fitting description of what follows regarding the progression and narrative. This narrative is already ambiguous and chaotic, yet it regularly gives way to incoherent ramblings and dreamlike sequences that can only be described, and perhaps only be understood, as the external expressions of the internal mental workings of Wood himself. In this aspect, the narrative is as postmodern as its criticism of the dominant gender ideology of 1950s America.

Figure 2. The scientist looks down from above.

Figure 3. Dr. Alton addresses the audience hereby breaking the fourth wall

In his article on postmodernism and film, Hill briefly remarks on Collins' definition of postmodernism involving "juxtaposition as a mode of interrogation", in relation to a film combining "different discursive modes" (102). The lengthy dreamlike sequence in the middle of the film that moves from one unrelated scene to the next combined with Lugosi's rambling incoherent green dragon speech that is dispersed throughout the entire film certainly fits in with Collins' definition. For example, at 35:30, Lugosi looks down on Glenda, Glen's alter ego when wearing drag, who has fainted, and begins his speech: "beware of the big green dragon that sits on your doorstep. He eats little boys, puppy dog tails, and big fat snails." We then see Glenda imploring with his fiancé Barbara who, upon seeing Glen in drag, dramatically bangs her fists on the floor all the while tense and dramatic music plays over the scene. Barbara is then trapped under a tree and, significantly, Glenda struggles and does not manage to lift it off her but Glen does.

Shortly after this scene, Lugosi sternly asks the dragon if he eats little boys and other aforementioned items as the camera shows a close-up of Glen facing downwards with eyes closed. He slowly moves up while shaking in terror and gazes directly into the camera eyes wide in shock while a girl tauntingly repeats puppy dog tails and laughs mockingly. This is followed by several unconnected erotically tinted scenes in rapid succession before turning once more to Glen reverting back and forth to Glenda. Arguably, by juxtaposing these various scenes of Glen changing back and forth to Glenda, women wearing lingerie and brushing their hair, and Lugosi repeating, as well as asking, what the big green dragon eats, reads as an interrogation and exploration of gender norms. Wood is urging the audience to consider what it really means to be male or female. For this reason, *GoG*, despite being produced in 1953 which is the outset of the postmodern period, closely resembles a modern postmodern film in terms of narrative, cinematic form such as mise-en-scène, and character portrayal.

As stated above, there are several important aspects in *GoG* that fit into the postmodern framework, hence special attention will now be given to the postmodern subject present in the film. One of the most obvious instances of Wood inhabiting his film characters and wanting to live out his own desires and fantasies is in his portrayal of the title character Glen in *GoG*. It is somewhat ironic that while the financer and producer behind *GoG*, George Weiss, wanted to produce a film based entirely on the real life sex change of Christine Jorgensen, whereby the focus would solely lie on her transsexual lifestyle, Wood managed to turn the film into approximately 60 minutes of his own personal interest in transvestitism. Hereby, mainly creating an autobiographical story and effectively adding the story of the struggles of a transsexual in as an afterthought by condensing this to not even 10 minutes near the end of the film. Additionally, the character of Alan, who becomes Ann, remains quite two-dimensional she does not receive a voice nor does she appear to undergo any real struggles or hardships; instead, it is purely through Dr. Alton's narration that we

hear her story that ends with a rather trite and bland "happy ending" (54:00-1:03). However, due to Wood's projection of his own experiences of fighting in the war (e.g. hiding the desire to wear women's clothing or being awarded a bronze and silver star), even this story is more about Wood/Glen than Christine/Alan.

As touched upon earlier, the film contains a strange dreamlike sequence in which Glen changes back and forth to Glenda. Besides being able to save Barbara from underneath the fallen tree only in his guise of Glen he also imagines him and Barbara getting married while a devil like person stands next to them as their best man and witness. This devil reappears once more as Barbara lovingly beckons Glenda, but as he approaches she turns into the devil. These scenes represent the conflicted self-image and turmoil Wood experiences in his mind as the significances of losing Barbara underneath the tree and seeing her turn into the devil while dressed as Glenda coupled with having the devil present during their marriage while dressed as Glen are clear.

Equally significant to Wood's constructed identity is the proposed cause and treatment of Glen's transvestitism. The character of the psychiatrist informs us that Glen's interest in crossdressing condition was brought on by his youth, in particularly due to the lack of a loving mother and father (1:02-1:04). This neglect had caused him to project his desires of having a loving female present in his life to his alter-ego Glenda. Significantly, the only way for Glen to have his "happy ending" is to kill this fictional character. Thus, in the penultimate scene of the film the psychiatrist discusses these matters with Glen and Barbara and through his advice Glen comes to the realization that he can kill Glenda by transferring all her qualities to Barbara. Then the final scene shows Glen and Barbara are now married and while uplifting music plays in the background the narrator states that "soon due to a happily married life … Glenda begins to disappear forever from Glen … thus Glen's case has a happy conclusion." Wood exposes his true desire in this final scene as he has effectively orchestrated a happy ending for himself, one in which he no longer

desires to be a transvestite and can lead a "normal" life. Hence, Wood treated the directing of films as a vehicle to explore his own identity and correct certain personal aspects in order to live out his imagined perfect life through his characters. It is important to note, however, that unlike Wiseau—as will be shown in the following chapter—Wood consistently maintains a difference between the outside world and his own inner world as presented in his film.

2.2. Burton's Directorial Background

As touched upon earlier, Burton is best known for directing predominantly dark-gothic comedy and fantasy films, some of his biggest titles before 1995 were *Pee-Wee's big Adventure* (1985), *Beetlejuice* (1988), two Batman films in 1989 and 1992, and *The Nightmare before Christmas* (1993). The first film actually has a very postmodern quality to it in terms of narrative and subject matter. Similar to Wood's films and the *EW* biopic, it has reached a cult classic status over the years. Moreover, the film outwardly affects to be a family-comedy, while, in actuality, it focusses on quite shocking and controversial topics causing it to be considered too strange, and weird by mainstream audiences in the same way that *GoG* and *TR* are considered exceptionally strange. Besides the colorful Pee-Wee film, all others are known for their dark atmosphere, color schematics, and fantasy elements.

Burton did involve himself with at least three biographical films and tv-series before embarking on the production of the Wood biopic. He created a short animation exalting Vincent Price, best known for acting in horror films, in 1982. He also appeared on the tv-series Biography during an episode focusing on Vincent Price in 1987. Less relevant: Burton also appeared in a biographical film portraying the life of Jimmy Hoffa directed by Danny DeVito, albeit as an uncredited corpse. Nevertheless, it can thus be suggested that the directing of his Wood biopic was an entirely new endeavor for Burton.

With regard to personal motives, I will argue that Wood's eccentricity and fascination with predominantly gothic, horror, and supernatural creatures and actors sparked a personal interest in Burton due to his own preference of the strange and the weird. Evidently, Burton is most attracted to portraying characters that are weird: outsiders and rejects who live on the fringes of society and are shunned by most such as the characters of Edward Sciccorhands or Beetlejuice. Additionally, Burton seemingly perceived a certain recognition of Wood's friendship with an older Lugosi, as he himself had a similar situation with his friend Vincent Price, whom he also befriended later in his life. Indeed, a 1994 interview corroborates these notions as it uncovers three important recurrent motives that inspired Burton to direct this biopic and portray Wood and other characters in an overly sympathetic way, further discussed in the subsequent section on Burton's portrayal of Wood.

Firstly, Burton remarks on this perceived relatability towards Wood in a statement when asked to express his view on Wood's films, particularly *Plan 9* and *GoG*: "Obviously they are bad, but they're layered in a way, to me …. Wood did have this perverse optimism … I could relate to that in terms of when you're making a film" (Smith 54). He opines that during the process of making a film, directors should feel that what they are working on is the best film ever made, even if in fact you are creating the worst film. Consequently, it is this irony of Wood's situation, who sincerely believed he created masterful films, that attracted Burton to direct the biopic and expose this process. Secondly, when asked about his attraction to primarily portray outsiders who seek acceptance, Burton's observation that that "[i]s sort of the history of the world … [w]hy are these people tortured so much" implies that there is a universal interest, or perhaps morbid curiosity, in understanding and observing life from the weird-loner-perspective (60). Lastly, regarding the relationship between Wood and Lugosi, Burton admits to romanticizing this relationship between them mainly because he related it to his own feelings for Price (54). Simultaneously, while shooting the Wood-Lugosi scenes many of the aspects and elements were comprised of memories Burton

had of another friend: Furst. The interview makes clear that the Wood and Lugosi scenes do not necessarily reflect the real relationship between Wood and Lugosi at all, but are purely Burton's projections of his own relationship with and feelings towards Price, who reminded him of Lugosi, and towards his former friend Furst. Especially the aspects of struggling with an addiction and being suicidal corresponded to Furst who had already passed away at the time of shooting (54).

Coincidentally, in this interview, Burton remarks that how we perceive the past is due to the reshaping and revisiting that happens in the present and that true memory is inconstant "as things get further away from you" (56). In short, the past is reconstructed and reshaped by our current understanding of the present, which in turn is constantly reformed as new impressions color our experiences and influence this vision. This is fairly similar to the postmodern notion that Jameson propounds in *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, namely the problematic nature of historicity, historical authenticity, that no longer faithfully represents the past (284). Hence, it is reasonable to expect that the image that Burton presents of Wood is historically inaccurate because, not only is it modelled on his personal experiences and friendships, but also because it is further distorted by historical distance.

2.3. Burton's metatextual method of directing

Burton's biopic opens with a familiar postmodern film method of mimicry, namely, a pastiche of *Plan 9*: while eerie music swells into the background the camera moves in on a house and goes through a window that opens up for the camera showing a room with a coffin. Incidentally, this is also one of his signature directing styles as a large percentage of his films open with this camera movement know in cinematic terms as tracking or a dolly shot (Sipos 90). The character of Criswell rises up from his coffin while looking straight into the camera and addresses the audience as follows: "Greetings my friend …and now for the first time we are bringing the full story of what

happened. We are giving you all the evidence…the shocking facts of the true story of Edward D. Wood Jr." Compare this to Criswell's address in *Plan 9* "Greetings my friend…and now for the first time we are bringing to you the full story of what happened on that fateful day. We are giving you all the evidence … the shocking facts about grave-robbers from outer space." Almost a verbatim report, this shows the level of dedication Burton employs in creating pastiches of, or overtly alluding to, the original three films Wood is shown to direct; *GoG*, *Plan 9*, and *Bride of the Atom*, later renamed *Bride of the Monster* (1955). This can be further illustrated by briefly highlighting a few scenes: when Wood is shooting his scenes as Glenda he walks passed a women's clothing store wistfully stares at the mannequins before slowly turning and walking away. This scene closely mimics the same scene in *GoG*. Secondly, at around 1:16-1:17 when Wood calls up Vampira the film poster hanging behind him on the wall is the real film poster printed in 1956 for *Bride of the Monster*. Lastly, in an ironic juxtaposition there is a brief shot of boxes filled with shoddy cardboard graves and props for *Plan 9* placed underneath a sign that says quality stages (1:40:20). This is of course a meta-reference to the overall low quality of the stages and props Wood used while filming *Plan 9*.

As indicated, there are several instances of direct imitation between scenes in the biopic and the respective films; however, the mimicry does not confine itself to Wood films only, several classic Lugosi scenes and mannerism are likewise referred to. From showing Lugosi testing out his coffin and sleeping with his arms crossed—both alluding to his famous role as Dracula—to his peculiar hand movement ("you must be double jointed"). This latter is shown in a scene that actually epitomizes metatextuality: Martin Landau in his imitation and portrayal of Lugosi watches Vampira on tv and starts moving his hands in beckoning gestures in exact imitation of his younger self when he portrayed Dracula.

In regards to another aspect of "postmodern cinematic sensibility," to use Fabe's term, the film calls attention to its own existence as a biopic throughout, as well as, inviting the audience to juxtapose the events shown in the biopic with Wood's own life (173). This is evident in several remarks made in *EW* that at first glance refer to in-film characters or events, but can aptly be extrapolated to refer to real events surrounding the real Ed Wood. First, when two office girls discuss the upcoming biopic of Christine Jorgensen, one of the first openly transsexuals and first to undergo sex reassignment surgery, they are quite dismissive of this person and call her "a freak". Arguably, the dismissive tone of voice and use of the key terms 'biopic' and 'freak' here are not coincidental, but purposely said to establish a link between the general opinion on Ms. Jorgensen and the upcoming biopic and Ed Wood, who was not generally held in high esteem, and the biopic that the audience is watching right that instance. Thus, by referring to a different biopic of an un-popular person within his own biopic Burton cleverly emphasizes the film's metatextuality. Another good example of metatextuality occurs when on two separate occasions Wood refers to *Plan 9* as "the ultimate Wood movie" and "this is the one I'll be remembered for." Naturally, the real Wood probably never realized that he would be remembered as the worst filmmaker of all time, in particularly for his *Plan 9* which won the title of worst film of all time in 1980 (Corliss 1992).

Similarly, there are two instances of metatextuality and metanarrative in the wrap party scene where Wood and other characters celebrate the wrapping up of *Bride of the Atom*. Wood performs a striptease in full drag, including a wig and his trademark angora sweater, for the climax he not only takes off his dress, hereby revealing his brassiere, but also unveils his face as the camera instantly goes for a close-up of Wood smiling broadly and, significantly, missing his front teeth (fig 4.). This is a clear example of Burton choosing to not merely show the public figure of Wood, who indeed would have worn dentures as he lost his front teeth in the war, but to emphasize the real person behind the façade: the Wood who had a great passion for drag. By placing him in the

center of this scene surrounded by a cheering crowd who encourage his strip tease, and most importantly, by ending on a close- up of a happily smiling Wood without dentures Burton provides an empowering image of the real him. Subsequently, by immediately following this with an upset Dolores screaming at the silent crowd, "You people are insane … nobody cares, these movies are terrible!" the attention is once more drawn to the fact that in actuality nobody did care about wood's films. Because this monologue is mostly shot in close-up a heightened suggestion that this rebuff is directly addressing the audience is given, suggesting that we might be insane for watching, i.e. caring for, this biopic about a certified nobody (figure. 5).

Not only does Burton place his biopic in a continuation concerning rejection of the metanarrative of masculinity, he also improves upon it. The biopic focusses on Wood's defiance of stereotypes and desire to educate people on transsexuality and transvestitism as Wood repeatedly explains the difference between these two topics to those around him. Furthermore, Burton has Wood direct part of *Plan 9* while wearing his drag outfit in front of outraged members of the Baptist Church, in doing so Burton implies that Wood is comfortable enough in his masculinity to wear women's clothing.

Finally, several minor metatextual aspects in the final scene of the biopic need to be addressed. Wood and his whole crew are watching the premiere of his *Plan 9* amidst a fully packed cinema hall and as the camera cuts between close-ups of Wood's face and *Plan 9* it is easy to infer from Wood's facial expressions that this is an emotional and touching moment for him. Mouthing the dialogue alongside the actors and shaking his head in delightful disbelief it is evident that Wood truly viewed *Plan 9* as his personal masterpiece. Afterwards, as Wood and Kathy drive of, presumably to get married straight away, the camera pans up and zooms out to reveal the large sign of Hollywood in the hills behind the cinema. Subsequently, closing the film with a typical comedy happy ending, as well as, cleverly placing Ed Wood the person and the biopic in direct relation to

Hollywood. Thus, in a way Burton restores Wood to the glamour and prestige of the Hollywood industry.

Figure 4. Wood smiling broadly at completion of his striptease.

Figure 5. Dolores screaming at the crowd applauding Wood's striptease.

2.4. Burton's postmodern representation of Ed Wood in *Ed Wood* (1994).

This section will show that Burton's personal impressions of and attitudes towards Ed Wood led him to create a new fiction of the director's life and person. As briefly mentioned above, Burton's ulterior motive for creating his biopic of Wood, was to construct an ode to an eccentric quirky film director whom he admired. As Burton explains in his interview with Gavin Smith, he grew up watching Wood films and wishes that he himself "could have been a director of horror and sci-fi B movies in that era" (54). This element of nostalgia, which was part of the reason for making the biopic, ties in with Jameson's notion of nostalgia films as discussed in chapter 1. Consequently, Wood is portrayed as an incredibly sympathetic person, he is predominantly positive throughout the film, smiling, encourages his crew, and he has an air of sweet naïveté and childlike wonder. He is a good friend to Bela Lugosi and openly and sincerely admires him, which is in stark

contrast to all the other characters in the film who consider him a junkie, a has-been, and repeatedly remark they thought he was dead. First, at 18:41, when Wood ecstatically tells Dolores he met a movie star, she fails to guess who it was because she "thought he was dead." At 23:32, upon promising George Weiss he can have a movie star in his sex change film for only $1000; Weiss questioningly replies "Isn't he dead?" Lastly, at 46:23, as Wood tries to generate an interest and secure financers for his film over the phone, he exclaims: "Yes, that's right THE Bela Lugosi [pause] he's still alive!"

Burton placed great emphasis on this close friendship with Lugosi through three crucial scenes: Lugosi calls Wood in distress and the latter immediately rushes over to Lugosi's house to come to his aid. Secondly, he accompanies him to a rehab center where he visits him every day. In fact, it could be argued that it is thanks to Wood's urging or concern that Lugosi checks himself in. Finally, the film demonstrates early on that the constant underlying motivation for Wood to make films is to help his good friend Bela, which is certainly an honorable incentive. In doing so, Burton ascribes incredibly noble motivations to Wood's rapid production of subpar films: he wanted to provide a steady income for Lugosi, as well as, help keep him relevant in the film industry. This latter is an interesting take on the film industry as it suggests that in the margins of Hollywood there is room for compassion and idealism. Indeed, as Lupo and Anderson describe, this emphasis on Wood's steadfast care for Lugosi "reinforces the idea that the film is not a biopic of failure, but one of (personal) success despite (artistic) failure" (106). Yet, is important to keep in mind that the portrayal of this relationship between Wood and Lugosi reflects more on Burton's personal relationships with Price and Furst. Subsequently, the entire perspective on their relationship shifts as the crucial scene where Wood rushes over to save a suicidal Lugosi and convinces him to check into rehab—already emotionally laden, now becomes a poignant and mournful moment. For

through directing this scene Burton, who may have regretted his own inability to prevent his friend Furst from committing suicide, understandably fulfills a personal wish.

Additionally, Burton portrays John "Bunny" Breckinridge as a close personal friend of Wood, who conceived the idea of undergoing a sex reassignment surgery after Wood produced his *GoG* stating that he took courage from Wood's film. Hence, Burton effectively demonstrates the positive and empowering theme of Wood's unconventional films, in addition to drawing the audience's attention to how it provided moral support to those around him. In short, Burton ensures that his representation of Wood is nothing but touching, sympathetic, and reverential, even if this does not always resemble the truth. Indeed, within, as well as through this biopic, Burton has given Wood the adoration that he never knew during his life (Lupo and Anderson 106).

It is also worth noting that Burton apparently does not permit any real negativity to befall his fictional Wood, undoubtedly implemented as a type of compensation. For though the real Wood did suffer countless hardships, along with possessing some lesser character traits, Burton has chosen not to address these in his biopic. The only instance in the film in which he is shown to lose heart and become upset is during the production of *Plan 9*, but when he steps into a bar to cool off and drink away his anger he meets his biggest hero: Orson Welles. In an incredibly short yet uplifting scene Welles proceed to give Wood a small pep-talk as they appear to encounter similar obstacles whilst attempting to direct films true to their vision. "Ed, visions are worth fighting for" Welles tells him, "why spend your life making someone else's dreams?" with these closing words and as the music swells in the background an enraptured Wood leaves Welles and heads back into the study. By juxtaposing Wood's lowest moment as a filmmaker, in this film, with what would most likely have been the greatest moment in his life, Burton allows his version of Wood to find salvation and a certain state of grace through receiving such encouraging words from a fellow director and personal hero.

Yet, the real Wood experienced far greater misfortune than merely becoming discouraged while filming. He most notably suffered from an alcohol addiction and subsequent personal degradation. Although the biopic only focusses on Wood's life from 1953 until 1959, his addiction was nevertheless already steadfastly becoming an obstacle during that time. It was this addiction, in fact, that was responsible for the break-up between Wood and Dolores Fuller and not his transvestitism. What is more, it is mainly due to Burton's handling of this aspect of Wood's life that she expressed her disappointment in Burton's portrayal of her in his biopic ("Dolores Fuller"). This raises questions about Wood's transvestitism and Burton's portrayal thereof, which will be discussed in the next section.

Burton does not touch upon Wood's wish to cure himself from his transvestitism nor his explanation that both transvestitism and transsexuality occur through parental neglect. As noted above, Wood concludes *GoG* with the protagonist Glen/himself realizing through the help of the psychiatrist that he can be cured if he only transfers all his desires and admiration of being Glenda to his fiancée Barbara. I will offer two possible explanations why Burton deliberately chose to omit Wood's wish fulfilment from his biopic. Firstly, by the time the biopic was released, in 1994, several sexual and feminist revolutions had occurred, opening up more dialogue on and a greater understanding of topics such as homosexuality, transsexuality, and transvestitism (Escoffier 6). Arguably, Burton, even though he was making a period film, wished to stay within the more progressive and accepting 90s culture regarding gender and sexual identity and did not inadvertently want to stultify the progress that had already been made. Secondly, by excluding Wood's wish to be cured Burton not only rejects Wood's unacceptance of himself, but also, in a way, lets his version of Wood make peace with this intrinsic part of himself: Burton fully accepts and embraces Wood for who he is and portrays Wood as doing the same.

Robert Birchard does not mince words in his article that specifically undertakes to discredit and debunk certain facts about Wood. He claims that Wood was not unique and did not bring a personal vision to his projects, and that his films never found a wide audience. He supports this last point by quoting the fact that Paramount showed *GoG* as a midnight matinee in hopes of generating the same kind of hype-phenomenon as the immensely popular *Rocky Horror Picture Show*, but failed miserably (455). In regards to his friendship with Lugosi, Wood did not accidentally meet Lugosi in the street, it was Alex Gordon who introduced the two years before Wood started filming *GoG*, moreover Gordon was also responsible for writing the classic "I have no home…" speech for Lugosi in *Bride of the Monster* (Birchard 451-452). However, it is understandable that Burton chose not to include the whole truth regarding Wood and Lugosi's friendship in in his biopic for the sake of condensing the plotline. In contrast, the knowledge that Wood never purposefully wrote, or rewrote, the speech for his friend Lugosi does place the real Wood in sharp contrast to Burton's version as he once more heavily emphasizes Wood's noble, friendly nature and goodwill. Perhaps a more surprising omission, in that it certainly would have added somewhat more prestige and glamor to the character of Wood, is his brief collaboration with John Carpenter Wood wrote a western movie script for him and took on the function of his production manager (Birchard 454).

While Burton undoubtedly could have presented this as a favorable subplot, he maintains the focus on Wood's controversial—and independent—filmmaking career spanning from 1953 till 1959 and featuring three of his most memorably bad films. Hereby choosing to show him at his most defeated yet optimistic, relentlessly enthusiastic, and endearing. Undeniably, Burton has skillfully directed this biopic displaying Wood at his best thus aiming to elicit only sympathetic reactions from the audience, who may laugh with Wood not at him, truly creating an ode to this film director.

Chapter 3 - Tommy Wiseau and James Franco

Like Ed Wood's *Plan 9,* Tommy Wiseau's *The Room* (2003) is often classified in the "so bad it's good" category. It has been over a decade since Wiseau created his film and it is still revered for its notoriously bad production quality and strange plot. Unsurprisingly, it generated incredible amounts of interest with the public and critics alike, swiftly becoming a cult phenomenon. Recently it was referred to as "the 'Citizen Kane' of bad movies" (Van Luling 2017).

Franco's biopic *The Disaster Artist* (2017) that chronicles the development and the making of *The Room*—henceforth abbreviated as *TDA* and *TR* respectively—may come across as a lighthearted humorous film, perhaps even more so than *EW*. The characters are mostly portrayed as friendly, in particularly Tommy seems quirky yet endearing. Combined with witty and funny dialogue and various absurdly hilarious scenes and elements (that become even funnier to audiences aware of all the references to *TR*), it is not difficult to understand why it is predominantly labelled as a comedy. However, Franco's rendering of Tommy Wiseau's struggle to make it in Hollywood, and his subsequent intense desire to produce and direct his film as an ode to himself also carries a slight dark and grim undertone. Unlike Burton's ode to Ed Wood, Franco did not direct his biopic as a vehicle through which he could praise Wiseau, or find his friend the recognition that had alluded him with the release of *TR*. Whereas Franco similarly explores the postmodern subject in relation to Wiseau, the portrait he creates of him is painted in a very different style to the Wood portrait created by Burton.

Incidentally, like Wood, Wiseau produced, directed, and cast himself as the star in his own film, through which he essentially lives out his own perfect life. This comparison can be extended to Franco as he, in a way, imitates Wiseau. Not only by mimicking Wiseau as an actor, but also by partially producing his biopic through his own production company RabbitBandini Productions besides directing and acting as the main protagonist: Wiseau.

Once again, this chapter is divided into four main sections; the first section will explore the postmodern expression of identity in Wiseau's *TR* chiefly by drawing upon both his film and Greg Sestero's semi-biographical memoir *The Disaster Artist* (2013). This novel, written by one of the few people close to Wiseau, provides an honest and insightful account into their friendship and the experience of acting alongside Wiseau in *TR*. The second section will examine Franco as a director and Franco's biopic. Accordingly, a brief analysis of the directorial background of Franco will be provided, hereby asserting what the possible underlying motives for Franco to produce his biopic are. Correspondingly, the interplay between the film and the biopic and metatextuality present in the biopic will be examined in the third section, particularly the slightly negative and hostile undertones taking the shape of disapproval towards the protagonist. This disapproving and parodic display ties in with Franco's representation of Wiseau. It follows that the final area that deserves to be examined is that of the character of Wiseau as perceived and presented by Franco.

3.1. *The Room*: Tommy Wiseau's ideal vision of himself in noughties.

The most appropriate and simplest descriptive term given to Wiseau's film and narrative could be that it is meaningless. Accordingly, Fabe's argument that "meaninglessness is a core concern of postmodernism" perfectly epitomizes the postmodern expression of the narrative in *TR* (173). I will argue, based on the analysis of several key scenes of the film, that *TR* can easily be considered as the ultimate illustration of postmodernism and the postmodern condition in film. The dialogue deserves the most attention and will be analyzed first. I would like to interject here that all conversations and interactions in the film are serious and were meant to be taken at face value. When the film was being shot, Wiseau was not filming a dark-comedy or a film purposely meant to be "so bad it's good." Normally, a film narrative contains well-scripted dialogues and interactions that clarify key-elements, add poetic grace, or further the plot. Most characters will

speak eloquently and coherently, to ensure the audience can understand and follow underlying motivations and will not lose their interest in the plot. Characters will frequently interact with one another in a logic manner, concerning the plot, or if a certain action or dialogue initially appears illogical this quite often becomes clear at a later point in the film. On the contrary, conversations and interactions between characters in *TR* at first glance appear strange, repetitive, and illogical or unmotivated.

At the start of the film, from 2:20-5:07, Johnny comes home and presents his future wife Lisa with a new dress. When Lisa tries on the dress for Johnny, a new character, Denny, walks into the apartment (it will be made clear later that he is like a son to them). After the obligatory standard greetings of "Oh, hai…" that all characters exchange upon seeing one another, Johnny announces that he will go and take a nap, but Denny asks if he can go upstairs too. While already a somewhat atypical question, it can be constructed as Denny being unaware of the implications that a host usually prefers their guest to leave when he informs them that he will take a nap. Then, Lisa informs Denny that she will join Johnny for the nap as well, hereby attempting to convey the hint that this nap is a private affair between her and Johnny. The situation quickly grows more bizarre: at first Denny stands in their living room, wistfully looking up at the stairs while biting into an apple that just manifested itself out of nowhere; meanwhile, Lisa and Johnny can still be heard talking about lightning candles and taking her dress off. Presumably, as the audience can hear this conversation going on while the camera switches between Denny looking up and Lisa and Johnny walking up the stairs, the audience is expected to infer that Denny can also clearly hear the ongoing conversation. The scene then cuts to Lisa and Johnny pillow fighting on the bed when suddenly Denny jumps on the bed to join in. After a few back-and-forths with the pillows, Johnny asks "Denny, do you have something else to do?" to which he replies, "I just like to watch you guys." This incredibly awkward and painful scene culminates with Denny understanding the message at

last and leaving them alone in the bedroom, upon which the audience is immediately launched into another hard to watch and entirely uninterrupted four-minute sex scene.

One specific interaction between Lisa and her mother Claudette gives the audience the impression that the characters are partaking in an entirely different conversation. They mainly talk at and not with each other. Claudette woefully exclaims, “everything goes wrong at once. Nobody wants to help me and I’m dying.” Lisa’s respond by saying that she is not dying, but Claudette simply states, in a slight singsong voice, that she “got the results from the test back. I definitely have breast cancer.” This elicits nothing more than an emotionally flat response from Lisa who tells her not to worry about it and that “they’re curing lots of people every day.” With this, the topic is dropped for the rest of the film and the audience is forever left pondering whether Claudette will be cured. However, the conversation has not ended yet. As they move on to the topic of horrible men and good men, Lisa informs her mother that Johnny did not receive his promotion, became drunk, and hit her. Her mother only responds slightly shocked at the fact that Johnny got drunk because “he does not drink” and makes no further mention of her daughter’s possible struggle with domestic violence at the hands of her future husband.

A third telling scene is the one in which Johnny bumps into his best friend, Mark, on the rooftop. Prompted by Johnny’s passionate remarks of “I did not hit her. It’s not true” they launch into a conversation about girl trouble. Mark holds a brief monologue to Johnny about a girl he once knew who “had a dozen guys. One of them found out about it, beat her up so bad she ended up on a hospital on Guerrero Street.” This causes Johnny to smile broadly, laugh, and exclaim “what a story, Mark!” as if the dark implications of severe physical abuse in the story are pure entertainment for him.

That the dialogue and interactions are predominantly illogical and confusing is undeniable. However, I want to argue that they are a far more realistic portrayal of real life interactions than

the carefully scripted, eloquently worded, and easy-to-follow conversations in most mainstream movie dramas. Conversations in real life are regularly unscripted, incredibly vague with interrupted or halting speech, trying to say several things at once or talking only for the sake of talking. Similarly, in any given situation it is possible for people to appear to act illogical or without distinct motivations that, unlike in film, will not be conveniently explained or clarified at the end. Indeed, one research examining the daily conversational behavior of couples found that their mundane conversations primarily consists of 27.5% self-report, 10.6% other-report, and 14.9% observations (Alberts et al. 309). Accordingly, self-report would be when the characters engage in conversations that convey their own experiences or feelings e.g. Johnny saying he did not get the promotion at the bank, and the numerous instances in which characters mention what a good guy Johnny is would fall under other-report as that refers to "comments about third parties" (309-310).

Thus, the peculiar unexplained actions of Denny, the unresolved breast-cancer physical abuse conversation between Lisa and Claudette, and Johnny's strangely gleeful response to a terrible story all closely resemble possible real life interactions. Fabe mentions Derrida's theory of language being infinitely reverential in relation to a film consisting of a reality that only refers to reality in other films. Fabe does this in order to highlight the self-reflexive nature of certain films (177). This theory can be extrapolated to reality as a whole; our understanding of reality and the meaning we give to reality is achieved through talking about our own and other realities. Thus, reality derives its meaning from other realities, as there is no fundamental reality outside the one we perceive, likewise the world created inside *TR* is somewhat comparable to this theory. There is nothing outside of *TR* that can give true meaning to it or explain its absurdness; it remains incomparable to other films or reality because the only way to fully appreciate and "understand" *TR* is by watching it as is.

Another structural aspect of narrative is the plot; this will be further discussed below together with an analysis of the sequence of the scenes and the overall editing. Postmodern cinema can be characterized by a shift in viewing techniques as the "normal modes of deciphering narrative" become less important (Constable 26). For instance, the audience may no longer have one or two protagonists to identify with throughout the film, or understand the motives of main characters. Constable further explains that this postmodern sensibility ties in with "a dwindling of spectatorial concern for coherent characters or motives" (26). This is precisely how *TR* should be perceived as the characters' behavior and motivations do not necessarily follow logically. Similarly, the film introduces various subplots that are immediately abandoned and never called back to by any of the characters. The aforementioned breast cancer announcement is one of such abandoned subplots; another example is Denny suddenly being assaulted by a gangster-type character on the roof due to a certain drug money involvement. Lastly, during his birthday party Johnny proudly announces that he and Lisa are expecting. However, the audience is instantly informed that Lisa only made this up "to make it interesting." No further indication is given as to how, why, or what exactly this adds interest to and the film ends without any additional information to this subplot.

With respect to the editing, this again appears to have been done at random as numerous location shots of San Francisco and scenes of Johnny along with various minor characters tossing a football around are dispersed across the already thinly stretched out plot. Incidentally, this extensive use of landscape and skyline scenes of San Francisco in *TR* can be likened to Wood's frequent use of stock footage. It is simply filler material that, within the film's timeline, only sporadically serves to indicate the actual passing of time. Moreover, except for the San Francisco Park none of the other locations indicated by the skyline scenes are visited by characters in the film. In this regard, Wiseau treats the directing of his film in the same manner as Wood; both show an affinity for adding in stock footage and working the plot around this as opposed to only shooting

or using material that is necessary for the plot. Their stock footage serves no aesthetic, thematic, or structural function within their film as both Wood and Wiseau appear to intersperse their narrative with stock footage merely to lengthen the screen time of their film.

Furthermore, all that occurs between the first sex scene between Lisa and Mark up until halfway through Johnny's birthday party has no bearing on the eventual outcome of the plot. All the above mentioned subplots, all the dialogue and scenes could have been switched around or removed and the plot would remain entirely the same. That is roughly one hour of film that has absolutely no relation to the plot introduced in the first 20 minutes of the film where it is established that: Johnny and Lisa are engaged and love each other very much, Mark is Johnny's best friend, yet Lisa and Mark are having an affair. Subsequently, it is only in the last 11 minutes that we see Johnny confronting Lisa about his discovery of the affair between her and Mark and then committing suicide. Surely, this merits a certain level of appreciation of how utterly meaningless and random the entire film is, nevertheless this is only due to Wiseau's ineptness as a director and unintentional disastrous treatment of his script and his directorial duties. Though the film does have a postmodern subject matter, there is no sense of postmodern style nor is the film self-aware of being postmodern as there is only the coincidental parallel. Thus, *TR* cannot be said to be intentionally created as a film following in the postmodern tradition.

Lastly, I will briefly discuss the metatextuality present within the film since there are few references and allusions to an ongoing American cinematic history. Interestingly, the film also contains a scene that appears to allude to Vaslav Nijinsky's famous ballet *L'Après-midi d'un faune* performed in 1912. In this ballet, a faun encounters a nymph and becomes enamored of her, when she leaves the stage an item of her clothing remains behind to the faun's great delight as he proceeds to lay down upon it in a highly suggestive manner (figure 1). Compare this to the final scene of TR in which Lisa exits the scene leaving behind a distraught Johnny who picks up her red dress and

holds it against his crotch while writing and moaning (figure 2). Granted, this may be entirely unintentional, but it struck me as curiously similar. Next, regarding film allusions, one of the most iconic and often quoted lines in the film comes at 46:15 when Johnny, frustrated with Lisa, screams out "You are tearing me apart, Lisa!" this line is a direct reference to James Dean's character in *Rebel without a Cause* (1955). Thus, Wiseau using this phrase in his film is a prime example of the postmodern device of pastiche. Moreover, Wiseau delivers this line in a similar strongly emotional fashion mimicking Dean's facial expressions (figure 3 and 4).

Figure 1. The faun with the nymph's cloth.

Figure 2. Johnny with Lisa's dress.

Figure 4. The original emotional delivery of “You’re tearing me apart!”

Figure 4. Strong emotional performance in direct reference to James Dean’s delivery.

In his memoir, *TDA* Sestero explains that Wiseau adored James Dean and had purposely placed this line as a direct reference and ode to Dean's performance. Sestero even goes as far as suggesting that perhaps Wiseau conceived *TR* "just so [he] could have this elemental, unbridled moment of performance" (Sestero and Bissell 135). A second element of allusion appears in the form of character traits from the main protagonists in *The Talented Mr. Ripley* (1999). Sestero explains that Wiseau mixed up the characteristics of Tom Ripley and Dickie Greenleaf in order to place them "into a warped version of his own life experience" (203). Only in his version all the villainous characteristics of Ripley were transferred to both Lisa and Mark while the character Johnny consists of "half the charismatic Dickie Greenleaf and half the lonely victim Tom Ripley" (203). Though this indicates what inspired Wiseau to create his characters and model their personalities after, it unfortunately still does not fully explain her actions and motivations within the reality of the film. Evidently, Wiseau demonstrates his awareness of preexisting films, and possibly modern ballet, and by alluding to these he, in a way, places his film in a continued cinematic historical framework. In doing so, he does suggest a level of self-reflexivity and metatextuality that gives the film a sense of aspiring to be postmodern, albeit rather ineptly.

Though Fabe in his article on postmodernism and film uses Woody Allen's films as his prime example of postmodern cinematic sensibility, *TR* proves to be an equally fitting case. For, like Allen's portrayal of protagonists in his own film, Wiseau lacks a distinct identity and consequently suffers from identity diffusion. This is present from the start of *TR* as we discover that the protagonist's name is Johnny, incidentally, for the purpose of this analysis it is irrelevant whether Tommy Wiseau purposely chose this similar sounding name or not. Johnny leads a life that is as contradictory from Tommy as possible. Johnny has a fiancée and many friends, is supposedly in the same age-range as them i.e. 20-25, and is very popular. While at the time of filming Sestero notes that Wiseau was single, had practically no close friends besides himself and,

though he never told him his exact age must have been close to middle-age at the time of directing (129). It becomes evident that Wiseau treats the film and the character Johnny as an extension of himself; herein he enacts his own perfect life, while simultaneously highlighting how he is tragically misunderstood and misused by everyone in his life. Throughout the film every single character repetitively declares that Johnny is a great and generous guy, or a variation on this theme, when Lisa accuses him of hitting her several characters affirm that Johnny never lies and would never hit anyone. The film places great emphasis on the amazingly friendly and caring nature of Johnny; heavy emphasis is also placed on the fact that Johnny is a great friend—the fact that Johnny and Mark are best friends is mentioned 7 times alone throughout the film. When he discovers that Lisa is cheating on him with his best friend Mark, in the aforementioned birthday party scene, he throws his arms in the air and exclaims "everybody betrayed me! I'm fed up with this world!" This feeling of betrayal is a crucial theme to the film and thus to Wiseau. Through Sestero's memoir we discover that Wiseau felt that no one in Hollywood wanted to give him a chance to prove that he could be a star, similarly because of the many disputes and tensions that accompanied the directing of his film Wiseau must have truly felt as if the whole world was against him.

Equally significant to understanding how Wiseau perceived himself is the ending of the film as Lisa, Mark, and Denny are all sobbing inconsolably over the dead body of Johnny. I want to argue that these three characters standing around him represent three major themes in the film. First, Lisa represents romantic love and relationships that both ensnares and betrays Johnny as he showers her with gifts e.g. a dress, flowers, a car, yet she rejects him. Then Mark initially stands for friendship and trust, yet again this character betrays Johnny as well. Lastly, Denny who looks up to Johnny and is provided for by him exists to emphasis Johnny's caring and father like qualities. This latter is affirmed by Lisa telling her mother that Johnny "wanted to adopt Denny" and that he has found him a little apartment and pays for his tuition. Accordingly, by grouping these three

characters around him Wiseau highlights the fact that despite having been the perfect man who has never done anything wrong in all these three aspects, life, ultimately, has betrayed him. In doing so, Wiseau ensures the audience that what they have witnessed is the tragic downfall, against his own magnificent personality and actions, of a saint like hero.

With this in mind, I would now like to discuss the concept and importance of narrative. Paul Cobley observes how oral cultures placed great importance on repetition and the use of certain narrative structures citing that "[m]emory embodied in narrative made a significant contribution to the formation and maintenance of the self-image of the peoples" (36). I would like to argue that the repetitive nature of Wiseau's narrative where characters constantly remind the audience that Mark and Johnny are best friends and that Johnny is an amazing and generous friend, father figure, and all-round stand-up real American guy doubles as an affirmative mnemonic device to Wiseau himself. He has constructed the film in such a way because he himself is in desperate need of maintaining and boosting his possibly deluded self-image. Similarly, Fabe's analysis of the behavior of a certain Woody Allen character as "a symptom of his pathological need to be accepted" can be extrapolated to the entire process of Wiseau writing, directing, and producing this self-praising and self-glorifying film (178). Coincidentally, in a narcissistic inversion of Burton's portrayal of Wood, who is his own biggest and most genuine fan, Wiseau, unsurprisingly, stated in an interview "I inspire myself every day of my existence" (Lannamann 2009). To conclude, it has been demonstrated that Wiseau used his own vision of himself, as well as, this inspiration to fuel his directing of and acting in *TR*.

3.2. Franco's Directorial Background

James Franco is an incredibly prolific actor, director, and producer who at the time of directing *TDA* had already directed six documentaries and over a dozen feature films. Interestingly, four of these are biopics dealing with writers, poets, and actors, and four are film adaptations of well-known literary novels. However, for the purpose of this paper, and for the sake of brevity, I will solely focus on the non-biographical films to try to determine how *TDA* fits into the progression. Turning to the non-biographical films, there are a few that are more prominent than others due to their perceived excellence, or failure, or unusual subject matter. The first film Franco directed was *The Ape* (2005). The synopsis states that the film is about an aspiring novelist who needs to find the solitude to write his self-acclaimed masterpiece. However, he finds himself renting an apartment with a foul-mouthed ape as roommate. Based on the description alone, one could imagine an almost Woodesque narrative where the mundane meets the absurd. While this film appears to have been poorly received by audiences, one of the following films Franco directed, *Good Time Max* (2007), was slightly better received than *The Ape*. Interestingly he dedicated the film to his own brother Dave Franco, who also portrays the best friend of Tommy in *TDA*, (stockholmfilmfestival). The story concerns two intellectually gifted brothers who appear to live completely opposite lives yet upon closer scrutiny share many similarities. One is a drug addict and a party animal; the other is a successful doctor who slowly becomes addicted to prescription drugs. In 2014, Franco directed *I Think You're Totally Wrong: A Quarrel*. This film appears to be exceedingly metatextual and self-reflective as Franco together with the authors of the same-titled novel loosely recreate the plot of the novel by coming together and argue. Moreover, their quarrel pertains to which parts of the novel can or cannot be in the film adaptation. Lastly, the most recent film Franco created before directing *TDA* is *The Institute* (2017), a horror film that he claims is roughly based on true events at the Rosewood Center in Baltimore during the nineteenth century.

It seems that Franco enjoys taking on a wide variety of projects and genres, though a pattern does emerge when the films that are direct novel adaptions are taken into account. Regarding these films, they all stem from a personal interest as Franco greatly admires these prominent American authors, especially William Faulkner (Galuppo 2015). With this in mind, it can be extrapolated that by making these literary adoptions Franco is most interested in bringing high culture to the masses. Similarly, by directing a historical film based on a true story he is equally invested in wanting to educate audiences about the past. Furthermore, the fact that the script of *TDA* is an adaptation of a novel has obviously furthered Franco's interest in directing the film. Indeed, in an interview with *Vanity Fair* Franco notes "he became interested in *The Room* after reading producer Greg Sestero's 2013 memoir about the making of the movie." Coincidentally, when Franco approached Wiseau about his project the first casting choice of Wiseau to play himself was Johnny Depp (Miller 2017). This clearly ties in with Burton's *EW*, whether or not Wiseau was aware of Depp's performance as Wood.

3.3. Franco's metatextual method of directing

Similar to Burton's biopic, Franco's film opens with an audience watching a play. Interestingly, here it is Greg and a fellow drama student who perform a scene from Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, which is the perfect example of the postmodern theatre of the absurd. This is particularly true in terms of dialogue and form, as Beckett skillfully designed this play to confront audiences with the boredom of human existence (Taylor-Batty 29). It is highly metatextual and celebrates the meaninglessness of existence, hereby forming a polar opposite with *TR*. Though *TR* does exhibit a similar lack of any fixed meaning and contains mundane dialogue, it evidently was not purposely crafted to belong to a postmodern film tradition or to create high culture art that engages with low culture such as Beckett. Significantly, Franco, by starting his biopic in this

manner, encourages the audience to juxtapose his film to Beckett's play. Where the biopic showcases a supposedly misunderstood artist who inadvertently created a film whose entire dialogue consists of repetitive, simple, and often meaningless (to the plot) statements Beckett's play, despite containing somewhat similar meaningless dialogue, conveys a more profound existential theme. In this manner, Franco draws the audience's attention to the self-reflexive nature of his biopic.

This biopic, however, rather than faithfully depicting the events as they are described in Sestero's *TDA*, seems to be more concerned with closely resembling Burton's *EW*. To illustrate, the friendship between Greg and Tommy is incredibly emphasized even going as far as to indicate that Tommy wrote and directed this entire film just for his best friend Greg to make him a star. This is similar to the way in which Wood and Lugosi are portrayed in *EW*, Wood is shown to be Lugosi's only and closest friend and, as mentioned in chapter two, and directed several of his films primarily to ensure Lugosi was still relevant and received an income. However, as stated in Greg´s memoir Wiseau conceived the plan of writing and directing his own film after they saw *The Talented Mr. Ripley* in the cinema exclaiming:

> You know what? Fuck it, man. I will write my own play. I´ll do my own project and it will be better than everybody else. You think movie we just saw was tragedy? No. Not even close. I will make tragedy. People will see my project and … you know what? They will not sleep for two weeks. They will be completely shocked. You watch. (202)

This statement shows that Wiseau certainly did not create his film in order to give both Greg and himself a shot at acting and becoming famous. Contrariwise, Wiseau, tired of waiting for

Hollywood to give him his chance, yearned to show the whole world that he could create the greatest drama film and that he will achieve this all by his own hard work and talent.

Likewise, in *TDA* Wiseau encounters Judd Apatow while at a restaurant and in an especially painful, yet, heart-rending scene tries to convince this director to cast him as the star in one of his movies. Unlike Wood who is granted a meeting with his hero Orson Welles, albeit fictional, and subsequently receives an encouraging pep talk from him, Apatow tells Wiseau that it will never happen for him. At first, Apatow politely informs Wiseau that he cannot just walk up to people while they are in the middle of dinner, but he can get in touch with his agency and send his resume. However, Wiseau is only focused on immediately getting a foot in the door and eager to make a good impression on this "big Hollywood producer" launches into a butchered rendering of Shakespeare (0:31-0:33). Understandably, this promptly irritates Apatow even further and the scene ends with security escorting a defeated Wiseau off the premises while Apatow tells him once more "I'm saying not in a million years" (0:32:26). Surely, this is in sharp contrast with Welles' treatment of Wood as the entire scene in *EW* bestows a redemption, if you will, upon Wood the failing director, encouraging him to continue creating his vision in films. Thus, while both Wood and Wiseau have been granted a fictional meeting with a superior Hollywood director, this scene in *TDA* only serves to highlight how misguided and ridiculous Wiseau is.

Lastly, Franco ends his biopic with the cast and crew, together with an extraordinary large and sold-out cinema hall, attending the premiere of *TR*. In this scene the camera alternates between shots of Greg and Tommy, the audience, and the film, the latter containing various well-known scenes from *TR* thus establishing another obvious metatextual link to the original film. The entire audience's reaction, save Tommy, swiftly changes from puzzlement to abundant laughter. The way in which the camera continues to alternate between showing parts of the film and the audience erupting in laughter is reminiscent of the prisoner cinema scene in *Sullivan's travels* (1941).

Consequently, when the film ends Tommy runs up the stage amidst a standing ovation, cheers, and high fives from the audience, he then announces that he is "glad you like my comedic movie. Exactly how I intended." Naturally, this is another nod to the real Tommy who according to Sestero originally intended it to be "a serious American Drama, a cautionary tale about love and friendship" yet later alleges that his film was always intended to be taken as a dark comedy (xiii). This final scene also contains a bizarre grim undertone as the audience watches the final scene of *TR*, in which Johnny commits suicide, and is swept into an entire frenzy jeering and screaming, "Do it! Do it! Do it!" Once Johnny pulls the trigger everyone screams triumphantly and applauds the on-screen death of Johnny. On the one hand, this scene may convey the ultimate triumph of *TR* as the audience is obviously enjoying the film, and considering that real audiences around the world also do enjoy watching it Johnny, in a way, has achieved his dream of creating a famous, popular film. On the other hand, the audience's gleeful encouragement and response to Wiseau's character placing a gun in his mouth juxtaposed with several close-ups of the audience roaring with laughter, while the real Wiseau is watching from the back of the cinema hall gives the impression that perhaps more than anything everyone is rather glad that the film is nearing its grand finale and the creator of this monstrosity receives what he deserves.

3.4. Franco's postmodern representation of Tommy Wiseau in *The Disaster Artist* (2017)

Lupo and Anderson state that a major trope among biopics of artists is "the contradiction between the individual who is a great artist but a lousy person" especially towards friends, family, and loved ones (106). Ironically, whereas Burton merely inverts this trope, Franco subtly surpasses it by demonstrating how Wiseau failed as an artist, as well as, throughout the film sporadically hinting at how unpleasant he can behave towards those around him. During the filming of the first sex scene, for instance, Tommy loudly criticizes his scene partner's body, who most likely already felt quite nervous about filming a sex scene on an open set. This scene culminates in a climax with several crewmembers screaming at Wiseau that he is mistreating Juliette, Lisa in *TR*, while Wiseau defends his actions by comparing himself to Hitchcock. Naturally, this comparison of Wiseau and Hitchcock highlights the fact that not only does Wiseau perceive himself to be on par with one of the most celebrated directors in modern cinema, but also how far removed his final product is from Hitchcock's films.

Similarly, Wiseau's prominent accent is turned into an easy target to mock as Franco depicts Wiseau struggling to pronounce his lines during a film audition. The casting agent first asks him if he is doing an accent and after being informed by a disgruntled Wiseau that he is from New Orleans asks him to "just try and lose the accent". Whereupon Wiseau delivers his lines in the exact same style, save for mumbling and trailing off the sentences even more in hopes of hiding his failure of speaking accentless (0:26-0:27). This scene, while providing excellent entertainment and high in comedy only serves to receive more laughs from the audience at the expense of Wiseau.

Another prime example of Franco's unpleasant portrayal of Wiseau is a fictional event that did not occur while filming *TR*. Greg begs Wiseau to postpone a shoot he has to shave off his beard for, due to needing it for a small role in a tv-series, set up by none other than Bryan Cranston. Instead of being supportive or happy for Greg or even merely understanding of his situation as this

could be "a great stepping stone" for his career Wiseau screams at Greg that he made this entire film for him and that he should not betray him. Moreover, he forces Greg to choose between taking that tv-show role or continuing to be in his film culminating in Greg's girlfriend breaking up with him due to his decision to stay on *TR* (1:10-1:13).

However, *TDA,* the memoir, exposes still far more darker and unpleasant characteristics of Wiseau that Franco could have expressed through his character, such as obsessively calling Greg each day when they were still living apart or his slightly psychotic outburst at Greg sparked by a friend of Greg having asked Tommy several basic background questions. This latter episode even prompted Greg to describe Tommy as having "something twisted and poisonous inside him—something potentially dangerous, even" (162). In the same vein, on the first day of shooting instead of beginning with an inspiring pep talk to his entire crew as the biopic shows him doing, Wiseau actually had a problem with the actors he previously hired as Mark and Lisa. He insisted that Greg took on the role of Mark, however, too afraid to confront the actor he already hired and inform him of his decision he just informed the camera crew to shoot his scenes without any tape (Sestero32). Surely, this is indicative of what type of egocentric personality Wiseau possesses. Yet, it could be argued that Franco either chose, or was forced, not to include these experiences in his representation of him and subsequently Franco tried to establish a balance between showing Wiseau as sympathetic yet realistic as possible. Nevertheless, the overall image that is created through this biopic does not praise or redeem Wiseau neither as a person nor as a director, unlike Burton's biopic does for Wood.

An article in *The New Yorker* juxtaposes Franco directing *TDA* with the real Wiseau who acted as himself in his own chosen project concluding that *TDA* was an opportunity for Franco "to do a vigorous, gleefully comedic impersonation of Wiseau" (Brody 2017). Whereas the former merely portrayed a character that is widely perceived as comically weird, the latter primarily

constructed the film as a serious exploration of deeper human (and personal) emotions. Indeed, this is exactly wherein the difference lies, it is crucial to the analysis of the biopic to realize that Wiseau projected his actual personal vision of the world and of his own persona into his film, hereby inadvertently exposing his core identity and inner-most desires to the entire world. The popular protagonist who on his birthday has an entire apartment filled with many friends, who is an important mentor and father-figure to a young boy, and who initially has a loving and trusting relationship with his future-wife. Contrasting this with certain facts that come to light in the *TDA* novel written by Sestero, most notably, his difficult youth as he escaped, with a cousin that is later deported back, from Poland to France and subsequently crossed over to the USA (207,218). Combined with Sestero's poignant realization while they filmed the birthday party scene that this was in reality a rather sad party as Wiseau's dream life is embodied here in his character Johnny who is surrounded by all his friends and his fiancée, who is expecting, on his birthday (215). It is painfully obvious that, more than anything, through constructing his onscreen-persona Wiseau is giving himself the life that he hitherto has never known. Ultimately, though Franco does add certain sympathetic elements to his portrayal of Wiseau he also knowingly parodies him hereby turning him into a character the audience is encouraged to laugh at not with, unlike Burton's portrayal of Wood.

Conclusion: The parodic biopic as a postmodern film genre

Thus, this thesis has shown that through directing *GoG* Wood truly tried to create a film with an important social message: accept transvestitism, and in a way transsexuality, as part of the spectrum of human identities. Unfortunately, due to the dominant gender ideology of that time that prescribed rigidly polarized gender roles for men and women, Wood felt obliged to end his film with a proposed cure for his transvestitism. Though *GoG*, in some ways, can be seen as a poor egocentric film the topics that it engages with and the progressive nature cause Wood's film to transcend its poor production value and its autobiographical origins. In his biopic, Burton attempted to create a sympathetic portrait of his childhood hero, moreover, he was able to emphasize the transvestitism as this had become much more of an accepted practice in the nineties. Hence, in creating *EW*, Burton created an homage to one of his heroes and subsequently Burton's mimicking of Wood's filmmaking practices is all part of this homage. On the other hand, in *TR* Wiseau did honestly try to make a film on his own similar to Wood, as he felt cast out by the Hollywood mainstream, however his motivation stemmed from much more egocentric behavior. Like Wood, he cast himself as the main protagonist, but unlike *GoG'*s theme that transcends the concerns of Wood and advocates for a greater ideological idea, *TR* only has as its central subject Wiseau. His film only expresses the director's personal frustrations with life and attempts to portray a perfect image of himself and since Wiseau was equally inept at directing, the result is a poor egocentric film as opposed to Wood's film. In Franco's biopic, he chronicles Wiseau's ineptitude and the making of the room, but, significantly, this is only done as a parody and ridicule of Wiseau and his methods of filmmaking.

Furthermore, by placing themselves in their own films, Wood and Wiseau both invited the biopic, as it were, specifically due to their emphasis on portraying a character that inhabits their

own characteristics and has been demonstrated to be comprised of their ideal image of themselves. Consequently, Wood has become to Burton what Wiseau has to Franco, namely, an inspiration to direct a biopic examining the personal and professional attitudes behind these strange filmmakers. Subsequently, both Burton and Franco, through their biopic, engage in a reimaging of Wood and Wiseau's image and persona as they construct a new identity for them through their portrayal.

As briefly touched upon in the previous chapter, Franco's biopic both in character portrayal and scene sequences closely resembles Burtons *EW* in various ways. This is evident from various scenes that are similar to scenes in *EW* combined with the way in which Wiseau's friendship with Greg is depicted. Furthermore, even the film poster for *TDA* resembles *EW*, which is rather remarkable as both posters have been done in black and white whereas only *EW* is a black and white film. Likewise, in the *EW* poster we see Johnny Depp as Wood in his directorial chair while wearing an angora sweater, while in *TDA* poster we see James and Dave Franco as Wiseau and Sestero watching the premiere of *TR*. Thus, both posters contain a metatextual layer by depicting their main subject in the very act of directing, or viewing, their own work (see figure 1 and 2). Likewise, as Burton places heavy emphasis on Wood's friendship and loyalty to Lugosi so does Franco emphasize the close friendship between Wiseau and Sestero, despite these interactions being entirely fictional. Sestero, in his memoir, frequently doubts the intentions of Wiseau and the nature of their friendship, thus it seems that Franco has modelled this relationship more on Burton's biopic than on real life events. Lastly, *EW* contains various scenes that are a direct imitation of the respective scenes in Wood's films i.e. the biopic scenes closely mimic scenes from the original films. Interestingly, the exact same style of mimicry is done in Franco's *TDA* only taken one-step further. At the end of that film, the corresponding scenes of both *TDA* and *TR* are shown side by side as if to ensure that the audience properly appreciates the level of pastiche or mimicry that has been achieved. In fact, it seems that more than showing the events regarding Wiseau and the

Above: figure 1. Film poster for *Ed Wood*. Below: Film poster for *The Disaster Artist*

making of his film, *TDA* mimics *EW* by focusing on certain key-elements and presenting certain scenes, amongst other elements, in their film in the exact same way as this biopic. Almost as if Franco takes the template of Burton's biopic and sketches over that with a picture of Wiseau in order to create his own biopic. Due to the extensive use of parody and pastiche, and intertextual references *TDA* can also be said to exemplify a "characteristically postmodern loss of historical depth" a term Jameson's uses in relation to nostalgia films (qt. in Hill 101). Particularly because *TDA* can be understood to be a simulation of *TR* that only deals with pre-existing representations and styles as the entire film refers back to *TR*.

Perhaps, this mimicking of the previous biopic done by Franco follows logically from how biopics will progress in the future. Additionally, changing the tone of the biopic from ode to parody may also be the result of this progression as Lupo and Anderson state how filmmakers in the US construct a more elastic concept of the biopic and have a more ironic approach to biographies as compared to the past (102). By structurally building upon Burton's postmodern biopic, Franco has succeeded in creating a new fiction regarding the persona of Tommy Wiseau and in placing his biopic in a continued tradition of postmodern film. The practice of creating high art that concerns itself with low art and the high level of parody and self-reflexive nature of these biopics indicates a growing fascination with these postmodern components, combined with the popularity of *EW* and, especially, *TDA* supposes that audiences are eager to embrace films that express themselves in a severely postmodern mode[3].

[3] I would like to interject here that this development of high art that engages with low art also occurs in the literary field. For instance, renowned science fiction author Kurt Vonnegut frequently focusses on a recurring character in his novels, namely Kilgore Trout, who is also a science fiction author, albeit a failed one. Hence, a metatextual situation is created whereby a successful science-fiction author writes about a failed science-fiction author, much in the same way that Burton and Franco as prominent directors have directed a film about disastrous directors.

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