

In Search of Radical Metacinema

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Introduction

A recent segment of British critical literature has been primarily concerned with defining aspects of what has come to be called “postmodernist metafiction” and doing so largely in relation to theories of parody. These works have sprung up partly in response to Julia Kristeva, Mikhail Bakhtin, and Gérard Genette and together constitute a body of ideas with great applicability to film studies. I will draw upon three of the major studies to explore a related group of films: *Parody/Meta-fiction* by Margaret Rose (1979), *Metafiction* by Patricia Waugh (1984), and *A Theory of Parody* by Linda Hutcheon (1985).

I will use issues suggested by these three to establish and explore common parody elements in the works of four filmmakers. In the process, I hope to outline some possibilities easily extendible to a range of other films, from these directors and an easily assembled list of others. For the most part, I will stick to Stanley Kubrick and *The Shining*, Brian De Palma and *Body Double*, Martin Scorsese and *King of Comedy*, Woody Allen and *The Purple Rose of Cairo* (referred to from now on just as *Purple Rose*). All four are nearly identical in their attention to the following parody-related activities.

Intertextual Overkill

The term *intertextual overkill* is Waugh’s (one component of her definition of radical metafiction) and signifies the wholesale incorporation of source materials from outside the created fictional work (145). In terms of

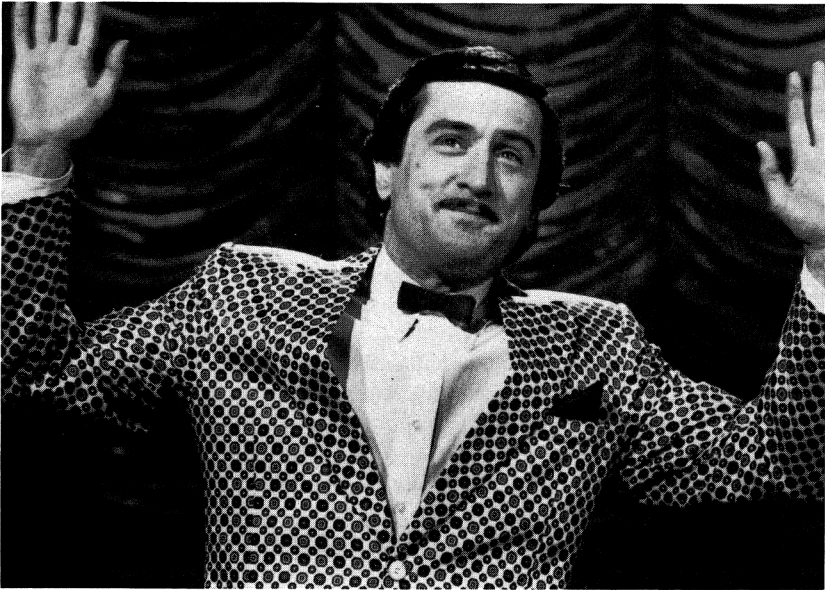
the films explored here, overkill could more properly be labeled massive annihilation by multiple warheads. (Radical metacinema could occupy us for a long time in simply charting original sources.) As “students” of movies (and television and music), these filmmakers are preoccupied with the pointed inclusive reference, so as audience we play continual catch-up. We can’t help but feel sorely taxed by the demands of spotting that TV screen as the heroine walks past a department store window or straining to identify the song on the car radio as it’s driven off a cliff. Watching and listening to movies today are partly acts of cataloging because the days of innocent homage are long over.

Even though the forms of multiple intertextuality as parody are more than sufficiently varied to be worthy of extensive study in their own right, as in each of my subsequent categories I’ll just describe the territory in terms of its principal peaks. I mark them as four, present in abundance in the films in question:

1. Inclusions of television
2. Use of source music
3. Film historical quotes
4. Inversions of star types

The appearance of TV sets and programs is fairly obvious: characters come close to tripping over them. What is important is not their continual presence but their direct parody functions. These include ironic reformulation of narrative structures, as when in *The Shining* a Roadrunner cartoon anticipates the same failed pursuit rituals Jack Torrance and his son will play out.¹ Other televised cartoons, soap operas, and perfectly banal Kubrickian TV newscaster banter also serve to mirror and ridicule our supposedly more serious and central dramatic activities. *Body Double*’s use of porno video before that world is incorporated into the film itself and the clearly central role of video from the opening of *King of Comedy*, which begins as a television show presented to us in video transferred to film, are equally as pronounced.

Although *Purple Rose*’s being set in the 1930s obviously precludes use of video, Allen has been a heavy TV user in the past.² *Purple Rose* is interesting in this regard for its similar interplay of film-within-film (of the same name as the film), its black-and-white/color split, and its use of movie “materials,” such as the poster that is the first shot of the film and the many shots of the movie marquee. The criticisms of film as exploitive low culture in *Purple Rose* (even by characters in the film-within-the-film) provide the “inferior art” backdrop corresponding to television in the other films.



Robert De Niro as Rupert Pipkin in Martin Scorsese's *King of Comedy* (1983)

As with television, so, too, with music, especially for the quality of continual commentative presence. *Body Double* goes so far as to insert its own music video, so elaborately produced and disruptive we're not sure for a time if we're still within conventional narrative. *King of Comedy* has the kind of eclectic and dominating rock-and-roll-history soundtrack that was also present in *Who's That Knocking at My Door* and *Mean Streets*. *The Shining* never reaches the repellent glories of the use of "Singin' in the Rain" in *Clockwork Orange*, but there's never been a more obtrusive and overstylized prototypical horror movie synthesizer score than the one that beats down on us in that movie with nearly every footstep and glance.³ *Purple Rose* begins with Fred Astaire singing over the credits and comes full circle when Fred returns to sing in the "new" film that Cecilia, the main character played by Mia Farrow, is watching at the very end.

Oddly enough, *Singin' in the Rain* does make another parodied appearance as one example of the intertextual overkill surely present in the frequent film historical references of these works. Along with *Sunset Boulevard*, *Singin' in the Rain* is openly quoted at the start of the "Relax" video number in *Body Double*, two films about films mimicked in yet another film-within-film sequence. Give Martin Scorsese a blank screen, and he'll probably put *Pickup on South Street* on it, as he does for quite a substantial time in the scene in Jerry Langford/Lewis's apartment.⁴ *Purple Rose* is as

evidently astute in its film clips as was *Stardust Memories* and *Zelig*, where Allen clearly knows his old movies so well he not only quotes them; he makes them over so adeptly you can barely tell the fake-new from the real-old. The film-within-film fits comfortably with the “real” Fred Astaire film that follows it.

Mocking inversions of star types or the invoking of star-associated references adds a further dose of intertextual overkill. Star images are brought up and simultaneously chopped down. In *The Shining*, Jack Nicholson’s gleefully threatening “Here’s Johnny” is a reference no one can miss, and of course Johnny Carson looms even larger as a phantom-parodied presence in the Scorsese film. In a touch of self-mockery, Jerry Lewis running legs akimbo down the street after his kidnapping conveniently wears remnants of his white bandages in just the places where his white socks always are in his own movies, an unsettlingly humorous intrusion at an otherwise fairly tense moment. In *Body Double*, Melanie Griffith can’t help but stand in ironic relation to the roles her mother, Tippi Hedren, played in Alfred Hitchcock films, especially when in varied hair colors and occasionally high-fashion masquerades she replicates the appearance changes in *Marnie*.

Purple Rose takes mocking inversions to a glorious level in that it presents the actor and his creation as independent entities. (Tom Baxter is the movie character and Gil Shepherd is the actor who plays him, although we even find out that Gil Shepherd is not his “real” name. All are played by Jeff Daniels.) The movie star is nicely ego driven and full of pomposity, in marked contrast to his “character.” The character also tells the actor at one point that he might have been played by another star, such as Fredric March or Leslie Howard, to which one of the film-within-film characters comments that the part is not big enough to have attracted someone of that magnitude.

Failed Artists

The nonheroes of these films—a writer, an actor, a stand-up comic, and a divided film star/film character—are themselves parodies of artists. The metafictional tendency to place the author near the center of his or her own unfolding fiction is here thrown even further off kilter by the element of mediocrity of the protagonists. These main characters are all chronically unemployed, frustrated in their career ambitions, and unbalanced by lack of talent.

The book we see Jack Torrance working on in *The Shining* deserves special mention in this regard. When wife Wendy makes her horrific discovery that his time at the typewriter has produced pages and pages of “All work and no play make Jack a dull boy,” there’s something rather beautiful



Dennis Franz and Craig Weston in Brian De Palma's Body Double (1984)

about the glimpses of elaborate typing patterns we see as she flips through the manuscript, especially those pages displayed meticulously as if in film script format. Perhaps Jack is an underappreciated artist rather than the crazed failure this moment makes him out to be (or Wendy's possibly imagined point-of-view of the manuscript suggests), although I doubt similar claims could be made for Rupert Pupkin's stand-up routine in *King of Comedy* when he finally gets his shot at the crown; it seems genuinely low level, even by the often lax standards of TV talk show guest appearances.⁵ As for Jake in *Body Double*, the audition scenes, acting classes, and part-time film work he performs within the film provide abundant evidence for his deserved spot on the unemployment line. Bad acting becomes an important question on multiple levels within the film, is continually discussed and incorporated within narrative concerns, and perhaps is raised by questionable (unintentionally bad) casting as well.

In *Purple Rose*, the actor and character have at least one quality in common: both are marginal. The role in the movie Tom Baxter has walked out of is of questionable importance, and the actor, Gil Shepherd, is also in fear for his career and deservedly so, given the pretentiousness with which he is ready to discuss his craft. (He's also too minor to get any billing on the movie marquee.) Cecilia, herself fired from her waitress job because of

movie-obsession problems, has not exactly fixated on the higher levels of the firmament. It is as if Rupert in *King of Comedy* had chosen Joan Rivers or Garry Shandling as the star to shoot for.

In all four films, the characters stand in a parodied relation to their frequent proclamations of substantial self-worth. The illusion of talent is abandoned by the audience much sooner than it's stripped from the characters, although they surely have their own doubts right from the start.

Daring to Be Bad

In one of Linda Hutcheon's few references to films, she correctly picks on the opening of the De Palma film *Dressed to Kill* for "its deliberately bad parody of Hitchcock's *Psycho*, which acts as a signal, as does the title, for the audience to look for parodic backgrounded text" (106). With De Palma we can take our pick of deliberately bad Hitchcock parody, and although some might suggest badness in this regard is all De Palma's capable of, the parody activity of excessively exaggerating what was already florid in Hitchcock might be not without its own intrinsic pleasures. Audiences invariably groan at the kiss in *Body Double*, when Jake finally holds the object of his obsession in his arms, while De Palma circles around them twenty times faster and more frequently than did Hitchcock at the obviously parallel moment in *Vertigo*. To cite Hutcheon again, it is knowledge that separates plagiarism from parody, and De Palma's knowingness can scarcely be in doubt, nor can his overt desire to tear apart his cinematic past.

Kubrick, of course, is the know-it-all who rubs our noses in horror movie conventions until we wonder why we ever went to one in the first place. Stretched out suspense, intrusive comedy, unexplained escapes, multiple motives, even title cards that move from the merely ominous to the madly random and unspecific—all point not to a failed horror film, as so many reviews stupidly labeled it, but to a deliberately subverted one.

The Scorsese trick is to ape the flatness of television style, abandoning the tracking shot mannerisms and elaborate noirish visual effects more generally characteristic of his style. Filming often as if he is shooting a three-camera video sitcom, Scorsese is so successful in recreating a TV style that once more the parody can become indistinguishable from the backgrounded text. TV within the film and film as parodied TV style continually interchange. Scorsese also makes an appearance himself as a TV director, which functions as parody on any number of levels, particularly as a Hitchcockian type of authorial self-inscription,⁶ and we might even consider a TV director (especially when presented in a film) as a parody of a "real" director.

One of the first amazements of *Purple Rose* is how perfectly recreated the film-within-film is. We see just enough of it (or perhaps too much) to feel we've seen it all before dozens of times. The "interior" *Purple Rose* is purposely mediocre yet lovable, teetering humorously on the edge of true lousiness, as the characters within that film are all too ready to remark when problems occur. Also enjoyable in this regard are the complaints of the "audience" in the film, such as, "They sit around and talk and no action. Nothing happens." This sounds like lines from the Mel Brooks-narrated cartoon *The Critic* or, as is so often said of films Allen has emulated without parody, from Ingmar Bergman. Allen probably much prefers the inner *Purple Rose* after Tom Baxter has exited to the real world. It becomes more like *Interiors* or *Another Woman*.

These films certainly flaunt the dangers of such parodic activities; we don't expect imitation to be an insincere form of nonflattery. Risking comparison to the originals, these films can easily be thought of as "bad" by the unparody-minded, a risk openly engaged.

Parodic Cultural Juxtaposition

Hutcheon takes appropriate pleasure from what she calls "high-low self-reflexive fiction," the juxtaposing of wildly eclectic sources (81). Tom Robbins's *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues* is her favorite example in its pushing against each other of Roy Rogers and William Blake. These filmmakers do the same kind of shocking matchmaking with equal abandon.

Perhaps the most obscure disparate linkage ever in a popular movie comes in Scorsese's *After Hours*, so weird it's worth explaining. The possible robbers played by Cheech and Chong have finally gotten their hands on the wrapped sculpture they've been after throughout the movie. As they load it onto their truck, one of them remarks that he saw the sculptor play banjo on the "Tonight Show." To get the joke and the parodic reference one has to recognize that (1) the sculpture in question is in the style of artist George Segal and (2) the actor George Segal had often appeared on talk shows playing a banjo (badly).

If you're up on your pop trash and your high art, you might manage to keep up with Scorsese's joke, a giant step ahead of his earlier penchant for sprinkling the names of his favorite directors and film characters throughout his films, as when Robert De Niro in *New York, New York* tries to register in a hotel under the name Michael Powell. As annoying as these little games might seem, on such foundations parodistic activities have always been constructed.

The high-low juxtaposition is so deeply imbedded within Kubrick's style as to be an identifying characteristic. The music clashes are most ob-

vicious: Gioacchino Rossini and gang fights in *2001*, Béla Bartók and Krzysztof Penderecki over the gore in *The Shining*. Barry Lyndon presents the spectacle of an almost never-ending gulf between base human activity and breathtaking classical art and music.

In De Palma the trash may be trashy enough that the high art doesn't have to be too high for a clash to be felt, so dropping *Sunset Boulevard* or *Vertigo* into the middle of faithfully recreated porno scenes is sufficient in itself to generate dissonance. The actor who sets up the *Body Double* plot (the partial counterpart to *Vertigo*'s Gavin Elster) is off to do *Private Lives* (even if it's in Seattle), and art museums, classical music, and religious artifacts have shown up discordantly in other De Palma films.

Allen's humor, especially in his *New Yorker* pieces, has often been built around high-low conflicts, with his film *Love and Death* probably his most overt so far in pushing cultural twists. The grafting of borscht belt humor to Dostoevskian musings on spiritual rebirth has been Allen's near stock-in-trade. In *Purple Rose*, we shouldn't express surprise when the playboy in the inner film is named Henry Adams, as these name games are one of the easiest ways to identify this kind of parodistic artistic split.

Conflicted Obsession, or You Always Hate the One You Love

These films share a long-noted parody characteristic: the simultaneous qualities of faithful appropriation and vengeful revisionism. In speculating on the double-edged character of parody, Hutcheon recalls two important views on this issue. Marcel Proust, accounting for his own obsession with Gustave Flaubert, described his reworkings as "the purgative antidotes to the toxins of admiration." Robert Motherwell ties the two emotions together in describing the role of the modern artist as "everything he paints is both an homage and a critique" (Hutcheon, 50).

In the four films I have been discussing, obsessive love/hate is an extensive activity within the film and strongly characteristic of the film itself in relation to its genre. Love or frustration in the characters generally turns to murderous intent, and in the process these conflicted attitudes pass into parody complexity: ambivalent (but also extreme) feelings are everywhere.

It's not accidental that critiques of fandom are built into these films, most obviously in *King of Comedy* and *Purple Rose*. In the latter, it may be Cecilia's (near Pupkin-like) obsessiveness that pulls Tom Baxter off the screen (that's his story, anyway) and her rejection that dooms him to a Promethean return to what is now a perpetual straitjacket of mechanical performance. Rupert's obsession with Langford nearly kills him, as was to occur in an earlier version of the script.⁷ In *Stardust Memories*, Allen

eerily anticipates this kind of fan-murderer as well. Careening acceptance-rejection obsessions clearly have their consequences on both sides. Indirectly, the “worth” of the recreated worlds is questioned, be it a star, a genre, or, in the case of *Purple Rose*, old-time Hollywood itself.

We probably can't ever decide whether Kubrick hates horror films, whether De Palma is strictly idolatrous of Hitchcock (“body double” may have a certain literal meaning), how much time Scorsese still spends watching TV talk shows, or the extent of Allen's engagement with Golden Age movies. It is enough to see evidence of the closest study and imitation and the kind of ultimate rejection through revision that mature art encompasses. Doomed to imitate an artistic past and sufficiently reflexive to bracket the old experiences by means of parodic devices, love/hate becomes comedy/tragedy. Heavy doses of humor and violence intermingle in uneasy, shifting disharmonies, reflecting strongly ambivalent relations to artistic predecessors.

Self-parody as Signature

Identifying parody strategies can go a long way toward determining distinctive authorial style. One of the most interesting and peculiar links between parody and authorship is the propensity, first, to self-reference and from there to self-parody. Rose establishes self-parody as a preeminent activity in metafiction, and in terms of film it's not hard to see the extension. The troubled artists at the center of these films surely have troubled artists behind them; and although the heroes here are never directors, like Chaucer's self-inscription in *Canterbury Tales* that Rose refers to, the authors of these works seem to have left their tracings in all sorts of sneaky ways (97).

Only Scorsese appears himself, but *Body Double* has director figures throughout, including an Eric Von Stroheim stand-in, a director working over an actor at a reading, and a porno film director—all possible versions of De Palma himself. Kubrick has tantalizingly left his own playful mark before, as in the prominently displayed *2001* soundtrack album cover that pops up in *Clockwork Orange*. In *The Shining*, stylistic exaggeration is often self-parodic and is most easily seen in the exhilarating steadicam tracking shots as Danny tricycles his way down the long hotel hallways, so reminiscent of the spaceship corridors of *2001*, the wartime trenches of *Paths of Glory*, and the other perfectly symmetrical narrow passageways so dear to Kubrick.

The Shining also presents us with a series of potentially controlling figures appearing in a variety of guises, including a hotel manager, the ghost of a dead murderer who may be Jack Torrance in an earlier incarnation, and a bartender, each giving us a vacant feeling that someone's deal-

ing the deck, but we're not sure who. Absent ultimate power figures are a Kubrick staple, whether it's which general is in charge, who stuck that monolith there anyway, or where that narrator went in *The Killing* and *Barry Lyndon*. The most absent figure is, of course, Kubrick himself, whose mythic image as a reclusive castle-inhabiting control-freak is the only media creation able to rival his own power-mad figures. Behind all the hotel doors setting ghastly images in motion, dripping blood out of elevators, providing the unexplained means of escape to frequently trapped characters, lies the director himself, a parody puppeteer in the shadows.

Although Allen's nonappearance in *Purple Rose* is likely because his overt self-inscription has been so frequent,⁸ there is still a director for the film-within-a-film (amusingly named Raoul Hirsh, no doubt a Jewish Raoul Walsh) and a cynical set of agents and studio-employed hacks, historical precursors to the bunch who pop up in *Stardust Memories*. Gil Shepherd's falsely modest remark to Cecilia about his career to date that he "tries to do one a year" is a clearly self-referring and self-mocking Allen remark. For Allen as personality, obviously the most known to the general public of these four directors, the tendency to blur persona and character, including this kind of mocking self-parody, has also been the most extreme.

Conclusion

Distinctive cinematic parody style, the strategies of radical metacinema we can extrapolate from *Rose*, *Waugh*, *Hutcheon*, et al., is so broadly pervasive we bump into it more easily than the TV sets all over these movies. What is especially distinctive in terms of cinema is how eclectic the forms of intertextuality have become and how properly the activities of parody have been directed toward an exploration of the processes of creation. Whether we go to other films by these four, or to Arthur Penn, Robert Altman, Jonathan Demme, Bob Fosse, Stanley Donen, or Francis Coppola, to name a fast six contemporary Americans,⁹ the incorporation of mediocre art and artists, show biz references, and eclectic cross-cultural juxtapositions into ambitious, risky, and very funny movies is a parody lesson we're still in the process of discovering.

A number of filmmakers working within mainstream commercial cinema today have been systematically employing parody devices more commonly discussed and appreciated in literary circles. The clear applicability of the *Rose-Waugh-Hutcheon* school to this body of films suggests that the cinematic forms of these devices are widespread and distinctive. By using parody techniques not readily recognized and by making difficult, seemingly "bad" films, they push the limits of the acceptable, especially in

redefining the ways the films are to be viewed. This critique-from-within and testing of audiences make up our unlikely but prevalent radical metacinema.

Notes

1. A Roadrunner cartoon is also heard without being seen in a second scene, and Danny wears a Roadrunner shirt among his parody attire, which includes a spaceship sweater and a Philadelphia Flyers (!) jacket.

2. Allen plays a TV writer in *Manhattan* very much concerned with having frittered away his talents in that medium, as he's now trying to write a novel. In *Bananas*, and in early Allen generally, overt TV parody is a continual staple, as in, for example, the appearance of Howard Cosell to provide play-by-play commentary on the honeymoon night.

3. See Stephen Mamber for a section on parody in that film.

4. TV screens also make prominent appearances in other Scorsese films, notably the newly installed and barely working set in *Raging Bull*. (Later we see one of the boxing matches on it.) In *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore*, there is extensive television watching, including a long (and prescient) close-up of Johnny Carson.

5. Beverle Houston, in an excellent article that explores the television questions raised by the film, has a useful discussion of the "Is Rupert's monologue funny?" question.

6. Scorsese has made regular appearances in his own films, in addition to his well-known cameo appearance in *Taxi Driver*. In *After Hours*, he again has a parodied directorial role as a guy "shining" a light in the punk nightclub.

7. Jerry Lewis reported this at a University of Southern California screening of *King of Comedy*. Also cited in Houston.

8. Allen's role in *Zelig* is an interesting precursor to Rupert Pupkin in *King of Comedy*. The director Allen plays in *Stardust Memories* struck so many as being a Woody Allen stand-in that his interviews related to that film generally begin with Allen laboring to point out differences. Also, in *Play It Again, Sam* (which he wrote and starred in but didn't direct), he does put himself into a *Purple Rose*-like situation, playing a character taking cues from the Humphrey Bogart of *Casa-blanca* come to life, a clear warm-up for the more complicated on-screen/off-screen interactions here.

9. The films of each I most have in mind (in a list that could be much longer) are *Mickey One*, *Nashville*, *Melvin and Howard*, *Star 80* (or, obviously, *All That Jazz* or *Lennie*), *Movie Movie*, and *One From the Heart*.

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