

Iipseity & Inheritance: New Trends in Identity Construction in Stage & Screen Adaptations

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Two recent adaptations—one for stage; one for screen—present alternative strategies of constructing identity through composite characterizations drawn from elements internal and external to their respective source materials. Matthew Lopez's *The Inheritance* (2018), an epic drama comprised of two full-length plays produced on Broadway in 2019 is, in the playwright's words, "inspired" by E.M. Forster's *Howard's End* (1910). Whereas Lopez incorporates allusions to the novel with only minimal direct citation, by contrast, Charlie Kaufman's film version of *I'm Thinking of Ending Things* (2020) follows the central plot and includes whole swatches of text and "dialogue" from Iain Reid's 2016 novel of the same name, but unsurprisingly, extends his adaptation with "new," idiosyncratic, and probably personally relevant textual fragments, ranging from film criticism and poetry to critical theory spoken by characters as if they were their own "original" thoughts, ideas, or creations. Despite these disparate strategies, both produce meta-critiques of narratological and adaptation processes instantiated by deviations from "realistic" acting modes.

Lopez re-deploys plot points, character traits, and the central metaphor of the pastoral estate in Forster's novel as scaffolding for a panoramic view of the AIDS epidemic and its effect on gay men's lives over three decades. Director Stephen Daldry amplified Lopez's convention that actors should play multiple roles by having them slip out of individuated characterizations to form a chorus. This enhanced the correspondences between Lopez's characters and Forster's "templates;" established an ensemble representative of a swath of contemporary (mostly young, male) gay lives; and alluded to the ritualistic dimensions of classic tragedy conducive to the conflation of past and present time in the play's trajectory. Of all the instances of actor-doubling, however, the most significant was having one actor playing a fictive version of Forster as well as an older survivor of the epidemic, who

encourages the central character to write his/this story, and bequeathes to him a simulacrum of “Howard’s End” to serve as hospice for sick and dying men. The fictive Forster, meanwhile, grants permission for a loose adaption of his novel so that the young writer can depict the devastating consequences of the epidemic and the loss of a generation of standard-bearers in the ongoing struggle for gay liberation. Combined, these strategies intensified Daltry’s Brechtian approach, which permits distanciation between actors and characters to maximize critical reflexivity and minimize character identification on the part of spectators. This reached a meta-dramatic crescendo when the younger writer accuses “Forster” of impeding progress for the acceptance of gay identities by creating mostly heteronormative stories, and more importantly, for not publishing *Maurice* in his own lifetime—a novel which explicitly affirms same-sex desire.

Structured in what could be considered the literary equivalent of actor/character doubling, Reid’s novel unfolds through two distinct points of view: a first-person account by a young woman who accompanies her boyfriend on a visit to his parents’ home, alternating with brief chapters (*printed in italic font*), consisting of mini-dialogues between two unknown, unnamed persons discussing a school janitor’s suicide. While the woman’s shifting musings about ending things (the relationship) exemplifies all the traits of an unreliable narrator, the interstitial discussions about the suicidal man—who literally has ended things—have the patina of authenticity, even if the reader cannot definitively verify the facts or their sources. Kaufman, who created the screenplay and directed the film, retains many of the “stories” Reid’s couple tell each other, but also incorporates “found,” yet recognizable texts, which lend credence to the central premise that the female is not “real” at all, but rather a fantasy projection of an ever-rejecting composite female conjured by the eternally rejected male, who it turns out, is the janitor. Kaufman augments these narrative turns through performative means, such as directing the actress assaying the woman’s ever-shifting identities to alter her performance traits and registers, even replacing her briefly with another actress. Similarly, the male’s parents transform from middle to old age and back

again during the couple's brief visit, conveyed through the actors' altering their physicality and donning (not too convincing) age make-up. In the most compelling "original," and meta-dramatic sequences, Kaufman has the female character recite Pauline Kael's critique of John Cassavetes's *A Woman Under the Influence* which fixates on the objectification of women as a character construct and as performed by (Cassavetes's wife) Gena Rowlands; and later in the film interpolates the tragic-ballet sequence from *Oklahoma*—itself a dystopian reflection of the love triangle at the heart of that musical—both of which reflect and refract Reid's narrative techniques into a mediation on examples of identity construction through screen and ironically, musical theatre.

Formally innovative, and thematically ambitious, both adaptations focus on the social, textual, and performative dimensions of identity construction, but reach widely divergent conclusions: one positing the utopian possibilities of synthesis and communality, the other a decidedly jaundiced, deeply cynical commentary on inauthenticity and isolation in human experience today.