The maladjusted and the all-too-easily adjusted

Catch Me If You Can, directed by Steven Spielberg; Adaptation, directed by Spike Jonze

David Walsh
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Veteran filmmaker Steven Spielberg has made a film about Frank Abagnale Jr., who successfully passed himself off—before his 19th birthday—as a commercial airline pilot, a pediatrician and an assistant prosecutor in the 1960s. He financed his activities by cashing millions of dollars in bad checks. Abagnale was ultimately arrested and jailed in Europe, extradited to the US and sentenced to 12 years in prison. In order to obtain an early release he went to work for the FBI, advising the federal police on check fraud issues. He has apparently been on the straight and narrow ever since.

The story is an extraordinary one. Abagnale's father (Christopher Walken) is a small businessman in suburban New York City, who runs into difficulty with the banks and the Internal Revenue Service. Frank Jr.'s mother is a Frenchwoman (Nathalie Baye) his father met during the war. She begins an affair with one of her husband's friends around the time the family business troubles develop. The marriage breaks up and Frank Jr. (Leonardo DiCaprio) is asked, at 16, to decide whether he wants to live with his mother or his father. Traumatized, he runs away instead and begins his career passing bad checks. Indeed he initially obtains an airline pilot's uniform and identification to facilitate his cashing of bogus checks.

Abagnale learns first of all that uniform and the social standing it signifies count for a good deal. As a Pan American "co-pilot" (he never does any actual flying, but simply uses the position to get free flights), or later as a doctor or lawyer (he never treats a patient or tries a case either), Abagnale is taken seriously by the various banks, hotels, hospitals and other institutions with which he comes into contact.

Obviously a very bright boy (he passed the Louisiana bar exam after studying for two weeks), Frank learns the art of sleight of hand, distracting attention from his operations in a variety of clever ways. Apparently cornered by the FBI and local police, who lie in wait for him at the Miami airport with a hundred agents, the youth "recruits" a bevy of engaging apprentice stewardesses and marches unseen for all intents and purposes through the terminal in their midst.

Con artists ordinarily have a contempt for their victims, for humanity in general, that pool of all-too-eager "suckers." They like to repeat, in self-justification, that "you cannot cheat an honest man." Frank, as depicted in Spielberg's film, is not of this breed. Only one scene leaves an unpleasant taste in the mouth: when Frank cheats a high-priced call girl (Jennifer Garner), paying her for sex with a phony check—indeed getting four hundred dollars in change. Granted that the woman is a mercenary herself, the scene has a misogynistic, almost sadistic edge to it.

None of the female characters comes off well. Frank's mother is a home wrecker, the prostitute is a money-hungry shark and his eventual fiancée is something of a nitwit. This is a story about father-son relations, about one "permissive" father, caught up in his own delusions, whose place is taken by another, a surrogate, FBI agent Hanratty (Tom Hanks), who is pursuing Frank and firmly telling him "No."

The film is amusing. Legitimately so. This is perhaps as anti-establishment as one can expect Spielberg to be: a middle class youth, "abandoned" by his family, surviving on his wits and audacity. The ending is entirely conformist, but along the way the spectator derives pleasure from the teenager's thumbing his nose at authority.

Catch Me If You Can is relatively lighthearted, but Abagnale's situation must have had a terrifying aspect to it. He was driven out of his home by an impossible choice, according to the film, and took to impersonating others with a vengeance, almost in a state of delirium. Later he nearly died as a result of his mistreatment in a French prison. His excursion into crime was no laughing matter.

Intriguingly, Spielberg notes that he underwent a similar crisis when his own parents' marriage dissolved. He also pretended to be someone else, a film studio executive. The director told an interviewer: "All I ever did was dress up as an executive when I was 15 and a half and crash the Universal lot. I did it two years in a row for three months each over summer

vacation. It was terrifying because I was a counterfeit film student. I was pretending to be an executive. I went out and got a suit and I carried a briefcase with absolutely nothing in it, and I walked past the guard and waved at him and he didn't ask for my pass. So my whole summer vacation was spent at the Universal Studios, it was like my first film school. I wandered the lot and watched television shows being made." (Perhaps there is a link to the artist's situation in this observation by a psychoanalyst, "The con man is the seducer who pursues acceptance not of himself but of his fictions—of the capacity to produce fictions.")

Unable to heal his parents' relationship, *Catch Me If You Can* seems to imply, Frank Abagnale took to manipulating and exerting power over adults in other ways. An element of revenge against the corporations and banks he blames for his father's financial problems also plays a role. This element of anger is perhaps, as Sartre once described it, "a blind and magical attempt to simplify situations that are too complex." Along with parts of *The Sugarland Express*, *Empire of the Sun* and *Schindler's List*, this is one of Spielberg's more creditable efforts.

Adaptation is a self-indulgent work directed by Spike Jonze and written by Charlie Kaufman (the team that created *Being John Malkovich*). The film centers on a fictional "Charlie Kaufman" (Nicolas Cage), a screenwriter attempting, with great difficulty, to adapt *The Orchid Thief*, journalist Susan Orlean's best-selling non-fiction work about rare flowers and those obsessed with them. A fictionalized Orlean (Meryl Streep) also makes an appearance in the film, as does the principal subject of her book, John Laroche (Chris Cooper).

While the screenwriter struggles with his material, his lonely existence and his self-doubt ("Do I have an original thought in my head?"), his twin brother Donald (also Cage) is getting along nicely in his efforts to construct a mindless Hollywood script about a split-personality serial killer. Donald has no difficulty landing a six-digit deal for his script or finding an attractive girl-friend. After Charlie, in desperation, attends a script-writing seminar with film industry insider Robert McKee (Brian Cox), who proposes conventional Hollywood solutions to every problem, the film takes a standardized turn and ends up with a chase scene and shoot-out in a Florida swamp.

By introducing a fictionalized version of himself into his film (as well as real-life figures Orlean, Laroche, McKee and producer Valerie Thomas [Tilda Swinton]), Charlie Kaufman takes the self-reflexive element (already present in *Being John Malkovich*) to a new level. To what end, however?

The whole affair, despite the clever twists and turns, seems rather trivial and self-serving. Aside from a few mild swipes at the commercial film industry and New York pseudo-intellectual circles, the film is rather toothless. Are we to take seriously the homily (pronounced by fictional brother Donald) that it is 'what you love that matters, not what loves you,' introduced in the final sequence? And there is nothing particularly compelling or convincing either about the screenwriter's argument that 'adaptation,' i.e., learning to fit into one's environment, no matter how inhospitable, is necessary and inevitable.

The self-reflexive element has always been present in art. It certainly became more prominent in the second half of the 19th century, as artists began to treat their own presence and activity as an independent problem. In Gustave Courbet's *The Painter's Studio* (1855), for example, the painter has included himself, his friends and a series of figures representing various social and intellectual types.

In the work of Courbet and others the depiction of both the artistic process and the artist's social role had a radical, "realistic" purpose to it. At least in part the artists were demystifying mechanisms that still had about them a quasi-religious aura. It is difficult not to see this effort in the light of the comment by Marx and Engels that in modern, bourgeois society "All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses, his real conditions of life, and relations with his own kind."

It is not immediately apparent that there is any radical impulse associated with *Adaptation*, any desire to confront the "real conditions of life." The self-consciousness of the film calls attention to itself. Indeed it is the single most dominant element in the work. It does not lead, however, to any remarkable insights into the filmmaking process or anything else. The framework of the film is unusual and a rather frantic pace is set, but the characters themselves are essentially static and their doings banal.

If the artist directs our attention to his or her own activity, it had better be for a good reason.

The unpleasant truth is that the filmmakers are rather fascinated with themselves and their lives. They believe themselves to be at the center of the universe. Sadly, the evidence is not there to support this view. One cannot help but ask: at this particular moment in history, is this all that these people are thinking about? That is to say, themselves? Is that really it?

In *Adaptation* Jonze and Kaufman forthrightly acknowledge that they (and an entire layer of talented artists and technicians) have adjusted, without any apparent overwhelming internal struggle, to the demands of the commercial film industry. They have not, after all, made a film entitled *Defiance*, *Disagreement* or *Denial*, much less *Opposition*. Someone needs to.