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“Woody’s Melindas and Todd’s Stories: Complex Film Narratives in the Light of Literary Modernism”

By Walter Metz

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I. Introduction

In his review of *Melinda and Melinda* (Woody Allen, 2004), Roger Ebert argues, “More than any other film that comes to mind, *Melinda and Melinda* says, clearly and without compromise, that movies are only movies. They’re made up of thin air, the characters are not real, they could turn out however the director wants them to.” Another recent film comes to *my* mind, Todd Solondz’s *Storytelling* (2001). While Solondz and Allen share some obvious affinities—a vicious wit deployed against middle-class hypocrisy—these are not two filmmakers one commonly links together. Allen makes precious films about upper-class Manhattanites, while Solondz saves his misanthropic barbs for the suburbs in New Jersey. And yet, these two films share an interest in the deconstruction of storytelling. Furthermore, to describe what will be the focus of my inquiry, both films are presented through a bifurcated narrative structure in which two sections are held apart in order that they may comment upon each other.

Melinda and Melinda investigates the compatibility of comedy and tragedy in contemporary human relationships. The film features two playwrights out to dinner: Sy (Wallace Shawn), a comic specialist, and Max (Larry Pine), a tragedian. In the course of their argument, they settle upon a story about a wayward woman, Melinda (Radha Mitchell), to use as a case study for their positions. Each playwright narrates Melinda’s story, the representation of which, intertwined and cross-cut with different characters and narrative circumstances, becomes the material of the film.

For its part, *Storytelling* uses no such cross-cutting trickery. Instead, it is an omnibus of two short films, one called “Fiction” and the other “Nonfiction.” “Fiction” is about Vi (Selma Blair), a politically-correct creative writing student who has sex with Mr. Scott (Robert Wisdom), her African-American professor, and then writes a caustic story about the experience. “Nonfiction” is about Toby Oxman (Paul Giamatti), a filmmaker making a documentary about the impoverished state of American high schools, settling on the disaffected Scooby Livingston (Mark Webber) and his dysfunctional family as his film’s focus.

Both *Melinda and Melinda* and *Storytelling* are complex narratives in the sense that they eschew the Aristotelian precepts of unity: “Beauty depends on size and order” (53). What interests me is the *variety* of ways such “complex narratives” can violate Aristotle’s normative prescriptions. Critic J. Hoberman calls *Melinda and Melinda* a “two-track narrative”; one can imagine complex narratives with a lot more tracks. Rick Altman’s analysis of *Nashville* (Robert Altman, 1975), for example, describes the film as a “twenty-four track narrative,” since it has twenty-four characters, each with his or her own sound track because the film’s sound designers, Jim Webb and Chris McLaughlin, were able to string together three eight-track recording devices to record the sound for the film.

The two tracks of narrative offered both by *Melinda and Melinda* and *Storytelling* offer a different, more complex, experience than the central protagonist narrative theorized by Aristotle and embraced by the Classical Hollywood Cinema. In this essay, I want to argue for the productive complexity of these two-track cinematic narratives. In order to do so, I will analyze the films in relation to two modernist novels that also use the two-track narrative system, novels whose complexity is unchallenged in literary theory: Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925) and William Faulkner’s *Light in August* (1932).

Woolf’s novel concerns a day in the life of Clarissa Dalloway in which she plans and then throws a party for her husband’s political friends. During the day, as we pass in stream-of-consciousness narration among the characters of the novel, we meet Septimus Smith, a World War I veteran with shell-shock who commits suicide. While Septimus and Clarissa never meet, the partygoers discuss Septimus’ tragic death at the end of the novel. Similarly, in *Melinda and Melinda*, only the character of Melinda (or more precisely, the actress who portrays her) remains constant between the comic and the tragic stories.

Light in August begins and ends with a pregnant, working-class white woman, Lena Grove, in search of her baby’s delinquent father, Lucas Burch. In the middle of the novel, told largely to a defrocked minister, Reverend Hightower, we meet Joe Christmas, a character of mixed race who is murdered and castrated for the murder of his lover, a white Northerner, Joanna Burden. While Faulkner bifurcates his story across the black and white Southern poor, Solondz’s *Storytelling* features a two-track narrative about the upper-middle class, a female college student and a male teenager in high school.

The modernist, narrative complexity of *Mrs. Dalloway* and *Light in August* is incontrovertible. These are among a handful of 20th twentieth-century novels interminably discussed in literary studies. The purpose of my present essay is to argue that *Melinda and Melinda* and *Storytelling* match the productive complexity of these modernist novels. Relying on intertextuality instead of intentionality, I will argue that Allen and Solondz have “adapted” the two-track narratives of Woolf and Faulkner, producing effects that could not have been achieved under Aristotelian conditions.

II. Oedipus... with a Limp: The Two-Track Narrative of *Melinda and Melinda*

Contrary to the popular understanding of post-Soon Yi Woody Allen as an embarrassing has-been, *Melinda and Melinda* is an Ur-text for the Allen oeuvre, demanding with virtuosity the necessary synthesis of comedy and tragedy in everyday life. *Melinda and Melinda* is consistent with the entirety of Allen's prodigious filmic output; in fact, it is the clearest expression of an artistic position that he has been offering all along. As far back as 1975, Allen was using a comic method, satire, to engage serious questions, as in the case of *Love and Death's* humorous reconstruction of Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky. George Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion* (1913), itself a comic portrait of a deadly serious critique of the capitalist class system, became the dominant intertext of Allen's films, ranging from *Annie Hall* (1977) to *Deconstructing Harry* (1994). Prior to *Melinda and Melinda*, the tragicomic synthesis was most clearly presented in *Mighty Aphrodite* (1995), a comic reconstruction of the tragedy of Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* (427 B.C.).

The pedigree of narrative complexity can also be traced through Allen's oeuvre. While the radical narrative strategy of *Melinda and Melinda* only begins to be expressed in films from *Deconstructing Harry* onward, glimmers of such instability are found in *Annie Hall*, even if they were arrived at after the shooting of the film had ended. The story goes that the modernist narrative interventions of *Annie Hall*—Allen delivering jokes into the camera in direct address—were only added in post-production when the original idea of the film (a “he said/she said” psychological duality) failed to work in the editing room. Since then, narrative complexity in Allen's films has been steadily developing.

This realization is important because Allen's discovery of non-Aristotelian narrative complexity comes at a time of post-modern narrativity in which such a technique is ubiquitous in the Hollywood film industry. However, unlike *Melinda and Melinda*'s counterparts (*Pulp Fiction* or *Memento*), Allen's film is not a gimmick, but a profound expression of an important idea. In an American culture in which despair seems the likely response (to terrorism, to a willfully incompetent presidency), Allen—as he did in his persona's epiphany in 1986's *Hannah and Her Sisters*—argues for the need to see life holistically and gives the sound advice to attend also to the smaller, comic joys. I cannot think of a filmic message that is more needed at this historic juncture in the American experience.

Melinda and Melinda begins with modernist virtuosity. During the film's typical—for Allen—minimalist credit sequence, which always consists of white letters on a black background, emotionally dramatic orchestral music plays. Then, suddenly, and without motivation, that music is replaced, in the middle of the credit sequence, with a typically chipper rendition of "Take the A-Train." The film's premise, about the intermixing of comedy and tragedy, is thus first presented musically. This technique also anchors *Un Chien Andalou* (Luis Bunuel and Salvador Dali, 1929), the masterpiece of Surrealist cinema for which a soundtrack alternating between light Italian comic opera and tragic Wagnerian lamentation marks acoustically the film's complex avant-garde narrative.

Melinda and Melinda consists of seventeen narrative segments, five involving the playwrights Sy and Max relating the stories of Melinda, and six each devoted to her comic and tragic circumstances. The film begins with the set-up of the premise, in which Sy and Max begin arguing about the potential of Melinda's story, while having a familiar dinner (part *My Dinner With Andre*, due to the presence of Shawn; part *Broadway Danny Rose*, because this is, after all, an Allen film). Max goes first, relating the tale of the tragic Melinda: she crashes a dinner party being thrown by her two best friends from college, Laurel (Chloe Sevigny) and Cassie (Brooke Smith). Melinda has taken an arduous bus trip from the mid-west to Manhattan, escaping her failed relationship with her husband.

The motif of the party will dominate the tragic Melinda's story. Later in the film, Melinda will meet a suave, African-American piano player, Ellis Moonson (Chiwetel Ejiofor) at a party thrown by Cassie in an

attempt to set her up with their dentist friend, Bud. Clarissa Dalloway's party, of course, is the central motor of Woolf's novel. Clarissa begins the story planning for it, and the novel ends as the party winds down that night. Crucially, Clarissa has invited all of her friends from her youth, including her former boyfriend, Peter Walsh, who has just returned from India; Sally Seton, with whom she once had a lesbian encounter; and Hugh Whitbread, whom Clarissa admires as "very well-covered, manly, extremely handsome, [with a] perfectly upholstered body" (6).

In the comic Melinda's story, a Hugh Whitbread character appears, in the guise of the dentist, now named Greg Erlinger, an unctuous safari hunter who lives in a pretentious house on Long Island. While Greg jumps on his trampoline to emphasize his fitness, his guests admire the boar's head on his wall, save the Allen stand-in, Hobie (Will Ferrell), who is as disgusted by Greg as Peter Walsh is by Hugh Whitbread. Hobie, for his part, is a struggling actor who plays every role, including Henry Higgins from *Pygmalion* "with a limp."

The romantic, melodramatic complications of the youthful women and their male paramours are as pronounced in *Melinda and Melinda* as they are in *Mrs. Dalloway*. In Woolf's tale, Clarissa married Richard Dalloway, but could have married Peter. In addition, she once kissed Sally as they planned to rebel against the repressive British social structure. To put her in her place in response to her espousal of feminism, Hugh kisses Sally.

Melinda's romantic entanglements are just as complex. After attending a recording session of music by the modernist composer, Bela Bartok, Ellis and Melinda, who are dating, as well as Laurel, Melinda's college friend, go out to dinner at a secluded bistro. They discuss their past, as, in the modernist, stream-of-consciousness narration of *Mrs. Dalloway*, we learn of Clarissa's past with her friends one summer at Bourton. We learn that Melinda was the sexually precocious one. Laurel delivers one of the best joke lines in the film, thus contaminating the tragic section of the film with the comic: "Melinda had a reputation for being postmodern in bed."

Laurel, for her part, has only had sex with one man, her actor husband Lee, whom we have previously seen sleeping with one of his students. Ellis observes that, despite these differences, Laurel and Melinda are very much alike. When Melinda is called away from the table to answer a phone call, Laurel and Ellis begin

flirting with each other. Ellis says that when he first saw Laurel at the party, he looked into her soul, which was “clouded, protective, with lots of longing.” From this point onward, the relationship between Ellis and Melinda deteriorates, as love blossoms between Ellis and Laurel.

At the tragedy section’s climax, Melinda walks the streets of New York, distraught, accompanied by the Bartok music introduced earlier. Jump cuts show Melinda in crisis as she stands at Ellis’s door. She discovers Laurel there with Ellis. Ellis explains: “These things happen. Life is messy.” At this point, Melinda decides to throw herself out of the window. Ellis pins her to the floor to stop her. Laurel tries to calm her: “We have to move on with our lives.”

The suicide motif is the center of Clarissa’s shadow story: Septimus Smith, ravaged by shell shock, sits in his apartment, obsessing about his former writings on Shakespeare, now to him maddeningly just “odes to time” (147). Septimus’s doctor comes to make a house call. But Septimus jumps out of the window. The uncaring Dr. Holmes can only call Septimus a “coward” (149). In the novel’s central irony, the stream-of-consciousness technique shifts our attention to Peter admiring “the triumphs of civilization” (151), as the ambulance races by him on the streets of London. To Peter, the ambulance demonstrates “the communal spirit of London” (151), but we know that it is the failure of that civilization, as the machine is racing to the dead Septimus.

For its part, the comic story of Melinda also engages this suicide motif. At one of the film’s funniest moments, Melinda tells Hobie, who is desperately in love with her, that she has met, and fallen in love with, Billy Wheeler, an African-American musician, the equivalent to Ellis in the tragic story. We begin to hear Sy’s voice-over narration again as the image freeze frames on a close-up of Hobie’s distraught face. Allen cuts back to Sy at the restaurant table. Sy comically tells us: “He’s suicidal. All of the perfect comic elements are in place!”

As the story continues, Sy invents his equivalent to Melinda’s suicide attempt in Max’s tragic tale. Melinda sets Hobie up with a nymphomaniac, Stacey. Hobie brings Stacey back to his apartment. However, she begins telling him about her discovery of her best friend having an affair with her boyfriend right under her nose (that is, the exact plot details from Laurel and Melinda’s story in the tragedy section). Like Septimus, she

cannot bear to think about her life any more: “Life is so cruel, and then finally about nothing.” Stacy decides to jump out the window. As Hobie tries to stop her, she hits him over the head with a glass jar. Later that night, Melinda comes to Hobie’s apartment. She tells him she was jealous of Stacey. They declare their love for each other, as the comic tale ends happily.

Now, it may seem deeply offensive to connect Stacey’s comic attempted suicide with Septimus Smith’s, the tragic victim of shell shock. However, the mixing of comedy and tragedy that is the central narrative strategy of *Melinda and Melinda* is also present in *Mrs. Dalloway*. That is to say, Septimus’s story is the tragic element, and Clarissa’s party is the comic. Woolf is certainly a satirist, building an ironic critique of London society by emphasizing Clarissa’s indifference to Septimus’s suffering. When Sir Bradshaw and her husband Richard begin discussing Septimus’s story and a bill that they plan to introduce to help shell shock victims, Clarissa selfishly thinks: “Oh!... in the middle of my party, here’s death” (183).

However, Clarissa’s party recovers from its inauspicious beginning and the specter of Septimus. Sally, now the Lady Rosseter, has mellowed with age: she now finds Richard Dalloway, whom she used to loathe, “improved” (194). And, the last lines of the novel, while not quite consecrating the traditional romantic coupling as that between Hobie and Melinda, nonetheless embrace a hopefulness for human kindness. Peter realizes that he is still in love with Clarissa: “What is it that fills me with extraordinary excitement?” Peter ruminates. The novel’s final lines celebrate the simplicity of human emotions: “It is Clarissa, he said... For there she was” (194). Thus, whatever the force of Woolf’s ironic, anti-war critique, the novel also attempts to attenuate that pessimism with lovers’ ability to continue to love. This is precisely the point of *Melinda and Melinda*: for whatever viciousness lovers inflict upon one another—like Laurel’s betrayal of Melinda with Ellis—there is always hope for the Melindas to find the Hobies, after so many disastrous couplings.

Not just in a narrative sense, but also a narrational one, *Melinda and Melinda* replicates the modernist sensibility of *Mrs. Dalloway*. The novel’s famous stream-of-consciousness technique shifts radically between the thoughts of characters as the day progresses. We begin with Clarissa in the morning, leaving her house to buy flowers in preparation for the party that night. When Clarissa leaves the floral shop, an automobile backfires, which Woolf describes as “a pistol shot in the street outside!” (13). This cue produces a radical shift

in consciousness, to Septimus, unsettled by the car backfiring: “The world wavered and quivered and threatened to burst into flames” (15). As Septimus contemplates suicide in response, the narration shifts back to Clarissa’s consciousness. For her initially, the car “had left a slight ripple” (17), but even she is sensitive to the meaning that lies behind such seemingly simple events: “Something so trifling in single instances that no mathematical instrument, though capable of transmitting shocks in China, could register the vibration; yet in its fullness rather formidable and in its common appeal emotional, for in all the hat shops and tailors’ shops strangers looked at each other and thought of the dead; of the flag; of Empire.... For the surface agitation of the passing car as it sunk grazed something very profound” (18).

While *Mrs. Dalloway* signals its shifts in consciousness using the striking of Big Ben, *Melinda and Melinda* relies on unannounced shifts between the comic and tragic sections of the story. The first occurs as Hobie comically destroys his wife’s dinner party, thrown to impress a potential backer for her proposed film, *The Castration Sonata*. Melinda has crashed the party, having taken twenty-eight sleeping pills. When they offer her coffee to sober up from the overdose, she comically replies that she is allergic to coffee, but would love some vodka! In the midst of the chaos, Hobie’s yuppie meal, Chilean sea bass, burns in the oven. A simple cut takes us to Laurel and Melinda in the tragic story, cleaning up from the equivalent party which she has crashed, now in Laurel’s kitchen. This tragic Melinda explains that she tried to commit suicide back in the Midwest. She was having an affair with a photographer. When her husband found out, she lost custody of her beloved children.

It is the film’s final unannounced shift between tragedy and comedy, however, that matches *Mrs. Dalloway*’s shift from the frivolous Clarissa preparing for her party to the tragically destroyed Septimus. At the emotional high point of the film, as Ellis pins the suicidal Melinda to the ground to ensure her safety, a shock cut reveals Bela Lugosi on a film screen, starring in *The Black Cat*. Melinda and her new boyfriend Billy are out on a double date with Hobie and Stacey, the nymphomaniac. She is a Republican operative who poses for *Playboy*. Hobie jokes, “It’s hard to believe a Republican could be that sexual.” Stacey, however re-assures him that in bed, “I’m a radical.” Will Ferrell, as Hobie channeling the Allen persona, looks up heavenward to joke: “Yes, I will never vote against school prayer again!”

The intertextual comparison of *Melinda and Melinda* and *Mrs. Dalloway* produces not only insight into the complex narrative operations of the Allen film, but also a re-evaluation of Woolf's modernist text. What has activated this comparison is a gendered consideration of the tensions between the public and private in modern life. Woolf's feminist approach demands that we see the normative public figure, the veteran Septimus, as merely private, the victim of a tragic dissolution into madness witnessed only by his wife, Rezia. Woolf presents this in stark contrast to the supposedly private Mrs. Dalloway, one who, in anti-feminist terms, fritters away her life giving parties for the advancement of the career of her husband. And yet, it is Mrs. Dalloway's skillful parties, with the exception of her one unexplained, mysterious failure in Constantinople, when "Richard lost his chance at the Cabinet" (179), that make Clarissa the most talented public figure in the novel. Peter calls Clarissa "the perfect hostess" (7), while Mrs. Dalloway's self-analysis is even more precise: because she believes everyday life is "absolutely absorbing" (8), "Her only gift was knowing people almost by instinct" (9).

When seen in the light of *Melinda and Melinda*, *Mrs. Dalloway's* gender politics become strikingly more conventional: the gendered split between the male public, as embodied in Septimus, and the female private, represented by Clarissa, is collapsed into the two Melindas. Allen's recent film, unlike most, but not all of his previous work (*Another Woman* being the most compelling exception before *Melinda and Melinda*), refuses to bifurcate the world along gendered lines, which makes *Melinda and Melinda* a crowning achievement in his career. Whereas Allen previously split, not his individual narratives, but his film projects, into major philosophical works about men (for example, *Crimes and Misdemeanors*) and minor flippant ones about women (*Alice*, for instance), *Melinda and Melinda* engages both the serious tragic and the flippant comic in assessing the character of Melinda. Unlike *Mrs. Dalloway*, in which the public/private tensions are split across sexes, the social conditions around Melinda change, producing the differing comic or tragic effects.

Allen's interest in these differing effects was previously most clearly expressed in *Mighty Aphrodite*, a comic re-articulation of *Oedipus Rex*, the Greek tragedy by Sophocles. The importance of *Oedipus Rex* in Allen's oeuvre relates directly to *Light in August*, clearly an American version of its British modernist counterpart, Woolf's novel. Faulkner's American modernism is a direct descendant of the prior European experimentation with narrative form, a claim that is best exemplified in *Light in August's* collision of the story

of Lena and Joe Christmas, the same sort of two-track narrative as that of Septimus Smith and Clarissa Dalloway.

Light in August is a murder mystery. In an introductory chapter, Faulkner presents Lena Grove, traveling westward from Alabama in search of Lucas Burch, the delinquent father of her unborn baby. Then, in the second chapter, we meet Joe Christmas, a mysterious inhabitant of Jefferson, Mississippi, the roommate of Lucas Burch, who hides under his alias, Brown. The Burden mansion is on fire, and we later learn that its reclusive inhabitant, Joanna Burden, has been murdered. By the end of the novel, Joanna's murderer, her lover, Joe Christmas, is on the run from a white lynch mob. Joe, who has also spent his entire life running from his uncertain identity as a "Negro" (his mother was white, his father may have been a black itinerant circus worker) resigns himself to dying the brutal death of a black man in the Jim Crow South. In stream-of-consciousness narration, Faulkner tells us: "The black shoes smelling of negro: that mark on his ankles the gauge definite and ineradicable of the black tide creeping up his legs, moving from his feet upward as death moves" (339).

The mark on the ankles is, of course, Faulkner's classical allusion to the marks placed on Oedipus by his father, binding his feet for execution, in hopes of avoiding the fulfillment of the prophecy that Oedipus would one day kill his father and marry his mother. Due to the shepherd's inability to carry out Laius's orders to kill the baby, Oedipus grows to adulthood and unknowingly fulfills the prophecy. Faulkner harnesses this narrative to an American context, revealing how Jim Crow racism comes to roost in black violence against the least likely of victims, the anti-racist Burden family.

Faulkner racializes the notion of classical Greek fate. No longer is Oedipus' sin a prideful resentment of the gods, but now a sociological collision between white supremacy and the black underclass. In *Light in August's* next chapter, Faulkner continues the allusion to *Oedipus Rex*. Joe's grandmother and grandfather, Mr. and Mrs. Hines come to Jefferson. Playing with racial inversions, Faulkner describes the Hines' as "a different race, species" (341). Eupheus "Uncle Doc" Hines is the most vicious of Southern racists; his avocation is to travel to black churches to preach white supremacy (343). He cannot abide his grandson's mixed race status, loathing Joe as a "white nigger" (344).

Hines screams in the town square for the people to kill his grandson. Trying to comprehend her husband's behavior, Mrs. Hines finally figures out the Oedipal circumstances. Like the plague-stricken Thebans interrogating the disobedient shepherd, Mrs. Hines demands of her husband: "What did you do with Milly's [her daughter's] baby?" (348). The answer in both texts is the same: the cursed child was removed from the society, but not executed as planned. Instead, that child has grown up and returned to interrogate the basic structures of civilization. For Faulkner, those structures are racial liminality. The sheriff observes that Joe Christmas "never acted like either a nigger or a white man" (350).

While we are clearly far in spirit from *Melinda and Melinda*, in which the interracial romances engaged by Melinda (with Ellis Moonsong in the tragedy section and Billy Wheeler in the comedy) are normative and do not raise the community's racist ire, in terms of narrative structure, things are not so different. Like *Mrs. Dalloway*, *Light in August* engages a two-track narrative in which the experiences of Joe Christmas (he is castrated by a racist vigilante, and thus like Septimus Smith suffers a tragic end) are juxtaposed against those of Lena Grove, who, after Lucas Burch flees her again, in the last chapter of the novel is continuing her quest unabated, this time northward to Tennessee. While Lena's story has not been typically interpreted as humorous, her perseverance against vicious social forces (traditional Southern culture's barely tolerant acceptance of her status as an unwed mother) is certainly comic in the sense of Allen's existential engagement with the absurdity of human experience.

Again, however, *Light in August*, because it relies on the male/female duality of its Woolfian modernism, can be illuminated by *Melinda and Melinda*'s differential gender politics. Melinda embodies the searching impulses of Lena (for a family) and Joe Christmas (for a stable identity). Indeed, the direct artistic experimentation that defines *Melinda and Melinda*'s complex narrative, the belief that there is both a tragic and a comic story within every human soul, is merely hinted at in the modernist dynamics of *Mrs. Dalloway* and *Light in August*. Clarissa's party turns from disaster to success as she comes to terms with her similarity to Septimus: "But what an extraordinary night! She felt somehow very like him—the young man who had killed himself. She felt glad that he had done it; thrown it away. The clock was striking" (186).

The collapse of the two-track narrative in *Light in August* is even more pronounced. In the dying light of August, Reverend Hightower, to whom town inhabitant Byron Bunch has been narrating most of the stories of Lena and Joe, breathes for the last time. As he does so, he sees a composite face, consisting of Byron, Lena, and Joe (491). Faulkner connects Hightower's experience (he was defrocked as a minister and shunned by the town because of his wife's infidelity) to Joe Christmas': both these characters lament that their lives were so tragic despite wanting so little. Faulkner describes Hightower's death as "the crater of the world in explosion" (493).

And yet, for Faulkner as for Woody Allen, the world does not die in such a tragic explosion. It endures, as Faulkner so thoroughly documents through this oeuvre, in this case in the relentless searching of Lena Grove. Her story ends, not tragically, but optimistically. The furniture dealer who narrates the final chapter to his wife in bed describes having given Lena a ride to Tennessee. At first, he is horrified at the pathos of Lena's search and Bryon's obsessive quest to protect her. But then he figures it out: This is the sheltered and impoverished Lena's only chance to travel. She is enjoying others taking care of her (506). Lena's story is not one of tragic immolation, such as that suffered by Reverend Hightower and Joe Christmas. Instead, it is one of circularity: Her closing observation, indeed the last line of the novel, mirrors her opening one: "A body does get around" (507).

Despite the radical differences in tone between *Melinda and Melinda* and *Light in August*, this sense of comic triumph in the midst of tragic despair also characterizes the ending of Allen's film. After the heart-breaking climactic scene in which Ellis pins down the tragic Melinda so that she will not be able to jump out the window, the film cuts to Hobie's date with Stacey. The nymphomaniac observes, "Life is so cruel, and then finally about nothing." Stacey threatens to go out the window as well, but does not. After another shock cut, Hobie wakes up in bed alone, having been dreaming about Melinda. He hears someone at his door and picks up a baseball bat in fear. It turns out merely to be Melinda, listening at his door, jealous of his relations with Stacey. Hobie finally tells Melinda that he is in love with her. When he tries to take the upper hand, ridiculing her jealousy, she fires back with the knowledge that he too behaved so childishly: she discovered the piece of the robe that Hobie had to cut off as it got stuck when he was spying in front of Melinda's apartment door while she was having sex with Billy.

This happy ending puts a stop to the storytelling in *Melinda and Melinda*. The narrators end their games with Melinda shifting their conversation to a friend's upcoming funeral. Sy observes that, "We laugh, because it masks our real feelings about mortality." They toast to such laughter because, "Comic or tragic, it could end like that." As Sy snaps his fingers during this last comment, the film cuts to black and the credits roll, embracing the examination of the ephemerality of character in modernist literature. "A body does get around," but disappears when the page is turned. "For there she was," until the moment that I put the book down and turn toward the matters of real life that endlessly beckon.

III. "Don't Be a Racist": The Two-Track Narrative of *Storytelling*

The end of "Fiction," the first film in Todd Solondz's two-track narrative, *Storytelling*, features a similar shock ending to the one that allows Sy to suddenly turn out the lights in *Melinda and Melinda*. After the central character, Vi, has read her story about her teacher's disturbing sexual encounter with her, the other students comment about why they hated it. Finally, Mr. Scott, the creative writing teacher, chimes in. Vi and her boyfriend Marcus have defended the story to their classmates, not as a literary text, but as Truth. "But it happened!" is Vi's final scream of anguish. Mr. Scott replies, calmly, malevolently: "I don't know what happened, Vi, because once you start writing, it all becomes fiction. Still, it certainly is an improvement over your last story. There is now, at least, a beginning, a middle, and an end." As Mr. Scott delivers this scathing Aristotelian endorsement, ironically in a film that is about to decimate such unities, Solondz cuts to black and proceeds with the second section, "Nonfiction," never to return explicitly to Vi's circumstances.

The structure of Solondz's film is even simpler than that of *Melinda and Melinda*, further from the stream-of-consciousness complexity of either *Mrs. Dalloway* or *Light in August*. It is merely an omnibus of two classical films. However, like the narrational sections of Allen's film, in which Sy and Max ruminate on the fictive nature of human experience, both of these short films offer meditations on the complex nature of storytelling. "Fiction" brilliantly indicts sycophantic critique in creative writing classes on American college campuses, while "Nonfiction" interrogates the comic reception a schmuck filmmaker's depiction of a tragic

high school student's life receives once his film is screened before an actual audience. In both cases, the narrative simplicity is belied by the films' engagement with the complexities of reception circumstances.

Storytelling is, in the end, a radical work of film art because it discovers a compelling narrative mode of auto-critique. To his credit, after the vicious critical reception of *Happiness* (1998)—Manohla Dargis called the film “as dead inside as *Armageddon*”—Solondz decided not to back away from his misanthropic examination of middle-class suburban life. Instead, he focuses both of his short films on the creative process, embedding the negative responses to all of his films into the narratives themselves. The end credits to *Storytelling* are presented over a wonderfully ironic song by the Scottish musical group, Belle and Sebastian, with words that echo Ebert's observations about the narrative of *Melinda and Melinda*. Ebert argues: “We get all worked up about what Frankie does in *Million Dollar Baby*, and would get just as worked up if he did the opposite, both times talking about Frankie as if he were real and had actually done something.” Belle and Sebastian's song, to lyrics by Solondz, claim: “[When you are a storyteller] you are without responsibility... you have immunity... Are you the one to be blamed?”

While this interrogation might seem far from my analysis of the two-track *Melinda and Melinda*, I am interested in assessing the narrational complexity of *Storytelling*'s two parts, considering how these two seemingly discrete short, Aristotelian films comment upon one another without any of the narrative mixing in my other three case studies. I begin with “Fiction” because it drips with Faulkneresque grotesquery. At one point, the film establishes this reference directly. Vi's boyfriend, Marcus (Leo Fitzpatrick), afflicted with Cerebral Palsy, reads his autobiographical story to the class. The students, trying to be politically correct, sing its praises. One woman in the class says, in one of Solondz's pitch-perfect joke lines, “It kind of reminded me of Faulkner, but East Coast and disabled.”

Furthermore, Mr. Scott, the teacher, is a post-Faulknerian Southern novelist who won the Pulitzer Prize for a work entitled, *A Sunday Morning Lynching*. The turning point of “Fiction” features Mr. Scott having rear-entry sex with Vi, forcing her to say “nigger fuck me hard” as he does so. The scene, about sex between an African-American man and a white woman, presses at similar racial and gender issues as those seminally explored in Faulkner's representation of the tragic life of Joe Christmas.

Faulkner uses literary techniques to represent viscerally the social consequences of treating black sexuality as deviant. In moments of crisis, Joe knows to retreat to the black community. In terms that critique racism as much as forward it, Faulkner delivers, in stream-of-consciousness narration, Joe's thoughts as he flees the white lynch mob and enters Jefferson's Freedman Town, the segregated section where the town's black community lives. Joe turns into a kind of animal, feeling directly the "fecund mellow voices of negro women" and the "hot wet primogenitive Female" (115). He then retreats from this space, returning to "the cold hard air of white people" (115). This encounter causes Joe to lament: "That's all I wanted. That don't seem like a whole lot to ask" (115). Here, Faulkner presents how internalized Joe's negative image of black people is within white supremacist culture.

This foundational experience, the subsuming of his sexual identity to a racist mythology that demands black sexuality's deviance, frames all of Joe's sexual encounters. As a child, as presented in the famous chapter that begins, "Memory believes before knowing remembers" (119), Faulkner uses the stream-of-consciousness technique, representing a pre-literate child's first encounter with sexuality. At his orphanage, Joe eats toothpaste while watching a woman dietician struggle with one of the male orderlies trying to have sex with her. When Joe vomits up the toothpaste, giving away his hiding place, the dietician takes out her shame on him, calling him a "nigger bastard" (122), thus defining a pattern that conflates Joe's sexuality with his racial identity.

In the next chapter, when Joe is eight years old, his friends have sex with a young black girl. When it is Joe's turn, he smells toothpaste, loathing her as a "womanshenegro" (156), a term that serves as a virtual definition of modernist linguistic indeterminacy: depending on how one parses the word, it could mean "woman she negro," "womans he negro" or "womans hen negro," the first of which defines Joe's misogyny as a form of self-hatred, with both women and blacks as subalterns, marginalized and despised. The second parsing highlights gender confusion, while the third activates the novel's critique of black sexuality as animalistic and therefore deviant.

Joe's first sexual experience, with the waitress Bobbie Allen, goes no better. As Joe advances on Bobbie, she has to explain the nature of menstruation. Reflecting upon this knowledge, Joe laments that women are "victims of periodical filth," as he puts his hands in warm sheep blood in some form of bizarre sexist ritual

(185). Bobbie's ineffectual and inarticulate attempt to explain her menstruation to Joe—"I'm sick"—results in Joe hitting her, running away, and then vomiting, again recapitulating the initial gastrointestinal response to sexuality initiated by the toothpaste (189).

After trying to run for fifteen years from both his racial and sexual identity, the adult Joe turns sadistic, having sex with white Southern women, telling them afterward that he is black. However, when he tries this in the North, Joe learns that white women enjoy having sex with black men. This knowledge again sickens him, the victim of the internalization of white supremacist hatred for black sexuality. At the age of thirty-three, Christ's age at the crucifixion, Joe settles down with a black woman in an attempt to expel his internalized whiteness. When this fails, Joe arrives in Jefferson, climbing into Joanna Burden's window to steal her food. When Joanna enters the room and has sex with Joe, he enters into the doomed relationship that will lead to his obliteration.

Solondz, like Faulkner before him, represents, this time in images, the relationship between sexuality and that which the social order deems deviant. In post-Civil Rights America, inter-racial relations no longer carry the destructive force they did for Faulkner's 1930s South. Instead, Solondz chooses to represent sex between a young, beautiful woman and a young man whose body is ravaged by Cerebral Palsy. The opening of the film is astonishing: in what we believe to be a callow, conventional sexual encounter, Vi thrusts her body up and down on top of an unseen man beneath her. As the camera pans down, we catch a glimpse of Marcus, who is strangely contorted, yet for reasons we do not yet comprehend. When Marcus speaks, after they are finished, he asks, "Hey, do you want to hear my short story now?" Marcus slurs his words because of the effects of the disease on his facial muscles.

From this very opening moment of "Fiction," Solondz studies the dissolution of the relationship between Vi and Marcus. He is not a good writer, but he is a precise judge of character. As Vi refuses to listen to Marcus read his story again—because she does not have the heart to tell him it is no good—she makes up an excuse to leave the room. He is angered by her behavior, stating correctly: "You're tired of me. I can tell. You hardly even sweat anymore when we have sex." When she tries, lamely, to defend herself—"I was never much of a sweater, you know that"—he strikes at the heart of the matter: "The kinkiness is gone. You've become kind."

As Vi leaves, putting on her “USA for Africa” t-shirt, she visually confirms Marcus’s interpretation of their relationship: she is a kind-hearted liberal who chooses deception rather than hurting anyone’s feelings.

The victim of political correctness, Vi has sex with Marcus because not to do so would define her as someone who accepts that sex with a man with Cerebral Palsy is deviant. Vi’s interpretation of identity politics damns her as she encounters the diabolical Mr. Scott, a sexual predator. Before her encounter with Mr. Scott, Vi lies on her bed, sobbing over the break-up with Marcus. When her roommate tries to console her, Vi’s PC sheen drops away, as she fumes: “Fucking cripple.” Yet in the instant after she has uttered her repressed discriminatory feelings, she covers them over, justifying to herself that she is not an un-PC monster but just a rational woman searching for maturity in her sexual partners: “Why do I waste my time with undergrads? They’re all so juvenile!” Vi then finishes her reconstruction of absurd PC thinking, observing: “I just thought Marcus would be different. I mean, he’s got C.P.!”

At this point, Vi goes to a bar “to get laid,” she tells her roommate. In the bar, she encounters Mr. Scott, with whom she returns to his apartment. Once they enter, Mr. Scott caresses Vi’s face. She excuses herself to the bathroom to “freshen up.” On top of his toilet, she finds all sorts of photographs of naked white women. Vi’s fellow student, Catherine, wears nothing but her glasses and handcuffs. In another, two girls are tied together on the couch. In another bout of self-destructive PC thinking overriding sensibility for one’s personal safety, Vi mutters to herself repeatedly, “Don’t be a racist.”

Vi returns to Mr. Scott, determined to establish her political correctness by having sex with him. She takes a few baby steps toward him, at which he demands that she turn around and bend over. Solondz shoots her face in close up as she grabs the wall. Solondz then, Mizoguchi-like, cuts to a long shot behind the characters as Mr. Scott penetrates Vi from behind. Mr. Scott demands that she “Say, ‘nigger fuck me hard’.” Even at this late moment determined by her PC identity, Vi cries, “I can’t do that.” As Mr. Scott becomes more violent in his insistence, she tries to compromise, uttering, “Fuck me hard.” As he continues pounding away at her, he finally gets Vi to scream, “Nigger fuck me hard!” and the scene ends.

This scene engages in a spectatorially complex way the racial and sexual dynamics that simplistically frame Faulkner’s *Light in August*. As Joe moves into the slave quarters at Joanna’s mansion, the two become

lovers. Joe is surprised at Joanna's "deviant" behavior: "She had an avidity for the forbidden wordsymbols" (258). She hides notes for him in fence posts, meeting him naked outside on the grounds of the former plantation. Unlike Vi, and in spite of her family's anti-racist devotions, Joanna receives sexual pleasure by shouting "Negro" during sex with Joe (260). Joe, of course, knows both for legitimate reasons (Joanna is insane) and illegitimate ones (this behavior is not safe for him in the Jim Crow South), that he needs to flee the relationship, but he is "held there" (260). This inaction leads directly to Joe's death.

One night, Joanna forces Joe to pray with her. He has been abused by religion his entire life, having been beaten brutally as a child by his adoptive fundamentalist parents. Joe's response to Joanna's prayers is to murder her. The sexually charged murder of a white woman by a black man in the Jim Crow South sets a lynch mob against him. Percy Grimm, an America First, white supremacist whose racial politics are so offensive that even the Southern national guard of the 1930s finds him outside the pale, leads the mob. The townspeople of Jefferson, on the contrary, accept Percy's leadership. Percy tracks Joe to Reverend Hightower's house, where Mrs. Hines and Hightower attempt to protect Joe. This infuriates Percy, who responds with racism, sexism, and homophobia. "Has every preacher and old maid in Jefferson taken their pants down to the yellowbellied son of a bitch?" (464). Percy shoots Joe, castrating his still-living body, causing one of the vigilantes to vomit (464), thus bringing full circle the viciousness of the race and sex nexus of Southern life which Joe has had to endure his entire life.

"Fiction" is a Faulknerian narrative of sexuality, race, and deviance that at once finds the contemporary equivalent to Faulkner's interrogation of the Jim Crow South, the sexually-active yet cerebral-palsied Marcus, and simultaneously takes Faulkner's original conceit, sexual racism, and inserts it into a complex new reception context. The remainder of "Fiction" studies Vi's response to Mr. Scott's attack. She immediately goes to see Marcus in his dorm room. He stands before his mirror, muttering "Freak," thus replicating Joe's self-loathing. When Vi asks to come in, she hugs him. Marcus observes precisely, "You're all sweaty."

The film ends back in Mr. Scott's creative writing class. Vi finishes reading her new story, about her encounter with the sexual predator: "So John flipped her around and slammed her against the wall. Jane braced herself. She thought about her mother. She thought about Peter. She thought about God. She thought about rape.

John's flesh abraded her soft skin. There would be marks. She had entered college with hope, with dignity, but she would graduate as a whore." The female students in the class respond viciously, echoing the popular reviews of Solondz's *Happiness*, critiquing the author for his/her misanthropy. One female student begins, "Why do people have to be so ugly? Write about such ugly characters. It's perverted. I know you all think I'm being prissy, but I don't care. I was brought up a certain way, and this is mean-spirited."

The students then demonstrate their PC post-structural credentials. Ethan, a male student, timidly suggests, "I think it was a little bit racist." A female student responds more forcefully: "It was completely racist. And beyond that, I felt deeply offended as a woman, as if women could only operate from experiences of objectification." Another woman jumps onto the bandwagon, adding that the story is "totally phallogentric. And so weirdly misogynistic." When Ethan tries to engage the story as a study of rape, Catherine silences him by bludgeoning away with more critical race theory:

It was confessional yet dishonest. Jane pretends to be horrified by the sexuality that she in fact fetishizes. She subsumes herself to the black male, sexual potency, but then doesn't follow through. She thinks she respects Afro-Americans, and thinks they're cool and exotic, what a great notch he'd make in her belt. But of course it all comes down to Mandingo cliché, and he calls her on it. In classic racist tradition, she demonizes and then runs for cover. But then, how could she behave otherwise? She's just a spoiled, suburban white girl with a Benetton rainbow complex... I think it's a callow piece of writing.

Mr. Scott then supports Catherine's attack: "Callow and coy. Jane wants more, but isn't honest enough to admit it," calling not only Vi but also the film's audience on their likely response.

"Fiction" thus ends with a complexity that deconstructs the reception circumstances of literary texts in the contemporary American college classroom. Solondz defends his own films' misanthropy by forcing us to identify with Vi, his surrogate author, because we have seen the truth of her violation by Mr. Scott. While sexual hysteria has in fact characterized white culture's fear of black men, sometimes black men are in fact sexual predators. We see how wrong the students are when they blindly parrot post-structural theory as a way of

responding to her experience. They, as Vi herself did in Scott's bathroom, allow racial sensitivity to trump common sense considerations of her own safety and well-being. Yet, their own racism is what marks the sexual scene between Vi and Mr. Scott as disturbing, and in a convoluted way, the students' post-structural theory goes to the truth of the encounter.

Solondz' strategy in this regard renders "Fiction" a meta-textual adaptation of Faulkner's work in two ways. First, with the publication of *Sanctuary* (1931), in which an impotent sexual monster rapes a young woman with a corn cob, Faulkner was ridiculed by the mainstream 1930s literary establishment as "old corn cob," a joke on what was seen as his juvenile, sexually depraved misanthropy. Solondz has suffered similar critiques, particularly for *Happiness*, a suburban melodrama in which the kindest character is a pedophile. One can only hope that future generations of critics will assess Solondz in the same terms that post-war American culture has come to use to revere Faulkner.

Secondly, Solondz takes the racial and sexual terms of *Light in August*, the scandalous relationship between Joanna and Joe, and inserts them into a meta-textual meditation on contemporary American identity politics. *Light in August* was a much-needed indictment of Jim Crow racism. The American academy, by fetishizing canonical literature, seals that critique in the past, leaving the terms of its application to the present more than a little bit fuzzy.

It is this project upon which the second film in *Storytelling* focuses. Much more in keeping with Solondz's other films, "Nonfiction" presents an encounter with an astonishingly dysfunctional middle-class family, the Livingstons. By happenstance, Toby Oxman, a documentary filmmaker, meets Scooby Livingston in a bathroom getting stoned. Toby decides to make Scooby and his family the subjects of his documentary, *American Scooby*, about the pathetic state of the American high school.

The film takes great pains to demonstrate Toby's incompetence as a filmmaker. In the film's opening scene, he engages in a pathetically diabolical action. Having heard that the woman he refused to take to the prom in high school is now a film producer, he calls her cold to ask for money. He sadly tries to sell his film about teenage life in suburbia with post-structuralism: "I wrote to Derrida to see if he would do the narration." She, of course, for both personal and professional reasons, hangs up on him.

Solondz uses Toby's filmic encounter with the Livingstons to continue his critique of blind political correctness. In a series of family dinners gone horribly wrong, Marty Livingston (John Goodman), Scooby's Dad, banishes his children from the table for what he believes to be affronts to his authority. Refusing to entertain the possibility that Scooby is gay, Mr. Livingston banishes Scooby's brother, Brady (Noah Fleiss), from the table for observing that Scooby likes to listen to Elton John music.

At a subsequent dinner, Brady announces that he is studying the Holocaust in social studies class. This news interests his mother, Fern (Julie Hagerty), who raises money for Israel as a telemarketer. Brady asks his parents if they know any survivors. Fern says one of the boys' uncles is a survivor. When Brady corrects her, observing that he came to the United States *before* World War II, Fern says she believes that still counts. Scooby chimes in, arguing that by that logic, they would all be survivors. Fern does not argue with this extension, an absurd "Americanization of the Holocaust," a trend studied in detail by Peter Novick. When Scooby observes that if it had not been for Hitler, they would never have been born, Marty banishes him from the table, too.

"Nonfiction" continues the critique of fuzzy, hypocritical liberal thinking begun in "Fiction." Toby interviews Elizabeth St. Clair, the school psychologist, who argues that American high school students preparing for their SATs suffer more stress than the war-torn children of Bosnia. The film saves its most vicious critique, however, for its examination of the relationship between the family's youngest member, Mikey, and the family's Latina maid, Consuelo.

Mikey is the pure product of the family's cold illogic. With no emotional skills, Mikey harasses Consuelo with annoying questions while she scrubs their floors on her hands and knees. Mikey observes that if Consuelo's parents were so poor, they should not have had so many kids. Positioning Consuelo as a stereotypical Latina Catholic woman, the film engages in an unexpected turn. When Consuelo explains to Mikey that the number of brothers and sisters she had was "God's will," Mikey asks Consuelo if she believes in God. She angrily snaps, "No."

As the precipitation of the film's climax, Mikey spills grape juice in the kitchen. He seeks out Consuelo in her room so that she can clean it up. There, he discovers her crying over the execution of her grandson, Jesus,

in a prison gas chamber. Mikey annoys her, saying that bad people should be killed. Consuelo insists that Jesus was not bad. Mikey continues his logical interrogation of her position: “Maybe he was, and you just didn’t know it.” Mikey asks why Jesus was on death row. Consuelo explains that it was for rape and murder, delivering a chilling definition of rape: “When you love someone, but they don’t love you. And you do something about it.” Mikey rightfully says that he thinks his parents do not love him. Consuelo coldly advises, “Well, then, when you get older, you can do something about it.” Mikey ends this startling conversation with a reminder to Consuelo to clean up the spilled grape juice.

Immediately after, Mikey hypnotizes his father to have him fire Consuelo because he believes her to be “lazy,” clearly accepting racist stereotypes over and above the evidence before him. The hypnotism works, and Marty fires Consuelo. That night, Consuelo sneaks back into the house, loosens the natural gas pipes in the house, and kills the entire family in their sleep. Scooby, who has been to New York City to see a rough cut of Toby’s film about him, returns to his New Jersey suburb to discover his family murdered. Toby comes over to Scooby to say how sorry he is. Scooby responds bitterly, “Don’t be, your movie is a hit,” a last line equally as powerful as Mr. Scott’s Aristotelian declaration and Sy’s meditation on the fictionality of all stories.

Throughout the making of *American Scooby*, Toby’s editor (Franka Potente) has been arguing with him about his stance toward his subjects. She critiques him for feeling superior to them. Toby finds the material funny, but the editor observes that, since Brady has suffered a life-threatening head injury and is in a coma, Toby has a family tragedy on his hands. Toby refuses to agree with the editor’s perspective, demanding that they do a test screening. In the film, Scooby, who wants to be a talk show host, despite having neither experience nor any personality to speak of, insists in the film that “I could be the next Oprah” and that “I’d be willing to direct.” When Toby observes to Scooby that even Conan O’Brien, Scooby’s hero, went to Harvard, and Scooby reveals his ignorance, the audience laughs hysterically and applauds.

Thus, while “Fiction” ends with nothing to laugh about, “Nonfiction” shatters Faulknerian tragedy into generic shards. On the one hand, Scooby’s family is brutally murdered. On the other, the audience within the film finds hilarity in Scooby’s pathetic life. While Solondz refuses to intercut his two films, he produces as engaging an examination of the intertwined relationships between comedy and tragedy as that in *Melinda and*

Melinda. The act of storytelling usually tidies up the messiness of real life, ordering it into generic simplicities. The societal murders of Septimus Smith and Joe Christmas are tragedies in the Aristotelian sense, unburdened by any sense of the comic. On the other hand, Scooby retells a story to himself, a mythical inheritance of the American success fiction, that he could be the next Oprah or Conan, a circumstance that is tragic in Todd Solondz's hands but comic in Toby Oxman's. For her part, Vi tells herself a story about what well-intentioned people do when confronted with difference. The fact that this story causes her tremendous personal harm when it overrides her self-preservation instincts becomes in Solondz's hands an absurd joke about what damage a college education can do to a young woman.

IV. Conclusion

Like "Fiction," "Nonfiction" positions an artist substitute for Solondz. However, in "Fiction," the material has tragic effects. In "Nonfiction," that material, while tragic in content, produces an artwork that is received as comedy. In this way, *Storytelling* and *Melinda and Melinda* converge thematically, despite their very different narrational strategies. My point has been to position how these films complicate narrative within a well-respected modernist literary tradition, but simultaneously to demonstrate how deviations from a narrow definition of complexity can lead toward just as compelling critiques of the established social order.

While *Melinda and Melinda* employs the two-track narrative in ways akin to *Mrs. Dalloway*, and "Fiction" develops a thematic rapport with Faulkner, "Nonfiction" is seemingly the least complex of the films. However, I believe that it ultimately offers the best synthesis of the mechanisms studied in this article. The storyline of Consuelo collapses many issues. The family protects the Holocaust as a discourse that establishes their identity status as victims, deserving of unique status. Consuelo ends up murdering them using the Nazi technique of gassing Jews as punishment for the U.S. government's murder of her grandson by the same technique. Jesus' conviction for rape recalls the violent sexuality of the unpunished Mr. Scott from "Fiction." Consuelo's story is housed metatextually in a larger story about Toby's immoral ethical lapse in exploiting this crippled family for his role as comic artist.

Both Solondz's and Allen's films ask the question of whether the storyteller can be held accountable for these capricious shifts between tragedy and comedy. Solondz and Allen both provide complex answers to the question, challenging what exactly one *could* be held accountable for, given the ephemeral nature of fiction. It would be easy, following this logic, to argue for the superiority of the modernist practice of ironic social critique. Woolf makes it clear that arrogant, Imperial British society is to blame for the death of Septimus Smith and indicts Clarissa Dalloway for skillfully keeping that society working. Faulkner clearly indicts the Jim Crow South for the vilification of Lena Grove and the murder of Joe Christmas.

However, for all these novels' narrational complexity, I think Allen's and Solondz's films go them one step further. These films rely on various incarnations of the two-track narrative innovated by modernist fiction but refuse the simplicity of Manicheanism. It is not at all clear in either film that the comic response to tragic events should be out of bounds. Instead, these films insist that everyone is suspect, that no textual, generic, or political platitudes are able to stabilize our spectatorial position. All that we have is storytelling, and indeed that is quite sufficient.

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