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Tall Tales—Myth and Honesty in Tim Burton's *Big Fish* (2003)

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Abstract: Questions about the relationship between truth and fiction have a long history in philosophical thinking, going back at least as far as Plato. They re-emerge in more recent philosophical debates on cinema and are powerfully illustrated in Tim Burton's 2003 film *Big Fish*, which narrates the story of Edward and his son Will, who tries to uncover the truth behind his father's tall tales. Will's desire for honesty—for facts rather stories—has led to a considerable rift between them. While the film extols the beauty of storytelling and the power of myth, it also raises questions about the relationship between honesty and myth, fact and fiction. This article explores these themes from a multidisciplinary perspective by drawing on diverse sources, including Friedrich Nietzsche's *Vom Nutzen und Nachteil der Historie für das Leben/On Truth and Lies in an Nonmoral Sense* (1873), contemporary philosophical writings on fiction, the virtues of truthfulness, honesty and sincerity, as well as ideas on memoir and creative life writing drawn from literary studies. Overall, it argues for the positive, creative potential of storytelling and defends the idea that larger truths may often be found behind embellished facts and deceptive fictions. The final section expands this discussion to explore cinema's power to create what Nietzsche called 'honesty by myth'. Through the variety of background sources, the article also aims to demonstrate how ideas from multiple disciplinary contexts can be brought together to stimulate fruitful conversations on cinema, myth and the power of storytelling.

Keywords: *Big Fish*; Tim Burton; honesty; mythmaking; truthfulness; storytelling; authenticity

1. Introduction

Questions about the relationship between fact and fiction, truth and myth are almost as old as the art of storytelling itself. In antiquity, the Greek philosopher Plato famously expounded the dangers of poetry (most notably in his *Republic*), yet he also used myth 'to show how such imagery possesses the paradoxical ability to reveal that which transcends corporeal, embodied life' (Layne and Schmidt 2019, p. 57). Towards the end of the nineteenth century, several provocative essays explored the relationship between art, deception and truth. Mark Twain's ([1885] 2009) *On the Decay of the Art of Lying* and Oscar Wilde's ([1889] 2008) *The Decay of Lying* (revised in 1891 and 1894) followed Friedrich Nietzsche's ([1873] 1979) *Vom Nutzen und Nachteil der Historie für das Leben/On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense*, all of which addressed the issue from a literary and philosophical perspective, respectively. Each essay explores, to varying degrees, aesthetical as well as ethical considerations regarding the power of make-believe and the role of deception in our life. Despite the arrival of the postmodern project in the intervening century and its even more radical challenge to general notions of truth more broadly, the issues raised in these earlier works have not lost their bite. Recently, these issues came back into focus in debates concerning the so-call age of post-truth and some have blamed postmodern philosophy for these developments (D'Ancona 2017). Unfortunately, these important discussions often throw justified criticism of concerted misinformation campaigns, political deception and conspiracy theories together under the umbrella of myths, using the latter as synonym for all kinds of falsehood (see Segal 2015), without taking into account the complexities and cultural ubiquity of mythologies, as well as their creative, positive potential. As Steven Poole (2017, p. 43) points out in a review on several recent books on the topic of post-truth,

the 'underlying difficulty of today's polemics about post-truth is that many well-meaning residents of the reality-based community are talking as though it is always obvious and uncontroversial what is a "fact" and what isn't'. Moreover, it also becomes clear that these socio-political discussions may not easily transfer into a more creative, artistic environment. Otherwise, we would need to apply Evan Davis's broad definition of bullshit as 'any form of communication—verbal or non-verbal—that is not the clearest or most succinct statement of the sincere and reasonably held beliefs of the communicator" to anything but the most basic news report (cited in Poole 2017, p. 42). Unlike some postmodernist thinkers that dismissed even scientific truths as merely instruments to 'augment power (Lyotard [1979] 1984, p. 64), the nineteenth-century thinkers noted above made a clear distinction between truth and facts on one hand and artistic creation and lying on another. I therefore think that revisiting some of these earlier works, especially Nietzsche, can provide a fruitful way of disentangling the creative, positive aspects of myth from the negative associations with falsehood and oppressive ideologies imparted by thinkers such as Lyotard.

The conflict between a journalistically minded search for truth and an artistic desire to tell a good story are brought to the fore in Tim Burton's 2003 film *Big Fish*. Although the film precedes most of the recent discussions on post-truth and 'alternative facts', the fervour with which reviewers either embraced or criticised the film's take on 'truth' can be linked to these debates, but presents us, as I will argue, with a notion of myth that cannot be simply equated with falsehood. *Big Fish* is based on the homonymous novel by Daniel Wallace, which carries the subtitle 'A Novel of Mythic Proportions'. However, as the novelist himself suggests, '*Big Fish* is a good movie, partly because it's nothing like the book' (Wallace 2011). While inspired by Wallace's story, the way the story is told by director Tim Burton (and screenwriter John August) is distinctly cinematic. As my interest lies with exploring the cinematic possibilities of storytelling and myth, my discussion here will focus solely on the film.

Of course, this is not the only film to consciously reflect on the relationship between fact and fiction, between myth and reality. Mexican filmmaker Guillermo del Toro, for example, blends myth and fairy tale with the history of oppression in Franco's Spain in his dark fantasy *Pan's Labyrinth* (2006) and many of his other works blend fairy tales and reality in sophisticated ways. Many of the films by screenwriter Charlie Kaufman, such as *Adaptation* (2002) and *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (2004), deal with the connection between storytelling, writing and memory. Darren Aronofski's 2006 film *The Fountain* intertwines mythology, history and realism in order to explore big questions of love, life and death. Terry Gilliam's *Brothers Grimm* (2005) portrays the eponymous collectors of fairy tales as con artists that create their legends to trick unsuspecting villagers until they stumble upon a 'real' fairy tale and the boundaries between reality and myth become blurred. However, very few films explore the nature of stories as explicitly as Burton's *Big Fish*.

For Burton, known for his extravagant, creative and fantastical style, questions about the role of storytelling, myth and perception are deeply personal. Burton had already explored such questions in his earlier works, such as *Edward Scissorhands* (1990), which has often been considered quasi-autobiographical, despite its fantasy elements (see Hanke 1999). Linking these questions to the personal relationship between a father and his son, *Big Fish* similarly explores creative possibilities as well as ethical issues. Another Edward—Edward Bloom (young Edward played by Ewan McGregor, the older by Albert Finney)—loves to tell tall tales. And it seems that most other characters in the film love to hear them, apart from his son Will (Billy Crudup). As a journalist, Will is frustrated with what he considers to be his father's lies and wants to discover the true facts before his father, who is terminally ill, passes away. The question that runs through the film is what may be behind those stories, why are they told and why some embrace them while Will cannot—at least not in the beginning?

This article, then, aims to explore these questions by bringing together ideas from a range of discourses, such as philosophical debates on virtue, make-believe theory as

applied to film, memoir writing, and theories on myth and fiction with regard to cinema more broadly. This approach has been chosen to bring into conversation related disciplines to generate a broader picture on the topics examined. It is acknowledged that this method does not always allow for an in-depth analysis of one particular disciplinary concept, especially the often complex philosophical debates that underlie the article, but the author hopes that this paper will be able to inspire further debate that may lead to more in-depth examinations of any of the topics touched upon in this paper. In order to tackle the range of themes presented in *Big Fish*, the article is divided into three parts. The first part explores the relationship between fiction, truthfulness and deception and examines the role of storytelling in relation to narrating a life story. The second part looks in more detail at the personal relationship between the main characters Edward and Will and examine philosophical ideas on honesty, authenticity and sincerity. The final part discusses the ability of cinema to create myths that can nevertheless convey profound truths about our relationship to others and the world around us.

2. Tall Tales—Storytelling, Fiction, Lies

As noted above, critics were divided on the apparent conflict between fiction and truth presented in *Big Fish*. While the general audience reception of the film was overwhelmingly positive, the responses from professional reviewers were much more mixed.[1] For example, Peter Bradshaw (2004) in *The Guardian* is frustrated at the 'suggestion that Burton's fantasy is just so adorable and life enhancing that the boring old truth doesn't matter', insisting that for him it does matter as it is 'what underwrites the value of fantasy and makes it interesting.' But is that necessarily the case? As we will see, it is neither clear that the film actually claims that truth does not matter, nor that fantasy needs the truth to make it interesting. Eminent critic Roger Ebert also sides with son Will in his exasperation of Edward's stories and bemoans that Burton presents us with 'a series of visual fantasies' that ultimately lack purpose (Ebert 2003). A.O. Scott in the *New York Times* even claims that the film gives us a vision of life that offers fantasy as an answer to dealing with the difficulties of real life and ignoring the difficult socio-political situation of the American South over the last forty years (Scott 2003). Given that the film's focus is on a father and son relationship that only includes vague nods to historical context, this seems an overly harsh criticism, raising the question of what level of truth ought to be expected from a fictional film with no claims to historical accuracy (in contrast to, say, a biopic or historical drama)?

Other critics, however, were more open to embracing this 'story about stories' and acknowledged the complexity of the film, especially with regard to questions of truth. For instance, Will Self writing for the *Evening Standard* recognizes that in *Big Fish*, 'the mystical and the real interpenetrate in a way at once unsettling and quirkily humorous' (Self 2012), while Nick Schager (2004) notes that '*Big Fish* wonderfully evokes the way in which our fanciful myths tell us fundamental truths about ourselves.' This brief snapshot highlights the different ways of reading *Big Fish* as either a charming tale promoting the power of stories or indulging in manipulative deception. While I acknowledge that it is possible to interpret the film in a more negative light, I suggest that the overwhelmingly positive audience reception indicates that the film overall inspired a more positive outlook in its viewers, which reflects my own experience of the film. My aim is, therefore, to explore the ways in which these differences of perspective are echoed in some of the scholarly debates on storytelling and truth more broadly, in order to attempt a justification, not just for this film, but also for a positive role of myth more generally.

Big Fish opens with a sequence of shots showing Will Bloom growing up (age 6–8 played by Grayson Stone, age 10 by Perry Walston), while his father continually narrates his favourite story about a legendary fish, which he caught (and released) on the day of his son's birth. In one scene of this opening sequence, a group of boy scouts sit around a campfire listening to Edward's story in awe, apart from Will, who is clearly bored, having heard the story too many times already. The sequence culminates with the story being concluded at Will's wedding. This leads to a fallout between father and son as the latter

accuses Edward of stealing the limelight. Edward defends himself by arguing that the story is all about Will (as it happened on the day he was born), but Will counters that he is a mere footnote in Edward's great adventure. Most of us probably sympathise with Will at this stage, being outshone by his father on his wedding day, but there is something more profound at work. Will's frustration with his father's stories seems to go much deeper. As will become clearer later, the story about catching the eponymous big fish is indeed more about his son than Will realises as this stage. Moreover, the motif of catching an elusive big fish, and the life-changing power of this encounter, is already a persistent mythical theme in famous literary works from Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* (1851) to Ernest Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* (1952). *Big Fish* playfully adapts this trope in an arguably more child-friendly manner, but with equal metaphorical weight. Following this opening sequence, the off-screen narrator—Will—informs us that 'in telling my father's story it's impossible to separate fact from fiction, the man from the myth. The best I can do is to tell it the way he told me. It doesn't always make sense and most of it never happened—but that's what kind of story this is' (0:05:31–0:06:27).

Defining the 'kind of story' that is being told is a crucial starting point. As Peter Lamarque and Stein Haugom Olsen (2002) suggest, understanding the practice in which a particular statement is produced (e.g., a novel or a news article) is necessary to define something as fictional or not. Will might be assuming that his father is recounting a personal experience, which he expects to have some truth content, whereas Edward may first and foremost be telling a story—a fiction that may or may not contain any facts. Therefore, understanding what is being said and responding accurately 'requires recognizing that the rules of the practice are in effect and following them' (Cooke 2014, p. 318). In the case of fiction, the proper response, according to Lamarque and Olsen, is to take the fictive stance, which means 'to make-believe . . . that the standard speech act commitments associated with the sentences are operative even while knowing they are not' (Cooke 2014, pp. 318–19; drawing on Lamarque and Olsen 2002). Is Will simply failing to take a fictional stance towards his father's stories or are we wrong to assume that they are fictions in the first place? As we will see, not all elements of Edward's stories are entirely fictional. Despite the fact that significant parts of Edward's stories are clearly identifiable as fictional, with their content of witches, giants and haunted forests, we also learn gradually throughout the film that a significant part of these fictions is indeed underpinned by facts. Although that does not necessarily mean that Edward does not narrate them *as* fictions, it seems to shift their status from outright fiction towards embellishment and exaggeration. Therefore, these stories may be more accurately described as myths, stories that 'must have a powerful hold on its adherents', but 'can be either true or false' or possibly a combination of both (Segal 2015, p. 5).

In addition, Edward is evidently very conscious of his role as storyteller and reflects on it at several points throughout the film. For instance, when Will returns home after not having spoken to his father for several years following their fallout at the wedding, Edward tells him: 'We are storytellers both of us. I speak mine out, you write yours down. Same thing' (0:15:37–0:15:42). Of course, for his son, there is a world of difference between their respective forms of storytelling, and it is not just a matter of the medium in which they are conveyed. Will, the journalist, insists that he wants 'to know the true versions of things. Events. Stories' (0:15:52–0:15:57). In one of the featurettes accompanying the film, Tim Burton suggests that 'Will is a very literal character, searching for literal answers . . . [yet] . . . some things in life aren't literal. Things aren't just black and white. There are some things that can be both real and unreal at the same time' ('Father and Sons' 2003). These blurred boundaries are particularly evident in the final sequence of the film, which I will discuss in more detail towards the end of this article.

Another time, when Josephine tells her father-in-law that Will has never told her the story of how his parents met, Edward replies: 'He would have told it the wrong way anyway. All of the facts, none of the flavour' (0:44:34–0:44:40). Here, Edward seems to concur with Nietzsche ([1873] 1979, p. 89), who argues that we all have a 'desire to refashion

the world . . . so that it will be as colourful, irregular, lacking in results and coherence, charming, and eternally new as the world of dreams.' Edward's stories clearly seem dreamlike, and Burton's colourful and slightly surreal cinematography further enhances this aspect. When Josephine knowingly responds to Edward's remark: 'Oh, so this is a tall tale', he simply smiles and notes: 'Well, it's not a short one' (0:44:41–0:44:47). This indicates that Edward is well aware of the (somewhat falsifying) flourishes he adds and does not take it as a criticism when Josephine describes them as tall tales, thus implying that they are untrue. Edward starts to tell Josephine about his wife, but then moves on to talking about something else. When Josephine reminds him that he was 'talking about the wedding', Edward once again explains his role as storyteller: 'I didn't forget. I was just working on a tangent. You see, most men, they'll tell you a story straight through. It won't be complicated, but it won't be interesting either' (1:04:52–1:05:03). His emphasis here is always on the *craft* of storytelling, rather than the content. He enjoys telling stories that may be inspired by his life, but it is the storytelling that matters most of all, rather than the sharing of information.

However, taking a creative approach to the facts of his life story does not mean that these stories do not also tell us something about Edward's life. As Burton suggests in another featurette, *Big Fish* 'has what I consider a realistic way of thinking about memory, where it's selective, and some things are real and not real, creating its own reality' ('Tim Burton: Storyteller' 2003). This connects the film to some debates within literary studies on the role of truth in memoir writing.[2] For example, Sarah Worth (2015, p. 106) suggests that 'the consensus from the psychological literature is that memories are anything but clear or literal representations of events'. She argues further that they are also 'interpreted and reinterpreted through time, through our retelling of events, the occurrence of new events, the need for consistency in our own beliefs, and of our own basic need for narrative' (Worth 2015, p. 106; drawing on Lynn and Payne 1997). In her discussion of the genre of memoir, Worth (2015, p. 95) further emphasises that events and stories are not the same, as events always need to be 'interpreted, condensed' and transformed 'into something that can be consumed and made sense of by readers or listeners'. This gives a memoir a somewhat distinct status between truth and fiction. Of course, *Big Fish* is not a memoir. Yet, I want to suggest that the way in which first Edward, then Will, narrate the life story of Edward Bloom can nevertheless be understood in terms of a memoir. Worth (2015, p. 98) highlights that people tend to assume that truth in a memoir is 'merely that which can be documented or otherwise supported by testimony', yet apart from these core facts, what 'is not documentable or verifiable is the insight gained by one who experiences a certain event'. This is particularly relevant to my discussion of *Big Fish*. Although Edward's stories are full of fantastical events and characters, I argue that they nevertheless convey deep truths about his attitudes and emotions with regard to events and people. As such, the 'flourishes Edward lavishes upon his fairy tales [. . .] not only reflect this cagey storyteller's personality but [. . .] allow him to convey the spirit of his experiences', as Schager (2004) notes. His stories reflect his resilience, his devotion to his beloved wife, his openness to try out new things and his willingness to help others. All these are not mere fictions as his extended network of friends and his loving wife confirm. Worth (2015, p. 98) notes that without this personal 'insight, memoirs would merely be lists of places, people, and events . . . devoid of the plot devices woven in for coherency and intrigue'. This relates to Edward's comments that Will may tell all the facts, but misses the flavour and that linear stories are uninteresting.

Similarly, creative nonfiction author Mimi Schwartz (2002, p. 339) claims that it is not necessary to get all of the facts right and says that she encourages her students to instead go 'for the emotional truth'. This also seems Edward's approach to storytelling and the way in which most other characters in the film interpret them. Not everything in Edward's love story may be factual, but Josephine sees in it the reflection of Edward's deep love and care for his wife, so that when Will tells her frustratedly that most of it did not happen, she simply counters with 'but it's romantic!' (1:12:51–1:12:53). And, when the family doctor

says that he prefers Edward's elaborate tale about a legendary fish he caught on the day of Will's birth to the dull truth of the actual uneventful delivery that Edward missed, it might be because the fanciful story better reflects the monumental, life-changing significance of this event for Edward. As Cooke argues, the 'fictive imagination has immense practical value for us . . . [it is] a significant source of pleasure, giving rise to many cultural practices we would not choose to live without' (Cooke 2014, p. 325). In addition, in an article on honesty in Nietzsche's work, Margot Harrison draws on a particular passage in *Fröhliche Wissenschaft/Gay Science* (1882) to argue that the author suggests 'it is not just possible but perhaps desirable to read autobiographies as lies (whether these lies be deliberate or accidental, "irony" or "lack of self-awareness") without thereby dismissing them as lies, and above all without ceasing to read them' (Harrison 1995, p. 50).

However, against arguments such as these, Fern Kupfer (2002, p. 291) notes that although we 'all like good stories, especially those taken from real life . . . we also don't like being lied to'. Similarly, Philippe Lejeune (1989, p. 131) argues that autobiographies rely on a tricky pact between writer and reader that assumes the book is a true account, although he acknowledges that telling 'the truth about the self, constituting the self as complete subject—it is a fantasy', suggesting that writing autobiographies is in the strictest sense impossible. However, like Nietzsche, he does not think this should put us off reading (or writing) them. Kupfer also admits that 'shaping the truth when writing memoir is an acceptable aspect of the craft' (Kupfer 2002, p. 291), but nevertheless insists that a line needs to be drawn, criticising writers for straying all too often beyond it. This also seems to be Will's view when he accuses Edward of never having told him a single fact. However, despite broadly advocating the importance of truthfulness, Bernard Williams (2002, p. 12) criticises positivist thinkers for their insistence on mere facts and the false assumptions 'that no interpretation is needed, and that it is not needed because the story the positivist writer tells . . . is obvious.' This is not dissimilar to Poole's criticism of what he calls the 'naive positivism espoused by aggrieved liberals who insist on a simplistic portrayal of "the facts" and "the science"', a stance that in fact worsens polarisation in the 'post-truth' debates rather than opening avenues for discourse and debate (Poole 2017, p. 43). We could argue that Will takes such a positivist stance, taking things too literal as Burton suggests. Of course, as a journalist, it is indeed Will's bread and butter to tell facts and not fictions, but should he interpret his father's stories in the same light? Moreover, is he right to call his father a liar and what (if any) distinction should we draw between manipulative deception and 'lying' as an art?

As noted earlier, these questions regarding the relationship between truth, art and lying particularly seemed to have troubled writers and scholars in the late nineteenth century. Notoriously, of course, Nietzsche ([1873] 1979, p. 84) was sceptical of the truth, which he at one point describes as a 'movable host of metaphors, metonymies, and anthropomorphisms: in short, a sum of human relations which have been poetically and rhetorically intensified, transferred, and embellished'. However, in the same essay, he also argues that the good thing about art is that it 'treats illusion as illusion; therefore it does not wish to deceive; it is true' (Nietzsche [1873] 1979, p. 96). This seems to be an odd statement at first glance. On the surface it seems similar to Oscar Wilde's view that the 'only form of lying that is absolutely beyond reproach is lying for its own sake, and the highest development of this is, as we have already pointed out, lying in Art' (Wilde [1889] 2008; cited in Bristow and Mitchell 2018, p. 116). Yet, whereas Wilde simply focusses on the aesthetic qualities of lying, Nietzsche's statement is more profound and has a stronger ethical dimension that focusses on the *intentions* of the illusion. We can see parallels to Edward here, who by telling his stories *as stories* (including his reflections on style and artistry) aims to pre-empt the criticism that they are 'merely' tall tales. Yet, despite Nietzsche's emphasis on art beyond truth as focussing on that which is positive and life-enhancing, he is also keen to insist that this is not done self-deceivingly or damaging to others (see Harrison 1995, pp. 33–34). This sentiment was also shared by Mark Twain, who advises that telling lies 'is universal . . . [therefore] the wise thing is for us diligently to train ourselves to lie thoughtfully,

judiciously; to lie with a good object, and not an evil one; to lie for others' advantage, and not our own; to lie healingly, charitably, humanely' (Twain [1885] 2009, p. 11), an important distinction to be made especially with regard to the 'post-truth' debates, where 'alternative facts' are all too often used with malicious intent and have the potential to cause significant harm. In addition, these questions of intention and purpose also allow Nietzsche to draw an interesting distinction between truth and honesty, which I will explore further in the next section.

3. 'I've Been Nothing but Myself'—Authenticity, Honesty and Sincerity

Apart from issues regarding the relationship between fact and fiction and the role of storytelling more broadly, the discussion of truth and lying in *Big Fish* also raise questions about Edward's character itself. One of the more hostile critics of the film, for example, describes Edward as an 'incorrigible narcissist' and 'compulsory liar', bemoaning the film's refusal 'to explore the causes or the costs of his addiction to fantasy' (Scott 2003). The ferociousness of this characterisation rather surprised me, although, as indicated at the start of this article, Scott is by no means alone in this negative interpretation of Edward. While I can accept that it is possible to read Edward's character in this light, it is in stark contrast to my experience of him. In order to better understand these discrepancies, it may be helpful to look at both accusations in more detail, starting with the notion of Edward as liar. This is brought up in the film itself, when Will confronts his father in the following pivotal dialogue, about halfway through the film:

Will: You know about icebergs, dad?

Edward (in storyteller mode): Do I? I saw an iceberg once. They were hauling it down to Texas for drinking water [. . .]

Will (exasperated): I'm trying to make a metaphor here.

Edward: Well, you shouldn't have started with a question, because people want to answer questions. You should have started with 'The thing about icebergs is . . . '

Will (frustrated): Okay, okay, okay. The thing about icebergs is you only see ten percent; the other ninety percent is below the water where you can't see it. And that's what it is with you dad, I am only seeing this little bit that sticks above the water.

Edward (taking him literally): Oh, you only seeing down to my nose, my chin, my . . .

Will (interrupts): Dad, I have no idea who you are because you've never told me a single fact.

Edward: I've told you a thousand facts, Will. That's what I do, I tell stories.

Will: You tell lies, dad. You tell amusing lies. Stories are what you tell a five-year-old at bedtime. They're not elaborate mythologies that you maintain when your son is ten or fifteen and twenty and thirty. And I believed you. I believed your stories so much longer than I should have. Then when I realised everything you said was impossible, I felt like a fool to have trusted you. You're like Santa Claus and the Easter Bunny combined. Just as charming and just as fake.

Edward: You think I'm fake?

Will: Only on the surface, dad, but it's all I've ever seen.

[. . .]

Edward: What do you want, Will, who do you want me to be?

Will: Just yourself. Good, bad, everything. Just show me who you are for once.

Edward: I've been nothing but myself since the day I was born. And if you can't see that, it's your failing, not mine.

(1:15:07–1:17:09, *highlights in bold my emphasis*)

This dialogue is worth analysing in more depth as I think it goes to the heart of the misunderstanding between father and son. At the start, we see further evidence of Edward the storyteller, explaining to his son how he should be telling his tale. He also conflates telling stories and telling facts, much to Will's frustration. For Will, these stories are merely lies, which he describes as elaborate mythologies, following the aforementioned contemporary trend to use myth synonymously with falsehood. Yet, we also see a shift from accusing his father of lying to explaining that he felt deceived. The latter is more problematic for our discussion as we noted above that stories and illusions should not be harmful to others. It could be argued that as a child, Edward could not be expected to differentiate between truth and fiction, and he therefore believed his father. Yet, against this argument we could claim that when we do tell stories to children, we do, in fact, expect them to read them as stories, and Edward's fantastical tales of giants, witches and haunted forests seem very much like fairy tales. The discovery that the Easter Bunny and Santa Claus are fake, does not generally lead us to think of our parents as liars, at least not for long. The problem here seems the resulting assumptions that Will draws about Edward's character. Will accuses his father of being 'fake', conflating him with his stories. And it appears that this, rather than the content of the stories, makes Will feel deceived. Yet, when confronted with the accusation, Edward insists that he has never been anything 'but himself'. Edward did not mind when Josephine called his stories tall tales, but being called a fake clearly upsets him. For Edward, the tall tales that so frustrate Will are a fundamental part of who he is, his understanding of himself as storyteller. There is no 'true other' hidden behind them, as Will seems to assume. A helpful way to understand the conflict here is by drawing on Williams (2002, p. 11) distinction between 'two basic virtues of truth . . . Accuracy and Sincerity', which he defines as doing 'the best you can to acquire true beliefs, and what you say reveals what you believe', respectively. Although those definitions do not exactly map onto the positions outlined by Will and Edward, I suggest that they are nevertheless helpful in understanding the conflict between father and son. Edward's stories definitely lack accuracy, but I would suggest that he is sincere in telling them. He may not literally believe every fact to be true, but his intension is to entertain, not to deceive, thus being consistent with the suggestion that 'sincere assertions do not necessarily have the aim of informing the hearer; but insincere assertions do have the aim of misinforming the hearer' (Williams 2002, p. 73). Will feels deceived as he misunderstands his father's motivations, but as we have seen in the aforementioned conversation with Josephine, Edward does not assume that his listeners believe in the factuality of his stories.

The notion of sincerity rather than truth also plays a role in Nietzsche's work. Although Nietzsche is sceptical about truth, sincerity and self-honesty play an important role in his work. As Aaron Harper (2015, p. 368) emphasises, 'truthfulness and honesty are different virtues for Nietzsche'. This conceptual difference is complicated through translation issues (as is the case for a number of Nietzschean concepts), as Nietzsche's word 'Redlichkeit', is often translated as honesty, but more accurately reflects uprightness or sincerity. Thus, the notion of honesty in Nietzsche's work, as Harper (2015, pp. 372–73) points out, 'brings together elements of openness and integrity while opposing certain elements of skepticism and hypocrisy, revealing sincerity to be a more accurate gloss on honesty, not truth seeking or truth telling'. The difference is that by 'framing honesty as a virtue of sincerity, Nietzsche emphasizes sincerity as a kind of performance', more specifically 'performing the activity of valuing' (Harper 2015, pp. 374–75). The question is, then, what is valued in the film under discussion here? It seems that for Edward, value lies in being true to oneself and in his stories being positive and life-enhancing, just as for Nietzsche, the 'honest life must include aesthetic experience, since art is needed to temper the "nausea and suicide" honesty can induce' (Harper 2015, p. 379). Edward's stories are exaggerated and embellished versions of events, but they are clearly intended to be positive and uplifting, tales of courage, bravery, perseverance and love.

In contrast, it turns out that Will's apparently more factual interpretations of events are no less flawed than his father's, yet arguably they reflect a much more negative view of life. In the aforementioned conversation with his wife, Josephine asks Will if he loves his father, to which he flippantly (and evasively) replies: 'Everybody loves my father. He's a very likable guy' (1:13:03–1:13:06). When Josephine asks him again, he explains:

> When I was growing up, he was gone more than he was there. And I started thinking maybe he's got this second life somewhere else. Another family. Another house. And he leaves us and goes to them. Or maybe there is no second family. Maybe he never wanted a family. Whatever it is, he likes his second life better and the reason he tells his stories is because he can't stand this boring place (1:13:12–1:13:35).

When Josephine insists that 'it's not true', Will simply replies: 'Well, what's true? He never told me a single true thing' (1:13:36–1:13:41), not realising that while he is accusing his father of lying, he is also not above interpreting things in his own light, irrespective of facts. The difference between his father's own stories and his version is not so much that one has more truth than the other, but that Will's interpretation veers in the opposite direction, assuming the worst about his father. In fact, Will is so focused on his father's apparent lies that he fails to recognise the moments when his father is deeply honest and straight-talking. Early in the film, Will and Edward talk about cleaning the pool and Will reminds his father, with not a little resentment, that he used to take care of it when Edward was away on one of his frequent trips. Edward admits that he 'was never much for being at home, too confining' and confesses to Will that 'this here, being stuck in bed, dying, is the worst thing that's ever happened to me' (0:16:21–0:16:31). Edward's honest admission about the reasons for taking on a job as travelling salesman and his current vulnerability and fear of death seems to escape Will, who is so focussed on getting to the bottom of the stories, that he does not pay attention.

Later in the film, when sorting through some of his father's papers, Will finds a note relating to one of his dad's wartime stories. When his mother confirms the story that Edward went missing, presumed dead, Will is surprised. 'That really happened?' he asks, to which his mother replies, not without edge: 'Not everything your father says is a complete fabrication' (1:18:21–1:18:28), once again indicating that maybe Will's perception of his father is just as fraud as he believes Edward's stories to be. When Will also discovers a deed trust to a property in the town of Spectre, which he (and the audience) assumed to be entirely mythical up to that point, the realms of reality and fiction are starting to slowly converge. However, rather than delighting in having found some part of his father's stories to be true, Will sees this as confirming his own theory about a second family. He goes to visit a woman called Jennifer (Helena Bonham-Carter), who he thinks has been his father's mistress. Jennifer tells Will how his father found the town as it was on his trade route and saved it from dereliction. While this is not fully consistent with Edward's mythical tale about the hidden town of Spectre, it also makes clear that there is a foundation of truth to these stories. When Will asks Jennifer to tell him the truth, she ironically remarks: 'I don't know how much you want to know about any of this. You have one image of your father and it'll be wrong of me to change it' (1:28:38–1:28:47). Jennifer's comment is interestingly ambiguous. Will seems to think that Jennifer will reveal some dark secrets, when in fact the story she tells Will reveals his father to be a much more generous and reliable man than his son assumed. Will replies that his father 'talked about a lot of things he never did, and I'm sure did a lot of things that he never talked about. I'm just trying to reconcile the two' (1:28:48–1:28:56) He gradually realises that his father was not hiding a secret affair or a second family, but quiet acts of generosity and kindness that changed people's lives for the better. Jennifer confesses to having loved Edward, but emphasises that this was not reciprocated: 'I wanted to be as important to him as you were. And I was never going to be. It was *make-believe*. And his other life, you, you were real' (1:40:08–1:40:24, *my emphasis*). While Will believed his father to be fake, imagining him to have another 'real' life somewhere else, the opposite turns out to be true. It seems that his father liked

telling fantastic stories not out of a narcissistic desire to steal the limelight or hide a dark secret, but for the entertainment and benefit of his family and friends. In this sense, we might describe him as sincere, or even as an honest character. Although the latter might be problematic if we define honesty as a virtue or character trait that does 'not intentionally [distort] the facts as the agent sees them', as Christian Miller (2020, p. 346) argues, he also admits that 'both honesty and dishonesty are not tied down to veridical representations of the facts' (Miller 2020, p. 347). The important question is if the agent believes them to be true. While it is unlikely that Edward believes the facts of his stories to be literally true, we have seen that he uses embellishment and exaggeration as deliberate storytelling techniques, arguably assuming that the listener would interpret them as such. Williams (2002, p. 94) recounts that 'in some regions, if a stranger asks for directions, he is given not the correct answer but a more encouraging one'. He suggests that 'either enough strangers can be expected not to understand the practice, or the answers are supposed to be heard not as assertions aiming at the truth but rather as happy pictures of an alternative world . . . to cheer him on his way' (Williams 2002, p. 95). Williams assumes the latter to be the case and argues that the more encouraging answer may actually lead to more positive outcomes than brutal honesty and could not be considered as an attempt to deceive. In addition, Miller also suggests that 'altruistic motivating reasons' should be 'excluded from the class of dishonest motives' (Miller 2020, p. 355). Against critics like Scott, I want to argue that Edward is clearly motivated by altruistic concerns rather than narcissistic ones, and these are expressed through his stories. For example, early in the film we see Will as a young boy eagerly asking his father to tell him a bedtime story, which clearly creates a bond between the two. Shortly after, we see Edward again telling Will, who is ill at home with chickenpox, a story to cheer him up and distract him from his illness. We get the impression that despite his frequent travels, Edward was a kind father who connected with his son through telling him stories of fantastic adventures that were meant to compensate for his long absences.

As indicated earlier, it seems that Will's frustration with his father was not so much due to the lack of truth content in the stories, but his interpretation of his father as 'fake', as having a dark secret that may lead him to abandon his family. This points towards an observation made by Nietzsche, stating that it is not so much the lie we object to, but rather the potential harm that might come to us (Nietzsche [1873] 1979, p. 81). I want to argue that it is through his conversation with Jennifer that Will starts to realise that his father has indeed been 'nothing but himself', even if he did not share all the facts. We might say, Will realises that Edward is authentic. Authenticity, as Tim Müller (2009, p. 28) notes, 'has become a fashionable term over the last few decades, and like all fashionable terms, it has acquired many different meanings'. Moreover, the idea of authenticity is rather complex and has recently had some renewed traction in scholarly work ranging from philosophy and psychology to marketing and tourism (e.g., Varga 2012; Brüntrup et al. 2020; Brunskill 2015; Fritz et al. 2017; Yi et al. 2017). For example, drawing on Lionel Trilling's 1974 work *Sincerity and Authenticity*, which 'provides starting points for an inquiry into the self-reflexive enactment of authenticity in and through' (Müller 2009, p. 30) literary works, Müller explores these issues in relation to Hemmingway's early writings. Here, he emphasises that one key-aspect of the authenticity inherent in the author's work is the 'self-reflexive approach' of his writing (Müller 2009). We can argue that this self-reflexivity is also evident in Edward and the ways in which he both tells his stories and presents himself *as storyteller*.

However, against the hyper-individualism inherent in the modernist take on authenticity and the inwardness promoted by its earlier proponents (for example Rousseau (Rousseau [1770] 1957), *Confessions*), I want to suggest that the end of the film relates to an idea of authenticity proposed by Somogy Varga. Varga (2012, p. 83) argues for a more communal understanding of authenticity, which captures 'our embeddedness in a collective horizon of significance, the complex relation of what we wholeheartedly care about, . . . and a sense of responding to something "higher" whenever responding to what is fundamental to us'. I propose that such an understanding of authenticity as wholeheartedness and

responding to something higher can be related to the notion of shared myth-creation, which I will discuss in more detail in the next section. As *Big Fish* shows, Will ultimately needs re-enchantment rather than facts, reconciling with his father in a shared act of mythmaking.

4. Shared Mythmaking and the Power of Cinema

Nietzsche (Nietzsche [1872] 1967, p. 135) claimed that 'without myth every culture loses their healthy, natural power of its creativity: only a horizon defined by myths completes and unifies a cultural movement', indicating that myth has the power to connect as well as to inspire us. In contracts to the frequent contemporary associations of myth with falsehood mentioned earlier, myth and honesty were by no means contradictions for Nietzsche. For instance, according to Harper (2015, p. 378), Nietzsche argues that the 'demand of honesty by myth is a key element of tragedy', bringing 'the individual to understand the nature of her own existence, which affects the attitude with which she understands herself and her commitments.' It is clear that this 'honesty by myth' does not mean the factual truth of each element of the (tragic) narrative, but rather that they convey something honest and truthful about human nature. As the Neoplatonist Salutius (sometimes Sallustius) noted in the 4th century BC, myth shows us things that 'never happened but always are' (Murray 1946, p. 205). Moreover, the universal nature of myth also implies a communal experience. Edward is clearly a social man, and his stories are meant to create a rich mythical universe that holds his family together and enables him to share his experiences with those around him.

This communal aspect of storytelling is also noted by philosopher Nancy Sherman. When discussing what she calls virtues of common pursuit, she writes that:

> In looking for a good playmate, a child isn't simply concerned with a boy or girl who is decent and fair, who doesn't abuse the rules and is sympathetic to one's needs . . . there is the relish in inventing made up stories together, in inventing a myth about the team fort and the rules of membership, in going off on some space ship to a secret planet that is jointly named by its young discoverers . . . in short, in inventing a shared world together, with spontaneity, enthusiasm, loyalty, and mutual enjoyment. . . . But this kind of mutual engagement is not mere, child's play. Constructing a shared world, however brief or enduring, characterizes the best sort of adult interaction, too. (Sherman 1993, p. 280)

As Sherman suggests, this shared world-building or mythmaking, while not truth-seeking, can nevertheless be virtuous. More specifically, she argues for a certain kind of sociability as a virtue, a characteristic that I see clearly portrayed in Edward. More significantly, it is exactly at the moment when Will overcomes his scepticism at the end of the film and continues his father's story, making it a shared experience, that he is reunited with his father and creates a storytelling tradition that we see him passing to his own son.

I want to argue that the idea of cinema's power to represent 'honesty by myth' in its own unique way is illustrated in the final sequences of the film, which demonstrate how cinematic techniques can both create a beautiful myth and reveal truth in subtle ways. As mentioned earlier, the film diverges significantly from the novel on which it is based, and these scenes are specific to the cinematic version. Unlike the novel, which offers four different versions of Edward's death, without clear indication as to which one might be the 'correct' one, the film makes a clearer distinction between a 'Burtonesque' first version and a more realist second one, but links the two in subtle and powerfully evocative ways. Thus, despite the ways in which the film embraces fantasy and storytelling, it does ultimately make a point in favour of reality, albeit one imbued with mythology.

The first sequence (1:44:25–1:51:42) starts with Will alone in hospital with his father, who has taken a turn for the worse. Halfway through the night, Edward wakes up and stammers: 'The river. Tell me how it happens . . . how I go'. Will replies, upset and helpless: 'I don't know that story, dad, you never told me that'. Edward becomes agitated and in order to soothe him, Will says: 'Okay, I'll try, but I need your help. Tell me how it starts'. Edward simply says: 'Like this', handing the (metaphorical) storytelling baton over to

his son. Will starts—first hesitantly, then increasingly confident—to make up a series of fantastical scenes, narrated from the off, which shows both of them breaking out of the hospital in a daring chase and rushing down to the river in the red sports car that Edward drove in his youth. On their way, they get caught in a traffic jam, but Karl the Giant (Matthew McGrory), which featured in one of Edward's stories, is there to move the cars to let them pass. When they arrive at the riverside, it is decorated as if for a party. Will is carrying Edward in his arms as if he weights nothing. There is a marching band playing, Will's wife Josephine greets them wearing a pink chiffon dress, there are cheerleaders and circus folk. All the characters from Edward's stories line the pathway: the conjoined Korean twins Ping and Jing (Ada and Arlene Tai), the circus director cum werewolf Amos Calloway (Danny DeVito), poet/bank robber/investment banker Norther Winslow (Steve Buscemi), soldiers from the Korean War, a young Jennifer and the Major of Spectre (Charles McLawhorn). In a brief cut back to Will narrating the story to Edward in the hospital, a tearful Will sums up the scene with 'it's unbelievable', to which Edward replies with a faint smile: 'the story of my life.' As the film cuts back to the riverside, everyone is cheering and clapping as Edward waves to them saying 'goodbye' and 'farewell'. Will takes Edward to the river edge, where his wife Sandra greets him, also in a pink chiffon dress, half submerged in the water. Edward takes off his wedding ring and hands it to Sandra. Will then releases his father into the river where Edward promptly turns into a big fish, the one featuring in his favourite story. The camera cuts back to the hospital, where Will finishes the story with 'You become what you always were. A very big fish. And that's how it happens.' Edward replies weakly, 'Yeah, exactly!', and dies. In one of the aforementioned interviews accompanying the film, Albert Finney (who plays Edward) suggests that 'by this magical end of the film, Will makes a contribution to his father's life. And in that way, there is a coming together of them' ('Father and Sons' 2003). Although Will spent much of his life exasperated about his father's stories, in the end it is he who completes them and through this shared act of mythmaking the two are reconciled. For Sherman (1993, p. 298), this 'sense of mutuality and shared voyage [and the] ability to create a common moment or space, however transient or enduring' is a virtue, one 'whose focus is not on self or other, but on the fact of common doing'.

However, Edward's 'mythical end' is not yet the end of the film. While the sequence just described highlights the benefits of shared mythmaking and reflects the colourful aesthetic of Burton's cinematic style, it is the following sequence (1:52:24–1:55:15) that most clearly shows the idea of 'honesty by myth'—through the power of cinematography. Truth is revealed slowly and subtly through images while the off-screen narration continues the myth. Edward's actual funeral, which follows the fantastical version outlined above, is a much more sombre affair, taking place outside the church with a more traditional burial. People are dressed in more customary black rather than the colourful costumes of the previous version. And yet, as the camera approaches, we see all the same characters once again, Karl, Ping and Jing, Norther Winslow, Amos Calloway and so on. While they appear less extravagant than their story versions, they are nevertheless real people and not so far removed from their fictional alter egos to be unrecognisable. For instance, Karl the Giant is still a very tall man (late actor Matthew McGrory has been recognized by Guinness World Records as the world's tallest actor) and Ping and Jing are indeed identical twins, but as the camera circles around them, we notice that they are not conjoint. As the camera slowly observes these characters, it also captures Will's looks of surprise when he notices them. While we do not hear any dialogue in this scene, the visuals do the work. What we can recognize here is that 'illusions are often means to truth, or at least require some degree of truthfulness to accomplish their goals' and that such 'illusions seem to depend on an overarching truthfulness even as they distort details along the way', as Harper (2015, p. 384) suggests, drawing on Nietzsche. After the funeral, we see people standing in groups, talking lively with each other and laughing about what we assume are reminiscences of Edward. Although there is still no on-screen dialogue, we get the clear impression that Edward had indeed many adventures and that he has touched and inspired a lot of people.

As Will Self (2012) notes with regard to the mythical and the real presented in *Big Fish*, it is 'the film's greatest achievement . . . to angle these apparently parallel universes so that they converge'.

On a broader level, the contrast—as well as the similarities—between these final two sequences shows that although in cinema, our imagination may be 'prompted by the bare "facts" of the fiction, [it] is also shaped by the way in which those fictional facts are presented' and that 'a work that prompts fictive imagining typically foregrounds the manipulation of medium in a way that other kinds of imagining do not' (Cooke 2014, p. 323). Burton's reputation as master storyteller and his distinct fantastical style prompt our imagination, but also tell us something profound about the medium itself. Just like Edward and Will share the story at the end of the film, so all of us can participate in the shared mythmaking facilitated by cinema as the *experience of watching* might move, inspire or challenge us and we add our own interpretations and assumptions to the stories told on screen. For Sherman (1993, p. 282), the virtuous aspect of such shared activities is 'a relaxing of one's own sense of boundaries and control' and I argue that this is what happens to Will at the end. When confronted with his father's final moments, he is able to let go of his resentment and his insistence on facts and is willing to see the world through his father's eyes. In the final moments of the film, we see Will's son (now about eight or nine) telling a tall tale to his friends. When they seem doubtful, he looks at his father for reassurance, who backs him up. Will's final words (spoken off-screen) are: 'That was my father's final joke. A man tells his stories so many times that he becomes the stories. They live on after him. And in that way he becomes immortal' (1:55:37–1:55:55). This notion of immortality through storytelling deeply reflects on the nature of cinema itself. As one reviewer notes,

> Edward's stories provide a perfect metaphor for the cinema itself. Films are stories—be they exciting, touching, outrageous, or frightening—that reflect our hopes and dreams, and *Big Fish* wonderfully evokes the way in which our fanciful myths tell us fundamental truths about ourselves. (Schager 2004)

Big Fish may not be able to provide us with definitive answers on the nature of storytelling or the relationship between, facts, fiction and lies, but it does at the very least indicate the often complicated connections between these aspects. As such, it also highlights why cinema is such a fruitful medium through which we can explore philosophical questions and experience the complex relationships that surround them, providing us with a focus to draw into conversation a broad range of disciplinary scholarship in order to explore universal ideas about human nature.

Notes

[1] The audience approval on review website *Rotten Tomatoes* is 89% and around 86% approval on *IMDB* (based on audience reviewer star ratings of 7/10 or above). In contrast, the *Rotten Tomatoes* ratings of critics is only 75% positive, down to 61% for top critics. All data https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/1127787-big_fish (accessed on 1 December 2021) and https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0319061/?ref_=ttexrv_exrv_tt (accessed on 1 December 2021).

[2] It can also be related to ongoing discourses within history, indicating the broad cross-disciplinary appeal of this topic. Unfortunately, the scope of this paper does not allow me to explore this further here, but for a helpful overview on the discussion see (Southgate 2009).

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