Ruby Sparks. Dir. Jonathan Dayton, Valerie Faris. Perf. Paul Dano, Zoe Kazan, Annette Bening. Fox Searchlight Pictures, 2012. Film.

Calvin (Paul Dano) is young, wealthy, and successful. Or, at least, he has been successful. Ten years previously he had written a hit novel, which is still remembered with fondness by readers and critics alike. Today, however, is very different. Calvin is first shown in his minimalist decorated home, with white walls, and stares at an equally white page, sitting in front of an old-fashion typing machine. Like many others before him, and like French poet Mallarmé has brilliantly visualized, Calvin is afraid of the proverbial blank page.

Distraught he goes to a psychologist, who advises him to start writing something simple. Has Calvin met anyone recently? Maybe this person has paid a compliment to his dog? That night, Calvin dreams of a beautiful girl, who seems to like Scottie (the dog), and does not mind having a chat with his owner, either. Night after night, Calvin dreams of this girl (Zoe Kazan), and during the day, he writes about her. He gives her a name, Ruby, and makes up a story about her, about her tastes, her moods, until one morning she is standing in the kitchen, making breakfast.

Terrified, Calvin hides in his room, hoping that she will have disappeared once he comes out. But Ruby is still there, and hiding under a table will not make her go away. Paul Dano's expressivity and body language during this scene is very effective, and by this point the audience is convinced that the girl is a figment of his imagination. One day, Calvin sneaks out of the house, and, in search of some normality, has a date with a fan in a café; yet Ruby finds him. Calvin's demeanor tells us that he is afraid that his 'problem' may be discovered. However, to Calvin and the audience's surprise, the girl in the café can see Ruby as well. She is real, and she is here to stay.

The meeting between an author and his creation is not a new idea. To give a few examples, at the beginning of the 19th century it was skillfully portrayed by Italian dramatist Luigi Pirandello in *Six Characters in Search of an Author* (1922); in a special episode of British television series of *Red Dwarf* (1988 - 2012), the crew of the titular spaceship find out that they are nothing more than, well, characters in a television series, and trace their creator begging him not to end the show. In the film *Stranger than Fiction* (2006), Emma Thompson plays a writer that has decided to kill off her main character, only for the character to unexpectedly find out and rebel against. Ruby Sparks manages to give a new lease of life to an old idea.

It is the second feature-length film directed by husband and wife Jonathan Dayton and Valerie Faris after the very successful *Little Miss Sunshine* (2006), also starring Paul Dano. Like their previous feature this is a comedy, but, unlike *Miss Sunshine*, the film has some dark moments. Calvin realizes soon that he has total control over Ruby; he can make her do whatever he wants. After the few instances where he uses his power for fun, Calvin decides to stop writing the novel. Ruby is free to express herself as she pleases, to do what she wants.

However Calvin and Ruby's relationship turns sour. Ruby is confined at home, and the couple does not have a social life. Ruby's only friends are Calvin's mother Gertrude (Annette Bening) and stepfather Mort (a very amusing Antonio Banderas), who lead a hippy-style life in the Californian countryside. The scenes set in Calvin's parents alternative home are very witty and provide some of the most light-hearted moments in the film, thanks to very entertaining performances by Bening and Banderas, who puts on a full Spanish accent.

Back home, Ruby is increasingly unhappy, and decides to spend one night per week in her apartment. Calvin does not like the arrangement, and goes back to his book; he will make her homesick. As a result, Ruby develops an unhealthy attachment to Calvin, who once more intervenes; he will let her freely express her feelings. Free from her creator's intervention, Ruby becomes too independent for Calvin's liking, and, in the darkest moment of the feature, Calvin uses all his power. At first, he prevents Ruby from leaving his study, then he makes her speak French, and finally he makes her incessantly proclaim, while dancing, that he is a genius.

Ruby is played by the granddaughter of the late director Elia Kazan, Zoe, who is also the author of the script. As film critic Mark Kermode has recently pointed out, this fact provides an extra layer of complexity to the film ("Mark Kermode and Simon Mayo Film Reviews.") Usually a film should be watched without preconceptions, "but in the case of Ruby Sparks, the fact that it is written by its lead actress is central to the enjoyment of the film" ("Film Reviews.") Kazan's performance is very refreshing, and she successfully gives life, on the screen as well as on the page, to a fictional character that has, effectively, two authors.

In *Ruby Sparks*, Dano delivers his best and more all-round performance to date. The actor had shown his darker side in his double role in *There Will be Blood* (2007), while his latest appearance in *Looper* (2012) was little more than a cameo. Dano had already shown some promise as a

younger actor in *Little Miss Sunshine,* where he played the (rather clichéd) part of a rebellious teenager (still managing to deliver the best line, or rather, word, of the whole film). In *Ruby Sparks,* Dano's performance is mature and witty and, without necessarily making the audience to identify with his character, he brings the spectator to his side. The only downside is his rather young appearance, and he is not entirely believable as a character whose previous success is already ten years old.

Ruby Sparks is a very enjoyable film that captures attention from the beginning and is able to keep it till the end.

Works Cited

Kermode, Mark, and Simon Mayo. "Octoberfest from Sheffield." *Film Reviews.* BBC Manchester. 19 Oct. 2012. Radio.

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The Hunger Games. Dir. Gary Ross. Perf. Jennifer Lawrence, Josh Hutcherson. Lionsgate, 2012. Film.

Since Huxley's *Brave New World,* dystopia has been developed as a genre that, as utopia, focuses on the future. But instead of the utopian dream to be realized, dystopias show a nightmare marked, in general, by a post-apocalyptic scenario in which the suppression of freedoms, the numbness of the masses and the use of force by the established political regime are the order of the day.

The Hunger Games is part of this tradition and seeks in our reality the origins of a bleak future, inviting us to a reflection on the present. Brought to the screen in 2012 by director Gary Ross, Suzanne Collins's story appeals to the empathy of viewers immersed in the modem entertainment world. Situated in an undetermined point in the future, after wars and natural disasters that led almost to the extinction of the human race, Panem, the scenario of this saga, is what remains of North America. Its founding myth is closely linked to US history: whereas the latter was formed from 13