In Chapter 8, Rebecca Bell-Metereau takes on the two very different film adaptations of Vladimir Nabokov’s ironic but controversial novel Lolita (1955). Her informed discussion details Kubrick’s experience with Nabokov’s own screenplay, as well as with movie censors in 1962, when his film was finally released. Director Adrianne Lyne’s version of 1998 had problems with the public’s response to a romanticized form of pedophilia. Bell-Metereau explains the many complexities surrounding the characters and tone of the novel and the different characterizations and thematic, structural, and stylistic approaches of the film versions. She registers a closing concern with both adaptations.

In Chapter 9, Mark Gallagher’s comprehensive study of the American film Traffic, a “remake” of the British television miniseries Traffik, includes a compelling discussion of the effect of changing the story’s international setting. The adapted screenplay, by Stephen Gaghai, and the film, directed by Steven Soderbergh, demonstrate the radically different cultural, economic, and political orientations of the two works, in part resulting from a change in locations from the South Asian and European settings in the British TV miniseries to Mexican and U.S. settings in the American film. Gallagher also emphasizes the unique politics of the American “war on drugs” in light of the personal tragedy of drug addiction for obsessed American consumers and their families.
ADAPTATION AS ADAPTATION

From Susan Orlean's *The Orchid Thief* to Charlie (and "Donald") Kaufman's Screenplay to Spike Jonze's Film

Frank P. Tomasulo

Adaptation is a profound process.
—John Laroche, *The Orchid Thief*

No less an authority than André Bazin wrote two essays on the process of filmic adaptation, "In Defense of Mixed Cinema" and "Adaptation, or the Cinema as Digest."¹ These articles, and others in Bazin's corpus of theoretical writings, suggested that filmic adaptations of literary works should be less concerned with strict formal fidelity to the source material than to "equivalence in meaning of the forms."² Bazin went on to point out that a crucial distinction had to be made between adaptations designed for the cinema and those designed for the audience. He noted that "most adapters care far more about the latter than about the former."³

A discussion of adaptation from the perspective of a film's fidelity (or lack thereof) to its literary progenitor is bound to be tedious. As Brian McFarlane avers, "Discussion of adaptation has been bedeviled by the fidelity issue."⁴ The changes that appear in even the most faithful versions of novels, plays, and other prose fiction are ultimately not that significant in terms of the meanings of the two distinct works. As Dudley Andrew notes, the two forms—written prose and cinema—derive from "the absolutely different semiotic systems of film and language."⁵ Furthermore, as Keith Cohen points out, "film technique ... relates to a way of thinking and feeling—about time, space, being, and relation ... that has become a part of the mental life of an entire epoch in our culture."⁶ Thus, from a textual standpoint, both literature and film rely on theme, characters, situations, and imagery. Similarly, although they are processed in different ways, both art forms require analysis and connotation on the part of the reader or spectator to be understood and appreciated.
Thus, the two questions raised by Bazin—about the style and meaning of a work when it is transmogrified by cinematization, and about its artistic aspirations versus its box-office marketability—are crucial to the analysis of any filmic adaptation. They are especially apposite for an analysis of Adaptation, the 2003 film written by Charlie Kaufman (and his nonexistent brother “Donald”) and directed by Spike Jonze, from the 1998 nonfiction book The Orchid Thief, by New Yorker essayist Susan Orlean. Indeed, few movies exhibit so frankly the dialectical marks of their artistic and industrial production as the paradoxical Adaptation.

The answer to everything [is] adaptation.
—Susan Orlean, Foreword, Adaptation: The Shooting Script

If Susan Orlean’s The Orchid Thief is an unadaptable literary property, both in the real capitalist world of movie studio commercial imperatives and in the fictional world of the movie Adaptation, then it stands to reason that a Hollywood film about adapting it to the screen would be an exercise in postmodernist pastiche and self-reflexive intertextuality. Orlean has even compared the adaptation of her book to the changes that follow the adoption of a child, especially since “orchids . . . happen to be complex organisms.”7 Her first-person bestseller is a veritable bricolage or hybrid of several genres: journalistic reportage, lowbrow botany and biology tract, historical essay, character study, autobiography, poetic meditation, and sociology tract.8 There is no story line to speak of, no dramatic crisis, and the events are told in a meandering format that departs from traditional narrative causality.9 Indeed, Orlean’s description of her orchid-hunting travels to Florida’s Fakahatchee Strand is a metaphor for her book’s structure. Rather than take a direct route, she preferred going the other way, zigzagging across [various counties], rounding the bottom of Lake Okeechobee, then cutting across the Everglades . . . through the Seminole reservation near Immokalee, past the ghostly signs for long-gone tourist stops . . . on the small state roads that go off at right angles every few miles as if they had been drawn by a box cutter. It is slow going but broadening.10

This is also the circuitous narrative structure of Adaptation, at least until screenwriting guru Robert McKee (Brian Cox) appears on the scene and convinces the diegetic Charlie Kaufman (Nicolas Cage) to abandon his
MCKEE OR NOT MCKEE? THAT IS THE QUESTION

Early in the script, Donald Kaufman (Nicolas Cage) had taped a copy of Robert McKee’s pseudo-religious and formulaic “Ten Commandments” of screenwriting above Charlie’s work area, but Charlie tore them down and crumpled them up—even though Donald had assured him that McKee’s “principles” (like the Bible’s Ten Commandments) “work and [have worked] through all remembered time.” Charlie initially eschews such recipes (“Screenwriting seminars are bullshit. . . . There are no rules.”). He also believes that “people don’t change, they don’t have epiphanies. They struggle and are frustrated, and nothing is resolved,” as in the “real world.”

By the end, however, Charlie has adapted many of McKee’s principles for Adaptation, including the idea of mixing genres. He attends one of McKee’s seminars in New York and is even seen reading McKee’s screenwriting primer, Story (while Donald reads The Orchid Thief). Charlie also learns, by interacting with other human beings, some of McKee’s “life lessons,” that in “the real fucking world” there is conflict and crisis: “People are murdered every day. There’s genocide, war, corruption. Every fucking day. . . . somebody sacrifices his life to save somebody else” (just as “Donald” sacrifices his life to save Charlie’s script).

Nonetheless, at the outset of the script (and throughout most of its narrative), the putative protagonist, Charlie Kaufman, attempts to preserve Orlean’s “book about flowers” from the clichéd commercial formulas of the Hollywood assembly line. As he tells his producer Valerie Thomas (Tilda Swinton),

I think it’s a great book. . . . and I’d want to remain true to that. . . . Y’know, I just don’t want to ruin it by making it a Hollywood thing. . . . Like an orchid heist movie or something, or, y’know, changing the orchids into poppies and turning it into a movie about drug running. . . . Why can’t there be a movie simply about flowers? I don’t want to cram in sex or guns or car chases. You know? Or characters learning profound life lessons.
In that vein, many passages from Orleans's book are quoted faithfully, if not verbatim, in the screenplay and film, particularly her introspective moments focusing on her relationship with flowers. Later, on the verge of selling out his original purist intent to be true to the spirit of The Orchid Thief, however, Charlie is advised by Robert McKee, "Don't you dare bring in a deus ex machina!" But the semicommercial film version does just that: it must contain gratuitous guns, sex, drugs, car chases, life lessons, and a deus ex machina—an alligator who chomps on the villain's leg and then proceeds to devour him half a second before he fires a fatal rifle shot at the hero. Although the alligator ex machina seems to save the day, Donald Kaufman later dies in a car crash—a reprise of the shocking car crash shown at the beginning of the film that caused the death of John Laroche's mother and uncle, put his wife in a coma, and left him toothless.

Similarly, McKee provides another screenwriting "secret" to Charlie, just before the final act of Adaptation: "The last act makes a film. Wow them in the end and you've got a hit." That tacked-on third act inscribes almost all of the negative plot and character elements that Charlie had railed against throughout the screenplay, thereby putting in question whether Adaptation itself is a conscious metatext that critiques the Hollywood system (and itself) or one that capitulates to Tinseltown's standard shibboleths. As Natalia Skradol put it, "We are not sure whether that which was announced as a self-conscious meta-film turns into kitsch, or whether that which was introduced to
us as kitsch manifests itself as a tragic reality." This is not the only instance in which the potential for an allusive and understated artistic expression is jettisoned in favor of an obvious concession to imitative box-office formulas, whether the screenwriter's ironic tongue is in his cheek or not. Within the reality of this movie, where there's only one character," Charlie is able to overcome his writer's block only when he introduces himself and his own personal and artistic concerns into Orlean's text. Even the larger theme of human and vegetative adaptation is introduced only when Charlie starts to muse about where he came from, starting with the "primal ooze."

Finally, Charlie Kaufman (the screenwriter and fictional character) does not follow another McKee injunction: the ban on voice-over narration. During McKee's lecture (and later on in the script), he says, "God help you if you use voice-over in your work, my friends! ... It's flaccid, sloppy writing! Any idiot can write voice-over narration to explain the thoughts of the character."

And, of course, Adaptation begins and ends with Charlie Kaufman's voice-over narration. Later, at an orchid show, we hear Susan's disembodied voice-over from her book: "One [orchid] looks like a turtle. One looks like a monkey. One looks like an onion." Then we hear Charlie continue her recitation, but with his own preoccupation—women: "One looks like a gymnast. One looks like that girl in high school with creamy skin. One looks like a New York intellectual." These sorts of expository voice-overs dot the aural landscape of the entire movie, as Charlie muses on his script and his life—and makes explicit some of the screenplay's more abstract concepts, such as the analogy between orchids and people. Indeed, when we finally see the ghost orchid, it is shaped like a woman—with two white petals as its open legs, two "arms" coming out of each side, and a little "face" in the center of its flower. Most of the time, Charlie's recitations reveal material that cannot be conveyed visually, for example, "It is a journey of evolution. Adaptation. The journey we all take. A journey that unites each and every one of us."

The screenplay and film contain several instances of Susan Orlean's narration. The first such instance occurs during our first view of the author, who recites the opening words of The Orchid Thief in her office at the New Yorker magazine: "John Laroche is a tall guy, skinny as a stick, pale-eyed, slouch-shouldered, sharply handsome despite the fact he's missing all his front teeth." Later, when Laroche tells her about how he is able to change, adapt, and drop his various enthusiasms (flowers, tropical fish, turtles, fossils, antique mirrors) without a second thought, Susan thinks aloud, "Sometimes I wish I could do the same." We also hear her voice reciting from her book several times as we watch Charlie reading the volume or as we observe
Orlean (the character) with her husband or Laroche. Even Charles Darwin has a voice-over narration: “Therefore, I should infer from analogy that probably all the organic beings which have ever lived on this earth have descended from some one primordial form into which life was first breathed.”

If a picture is worth a thousand words, then a book such as The Orchard Thief, which is replete with lengthy, detailed, and highly repetitious verbal descriptions of the sights, sounds, and smells of flora and fauna, is bound to be visually upstaged by a film that can show an orchid bloom in slow motion—or flowers growing magically through time-lapse photography, as in The Wizard of Oz (1939). The movie’s “image system” (Robert McKee’s phrase, used throughout Adaptation) is packed with such visual motifs, unlike Orlean’s book, which depends on more overt verbal statements, such as “I hate hiking with convicts carrying machetes” or a pages-long description of explorers hunting for orchids that can be condensed into a few quick shots in a movie.

Thus, a weak, rambling narrative is found in the source book, the screenplay, and the film. The Orchard Thief is filled with repetitions, diversions, and digressions—the very antithesis of a carefully structured “through line.” In contrast, plot is an ironic and self-conscious construct within the diegesis of both the script and the film, to the extent that the characters Charlie and Donald Kaufman represent respectively the polar extremes of serious modernist and lighthearted (and lighthead) postmodernist narratorial strategies and styles. Indeed, at one point Donald even calls his brother “my friend,” a phrase he undoubtedly picked up from Robert McKee, who uses it frequently in his seminars. Charlie tells his brother, “Don’t say ‘my friend.’” Throughout most of the story, Charlie attempts, mostly unsuccessfully, to avoid McKee’s principles and vocabulary; he yearns to write an authentic personal screenplay, while Donald “borrows” all of his plotlines and characters from clichéd B-movies.

In fact, Charlie specifically acknowledges a private side to his script when he says, “I’ve written myself into my screenplay,” while Donald incorporates every stock motif of the thriller genre into his script, The 3: a serial killer, multiple personality disorder, chase scenes, cop-and-criminal-share-one-psyche theme, and so on. Indeed, Donald’s premise for The 3 can be construed as a comment on Adaptation itself, in that Charlie, Susan (Meryl Streep), and John Laroche (Chris Cooper) are “the three” who animate its narrative and
who, in a way, share one psyche. Susan, who, like Charlie, is emotionally stagnant but successful as a writer, and John, like Donald, who is a passionate but unsuccessful hobbyist, represent the two life paths that Charlie can take, and, in a sense, the two poles of the one psyche: Charlie/Donald.\textsuperscript{17} Even the real-life Robert McKee accepts this reading: "[The screenplay] reads like a filmic stream of consciousness, an allegory starring the contentious facets of Kaufman's psyche."\textsuperscript{18} Of course, in this interpretation, Charlie and Donald are essentially warring aspects of one character—internal doppelgängers, so to speak—who are twin sides (the artistic and the commercial) of American independent cinema circa 2002. (It is therefore noteworthy that both Charlie and Donald have each, in their own way, written a script in which all the characters are aspects of the author.)

Indeed, the whole idea for this "odd couple," who represent the art-versus-commerce poles of film praxis, may have come from \textit{The Orchid Thief}. Referring to the differences brought about when Laroche had to give up his nursery business, Orlean notes,

"None of the plants at the nursery now had the mangy, fantastic look that Laroche's... all had. [The new owner's] plants were clean-cut and regular and looked like plants that a normal person would be able to grow. ... [Laroche] had a lot of impractical plans. He filled the nursery with weird things that were never going to sell."\textsuperscript{19}

In this sense, the toothless and unkempt dreamer Laroche is akin to Charlie Kaufman, whose "mangy" looks and "weird plans" (uncommercial screenplays) are "never going to sell." Indeed, Laroche is established as having a problem with both "personal hygiene" and a "funny smell" in his van, while Kaufman refers several times to the fact that he sweats too much. Laroche claims to be "the smartest person I know," while Charlie's condescending air (especially with his brother) \textit{acts as though} he is the smartest person he knows. Laroche, who appears not to require human companionship, shares that trait with Charlie, who is too shy to even accept an offer of a nightcap from his "girlfriend" Amelia (Cara Seymour).\textsuperscript{20} In addition, Orlean believes that Laroche is "obsessed with his dead mother," while Charlie and "Donald" are obsessed with their live mother, who is referred to several times in the narrative. Finally, another similarity between the two characters is that Laroche is always willing to reinvent himself, giving up stale passions to take on new ones, just as Charlie forsakes his artistic integrity in favor of adapting to commercial realities.
In a key line of dialogue with self-reflexive connotations, Charlie says, “In the reality of this movie, where there’s only one character”—leaving the audience to determine whether “this movie” refers to Donald’s script The 3 or to Adaptation itself. In addition, Charlie’s repeated use of terms such as “narcissistic” and “solipsistic” confirms that this is all happening in one mind (or widescreen).21 Without accepting Lucas Hilderbrand’s odd premise that Adaptation is “a masturbation narrative,” one can still concur with his assertion that “Charlie’s twin brother and co-screenwriter Donald is a fantasy alter-ego adept at Hollywood screenplay structure and happy-go-lucky in romance.”22 Similarly, Arthur Lazar has argued that, “the playoff between the two brothers is surely intended as ego and alter-ego, as two sides of the same conflicted writer battling for control.”23 More accurately, though, Donald may not be an actual (that is, diegetic) alter ego (the Hollywood facet of his persona) fantasized by Charlie but just a cinematic means to dramatize Charlie’s inner conflicts to an audience.24

The first time we see Charlie, he is on the soundstage of the real-life Kaufman’s earlier movie, Being John Malkovich (Spike Jonze, 1999). Charlie is awkward and out of place on the movie set and is actually thrown off the soundstage for interfering with “the eyeline” of the camera. His nervousness is conveyed both by Cage’s performance and by the director’s use of a jerry-handheld camera. This camera technique, which calls attention to the artifice of cinematography, serves also to remind the audience that they are watching a film. Later, Donald, who has no official business being on a film set, is allowed to stay and even flirts with and picks up Caroline (Maggie Gyllenhaal), an attractive makeup artist.

“THE FILM’S THE THING . . .”

My genre’s thriller. What’s yours?
—Donald Kaufman, to Charlie, in Adaptation

Adaptation is also an example of a compound genre—“mixed cinema,” to return to Bazin’s pithy phrase. Indeed, it is mixed and multiple at its core, as is its source, The Orchid Thief. There are identical twin brother screenwriters, rather obvious Doppelgänger figures (and sibling rivals), who dominate the action—even as one of them writes a clichéd script about multiple personalities. This self-reflexive turn is accentuated by an obscure (but telling) reference to Ourobouros, the Gnostic symbol of a snake that swallows its own tail. This “image system”—Robert McKee’s term for recurring motifs—also
applies to Charlie, who swallows his own tale, by writing about himself writing about Susan Orlean writing about John LaRoche.

The opening voice-over monologue, delivered over a black screen as credits appear, is a painfully solipsistic introduction to Charlie’s unbridled neuroses, his “self-loathing and pathetic existence”:

Do I have an original thought in my head? My bald head? Maybe if I were happier, my hair wouldn’t be falling out. Life is short... I need to turn my life around. What do I need to do? I need to fall in love. I need to have a girlfriend. I need to read more, improve myself... Why should I be made to feel I have to apologize for my existence? Maybe it’s my brain chemistry... I need to get help for that. But I’ll still be ugly, though. Nothing’s gonna change that.25

Human, animal, and plant adaptation (in that other sense of the term) are hardly possible if “nothing’s gonna change.” The very meaning of the screenplay’s title is alive with doubled possibilities. At one level, it refers to the troublesome process of adapting a book to the screen; just as important, Adaptation refers to the troublesome process of growing and maturing as a person—and as a species. This latter self-reflexive theme is loosely found in The Orchid Thief, in passages such as the following:

Sometimes this kind of story turns out to be something more, some glimpse of life that expands like those Japanese paper balls you drop in water and then after a minute they bloom into flowers, and the flower is so marvelous that you can’t believe there was a time when all you saw in front of you was a paper ball and a glass of water.26

[Laroche] especially loved working on hybrids—cross-pollinating different types to create new orchid hybrids... “Mutation is great. It’s the way evolution moves ahead.”27

Mutation is also the way that the script for Adaptation develops within the film; the screenplay ends up as the composite vision of Charlie and Donald. So, people mutate just as readily as flowers. Furthermore, as J. Hoberman points out, the writing styles of the two “brothers” are completely opposite: Charlie writes slowly and painfully (until Donald’s and McKee’s advice is sought), while Donald seems to bang out his script without effort (like Susan Orlean).28 As Orlean notes,
Many wild orchids don’t like to live away from the woods. They will usually flourish and produce seeds only if they are in their own little universe.29

Similarly, at the beginning of the story, Charlie lives in his own private universe, alienated from relatives, friends, other people, and the Hollywood community.

Such doubling is found not only in the twin brothers but in specific motifs that dot the narrative landscape of the screenplay and film: (1) two fatal car crashes (one at the beginning, one at the end); (2) an odd Doppelgänger connection between Orlean and LaRoche, who are opposites in many of the same ways that the Kaufman brothers are foils to each other (one, Charlie, is an intellectual, a serious writer, like Susan; the other, Donald, is a somewhat crude and flaky eccentric); and (3) both Charlie and Susan seem to suffer from anhedonia, the inability to experience pleasure or passion. In many ways, the LaRoche-Orlean “odd couple” resembles LaRoche’s description of the pollination process: “Every one of these flowers has a specific relationship with the insect that pollinates it. There’s a certain orchid looks exactly like a certain insect, so the insect is drawn to this flower. Its double. Its soul mate. And wants nothing more than to make love to it.” LaRoche adds, “And neither the flower nor the insect will ever understand the significance of their lovemaking,” just as LaRoche and Orlean will never understand the nature of their attraction to each other.

Another, subtler recurring motif is one of shattering glass. Donald mentions wanting to incorporate an Image System of broken mirrors in his script—just as Charlie gazes into a mirror on the wall of their shared home—to show the fragmentation of the protagonist’s self;30 of course, Donald himself is killed when he flies through the windshield of a car.

Orlean’s book is filled with first-person reflections on her lack of passion. As one example, the author’s own jaded existence is only hinted at in the following passage:

I felt that I was meeting people who didn’t at all seem part of this modern world and this moment in time—the world of petty aggravations and obligations and boundaries, a time of bored cynicism . . . they sincerely loved something, trusted in the perfectibility of some living thing, lived for a myth about themselves and the idea of adventure, were convinced that certain things were really worth dying for, believed that they could make their lives into whatever they dreamed.31
Charlie Kaufman sees Susan Orlean in an elevator but is too mortified to speak to her. Charlie and Susan have certain similarities: they are both intellectuals, serious writers, and both seem to suffer from anhedonia, the inability to experience pleasure or passion.

At one point in the book (related in voice-over narration in the film as she stares at herself in a mirror), she even states, “I wanted to want something as much as people wanted these plants. But it isn’t part of my constitution. I suppose I do have one unembarrassed passion: I want to know what it feels like to care about something passionately.” The apparition-like ghost orchid becomes her Holy Grail, and her journey of self-discovery.

Likewise, her ideas mirror Charlie’s anomic, as well as his indecisive and rudderless approach to his quest—a perfect screenplay—in another passage:

The sheer bigness of the world made me feel lonely to the bone. The world is so huge that people are always getting lost in it. There are too many ideas and things and people, too many directions to go. I was starting to believe that the reason it matters to care passionately about something is that it whittles the world down to a more manageable size . . . not huge and empty, but full of possibility.32

Like the fictional Charlie, the real-life Susan Orlean (as well as her on-screen incarnation) lives in a world of “petty aggravations” (Charlie’s balding, his aches and pains, his nervous perspiration, his agent; Susan’s complacent relationships with her husband, friends, and co-workers). Their escape from that world-weary ennui is through discovering a fervor—for flowers,
people, and life. So, even though Charlie initially eschews "life lessons" and believes he can write a script "without dramatic arcs and conflict," his final draft—and the film we witness—has all these things. In fact, in the book, Susan Orlean develops at least one passionate desire, to see the elusive ghost orchid: "I was so excited to finally see a ghost orchid that I wouldn't have waited a minute longer." Of course, at the book's conclusion she never gets to see one: "At this point I realized that it was just as well that I never saw a ghost orchid, so that it could never disappoint me, and so that it would remain forever something I wanted to see." Not exactly a Hollywood happy ending, based as it is on frustration and irresolution, but a slightly upbeat and optimistic finale to a tale of disappointment. Even a denouement like this is inappropriate for a Hollywood movie, even one that supposedly breaks (or bends) the rules.

Not only does Susan Orlean (the character) see a ghost orchid at the end of the screenplay and movie, when she does so, she is extremely disappointed: "It's just a flower." In the end, she must also suffer the death of her lover, Laroche, and be arrested for her crimes. In contrast, Charlie must be uplifted by his brother's (literal or figurative) death, learn the profound, adaptive life lesson that Donald conveys ("You are what you love, not what loves you"), complete his script, and reach out to Amelia. In short, he must develop passion—in line with McKee's commercial advice, "You cannot have a protagonist without desire! It doesn't make any sense! Any fucking sense!"

Needless to say, most books—fiction or nonfiction—do not come with soundtracks. Cinema has an important advantage over literature in its ability to convey mood, theme, character, and narratological information through diegetic and extradiegetic music. Adaptation uses four songs to communicate information to the viewer: "Wild Horses," by the Rolling Stones; "Allison," by Elvis Costello; "Dead Melodies," by Beck; and, most important, "Happy Together," by the Turtles. These pop culture hits contribute to the film's theme about mass-produced and mass-marketed commercial entertainment and also provide clues about the movie's characters and other themes. The lyrics of "Wild Horses," for instance, are heard on Laroche's van radio as he drives Susan around Florida. The song's refrain—"Wild horses couldn't drag me away"—suggests an intensity and passion that Laroche has and that Susan wants to acquire. In addition, the motif of horses "rhymes" with Donald's awkward statement of his theme in The 3: "Technology versus . . . horse." "Happy Together" is actually heard three times in the film: first it is sung by Donald, in an attempt to befriend his
antisocial twin brother by reminding him of their more fraternal youth; after Donald’s “death,” Charlie sings it in a melancholy manner, as if to revive him from the dead or to commune with the soul of his late brother; and, finally, the song (sung by the Turtles) is heard over the final shots and end credits, as if an authorial expression of the movie’s coda and moral. The lyrics are instructive:

\[
\text{Imagine me and you, I do} \\
\text{I think about you day and night} \\
\text{It's only right} \\
\text{To think about the girl you love} \\
\text{And hold her tight} \\
\text{So happy together.}
\]

In its penultimate rendition, as Donald lies dying in his arms, Charlie modifies (adapts?) the lyrics and sings, “It’s only right to think about the one you love.” Then, in its final presentation immediately following Amelia’s profession of love to Charlie (“I love you too, ’y’know?”), the “girl” of the song seems to be Amelia, but this does not explain its two previous versions, which relate to the love between the two “brothers.” Of course, the possibility for homoerotic incest is present but since Charlie and Donald are one and the same, the lyrics suggest a self-love merging of the opposites within a single psyche rather than a taboo relationship between actual twins. Although the other songs are not specified in the screenplay and may have been selected by director Spike Jonze or composer Carter Burwell, “Happy Together” is explicitly referred to in the screenplay.

Another cinematic technique that reveals theme and character that is not found much in the source book or in the script is set design. As one major example, Charlie spends a good deal of screen time in his home office/bedroom. It is interesting to note that there is almost nothing on the walls: no movie posters, art reproductions, or photos. This is not to suggest that he is a John Lockeian tabula rasa. These blank white walls seem more to be a subtle visual representation of Charlie’s writer’s block as he tries to begin his orchid screenplay, or perhaps of his empty personality, a reading supported by the absence of open windows in his closed-off, insulated environment. Charlie seems to come alive only when he meets with Donald and Donald’s makeup artist girlfriend in the colorfully wallpapered kitchen with open windows and the sun streaming in.
CONCLUSION: ALL'S WELL THAT ENDS WELL

Toward the end of the film, when Charlie goes out to a bar for a beer with McKee and the script sage offers free advice, Kaufman reads aloud what is ostensibly the concluding line of The Orchid Thief to his newfound mentor: “but a little fantastic and fleeting and out of reach.” McKee then asks the proverbial screenwriting question “Then what happens?” Charlie replies that it is the end of the book. However, the cited passage is not the end of the book. The Orchid Thief actually ends with Orlean and Laroche lost in a prelapsarian swamp, as follows:

It was pure vivid gorgeousness, a bounty, a place so rich no one could help but pass through it and say to himself, I will find something here. After hours or minutes or forever, we splashed through the last black water and onto the dry levee. First we turned to the right but saw only cypress and palm and saw grass, so we turned to the left, and there, far down the diagonal of the levee, we could see the gleam of a car fender, and we followed it like a beacon all the way to the road.

Why would the real-life Charlie Kaufman use the “but a little fantastic and fleeting and out of reach” line as the supposed conclusion to The Orchid Thief? The obvious answer is that to use Orlean’s actual last words would have her and Laroche escaping from their predicament, returning from nature to civilization. No car chase, no deaths, no major life lessons. The full “fantastic and fleeting” quotation from the book can be instructive: “Life seems to be filled with things like the ghost orchid—wonderful to imagine and easy to fall in love with—but a little fantastic and fleeting and out of reach.” Here the self-reflexivity is more apparent: to Susan, Laroche and his passion have become “easy to fall in love with.”

The actual ending of Adaptation shows nature—in the form of morning glories in an urban planter—continuously opening and closing as day shifts to night and back again in time’s (speeded-up) diurnal rhythms. Nature adapts and even thrives within a smog-filled civilization, Los Angeles. Likewise, Charlie eventually adapts and even thrives in that same stultifying Hollywood milieu. He has changed and tacked on a happy ending that includes reconciliation with Amelia, closure to his screenplay, and (like Laroche) a concern with who will play him in the film version (Gerard Depardieu, without a French accent). His final upbeat voice-over lines show the degree to
which he has matured (or sold out): "So Kaufman drives off from his encounter with Amelia, filled for the first time with hope. I like this. This is good."

Thus, both the script and the movie resolved André Bazin's commercial-artistic conundrum by capitulating to the audience (or, more accurately, the movie industry) rather than by preserving cinematic purity. Indeed, the screenplay was so successful in this regard that it garnered an Academy Award for Best Screenplay, Adaptation, at the Oscar ceremonies in 2003. (Interestingly, the Motion Picture Academy seemed to play along with the screenwriter's in-joke by awarding the gold statuette to Charlie Kaufman and his fictitious brother, Donald.)

In this regard, an author and a filmmaker's complementary comments are noteworthy. Norman Mailer once said that "Film and literature are as far apart as cave painting and a song"; Ingmar Bergman agreed, stating, "Film and literature have nothing to do with one another; the character and substance of the two art forms are usually in conflict." At the opposite end of the spectrum are Herbert Read and Béla Belázs. Read wrote,

Those people who deny that there can be any connection between the scenario and literature seem to me to have a wrong conception, so much of the film as of literature. . . . Reduce the art of writing to its fundamentals and you come to this single aim: to convey images by means of words. But to convey images. To make the mind see.
In a like vein, Belázs noted that an adaptation should be a new, different work, with its own aesthetic integrity: “If the [film] artist is a true artist . . . [he/she] may use the existing work of art merely as raw material, regard it from the specific angle of his own art form, . . . and pay no attention to the form once already given to the material.”

In the case of Adaptation, both sets of commentators seem to be accurate. On the one hand, the screenplay and resulting film seem to have little to do with Susan Orlean’s “book about flowers.” On the other, screenwriter Charlie Kaufman has turned the source volume into an authentic vehicle of self-expression, a new statement. After all, to adapt (in both the cinematic and biological senses of the term) is to change.

NOTES


3. Ibid., 21.


8. Orlean even admits that there is no central focus in her volume: “What was the book about? Was it about orchids? Was it the biography of John Laroche, orchid thief? Was it about passion in general?” Kaufman, Adaptation, viii.

9. Again, Orlean acknowledges that her book is “a nonlinear, eccentric story . . . too subtle and convoluted for movie-making.” Orlean, foreword, vi.


12. The deus ex machina device is specifically proscribed to Charlie by screenplay guru Robert McKee in the script and film: “Don’t cheat. And don’t you dare bring in a deus ex machina. Your characters must change. And the change must come.
from them." Kaufman, *Adaptation*, 70. If *Adaptation* is supposed to be the script that Charlie wrote, then it is interesting that so much of its ending seems to fit McKee’s “principles” (and Donald’s kitschy B-movie “taste”).


14. Actually, this voice-over is not meant to be Charles Darwin’s. It is the British narrator of the audiocassette, *The Writings of Charles Darwin*, seen in Laroche’s van at the beginning of the movie.


16. It may be that "the three" are also the Freudian superego (Charlie/Donald), ego (Susan), and id (John). In fact, as the film goes on, *Adaptation* comes to resemble *The 3* more and more, with Charlie/Donald in the role of the detective who spies on and tails Susan, with Orlean representing the helpless heroine who is kidnapped by the villain (Laroche). Indeed, not only does *The 3* take on more relevance as the film progresses, but its screenwriter, Donald, gains increasing control and dominance within the narrative. Charlie and Donald go through a role-reversing gradual metamorphosis (or adaptation) in which Charlie first asks Donald to help him with his flower script and then begins to read McKee’s book *Story* while Donald reads *The Orchid Thief*. Thus, Donald can be killed off in the end, since Charlie has adapted and absorbed all his twin’s commercial instincts, as well as his social skills.

17. It is instructive to remember that in their initial meeting, when Laroche suggests that he can propagate enough ghost orchids to make them available commercially, Susan writes “delusions of grandeur” in her notebook. Likewise, Charlie believes that his brother’s harebrained schemes of Hollywood screenwriting success are nothing more than pipe dreams.


20. When Charlie decides to include the creation of the universe in his script, to “tie all of history together,” he speaks it into his mini-recorder: “All is... lifeless. And then, like, life begins... Oh, and it’s before sex, ‘cause, like everything was asexual.” Of course, this is not only the “journey of evolution,” it is also Charlie’s individual story. He appears to be “lifeless” and “sexual” at the beginning, unable to express his love for Amelia until the very end.


22. Lucas Hilderbrand, review of *Adaptation*, *Film Quarterly* 58, no. 1 (fall 2004): 38.


24. For more on the authorial inscription of narrational agency, see Frank P. Tomasulo, "Narrate and Describe? Point of View and Narrative Voice in Citizen..."