

## Adaptation from Charles Darwin to Charlie Kaufman

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The almost endlessly inventive film *Adaptation* sets out to unsettle, frustrate and even anger audiences by offering them everything they are supposed to want: larger-than-life protagonists, exotic locations, deftly paced dramatic tension, resolved conflicts, requited love, perhaps an uplifting closing song to whistle once the credits have rolled. But as the film's central character, a screenwriter called Charlie Kaufman (Nicolas Cage), drives happily away into L.A. traffic at the finale to the strains of The Turtles' frothy 1967 pop hit, 'Happy Together,' having solved the problem haunting him throughout the film (how to adapt a seemingly unadaptable text), audience members might experience a disheartening sense of betrayal at his loss of principles. Or they might recognise the 'happy ending' as one of the most ironic finales in modern American cinema history. Crucially, these conflicting interpretations both involve understanding the substantial process of adaptation Kaufman himself has undergone in 110 minutes of screen time. Yet has he progressed or regressed? Has he evolved or mutated? Will the script he writes beyond the credits be the triumph of originality he has been grimly and gamely striving for throughout *Adaptation*, or a miserable capitulation to Hollywood formulas and clichés? Will it be like 'The 3,' the risibly formulaic script rapidly punched out and successfully pitched in *Adaptation* by his twin brother, Donald? These unanswered and perhaps unanswerable questions must be read through what I take as the central metatextual joke of the film: *Adaptation* was itself written by Charlie and Donald Kaufman. And we need to assess that information through another ironic lens. While 'Donald Kaufman' exists as a character within the film, gets acknowledgement in its

credits for having co-written the screenplay, and subsequently won an Academy Award nomination with Charlie Kaufman for that screenplay, he does not exist. His origins lie in the fertile brain of Charlie, who lives, both within the film and beyond it. The film's title, then, with its cross-pollinating references to Darwinian and cinematic adaptation, points to central concerns with origins and creation, originality and creativity.

The gesture to Charles Darwin in *Adaptation's* title is no affectation, and in what follows I want to chart and examine productive interactions between the scientist and the film. The film's ostensible narrative involves Kaufman's desperate attempts to transform Susan Orlean's 1999 bestseller *The Orchid Thief* into a screenplay. Orlean's essayistic report of her explorations in the bizarre but captivating world of botanical obsessives received plaudits for originality, much of that novelty depending on its eponymous if slightly repulsive anti-hero, the idiosyncratic John Laroche, and his search for the rare, beautiful and much-prized 'ghost orchid.' Adaptation underpins the staggering proliferation and longevity of orchids as a species, Orlean explains, noting that they 'are considered the most highly evolved flowering plants on earth'.<sup>1</sup> They are, she adds, 'ancient, intricate things that have adapted to every environment on earth. They have outlived dinosaurs; they might outlive humans.'<sup>2</sup> Orchids literally are living proof of Darwin's revolutionary theory. Darwin himself 'appears' in several recreated scenes, is cited by Laroche, and through works such as *The Origin of Species*, *The Voyage of the Beagle* and *The Various Contrivances By Which Orchids are Fertilised by Insects* provides a vital link between Orlean's text, Kaufman's screenplay and the screenwriter's relentless interrogation of his own creative powers. Orlean notes that Darwin's research convinced him 'that living things produced by cross-fertilization always prevail over self-pollinated ones in the contest for existence because their offspring have new genetic mixtures and that they will have the evolutionary chance to adapt as the world around them changes.'<sup>3</sup> Kaufman's repeated failure to 'cross-fertilise' with the various women who attract him provides a telling parallel to the artistic sterility that bedevils him through much of *Adaptation*. Not that Kaufman is permanently neutered. We learn that he wins the lucrative assignment to adapt Orlean's

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<sup>1</sup> *The Orchid Thief*, p. 48.

<sup>2</sup> *The Orchid Thief*, p. 63.

<sup>3</sup> Susan Orlean, *The Orchid Thief* (London, Vintage: 2000), pp. 52-3.

book as a consequence of writing *Being John Malkovich* (1999), a film about people buying access to a portal inside the head of quirky actor John Malkovich. The film rapidly became a cult classic, winning Kaufman a dozen major awards for screenwriting, as well as Oscar, Writers Guild and Golden Globe nominations; the powerful mainstream film critic Roger Ebert described the film as 'endlessly inventive'.<sup>4</sup>

Kaufman, Orlean and Laroche all qualify in a loose sense as 'originals,' and all at points in the film take account of Darwin's work, but their respective interpretations of Darwin show illuminating differences. Our first view of Laroche comes from the back of his van, strewn with bags of garden mix and computer parts, as he enters the Fakahatchee State Forest to perform the theft that attracts Orlean's attention as a journalist. We don't see Laroche's face at this point, but we do hear what he is listening to: a tape recording of *The Writings of Charles Darwin* in which Darwin explains the purpose of natural selection. Laroche possibly is the least aware of the full implications of Darwin's ideas, although he sees himself as a product of evolutionary mutation. Mutation, he tells Orlean

is the answer to *everything*. . . . Look, why do you think some people are smarter than other people? Obviously it's because they mutated when they are babies! I'm sure I was one of those people. When I was a baby I was probably exposed to something that mutated me, and now I'm incredibly smart. Mutation is great. It's the way evolution moves ahead.<sup>5</sup>

Laroche's understanding of Darwin is scatter-gun at best, but he most clearly demonstrates certain Darwinian principles. A highly instinctive creature, he regularly moves with little or no sense of loss from one obsession to another, switching between tropical fish, Ice Age fossils, turtles, nineteenth-century mirrors and, once he loses interest in orchids, the internet. For the more cerebral Orlean, Darwin provides the scientific rationale for creativity in a general sense. And yet she envies Laroche his instinctiveness, seeing in it an authenticity and immediacy superior to her own journalistic and emotional detachment. Her one 'unembarrassed

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<sup>4</sup><http://rogerebert.suntimes.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/19991029/REVIEWS/910290301/1023> (accessed 25/8/08)

<sup>5</sup> *The Orchid Thief*, pp.18-19.

passion,' she admits in the book is the desire 'to know what it feels like to care for something passionately'<sup>6</sup> and in Laroche she sees that quality made manifest. As he admits towards the end of the book: 'It's not really about collecting the thing itself. . . It's about getting immersed in something, in learning about it, and having it become part of your life. It's a kind of direction.'<sup>7</sup> The film radically adapts these notions of immersion and passion, taking them in a very different kind of direction from that of the book.

Charlie Kaufman, by contrast, suffers from his inability to adapt, both in cinematic and personal terms. The first of these deficiencies has dire professional implications, but it is fused with the second stubborn, if principled, unwillingness to compromise. In this sense he sees adapting as synonymous with capitulating to Hollywood imperatives. While recognising Darwin's centrality to *The Orchid Thief*, Kaufman strains to incorporate the great scientist's insights to his own situation. The film begins with a dark screen and Kaufman's voice lamenting quizzically: 'Do I have an original thought in my head?' But the quest for the origin of originality itself immediately deteriorates into his default state of stultifying anxiety and self-loathing: 'My bald head. Maybe if I were happier, my hair wouldn't be falling out. Life is short. I need to make the most of it. Today is the first day of the rest of my life. . . I'm a walking cliché.' Intimately aware of his own mortality, operating in a filmmaking environment threatened by novelty, and with a crippling sense of his lack of originality, Kaufman in his own mind faces forms of personal and creative extinction. We first 'see' him soon after in flashback to the *Being John Malkovich* shoot, an anonymous and rather bewildered figure haunting the background. His presence merely elicits a dismissive command from one of the crew: 'You. You're in the eyeline, could you please get off the stage.' Forced outside, he wonders: 'What am I doing here? . . . Nobody even seems to know my name.' This self-questioning quickly mutates into more existential musings on the meaning of life: 'I've been on this planet for forty years and I'm no closer to understanding a single thing. Why am I here? How did I get here?' In answer the film cuts to a shot of the earth's molten surface dotted with black, lifeless islands, and bearing the caption: 'Hollywood, CA, Four Billion and Forty Years Earlier.' In a hilarious and bravura truncation of the

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<sup>6</sup> *The Orchid Thief*, p.26. The admission also appears in the film.

<sup>7</sup> *The Orchid Thief*, p.344.

history of life on earth that takes less than a minute, we witness a sequence of Darwinian scope and process. Beginning with life-creating volcanic explosion, it depicts the appearance of sea creatures, the movement of amphibians on to land, the proliferation of plants, the extinction of dinosaurs, Ice Ages, the movement of tectonic plates, the rise of mammals, early forms of humanity, the suburbanisation of California and the birth of a child we take to represent young Charlie Kaufman. Another cut transports us forward beyond the starting point of his initial thought to his slightly older adult self, tormented by the fear that the bump on his leg is cancer. Placed in this 4,000,000,040-year time frame, Kaufman's concerns are exposed as meagre and pathetically narcissistic.

The end point of this hyper-fast evolutionary journey introduces the other type of adaptation, the sweat-gushing Kaufman lunching with the coolly attractive Valerie Thomas (Tilda Swinton), a film executive eager to know his thoughts on adapting *The Orchid Thief*. He responds with an intensity that borders on the manic, explaining that he thinks it is 'great sprawling *New Yorker* stuff, and I'd want to remain true to that.' When she interrupts, suggesting that 'I guess we [the studio] thought that maybe Susan and Laroche could fall in love,' he cuts her off, insisting:

Okay, but I'm saying that I don't want to cram in sex, or guns or car chases, or characters learning profound life lessons, or growing, or coming to like each other, or overcoming obstacles to [his tone briefly one of cynical assertiveness] succeed in the end. The book isn't like that and life isn't like that. It just isn't.

Pulling himself together and mopping his brow, he needlessly explains, 'I feel very strongly about this.' And yet, of course, the last section of *Adaptation* is crammed with sex, guns, car chases and characters learning life lessons, the very Hollywood clichés Kaufman rails against here. At this early stage, though, he maintains the need for fidelity to the originating text, one of the most worked-over notions in theories of adaptation. Film historian Brian McFarlane, in the recent *Cambridge Companion to Literature on Screen*, contends that 'perhaps no aspect of filmmaking has been so thoroughly canvassed at every level, from cinema-foyer gossip to learned academic exegeses, as the matter of adaptation of literature into film,' adding that it 'shouldn't be necessary after several decades of serious research . . . to insist that "fidelity" to the original text (however

distinguished) is a wholly inappropriate and unhelpful criterion for either understanding or judgement.<sup>8</sup> This does not stop many of the other contributors to the volume dealing with the topic. Robert Stam makes a similar case, noting: "The traditional language of criticism of filmic adaptation of novels . . . has often been extremely judgemental, proliferating in terms that imply that film has often performed a disservice to literature."<sup>9</sup> For Stam, any 'adaptation is automatically different and original due to the change of medium. The shift from a single-track verbal medium such as the novel to a multitrack medium like film. . . explains the unlikelihood, and I would suggest even the undesirability, of literal fidelity.'<sup>10</sup>

It is crucial to remind ourselves that the screenwriter 'Charlie Kaufman' who proposes this argument for fidelity, and who we see subsequently in *Adaptation* tussling with the problems of adapting *The Orchid Thief*, is not the Charlie Kaufman who writes *Adaptation*. This remains true even if we know that the *Adaptation* screenplay the real Kaufman produced came out of similar struggles and torments endured by the *character* Kaufman in *Adaptation*. This postmodern reflexivity itself entails a type of adaptation, Kaufman transforming himself, his life and his anxieties into comic fodder. Yet this involves some distancing of writer from character, so that the real Kaufman, who pictures show is fashionably trim and adorned with an impressive mop of hair, depicts himself as fat, and paranoid about all too evident baldness. If Darwin is associated (wrongly) with the phrase 'the survival of the fittest'<sup>11</sup>, the Charlie Kaufman of the film doesn't stand a chance. Worse, for Charlie, his twin Donald (also played by Nicolas Cage), quickly adapts and prospers in Hollywood. Having drifted into the movie 'industry' (one of several cliches Charlie implores him not to use) on the spur of the moment, Donald fashions a ludicrously implausible script 'The 3,' about a serial killer with multiple personalities, one of which is the detective investigating the serial killings, while yet another is the killer's next victim, a girl who he has trapped in his 'creepy basement.'

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<sup>8</sup> Brian McFarlane, 'Reading film and literature,' in Deborah Cartmell and Imelda Whelehan (eds), *The Cambridge Companion to Literature on Screen* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press: 2007), pp.15-28, p.15.

<sup>9</sup> Robert Stam, *Literature Through Film: Realism, Magic, and the Art of Adaptation* (London, Blackwell: 2005), p.3.

<sup>10</sup> *Literature Through Film*, pp.3-4.

<sup>11</sup> The phrase comes from Herbert Spencer's *Principles of Biology* (1864)

When Charlie asks how it would be possible to shoot a film in which one character is in two places at the same time, Donald offers the hopeful answer, 'trick photography?'

Beyond the script's manifest impossibilities what Charlie finds most galling is its lack of originality: 'The only idea more overused than serial killers is multiple personality. On top of that, you explore the notion that cop and criminal are really two aspects of the same person. See every other cop movie ever made for other examples of this.' Charlie sees himself as a creative writer (hence his uneasiness with the view that he is part of an industry), and a key attraction for him in adapting Orlean's book is that 'nobody has ever written a film about flowers before. So there are no guidelines.' Donald, though, immediately buys in to the production line approach to screenwriting, attending the three-day screenwriting seminar by screenwriting guru Robert McKee, and then adhering to the teachings McKee sets down in his bestselling guide *Story: Substance, Structure, Style and the Principles of Screenwriting* (1997)<sup>12</sup>, a text seen by some as the screenwriters' bible. Dotted with chapters on 'The Writer and the Art of Story,' 'The Writer at Work', 'A Writer's Method', *Story* provides Donald with a clear sense of the writer's role, a guide for constructing 'The 3', and the confidence to counter his brother's disdain for McKee and others like him who pretend to know screenwriting rules. 'Not rules,' responds Donald, 'Principles. McKee writes that a rule says you must do it this way. A principle says this works and has through all remembered time.' McKee and *Story*, then, provide Donald with the same type of underlying and explanatory principles as do Darwin and *The Origin of Species* (channelled through Orlean) for Charlie.

The crucial difference between the brothers lies in the fact that where for Donald the production of a script that applies McKee's principles correctly is sufficient in itself, Charlie has higher aspirations: 'my point is,' he explains, is that teachers like McKee 'are dangerous if your goal is to try to do something new. And the writer should always have that goal. Writing is a journey into the unknown.' This romantic conception of a journey of discovery has some parallels with Darwin's own transformative voyages on HMS Beagle, but *The Orchid Thief* itself supplies many examples of

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<sup>12</sup> Robert McKee, *Story: Substance, Structure, Style and the Principles of Screenwriting* (New York: Regan Books, 1997)

perilous journeys into the unknown in search of rare orchids. The results are not always triumphant, however, the chapter 'A Mortal Occupation' beginning with a grisly catalogue of failure:

The great Victorian-era orchid hunter William Arnold drowned on a collecting expedition on the Orinoco River. The orchid hunter Schroeder, a contemporary of Arnold's, fell to his death while hunting in Sierra Leone. The hunter Falkenberg was also lost, while orchid hunting in Panama. David Bowman died of dysentery in Bogota. The hunter Klabock was murdered in Mexico. Brown was killed in Madagascar. Endres was shot dead in Rio Hacha. . . .<sup>13</sup>

And on it goes. The film also vividly depicts the demise of intrepid botanists and unscrupulous speculators. Many who journey into the unknown do not come back, and while 'Laroche's perverse pleasure in misery was traditional among orchid hunters'<sup>14</sup> through much of the film, and despite his romantic rhetoric, Charlie seems lost up a particularly uninviting creek without a paddle. The 'great sprawling *New Yorker* stuff' he enthused about to Valerie has become, by the time of a frantic conversation with his shallow agent Marty, 'that sprawling *New Yorker* shit,' something he can't structure, because 'the book has no story. There's no story!' What *The Orchid Thief* lacks, and what Charlie Kaufman desperately searches for at this point in order to adapt it, is the very thing promised in the title and chapters of McKee's book.

While his nemesis (McKee) offers Kaufman a tantalising solution to the process of adapting *The Orchid Thief*, Darwin provides a far more creative missing link, something Charlie realises when he picks up *The Portable Darwin* from a pile of books on his apartment floor. In voiceover we hear Kaufman musing that to write about and dramatise a flower he has to show its 'arc,' its narrative. In a minor reprise of his questions about his own origins, he recognises that 'the flower's arc stretches back to the beginning of time. How did this flower get here? What was its journey?' Instantly we cut from Kaufman's apartment to Darwin's study, 139 years earlier, in which the aged scientist writes at his desk: 'Therefore I infer from analogy that probably all the organic beings which have ever lived on this

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<sup>13</sup> *The Orchid Thief*, p. 65.

<sup>14</sup> *The Orchid Thief*, p. 66.



earth are descended from some one primordial form into which life was first breathed.' We return to Kaufman's apartment where, animated by Darwin's insight, he announces in voiceover that 'It is the journey of evolution. Adaptation. The journey we all take. A journey that unites each and every one of us.' There follows a quick series of cuts between Darwin's study and various sites, while an increasingly animated Kaufman continues: 'Darwin writes that we all come from the very first single cell organism . . .yet here am I' (we see Kaufman in his car), 'and there's Laroche' (we see Laroche at work on his plants) 'and there's Orlean' (she types in her study) 'and there's the ghost orchid' (close-up of the plant) . . . All trapped in our own bodies, in moments in history. That's it. That's what I need to do. Tie all of history together!'

This eureka moment immediately energises him, as he begins dictating passionately into a hand-held tape recorder:

Start right before life begins on the planet. All is. . . lifeless. And then, like, life begins. Um. . .with organisms. Those little single cell ones. Oh, and it's before sex, 'cause, like, everything was asexual. Uh, from there we go to bigger things. Jellyfish. And then the fish that got legs on it and crawled out on the land. And then we see, you know, um, dinosaurs. . . .

He careers on through insects, the 'old-fashioned monkeys giving way to the new monkeys', 'the whole history of human civilisation' until he imagines 'Susan Orlean in her office at *The New Yorker*, writing about flowers and bang! The movie begins.' Yet beyond the destruction of the dinosaurs we see this retelling of evolutionary history being replayed *later* by Kaufman, rather than spoken by him in his initial rush of enthusiasm. Now he trudges in semi-darkness, his despairing face registering that he realises how ridiculously unwieldy this narrative is and how impossible it would be to shoot. His triumphant cry in that earlier moment of inspiration: 'This is great! This is the breakthrough that I've been looking for. It has never been done before. It's profound' is cruelly undercut by the later context in which he listens to it. And just to drive the knife firmly home, at that moment Donald returns from his screenwriting seminar gushing with admiration for McKee's 'genius,' his humour, his seriousness, and the fact that McKee is 'all for originality, just like you.' McKee's conception of originality, however, is massively at odds with Charlie's, for as Donald explains, with

his usual eager innocence, McKee 'says we have to realize that we all write in a genre and we must find our originality within that genre. . . . My genre's thriller. What's yours?' Charlie's response, at what for him is a low point in a film that repeatedly forces him to dive to emotional depths, is to stare out the window and mournfully drone: 'You and I share the same DNA. Is there anything more lonely than that?'

Incorporating an identical twin in the narrative provides Charlie Kaufman an opportunity to explore, in a comic mode, the relationship between nature and nurture, and between different creative strategies. The study of twins plays a crucial role in research on identity, and the ways that different environments might subtly or substantially influence how an individual develops. Darwin himself was interested in the similarity and dissimilarity between twins, as he explained in a letter in 1875 to his cousin, Francis Galton, one of the pioneering figures in genetics.<sup>15</sup> But Darwin's thoughts and theories have a profundity that Charlie can never hope to emulate, and Donald provides a comic vehicle for exploring the deficiencies of Charlie's creativity. Donald's ability to adapt to the Hollywood environment allows him to succeed quickly, writing the script for 'The 3' that immediately is snapped up by an appreciative Marty. Donald also finds a girlfiend, Caroline (Maggie Gyllenhaal), an accomplishment that eludes Charlie, who spends most of the film in a state of terrified apprehension about women, when he is not feebly or grubbily fantasising about them.

Where Donald and Caroline clearly are a sexually active couple, Charlie's fears and insecurities means that he blows several romantic chances with his obvious soul mate, the sensitive, talented and attentive Amelia (Cara Seymour). More humiliating, if less consequential, are his efforts to chat up Alice (Judy Greer), a waitress at a diner whose vague interest in orchids and chatty demeanour he misinterprets as interest in him. In a fantasy sequence he takes her to an orchid show, where their hands brush, after which she leads him outside and then sensually opens her blouse. But when in the diner itself he suggests the possibility that they attend the show her mouth curls in disgust and she reports his vile advances to her boss. More abysmally, perhaps, Charlie fantasises about sexual encounters with Valerie and Susan Orlean, who in both cases are besotted

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<sup>15</sup> Charles Darwin, Letter 271 to Francis Galton, November 7, 1875, at <http://www.galton.org/letters/darwin/correspondence.htm> (accessed 13/9/08)

by his literary genius. The overblown narcissism of these scenes renders them funny, although the humour is darkened by the fact that we realise Charlie is masturbating to these fantasy conquests. But even this is rendered comic by the rapid deflation of the erotic to the humiliating, as when Donald interrupts Charlie's private activities to talk about his script. We might generously see these episodes in Darwinian terms, so that rather than abhorring or pitying Charlie we merely judge his actions as instances of sexual frustration that have non-productive outcomes. If living things produced by cross-fertilization always prevail over self-pollinated ones, masturbators are even more vulnerable in the Darwinian scheme, producing no living things at all.<sup>16</sup>

Despite the existential anguish Charlie suffers when contemplating the DNA he shares with Donald, the film at this point already offers a complex but upbeat reading for its audience. For while Charlie recognises with increasing gloom the difficulty of starting with the beginning of life and ending with Susan Orlean typing in her office as a mere *opening* for the film of her book, we already have seen those scenes in modified form when he asks questions about his own origins. The modification is slight but significant, because rather than ending up with Orlean typing (even though we do see her doing so soon after), *Adaptation's* history of the planet ends with Kaufman himself sweating at the meeting with Valerie where he wins the job for adapting *The Orchid Thief*. At this admittedly asexual meeting (although Charlie clearly is attracted to Valerie) the life cycle of the adaptation, and of *Adaptation*, begins. This shift of focus from Orlean to Kaufman establishes the central thrust of the film, which is not about Orlean's book so much as about Kaufman's efforts to adapt it. *The Orchid Thief* does, however, provide the base material for the film, with words, narrative and images from it being utilised throughout. As a piece of New Journalism, the book gives a central role to Orlean as investigative journalist, and while the book begins with the figure of Laroche, Orlean establishes herself centre stage by page 2, and clearly it is her research, interests and skills as a journalist that take the book far beyond a portrait of Laroche. She also features prominently in the film, but in a way that radically reconfigures (even ridicules) her for the film's own purposes. Her character undergoes one of the major adaptations in the film, so that while

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<sup>16</sup> Leaving aside, of course, the use of sperm banks, something Darwin could not have envisaged.

in *The Orchid Thief* Orlean very much is the 'creator' of Laroche as an attractive though obnoxious character, in *Adaptation* she suffers substantial reconstruction at the hands of Kaufman, whose namesake in the film at one point screams at her: 'you're just a lonely, old, desperate, pathetic drug addict.' Although the film begins by depicting her as the intelligent, inquisitive and skilful *New Yorker* journalist she no doubt is, by the end she has become an adulterous, would-be murderer, tracking through the alligator infested swamps of Florida with her lover Laroche, fully intent on murdering Charlie and Donald Kaufman.

Not surprisingly, Darwin looms large in the way the film shows her adaptating. 'Darwin loved studying orchids', Orlean writes, in 1877 publishing *The Various Contrivances By Which Orchids are Fertilised by Insects*. She continues that in this book he describes a strange Madagascan orchid called *Angraecum sesquidale*:

The nectary [the nectar-producing organ of a flowering plant] was almost twelve inches long and all the nectar was in the bottom inch. Darwin hypothesised that there had to be an insect that could eat the unreachable nectar and at the same time fertilise the plant—otherwise the species couldn't exist.

Darwin's solution to this mystery was that 'there must be moths with proboscis capable of extension up to a length of ten to twelve inches!'<sup>17</sup> Although, as Orlean adds, some entomologists ridiculed Darwin, eventually he was proved correct. In *The Orchid Thief* this information is conveyed by Orlean, presumably as a result of research she undertook to flesh out the book, but in *Adaptation*, Laroche delivers these facts. The scene is pivotal to the narrative and emotional development of the film and to the underlying thematic concern with creativity and fertilisation. Laroche takes Orlean to an orchid show where an *Angraecum sesquidale* transfixes him. Enthused by the beauty of the plant, he relates to her the story of Darwin's seemingly ridiculous hypothesis and the way in which Darwin eventually was validated. Clearly, Laroche, sure of his own mutated brilliance, sees parallels between himself and the renegade Darwin. The patronising manner with which he explains the story riles Orlean, especially when he explains to her the meaning of 'proboscis'. When she fires back that she knows what

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<sup>17</sup> *The Orchid Thief*, p. 55. Orlean does not provide a footnote for this quotation.

the term means, he ratchets up the tension, dismissing her with the overtly sexist throwaway line: 'This isn't a pissing contest.' While this is the low point in their relationship to date, what follows dramatically transforms Orlean. 'The point is', Laroche continues, almost off-handedly

what's so wonderful is that 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. After the insect flies off it spots another soul mate flower and makes love to it, thus pollinating it. And neither the flower nor the insect will ever understand the significance of their love-making. How could they know that because of their little dance, the world lives. But it does. By simply doing what they're designed to do, something large and magnificent happens. In this sense they show us how to live. How the only barometer you have is your heart. How, when you spot your flower, you can't let anything get in your way.

By the time he finishes this truncated but immensely lyrical account of pollination's contribution to a comprehension of life's mystery and purpose (words suitably graced by rousing orchestral music and soft-focus close-ups of bees pollinating orchids) Orlean is psychologically and philosophically altered. From this point on she is emotionally and sexually susceptible to the previously unappealing orchid thief. Her life back amongst New York middle-class intellectuals now seems to her vapid and indulgent, tame and superficial next to Laroche's life-affirming authenticity. For her, at least, she and Laroche from this point on are destined to perform their little dance.

Orlean reveals in a later voiceover as she lies in bed with her husband, contemplating the impact of Laroche's précis of Darwin: 'What I came to understand is that change is not a choice. Not for a species of plant, and not for me. It happens, and you are different. Maybe the only distinction between the plant and me is that afterward I lied about my change. I lied in my book. I pretended with my husband that everything was the same. But something happened in the swamp that day.' Once again Darwinian forces appear to mock the pretence that we are autonomous, conscious individuals rather than in the service of our genes. Or at least they might do if Orlean had actually thought these thoughts. But in fact none of this highly intimate

revelation comes from the book; all of it appears in the film, the environment that allows Kaufman control of the creation and recreation of narratives, dialogue, images and character. Well beyond her revealing disclosure, we last see Orlean dishevelled and bereft, her supposed adultery and drug-taking exposed, her attempt to murder Charlie and Donald a failure, as she cries feebly: 'I want to be a baby again. I want to be new. I want to be new.' What is remarkable is that Orlean did not complain about being re-presented in so negative a way as she is in *Adaptation*. But the omnipotent creativeness suggested by this remark is the one thing most regularly and variously pilloried in a film that constantly emphasises the constrictions, gaps, compromises and deficiencies encoded in the DNA of the creative process.

The irony remains that out of creative failure, out of his own fully and humiliatingly-exposed inability to adapt *The Orchid Thief*, Kaufman fashions a screenplay that retains and celebrates its idiosyncrasies while simultaneously utilising and satirising key elements from mainstream cinema. The key figure in this instance, and Darwin's competitor in theorising creation, is Robert McKee. As with Charlie Kaufman, John Larocche, and Susan Orlean, McKee is a real person. He is also a very powerful and respected person in the field of screenwriting. In *Adaptation*, his bestselling *Story* provides a form of alternative to Darwin's *The Origin of Species* as a way of explaining creation. For Donald, *Story* provides a rationale, time-tested principles, and the idea that through discovering his genre he might find his 'originality.' But what type of 'originality' does Donald's slavish adherence to McKee produce: a completely implausible serial killer movie that would be impossible to film. For all that, though, the film is optioned; in screenwriting terms, Donald triumphs, whereas Charlie's obstinate desire to do something never done before reduces him to impotent self-loathing: 'I'm insane,' he laments during yet another moment of despondency after Donald has announced that he has just finished his script. 'I've written myself into my screenplay. . . .It's self-indulgent. It's narcissistic. It's solipsistic. It's pathetic. I'm pathetic. I'm fat and pathetic.' Having failed in his attempt to speak with Orlean in New York, or advance the adaptation of her book, while also hearing Marty's rave review for Donald's script, Charlie finally succumbs to necessity and against all his instincts attends McKee's seminar.

Listening to McKee (Brian Cox) pontificate at an event Charlie had earlier mocked, predictably provokes a tide of self-loathing:

I am pathetic. I am a loser. . . I have failed. I am panicked. I have sold out. I am worthless. . . .It is my weakness, my ultimate lack of conviction that brings me here. Easy answers. Rules to shortcut your way to success. And here I am because my jaunt into the abyss has brought me nothing. Well, isn't that just the risk one takes for attempting something new. . . . I need to face this project head on.

We hear this in a voiceover as Charlie rises to leave, only to be forced back in his seat by McKee's stentorian cry: 'And God help you if you use voiceover in your work, my friends . . . .It's flaccid, sloppy writing. . . Any idiot can write voiceover narration to explain the thoughts of the character.' Since this is a favoured mode in *Adaptation*, the criticism has a clear pertinence. McKee's target is not Kaufman the character so much as Kaufman the screenwriter. In fact we might see McKee's words (unknowingly) being directed towards us, the audience, offering a real-time critique of the film we are watching. The difference between Kaufman the character and the screenwriter is important, for while the writer and the audience remain somewhat distanced from events, Charlie the character remains within the mise-en-scene and the storyline. This 'reality' gathers momentum when he attempts to convince McKee during the seminar that it might be possible to write a screenplay where people don't change, where 'they struggle and are frustrated and where nothing is resolved.' This brings the full wrath of a vengeful god down upon him, as McKee thunders why would he waste his time watching such a movie: 'I don't have any bloody use for it.' Charlie meekly thanks him for his advice.

Where Orlean's apparent transformation came from the ideas of Darwin, Charlie's derives from a far more surprising source. Confronting McKee at the end of the seminar, he pleads for more advice, admitting that 'what you said this morning shook me to the bone. What you said was bigger than my screenwriting choices. It was as my choices as a human being.' Like Orlean, Kaufman's life apparently is changed completely by the ideas of a powerful thinker. In their subsequent discussion in a bar McKee first convinces Kaufman that *The Orchid Thief* of itself is 'not a movie. You've got to go back, put in the drama.' When Kaufman protests that at

this late stage he can't go back, that he has 'pages of false starts and wrong approaches,' McKee throws him a life-line:

I'll tell you a secret. A last act makes a film. Wow them in the end and you've got a hit. You can have flaws, problems, but wow them in the end and you've got a hit. Find an ending. But don't cheat. And don't you dare bring in a *deus ex machina*. The characters must change and the change must come from them.

The great joke of this interchange is that McKee's intervention at this point in the film, much of which has been a bleakly funny catalogue of false starts and wrong approaches, conforms precisely to that of a *deus ex machina*. The character McKee performs the very role the real McKee derides. Added to the extensive use of voiceover, the decided lack of conventional drama, and the focus on disappointment, the lack of a coherent narrative 'arc', the film the audience has been watching to date has crudely violated all the laws (or principles) of conventional screenwriting that McKee advocates. From this interchange on, though, things begin to change, not so much from within, as from the outside. And as the *deus ex machina* who abhors the device, it falls to McKee to introduce the vital agent of change. Feeling that he recognises Charlie he asks whether Charlie has attended his course before. When Charlie tells him that person was his identical twin brother Donald, McKee observes that Philip and Julius Epstein, the screenwriters of *Casablanca*, 'the finest screenplay ever written,' were twins.

The last act of *Adaptation* involves the collaboration of Charlie and Donald as they try to find a way to adapt *The Orchid Thief*. And it is Donald who takes control from this point—tellingly, there is no voiceover for most of the rest of the film. Donald's great breakthrough is to try to find what Charlie has missed in his reading of the book—the secret romance between Orlean and Laroche. Charlie has missed this dramatic element because it is not there, but in 'finding' it Donald can then translate the book into something amenable to the principles McKee has convinced him have worked 'through all remembered time'. They haven't, of course (the *deus ex machina*, which McKee derides, is a key feature of the ancient Greek theatre that underpins Western drama) but what McKee does supply is a mechanism for producing a conventional and convention-ridden story. Charlie had argued earlier with Valerie that he did not want to convert *The Orchid Thief* into an 'orchid heist' movie, undercutting her studio's hopes



and expectations that the adaptation would have Orlean and Laroche fall in love. As the last act of the film evolves, though, elements of the thriller (Donald's genre) increasingly determine the narrative: Donald uncovers the illicit relationship between Laroche and Orlean; he and Charlie shadow Orlean as she flies to be with Laroche in Florida; Donald is caught spying on the drug-taking lovers: Laroche captures him after a short chase. The abrupt shift from Charlie's difficulties with adaptation to something approaching a thriller is marked by the signature elements (lighting, music, cutting) of that genre, something only briefly interrupted when Orlean recognises Kaufman as the screenwriter adapting her book. Laroche, who is keen to know who will portray him, instantly drops his aggressive 'thriller' manner and tries to befriend Kaufman, but this relaxation of the thriller tension is only temporary. Orlean fears that Kaufman will include her and Laroche's dark secrets in the adaptation, asking him whether he will write about 'this' in his screenplay. His reply, 'I really don't know what "this" is,' unknowingly but brilliantly captures the multi-layered complexities of the film at this stage. Once she thinks he will incorporate 'this' he has to be killed to save her and Laroche. The hiatus in the thriller mode ends with them forcing Charlie into his car as they head back to the Fakahatchee State Forest. Unbeknownst to Orlean Donald has hidden away in the car, and helps Charlie escape into the night-time swamp.

Charlie had argued vehemently to Valerie that he did not want to 'cram in sex, or guns or car chases, or characters learning profound life lessons, or growing, or coming to like each other, or overcoming obstacles to succeed in the end.' To this point we have witnessed the sex and the guns; now it is time for the film to contravene another of his tenets. Having evaded Orlean and Laroche for the moment, Charlie confesses to Donald that his own emotional paralysis, worrying about the reactions of others, has caused him to waste his life. He admits to admiring Donald's ability to be oblivious to ridicule, recalling an incident from their past when Donald didn't realise that a girl he loved was mocking him. Donald replies that he did realise what was going on, but that he had figured out that 'you are what you love, not what loves you.' Overcome by this profound life lesson, Charlie weeps, breathlessly saying 'Thank you.' Rarely, perhaps has that simple response been so complicated by the context in which it is said, and the person who says it and hears it. But before the full implications of this emotionally charged and life-affirming exchange can be considered, the thriller genre takes control again. The twins flee from Orlean and Laroche,

but in not so much a car chase as a car accident, Donald is hurled through the windscreen and dies. The chase begins again back in the swamp, but just as it appears Charlie will be shot by a traumatised Laroche who cries out that he is not a killer, Laroche himself is attacked and killed by an alligator. Given his own promises to Valerie, the only one not violated has been the overcoming of obstacles to succeed in the end. Given the ludicrously heady adventures of the thriller sequences of the film, anything might be possible, but Donald's death also announces the death of the thriller genre in the film. The only obstacle remaining is the writing of the screenplay. That screenplay will not be an adaptation of *The Orchid Thief*, though, but *Adaptation* itself.

In fact, for *Adaptation* to exist, Donald must die. Although the collaboration between the twins has established the thriller as a compelling cinematic genre, one that Donald has mastered quickly, it has also taken them from trying to adapt a book about flowers to a world of adulterous sex, guns, drugs, attempted murder, chases through swamps and deadly alligator attacks. The process of turning book adapting into mainstream cinema requires a stream of absurdities that threaten to deteriorate into farce. And though Donald clearly is better at adapting to Hollywood conventions than Charlie, even he cannot escape chance; his surprise death in the car accident (something of a reprise of the car accident that ruined Laroche's life, and which we see earlier in the film) literally takes him out of the picture. He is mentioned in the final scene, a meeting between Charlie and Amelia where Charlie admits how much he misses Donald, the 'coming to like each' moment he had vowed not to include. But despite the loss, perhaps because of it, Charlie announces that he is close to finishing the screenplay. The encounter with Amelia prompts another piece of 'growing' on Charlie's part, as he finally admits to her that he loves her, and she admits to loving him. These revelations are accompanied by close-ups and yearning strings, but are saved from mawkishness by the wonderfully vulnerable portrayal of Amelia by Cara Seymour, and by the fact that she departs, leaving their relationship in its best shape, but still unresolved. The conventional romantic ending dispensed, the film returns to voice-over, signalling that the film that threatened to become a Donald Kaufman film is a Charlie Kaufman film again. This final voice-over is a marvellous piece of postmodern reflexivity and self-absorption, as Kaufman drives home after his lunch with Amelia:

I have to go right home. I know how to finish the script now. It ends with Kaufman driving home after his lunch with Amelia thinking that he knows how to finish the script. Shit, that's voice-over. McKee would not approve. How else can I show his thoughts. I don't know. Well, who cares what McKee thinks. It feels right. Conclusive. I wonder who's gonna play me. Someone not too fat. I like that Gerard Depardieu, but can he not do the accent? Anyway, it's done. And that's something. So: 'Kaufman drives off from his encounter with Amelia filled for the first time with hope.' [His car exits the dark car park and symbolically enters a sunlit Los Angeles] I like this. This is good.

The voice-over not only manages to recognise itself as voice-over, and argue in favour of the merits of the strategy, as well as claim to solve the problem of how to finish the film, but also supplies a happy ending, because the film now can be completed. And so *Adaptation* ends, its happiness confirmed by the strains of 'Happy Together' that insinuate themselves over Charlie's last words. As he drives off, the song swelling up, the camera tilts down to reveal a bed of flowers that carpet the floor of the frame, their yellow petals adding to the sunny glow of the ending. While the song continues to its uplifting end the street scene evolves in time-lapse fashion, the rapid movement over several days suggesting the good times will continue indefinitely.

Given the ways in which the film has utilised and satirised Hollywood convention, the happy ending itself needs careful scrutiny. 'Happy Together' provides a productive link, for we hear it three times in the film before this point, the first when Donald declares that he will use it as part of the screenplay for his serial killer thriller *The 3* as a way of breaking up tension. His inspiration for this massively inappropriate choice is McKee, who has explained that *Casablanca* had also used song to mix genres. This early instance plays off Charlie's own dire struggles with *The Orchid Thief* against Donald's facile ability to fashion something, no matter how inane, out of McKee's teachings. The second instance of 'Happy Together' occurs when Donald sings it to Charlie in the New York apartment Charlie takes during his abortive trip to see Orlean at *The New Yorker* offices. Here it signals Donald's excitement at the possibility of them working together, its cheery note jarring painfully with Charlie's own despair that he has been brought to this in order to salvage his screenplay.

The third iteration incorporates an important change, for here Charlie sings the song to Donald as he tries to keep his brother alive after the car crash. In keeping with the 'learning life lessons' section of the film, this rendering has a poignant tone, as though Charlie was recognising his own failings as he sings the song to his upbeat brother. The fact that the song can only briefly revive Donald's spirits but cannot save him adds to the effect and the affect. By this third instance 'ownership' of the song has passed tentatively to Charlie, and though the final rendition is sung by The Turtles, the song's meaning is clearly controlled by Charlie, for it simultaneously underpins and mocks the need for a happy ending.

The ending of the film is also its beginning, in that Charlie supposedly goes off to write *Adaptation*. I have commented that *that* script can only be written once Donald and his thriller affiliations have been removed, but of course both appear in the completed film. While one might think that the more ludicrous thriller elements only take place after Donald begins to collaborate with Charlie, or slightly earlier when Charlie has his momentous meeting with McKee, the elements of the supposed affair between Orlean and Laroche are introduced well before either the collaboration or the meeting. As I indicated, Darwin provides the spur by giving Laroche the theory with which to fashion his lyrical speech about the little dance of nature that undermines Orlean's view of the world and draws her inexorably towards the affair with Laroche. To reiterate: the affair did not take place, and is not in the book itself; it is the creation of Charlie Kaufman the screenwriter. Donald's ability to uncover the affair, based on his suspicion about the full implications of Orlean's comment that something small might expand 'like those Japanese paper balls you drop in water and then after a moment they bloom into flowers,'<sup>18</sup> potentially suggests a more astute, or at least as valid a reading of the book as Charlie's. Within the film Donald can make something out of the 'sprawling *New Yorker* shit,' something the character Charlie cannot. But the screenwriter Charlie is the one who seeds the ground with Laroche's fictitious speech, establishing the plausibility for the affair that Donald later uncovers. And several times in the film Charlie the character looks longingly at the easy success that Donald enjoys. While the film satirises Hollywood conventions, it also employs them at times, so that the inclusion of Donald in *Adaptation's* credits, while part of the games the film plays, is not entirely

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<sup>18</sup> *The Orchid Thief*, p. 5.

completely fanciful; without Donald Kaufman, there would be no *Adaptation*.

The same could also be said in a different context for Charles Darwin. I have tried to show his importance to the film as a character, a theoretician whose ideas about the natural world provide the intellectual underpinning for notions of creation and originality, and as a rival for Robert McKee as one of the figures whose ideas have the possibility of changing lives. Darwin's central notion of adaptation also provides an illuminating parallel for the sort of activity *Adaptation* comically dramatises. But it is also valuable to limit our application of Darwin to the film, or to culture in general, for in an essential way, his ideas are irrelevant to the cultural world. Stephen Jay Gould argues: 'Natural selection can forge only local adaptation—wondrously intricate in some cases, but always local and not a step in a series of general progress or complexification.' And he notes: 'The mammoth is every bit as good as the elephant—and vice versa.'<sup>19</sup> We could read this as applicable to Donald and Charlie, so that the generic pleasures and certainties of the thriller and postmodern sleight of hand are equally valid. But Gould clearly distinguishes natural evolution from cultural change, emphasising the 'enormous capacity culture holds—and nature lacks—for explosive rapidity and cumulative directionality.'<sup>20</sup> Against this reading of cultural change as dynamic and considered, *Adaptation* depicts Hollywood as an environment locked into the replication of the formulaic, the known, attuned more to the sort of local adaptation Gould associates with natural selection than the driven explosiveness he attributes to human culture. It might be argued that if innovation is crushed routinely in Hollywood then films such as Kaufman's would never be made there. But the existence of a few mutants does not of itself excuse the charge that the studio system is genetically resistant to something like *Adaptation*. As Darwin teaches us, cross-fertilisation is the essence of creativity.

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<sup>19</sup> Stephen Jay Gould, *Life's Grandeur: The Spread of Excellence from Plato to Darwin* (London, Vintage: 1997), p.140.

<sup>20</sup> *Life's Grandeur*, p. 220.

surveillance, literary periodicals, utopias and George Orwell. His full-length study of British filmmaker Terry Gilliam will be published by Manchester University Press in 2009.