

Adaptat

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Scooping up the BAFTA award for Best Adapted Screenplay in 2002 was Charlie Kaufman's Oscar-nominated script, *Adaptation*, loosely based on Susan Orlean's book, *The Orchid Thief*. Grossing just under \$33 million worldwide, *Adaptation* was generally regarded as a resounding critical success and has been variously described as an 'outrageously offbeat comedy', a 'masterpiece of surrealism' and 'the ultimate writers' film'.

Adaptation is the second film directed by Spike Jonze whose debut feature, *Being John Malkovich* (1999), was also written by Kaufman. Nicolas Cage played the roles of twin screenwriters Charlie and Donald Kaufman, and Meryl Streep took the part of Susan Orlean.

Adapting *The Orchid Thief*

In 1995, Susan Orlean, staff writer at *The New Yorker*, stumbled upon the story of John Laroche, a Florida-based nurseryman who employed Seminole Indians to get around state regulations prohibiting the poaching of orchids. The piece grew into a book and in 1999 the *The Orchid Thief* was published. What started as the story of Laroche and Orlean's adventures in the swamp became an examination of the lengths people go to in the name of passion.

When Jonathan Demme's company hired Kaufman to write the adaptation, like the protagonist in his screenplay, Kaufman professes to have been stumped for weeks. It was only when he drew on the double meanings of his script's title that the story started falling into place.

In fact, *Adaptation* isn't really an adaptation of *The Orchid Thief* at all, although elements of the book are in there. In the same way Orlean set out to write a book about Laroche but ended up

writing herself into the story, Kaufman wanted to write a script true to Orlean and instead created a hilariously self-referential frolic that layers the author's self-doubt over Orlean's. The script blends fact and fiction in a way that only Kaufman has mastered, and in its examination of the process of adapting a screenplay becomes a discussion of the struggle between high and low art.

Three Act Structure

It would be impossible to analyse *Adaptation* without recognising the irony that it's this process of deconstructing a screenplay that the protagonist demonises, but the humour of the script is that Kaufman does everything he tells us he won't. So despite railing against screenwriting guru Robert McKee, Kaufman follows his rules to the letter. Plot and sub-plot mirror each other

and intertwine in a masterpiece of construction.

Act One

In the first five minutes of his script, Kaufman not only establishes his hero, his flaw, his goal and his need, he sets up everything that's going to happen in the script's final act. Our neurotic protagonist is Charlie Kaufman, an introspective and self-hating screenwriter. Struggling to begin his new script, an adaptation of *The Orchid Thief*, Kaufman wants more than anything to keep the essence of Orlean's book alive. He beseeches Valerie, the production company executive: the script mustn't become an 'orchid heist' movie with drug-running, sex, guns and characters learning life lessons. So, the script's central dramatic question is posed: will Kaufman succeed in writing a script that will win Orlean's approval or



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analyses another BAFTA winning script.

will he be forced to sell out to Hollywood?

Kaufman's last straw comes when Donald, his clueless twin brother and temporary flatmate, announces he's going to try his hand at screenwriting. We'll later learn that Donald is, in fact, a figment of Charlie's imagination and this moment marks the beginning of a split in Kaufman's psyche where his internal conflict becomes externalised. The Inciting Incident, ten minutes into the script, comes when Donald reveals he's enrolled on a Robert McKee seminar. For Kaufman, McKee represents all that is wrong with Hollywood. Kaufman rails against formulaic screenwriting but his brother won't listen. Whether Kaufman likes it or not, Donald is going to write his screenplay, *The Three*, the story of a killer with multiple personality disorder.

If keeping the purity of Orlean's book is what Kaufman wants, it's to listen to his instincts (and win the love of a good woman) that he needs. Kaufman meets up with his non-date, Amelia, who promises to sort out his life but when he again fails to make his move, Amelia loses faith. We're left wondering whether Kaufman will ever pluck up the nerve to ask Amelia out.

Meanwhile, in the world of Kaufman's pages, Orlean meets the swashbuckling orchid thief, Laroche. Cunning and fearless, Laroche's quest is to find the rare ghost orchid, cultivate it and then sell it on to the public. Orlean admits her desire to experience the kind of passion a man like Laroche feels for his plants.

Act Two

The beginning of Act Two, around half an hour into the script, sees Kaufman pluck up the courage to ask out his regular waitress, Alice. She dodges the question and disappears. With his internal neurosis

deepening, Kaufman brings Donald on to the set of *Being John Malkovich*. There, to Kaufman's deep irritation, Donald effortlessly picks up the make-up artist. To make matters worse, she professes to love his script. Kaufman bumps into Amelia at a party. She's pleased to see him but he screws up once again and goes home alone.

Looking for a way out

Worried by his lack of progress on the script, Kaufman begs his agent to get him out of the contract but there's no escape. Kaufman is going to have to press on despite his worries that by injecting a story into *The Orchid Thief*, it won't be true to Orlean's work. Meanwhile, Donald continues to rhapsodise over the gospel of McKee.

Still as unsuccessful as ever with women, the closest Kaufman gets is through his masturbatory fantasies. Now in love with his mental image of Orlean, he thinks he's stumbled across a way of making the script work: by focusing on Orlean's desire to experience passion. Relieved, he starts work. Then he learns Orlean is in town and dying to meet him. Kaufman panics.

At the script's midpoint, confronted with the possibility of meeting Orlean in the flesh, Kaufman realises that to be true to his desire to stay close to the essence of the book, he can't simply 'Donaldize' and simplify the character of Susan Orlean but with no obvious alternative, how should he proceed?

The ghost orchid

Orlean tells Laroche she wants to see the ghost orchid. Laroche pulls himself away from his new venture (an Internet porn site) and takes Orlean out into the swamp. The ghost orchid remains elusive and

Orlean and Laroche instead find themselves lost. Orlean concludes: "Life seemed to be filled with things that were just like the ghost orchid: wonderful to imagine and ... easy to fall in love with but a little fantastic and fleeting and out of reach."

A visit to McKee

Kaufman's agent tells him Donald's script is the best thing he's read all year. With Donald's brilliant understanding of structure, perhaps Donald could help Kaufman with his script. Kaufman despairs and faces his final indignity. In his ordeal, or 'meeting with the dragon' as Joseph Campbell (author of *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*) would say, Kaufman swallows his pride and meets his opponent, screenwriting guru Robert McKee. Only by confronting McKee can Kaufman change. Or in Campbell's words, only by facing his greatest fear can Kaufman be symbolically reborn.

McKee instructs Kaufman to add drama and conflict to his script. More importantly, his protagonist must change. Kaufman realises he himself must also change. As a reward for facing his ordeal, Kaufman is given McKee's advice on how to complete the script. McKee also throws Kaufman another idea: the suggestion of using twin brothers.

Donald comes on board

At the Act Two low-point, Donald reads Kaufman's script and promises to help. He suggests Kaufman should meet and get to know Orlean. When Kaufman refuses, Donald goes instead. Convinced she's hiding something, Donald spies on her and discovers she's booked a trip to Miami. Donald persuades Kaufman they must follow her there.

This time in the swamp, Laroche and ▶

Orlean locate the ghost orchid. Laroche reveals it's the source of a drug which "seems to help people be fascinated". For Orlean, the prospect is too great a temptation and soon after she's sampled the orchid-coke, she and Laroche are making love. Kaufman peers in through the windows and is caught spying by Laroche. Orlean realises Kaufman must be the screenwriter. Terrified he's seen her indulgent excesses, she decides she can't live with the consequences of the story getting out into the world and the only solution is to kill him.

In the Act Two climax, the meeting that Kaufman has been fantasising about ends with Orlean driving him back into the swamp at gunpoint.

Act Three

Where the first two Acts of *Adaptation* were generally considered clever, engaging and a critical success, it's the third Act that splits the audiences. Whether the final ten minutes are a brilliant gag or a misguided clash in genre and tone that simply isn't funny, comes down to a question of personal taste and humour.

Climax in the swamp

Kaufman and Donald escape and run. Donald breaks down, telling Kaufman "You are what you love, not what loves you." Then he's shot by Laroche. Laroche also threatens to shoot Kaufman but in the nick of time an alligator pulls Laroche into the swamp and our protagonist is saved. Orlean collapses; ambulances and police

arrive on the scene and Kaufman calls his mother.

Resolutions

In the penultimate scene, Kaufman gets together with Amelia over a coffee. She tells him she's with someone but Kaufman kisses her anyway and tells her he's in love with her. In a wonderfully gratifying moment that we've been anticipating, Amelia reveals she loves him too. Back in his car, Kaufman tells us he's filled with hope for the first time and he knows how to finish the script. He realises he must write the script he wants to write and not the one that he thinks will please Orlean or, for that matter, McKee. We're left with a final quote from Donald's script, *The Three*. "We're all one thing, Lieutenant. That's what I've come to realise."

Genre?

Clearly this is not a film that's easily classified. Charlie Kaufman violates the conventions of genre as he throws over his creation to his fictitious twin brother Donald. What starts as a comedy in Acts One and Two, turns into an action-adventure pastiche in Act Three.

In McKee's analysis accompanying the published shooting script, he describes *Adaptation* as a Disillusionment Plot crossed with an Education Plot. The Disillusionment Plot starts with an optimistic protagonist: Orlean, who arcs to a defeated, pessimistic worldview. Kaufman's arc is the Education Plot. He begins as a

pessimistic defeatist and through experience becomes positive. In McKee's words, "Orlean is lost but Kaufman is found." The mirroring of their experiences ties their stories together.

Characterisation

Charlie Kaufman builds empathy for his protagonist with the first few pages of the script. In his opening monologue, Kaufman spews forth his worries. He doubts his originality, worries he's bald, knows he's fat and realises he's in need of love. Through establishing Kaufman with flaws we relate to, we develop a sense of recognition of the protagonist within ourselves. By focusing on the hero's failings (rather than his merits) and making them universal in nature, our hearts immediately go out to him. Given the real Kaufman was already an A List Hollywood writer at that time, it's undeniably appealing to have him painted as a struggling writer, plagued by the average demons. It's through empathy with his neuroses that we invest ourselves emotionally in Kaufman and live this story vicariously through him.

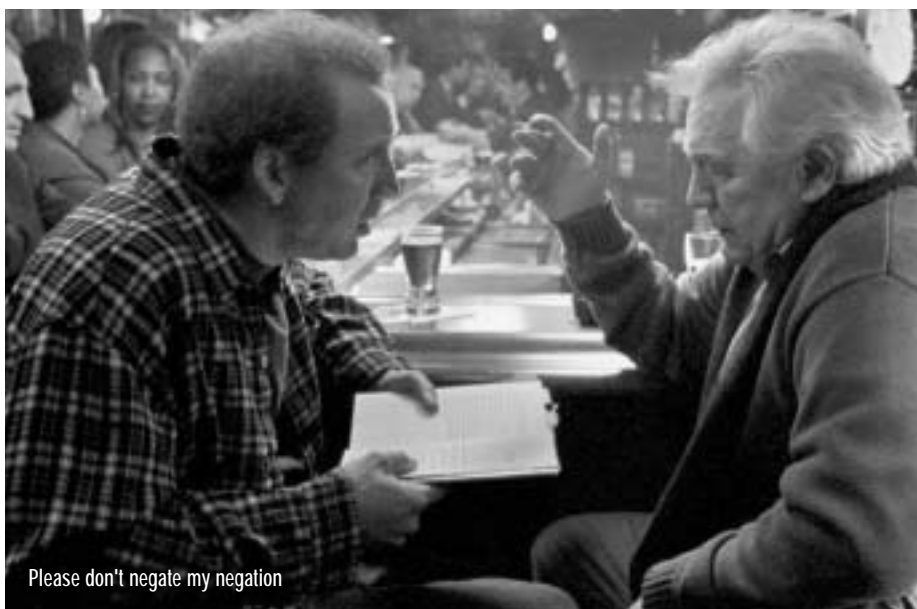
Empathy is compounded by the situation in which Kaufman finds himself: he has to share his apartment with his crass twin brother who not only decides to try his hand at screenwriting in the formulaic way Kaufman despises, but is an overnight success. It's only later that we discover there is no Donald; he's a demon of Charlie's tormented imagination.

Setting Kaufman against both Donald and the swashbuckling Laroche further deepens our relationship with our protagonist. Where both Donald and Laroche steam ahead, ever optimistic, fearless and confident in whom they are, Kaufman is the polar opposite.

From the outset Kaufman is portrayed as a passionate character who cares deeply about his craft. His determination to stay pure to the essence of Orlean's novel raises the stakes when we realise he may not achieve his goal. The drama is thereby intensified and we know just what he stands to lose if he fails.

Ego battling with superego

In psychoanalytic terms, Charlie's battles with his brother represent Kaufman's internal conflict between his superego and ego or the internalised, self-critical



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conscience (Charlie) battling with self-esteem (Donald). In fact, as referenced by Donald's multiple-personality script, *The Three*, it is the third element of this triad that Kaufman needs to listen to - his id or his instinct.

In the script's resolution it's his id that Kaufman finally hears. Kaufman decides to end his script with a feeling of hope not because McKee's rules dictate or it's what Orlean might want, but because "it feels right". Where there were once three authors fighting to write the screenplay (Charlie, Donald and Orlean) by the resolution there is but a single voice. Within Kaufman's imagination, both Donald and Orlean have been lost and Kaufman is again whole and able to act on his instinct.

The splitting of Kaufman into Charlie and Donald, or the Hero and his Shadow, symbolises much more than Kaufman's internal battles. It's also the struggle between highbrow and lowbrow, self-doubt and confidence, purity and pragmatism, freedom and rules, chaos and formula, art and entertainment.

McKee's character as a dark mentor

In Kaufman's world, the character of McKee is both the antagonist and mentor. He initially represents the approach to screenwriting that Kaufman most despises but when Kaufman finally meets him, it's his advice that enables Kaufman to finish his script. As Chris Vogler points out in *The Writer's Journey*, mentor archetypes can serve multiple functions. McKee motivates Kaufman in his time of doubt, rewards Kaufman for visiting him by giving him advice and also plants clues that Kaufman will later pick up on and use to complete his script (the twin screenwriters).

Unique voices

Adaptation's characterisation succeeds not only because the characters are rounded and three dimensional but also because of the strength of the dialogue. Each character speaks with a unique voice.

Let's take our protagonist and his two discrete patterns of speech: his internal voice, as expressed through the voice-over, and his external voice.

The stream-of-consciousness voice-over expressing Kaufman's internalised thoughts is as urgent as his character. Sentences are short, punchy and the



The empty chair is for our Id

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writing neurotic and Woody Allenesque. They're the antithesis of the fluent language we might expect from a writer, thus building realism and generating empathy for his character.

KAUFMAN (V.O.)

To begin. To begin. How to start. I'm hungry. I should get coffee...

Kaufman's external voice is less hurried. Sentences are slightly longer but his trademark anxiety is still shown through incomplete sentences, hesitations and mid-sentence changes of direction. Kaufman falls back on the colloquialisms "You know", "OK" and "like", particularly when he's anxious. He seeks reassurance and tries to minimise the impact of his words.

KAUFMAN

...Y'know, I just don't want to ruin it by making it a Hollywood thing. You know?

Orlean's voice-over is in contrast calm, fluent, poetic, sensuous and profound. Her sentence structure is more complex and her language is the voice we'd expect from a confident writer.

ORLEAN

Laroché loved orchids but I came to believe he loved the difficulty and fatality of getting them almost as much as he loved the orchids themselves.

Donald's dialogue is confident, simple, decisive, colloquial and direct.

DONALD

Some of these chicks look

okay. Hey... guess what. We're going to Miami tomorrow.

The script is also memorable for some great quotes, succinct observations that summarise the essence of the screenplay in pithy sound bites. Who can forget Donald's poignant observation: "You are what you love, not what loves you,"?

Humour

The humour of *Adaptation* relies on the screenwriter's use of irony. Kaufman tells us everything he doesn't want to do, then proceeds to do it. In the first five minutes of the film, Kaufman sets up all that's going to happen in the third Act. He tells Valerie he doesn't want to make an orchid heist then goes on to do exactly that.

Cuts between scenes are also used for comic effect. Following Kaufman's opening monologue, a spewing forth of his neuroses, we cut to Malkovich saying "Shut up" as though directly to our protagonist. A couple of scenes later, Kaufman wonders why he's even on the set of *Being John Malkovich*. Everyone is ignoring him. "How did I get here?" he asks. The answer comes literally with the next cut: a scene showing the process of evolution in Hollywood four billion years ago.

Thank goodness that process of evolution brought Kaufman to us. If Kaufman is indeed the screenwriters' screenwriter, then *Adaptation* is surely the screenwriters' top script. Whether or not we like the ending, *Adaptation* is undeniably a brilliantly crafted film, clever, funny and highly inventive.

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