

## (In)fidelity Criticism and the Sexual Politics of *Adaptation*

Under the heading "Adaptation in Theory," James Naremore gathers a group of essays whose authors help to move the discussion of literature and film beyond the fidelity criticism that once held sway in the academy and that still prevails in the popular imagination. From the embourgeoisement of movies to the institutional biases of English departments, the authors shed light on why critics and audiences expect a movie to faithfully adhere to a literary original. In addition, they provide new ways to conceive the relationship between literature and film. While their terms derive from different critical vocabularies, they all recognize the need to dethrone the literary text's privileged position in the relationship and, more broadly, promote what Dudley Andrew calls "a sociological turn"<sup>(35)</sup> in adaptation studies.

I fully endorse this theoretical turn and hope my reading of Spike Jonze and Charlie Kaufman's *Adaptation* (2002) is faithful to the sociological spirit, if not the letter, of the writers in Naremore's book. However, in moving beyond fidelity criticism, these scholars leave little room for the concept of "infidelity" as a means to assess the relationship between film and literature. Robert Stam, for example, while giving it some legitimacy, sees the concept as evincing a "Victorian prudery"<sup>(54)</sup>. Similarly, Andrew sees concerns about (in)fidelity arising out of a hierarchical literary culture that blocks the "fertility"<sup>(30)</sup> of adaptation found in earlier popular culture forms. For Naremore, the establishment of fidelity criticism in film studies can be traced back to stodgy English departments imbued with "a mixture of Kantian aesthetics and Arnoldian ideas about society"<sup>(2)</sup>. For all of these scholars, fidelity criticism is inextricably tied to an academicism and literary ideology that at least implicitly privilege and essentialize the verbal over the visual and the literary over the cinematic.

Jonze and Kaufman's *Adaptation* is a stunning cinematic realization of the principles Naremore's volume champions, revealing filmmaking to be a haphazard and heterogeneous process that would make problematic any attempt to judge a film by its (in)fidelity to any particular "source." In adapting Susan Orlean's novel *The Orchid Thief*—a far-reaching meditation on orchids and the people who pursue them that started out as a profile in *The New Yorker* about the renegade horticulturalist John Laroche—the movie unveils complex layers of intertextual reality: with appearances by Spike Jonze, John Malkovich, John Cusack, and Catherine Keener playing themselves; with real people played by actors, Orlean (Meryl Streep), Laroche (Chris Cooper), Robert McKee (Brian Cox), and Charlie Kaufman (Nicholas Cage); and with a fictional character, Charlie's





twin brother Donald Kaufman (also played by Nicholas Cage), listed in both the movie's and screenplay's credits as though he were a real person. To use the overworked metaphor of the movie critics who endorse it as a literary film that succeeds both with the critics and at the box office, *Adaptation's* meta-narrative makes it a rare Hollywood flower.

Of course, not everyone is impressed by the film's complex self-reflexivity. Writing for *Slate*, David Edelstein is irritated by the movie's attempt "to have it both ways: to be swooningly romantic and brusquely cynical." Stanley Kauffmann, with a condescension befitting *The New Republic's* fossilized leftism, proclaims, "Virtually everything that happens in *Adaptation* is almost juvenile showing off," not the least of which is the movie's impudent premise—"a film that is in search of a script." Stephanie Zacharek, writing for *Salon*, also slams the movie for being "[s]elf-referential to the extreme," but unlike most reviewers she detects an element of machismo in Kaufman's metafiction that she characterizes as "meta-macho." Further, she seems attuned to the gender roles at work when she describes Orlean's story as "melting away by the end of the movie subsumed by [Kaufman's] own neuroses." Instead of developing this gender critique, however, she keeps the movie in an aesthetic context comparing it to other films that, unlike *Adaptation*, "show an awareness on the filmmaker's part of what it means to turn words into movies." But any critical framework is obscured by the invective she heaps upon the film: "cowardly," "a cheap in-joke," "completely self-indulgent," "a faux-grand concept," and so forth. Citing Robin Wood's insistence that "there is no such thing as a faithful adaptation," she acknowledges the need to rethink adaptation and the rights of the adaptor, but then inexplicably criticizes *Adaptation* for "exercis[ing] those rights to the breaking point." No less than the screenwriter Kaufman, it would appear, Zacharek wants to have it both ways.

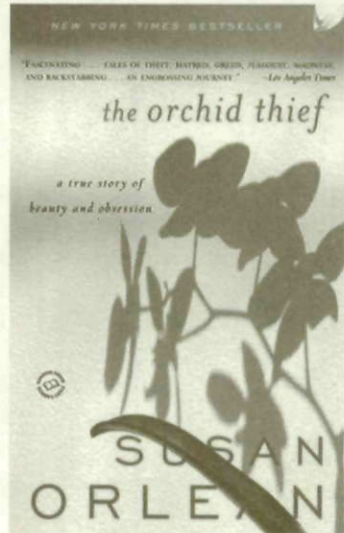
In my attempt to follow the "sociological turn" Andrew calls for in film studies, my reading of *Adaptation* develops Zacharek's nascent gender critique; however, before doing that, it is necessary to fully acknowledge the movie's success in taking the rights of the adaptor "to the breaking point," as she terms it. Calling *Adaptation* "a wonderful essay on the creative process," Kenneth Turan of the *Los Angeles Times* extends the theory of *le camera stylo* to put the adaptor on the level of an essayist. In *Sight & Sound*, Henry Bean says it more forcefully, calling the movie's screenplay nothing less than "the revenge of the writer"—a point of view that is also shared by Kaufman's colleagues. Robert McKee, the real-life screenwriter and teacher played by Brian Cox in the movie,



describes Kaufman as “an old-fashioned Modernist” (131), writing in the “palaeo-avant-garde tradition” of Strindberg, Proust, Pirandello, and Kafka, among other “luminaries of the Modern” (131). And screenwriter Stephen Schiff (*Lolita*, 1997; *The Deep End of the Ocean*, 1999), embracing the film as a manifesto, asserts that Kaufman’s work offers “redemption” to himself and his fellow screenwriters who have been “struggling to adapt to the world’s dismissive view of adaptation,” while taking the opportunity to disabuse moviegoers of the illusion that there is any such thing as “a truly faithful adaptation.”

The comments by these reviewers and Kaufman’s colleagues are consonant with the views expressed by Naremore and the other scholars who wish to banish fidelity criticism because of its Victorian prudery and literary elitism. Long overshadowed by the director—whom auteur theory, the New Wave, and film schools helped to establish as the primary creative agent behind a film—Kaufman’s success as a screenwriter reflects a new sensibility. Indeed, a new respect for the work of adaptation and the role of the screenwriter go hand in hand. Provoked in part by *Adaptation*’s screenplay, along with other Oscar nominees, this new sensibility was illustrated by the controversy among Academy Award voters in 2002. They found that year’s nominees unsettling the Academy’s traditional distinction between “original screenplay” and “adapted screenplay”—debating whether a nominee for best original screenplay, such as *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* (Joel Zwick) was more like an adaptation, while *Adaptation*, a nominee for best adapted screenplay, was more like an original screenplay. The Academy’s confusion on this score is not without precedents; nonetheless, as Rick Lyman of *The New York Times* reports, it led some to wonder, “in an age of narrative deconstruction and ‘reality television,’” whether the distinction between original and adaptation was still valid.

While Kaufman’s screenplay helps one to appreciate adaptation as an intertextual process that transcends, in the words of Stam, “the aporias of ‘fidelity’” (64), one also needs to avoid what might be called the “aporias of adaptation.” One such aporia shared by most movie reviewers and Kaufman’s colleagues is the gendered social context informing Kaufman’s adaptation of Orlean’s novel *The Orchid Thief*. Although Orlean is an enthusiastic supporter of the movie, she suggests the terms of fidelity criticism may still be useful when she describes Kaufman’s adaptation of her novel as going “from faithful to crazily unfaithful” (Boxer). The notion of Kaufman’s “crazily unfaithful” screenplay opens the movie, as well as Orlean’s novel, to an ideological reading that has been ignored by both its many supporters and few detractors—that is, the movie’s sexual politics. More generally, it suggests that in the effort to recognize the creative value of adaptation, one still needs to be wary of replacing one sort of formalist framework with another, obscuring a fuller accounting of a given text’s social and political environment.



It is worth keeping in mind that the view of the screenwriter as the Rodney Dangerfield of filmmaking is understood, like so much in filmmaking, on a sexual level. In Richard Corliss's path-breaking rejoinder to auteur theory, *The Hollywood Screenwriters*, Carl Foreman (*High Noon*, 1952; *The Guns of Navarone*, 1961) attempts to explain the screenwriter's misunderstood and undervalued place within the film industry with an old-fashioned chauvinism that is almost touching in its unself-consciousness. Describing the screenwriter's relationship to the director and producer of a film, he says:

If you are a man [as a screenwriter] you suddenly find yourself in an unaccustomedly feminine position, simultaneously wooed by two lovers, and you begin to suspect (correctly) that when you have given birth to your child, one or the other of these swains is going to take it away from you and raise it his way. (30-31)

Despite his "feminine position," Foreman maintains that the screenwriter can also be "gelded" (31) when, without warning, one or the other of his untrustworthy "swains" replaces him with another screenwriter. But in the phallogocentric imagination this is not much of a contradiction since there is a negligible difference between a woman and a castrated man. Nonetheless, whether the screenwriter suffers like a "screwed" woman or a "gelded" man, Foreman claims he can at least take comfort in the knowledge that, unbeknownst to most, "a director without a screenplay" is "like a Don Juan without a penis" (33).

Nowadays, one hopes, it would be hard to find a screenwriter using Foreman's unabashed phallogocentrism to describe his or her role in filmmaking—at least not intentionally or on the record.<sup>1</sup> And Kaufman's description of his attraction to Orlean's novel is no exception. However, his choice of *The Orchid Thief* does take place within a gendered context that betrays a level of anxiety about the obligations of a screenwriter in assuming a "feminine position." Calling Orlean's novel "just a really good book" and saying that he "liked Orlean's voice" (Zalewski), Kaufman uses the expected platitudes to explain why he was drawn to a work of literature that would not appear to lend itself to filmmaking. If we foreground the fact that Orlean's voice is a woman's and her book is a "woman's book,"<sup>2</sup> however, we can speculate on Kaufman's masculine attraction to it. He explains in his interview with Rob Feld, published along with the shooting script of the film, that he was attracted to the novel because it was different from the "weird stuff" he was being sent at the time due to his reputation as the "weirdo" (123) based on his work in *Being John Malkovich* (1999). Similarly, in his interview with Daniel Zalewski, he emphasizes the departure Orlean's novel provided from his prior work and, more specifically, that he was drawn to the novel's "muted, contemplative quality" because he was "interested in doing a small intimate piece that didn't have pyrotechnics."

Although initially attracted to the feminine space that Orlean's work provides, Kaufman eventually begins to regret his decision to "dramatize the idea of a flower" (Feld 123). Charlie's fictional struggle to adapt Orlean's book is based on what Kaufman describes as the "months of depression" (Zalewski) he suffered because of his inability to complete an adaptation of *The Orchid Thief* for which

Sony Pictures had already paid him. In his apparent failure to translate a “woman’s book,” Charlie assumes a feminine position, or, as he says of his failure to master the material at one point in the film, “I’m fucked” (49). Kaufman expresses his proximity to the feminine abyss in more polite terms. By the end of his struggle to adapt the novel, he says, “it was almost hysteria” (qtd. in Zalewski),<sup>3</sup> a concept that both etymologically and conventionally is linked to women.

However, as close as Charlie/Kaufman may have gotten to an inescapable femininity, he avoids becoming a woman and eventually finds his manhood—not unlike Foreman’s “gelded” screenwriter who pulls the phallic screenplay out of his hat and/or pants to rescue that “Don Juan without a penis,” the director. In his review of *Adaptation*, J. Hoberman seems to have a similar appreciation for the screenwriter’s veiled phallic potential when he mentions “the old joke about the aspiring starlet so



dumb she came to Hollywood and screwed the writers.” In *Adaptation*, Kaufman puts a new twist on the old joke, making the writer such a vortex of self-doubt he would not be able to take advantage of the “dumbest starlet,” much less the sharp professional women found in Kaufman’s script. Throughout

the film, Charlie’s struggle as a writer is cinematically and thematically interwoven with his sexual struggles with women. So much so it seems misleading to call his love life a sub-plot, although technically speaking it is. Painfully self-conscious about himself, he trashes one false start after another as he tries to turn Orlean’s novel into a screenplay. The same self-consciousness interferes with his attempts to have relationships with various women. These parallel plot lines converge, however, when he cannot bring himself to face Orlean, whom by this time he has built into a sexual fantasy,<sup>4</sup> in an attempt to break through his writer’s block.

Furthermore, his difficulties with women are used to draw out the contrast with his unselfconscious brother Donald, who “scores” as effortlessly with women as he does with screenwriting. Lacking Charlie’s artistic scruples and experience, Donald, the neophyte who will stoop to any cliché or cheap device to advance his screenplay’s plot, receives a six-figure contract for his first effort—a formulaic and absurd serial-killer movie, *The Three*, that their mother admires as a cross between *Psycho* and *Silence of the Lambs*. Unlike Charlie, Donald is fully in touch with his masculine side. He is spontaneous and outgoing, whereas Charlie is proper and withdrawn; Donald writes a wild action movie, whereas Charlie is consumed by a book about flowers; even their diet reflects their masculine and feminine orientations—in one scene, Donald is “chomping on a hoagie” while Charlie, who constantly frets about his



weight, “picks at his salad” (21). To some extent, this odd-couple duo reflects Jonze and Kaufman, the former notorious for his “irreverent exhibitionism” (Feld 116) and the latter for his shyness. But, more generally, it could also describe the “active” and “visual” interests of the director in contrast with the “contemplative” and “literary” interests of the screenwriter. Moreover, both the concepts of the visual and the literary are aligned with the explicit and implicit gender dynamics of the movie.

Kaufman’s unstable relationship with the literary source of his inspiration is humorously spoofed in the movie when Charlie describes the novel as that “great, sprawling *New Yorker* stuff” (5) to Valerie (Tilda Swinton) the studio executive. Later, talking to his agent Marty (Ron Livingston) and feeling frustrated in his attempts to adapt the novel, he refers to it as “that sprawling *New Yorker* shit” (50). Along with Charlie’s identification of Orlean’s writing as “*New Yorker* stuff,” she is visually linked with the magazine in a striking manner when Charlie goes to visit her at the magazine’s headquarters in New York. Shot from Charlie’s perspective as the elevator doors open, the scene reveals *The New Yorker*’s upscale lobby and an impressive sign spelling out the magazine’s name in large silver letters in the iconic font used on its covers. Charlie remains frozen in the elevator as Orlean’s character steps into view metonymically linking her to the name of the magazine, and thereby visually linking the literary with a paralyzing femininity.

In turn, *The New Yorker* is a metonym for a larger whole represented by New York, which asserts itself from the moment Orlean first meets Laroche in the parking lot of the Florida courthouse where he testifies in a case charging him with poaching orchids. Ultimately, Kaufman’s identification of Orlean with *The New Yorker* magazine serves a larger constellation of race, class, gender, and geographical dualisms that are particularly crucial in the movie’s sexualization/romanticization of Orlean’s journalistic relationship with Laroche. A “charmingly shy” (16) Orlean approaches Laroche, introducing herself as “a writer for *The New Yorker*.” As she begins to explain, “It’s a magazine that—” Laroche cuts her short, “I’m familiar with *The New Yorker*. *The New Yorker*, yes, *The New Yorker*. Right?” (16). *The New Yorker*’s status as a *literary* magazine goes hand



in hand with her condescension, betraying the class assumptions of a sophisticated New York professional confronting a toothless Floridian redneck. These class differences are further dramatized in a dinner scene with Orlean and her husband. Back in New York, she serves up details about Laroche, her latest project, for the amusement of her urbane guests. Her betrayal of Laroche contrasts

her inauthentic upper-class New York society with the authenticity of the working-class Laroche and Florida’s wilderness. However, when she sees her reflection in the bathroom mirror, she begins to sense her alienation from the comfortable but enervated world of her family and friends.

As often happens in American culture, if one is talking about sex, race cannot be far behind. With finely drawn portraits of contemporary Seminoles—like Chief James Billie, the entrepreneurial Vietnam-veteran who brought gambling to the reservation, increasing the tribe's yearly revenue by the millions—and historical figures—like Chief Osceola whose head was cut off by whites and put on display in a museum—Orlean's novel presents a thoughtful account of the unconquered Seminoles' complex relations with the real-life Laroche, the Fakahatchee swamp, and the white community surrounding their reservation. In an apparent effort to enhance the fictional Laroche's cinematic virility, however, Kaufman turns Orlean's portrait of the Seminoles into crude stereotypes.

The most prominent Indian in the movie is Matthew Osceola (Jay Tavare), one of Laroche's flunkies. High on psychotropic orchid dust, he stares at Orlean and announces, "I can see your sadness. It's lovely" (22). Whacked out on drugs, the primitive other sees through the white woman's façade and into her (essential) being. Far from being offended by his approach, Orlean's character is, as the screenplay puts it, "taken" (22) with the handsome Indian. Later in the movie, Laroche will supply Orlean with the orchid



dust in order to help her "loosen up" and find her passion. In a flashback, he explains to her how he learned of the drug. On a stormy night, he finds a trailer filled with "a bunch of young, stoned Indian men" (81). In addition to singing, staring off into space, and pulverizing the orchids, two of the men "make out" (81). Having witnessed this orgy of "deviant" acts, Laroche explains to Orlean that he is "probably the only white guy" (82) who knows how to extract the drug. Like other legendary white men from Natty Bumppo to Carlos Castaneda, Laroche acquires the native Indian's primitive life force and makes it safe for consumption by other whites.

Another character that Kaufman reduces to an oversimplified stereotype is Charles Darwin. While Orlean's novel does not provide a feminist reading of Darwin, she does alert her readers to the fact that he was a Victorian man and, as such, his science might reflect the prejudices of his day. In discussing Darwin's particular fondness for his "beloved Orchids" (47), she recounts his experiments to determine how they release their pollen: "He experimented by poking them with needles, camel-hair brushes, bristles, pencils, and his fingers. He discovered that parts were so sensitive that they released pollen upon the slightest touch, but that 'moderate degrees of violence' on the less sensitive parts had no effect [...]" (48). In contrast to this humorous view of Darwin as the historically situated *man* of science, the movie depicts Darwin (Bob Yerkes) as the stereotypical Man of Science.

Kaufman incorporates some of Orlean's discussion of Darwin's study of orchids, but the portion he uses advances the screenplay's sexualization/romanticization of Orlean's relationship with Laroche. At an orchid show, Laroche explains to Orlean about Darwin's theory that a particular orchid, *angraecum sesquipedale*, is



tion as a “little dance” (24) between flower and insect. “[The] only barometer you have is your heart [...]” (24) he tells Orlean, who is clearly taken aback and moved by the depth of his soliloquy.

It is as though Laroche is channeling not only what Darwin *says*, but also what he *represents*—or, rather, Kaufman and Jonze’s representation of him. In their cinematic visualization of Darwin, alone in his greenhouse, he appears to be the quintessential Victorian patriarch—the “father” of the theory of evolution. As such, he is also more figuratively the “father” of us all, or at least, “modern man.”<sup>25</sup> The old sage holds the key to whatever happiness his heirs may find in the world he has bequeathed them. In explaining his love of plants to Orlean, Laroche distills the life lesson within Darwin’s theory of evolution, “Adaptation’s a profound process. It means you figure out how to thrive in the world” (35). In adapting Darwin’s theory of evolution to the tragic love plot of Laroche and Orlean, as well as Charlie’s sexual/creative breakthrough, the significant change is the relatively ambiguous term “thrive” that replaces Darwin’s term “survive”—as in his much-abused quote, “In the struggle for survival the fittest win out at the expense of their rivals because they succeed in adapting themselves best to their environment” ([www.age-of-the-sage.org](http://www.age-of-the-sage.org)). Regardless of whether one is speaking of an individual or a species, while thriving is open to interpretation, survival is not. Kaufman’s “infidelity” to Darwin accommodates the contemporary moviegoer who expects—like Orlean and Charlie—not only to survive, but to thrive.

Despite this moment of filial infidelity, in other significant ways the movie remains faithful to Darwin, for example, in the cinematically effective montage representing his theory of evolution. The movie’s depiction of evolution is framed, figuratively and literally, by Charlie’s personal growth—as though the logical beginning and end of the evolutionary process is the well-adapted individual. The montage is prompted by Charlie’s question to himself, “Why am I here. How did I get here?” (3), and concludes with a close-up on the bawling face of a newborn baby, whom the viewer assumes is Charlie, an assumption reinforced by the next scene that begins with a close-up on the face of the adult Charlie sweating profusely while struggling to survive a luncheon with the attractive studio executive Valerie. Furthermore, along with the absent presence of Charlie’s mother throughout the film, her reduction in the movie’s depiction of the evolutionary process to an unidentified body disgorging the male protagonist seems troubling.

To better appreciate how the movie maintains Darwin’s individualist assumptions, Evelyn Fox Keller’s influential and wide-ranging critique of biology and scientific

pollinated by a moth with a twelve-inch proboscis. When Orlean takes exception to Laroche for telling her that proboscis means “nose,” he chides her, “Hey, let’s not get off the subject. This isn’t a pissing contest” (23). After this scene bristling with phallic imagery—and with his female pupil sufficiently chastised—Laroche proceeds to wax poetic about pollina-



discourse provides further context. Looking at how language and ideology have shaped evolutionary theory, she argues that the assumptions of a “methodological individualism” (129) inherited from Darwin persists in the biological sciences:

Much as the atomic individual in political and economic discourse is simultaneously divested of sex and invested with the attributes of the “universal man” (as if equality can prevail only in the absence of sexual differentiation), so too, the biological individual is undifferentiated, anonymous, and autonomous—assumed even to be capable (perhaps like the head of the family in the political sphere) of reproducing itself. (148)

*Adaptation*'s depiction of Charlie's evolution shares similar assumptions of autonomous and anonymous reproduction. This is reinforced by the movie's use of the ghost orchid whose agile mutability makes it a symbol of those who, as Laroche would say, “figure out how to thrive in the world” (35). At one point, Charlie seems defeated by his efforts at autonomous self-reproduction when his initial inspiration to turn Orlean's novel into a story about himself reaches an apparent dead end and he concludes, “I'm insane. I'm Ourobouros” (60). But the snake eating its tail, depending on how one reads it, can either be a symbol of inescapable repetition or of liberating renewal. Charlie is able to find his way to the latter reading with the help of Donald's transformative advice—which, significantly, stems from his adolescent triumph over the feminine rejection by his childhood sweetheart, Sarah Marsh—“You are what you love, not what loves you” (93). Delivered shortly before he dies, this insight crystallizes for Charlie what he needs both as a writer and a man. Donald's advice sounds good and may even work, but the formulation still preserves an assumption of autonomous individuality that marginalizes the (feminine) other.

In passing, Keller considers possible parallels between the “methodological individualism” she uncovers in evolution theory and Christopher Lasch's critique of “narcissistic individualism” emerging out of post-World War II American consumerism, especially Barbara Ehrenreich's reading of it that sees it as bringing forth a new ideal of masculinity “measured not by commitment, responsibility, or success as family provider, but precisely by the strength of a man's autonomy in the private sphere, his resistance to the demands of a hampering female” (qtd. in Keller 158). In this regard, it is significant that despite Charlie's eventual victory he remains unattached. Even better for him it seems, when Charlie meets his former love interest Amelia (Cara Seymour) at the end of the movie, she tells him that she loves him, but now that she is with someone else, he acquires the love of a woman without “the demands of a hampering female.”





“Narcissistic individualism” also helps to explain the movie’s nostalgic evocation of Darwin and McKee as redemptive father figures. Unlike their mother who is often referred to by the brothers, Charlie and Donald’s father is never mentioned. Due to the breakdown of the patriarchal family Lasch describes, Charlie and Donald—like their post-

modern brethren—are without “real” fathers. They must fashion their masculinity after larger-than-life fathers wherever they may find them—in movies, in history, or in writing seminars. But the movie’s nostalgic representation of Darwin, specifically, may reflect other aspects of the postmodern condition beyond gender. As Keller points out, with the advances of genetic engineering and biophysics making the project of “dominating nature” a reality, it becomes harder and harder to separate the “social and material dimensions of the knowledge/power nexus.” Thanks to the blurring of these dimensions, as Keller says, “we have all become postmodernists” (94). While this may be true, *Adaptation* suggests we are, at the least, conflicted postmodernists. In the midst of the film’s dazzling intertextual celebration of adaptation as cultural practice, it promotes a quite unpostmodern view of biological adaptation<sup>6</sup> as individual progress “fathered” by Darwin as a Man of Science.

Another aspect of the film’s conflicted postmodernism comes from its reliance on a conservative sexual attitude in order to dramatize Charlie’s creative and sexual “failure.” In three different scenes, Charlie’s recourse to masturbation, which serves as a metaphor for his frustrated attempts to write, evokes almost Biblical anxieties about “unproductive” (sexual) pleasure.<sup>7</sup> The first of the three masturbation scenes occurs after Charlie has twice blown it with Amelia, an attractive and unassuming violinist who is obviously eager for a romantic relationship, but Charlie is either unwilling or unable to kiss her. Not long after this, while reading Orlean’s novel in a restaurant, he is attracted to Alice (Judy Greer), a waitress “with glorious, orange hair, pouty lips, soulful eyes, and a voluptuous form” (29). From the restaurant, the scene segues to her with Charlie at an orchid show, where she seductively removes her uniform. Kneeling down before her, Charlie draws her pelvis toward his face. At which point, the scene cuts to Donald knocking on Charlie’s bedroom door, and Charlie is found in a state of masturbation interruptus.

The fact that it is Donald who intrudes upon Charlie’s erotic fantasy emphasizes that he, unlike Charlie who is reduced to fantasy substitutes, has a “real girlfriend,” Caroline (Maggie Gyllenhaal)—a fact that seems to further irritate Charlie. Earlier, in retaliation for Charlie’s snide putdowns of his screenplay, Donald reminds him of his failure with Amelia. From Charlie’s perspective, Donald’s sexual prowess is entirely emasculating; however, the viewer begins to perceive that Donald’s success

with women, as well as writing, is part of his realistic and unselfconscious approach to life that holds the key to solving Charlie's masturbatory "problems."

The second and third masturbation scenes occur close to one another and follow Charlie's oscillating attempts to break through his writer's block. The first of the two happens after his agent Marty leaves a voice-message reminding him that Valerie, the studio executive who hired him to adapt Orlean's book, is "anxious to see a draft"(48). Like the scene with the waitress Alice, there is a seamless transition to his fantasy with Valerie, dressed in a white t-shirt and intently reading Charlie's script in bed. After Charlie joins her on the bed, she proclaims, "You're a genius. You're a genius" (48), whereupon she straddles him, and they have sex until Charlie ejaculates, returning the viewer to his empty bedroom.

This time Donald is not there to save his brother from his self-absorbed fantasies, and Charlie himself gives voice to his sexual/creative failure. After ejaculating, he goes to his typewriter where he reads a passage of what he has written, concluding, "I'm fucked"(49)—the joke being that he has literally and figuratively "fucked" himself. But Donald and the rebuke he represents are not far away. Following a montage of desperate attempts by Charlie to start writing, the scene ends with him still in his bedroom listening to Donald and his girlfriend playfully wrestling in the room next to his.

The third and final masturbation scene occurs when Charlie awakes at three a.m. still creatively blocked and picking up his heavily highlighted copy of Orlean's book. Moved by a passage about Orlean's belief that "the reason it matters to care passionately about something is that it whittles the world down to a more manageable size" (54), he is then drawn to the author's photo on the book to which he masturbates. As in his earlier sexual fantasy with the studio executive Valerie, the author Orlean is on top of him, literally and figuratively looking down on him as they make love. In the "post-coital" conversation that follows, his old self-doubts return, but she reassures him, reminding him to "Just find the one thing that you care passionately about [...] then write about that" (55). This masturbatory episode seems the most successful of the three, leading to a moment of creative inspiration that will serve as the seed of his eventual breakthrough—his recognition that the "key" to Orlean's narrative, beneath all the novelistic stuff about orchids, Indians, Darwin, Florida land deals, and so forth is the writer's passionate desire "to care about something passionately" (55).

In the morning after, as an illustration of how successful he has been, Charlie is in unusually good spirits when he meets Donald and Caroline, whom Donald calls his "muse" (56) as they kiss and giggle. Despite Charlie's new equanimity toward the couple, Donald's real-life sexual partner figures as an implicit rebuke to Charlie's masturbatory muse. This becomes clear enough when later that day Valerie, who is waiting for Orlean in a restaurant, spots Charlie. Feeling trapped, he makes the excuse that he cannot meet Orlean because doing so would make him, as he puts it, "beholden" (58) to the author. Afraid to let go of his masturbatory muse, his inspiration soon founders. Not until Donald helps him to meet Orlean in the flesh will he be able to break free of the spell she has cast upon him—the spell of idealized femininity that Charlie has been laboring under all the while.

Donald's role in breaking Orlean's spell is more deeply embedded in the movie's gender dynamic however. It is only after Charlie meets the source of Donald's inspiration, the patriarchal screenwriting teacher Robert McKee, that he is in a position to break free of his dependence on the feminine ideal. Throughout their relationship, Donald has been telling Charlie to seek out the "genius" McKee, even at one point taping the teacher's Ten Commandments of screenwriting to Charlie's workstation. Unable to face Orlean in New York and unable to progress in his writing he attends McKee's seminar. Mustering his courage, from his seat in the packed auditorium he asks McKee about his attempt to remain faithful to Orlean's novel, or as he puts it, to "create a story where nothing much happens" (68). McKee replies with a furious denunciation worthy of an Old Testament prophet.

Although humiliated, Charlie is also shaken "to the bone" (69) by his words, as he tells McKee in seeking a private audience with him, which he grants. But the advice McKee gives his new convert is general and rather obvious. The "secret" he tells Charlie is that: "The last act makes the film. Wow them in the end and you 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*. Your characters must change. And the change must come from them" (70). Its shopworn aspect is not the only feature that undercuts McKee's advice. His warning not to use a *deus ex machina* is made ironic by the fact that his own character fulfills this function in the movie; likewise his earlier injunction against voiceover occurs in a movie that uses voiceover extensively. The self-reflexive irony of McKee's advice reinforces the viewer's sense that, as with Darwin, it is not so much what McKee has to *say* that is important as what he *represents*—a supportive father figure who dishes out plenty of tough love. As he gives Charlie a reassuring hug good-bye, he literally feels the similarity to a prior pupil of his, Donald. Through this paternal feeling, he helps Charlie to recognize "the Donald" within himself. When Charlie explains they are twins, McKee mentions Julius and Philip Epstein, the twin-brother screenwriting team that wrote the "finest screenplay ever written" (71), *Casablanca*. This points the way to Charlie's eventual collaboration with Donald that will redeem him as a screenwriter and a man.<sup>8</sup>

Because Charlie is unable to meet Orlean in person, Donald, posing as his brother, interviews her and is the first to suspect that she has something to hide. Donald then helps Charlie get in touch with his masculine side by showing him that his feminine ideal is being "unfaithful" to her husband; and thus revealing her to be the flipside of the idealized woman—the Whore. Spying on Orlean with binoculars, against Charlie's feeble protests, it is Donald who spots her adulterous relationship with Laroche—although, initially, he ascribes her "weird" behavior with her husband to possible lesbianism (78). But the definitive proof of her infidelity, as well as her whorishness, is provided when Donald discovers a photograph of her on Laroche's porn site. With this "ocular proof" of her infidelity, the brothers give chase.

The rationale for their pursuit is never given, although it is a necessary step in the narrative progression toward the violent and transformative ending in the Fakahatchee swamp, where Laroche and Donald die. Before he dies, however, Donald imparts to Charlie the power to confront the feminine ideal that threatens to destroy

the male worshiper by not returning his love. After learning of his brother's adolescent triumph over the feminine deceit of little Sarah Marsh—resulting in the maxim “You are what you love, not what loves you”(93)—Charlie is able to face his demons at both ends of the Virgin-Whore dichotomy. As a devastated Orlean calls him a “loser” and “fat fuck” (96)—terms of abuse that the self-conscious Charlie once tortured himself with—Charlie now stands up to the (fallen) feminine ideal, shouting back, “Fuck you, lady! You're just a lonely, old desperate, pathetic drug addict!” (96).



The viewer can applaud Charlie's victory, but he or she should also consider which characters lose and why. While the movie's action-packed ending follows Mckee's advice—“wow them in the end and you've got a hit”—some critics had their doubts. Most of these, however, limited their concerns to the ending's use of the Hollywood formulas that the movie, at least at some level, is critiquing. In the reviews I read, only Sarah Boxer, writing for *The New York Times*, raised any questions about the gender clichés at work in the movie's ending, which drove the real-life Orlean to insist that she is not a “gun-toting floozy.”

Despite such observations, both Boxer and Orlean appear eager to maintain a good-humored acceptance of Kaufman's infidelity toward her novel. Nevertheless, when Orlean first read the screenplay, she thought “the whole thing ‘seemed completely nuts’” and wondered whether she wanted “that much visibility” (Boxer). She decided to give her consent on the condition they not use her name. This solution, however, would not work because she did not want her book “in a movie with someone else's name on it” (Boxer). Forced to choose between an uncomfortable visibility and the loss of authorship—in addition to the authority already lost—she “chose” the former.

One of the lessons to learn from Orlean's example is not to forget that the authority of both the author and the screenwriter occurs within a gendered social context. Using the terminology of his day, Andre Bazin, in arguing for the film's right to depart from its literary source, starkly displays how gendered assumptions can inform one's understanding of the process of adaptation:

If the novelist is not happy with the adaptation of his work, I, of course, grant him the right to defend the original (although he sold it, and thus is guilty of an act of prostitution that deprives him of many of his privileges as the creator of his work). I grant him this right only because no one has yet found anyone better than parents to defend the rights of children until they come of age. One should not identify this natural right with an a priori infallibility, however. (25)

I think the harshness of Bazin's terms illustrate the extent to which, in his day, the literary text dominated, perhaps even tyrannized, its cinematic adaptation. It is

doubtful that in our media-saturated environment, where TV shows, video games, and rides at Disneyland are adapted to film as seamlessly as literary works once were, that sort of domination still pertains. Nevertheless, we could even go so far as to grant Bazin his point that the authors who sell their works are guilty of prostitution, as long as we recognize that the filmmakers and screenwriters who enjoy their services are not innocent either.

Sergio Rizzo  
Morehouse College

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Although the thrust is significantly different, even the women filmmakers in Corliss's collection can describe the screenwriter's position as a feminine one. Penelope Gilliat (*Sunday Bloody Sunday* [1971]), for example, complains, "[T]he screenwriters in this country have been put in the position of being whores. They have no authority, absolutely none" (Corliss 238).

<sup>2</sup> This was impressed upon me when I went to purchase Orlean's novel at a Borders bookstore in a suburb of Chicago. The book was shelved in the gardening section, not with other works of literature.

<sup>3</sup> Apparently, Orlean's novel had proven itself to be difficult material for more than one screenwriter to master. In extolling Kaufman's "prodigious imagination," screenwriter Steven Schiff reveals that, prior to Kaufman's attempt, he and David Henry Hwang had been asked to adapt the novel into a screenplay, but both declined because neither of them "knew what to do with it."

<sup>4</sup> In their interview with Rob Feld, Jonze and Kaufman mention Meryl Streep's influence on the editing of the film, bringing their attention to Charlie's "Fixation and interest in Susan Orlean's writing" (124). It's interesting to speculate on the gender dynamics within the collaboration between the famous older actress and the emerging *enfants terribles*, Jonze and Kaufman.

<sup>5</sup> This impression is reinforced by a scene that Joel Stein mentions: "In the final cut, [Jonze] excised the most indulgent scene of the movie—a long violent fight between Aristotle and Charles Darwin [...]." Underwriting Darwin's role in the movie, the personification of Philosophy and Science as antagonistic foes fosters the ideology of science as providing a "neutral" or "objective" knowledge grounded in material facts free of metaphysical speculation and subjective bias.

<sup>6</sup> Filmmakers sometimes refer to the screenplay as the "blueprint" of the movie. Similarly, scientists refer to the gene as providing a "blueprint" for life. The blueprint analogy, one could argue, advocates a forward-looking understanding of the evolutionary process as moving toward some unfinished future while the analogy of adaptation involves essentially backward-looking comparisons of the present with prior finished forms or stages.

<sup>7</sup> Lucas Hilderbrand's theoretically astute movie review of *Adaptation* in *Film Quarterly* 58.1 (Fall 2004) drew my attention to the film's masturbatory episodes. However, I am not persuaded by his argument that the movie "productively narrativizes masturbation's myriad associations, pathologies, and possibilities." Instead, I find the film's use of masturbation draws on and reinforces conventional dualisms: masturbation vs. sex, fantasy vs. reality, and female vs. male.

<sup>8</sup>The reference to *Casablanca* seems curiously overdetermined both in terms of Charlie's development as a man and a screenwriter. The movie recalls a Hollywood masculinity that feeds the juvenile fantasies of the nebbish, so humorously satirized in Woody Allen's *Play It Again, Sam* (1972). Moreover, designating the Epstein brothers as the ones who "wrote *Casablanca*" (71) ignores Howard Koch's work on turning the unpublished play *Everybody Comes to Rick's* into the movie's screenplay—ironically undercutting *Adaptation's* efforts to promote the authorial stature of the adaptor.

<sup>9</sup> Seen as a departure from her more "serious" roles, male reviewers praise Meryl Streep's ability to play the "floozy," which, besides a picture of her posing on a porn site, includes a scene where Orlean, high on drugs, enjoys an electric toothbrush while her mouth foams with toothpaste. David Ansen of *Newsweek* enthuses, "[Streep] hasn't been this much fun to watch in years."

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