

Still Life in a Narrative Age: Charlie Kaufman's *Adaptation*¹

I don't really have anything *against* stories, but I just want to feel something happening. I read something that Emily Dickinson said that I'm going to paraphrase: you know something's poetry if a shiver goes up your spine.

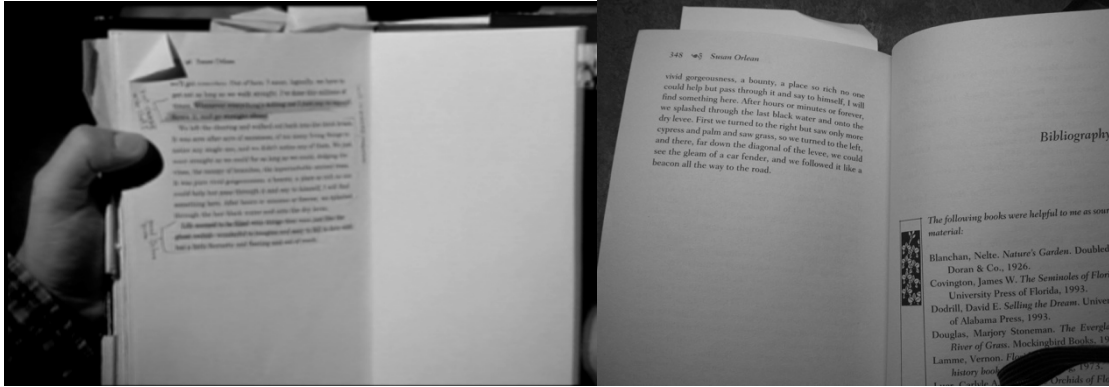
—Charlie Kaufman²

We are living today in the great age of narrative. I do not mean that we are living in the age of great narrative; it is far from certain that W. G. Sebald's *Austerlitz* is aesthetically superior to Dante's *Inferno*, or that Milan Kundera's *Ignorance*, stunning as it is, makes for a better "nostos" than the *Odyssey*. I mean simply that we Westerners are more obsessed with stories—good, bad, and indifferent—than ever before. We no longer have the slightest time for lyric poetry,³ but instead consume infinite quantities of novels and films and television shows, and the programs we like most are those which feature transformation, metamorphosis, *Bildung*, whether spiritual growth or just physical improvement. (We are living, one could also say, in the age of the *makeover*.) In the world of philosophy it has become an article of faith that selfhood must be understood narratively,⁴ and in some quarters it is even believed that the nature of *any* given entity is nothing more nor less than the history of that entity. In literary criticism, the great motto is "always historicize." (Why not "always philosophize"? Philosophers, it seems, are less imperialist—or at least more polite—in their dealings with other disciplines.) Even the artworld has become invaded by the spirit of narrativity, with a creeping tendency toward kinetic works. We are deeply impatient with the static. If it doesn't move, we refuse to look at it.

Yet out there in the world, nothing has changed. It is not that atemporal phenomena—the beauty of a landscape, say, or of an individual's personality—have suddenly become less valuable, in real terms. It is just that we are paying less and less attention to them, and that it is more and more difficult, accordingly, to create a space for their perception. The question is: how is this to be done? How can we rescue non-narrative phenomena from the tsunami of diachronic thinking that threatens to sweep everything away with it? How, in an age obsessed with change, can we enable people to see what sits quietly in front of them?

1: "Why Can't There Be a Movie Simply About Flowers?"

In Charlie Kaufman's *Adaptation* (2002), the central character, also called Charlie Kaufman, attempts to turn Susan Orlean's book *The Orchid Thief* into a full-length feature film. (Although a clean separation is fiendishly hard to make, I shall refer to the screenwriter as "Kaufman" and to his fictional alter ego as "Charlie"; I shall also distinguish between "Susan," the character in *Adaptation*, and "Orlean," author of *The Orchid Thief*. Delightfully, Susan and Orlean have even written two distinct books: while the fictional *Orchid Thief* closes on the phrase "fantastic and fleeting and out of reach," the real-world *Orchid Thief* includes the phrase on page 41, a full 241 pages before the very different ending.⁵) Eschewing the standard devices of Hollywood narrative, Charlie (Nicolas Cage, who also plays Charlie's twin brother, Donald) sets out to make a film that would capture nothing more or less than the magic of orchids, without, needless to say, degenerating into Warholesque tedium. "Why," he asks, "can't there be a movie simply about flowers?"

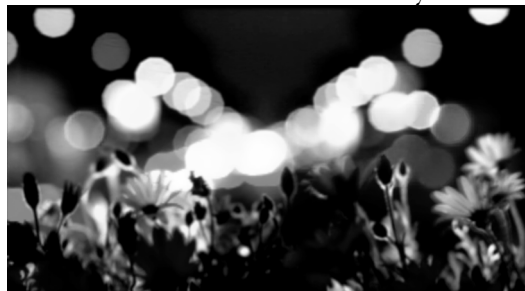


The last page of Susan's book; the last page of Orlean's book

That is the question the film raises explicitly, through its main character. But Charlie's question drags behind it another question, *Kaufman's* question, no longer explicit but equally inescapable. Why would anyone *want* to make a movie simply about flowers? Why on earth would Columbia Studios so much as dream that the right thing to do with a (non-fiction) book about orchids is to turn it into a major motion picture? Why does Charlie (or Kaufman, for that matter) accept the challenge, rather than laughing at its patent absurdity? The answer is, I think, what I mentioned a little earlier: our culture is obsessed with narrative. No-one today would look at paintings of orchids, let alone read sonnets about them, and not many would even watch a documentary about orchids and their hunters. (It is a measure of just how deeply the obsession runs that many viewers sit through the entirety of *Adaptation* without the question ever occurring to them; they focus on Charlie's failure, as though the idea of transforming *The Orchid Thief* into a feature-length Hollywood film were a perfectly reasonable one.) Charlie is forced to make a movie because movies are what we are willing to pay attention to—movies, not poems, let alone flowers themselves. The cost, however, is the introduction of narrative into a domain where none belongs.⁶

2: Stories About Flowers

Could there be a movie that is simply about flowers? Well, perhaps there could be a movie about *a* flower (or at least about a single patch of flowers), depicting the story of its life. But then again, what is the story of a flower? What, to paraphrase Charlie, is a flower's "arc"?⁷ If the phrase makes any sense at all in the present context, it applies to the steady rhythm of anthic life:⁸ seed to bloom, bloom to seed; open at dawn, closed at dusk; an arc of endless simplicity, and the very image, in fact, with which *Adaptation* concludes. For what we see, after Charlie drives away, is a cluster of daisies on the median of the highway. We watch them in time-lapse as they open and close, open and close, to the cheery strains of "Happy Together,"⁹ while the human world (in the form of speeding cars) races on behind them in a steady blur.



Cars and daisies

The juxtaposition of plant and human domains merely serves, however, to throw into starker relief the distinction between the two. For flowers and people occupy radically divergent chronologies. Anthic time is at once too slow and too fast: so slow that it requires time-lapse photography to capture it, so fast that it fails to engage the quasi-empathetic response we are able to grant longer-lived entities like redwoods. (Caring deeply about an individual daisy is about as difficult as caring deeply about a mayfly.) The time of colonies and species is cyclical, not linear—no “arc” here, properly speaking, only a loop—and the time of individual blooms is too brief, too gradual, too predictable. One cannot tell the story of a flower, because stories belong to human time, and flowers have their being outside of that time.¹⁰

3: Stories Around Flowers

It is impossible, then, to tell the story of a flower. What is more, however excited Charlie may be at one point by the idea—“that’s it, that’s what I need to do: tie all of history together!”—it is equally impossible to tell the story of flowers in general (which is to say, tell the entire story of evolution). For as the comedy of the situation immediately makes clear, there is no such thing as the story of everything; a story about everything is a story about nothing. Perhaps, though (and this is the third strategy implicitly proposed by *Adaptation*)¹¹ we could tell a story *around* flowers. Not a story *of* flowers, but a story *involving* flowers, a story that takes flowers as its pretext. A story, say, about intrepid hunters like August Margary who “survived toothache, rheumatism, pleurisy, and dysentery while sailing the Yangtze only to be murdered when he completed his mission and traveled beyond Bhamo.”¹² The risk here, however, is that we either write about *several* orchid hunters, and end up with a series of vignettes rather than a coherent narrative, or write about just one, and run out of things to say. If *The Orchid Thief* proves nothing else, it surely proves this. As Ted Conover aptly notes, in the New York Times review that Charlie quotes so despairingly, “There’s not... nearly enough of [Laroche] to fill a book, so Orlean... digresses in long passages... No narrative really unites these passages.”¹³

Let me just say, for the record, that this is a vast understatement. Orlean goes into astonishing depth on other orchid fanciers like Martin Motes (142-52), Savilla Quick (159-66), and Bob Fuchs (166-83); and not only does she give us more detail than we could ever need about Fuchs (171-5), but she goes on to inform us about his father Freddie, an orchid hunter (170-1), his grandfather Fred, explorer of the swamp (168-9), and even his *great*-grandfather Charles, who moved to Florida and tried to become a farmer before going back to baking (167). (Finally, after a full ten pages of filler, she returns to the point of the whole digression: a robbery at Fuchs’s nursery (176).) Not content with mentioning one Lee Moore, a man on trial for plant smuggling (191), she tells us about his childhood (191), his father (191), his wife Chady (193), the various irrelevant things he and his wife have to say (193-4), the list of flowers he has discovered (195), the newsletter he used to produce (196), a near-death experience he has had (196-7), and his sideline as an antiquities thief (197-8). When at last Orlean asks him if he happens to know Laroche, “Lee squinted and rubbed his chin. ‘Don’t think I know the fellow,’ he said.” (199)¹⁴ Orlean is already flailing for the right story to tell. How is Charlie expected to do any better?

4: Fictions Around Flowers

Perhaps he could resort to a fourth solution: *invent* a story around flowers. Make up a drug scheme involving their use as narcotics. Concoct a love intrigue involving their role as intermediary. Hatch a crime scenario involving murder committed in their name. Devise a friendship plot involving characters who grow, thanks to flowers, to understand each other. This

has the advantage of offering enough material for a film while preserving thematic unity, and it is, of course, exactly what we see toward the end of *Adaptation*. But is also exactly what Charlie has set out to avoid.

Here is Charlie talking to Valerie Thomas (Tilda Swinton) in the very first scene of the movie:

CHARLIE: I'd want to let the movie *exist*, rather than be artificially plot-driven. ... I just don't want to ruin it by making it a Hollywood thing, you know. Like an orchid heist movie, or something... Or, you know, changing the orchids into poppies and turning it into a movie about drug-running... Why can't there be a movie simply about flowers?

VALERIE THOMAS: I guess we thought that maybe Susan Orlean and Laroche could fall in love.

CHARLIE: OK, but... I don't want to cram in sex or guns or car chases. You know? Or characters, you know, learning profound life lessons. Or growing, or coming to like each other, or overcoming obstacles to succeed in the end. You know? I mean, the book isn't like that, and life isn't like that.¹⁵

By the end, however, every last element Charlie has sworn not to include has found its way—more or less in order, indeed—into the film: drugs (the orchids' secret chemical), sex (Orlean and Laroche), guns (Laroche in the swamp), car chases (Donald's death), characters learning profound life lessons (“who you are is what you love, not what loves you”), characters growing (Charlie) and coming to like each other (Charlie and Donald in the swamp), characters overcoming obstacles to succeed in the end (Charlie writing his screenplay). There is even a *deus ex machina*, that device explicitly banned by McKee, in the form of an alligator, and of course generous heapings of voiceover. Charlie has become what he hated, and the film has, by his own standards, failed completely.¹⁶

5: Life Lessons



“Darwin hypothesized a moth”

Early in *Adaptation*, Laroche (Chris Cooper) takes Susan to an orchid show. Laroche bends down to admire an *angraecum sesquipedale*, the orchid with a nectary so long that Darwin postulated the existence in the vicinity of a moth with a twelve-inch proboscis (the daring surmise, which no one believed at the time, ultimately proved correct). And this is what he says:

LAROCHE: *Angraecum sesquipedale*. [A] beauty! God! Darwin wrote about this one. Charles Darwin? Evolution guy? Hello?

ORLEAN (*nodding*): Mmm.

LAROCHE: See that nectary all the way down there? Darwin hypothesized a moth with a nose twelve inches long to pollinate it. And everyone thought he was a loon. Then sure enough, they found this moth with a twelve-inch proboscis. Proboscis means “nose,” by the way.

ORLEAN: I know what proboscis means.

LAROCHE: Hey, let’s not get off the subject. This isn’t a pissing contest. The point is, 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 [that] 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 with it. And 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 lovemaking. 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.



“Its double. Its soul-mate.”

“In this sense, they show us how to live”: the moral of the story is to be yourself, to find the one thing that you are designed to do, to pursue your passion, safe in the (almost Adam-Smithian) knowledge that it will make the world a better place. This sounds like a beautiful idea, made even more beautiful by being connected to the deepest secrets of the physical world—it is as though romantic love were a law of nature, on a par with gravity and the conservation of energy—and by the luscious images of bees and ophrys orchids, often in extreme close-up and shallow focus, set to soft, rising strings. Laroche is drawing on his extensive knowledge of the anthic realm to tell us something vitally important about the human condition, indeed something existentially important, in that it can and should serve as a guide to our behavior. And so we

have the glimmerings of a fifth solution: compensate for the dearth of story by a series of impressions inspired by flowers, a bouquet of flower-shaped thoughts, a set of lessons the plant world has to teach us about what human life is or could be. (This, surely, is Orlean's own strategy: for every aspect of flowers, she seems to feel, there is an analogous point to be made about human life.)

But when we look more closely, we find that there are serious problems with the apparent lesson ostensibly taught by flowers. First of all, there is something unintentionally comical in the claim that the bee "spots another soul-mate flower": the very definition of soul-mate includes the non-negotiable notion of singularity. There can only be *one* soul-mate; there is no such thing as an entire field full of barely distinguishable soul-mates; when you have found your "other half"—"when you spot your flower"—it makes no sense to go on searching (let alone to "make love to" other "soul-mates").¹⁷ And if each bee does not have a specific soul-mate, then this part of nature cannot imply that each of us has a specific vocation; the entire analogy falls apart.¹⁸

In addition, there is every indication that it is not Laroche speaking at all.¹⁹ It is already possible to detect a change in tone, I think, just from reading the text of the scene: beginning with "there's a certain orchid..." Laroche suddenly shifts into a higher register, refined, thoughtful, even lyrical. Instead of "evolution guy" and "pissing contest," we see "the significance of their lovemaking" and "the only barometer you have." But it is clearer still on film, since the sound quality changes dramatically (clearly this part was recorded in a studio, without the ambient noise of the set). What is more, we no longer see Laroche's face.²⁰ The strong suggestion here is that Susan is projecting the ideas onto Laroche, and that the ideas themselves are deeply confused. Susan wants nature to have secrets, and wants humankind to have exceptional individuals—oracles, seers—capable of delivering them. But Kaufman cannot bring himself to feel the same way.

6: A Story About a Story

We are left with a rather despairing option: turn the five failed solutions themselves into a narrative. Tell *the story of the impossibility of telling a story about flowers*. Recount the tale of a screenwriter pounding away at the hard rock face of adaptation and being repeatedly defeated. Perhaps even give this screenwriter an "arc"—allow him to change, progress, develop, solving the technical problem of his movie by solving the psychological problem of his life. Call him, why not?, by one's own name...

Is this a little narcissistic?²¹ Yes, but the beauty of it is that narcissism is the only strategy appropriate to the context. To be sure, Kaufman's movie is really a movie about Kaufman, not Orlean; but then, Orlean's book was really a book about Orlean, not Laroche. *The Orchid Thief* is not about flowers, or Laroche, or even orchid hunting more generally; it is, instead, about the ability, so yearned for by Orlean, "to care about something passionately."²² So too, Charlie projects his own frustrated desire—in his case, for reciprocated attraction, for release from the prison of solipsism—onto the subject matter. (Immediately after an imagined Susan advises him to "find that one thing that you care passionately about and then write about that," the film cuts to Charlie saying into his voice recorder "we see Susan Orlean, delicate, haunted by loneliness, fragile, beautiful."²³) And so, too, *Kaufman* projects onto it *his* own desire, this time for a Hollywood film that would just be about flowers. In short, paradoxically, Kaufman captures the spirit of *The Orchid Thief* precisely by being unfaithful to it.

7: Narrative Destroyed

The story does not end there, however. It might seem as though Kaufman has succeeded in adapting *The Orchid Thief* in a perversely appropriate manner—indeed far more faithfully, in a sense, than if he had simply rewritten its events for the screen—but failed at the much more important task of making a movie about flowers. (Let's be honest, *Adaptation* is about as much about flowers as *Flowers for Algernon* is about flowers.²⁴) Recall, however, that *Adaptation* closes with a time-lapse sequence of daisies on a meridian, an astonishingly powerful sequence, with rhythms borrowed (appropriately enough) from the Fibonacci series²⁵ and set to music that ends in a lush, ethereal harmony. What if this sequence were not just the finale but also the *telos* of the movie?²⁶ What if the entire film were simply building up to the daisies on the meridian, indeed making them possible, *turning them for the first time into something that can be noticed?*²⁷



Street and daisies

This, I want to claim, is the deep strategy of the film, the seventh and only successful approach, the one that finally brings about a victory for the non-narrative (the static, the cyclical) over the narrative. It is, I should add, *Kaufman's* plan, not that of his character. For Charlie declares himself satisfied, and his movie finished, when he has worked out how to write his screenplay:

I have to go right home. I know how to end the script now. It ends with Kaufman driving home after his encounter with Amelia thinking he knows how to finish the script. . . . So. Kaufman drives off from his encounter with Amelia, filled for the first time with hope. I like this. This is good.

Charlie stops here (it is the last we see of him), and Charlie's putative movie stops here.²⁸ But *Adaptation*, and Kaufman, do not. Charlie and Kaufman are, in fact, quite different: unlike Charlie, Kaufman has no twin brother; unlike Charlie, Kaufman is neither fat nor balding; unlike Charlie, Kaufman is not deeply antisocial, and not crippled by neuroses (he admits to sweating under pressure, but this is a far cry from what we see). And unlike Charlie, for these very reasons, Kaufman *does not write himself into his own movie*.²⁹ He writes, instead, a *caricature* of himself into his movie, complete with some traits borrowed from the original (the desire to adapt *The Orchid Thief*, the inability to do so³⁰), some traits distorted or exaggerated (the anxiety), and

some traits simply invented from whole cloth (the weight, the hair loss, the brother).³¹ Charlie is not quite Kaufman, and Charlie's film is not quite the one we have been watching, either.



Kaufman

Not Kaufman

Charlie's film stops at solution six; it becomes a film about a writer attempting to produce a screenplay, and in a sense succeeding (although he fails to tell the story of *The Orchid Thief*, he manages at least to tell his own story). For Charlie, one might say, all that counts is that there be a (workable) screenplay, regardless of its theme. Kaufman's film, by contrast, delivers on the original promise to make a movie that would bring us closer to flowers. And it does so precisely by taking the detour through approaches one to six, by trying each one on only to discard it, by giving us an overdose of what we believed we wanted. Kaufman cannot simply show us flowers, right from the get-go: he must relentlessly rid us of our desire for "more," patiently overcome our temptation to extract morals, meticulously ridicule our demand for stories. The opening of the movie sets the terms of the question; the first part cures us of our desire for flower-based wisdom, for stories around flowers, and for the story of flowers; and the second part, with its cascade of action, cures us by surfeit of our desire for narrative more generally, killing it off, as it were, along with Donald. We are able for the first time to see, actually see, what would have escaped our (full) attention at the start of the film, namely flowers. *Adaptation* is, in the end, not an answer to the question why there can't be a movie simply about flowers.³² But it is not a mere side-stepping of the question either. It is, instead, a reaction to the question *underneath* the question, the question why we are so obsessed with narrative in the first place. It is not a statement but an *action*, a philosophical therapy.³³ Its value lies in what it does, and what it does is to make the essentially atemporal life of flowers available once again to human beings, via the only medium they still take seriously.

8: The Triumph of Still Life

Can this really be right? Consider, again, the Hollywoodized portion of the film, that thirty-minute sequence that recycles every last trope Charlie has sworn to avoid.³⁴ Why should we not consider this a sell-out, an abject capitulation to the imperious demand for narrative?³⁵ After all, even the calmer sequence that concludes the film, following the death of Donald, could be seen as part of the same general trend. To be sure, the tone changes here—gone is the high drama, gone the clichéd action-movie music—but Charlie's rapprochement with Amelia (Cara Seymour), while less absurd than the guns and drugs and alligators, surely still falls under the general rubric of characters "coming to like each other." And the very fact that Charlie finds a way to complete his screenplay means that the movie is, however one looks at it, the story of a

man “overcoming obstacles to succeed in the end.” Has Kaufman not given us, then, exactly what Charlie swore to withhold?

We may wish to respond by saying that Kaufman merely offers us these scenes *ironically*, as a satire on Hollywood conventions. Yet this defense exposes Kaufman to a second danger, the danger of sweeping everything away, deep questions and heartfelt responses included, with the indiscriminating broom of irony. It is perhaps unsurprising, albeit unfortunate, that one of the movie’s earliest reviewers complained that “*Adaptation* is a movie that eats itself whole and leaves the audience with nothing”:³⁶ the ironic tone of the finale risks casting its echoes over the earlier parts of the film, making the entire thing seem like an exercise in sheer negativity, a wholesale rejection of everything.³⁷ So here is the objection: should we not say that in spite of Kaufman’s best efforts, he has managed only to make yet another Hollywood film, one whose self-irony not only fails to save it—no-one ceases being a sellout or a flop merely by acknowledging his or her shortcomings—but risks, like a universal solvent, eating its way through everything that might otherwise have been of interest?

The answer, in fact, is no. First of all, the film has done us the immense favor of breaking down a thorny question (can there be a movie that is just about flowers?) into its component parts (can one tell the story of a flower? the story of all flowers? and so on). Second, it does us the equally large favor of taking us through each of them in order to rid us of our temptation to embrace any particular one. The thirty minutes of melodrama should be understood not as a crowd-pleasing gesture to which Kaufman reluctantly and guiltily succumbs but rather as a deliberately chosen strategy whose function is, quite the contrary, to cure us of our insatiable appetite for narrative, not by starving it but by satisfying it to excess. And this, third, does us the immeasurable favor of bringing flowers before our suddenly rapt attention, of clearing a space for flowers to fill.

Neither—to return to the earlier objection—has Kaufman quite yielded to the narrativity brigades by agreeing to tell that time-honoured story, “Charlie becomes a writer.”³⁸ To be sure, the fictional character Charlie “grows” and “adapts” and “learns” and “overcomes obstacles to succeed in the end.” But above and behind Charlie, we sense the existence of an entity who does *not* grow and adapt and learn, an entity who may well feel, with Susan, that “for a person, adapting is almost shameful; it’s like running away,” an entity who has been more or less the same since the days of *Being John Malkovich*. Here is where the distinction between Charlie and Kaufman, which might seem like a technical issue, actually becomes of prime importance. In the movie, one might say, Charlie becomes Donald. But in real life, there is no Donald; in real life, there is only Kaufman, someone who is, we assume, an amalgam of Charlie and Donald, *at once*, enduringly, with an inexorable combat being unchangingly waged in his head, that marvellous, mysterious head into which Valerie Thomas, in the opening scene, expresses a desire to climb. From this point of view, the film is a spurious diachrony concealing a genuine synchrony: only superficially the story of how Charlie became Donald, *Adaptation* is, at a deeper level, the entirely non-narrative portrait of a never-changing Kaufman.³⁹

Far from an abject capitulation, then, to the spirit of narrative, *Adaptation* is a Hollywood film in which atemporal phenomena score a twofold victory. It leaves us, in the end, with the powerful, unchanging beauty of flowers and the strange, unchanging beauty of Charlie Kaufman’s soul. And it invites us to wonder whether phenomena like these, phenomena that do not have a history in the full sense of the word, may not, when all is said and done, be the most important ones there are.

NOTES

¹ For some years now, R. Lanier Anderson and I have taught *Adaptation* in an annual class on Philosophy and Literature. I am grateful to Lanier and also to the students in that course, including Andrew Suciuc, Eric Messinger (who pointed out the Wong Kar-Wai connection), Kim Liao (who suggested that the way to adapt a narcissistic book is to make a movie about you), and Manya Lempert (who noted that Kaufman does not put himself into his film), for all their ideas, challenges, and inspirations. Further thanks go to Katherine Preston, who provided not just helpful but positively enchanting information about flowers, and to Angela Sebastiana, without whom we would never have thought to put such a perfect work of filmic fiction on our syllabus.

² This is from the interview with Michael Koresky and Matthew Plouffe, “Why Charlie Kaufman Doesn’t Watch Movies Anymore.” *Reverse Shot*, Spring 2005. <http://www.reverseshot.com/legacy/spring05/kaufman.html>

³ Interest in popular song, of course, has remained robust, but the same cannot be said for written forms of poetry. Nor is the decline of the latter the result, as one sometimes hears, of a widespread postmodern skepticism about selfhood. On the contrary, the general reader today, having been blessedly spared the ravages of postmodernism, is more obsessed with selfhood than ever before. The clearest evidence of this is the barrage of memoirs to which we have been subjected in recent years (not to mention biographical documentaries, fictional life stories, and the usual steady stream of strong protagonists). We are still deeply fascinated by selves, but for some reason we have become convinced that the important questions about them are historical: where they came from, what that did to them, how they overcame it. That is why poetry and painting are, for now at least, losing the war against narrative forms.

⁴ See for example Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1989, pp. 50-51; Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, London: Duckworth, 1981, pp. 204-7. MacIntyre’s view is that in order for my current actions to be intelligible—even to me—I need to consider them against the background of my history. Plenty of our actions make perfect sense, however, against the background of non-narrative features of personality: I don’t eat much Mexican food, for example, because I am one of those blessed or cursed with “cilantro intolerance.” No need for any personal history here.

⁵ The phrase is also altered slightly. What was, in *The Orchid Thief*, a statement about Laroche’s life—“his 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” (41, my emphasis)—becomes, in *Adaptation*, a statement about life in general, the initial possessive adjective quietly removed. (The book we see Charlie reading is this book, not the original *Orchid Thief*: Kaufman clearly had a prop specially made, superficially resembling Orlean’s text but differing in this respect.) For the record, the final sentence of the *real* book is the rather bathetic “First we turned to the right but saw only more cypress and palm and saw grass, so we turned to the left, and there, far down the diagonal of the levee, we could see the gleam of a car fender, and we followed it like a beacon all the way to the road.” (282) See Susan Orlean, *The Orchid Thief*, New York: Random House, 1998.

⁶ It should be noted from the outset that the problem is not one of adaptation per se. Thomas Leitch takes the film to be “showing that anything like a faithful adaptation of Orlean’s book, and by extension of any literary text, is a contradiction in terms.” (Thomas M. Leitch, *Film Adaptation and its Discontents: From Gone with the Wind to The Passion of the Christ*, Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins UP, 2007, p. 112.) But first of all, Orlean’s book is not a literary text (in the modern definition of the word), since it is a prose work of non-fiction. And second, nothing said or implied by *Adaptation* suggests that the problem extends beyond books about flowers (or other non-narrative phenomena). The question is not how to adapt books for the screen; it is how to adapt flowers to a narrative.

⁷ “To dramatize a flower,” says Charlie at one point, “I have to show the flower’s arc.”

⁸ I have coined here the term “anthic,” based on the Greek word for flower, since as far as I know there is no serviceable adjective (“floral” has all kinds of undesirable connotations).

⁹ Intriguingly, Kaufman appears to have borrowed this from Wong Kar-Wai’s *Happy Together*, which ends with time-lapse traffic—but no flowers—over the song “Happy Together.”

¹⁰ David L. Smith sees this as the core of *Adaptation*. Flowers have no stories, and neither do certain core experiences; “in Charlie’s view, then, to impose a story on his subject would be to falsify it” (“The Implicit Soul of Charlie Kaufman’s *Adaptation*,” *Philosophy and Literature* 30.2 (2006): 424-35, p. 426). I very much share this sense of Kaufman’s starting-point. I depart, however, when it comes to the telos. Smith takes seriously (431) the idea that flowers can have an arc (that of macro-evolution), an idea that I see as heavily ironized by the movie. And he sees *Adaptation* as ultimately serving “to uphold and sustain competing truths” (433), rather than to fulfill the initial promise of making flowers available to us moderns. (On the notion of human time, cf. Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative* vol. 1, trans. K. McLaughlin and D. Pellauer, Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press, 1984, p. 3.)

¹¹ *Adaptation* does not, of course, show the various strategies being attempted in sequence; I have separated them out for the sake of clarity.

¹² *The Orchid Thief*, op. cit., 55.

¹³ See Ted Conover, "Flower Power," *New York Times Book Review*, January 3, 1999. In his first conversation with Valerie Thomas, Charlie expresses his enthusiasm for *The Orchid Thief* by saying "it's great, sprawling *New Yorker* stuff"! In the *New York Times* review scene, by contrast, he complains "It's that sprawling *New Yorker* shit." I leave my readers to decide which statement more accurately captures the ethos of *The New Yorker*.

¹⁴ Another example: Orlean starts taking an interest in other plant-related crimes, and somehow this leads her—but how?—to transcribing a *fait divers* about an alligator wandering onto a housing estate. (*The Orchid Thief*, op. cit., 154.) The book is simply riddled with irrelevant information: about Florida, its land schemes, and its non-orchid flora (the meluca tree, for example); about Seminole Chief James E. Billie (110), the man who shot a protected panther and was acquitted; and so on, and so on.

¹⁵ Later in the film, Charlie describes his project as that of "attempting to create a story where nothing much happens—where people don't change, they don't have any epiphanies. They struggle and are frustrated, and nothing is resolved. More a reflection of the real world."

¹⁶ Astonishingly, Gregory E. Ganssle treats the film as a seamless whole, as though the segment involving sex, drugs, guns, car chases, and alligators were merely an extension of the part about loneliness and writer's block. For Ganssle, the fact that Susan becomes a drug addict and porn star is sufficiently explained by her yearning to share the passion of an orchid hunter: "it is no surprise," he writes, "that she returns to Laroche and enters the world of drugs and pornography" ("Consciousness, Memory, and Identity: The Nature of Persons in Three Films by Charlie Kaufman," *Faith, Film and Philosophy: Big Ideas on the Big Screen*, ed. R. Douglas Geivett and James S. Spiegel, InterVarsity Press, 2007: 111-115, p. 114). As far as I can tell, Ganssle is alone in this.

¹⁷ Part of the irony, of course, is that Laroche himself does not have a "soul-mate" vocation, any more than Susan does (or Orlean for that matter: after writing about orchid hunters, she went on to expatiate about dog shows and origami). Instead, his *modus operandi* is to fall "madly in love" with something, only to drop it cold. Here is Orlean on Laroche's turtles, fossils, lapidary, mirrors, and fish: "and then he could think of nothing *but* turtles and then decided that his life wasn't worth living unless he could collect one of every single turtle species known to mankind... Then, out of the blue, he fell out of love with turtles and fell madly in love with Ice Age fossils. He collected them, sold, them, declared that he lived for them, then abandoned them for something else—lapidary I think—then he abandoned lapidary and became obsessed with collecting and resilvering old mirrors. . . . Years ago, between his Ice Age fossils and his old mirrors, he went through a tropical-fish phase. At its peak, he had more than sixty fish tanks in his house and went skin-diving regularly to collect fish. Then the end came. He didn't gradually lose interest: he renounced fish and vowed he would never again collect them and, for that matter, he would never set foot in the ocean again. That was seventeen years ago. He has lived his whole life only a couple of feet west of the Atlantic, but he has not dipped a toe in it since then." (*Orchid Thief*, op. cit., 4) Much of this is reprised in *Adaptation*, supplemented by the brilliant Kaufman coinage, "that's how much fuck fish."

¹⁸ Matthew Anderson takes the soul-mate scene entirely seriously, and thinks it may "give us something of the screenwriter's [own] views" ("Adaptation: The Self-Proclaiming Rhetoric of Charlie Kaufman and of the Apostle Paul," *Journal of Religion and Popular Culture* 13 (2006), sec. 37). And in his discussion of the film, Matthew Kirby writes that "flowers are essentially like us." ("*Adaptation*: Through a Movie Screen Darkly," *Metaphilm*. <<http://metaphilm.com/index.php/detail/adaptation/>>) Kaufman, I think, strongly disagrees.

¹⁹ The book, incidentally, does not present this information as coming from Laroche. See *Orchid Thief*, op. cit., 45-7. Nor does Orlean draw any explicit inferences here about human life. She does indulge, however, in a little anthropomorphism, projecting her own wistfulness onto the insects: "Other species look like the mate of their pollinator, so the bug tries to mate with one orchid and then another—pseudocopulation—and spreads pollen from flower to flower each *hopeless* time." (46, my emphasis)

²⁰ When he briefly brushes past the camera, his mouth is out of shot, so there is still no indication that he is talking. The only sentence we actually *see* him utter is the very first: "The point is, what's so wonderful is that every one of these flowers has a specific relationship with the insect that pollinates it."

²¹ Stephanie Zacharek complains: "*Adaptation* is their [Kaufman's and Jonze's] assertion that the most interesting movie they could possibly make is one that's all about them . . . Kaufman has decided *he's* the most interesting thing about Orlean's book." ("*Adaptation* and the perils of adaptation," *Salon*, December 16, 2002. <http://dir.salon.com/story/ent/movies/feature/2002/12/16/adaptation/index.html>) For a more charitable reading on the effort to escape the prison of subjectivity, see Henry Bean, "Self-made Heroes," *Sight & Sound*, March 2003, <http://www.bfi.org.uk/sightandsound/feature/85>.

²² Orlean: “I wanted to keep coming back to Florida until I could see one. The reason was not that I love orchids. I don’t even especially *like* orchids. What I wanted was to see this thing that people were drawn to in such a singular and powerful way. Everyone I was meeting connected to the orchid poaching had circled their lives around some great desire—Laroche had his crazy inspirations and orchid lovers had their intense devotion to their flowers and the Seminoles had their burning dedication to their history and culture—a desire that then answered questions for them about how to spend their time and their money and who their friends would be and where they would travel and what they did when they got there. It was religion. I wanted to want something as much as people wanted these plants, but it isn’t part of my constitution. I think people my age are embarrassed by too much enthusiasm and believe that too much passion about anything is naive. I suppose I do have one unembarrassing passion—I want to know what it feels like to care about something passionately.” (*The Orchid Thief*, op. cit., 40-1) The film borrows the last line, just changing the word “unembarrassing” to “unembarrassed.”

²³ Another telling transition, as Charlie visits the Santa Barbara orchid show:

ORLEAN (*voice over*): There are more than thirty thousand known orchid species. One looks like a turtle. One looks like a monkey. One looks like an onion. One looks like a German shepherd. One looks like . . .

CHARLIE (*voice over*): . . . a schoolteacher. . . One looks like a gymnast. One looks like that girl in high school with creamy skin.

²⁴ CHARLIE: The script I’m starting, it’s about flowers. Nobody’s ever done a movie about flowers before. So, so there are no guidelines...

DONALD: What about *Flowers for Algernon*?

CHARLIE: Well that’s not about flowers. And it’s not a movie.

DONALD: OK, I’m sorry, I never saw it.

²⁵ The flowers sequence covers a period of exactly a week (the seven days of creation, perhaps?), beginning and ending in the middle of a day. As we move through the week, the rate of change increases exponentially: it takes eighteen seconds until night falls on day one, five and a half on day two, two on day three. The relative length of the last five days—5, 3, 2, 1, 1—forms a reverse Fibonacci series. (That series controls all kinds of botanical phenomena; if you count the petals on a daisy, for example, you will almost always find yourself with a Fibonacci number.) After that, the last day slows to what feels like a luxurious 2.7 seconds of almost steady flowers as the song’s final, wordless harmony is heard. Then we fade to black.

²⁶ Not, of course, the telos of its *narrative*—the daisies stand outside that—but the telos of its *operation*. There is no contradiction in using temporally extended mechanisms for weakening the hold of narrative structures of thought (consider the training of Buddhist monks).

²⁷ Interestingly, events in the final part of *Adaptation* fall into a clear pattern, gaining progressively in verisimilitude. The drugs, sex, and guns are of course ludicrous. But the tender scene in the swamp between Charlie and Donald is merely unlikely. The tender scene with Amelia is also merely unlikely, and is given increased plausibility by Donald’s death (after such an event, Charlie may well be a changed man). Charlie finishing his film is something easy to imagine. And the flowers at the end are not just realistic but, well, real. They would not look out of place in a Discovery Channel documentary.

²⁸ For some reason, Leitch writes that “*Adaptation* ends with Charlie still unable to adapt his refractory source” (*Film Adaptation*, op. cit., 112). It is hard to understand how Leitch reached this conclusion.

²⁹ Some, like Nitzan Ben Shaul, have jumped to the conclusion that “the script being written within the film by Charlie is also the actual film the spectators are watching” (*Hyper-Narrative Interactive Cinema: Problems and Solutions*, Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2008, p. 22). This, however, cannot be the case.

³⁰ Kaufman: “The movie’s pretty accurate in its depiction of my false starts and my confusion, and how I just had to plug away because I was hired and because they had paid me a certain amount of money to proceed, and so I had to. I would have dropped it a hundred times if they didn’t give me that advance money, but I felt [an] obligation.” (Charlie Kaufman, Donald Kaufman, and Robert McKee, *Adaptation: The Shooting Script*, New York: Newmarket Press, 2002, p. 123).

³¹ When Emily Blunt asked Kaufman “So, if we’ve seen *Adaptation* do we know everything about you?” Kaufman responded wryly, “No. If you’ve seen *Adaptation* you know nothing about me. No. You know a couple things about me.” See “Bluntly Speaking (I Think Therefore I Am. But, Then Again, How Do I Really Know? No. Really. Is Reality Even Real? What if We are Just Animated Thoughts in Someone’s Mindgame? Ever Think of That?),” *The Blunt Review*, <<http://www.bluntreview.com/reviews/kaufman.html>>.

³² A number of critics have wanted the film to be making arguments, sending messages, transmitting statements about the human condition. Thus Matthew Anderson sees the film as “present[ing] an argument” (sec. 41);

Stephanie Zacharek claims that it “doesn’t offer us a real story, just a bloated thesis,” the thesis being “that human beings must adapt in order to grow”; for Gregory Ganssle, quite the reverse, “the deeper message of the film is that there are limits to human adaptability” (*op. cit.*, 115); and for Lucas Hildebrand, the line “you are what you love, not what loves you” is to be taken entirely seriously as a lesson Kaufman wishes us to learn (“Review,” *Film Quarterly* 58:1 (2004): 36-43, p. 41). In interview after interview, however, Kaufman has repeatedly stressed his intention to avoid didacticism. “I don’t like the idea of dictating what people ought to think. I can’t stand movies that are about teaching people things like how to live better or something. First of all, I’m not qualified to do that, and second of all, it’s like, garbage.” Or again: “if I were working to make any conscious point it would become banal.” Or yet again: “The movie is... not taking you through and teaching you something, you know, it’s to have interactions with.” Or finally: “my goal when I do something is to have a conversation with the audience rather than to lecture them.”

(See, respectively, Marc Fortier, “Writing John Malkovich,”

<http://www.reel.com/reel.asp?node=features/interviews/kaufman/2>; Michael Sragow, “Being Charlie Kaufman,” *Salon.com*, Nov. 11, 1999, <<http://archive.salon.com/ent/col/srag/1999/11/11/kaufman/>>; George Stroumboulopoulos, “Charlie Kaufman,” <<http://www.cbc.ca/thehour/videos.html?id=906970410>>; Peter Sciretta, “Interview with Charlie Kaufman,” *Slashfilm*, October 24, 2008,

<<http://www.slashfilm.com/2008/10/24/interview-with-charlie-kaufman/>>.) (My thanks to Eric Messinger for these references.) The fact that Zacharek and Ganssle reach opposite conclusions, both based on textual evidence, is I think a strong indication that Kaufman, and not Zacharek, is to be believed.

³³ My approach has something in common with that of Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht’s *Production of Presence: What Meaning Cannot Convey* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2004). I differ, however, in viewing the crucial contemporary barrier to contemplation as that of an obsession with narrative, rather than an obsession with “meaning.” (The last thing I would accuse contemporary culture of is a surfeit of intellectualism!). To be re-engaged with non-narrative phenomena does not require us to surrender all interest in meanings: perceiving the beauty of a gesture, for example, requires understanding what it signifies. Nor does it require us to surrender all interest in depth, another of Gumbrecht’s targets; on the contrary, the beauty of other human beings *is* their depth, the depth of that invisible perspective which emerges in their aesthetic and everyday style. Even scientific knowledge—such as the delightful fact, in *Adaptation*, about Darwin’s moth—can be truly enchanting, an enrichment rather than a desiccation of experience. We may well wish to save all these charming babies from going out with the “meaning” bathwater. What is more, the contemplation of orchids need, on my account, have nothing mystical about it (it would certainly not need to involve a perception of “Being”) and need not be transitory in the manner of epiphanies (orchid-lovers can happily stare at bromeliads all day). Finally, I hope to have given a substantive account of the role that the non-“presence” elements play in the fictional work: as I see it, these elements are absolutely necessary for making the flowers available in the first place.

³⁴ Thirty minutes is a rough figure. The shift begins some time after 1:14, when Charlie asks how “the great Donald” would solve the script problem, and ends, depending on one’s interpretation, either with the deaths of Larocche and Donald (1:41-45) or the triumphant departure of Charlie (1:49).

³⁵ Thus Frank Tomasulo: “both the script and the movie resolved André Bazin’s commercial-artistic conundrum by capitulating to the audience . . . rather than by preserving cinematic purity.” (“*Adaptation as Adaptation*,” *Authorship in Film Adaptation*, ed. Jack Boozer, University of Texas Press, 2008, 161-178, p. 175.)

³⁶ These are the words of Zacharek (*op. cit.*). Cf. also David Sterritt, “If You Can’t Write It, Join In,” *Christian Science Monitor*, December 6, 2002.

³⁷ Nitzan Ben Shaul considers Kaufman’s ambition to be that of rendering truth (apparently) subjective in order to offer reassurance to the decentered postmodern subject (*op. cit.*, 23). I do not accept this as Kaufman’s aim, which as I see it has nothing to do with truth. (Further, it is not clear just how a work of fiction could achieve the “subjectification of truth” in the first place; but that is another story.)

³⁸ Gérard Genette famously claimed (*Figures III*, Paris: Seuil, 1972, p. 75) that the entirety of Proust’s four-thousand-page novel could be boiled down to the three-word sentence “Marcel devient écrivain” (“Marcel becomes a writer”).

³⁹ It is true, of course, that we have a much harder time postulating an author for *Adaptation*—that is, working out what the “ideal” Kaufman must have wanted the overall effect of his film to be—than postulating an author for the average Hollywood movie. Still, it is surely not the case that *Adaptation* “undermines the concept of the author as a unifying origin and legitimation,” as Karen Diehl claims (“Once upon an Adaptation: Traces of the Authorial on Film,” *Books in Motion: Adaptation, Intertextuality, Authorship*, ed. Mireia Aragay. Rodopi Press, 2005, 97-106, p. 100). It may be harder to know what Kaufman is up to than what James Cameron (say) is up to, but Kaufman is clearly up to *something*, and the film bears if anything a more powerful stamp of an original vision than that average movie we

find easier to read. (Although cinema is a collaborative enterprise, it is reasonable to imagine Spike Jonze and company collectively seeking to realize Kaufman's design.) Far from putting inherited notions of authorship into question, then, it has comfortably positioned Kaufman as the "unifying origin" of his various works.