

Adaptation (2002)

“Darkness descends.”—John Laroche

“You are what you love, not what loves you.”—Donald Kaufman

Major Credits:

Director: Spike Jonze

Screenplay: Charlie Kaufman

Cinematography: Lance Acord

Cast: Nicolas Cage (Charlie Kaufman/Donald Kaufman); Meryl Streep (Susan Orlean); Chris Cooper (John Laroche); Cara Seymour (Amelia); Tilda Swinton (Valerie); Brian Cox (Robert McKee); uncredited appearances by John Cusack, Catherine Keener, John Malkovich, Spike Jonze, and Charlie Kaufman, all playing themselves.

Background:

Adaptation marks the second collaboration between Jonze and Kaufman, following their highly successful debut in *Being John Malkovich* (1999; Lance Acord was also the cinematographer). Both films are broadly concerned with the desire for a different self and the vagaries of the creative process. *Adaptation*'s dazzling confluences of fantasy and reality along with the philosophical tone of its narration link it to numerous contemporary “puzzler” films (like *Memento*) that seemingly strive to provide more intellectual forms of entertainment for audiences sated on blockbuster action movies or formulaic situation comedies. The film's self-reflexivity with respect to creativity within the Hollywood milieu goes back at least as far as Preston Sturges' *Sullivan's Travels* (1941) and as recently as Woody Allen's *Hollywood Ending* (2002). But in addition to being about the making of a movie, *Adaptation* is also a thriller about orchid theft and various other crimes and misdemeanors, an essay about biological and narrative adaptation, a doppelganger involving opposite twins, a romantic comedy, and a modernist pastiche.

At another level, *Adaptation* is a version of the creative dilemma we have all thought about or actually attempted: making an artistic work out of our stubborn inability to create art (in student terms: writing a paper about not being able to write a paper).

A few observations about the film's play with fiction/reality: Susan Orlean and Robert McKee are real persons played by actors; Donald Kaufman is credited as a co-screenwriter, the picture is dedicated to his memory, and he was nominated for a Golden Globe award, despite his being a fictional character; in the scene where Charlie checks his mail in front of a mirror while Donald is talking behind him, the reflection of Donald in the mirror is actually the real Charlie Kaufman.

Cinematic Aspects:

The inspired aspects of Jonze's direction and Acord's cinematography should not be overlooked in the face of Kaufman's virtuoso screenplay.

1. Note the beautiful microscopic close-ups of pollination and superimpositions of various orchids juxtaposed with Susan's voiceover description of what she has learned from Laroche.

2. In a more comic instance of directorial skill and cinematography, Charlie and Donald are first seen fully in the frame together just as Donald glibly answers his brother's question about how to visualize the multiple personalities in *The 3*: "trick photography."
3. The performances in *Adaptation* are particularly noteworthy (Cooper won an Academy Award; Cage and Streep were nominated).
4. Montage has perhaps never been put to a more audacious purpose than in the early "history of the universe" sequence.
5. The ending—by which I mean the final tilt and time-lapse long shot down the Hollywood boulevard to the accompaniment of the Turtles' original recording of "Happy Together"—is particularly satisfying.

Questions for Discussion:

1. In the film's final act, *Adaptation* seems to betray everything Charlie swore at the outset he would not do ("I don't want to ruin it by making a Hollywood ending... I don't want to cram in guns or car crashes and characters learning profound life lessons."). What are we then to make of the prolonged climactic sequence in Florida?
2. In a similar vein, the film seems to ridicule and honor Bob McKee's success as a guru of formula script-writing. How does *Adaptation* manage to both satirize and valorize McKee's influence without lapsing into contradiction?
3. How does Susan Orlean's best-selling book (itself adapted from her earlier article for the *New Yorker*) serve as the inspiration for Jonze/Kaufman's film? What specific themes do the two works share?
4. How does the film's central concept of *adaptation*, understood in both senses of the word, apply to the making and final form of *Adaptation*? In other words, how do the biological and creative meanings of "adaptation" shape the film's final form?