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## Transformative Screenwriting: Charlie Kaufman's Postmodern *Adaptation* of *Story*



Nothing is random. Nothing that happens to him has no point. Nothing that he says happens to him in his life does not get turned into something that is useful to him. Things that appear to have been pointlessly destructive and poisoning, things that look at the time to have been wasteful and appalling and spoiling, are the things that turn out to be, say, the writing of *Portnoy's Complaint*. As each person comes into his life, you begin to think, "So what is this person's usefulness going to be? What is this person going to provide him in the way of the book?" Well, maybe this is the difference between the writer's life and an ordinary life.<sup>1</sup>

– Philip Roth, *The Facts*

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<sup>1</sup> Philip Roth, *The Facts: A Novelist's Autobiography*, London, Penguin, 1988, p. 189.

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## Part 1: Introduction

We open on Charlie Kaufman, fat, old, bald, repulsive.<sup>2</sup>  
 – Charlie and Donald Kaufman, *Adaptation*

A short summary of *Adaptation* (Spike Jonze, 2002) might say that it depicts real-life screenwriter Charlie Kaufman, as he struggles to adapt the New Yorker writer Susan Orlean's book *The Orchid Thief* (1998) into a film; writing himself into the script in the process. It has also often been mentioned how the fictional Charlie Kaufman comes to write the script that we are watching: dismissing the ideas of screenwriting guru Robert McKee in the first act, only to desperately seek his advice at the end of the second act; and how everything Charlie was against in the beginning becomes what the film is about in the parodic third act. What hasn't been explored, except on the surface, is how there is another book – besides *The Orchid Thief* (hereafter "TOT") – that is so prominently featured that it's almost adapted in the meta-movie that is *Adaptation*.

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<sup>2</sup> Charlie and Donald Kaufman, *Adaptation: The Shooting Script*, Newmarket Press, New York, 2012 (2002) p. 58.

Namely: Robert McKee's *Story: Substance, Structure, Style and the Principles of Screenwriting* (1997, hereafter referred to as "*Story*"). As Charlie Kaufman has asserted: "I took it [McKee's seminar] when I decided to use him in the script, to research to see what it was. And I bought his book."<sup>3</sup> This thesis will explore to which degree *Adaptation* reflects the ideas in *Story*.

To take a step back: *Adaptation* is a highly unusual, smart, complex and layered film, with its reflective approach to screenwriting and film form, which continues to trigger new studies and critical insights over one decade after its release. It's unique in its doubleness related to complicity (entertainment) and critique (intellectual discussion), and its in-depth, labyrinthine, self-contradicting exploration of the screenwriting process. This essay is an exploration into the previously untouched/underdeveloped domain of *Story's* relation to *Adaptation*, cutting right to the heart of what the film is and what it claims to be – while placing *auteur screenwriter* (if there is such a thing) Charlie Kaufman's reflection on his own craft and storytelling in a bigger picture.

Behind every film is a screenwriter – a fact that is, interestingly enough, not paid much attention to. But in *Adaptation*, this is not so. To quote Charlie Kaufman on the subject: "the only person who's the complete inventor of the movie is the writer. The director's interpreting material. Actors are interpreting material. Everybody's interpreting the script."<sup>4</sup> In *Adaptation* it's obvious to which degree the screenwriter has created the film we watch, as the film seemingly writes itself – through its protagonist screenwriter – as it goes along. *Adaptation* is crafted to be a revelation of the mind of (the fictional) Charlie Kaufman, just like an essay by Ralph Waldo Emerson or Michel de Montaigne "is crafted to be a revelation of the mind or self of ~~the~~ [its] author"<sup>5</sup>. *Adaptation* served to solidify Charlie Kaufman's position as not only a screenwriter – but a filmmaker – with an original, unique and internally consistent way of creating fiction, positioning him as the single most important unifying factor behind his various film collaborations. To put Charlie Kaufman's special status in perspective, he was included in Time Magazine's list of the 100 most influential people in the world in

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<sup>3</sup> Fred Topel, *An Unorthodox Adaptation: Deciphering Charlie Kaufman*, Screenwriter's Monthly, February 23, 2003. On: <https://web.archive.org/web/20030821052144/http://www.beingcharliekaufman.com/index.htm?articles/adaptationunorthodox.htm&2> – 2014-10-04 (PDF available from the author).

<sup>4</sup> Peter Sciretta, *Interview with Charlie Kaufman*, /Film. 24 Oct. 2008. Available on: <http://www.slashfilm.com/interview-with-charlie-kaufman/> – 2014-12-19 (PDF available).

<sup>5</sup> David L. Smith, *Synecdoche, in Part*, in *The Philosophy of Charlie Kaufman*, Edited by David LaRocca, The University Press of Kentucky, 2011, p. 242.

2004<sup>6</sup> (probably the only screenwriter in history to make it to that list).

Now, films demand that we believe. *Adaptation* wants us to believe that we are in the fictional screenwriter's – Charlie Kaufman's – head, and that the film we're watching is written as we watch it. In one sense this depiction is a truthful declaration of content: Charlie Kaufman has indeed conceived and written the film we are watching, and films seldom openly depict how they are actually written by somebody. At the same time it's a lie, since *Adaptation* hasn't been created in the way the film depicts – and since the fictional and real Charlie Kaufman are not the same person. *Adaptation* plays with truth as lies (Charlie Kaufman has written the film, but not as shown) and lies as truth (Charlie's fictional brother Donald doesn't exist, but was nominated for an Oscar – together with Charlie – for “Best Adapted Screenplay”; the fictional character spilling out into extradiegetical reality and winning a bunch of other screenplay awards). The fact that there is a real Charlie Kaufman and a fictional Charlie Kaufman draws attention to the most elementary means of production for fiction films (screenwriting) – highlighting diegesis – while deliberately tricking us through its mimesis.

Meta-fiction makes it possible for a film to comment on its own status as an artifact. *Adaptation's* meta-content is critical; discussing the art and Hollywood film and the contrasting ideals (stasis and change, respectively) of these counterpoles, while having the complicitous form of the classical archplot – after having argued the ideas of the experimental antiplot in its content. These mirror effects – typical of postmodernism's parodic complicity and critique (and doubleness) – are both hidden and openly shown in several layers. These will be explored by discussing the storytelling of the film itself, e.g. its content and its way of telling the content: its form. This brings us right back to the story and form expert Robert McKee (IRLRMK), who is also a character in the film (FCRMK). Both IRLRMK's real work *Story* and his/its fictional presence in *Adaptation* will be investigated in relation to the film. This as the real *Story's* relation to, and possible importance for, *Adaptation* has been neglected. If covered at all in previous research, the approach has been superficial.

The thesis will further explore the concept of transformative screenwriting, the art and Hollywood film and postmodernism to put *Adaptation's* relation to *Story* in context. This in order to cast new light on Charlie Kaufman, commonly regarded as the most accomplished screenwriter of our time, and a key film in his oeuvre – *Adaptation*,

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<sup>6</sup> Time Magazine, *The 2004 Time 100*, Special Issue, 26 April, 2004. Available on: [http://content.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0,28804,1970858\\_1970890\\_1971351,00.html](http://content.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0,28804,1970858_1970890_1971351,00.html) – 2015-01-02.

dealing with the process of his very own craft – while evaluating it in terms of its postmodernness. I've focused on the new research this thesis contributes, rather than directly/specifically criticizing the approaches of others. I've done my best to explore and present the self-contradictory maze that is *Adaptation* clearly and understandably, and have perhaps sometimes been overly explicit at the expense of stringency (as it's not possible within the constrictions of the medium of a Film Thesis to be as double and open for interpretation as a Charlie Kaufman film). Hopefully the new insight into, and revelation of, *Adaptation's* “true” form and content makes up for it. Happy reading.

### Cast, Acronyms and Abbreviations

The following system of acronyms will, for purposes of clarity, from hereon be used for Charlie Kaufman and Robert McKee. It's less confusing than separating the fictional and real screenwriter by naming one Charlie and one Kaufman, as other writers on the subject have done. In order to not provide too many acronyms, names are written out in full when referring to the fictional character/real person for Susan Orlean, John Laroche and others. Doing this for Kaufman and McKee would become both tedious and highly space consuming (FCCK alone is mentioned about 400 times in the thesis). The use of acronyms also highlights the complexity of *Adaptation's* play reality, in relation to the real and fictional selves of the two most important characters in this thesis – Charlie Kaufman and Robert McKee – while forcing the reader to stop and think.

Charlie Kaufman, Screenwriter: "IRLCK" (In Real Life Charlie Kaufman) and  
"FCCK" (the Film Character Charlie Kaufman).

Robert McKee, Screenwriting Guru: IRLRMK (In Real Life Robert McKee) and  
FCRMK (the Film Character Robert McKee).

Donald Kaufman (Screenwriter – film character in *Adaptation* only).

Susan Orlean (IRL New Yorker Journalist/*TOT* Author and character in *Adaptation*).

John Laroche (IRL Orchid Thief, portrayed in *TOT* and character in *Adaptation*).

Valerie Thomas (IRL film executive and film character in *Adaptation*).

### Method and Purpose

*Story's* relation to *Adaptation* will be explored in depth as the film discusses the ideals of storytelling, and the process of screenwriting – which is correspondingly described in *Story*. *Adaptation* also deals with the subject of adaptation itself. Susan Orlean's book *TOT* is adapted to film, humans to their surroundings, all life to its circumstances, and the screenplay and its writer adapts to the demands of both form and commerce; all

through the process of screenwriting. As both *Story* and *Adaptation* deal with transformation, I've applied the concept of "Screenwriting instruction [a]s a transformative business"<sup>7</sup> to examine a hereby created and extended concept of "transformative screenwriting". I've developed the term from Susan Orlean's colleague Ian Parker's article on screenwriting guru and *Story* author IRLRMK in *The New Yorker*<sup>8</sup> – *The Real McKee: Lessons of a Screenwriting Guru* (2003) – where Parker describes how screenwriting seminars serve people's needs to create change in their screenplays, in order to create change in their lives by writing these screenplays. Parker's description of IRLRMK's role for his students is related to the depiction of FCRMK's role for FCCK and Donald Kaufman. This concept of change is what IRLRMK sells, in real life and in the fiction of *Adaptation* – where both Donald and FCCK take on his view on storytelling.

But to what degree has IRLCK adapted *Story*, and how does *Adaptation* reflect IRLRMK's ideas and the concept of transformative screenwriting? To what degree is *Adaptation* critical, and to which degree is it complicit? *Adaptation's* surface take on *Story* is parodic, but what is its real application of it? These questions serve to place the film and its writer in a bigger context – in relation to the concepts of art and Hollywood film – and provide a deeper understanding of the film and its implied philosophy. I will explore this mainly by cross-comparing quotes from *Story* with *Adaptation*. This is, naturally, quite space consuming – but also necessary; as it is the only way to scientifically present the research and proposed evidence. This is also the reason why the thesis comes in a third or so longer than a regular Master Thesis, evident by that the amount of footnotes are about the triple or more of most other essays at this level. Relative to the amount of necessary quotes – which form part of the method of cross-comparing, along with a theoretical background – and the space the footnotes themselves assume, the essay is actually short (sic) with its 79 pages (excluding the Title Page, Table of Contents and Bibliography). Adding to that, the spelled out differentiation between fictional and real persons takes up a lot of space as well, but is necessary for clarity – as the play with fiction and reality is a key aspect of the film.

*Adaptation's* relation to *Story*, narrative form and the concept of transformative screenwriting will be explored to contribute new knowledge – precisely because other writers on the film have left them unexplored (surprisingly so, since they seem of

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<sup>7</sup> Ian Parker, *The Real McKee: Lessons of a Screenwriting Guru*, *The New Yorker*, Oct 20, 2003, p. 3. On: <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2003/10/20/the-real-mckee> – 2014-10-03 (PDF available).

<sup>8</sup> The *New Yorker* being the magazine that Susan Orlean, writer of *TOT*, works for.

fundamental importance for understanding both the film and its screenwriter). The research thus constitutes a new approach and perspective. While the questions at issue have a steady basis, they have also been developed as I've gone along; according to evolving new insight. In that sense this thesis is a mixture of Robert McKee's method of planning and Charlie Kaufman's method of writing to discover. It should be noted that I've ended up with a conclusion that is the opposite of what I assumed at the start – which was that *Adaptation* is critical in regards to both form and content (much like almost all other writers' views on the subject). It is my hope that this thesis might therefore be less biased than other works on *Adaptation*, which, in my view, have often shared a tendency to view things in relation to their own purpose – whereas I, during the course of this project, have come to view and reveal the opposite of what I had in mind.

– Call it transformative thesis writing if you will.

### Questions at Issue

How does IRLCK's and FCCK's *Adaptation* reflect:

- Screenwriting, its process and whether/how it is transformative?
- *Story* and IRLRMK's ideas on narratology?
- Postmodernism, its doubleness – complicity and critique – as well as parody?
- Reality, fiction and the blurring of the two?
- Life and films as static/change?
- The art film's stasis and the Hollywood film's change, in regards to ideas/form?
- The process of adaptation?

### Abstract

The investigation of how *Story* is reflected in the film – in text and subtext, form and content – shows that *Adaptation*'s form is that of the classical archplot. It is only *Adaptation*'s content, reflecting the dream of an art film/antiplot that is critical – while the form is a complicitous Hollywood form. The ideas in the film are original, but not its form of storytelling. This is reflected in *Adaptation*'s doubleness, its postmodern mix of complicity and critique, and in how it uses the postmodern device of parody to play with what's real and what's not, and how the film – in a sense – is a conscious failure. The film's illusion of writing itself, however, forces the viewer to active engagement, creating a critical, Brechtian *verfremdung* effect – most notably in the film's third act.

*Adaptation* proves to be a process of evolution and adaptation through transformative screenwriting. IRLRMK's idea of story as change is reflected in its plot,



and FCCK himself is transformed at the end. *Adaptation's* form is conventional, and the film was a box office success – but IRLCK didn't manage to express what he originally intended. IRLRMK's ideas are made fun of, but his *Story* ideas are surprisingly deeply inherent in the film's formal backbone. With *Adaptation*, IRLCK wasn't yet able to free himself from his TV/Hollywood background to write the antiplot he dreamed of, and when he finally fully did so – with *Synecdoche, New York* – viewers deserted him.

### Synopsis of *Adaptation's* Plot (in relation to *Story*)

See Appendix A.

## Part 2: The Transformative Business of Screenwriting

There's no template for a screenplay, or there shouldn't be. There are at least as many screenplay possibilities as there are people who write them. We've been conned into thinking there is a pre-established form. – Charlie Kaufman<sup>9</sup>

### A Short History of Screenwriting How-To-Guides

First, there was Aristotle, and his *Poetics* (335 BC); the earliest surviving work of dramatic theory. Ian Parker provides a short history of them in his New Yorker article *The Real McKee*: "Before the arrival of cinema, there were how-to guides for aspiring novelists and playwrights. Then, when movies appeared, so did books like 'How to Write Moving Picture Plays,' by William Lewis Gordon (1913), and 'How to Write a Photoplay,' by A. W. Thomas (1914). Thomas nodded to Aristotle (as most modern guides do)."<sup>10</sup> Parker continues: "Today, a fair-sized Barnes & Noble will carry about sixty books in a similar vein."<sup>12</sup> - One of the most prominently displayed ones, more than a decade after Parker's article, would still be *Story*, by Robert McKee.

The first bestseller in the aspiring screenwriter genre was Syd Field's *Screenplay* (1979). Movies "always had beginnings, middles, and ends. Since 'Screenplay,' they have had three acts: Act I is the setup; Act II is the confrontation; and Act III is the Resolution."<sup>13</sup> Robert McKee became a part of a big boom forming in screenwriting instruction in the 1980s, "which had its roots in the end of the studio system and the

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<sup>9</sup> Charlie Kaufman, *Screenwriting Lecture*, at BAFTA (British Academy of Film and Television Arts), 30 September, 2011. On: <https://soundcloud.com/bafta/charlie-kaufman-screenwriting-lecture> & <http://cinearchive.org/post/36208986236/charlie-kaufman-interviewed-by-david-f-goldsmith> – 2014-12-18.

<sup>10</sup> Aristotle is mentioned several times in the earlier drafts of *Adaptation*.

<sup>11</sup> Parker, *The Real McKee: Lessons of a Screenwriting Guru*, p. 4.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.* p. 5.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

subsequent rise of the American auteur director"<sup>14</sup> in the 1970s. A screenwriter was one step from a director, with "a director being God."<sup>15</sup> As the public knowledge of the million dollar fees to certain writers spread, it propelled the boom, and this gold-digger mentality forms the basis of Donald's get rich quick-/becoming a screenwriter scheme in *Adaptation* – made obvious by that he states that it's not a get rich quick-scheme: "I know you think this is just one of my get-rich-quick schemes"<sup>16</sup>. As Parker asserts: "Screenwriting began to look like the weak point in a wall standing between the people in the land of joy and self-fulfilment [i.e. the movies] and the people outside."<sup>17</sup>

### Robert McKee's *Story*

So, if one, surprisingly, finds oneself unable to produce a hit screenplay out of nowhere – perhaps screenwriting instruction can transform one's life? McKee, the most famous screenwriting instructor in the world, argues that he doesn't have any competition and "presents himself in contrast to Field as a bold, angry intellectual."<sup>18</sup> *Story*, in its "first few pages, praises Ingmar Bergman and quotes from Yeats and Jean Anouilh."<sup>19</sup> McKee doesn't provide the usual, upbeat, motivational talk either, instead "life is drudgery and disappointment; and death lurks around the corner."<sup>20</sup> He paints a picture of himself as a truth-teller: "What I teach is the truth: you're in over your head, this is not a hobby, this is an art form and a profession, and your chances of success are very, very slim."<sup>21</sup> His selling point is that of a rebellious outsider, advising to write within a classical archplot to improve one's chances of success. The contrast between how he depicts himself and what he offers makes him believable, as does the contrast between quoting Sartre and advocating conventional form. It is, not surprisingly, good dramaturgy.

After his failure to complete a dissertation on narrative design, years later restructured to become *Story*, IRLRMK began teaching a Story Structure class and his audiences grew. McKee was subsequently asked, "to teach a compressed, three-day version"<sup>22</sup> of the course, and "it was with this gruelling format that McKee began travelling the country, and the world"<sup>23</sup> with his story seminars. McKee has by now

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<sup>14</sup> Parker, *The Real McKee: Lessons of a Screenwriting Guru*, p. 7.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Kaufman, *Adaptation: The Shooting Script*, p. 10.

<sup>17</sup> Parker, *The Real McKee: Lessons of a Screenwriting Guru*, p. 7.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid. p. 5.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid. p. 6.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid. p. 7.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

given the same screenplay course for over thirty years<sup>24</sup>, always "the same three-day, thirty-hour performance."<sup>25</sup> Ian Parker quotes some numbers in his article from 2003: "Pixar sends ten people to every McKee seminar in San Francisco; Miramax sent five or six to New York in 2001."<sup>26</sup> IRLRMK estimated that the films of his alumni earned more than a billion at the box office<sup>27</sup>, just in 2002, the year before Parker's article. IRLRMK's story ideas are a factor in Hollywood, just as Hollywood and its form are a factor in IRLRMK's class. Both dream factories reflect each other. IRLRMK sells the path from dream to factory, from hope born to life achieved. When reading *Story*, one gets the impression that IRLRMK sees his book as not only a manual, but **The Manual**. And perhaps not only to screenwriting – but also to life.

That screenwriting is not an easy task comes across in the portrayal of FCCK in *Adaptation*, and in IRLCK's own struggles with the script. As IRLCK himself has stated: "I found adapting the book arduous and depressing and just ... nightmarish"<sup>28</sup> and director Spike Jonze recalls Kaufman him: 'Oh God, I just want to give the money back, but my agent won't let me"<sup>29</sup>. But it also comes across in a different way; with IRLRMK's lack of success with his own screenwriting in life. IRLCK wrote *Adaptation*, while both Donald and FCCK "succeed" with their scripts in the fiction of the film. This in contrast to IRLRMK, who if one doesn't count the TV movie *Abraham* (1993), has not had a single of his umpteen scripts made into a film (one can discuss whether Donald's "The Three" is made or not). The stats are bad generally – "only one in twenty scripts optioned ever gets made"<sup>30</sup> into a film – but the screenwriters still make money for selling their scripts. Though, as IRLRMK expresses it, regarding that none of his numerous scripts were made into actual films: "you get your heart broken, again and again"<sup>31</sup>. Hence, IRLRMK found his talent not in screenwriting, but in narrative design. It wasn't writing himself, it was teaching screenwriting to others. He's still travelling the world with his story seminars, and has found an even bigger audience with the buzzword "storytelling" in advertising (where *Story* is referred to as "the [film] field's

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<sup>24</sup> The article is from October 2003 and says 20 years, which equals roughly 32 years 2015.

<sup>25</sup> Parker, *The Real McKee: Lessons of a Screenwriting Guru*, p. 4.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> It's impossible to know what the screenplays would have grossed if the alumni hadn't attended IRLRMK's seminars; as the use they had for IRLRMK's class is not quantifiable. E.g. all IRLCK's films would (ironically enough) be included in an estimate of how much the movies of IRLRMK's students have grossed to this day.

<sup>28</sup> Leigh, Danny, *Let's make a meta-movie*, The Guardian, 14 February 2003. Available on: <http://www.theguardian.com/film/2003/feb/14/artsfeatures/print-2014-10-03> (PDF available).

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Parker, *The Real McKee: Lessons of a Screenwriting Guru*, p. 7.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid. p. 6.

holy text"<sup>32</sup>), and is now also teaching a *Story-in-Business* seminar – becoming an even bigger part of the establishment while reaching into ever bigger wallets.

### Screenwriting Instruction as a Transformative Business

Parker writes about screenwriting instruction as a transformative business: "students are there to learn about the way a protagonist undergoes change in the two hours of a movie"<sup>33</sup>, while they learn about the change that they themselves "have to undergo before they are able to create such a character."<sup>34</sup> Thus we have screenwriting not only affecting the life of the protagonist, but also the writer. The students learn to create "a story of struggle and resolution that at least appears to echo the struggle and hoped-for resolution of the screenwriting life"<sup>35</sup>, leading to a happy end as: "the work promises to precipitate the action it often represents, [...] a life redrawn—a star [...] being born."<sup>36</sup>

IRLRMK knows his teachings have a powerful subtext and says "the students realize that it's their life I'm talking about: it's out of balance, they're struggling to put it into balance."<sup>37</sup> He continues: "How are they going to do it? They have conceived of that object, that something, that if they could get it, would restore the balance of their life"<sup>38</sup>, and concludes: "for the students it's a successful piece of writing. And until they achieve a successful piece of writing, their lives will be perpetually out of balance."<sup>39</sup> Screenwriting, thus, becomes the way to the Holy Grail.

Accordingly, IRLRMK's story seminars not only reflect the students' dream of writing a hit screenplay – but also their hope of restoring balance into their lives. Parker continues: "it's easy to see why an effective screenwriting instructor could become a commanding figure in the life of his students, and why McKee is more frequently referred to as a guru"<sup>40</sup> (reflecting an early comment in the film from FCCCK to his brother, when Donald raves enthusiastically about FCRMK: "You sound like you're in a cult."<sup>41</sup> FCCCK later, parodically, gets involved in the cult.) Can the students achieve it? Can they write a hit screenplay and find balance in their lives? This is not only the drama of the story seminar, but also that of the main characters in *Adaptation* – and the

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<sup>32</sup> Drake Baer, *How Screenwriting Guru Robert McKee Teaches Brands To Tell Better Stories*, Fast Company, October 22, 2013.

<sup>33</sup> Parker, *The Real McKee: Lessons of a Screenwriting Guru*, p. 3.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid. p. 11.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid. p. 4.

<sup>41</sup> Kaufman, *Adaptation: The Shooting Script*, p. 52.

background you have just been provided with will help put the picture together.

Screenwriting in *Adaptation* in Relation to IRLRMK's *Story*: Outline  
IRLRMK argues that "we can take the role of protagonist"<sup>42</sup> in "the movies of our own lives"<sup>43</sup>, something that *Adaptation* reflects directly in regards to the screenwriting process. The students at IRLRMK's seminars learn how they must undergo change, to create a protagonist's change. In *Adaptation*, FCCCK, the protagonist screenwriter, is stuck in stasis but learns from the film's representation of IRLRMK (FCRMK, with help from his disciple, Donald) to change. FCCCK accomplishes this by turning himself into a protagonist in his screenplay and taking action, in regards to both film and life. *Adaptation* reflects how his life and his screenplay changes (by successfully adapting).

FCCCK's brother Donald is also looking for a life redrawn. He provides a dramatic counterpoint through his words (reflecting IRLRMK's ideas and providing a contrast between them and FCCCK's) and actions (as opposes to FCCCK, Donald takes action in life, is outgoing rather than introverted and is successful with women). By becoming a student of FCRMK's, Donald goes from unemployed, poor and single to a rich, successful screenwriter in a relationship<sup>44</sup>. Hence, both he and FCCCK achieve the dreams of the story seminar; writing a hit screenplay and restoring balance in their lives.

### The Means of Production: Transformative, Existential Screenwriting

IRLRMK asks, "Why is so much of our life spent inside stories?"<sup>45</sup>, and goes on to answer: "Because [...] stories are equipment for living."<sup>46</sup> IRLRMK writes about stories as the attempts of humans to discover the answers to the question posed by Aristotle: "How should a human being lead his life?"<sup>47</sup> IRLRMK continues: "We struggle to fit our means to our dreams, fuse idea with passion, turn desire into reality. We're swept along on a risk-ridden shuttle through time."<sup>48</sup> FCCCK's attempt to adapt *TOT* indeed takes him back to the beginning of time, the big bang, the evolution of species and how he himself got here. And he encounters the very problems and consequences on the way

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<sup>42</sup> Parker, *The Real McKee: Lessons of a Screenwriting Guru*, p. 11.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Before helping out with FCCCK's script parodically leads to Donald ending up dead.

<sup>45</sup> McKee, *Story*, p. 11.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid. p. 12.

that IRLRMK describes: "If we pull back to grasp pattern and meaning, life, like a Gestalt, does flips: first serious, then comic; static, frantic; meaningful, meaningless."<sup>49</sup>

In *Adaptation* we are watching a fake documentary of IRLCK's process of adapting *TOT* and writing the film that we are watching. Here, life is what gives fiction its form. As IRLRMK writes, "[o]ur appetite for story is a reflection of the profound human need to grasp the patterns of living, not merely as an intellectual exercise, but within a very personal, emotional experience."<sup>50</sup> It is not only an intellectual exercise (adapting a New Yorker reportage turned into a book into a film) for FCCK either, but a personal, emotional experience. Already from the start he sets out to write the screenplay to express his true belief of what life is. As IRLRMK asserts, "Story isn't a flight from reality but a vehicle that carries us on our search for reality, our best effort to make sense out of the anarchy of existence."<sup>51</sup> In the end, FCCK's work on the adaptation and his encounter with FCRMK and *Story* shows him that life is something different than what he thought, transforming not only the film, but also his life. Literally: "[i]n the words of playwright Jean Anouilh, 'Fiction gives life its form.'<sup>52</sup>

IRLRMK writes: "Story is metaphor for life. A storyteller is a life poet, an artist who transforms day-to-day living, inner life and outer life, dream and actuality"<sup>53</sup>, and the goal is to say: "Life is like this! Therefore, a story must abstract from life to discover its essences".<sup>54</sup> The teller of the story here, FCCK, illustrates this – as his idea of what life is changes from beginning (negative: life is static) to end (positive: life is change). We are shown how FCCK transforms his inner and outer life into a story of what and how life is. The ironic and definitive catalyst for his change, for his renewed statement of "life is like this!" is *Story* and FCRMK.

### **Part 3: Robert McKee's Story Triangle**

Don't let anyone tell you what a story is, what it needs to include, what form it must take. – Charlie Kaufman<sup>55</sup>

IRLRMK has created a triangle of possible forms that he proclaims to map the story universe. Within the triangle he places "the totality of writers' cosmologies, all their

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<sup>49</sup> McKee, *Story*, p.12.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid. p. 13.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid. p. 14.

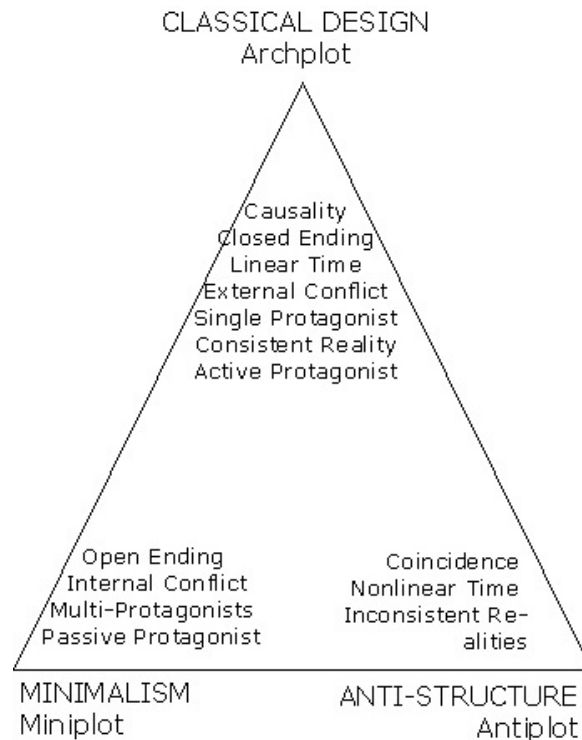
<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid. p. 29.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Kaufman, *Screenwriting Lecture*.

multitudinous visions of reality and how life is lived within it"<sup>56</sup>. He argues that writers can understand their place in the universe by "study[ing] the coordinates of the map" <sup>57</sup> . In this chapter, *Adaptation's* place in the Story triangle will be analyzed according to the definitions stated by IRLRMK. It should be noted that films are not either/or in the eyes of IRLRMK either, but can be placed at some point within the triangle: "The seven formal contradictions and contrasts listed are not hard and fast. There are unlimited shades and degrees



of openness/closeness, passivity/activity, consistent/ inconsistent reality, and the like."<sup>58</sup> According to IRLRMK, all forms of stories are distributed in the triangle, but very few films have such a purity of form that they settle only in one extreme corner. IRLRMK concludes that "[e]ach side of the triangle is a spectrum of structural choices, and writers slide their stories along these lines, blending or borrowing from each extreme."<sup>59</sup>

What IRLRMK has attempted is to categorize story choices for screenwriters, while pointing them in the direction of the archplot. He caters for the mainstream in that he himself declares that his story seminar is about classical design, referring to the triangle. Continuing: "Why? For your careers. As you move down the triangle, your audience shrinks. Why does it shrink? - Because people see themselves as protagonists of their own lives."<sup>60</sup> Catering for career rather than artistic vision is indeed more of a Hollywood move than striving first and foremost for self-expression as "art film" proponents would. IRLRMK goes on to explain this in more detail, and the relevance of these words to *Adaptation* and its design will be explored throughout this essay:

Most human beings believe that life brings closed experiences of absolute, irreversible change; that their greatest sources of conflict are external to themselves; that they are the single and active protagonists of their own existence; that their existence operates through continuous time within a consistent, causally interconnected reality; and that inside this

<sup>56</sup> McKee, *Story*, p. 52.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid. p. 67.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Parker, *The Real McKee: Lessons of a Screenwriting Guru*, p. 9.

reality events happen for explainable and meaningful reasons.<sup>61</sup>

IRLRMK concludes that "[c]lassical design is a mirror of the human mind. It's how we see the world."<sup>62</sup> In *Adaptation*, as FCCCK gravitates from antiplot to archplot content, he goes from passive to active protagonist in his own life. But let's analyze the background before examining how *Adaptation* fits into it in more detail. IRLRMK has three Event Design categories in his Story Triangle:

- Classical Design/Archplot (e.g. *M*; *Citizen Kane*; *The Seventh Seal*; *The Godfather II*)
- Anti-structure/Antiplot (*Un Chien Andalou*; *Persona*; *After Hours*; *Lost Highway*)
- Minimalism/Miniplot (*Wild Strawberries*; *The Red Desert*; *Paris, Texas*; *Pulp Fiction*)

IRLRMK's own definitions explain them best. Starting with classical design/archplot: IRLRMK narrows it down as "a story built around an active protagonist who struggles against primarily external forces of antagonism to pursue his or her desire, through continuous time, within a consistent and causally connected fictional reality, to a closed ending of absolute, irreversible change".<sup>63</sup> Moving onto the anti-structure/antiplot, IRLRMK asserts that the antiplot is:

[T]he cinema counterpart to the antinovel or Nouveau Roman and Theatre of the Absurd. This set of antistructure variations doesn't reduce the Classical but reverses it, contradicting traditional forms to exploit, perhaps ridicule the very idea of formal principles. The Antiplot-maker is rarely interested in understatement or quiet austerity; rather, to make clear his "revolutionary" ambitions, his films tend toward extravagance and self-conscious overstatement<sup>64</sup>.

And finally, in regards to minimalism/miniplot, "minimalism means that the writer begins with the elements of Classical Design but then reduces them—shrinking or compressing, trimming or truncating the prominent features of the Archplot. [///] Minimalism strives for simplicity and economy while retaining enough of the classical that the film will still satisfy the audience"<sup>65</sup>. Hereafter, I will refer to them by arch-, anti- and miniplot. The seven formal contradictions and their categories are:

- Causality (Archplot) – Coincidence (Antiplot)
- Closed Ending (Archplot) – Open Ending (Miniplot)
- Linear Time (Archplot) – Nonlinear time (Antiplot)
- External Conflict (Archplot) – Internal Conflict (Miniplot)
- Single Protagonist (Archplot) – Multi-Protagonists (Miniplot)
- Consistent Reality (Archplot) – Inconsistent Realities (Antiplot)
- Active Protagonist (Archplot) – Passive Protagonist (Miniplot)

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<sup>61</sup> McKee, *Story*, p. 75.

<sup>62</sup> Parker, *The Real McKee: Lessons of a Screenwriting Guru*, p. 9.

<sup>63</sup> McKee, *Story*, p. 54.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.* p. 55.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*



## Formal Summary of *Adaptation*: Contradictions and Conclusions

The formal contradictions of archplot, antiplot and miniplot in IRLRMK's story triangle clarify how *Adaptation* is structured in regards to IRLRMK's formal concepts. To provide you with a better understanding as you go along, I will (a little unorthodoxly) start with a few brief conclusions of the analysis of *Adaptation* in regards to IRLRMK's formal contradictions, and move on to the details afterwards.

*Adaptation* begins as the story of a screenwriter in L.A. who's made his mark in Hollywood, and is trying to make something different (**active protagonist**). But he suffers writer's block (**internal struggle**), because the book has no story (**lack of external force**). Also, he can't turn his thoughts or feelings into action in his personal life (**passive protagonist**), and this makes him depressed and more and more caught in his own mind (**internal struggle**). This idea, of nothing happening in life, is reflected in his idea of the film he wishes to write – that just "exists" (**antiplot idea**).

To overcome his depression, he must change his ideas (**active conflict with internal forces**) about life and films, to one where "stuff" happens and where's he's an active participant that makes active choices (achieving not only **archplot form**, but also **archplot content**). He does this, literally, by writing himself into the movie (the **external forces** of Hollywood never try to stop him); an act of transformation, as he uses the hitherto negative force of ensnaring himself in himself, into finding the energy and solution to finish the film by involving himself in it.

The third act progresses to **active conflict with external forces**. This is represented by the subjects he writes about, and here interacts with – calling what content is real and what is fantasy into question – but **the temporal and causal order** is never fractured, it is always kept intact in **linear time**. The **inconsistent realities** – conflict between what's real and what's fantasy – are an ideational part of the film, as it concerns the process of writing and its effect on reality (and vice versa), and the film's writing of itself; **highlighting diegesis and disturbing mimesis**. *Adaptation's* reality is called into question by the way it consciously distorts reality, turning the film into exactly what it was not supposed to be in the parodical third act. However, it is not highlighted that *Adaptation* is in fact a **classically designed archplot** when it comes to form – constituting a clear complicity. The ideas at play are of **inconsistent realities**, but the form is not; the realities are **consistent** and **causally interlinked**.

We move forward in **linear time**; flashbacks and dreams are only used to place the story's events in their **temporal order**. In the **rather closed ending** one protagonist

(the fictional Susan Orlean) is destroyed and FCCK is fulfilled. After having made **active choices** and taken action in life; FCCK is able to love and be loved, is released from depression, and is given the solution for how to finish the film by FCRMK.

### *Adaptation's* Story Design Compared to Each Formal Contradiction

The following will provide a widened understanding of *Adaptation's* relation to IRLRMK's formal contradictions. The numbers after the subheaders – arranged in thirds – are approximations to provide an overview of in which direction *Adaptation* leans.

#### Causality/Coincidence

(*Adaptation* **3/3 Archplot, 0/3 Antiplot**)

*Adaptation* is based on cause and effect. Events lead to other events. The film does not emphasize "the random collisions of things in the universe that break the chains of causality"<sup>66</sup>, nor do "unmotivated actions trigger events that do not cause further effects"<sup>67</sup> without being foreshadowed. The characters minds are applied "from the intimate to the epic"<sup>68</sup>, from FCCK's head to the story of humanity, nature and writing – evolution and adaptation. This network of chain-linked causalities gives meaning to the life of one protagonist (FCCK), and takes it away from another (the fictional Susan Orlean). The various levels of conflict are interlinked "in a chain reaction of episodes to the Story Climax, expressing the interconnectedness of reality"<sup>69</sup>. The reality in *Adaptation* is not only interconnected, but also affects the film we are watching – meanwhile written in the film – as the life events and the writing in the film creates the film as we watch it. These double-sided effects become causes that trigger other effects. The film follows the casual laws it has established. Actions, as well as non-actions, have consequences. The plot design is based on causality, not on coincidence.

#### Closed/Open Ending

(*Adaptation* **2/3 Archplot, 1/3 Miniplot**):

The fictional Orlean goes from a positive beginning to a negative end, whereas FCCK goes from a negative beginning to a positive end. He finds hope and finishes his script, whereas the fictional Orlean loses everything; lover gone, career shattered. In this sense, the ending is closed; the fictional Orlean is left destroyed in the swamp, while FCCK finds a way to express his love with Amelia Kavan. The fictional Orlean's desire to

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<sup>66</sup> McKee, *Story*, p. 61.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

experience passion and to be fascinated sheds her life to pieces, while FCCK's desire to change and finish the screenplay makes his life whole.

FCCK realizes that his love is his only, and that he can love without being loved back. When FCCK expresses his love to Amelia – she does love him back. As the film is about the process of writing the film we are watching – and FCCK's goal is to finish the screenplay – the ending is closed and conclusive in its most important aspect, with FCCK driving home knowing how to finish the movie. The story climax is "of absolute, irreversible change"<sup>70</sup> for both the fictional Orlean and FCCK (not to mention Donald and the fictional Laroche – who die), and it delivers the answer to if FCCK could finish the screenplay elegantly, by displaying itself as a finished film.

Still, these might not be the questions the viewer will think about after the ending. Instead, they might ponder to what extent *Adaptation* is true. To what extent are the characters with real names real/fictionalized? The self-reflexivity triggers questions, and in the miniplot "an unanswered question or two may trail out of the film, leaving the audience to supply it subsequent to the viewing."<sup>71</sup> Another miniplot characteristic is that "most of the emotion evoked by the film will be satisfied, but an emotional residue may be left for the audience to satisfy."<sup>72</sup> This goes together with the irony in that the end feels like a happy one – just because FCCK finds a way to finish the film, change and love – even if Donald and the fictional Laroche die and Orlean is destroyed.

To conclude, *Adaptation's* ending seems to be on the closed end of the spectra, with the absolute and irreversible change of the archplot, but with the miniplot's trailing train of thought and uncertainty in its wake – because the movie in itself is open.

### Consistent/Inconsistent Realities

(*Adaptation* 3/3 Archplot, 0/3 Antiplot in regards to form – but **discussing the ideas of antiplot in its content**):

In the antiplot, according to IRLRMK, "the story's episodes jump inconsistently from one 'reality' to another to create a sense of absurdity"<sup>73</sup>. This is not the case in *Adaptation*. Rather, as with the consistent realities of the archplot, the "fictional reality uniquely establishes how things happen within it".<sup>74</sup> The life events of the characters influences the screenplay, and the needs of the screenplay – for change and a third act

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<sup>70</sup> McKee, *Story*, p. 54.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid. p. 57.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid. 56-57.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid. p. 63.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid. p. 62.

that wows the audience in the end – affects the life events of the characters. The modes of interaction between the characters and their world "are kept consistently throughout the telling to create meaning"<sup>75</sup>. It could be argued that *Adaptation* breaks these rules in its third act, but it has laid the groundwork for doing exactly that, with its irony-laden foreshadowing of what's to come in the third act. The film states what it shouldn't be; then we watch it become exactly that. What could be more (ironically) causal?

IRLRMK argues that: "the Antinovel, and cinematic Antistructure may differ in technique but share the same result: a retreat inside the artist's private world to which the audience is admitted at the artist's discretion."<sup>76</sup> The viewer is indeed invited to the (fictional representation of the) artist's – IRLCK's – private world, but it is done with consistent rather than inconsistent realities. In the antiplot, events are "atemporal, coincidental, fragmented and chaotic"<sup>77</sup>, while the form of *Adaptation* is temporal, based on cause and effect, unified and thus ordered – even if its content is unruly. According to IRLRMK, films in these modes "are not metaphors for 'life as lived', but for 'life as thought about'"<sup>78</sup>. This cuts to the core of *Adaptation* as FCCK spends the first two acts of the film thinking about how to live – rather than living. The process of Hollywood screenwriting, as taught by FCRMK, teaches him how to live life too.

The film FCCK wants to make is an art film about flowers. The film he comes to write is about wanting to live life differently, with two detached writers – Orlean and FCCK – trying to find ways of being fascinated, taking action and being truly alive. According to IRLRMK, antiplot films "reflect not reality, but the solipsism of the filmmaker"<sup>79</sup> – a theory (that the self is all that can be known to exist) IRLCK subscribes to: "There's no objective reality as far as I'm concerned. There's only what takes place in your brain. My brain. We have our perceptions, and that's all we have."<sup>80</sup>

IRLRMK claims that antiplot stretches "story design toward didactic and ideational structures"<sup>81</sup>. *Adaptation* is indeed ideational – dealing with adaptation, stasis, change and how art and Hollywood stories reflect the two – and is didactic in its presentation of the process of how every fiction film is written by a screenwriter. However, *Adaptation* also lies about the actual writing process – e.g. pretending that

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<sup>75</sup> McKee, *Story*, p. 62.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid. p. 64.

<sup>80</sup> James Verini, *Another head case*, Los Angeles Times, March 17, 2004.

<sup>81</sup> McKee, *Story*, p. 64.

FCCK is IRLCK and that Donald Kaufman exists – and plays with the idea of truth through the concept of parody. But the film does not accomplish this through techniques of atemporality, coincidence, fragmentation and chaos – but clear, consistent reality.

IRLRMK declares that an antiplot's inconsistent reality can still have a unity of sorts, which "when done well, it's felt to be an expression of the subjective state of mind of the filmmaker".<sup>82</sup> This is applicable to the idea content of *Adaptation*, where everything is expressed according to the subjective state of mind of the screenwriter, and "this sense of a single perception [...] hold[s] the work together for audiences"<sup>83</sup> The film plays with what's real and what's not. The fiction coupled with real life creates an inconsistent reality between fictional and factual persons and works of art (*TOT*, Susan Orlean, Robert McKee, John Laroche, Donald Kaufman, John Cusack, Catherine Keener, Valerie Thomas and Charlie Kaufman among others). *Adaptation* is ideational, dealing with the subject of life as thought about versus life as lived, while discussing the ideas and ideals of the antiplot – but conveys it all through a life-as-lived archplot form. *Adaptation's* realities are consistent, but played with, in a typically postmodern fashion.

## External/Internal Conflict

(*Adaptation* 1/3 Archplot, 2/3 Miniplot):

IRLRMK asserts that "[t]he Archplot puts emphasis on external conflict"<sup>84</sup>. Its characters can still have strong inner conflicts, but "the emphasis falls on their struggles with personal relationships, with social institutions, or with forces in the physical world."<sup>85</sup> In the miniplot, on the other hand, "the protagonist may have strong external conflicts [...], but emphasis will fall on the battles within his own thoughts and feelings, conscious or unconscious"<sup>86</sup>. The emphasis in *Adaptation* is on FCCK's inner transformation, from thinking about life to living life – by acting out his thoughts and feelings. FCCK has active relations with other people as well however; his brother Donald teaches him the lesson "You are what you love, not what loves you"<sup>87</sup>, and FCCK expresses it to Amelia and finds his love returned. FCCK is fixated on the fictional Orlean while adapting the film – while coping with deadlines from a Hollywood executive and agent – but the emphasis is on his internal struggles, finding

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<sup>82</sup> McKee, *Story*, p. 64.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid. p. 57.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

<sup>87</sup> Kaufman, *Adaptation: The Shooting Script*, p. 93.

self-esteem, writing the screenplay and learning how to love and be loved. Ironically, FCCK's primary force of resistance is not the world – or Hollywood, as he imagines (the representatives of Hollywood support him throughout the movie, as they did with IRLCK in real life) – but himself; and his tendency to act only in his head, not in the world. Here, the form of *Adaptation* is leaning away from the archplot and it's external conflicts towards the miniplot and its internal ones – even as it portrays FCCK's process of adapting from stasis to change, in order to transform his (screenwriting) life.

### Single Protagonist/Multiprotagonist

#### *(Adaptation 2/3 Archplot, 1/3 Miniplot):*

IRMRMK asserts that "[t]he classically told story usually places a single protagonist [...] at the heart of the telling."<sup>88</sup> Whereas in a minimalist plot, the film can be splinted into "small, sub-plot-sized stories, each with a separate protagonist"<sup>89</sup> creating the multiplot variation of the miniplot. *Adaptation* is a special case as it focuses on writers dealing with their subjects: the fictional Orlean with the fictional Laroche, and FCCK with the fictional Orlean (as well as everybody else in the film, as FCCK has written it all). The fictional Laroche is shown through the fictional Orlean's reporting, while the latter has her own subplot, but is shown through FCCK's writing and research about her. So, while she has a clear plot of her own – following the arch from positive to negative – FCCK is the main character and his plot is the main one; going from negative to positive. FCCK is at the heart of the telling, but the fictional Orlean's plot zigzags with and counterpoints FCCK's plot. We only see Donald, FCRMK and other characters with FCCK, while scenes with Darwin and orchid hunters are imagined through FCCK. *Adaptation* is on the archplot end of the spectra, but not completely, as the fictional Orlean has a subplot. However, it all really takes place within FCCK's plot, as he has supposedly written the film we're watching. With the content – it's always complicated in *Adaptation* – but with the form, the film leans towards the archplot here as well.

### Active/Passive Protagonist

#### *(Adaptation 50% Archplot, 50% Miniplot):*

The difference between archplot and miniplot in this aspect consists of an active and dynamic protagonist, compared to a reactive and passive one. FCCK, shares both traits.

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<sup>88</sup> McKee, *Story*, p. 58.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

To start with the active protagonist, he willfully pursues "desire through ever-escalating conflict and change"<sup>90</sup>. In this pursuit, he "takes action in direct conflict with the people and the world around him."<sup>91</sup> To start with, FCCCK only does this in his head. He has trouble with turning thoughts into actions, and with taking action in the world. He is active in his thinking but passive in his dealings. He doesn't dare to contact the woman he becomes obsessed with (the fictional Orlean), nor kiss the woman he loves (Amelia), nor tell her that he loves her (until the end). The exception, before the third act, is that he stands up for wanting to write a film about flowers that just "exists", and rejects the idea of the fictional Laroche and Orlean falling in love. In this sense he does take action in direct conflict with the people and the world around him. Still, Hollywood and its representative lets FCCCK entertain his idea; so perhaps it's only in FCCCK's head that he is in clinch. And the idea of that static film never turns into an actual film. The same thing could be said for FCCCK writing himself into the script, which IRLCK has expressed is a truthful depiction of events – "I don't think I would have been able to do it if I thought this movie was going to get made"<sup>92</sup> – and "Hollywood" accepted that too, right? FCCCK is not active, but passive. His desire to write a movie about flowers "where nothing much happens"<sup>93</sup> is in the way of his desire to turn his life around.

IRLRMK asserts that the "passive protagonist is outwardly inactive while pursuing desire inwardly, in conflict with aspects of his or her own nature"<sup>94</sup>. Giving the protagonist a powerful inner struggle, or surrounding him with dramatic events, compensates for this passivity. FCCCK deals with this inner struggle in act 1 and 2, trying to write the script and trying to act his thoughts – but fails. His struggle is with internal, antagonistic forces; the clash between thought and action, expectation and result. His passivity leaves him depressed, desiring change while believing change doesn't exist. In Act 3, he is surrounded by dramatic events as soon as he acts to spy on the fictional Laroche and Orlean, after taking FCRMK's and Donald's advice. This leads to FCCCK giving up his screenwriter ideals, writing everything he said he wouldn't – due to his experience of dramatic stuff happening in life – to become active in the world, and write an active world, where things change.

FCCCK is thus both passive and active. For how can a protagonist in a film possibly be more active than a screenwriter writing the film we watch? Yet, this

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<sup>90</sup> McKee, *Story*, p. 59.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

<sup>92</sup> Topel, *An Unorthodox Adaptation: Deciphering Charlie Kaufman*

<sup>93</sup> Kaufman, *Adaptation: The Shooting Script*, p. 68.

<sup>94</sup> McKee, *Story*, p. 58.

screenwriter character is passive in the world, in terms of actions, and unable to act out his feelings until the third act. The role of the reporter is also supposed to be the passive observer's, but the fictional Orlean writes herself into her stories. FCCK/IRLCK and the fictional/real Susan Orlean, importantly, share these traits. They seem passive (the difference is that the fictional Orlean is out in the world reporting, while FCCK finds it hard to leave his own head), but are not. The fictional Orlean has written her world with *The Orchid Thief* and FCCK turns it – and *Story* – into his world with *Adaptation*.

## Linear/Nonlinear time

### (*Adaptation* 3/3 Archplot, 0/3 Antiplot):

*Adaptation* follows the archplot's linear time: "a story with or without flashbacks, arranged into a temporal order of events that the audience can follow"<sup>95</sup>, to place the story's events in temporal order. *Adaptation* begins and ends in Hollywood, with a screenplay being assigned and a screenplay having been written. Meanwhile, we get to see the screenwriter write the film. The sequences from different times – the big bang, history of life on earth and orchid hunters – have their place as material in the screenplay the protagonist writes. They also constitute key linear moments in the historical adaptation of human beings. This is the opposite of an antiplot's nonlinear time, where it's "difficult, if not impossible, to sort what happened into any linear sequence"<sup>96</sup>, due to the fragmentation of time in its event design.

### Formal Analysis of *Adaptation* – Summed-up

The ideas of formal principles are ridiculed by FCCK, but the **formal principles of the archplot**, as IRLRMK describes them, are deeply embedded at the core of *Adaptation*; and this is not shown to the public (who are just shown the ideational play). Placed in the story triangle, *Adaptation* leans heavily towards the **archplot**. It uses elements of the **miniplot**: most notably **internal conflict**, but also a **passive protagonist** (in certain aspects), **two/more protagonists rather than just one** – even if we really see all of the film through the eyes of our one main protagonist, the screenwriter – and a (not fully) **closed ending**. The film is conventional, if elaborate, in regards to **form** and **structure**. It's in regards to **content** that *Adaptation* is unusually complex, as it discusses the **antiplot** in its idea world, while not using any of its formal elements. The thought-provoking content is delivered **in the form of an archplot**, no matter if the screenwriter

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<sup>95</sup> McKee, *Story*, p. 50.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.



in the film declares himself to be an antiplot proponent. The antiplot is the film FCCCK wishes to write, but it is never the film we watch. *Adaptation* is only **quasi-antiplot in regards to form, but discusses the idea of the antiplot – and art film – in its content.**

## Part 4: The Fictional and Factual Story Design of *Adaptation*

As an experiment, go out of your way to write a non-story. It will still be a story, but it will have a chance of being a different story. – Charlie Kaufman<sup>97</sup>

### Postmodern Parody, Complicity and Critique

The postmodern aspects of *Adaptation* have already been mentioned briefly. A short theoretical background will be provided below, before moving on to explore it in more detail. The real Susan Orlean remarked that: "the film is aimed at [...] 'the postmodern generation'"<sup>98</sup> and, as Linda Hutcheon asserts, postmodernism can be distinguished from modernism by taking "the form of self-conscious, self-contradictory, self-undermining statement"<sup>99</sup>. It does this through the use of parody, central to postmodernism, whose distinct character lies in its doubleness, as "postmodernism ultimately manages to install and reinforce as much as undermine and subvert the conventions and presuppositions it appears to challenge."<sup>100</sup> Postmodern film shows off its own artifice, and "unmasks the process of production"<sup>101</sup> rather than concealing it. Just as in *Adaptation* "someone, the viewer is constantly reminded, is telling the story"<sup>102</sup>. A possible reason for the many objections against the film's third act is that the film points the way to a "new truth only to be returned, decidedly, to conventions and clichés"<sup>103</sup>, with its complicity resulting "from its participation in this ideological fictionalisation"<sup>104</sup>. Let us go on to explore how and to which degree *Adaptation* is postmodern, parodic, critical and complicit through *Adaptation*'s and *Story*'s discussion of stasis and change – the art and Hollywood film's respective messages.

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<sup>97</sup> Kaufman, *Screenwriting Lecture*.

<sup>98</sup> Sean Hagan, *Who's the Proper Charlie?* The Observer, 9 February 2003, <http://www.theguardian.com/film/2003/feb/09/features.review> – 2014-09-12 (PDF available).

<sup>99</sup> Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism*, New York, Routledge, 1989, p. 1.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid. p. 1-2.

<sup>101</sup> Cynthia Baron, *The Player's Parody of Hollywood*, Postmodernism in the Cinema, Edited by Cristina Degli Espoti, New York, Berghahn Books, 1998, p. 29.

<sup>102</sup> Barbara Simerka and Christopher B. Weimer, *Duplicious Diegesis: Don Quijote and Charlie Kaufman's Adaptation*, *Hispania* 88, no. 1 (March 2005), p. 92.

<sup>103</sup> David LaRocca, *Inconclusive Unscientific Postscript: Late Remarks on Kierkegaard and Kaufman*, appears in *The Philosophy of Charlie Kaufman*, Edited by David LaRocca, The University Press of Kentucky, 2011, p. 269.

<sup>104</sup> Kirk Boyle, *Reading the Dialectical Ontology of The Life Aquatic with Steve Zissou Against the Ontological Monism of Adaptation*, *Film-Philosophy*, v.11, n. 1, p. 13. Available on: <http://www.film-philosophy.com/2007v11n1/boyle.pdf> – 2014-09-30. (PDF available.)

## The Politics of Story Design, or: "Art Film" vs. "Hollywood"

IRLRMK discusses the "art film" vs. the "Hollywood film" and describes it as "the politics of artistic versus commercial success"<sup>105</sup>. FCCK begins at the art film corner, stating disdain for Hollywood: "I just don't want to ruin it by making it into a Hollywood thing"<sup>106</sup>. He declares: "Life isn't like that. It just isn't. I feel very strongly about this"<sup>107</sup> and wants to make a movie that just exists. The conflict between Hollywood and art film is dramatized in FCCK's discussions with his brother – a believer in FCRMK. The latter two are the Hollywood film proponents in *Adaptation*. The different preferences of the brothers are apparent in the scripts they write; FCCK is after artistic accomplishment, Donald desires commercial success. Beyond this conflict between art vs. Hollywood film something deeper – that cuts to the very core of *Adaptation* – lurks. Namely: the clash between stasis vs. change. Or in other terms: life as thought about vs. life as lived. This is at the center of the difference between arch-mini- and antiplot in IRLRMK's story triangle as well. *Adaptation* investigates the clash between stasis (art film) and change (Hollywood film), and its radical consequences for a writer who believes life is stasis and wants to write an art film that reflects this, but desires personal change – and comes to write a Hollywood film. FCRMK is symbolically meaningful as the most prominent representative of Hollywood story in the film. First he is FCCK's nemesis, then he saves FCCK, laying the foundation for FCCK's transformation: "Your characters must change. And the change must come from them"<sup>108</sup>. FCRMK is also reflected in FCCK's quarrels about screenwriting with his twin brother Donald, FCRMK's disciple. Their on-going conversation regarding screenwriting suggests a Yin/Yang between archplot (Donald) vs. mini-/antiplot (FCCK), and Hollywood/change (Donald) vs. art film/stasis (FCCK). Let's keep these notions in mind while discussing the fictional and factual story design of the film.

## Thought, Action and Foreshadowing Classic Dramaturgy

At the beginning of *Adaptation*, FCCK is depressed, believing in the art film's stasis, life as thought about rather than life as lived. He draws up his idea of a Hollywood film: "sex or guns or car chases, [...] characters [...] learning profound life lessons, or growing, or coming to like each other or overcoming obstacles to succeed in the end"<sup>109</sup>.

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<sup>105</sup> McKee, *Story*, p. 70.

<sup>106</sup> Kaufman, *Adaptation: The Shooting Script*, p. 5.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid. p. 70.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid. p. 5-6.

A statement close to IRLRMK's suggestion that "the political meaning of 'Hollywood film' is narrowed to thirty or forty special effects-dominated flicks and an equal number of farces and romances that Hollywood makes each year—far less than half of the town's output."<sup>110</sup> While FCCCK explains his take on Hollywood – and what he doesn't want his film to be; because "[t]he book isn't like that, and life isn't like that. It just isn't. I feel very strongly about this"<sup>111</sup> – the fictional Valerie Thomas, sits quiet, suggesting that the conflict could be in FCCCK's head. Ironically, this Hollywood representative never gives FCCCK anything but her support. The only thing she does suggest is the corny notion that the fictional Orlean and Laroche could fall in love, which, of course, also happens. Just as some other things FCCCK didn't want, such as “changing the orchids into poppies and turning it into a movie about drug running”.<sup>112</sup>

To reflect IRLRMK's assertion, FCCCK's opinion is based on prejudice. Sex, guns and car chases are a cliché of what Hollywood films are (if not a bad one, if true in half the cases, as IRLRMK writes). But the elements of characters learning (life lessons), growing, coming to like each other or overcoming obstacles to succeed in the end are indeed part of the major staple. Which is not so strange, as they are also elements of basic dramaturgy<sup>113</sup>. Besides making FCCCK's stance on Hollywood clear, the following things all happen in *Adaptation*:

- **Sex:** FCCCK masturbating to fantasies of a waitress, the fictional Valerie Thomas and Orlean. Also: the fictional Orlean naked on Laroche's porn site and having sex with him twice – scenes not part of the book, but part of FCCCK's and Donald's *Adaptation*.<sup>114</sup>
- **Guns:** the fictional Laroche and Orlean setting out to kill FCCCK – shooting Donald.
- **Car chases:** Donald and FCCCK following the fictional Orlean and Laroche in a tail scene. Laroche and Orlean driving after FCCCK and Donald when they escape.
- **Characters learning profound life lessons and growing:** FCCCK learning that neither life nor screenplays are stasis but change, and acting out his thoughts and feelings. Finding reciprocated love (in Amelia) through gained self-esteem (Donald's love lesson). The fictional Orlean – on the other hand – doesn't learn a profound life lesson; she becomes fascinated only by taking drugs, a way of cheating/doping that eventually leads to her destruction in her disillusionment plot.<sup>115</sup>
- **Coming to like each other:** FCCCK coming to love his brother (after earlier in the film having stated: You and I share the same DNA. Is there anything more lonely than that?<sup>116</sup>). The fictional Orlean and Laroche falling in love.
- **Overcoming obstacles to succeed in the end:** FCCCK overcomes his external and internal struggles to finish the screenplay and express his love for Amelia.

<sup>110</sup> McKee, *Story*, p. 70 (this statement is almost two decades old by now – but still reflective of its times).

<sup>111</sup> Kaufman, *Adaptation: The Shooting Script*, p. 6.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid. p. 5.

<sup>113</sup> Depending on what kind of plot the particular story concerns of course.

<sup>114</sup> In previous drafts of *Adaptation*, FCCCK masturbated to fantasies of even more women than three.

<sup>115</sup> Just as if it was a morality tale – constructed by a screenwriting instructor – only true writing can lead to true and positive change, while cheaters are caught out in the end.

<sup>116</sup> Kaufman, *Adaptation: The Shooting Script*, p. 43.

## The Fictional and Factual Premise, Controlling Idea and Counter-Idea

IRLRMK asserts that "two ideas bracket the creative process"<sup>117</sup>:

- the **Premise**; "the idea that inspires the writer's desire to create a story".<sup>118</sup>
- the **Controlling Idea**; "the story's ultimate meaning expressed through the action and aesthetic emotion of the last act's Climax"<sup>119</sup>.

According to IRLRMK, a premise, unlike a controlling idea, is "an open-ended question: What would happen if...?"<sup>120</sup> In *Adaptation*, FCCCK's first premise is to adapt the fictional Orlean's book about flowers into a movie, while his first controlling idea is that life is static. He wants to show his idea of life as static by letting the movie just exist. As FCCCK gets nowhere with neither script nor life, by letting them just exist, **the premise is expanded to an on-going, experimental exploration – what happens if I write myself into the script?** – as the movie progresses. As IRLRMK states, a "[p]remise is not precious"<sup>121</sup>, and in *Adaptation* we are shown how FCCCK only follows it as long as the premise contributes to the screenplay's growth, but abandons the original inspiration to adapt to the evolving story, as "the telling take[s] a left turn"<sup>122</sup>.

What FCCCK tells his brother – "[w]riting is a journey into the unknown"<sup>123</sup> – is reflected in IRLRMK's assertion: "We rarely know where we're going; writing is discovery."<sup>124</sup> In *Adaptation* we partake in this fictional process as FCCCK comes to write the film – with change and about change – that we are watching. First, we follow how he tries to express his original controlling idea of stasis. Regarding this, IRLMRK asserts "no one can achieve excellence as a writer without being something of a philosopher and holding strong convictions. The trick is not to be a slave to your ideas, but to immerse yourself in life."<sup>125</sup> IRLCK uses the belief he has admitted to sharing – "I think it was what you saw. I liked the book, I took the job"<sup>126</sup> and "[I]ike the character in the movie says, I felt why can't there be a movie about flowers?"<sup>127</sup> – in FCCCK's wish

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<sup>117</sup> McKee, *Story*, p. 133.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid. p. 134.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid.

<sup>123</sup> Kaufman, *Adaptation: The Shooting Script*, p. 12.

<sup>124</sup> McKee, *Story*, p. 133-134.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid. p. 145.

<sup>126</sup> Rob Blackwelder, *Creative Licenses*, Spliced Wire, October 25, 2002. Available on: <http://www.splicedwire.com/02features/jonzekaufman.html> – 2014-10-01 (PDF available).

<sup>127</sup> Topel, *An Unorthodox Adaptation: Deciphering Charlie Kaufman*.

to write a "movie where nothing much happens, where people don't change, they don't have any epiphanies, they struggle and are frustrated, and nothing is resolved".<sup>128</sup>

In the beginning, FCCK is a slave to his ideas and convictions of stasis, but learns to immerse himself in life as he goes from thoughts in the head to action in the world. FCCK undergoes this change by way of empirical experiences, unhappiness with stasis and meetings with the influential figure of FCRMK. The futility of FCCK's first controlling idea is balanced by the fruition of change the process of screenwriting rewards him. IRLRMK states that Paddy Chayefsky (screenwriter, novelist and playwright) designed his stories by playing the idea against the counter-idea. By letting "the positive Idea and its negative Counter-Idea argue [...] back and forth"<sup>129</sup> a dramatized debate is created. This is reflected in that FCCK, while living and writing the screenplay we're watching, has the opposite controlling idea (stasis) of the finished film (change) for the first two acts. In its dramatization of the debate between the declared controlling idea of stasis and the spurned controlling idea of change, **the real (positive) controlling idea of *Adaptation* turns out to be change** – while stasis is only the (negative) counter-idea in the end. It becomes even more effective as we not only see FCCK reaching this conclusion; he also writes it for us in the film we are watching.

IRLRMK argues that the "controlling idea has two components: Value + Cause. It identifies the positive or negative charge of the story's critical value at the last act's Climax, and it identifies the chief reason that this value has changed."<sup>130</sup> If we look at the value-charge in the beginning, and compare it to the end, we see "the great sweep of change that takes life from one condition at the opening to a changed condition at the end"<sup>131</sup>. In *Adaptation* this flows from static (art film; antiplot) to change (Hollywood movie; archplot). It conveys the idea of life and screenwriting as change as the "controlling idea is the purest form of a story's meaning, the how and why of change, the vision of life the audience members carry away into their lives."<sup>132</sup> FCCK goes from depressed, in stasis, to a happy, changed man. Everything is decisive and final; just as the "final condition, [the] end change, must be absolute and irreversible".<sup>133</sup>

Accordingly, IRLRMK claims that "storytelling is the creative demonstration of

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<sup>128</sup> Kaufman, *Adaptation: The Shooting Script*, p. 68.

<sup>129</sup> McKee, *Story*, p. 142.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid. p. 138.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid. p. 140.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid. p. 48.

truth, [...] the living proof of an idea, the conversion of idea to action"<sup>134</sup>, while the "event structure is the means by which you first express, then prove your idea."<sup>135</sup> FCCCK arrives at the positive value of change, through the cause of adaptation, from a dogmatic idea of stasis – by way of the transformative process of screenwriting. In this sense *Adaptation* becomes complicitous with Hollywood, as the idea it proves (change) is that of the Hollywood film, expressed through its event structure (archplot). IRLRMK claims the controlling idea must be expressible in one sentence and that it should describe "how and why life undergoes change from one condition of existence at the beginning to another at the end."<sup>136</sup> With *Adaptation*, one just has to look to the title for the controlling idea – how and why – FCCCK changes. As IRLRMK writes, "[t]o title means to name. An effective title points to something solid [...]—character, setting, theme or genre. The best titles name two or all elements at once."<sup>137</sup> *Adaptation* names the theme, the controlling idea and, it could be argued, even the setting and genre.

### The Tilted Argument

The art film where nothing happens that FCCCK dreams of writing has never been what we've been watching; the argument has been tilted for the classical Hollywood archplot of change from the beginning. We have been given the illusion of the opposite because it is the most dramatically effective. As with idea and counter-idea, by tilting the argument to the contrary of what will happen, what happens becomes more powerful. Following IRLRMK: "In creating the dimensions of your story's 'argument,' take great care to build the power of both sides."<sup>138</sup> IRLRMK advises to amplify the opposite of the idea that the film ends on and to "not slant your 'argument.'"<sup>139</sup> This is reflected in how FCCCK is opposed to FCRMK and set on writing an antiplot art film and not "a Hollywood thing"<sup>140</sup>. But then the opposite happens, and the film consciously turns in FCRMK's direction, becoming the very "Hollywood thing" FCCCK didn't want it to be.

IRLRMK asserts that the danger is that "[w]hen your Premise is an idea you feel you must prove to the world, and you design your story as an undeniable certification of that idea, you set yourself on the road to didacticism. In your zeal to persuade, you will

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<sup>134</sup> McKee, *Story*, p. 135.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid. p. 468.

<sup>138</sup> Ibid. p. 143.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid.

<sup>140</sup> Kaufman, *Adaptation: The Shooting Script*, p. 5.

stifle the voice of the other side."<sup>141</sup> For FCCK, this voice of the other side would be that of change in life and films reflecting it. Stifling it has stifled his writing efforts and it has also stifled his life. It's all solved when he meets FCRMK, and the film turns from the idea of stasis to the action of change – the much-spurned voice of the other side.

To begin with, FCCK's argument is slanted towards stasis and against change, for the antiplot art film against the archplot Hollywood flick – but what we get in the end is change as controlling idea, discussed antiplot content but complicit archplot form. As the story develops, FCCK entertains the very ideas that were repugnant to him in the beginning. The values are turned from the onset, when he is living life in stasis, thinking life is stasis, wanting to write a film where nothing happens – but comes to take action, to think life is change, to write a film where a lot happens and to live life rather than to just think about it. This tilted argument is the key – however parodic – to FCCK succeeding in his mission to finish the screenplay, find love and self-esteem.

### The Inciting Incident

In IRLRMK's description, "a story is: a human being ~~is~~ living a life that is more or less in balance"<sup>142</sup>. This is only partly true for FCCK, since already the narration in the opening scene<sup>143</sup> states that he is neither happy nor balanced. He has written *Being John Malkovich* though, so his professional life is in order. "Then comes the 'Inciting Incident'"<sup>144</sup> that, writes IRLRMK, "radically upsets the balance of forces in the protagonist's life"<sup>145</sup>. This is when FCCK is given *TOT* to adapt by the fictional Valerie Thomas – as the adaptation of it comes to test his belief in stasis. With that "[t]he protagonist reacts, [and] his life falls out of balance"<sup>146</sup>. FCCK tries to restore the balance by finishing the screenplay. His love interest, Amelia, says: "I'm glad you took the orchid script. I think it will be good for you to get out of your head. I think it'll ground you to think about the bigger picture, about nature and stuff"<sup>147</sup> (this foreshadows what happens to FCCK later in the film – he first thinks about the bigger picture, about “nature and stuff”, and is then taken out of his head into action in life). As FCCK comes home from the inciting incident of being given *TOT* to adapt, his brother

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<sup>141</sup> McKee, *Story*, p. 144.

<sup>142</sup> Parker, *The Real McKee: Lessons of a Screenwriting Guru*, p.9.

<sup>143</sup> See the end of the (next) chapter on “Conscious and Unconscious Desire” for a full description.

<sup>144</sup> Parker, *The Real McKee: Lessons of a Screenwriting Guru*, p. 9.

<sup>145</sup> McKee, *Story*, p. 210.

<sup>146</sup> Parker, *The Real McKee: Lessons of a Screenwriting Guru*, p. 9.

<sup>147</sup> Kaufman, *Adaptation: The Shooting Script*, p. 13.

has decided to become a screenwriter. As Donald becomes FCRMK's disciple of change, FCCK's belief in stasis is constantly challenged and eventually changed.

The actions in the film illustrate the ideas: Donald not only believes in the archplot ideas of change, he also changes (from unemployed, single and unsuccessful to the opposite). FCCK not only gets a book to adapt, he also adapts. IRLRMK advocates that a story must be unified, even when expressing chaos (and *Adaptation* does). He goes on to say that "[t]he Inciting Incident is the story's most profound cause, and, therefore, the final effect, the story Climax, should seem inevitable"<sup>148</sup>. The story climax is that nothing is in fact static; FCCK changes and takes action, writes action – as does the screenplay. What binds the inciting incident and the story climax together is "the spine, the protagonist's deep desire to restore the balance of life."<sup>149</sup> FCCK's adaptation restores his balance by uniting his thoughts and actions. The thinking "about nature and stuff" leads to the idea of evolution, and what we see in the film is FCCK adapting – with screenwriting itself as the evolutionary process that shapes his life and vice versa. The screenwriting process is causally locked to achieving change. This transformation happens as if inevitably, achieved by the use of the mentioned counter-idea, tilted argument and FCCK's now to-be-explored conscious and unconscious desire.

### Conscious and Unconscious Desire

IRLRMK argues that the protagonist has a conscious desire, along with "a need or goal, an object of desire, and knows it."<sup>150</sup> FCCK's conscious desire, need and goal is to portray life as he feels it is – static. However, "the most memorable, fascinating characters tend to have not only a conscious but an unconscious desire."<sup>151</sup> What happens is that "[t]he conscious and unconscious desires of a multidimensional protagonist contradict each other. What he believes he wants is the antithesis of what he actually but unwittingly wants"<sup>152</sup> – reflected in the idea of the aforementioned tilted argument. As when FCCK is given *TOT* to adapt, "the Inciting Incident arouses not only a conscious desire, but an Unconscious one as well"<sup>153</sup>. FCCK is unhappy, depressed and wants to write an art film to reflect his static life where nothing much happens. His unconscious desire is to change and he consequently writes a Hollywood movie (that changes) about change. IRLRMK claims that "[t]hese complex characters suffer intense

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<sup>148</sup> McKee, *Story*, p. 322.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid.

<sup>150</sup> Ibid. p. 164.

<sup>151</sup> Ibid.

<sup>152</sup> Ibid. p. 164.

<sup>153</sup> Ibid. p. 215.



inner battles because these two desires are in direct conflict with each other."<sup>154</sup> How can FCCCK accomplish his desired actions, when he doesn't believe in change? – "No matter what the character consciously thinks he wants, the audience senses or realizes that deep inside he unconsciously wants the very opposite."<sup>155</sup> In the end, the unconscious desire changes the film FCCCK writes, and the story's spine. This happens as "[a]n unconscious desire is always more powerful and durable, with roots reaching to the protagonist's innermost self. When an unconscious desire drives the story, it allows the writer to create a far more complex character".<sup>156</sup> Compare this to the 1999 draft of *Adaptation*, where Donald quotes directly from *Story* to FCCCK: "The most memorable, fascinating characters tend to have not only a conscious but an unconscious desire."<sup>157</sup>

"As Jean-Paul Sartre expressed it, the essence of reality is scarcity, a universal and eternal lacking."<sup>158</sup> For both the central characters, we get the feeling that their despairing involvement in the film is due to the following: "if we are to achieve anything in our brief being that lets us die without feeling we've wasted our time, we will have to go into heady conflict with the forces of scarcity that deny our desires."<sup>159</sup> For FCCCK this is himself, his inability to express love and take action. For the fictional Orlean, it is her stale life. Her conscious desire is to know what it feels like "to care about something passionately"<sup>160</sup>. Her unconscious desire is to break up from her orderly life as a married New York(er) intellectual, and take up a forbidden affair with her subject as a reporter. The fictional Orlean's book reflects her boredom. As IRLRMK puts it: "Boredom is the inner conflict we suffer when we lose desire, when we lack a lacking."<sup>161</sup> This is what FCCCK is drawn to, but also what gives him problems with adapting the book, and a theme that comes to not only affect his film but also his life. The lesson FCRMK teaches FCCCK is that "[l]ife is about the ultimate questions of finding love and self-worth, of bringing serenity to inner chaos [...]. Life is conflict. That is its nature."<sup>162</sup> In *Adaptation* this is also true for screenwriting – where screenwriting reflects life and vice versa. In the first scene of the film, FCCCK's rants on how his life is out of balance and his (unconscious) desire for change:

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<sup>154</sup> McKee, *Story*, p. 215.

<sup>155</sup> Ibid. p. 192.

<sup>156</sup> Ibid. p. 220.

<sup>157</sup> Charlie and Donald Kaufman, *Adaptation*, September 24, 1999, Second Draft, p. 19.

<sup>158</sup> McKee, *Story*, p. 242.

<sup>159</sup> Ibid.

<sup>160</sup> Susan Orlean, *The Orchid Thief: A True Story of Beauty and Obsession*, New York, Ballantine Books, 2000, p. 49.

<sup>161</sup> McKee, *Story*, p. 244.

<sup>162</sup> Ibid, p. 245.

I should start jogging again. [///] Maybe rock climbing. I need to turn my life around. What do I need to do? I need to fall in love. I need to have a girlfriend. I need to read more, improve myself. What if I learned Russian or something? Or took up an instrument? I could speak Chinese. I would be the screenwriter who speaks Chinese ... and plays the oboe. That would be cool. I should get my hair cut short. Stop trying to fool everyone into thinking I have a full head of hair. How pathetic is that? Just be real. Confident. Isn't that what women are attracted to?<sup>163</sup>

FCCK recites a long list of possible changes for himself only to go on and express his conflicting belief in stasis in the meeting with the fictional Valerie Thomas. As IRLMRK asserts, "an event throws a character's life out of balance, arousing in him the conscious and/or unconscious desire for that which he feels will restore balance."<sup>164</sup> What FCCK feels will restore his balance is adapting *TOT* to reflect his belief in stasis, but what he needs to do to successfully achieve his desire (change) has to be achieved by the opposite; taking action. By living, and writing that action, he finishes the screenplay and finds love – adapting both himself and the process of adaptation. As says Meryl Streep, playing the fictional Orlean, about *Adaptation*: "It's about creative process, but it's also about the creative process of living and how you live authentically in your life and feel your life and how you remain true in what you believe."<sup>165</sup>

### Crisis

According to IRLMRK: "Crisis with a capital C is the ultimate decision. The Chinese ideogram for Crisis is two terms: Danger/Opportunity—'danger' in that the wrong decision at this moment will lose forever what we want; 'opportunity' in that the right choice will achieve our desire".<sup>166</sup> This crisis occurs when FCCK approaches the screenwriting guru FCRMK – whose every idea FCCK has nothing but laughed at previously. As FCCK approaches FCRMK, he says: "My even standing here is very scary"<sup>167</sup>. The danger lies in the humiliation of admitting his weakness; that FCCK can't write the film on his own, as he wished. But why does FCCK stand in despair in front of FCRMK begging for help? To achieve his conscious desire, finishing the screenplay, but first and foremost – to achieve his unconscious desire for change.

FCRMK's real-life counterpart, IRLMRK declares that "the audience has been anticipating with growing vividness the scene in which the protagonist will be face to face with the most focused, powerful forces of antagonism in his existence. This is the

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<sup>163</sup> Kaufman, *Adaptation: The Shooting Script*, p. 1.

<sup>164</sup> McKee, *Story*, p. 225.

<sup>165</sup> Unknown Writer, *Adaptation Reviewed*, Hotdog Magazine.

<sup>166</sup> McKee, *Story*, p. 338.

<sup>167</sup> Kaufman, *Adaptation: The Shooting Script*, p. 69.

dragon, so to speak, that guards the Object of Desire".<sup>168</sup> In a last effort to achieve his conscious object of desire (finishing the screenplay) and his unconscious desire (change), FCCK seeks the advice of his most powerful force of antagonism – FCRMK (his nemesis in terms of writing philosophy). FCCK attends FCRMK's seminar because he's come to a total standstill. He's desperate for a solution and for the dragon, FCRMK, to have it. Just as he told Donald before, regarding FCRMK: "Anyone who says that they have the answer is going to attract desperate people."<sup>169</sup> FCCK is indeed desperate and in deep crisis, but still partly skeptical, thinking through voice-over as FCRMK speaks: "Easy answers, rules to short-cut yourself to success"<sup>170</sup>. In the following scene FCCK finally pops the deciding question of the crisis – stating the conflict taking place within his head throughout the film – the philosophical contradiction of stasis versus change, of life as thought about versus life as lived, of antiplot versus archplot:

Sir, what if a writer is 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<sup>171</sup>

FCRMK, the spokesman for Hollywood, answers:

First of all, you write a screenplay without a conflict or crisis, you'll bore your audience to tears. Secondly: nothing happens in the world? Are you out of your fucking mind? [///] If you can't find that stuff in life, then you my friend, don't know crap about life.<sup>172</sup>

As Ghazouani writes, FCCK "seems to [have] missed that realization because of his determination to write something different and original, something that deals with other aspects of life that seems to be overlooked in most stories."<sup>173</sup> FCRMK's real-life counterpart, IRLRMK asserts that: "Life teaches that the measure of the value of any human desire is in direct proportion to the risk involved in its pursuit."<sup>174</sup> When FCCK asks the question above, and then lingers to ask FCRMK's personal advice, he puts all his artistic and screenwriting values at risk. Screenwriting is all he has and the higher the value – the higher the risk. As "we not only create stories as metaphors for life, we create them as metaphors for meaningful life—and to live meaningfully is to be at perpetual risk."<sup>175</sup> This is why FCRMK screams to FCCK that he doesn't know anything

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<sup>168</sup> McKee, *Story*, p. 338.

<sup>169</sup> Kaufman, *Adaptation: The Shooting Script*, p. 11.

<sup>170</sup> *Ibid.* p. 67.

<sup>171</sup> *Ibid.* p. 68.

<sup>172</sup> *Ibid.* p. 68-69.

<sup>173</sup> Anas El Ghazouani, *How Meta-Films Can Serve Cinema*, Blekinge Technology Institute, 2012, p. 7.

<sup>174</sup> McKee, *Story*, p. 175.

<sup>175</sup> *Ibid.*

about life, leading to FCCK asking FCRMK for personal advice later:

What you said this morning shook me to the bone. What you said was bigger than my screenwriting choices. It was about my choices as a human being.

FCCK places his human desire at risk, because otherwise it'd be of no value – and he would just continue his existential limbo. As IRLRMK states it: "He now stands to lose in order to gain."<sup>176</sup> FCCK is in torment because he is too timid to act. Even writing the script is a perpetual risk now – as he would lose his livelihood, the only trade he knows, if he fails to finish it. In the words of his agent: "Not to give them anything at this point would be a terrible career move"<sup>177</sup>. As FCCK receives help from FCRMK, it leads to changes in the film we're watching. FCCK – still the "art film" proponent – tells FCRMK what he wanted: "I wanted to present it simply, without big character arcs or sensationalizing the story"<sup>178</sup>. FCRMK responds with the controlling idea of change: "That's not a movie. You gotta go back, put in the drama."<sup>179</sup> This is the clue to the viewer that the film will now change. It's also hinting that the film so far has been an antiplot, without drama – which is not correct from a form perspective, but partly so on a surface content level. As FCCK succumbs, is advised by FCRMK and joined by FCRMK's disciple Donald – after his agent suggests to bring Donald in: "maybe you could bring your brother on to help you with the orchid thing. [///] I mean, he's really goddamn amazing at structure"<sup>180</sup> – they transform the script.

### The Principle of Antagonism

IRLRMK claims that certainty is the key to ironic progression, with "protagonists who feel they know for certain what they must do and have a precise plan how to do it"<sup>181</sup>. Just as FCCK wants to write art film stasis but comes to write Hollywood change, these protagonists "think life is A, B, C, D, E. That's just when life likes to turn you around, kick you in the butt, and grin[s]: 'Not today, my friend. Today it's E, D, C, B, A. Sorry.'"<sup>182</sup> One of the grand ironies of the film is that it's the spurned FCRMK and Donald that gives FCCK his longed for revelation. FCRMK's role fits in with the assertion that "the principle of antagonism is the most important and least understood

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<sup>176</sup> McKee, *Story*, p. 174-175.

<sup>177</sup> Kaufman, *Adaptation: The Shooting Script*, p. 70.

<sup>178</sup> Ibid.

<sup>179</sup> Ibid.

<sup>180</sup> Ibid. p. 65.

<sup>181</sup> McKee, *Story*, p. 335-336.

<sup>182</sup> Ibid.

precept in story design"<sup>183</sup>, as a "protagonist and his story can only be as intellectually fascinating and emotionally compelling as the forces of antagonism make them."<sup>184</sup> IRLCK has incorporated this at the very core of his film by making FCRMK the antagonist of FCCCK, highlighting the conflict between art film antiplot (stasis) and Hollywood archplot (change). FCCCK's shyness, cowardice, and pain consist of not being able to act out his thoughts (ironically, he is not able to act out his idea of stasis either, but adapts to change). FCRMK and Donald, advocates for change, win in the end.

### Climax

IRLRMK claims that "[a]t Climax the protagonist sacrifices his dream (positive), a value that has become a soul-corrupting fixation (negative), to gain an honest, sane, balanced life (positive)."<sup>185</sup> FCCCK gives up his dream of the static art film, a value that has become a soul-corrupting fixation (life is static/I am static). He restores balance by finally showing himself capable of change. As IRLRMK states: "How the person chooses to act under pressure is who he is—the greater the pressure, the truer and deeper the choice to character".<sup>186</sup> To live life meaningfully FCCCK takes a perpetual risk, wagering his own life. IRLRMK asserts that "[t]he revelation of true character in contrast or contradiction to characterization is fundamental to all fine storytelling. [...] What seems is not what is. People are not what they appear to be."<sup>187</sup>

Here, FCCCK finally shows his essential nature. Earlier, under pressure, FCCCK has done nothing – or the opposite of what he wished to do. In the few cases when he did attempt something, as to ask a waitress out or with the fictional Orlean in the elevator, it had the opposite effect of what he intended (making him out as a creep). In the first two acts of the film, FCCCK's character is mostly revealed by the difference between what he wishes to do and what he does. It's only after he's flown to N.Y., attended FCRMK's seminars, asking and receiving FCRMK's and his brother's advice, that FCCCK shows himself capable of action. *Adaptation's* positive controlling idea of change thus wins over FCCCK's negative counter-idea of stasis in the third act climax; the film's dialectical debate dramatized into outer rather than inner action.

The idea of change affects all areas of the film. FCCCK changes positively but destroys Donald, the fictional Orlean and Laroche in the process (negative change).

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<sup>183</sup> McKee, *Story*, p. 352.

<sup>184</sup> Ibid.

<sup>185</sup> Ibid. p. 152.

<sup>186</sup> Ibid. p. 433.

<sup>187</sup> Ibid. p. 123.

This is also when FCCK succumbs to Hollywood content in the film. It's ironic, but makes the controlling idea all the more apparent. As IRLRMK writes, "the proof of your vision is not how well you can assert your controlling idea, but its victory over the enormously powerful forces that you array against it."<sup>188</sup>

IRLRMK declares that the best option, "[i]f logic allows, [is to] Climax subplots within the central plot's Climax"<sup>189</sup>, where one final action settles it all. That is not fully the case in *Adaptation*. The following is more applicable: "If this multiplying effect is impossible, the least important subplots are best climaxed earliest, followed by the next most important, building overall to [the] Climax of the Central Plot."<sup>190</sup> At the end of the swamp scene, the lives of all the main characters have irreversibly changed: Donald and the fictional Laroche have died. FCCK has changed; standing up for himself, screaming back at the destroyed fictional Orlean, expressing his thoughts in the action of mouthing them into dialogue. The film has become the "Hollywood thing" that FCCK did not want to make it. Why is *Adaptation* not fully climaxed here then?

– Because an even more important climax, for FCCK, occurs in "the brief Resolution scene to recuperate before going home"<sup>191</sup>.

## Resolution

In the resolution scene with Amelia, FCCK finally expresses his love, after having made "his way in a world larger than his own inner mental one"<sup>192</sup>. He turns his feelings into actions on his own, without the assistance of screenwriting gurus or brotherly disciples. He tells her: "I love you"<sup>193</sup>, and she replies "I love you too, y'know"<sup>194</sup>. This leads to the climax of the screenplay plot, as FCCK doesn't know how to finish the script until he meets with Amelia, acts and confirms his sense of self-worth. How FCCK acts in life and what happens in his life, becomes the script he's writing and the film we're watching. IRLRMK declares that a resolution is made up of any material left after the climax, and that it has three possible uses. These are:

- 1) To "climax subplots"<sup>195</sup> not resolved during the central plot climax;

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<sup>188</sup> McKee, *Story*, p. 145.

<sup>189</sup> Ibid. p. 345.

<sup>190</sup> Ibid, p. 344.

<sup>191</sup> Ibid. p. 324.

<sup>192</sup> Douglas J. Den Uyl, *Me and You: Identity, Love, and Friendship in the Films of Charlie Kaufman*, appears in *The Philosophy of Charlie Kaufman*, Edited by David LaRocca, The University Press of Kentucky, 2011, p. 120.

<sup>193</sup> Kaufman, *Adaptation: The Shooting Script*, p. 99.

<sup>194</sup> Ibid. (Another casualty of FCCK's change thus involves Amelia's soon to be ex-boyfriend.)

<sup>195</sup> McKee, *Story*, p. 345.

- 2) "[T]o show the spread of climactic effects"<sup>196</sup>;
- 3) To provide a curtain "so the audience can catch its breath and gather its thoughts"<sup>197</sup>.

FCCK's capacity for change is demonstrated in his private life in the resolution scene with Amelia. His displayed capacity for love leads to reciprocated love and finishing the screenplay; accomplishing absolute change for the film he's been writing/living and we've been watching<sup>198</sup>. While we watch the climactic effects of *Adaptation* unfold, we get to take a breather, fulfilling all possible uses IRLRMK mentioned for the resolution.

IRLRMK asserts that "regardless of genre, the principle is universal: the story's meaning, whether comic or tragic, must be dramatized in an emotionally expressive Story Climax without the aid of explanatory dialogue".<sup>199</sup> While this applies to *Adaptation's* climax in the swamp – expressing that living and stories lead to change – IRLCK ends the movie with as self-explanatory, or rather self-referring, monologue as has ever existed: "I know how to finish the script now. It ends with Kaufman driving home [...] thinking he knows how to finish the script."<sup>200</sup> Only to insert another layer of parody and self-reflection: "Shit, that's voice-over. McKee would not approve. [///] Well, who cares what McKee says? It feels right. Conclusive."<sup>201</sup> The next part is straight from the gut to counteract: "So: 'Kaufman drives off from his encounter with Amelia...filled for the first time with hope.' I like this. This is good."<sup>202</sup>

The two sentences comment not only on the film, but on how FCCK feels about his life. The film explicitly quotes itself here, the emotion is honest and "filled for the first time with hope" implies that something truly life-changing has happened. FCCK expressed his love for Amelia, and she has returned it. When he drives away to finish the film we've just watched; true change is accomplished and underlined, and his conscious desire (finishing the screenplay) and his unconscious desire (changing and expressing his love/being loved) are all fulfilled. In this sense, the soft resolution is more deeply fulfilling than the climax in the swamp. The action climax leads to the soft resolution however. Without it FCCK wouldn't have been able to achieve the goal of all the subplots: changing, loving and finishing the screenplay (in short: adapting). He's

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<sup>196</sup> Ibid. p. 348.

<sup>197</sup> McKee, *Story*, p. 350.

<sup>198</sup> Darkness lurks even in the happy end scenes as Amelia tells FCCK about her trip: "There's this church decorated with, like, human skulls and bones. Forty thousand skulls and bones. I thought about you when I went there." The script reads "Kaufman is touched"; notable after having turned both John Laroche and brother Donald into skulls and bones in his writing process. – *Adaptation: The Shooting Script*, p. 99.

<sup>199</sup> McKee, *Story*, p. 136.

<sup>200</sup> Kaufman, *Adaptation: The Shooting Script*, p. 99-100.

<sup>201</sup> Ibid.

<sup>202</sup> Ibid.

come the full way through on his writing journey, from rebelling in the beginning to mastering the form, as IRLRMK claims: “Anxious, inexperienced writers obey rules. Rebellious, unschooled writers break rules. Artists master the form.”<sup>203</sup> This reflects Friedrich Hegel’s – who is, as if by chance, mentioned several times in the 1999 and 2000 draft of *Adaptation* – notion of the dialectic: based on a thesis (art film/stasis), negated by an antithesis (Hollywood film/change) and resolved by a synthesis (the postmodern confluence of art and Hollywood in IRLCK’s transformative screenwriting).

### Verfremdung and Genre violations in the Third Act Climax and Resolution

IRLRMK argues: “With content in one hand and a mastery of form in the other, a writer sculpts story.”<sup>204</sup> The third act changes the genre and content – but not the form – of *Adaptation*. IRLRMK claims that “a story must obey its own internal laws of probability. The event choices of the writer, therefore, are limited to the possibilities and probabilities within the world he creates.”<sup>205</sup> This way, each fiction creates a unique world, with its own rules for why and how things happen in it. Correspondingly, the seed for the third act is planted in one of the first scenes of the film, when FCK states what he doesn't want the film to be<sup>206</sup>, which, of course, becomes exactly what happens.

IRLRMK states that “the audience inspects your fictional universe, sorting the possible from the impossible, the likely from the unlikely. Consciously and unconsciously, it wants to know your 'laws', to learn how and why things happen in your specific world.”<sup>207</sup> The audience (or most of it) knows IRLCK writes original scripts, such as *Being John Malkovich* and *Human Nature*. We also see that the screenwriter with the same name in *Adaptation* has original ideas. But the sudden change of genre from drama/comedy to action/adventure violates the film's focus on the inner life. The first and second acts' neurotic thoughts and inner monologues are replaced with a focus on exterior events, action and spectacular circumstances. Reality is called into question by the sudden change of feel, especially since the protagonist screenwriter has stated that it's exactly the film he did not wish to write. *Adaptation* states the “laws” only to break them; the movie turns on itself and becomes inauthentic to the audience in its third act – because it becomes unlike itself content-wise. Just like Brecht, IRLCK includes upsetting elements to make the audience respond actively.

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<sup>203</sup> McKee, *Story*, p. 3.

<sup>204</sup> Ibid. p. 8.

<sup>205</sup> Ibid. p. 85.

<sup>206</sup> See “Thought, Action and Foreshadowing Classic Dramaturgy”; sex or guns or car chases ...

<sup>207</sup> McKee, *Story*, p. 86.



This parodic mechanism made many reject the end of the film as illogical and unconvincing, even though this change from FCCCK's film to Donald's/FCRMK's film is the actual point. The reason for the resentment is that "once the audience grasps the laws of your reality, it feels violated if you break them and rejects your work as illogical and unconvincing."<sup>208</sup> IRLCK doesn't break the rules of narrative, but changes genre and the feel of the storytelling to what it wasn't supposed to be, which disturbs the viewer's experience – creating a postmodern, Brechtian *verfremdung* device. The archplot form is put to a different use, by shaping content and genre to break (or rather *play with*) as many rules as it can.

Even just looking at the first two acts; things have happened and people have changed. E.g. FCCCK has blown it with Amelia (by not taking action) and has begun to feel that he can't write a screenplay without a story; the fictional Orlean has started feeling something for Laroche; Donald has gone from single/poor/unemployed to finding a girlfriend and writing a screenplay that will make him rich. These events have been depicted in the style of both miniplot and archplot. The miniplot shares the most important story constituents with the archplot as its events occur due to cause and effect, in linear time, within consistent realities. It's a more subtle and cerebral version of the archplot, or a 'light' version if you so will (especially when mixed with the archplot). It doesn't challenge formal conventions like the antiplot: with coincidence, nonlinear time and inconsistent realities. Thus, not even the form of the first two acts adheres to FCCCK's imagined non-Hollywood film, but to classical dramaturgy. Consequently, it's a misunderstanding "that Kaufman uses all the rules of structure, while breaking all the rules of structure"<sup>209</sup>. In regards to story design, IRLCK doesn't break rules, he just creates the idea that he does so in the content. An overwhelming majority of reviewers and academic writers alike have accepted this idea at face value, according to expectation and what FCCCK says, without questioning or analyzing it closer.

Time Magazine illustrates many viewers sense of denied fulfillment: "the movie ends in a burst of violence that we are unprepared for and don't believe. Maybe it's the film's final joke: Donald's cheesy screenwriting manner winning out over Charlie's."<sup>210</sup> The critical aspect of *Adaptation's* complicity is well analyzed by the mentioned

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<sup>208</sup> McKee, *Story*, p. 86.

<sup>209</sup> David Poland, *Review*, The Hot Button, October 23, 2002. Available on: [https://web.archive.org/web/20030212143335/http://www.thehotbutton.com/today/hot.button/2002\\_thb/021023\\_wed.html](https://web.archive.org/web/20030212143335/http://www.thehotbutton.com/today/hot.button/2002_thb/021023_wed.html) – 2014-10-02 (PDF available).

<sup>210</sup> Richard Schickel, *No Good-Time Charlie*, Time Magazine, December 01, 2002, Time Magazine. On: <http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,395348,00.html> – 2014-10-01 (PDF available).

magazine writer's malcontent, shared by many viewers: "It's a miscalculation – though a calculated one."<sup>211</sup> K.L. Evans means “the spectacle that ends *Adaptation* can't be emotionally involving”<sup>212</sup> because IRLCK has previously highlighted the “routine method of animating scripts, and so highlighted their absurdity”<sup>213</sup>, and Derek Hill asserts that “it is debatable whether the film remains coherent as it implodes in the last act under the weight of its cynical satire of Hollywood plot clichés”<sup>214</sup>. As IRLCK himself has stated “it happens the same everywhere. Some get angry with the last part of the film”<sup>215</sup>. However, due to its complicity, the third act "does not erase one's fond memories of all the odd, deeply humorous behaviour that preceded it".<sup>216</sup> It's also because the emotions are written as true, as producer Ed Saxon explains: “The idea was to try to make the picture in its last act more human and stay focused in the humanity of the characters—a goal that Spike and Charlie both set for themselves.”<sup>217</sup> What happens is that the film reflects the writing of both Kaufman brothers that it is credited to. With Charlie, in the first two acts, it's cerebral, ideational and focusing on internal conflict. With Donald, in the third act, it's action-packed, sensational and focused on external conflict. However, this is just the content, the form is still that of an archplot, and both fictional brothers work within a Hollywood context – just as they live in L.A.

The third act thus constitutes a big shift from one aspect of the subplot (internal conflict) to one aspect of the archplot (external conflict), as the film shifts genre from drama to action. The mix in *Adaptation*, of rebelling antiplot ideas (in regards to content) and classical story design, is a mix of complicity with Hollywood (in form) and critique of Hollywood (in content) – typical for postmodernism and its concept of parody that “works to distance and, at the same time, to involve both artist and audience”<sup>218</sup>. Due to original, cerebral and thought-provoking content its matter distracts from that the film shares its conventional, inherent structure with Hollywood. What allows the trickery is the powerful dramaturgy of classical form. Working

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<sup>211</sup> Schickel, *No Good-Time Charlie*.

<sup>212</sup> K.L. Evans, *Charlie Kaufman, Screenwriter*, appears In *The Philosophy of Charlie Kaufman*, Edited by David LaRocca, The University Press of Kentucky, 2011, p. 25.

<sup>213</sup> Ibid.

<sup>214</sup> Derek Hill, *There's No More Watching*, appears In *The Philosophy of Charlie Kaufman*, Edited by David LaRocca, The University Press of Kentucky, 2011, p. 209.

<sup>215</sup> Pablo O. Scholz, *Cinema: Exclusive Interview with Charlie Kaufman*, Clarin.com, Feb. 26, 2003. Available on: <http://edant.clarin.com/diario/2003/02/26/c-01201.htm> – 2015-01-04. (PDF available.)

<sup>216</sup> Schickel, *No Good-Time Charlie*.

<sup>217</sup> David F. & Jeff Goldsmith, *Charlie Kaufman*, Creative Screenwriting, Volume 9, Volume 9 #2 (March/April 2002) and Volume 9 #6 (November/December 2002). Available on: <http://harpoonstudios.com/fromStoney/BESTOFCREATIVESCREENWRITING.PDF> – 2014-10-29 (PDF available).

<sup>218</sup> Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Post Modernism: Parody and History*, Cultural Critique (Winter, 1986-1987), p. 206.

together with shifting, seemingly unruly content, it paints us illusions – fooling slow Joe in the back row, academics and film critics alike.

IRLRMK asserts that the audience seeks the center of good as the story opens. And, "at the very least the Center of Good must be located in the protagonist."<sup>219</sup> It stands "in relationship to or against a background of negativity, a universe that's thought or felt to be 'not good.'"<sup>220</sup> And what's 'not good' in the Adaptation universe – seen from the perspective of our intimately followed center of good protagonist – is FCRMK and Hollywood movies. As the ending uses the very devices the supposedly sincere FCCCK spurned in the beginning, it creates another *verfremdungseffect*. And, sometimes, our hearts have difficulty with cerebral irony.

*Adaptation* shifts tone from serious to funny, from parodic to heartfelt, from brainy neurotic drama within a writer's head, to screwball, to deadly action out in the world, and then onto romantic feel-good – but always with comedic, dark, elements<sup>221</sup>. As Smith asserts, "the parody derives not from the implausibility of any particular genre, but from the frenzied juxtaposition of sex, drugs, murder, and bildungsroman."<sup>222</sup> The mix of honest and dishonest emotion, both emotion from the gut, and emotion questioned and ridiculed, makes the film difficult to tackle. It's wildly postmodern in this aspect, refusing both the resistance of modernism – sometimes bordering on parody in its insistence – and the uncritical commercialism of "Hollywood film". As Stam concludes, "[a]nti-illusionists hybridize genres in such a way that the signification of the work partially arises from the creative tension generated by their interaction."<sup>223</sup>

However, "[r]ather than interpreting the ending as a sell-out, the pastiche of juxtaposed genres may be seen as serving both to confirm and to undermine their validity."<sup>224</sup> It disturbs the predictable and unified by revealing conflicting sides and something not fully coherent, an often-criticized quality that makes it all the more interesting – if complicated. As is typical of postmodernism, *Adaptation* "casts a spell while dispelling an illusion"<sup>225</sup>, taking "simultaneous joy in both mystification and

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<sup>219</sup> McKee, *Story*, p. 405.

<sup>220</sup> *Ibid.* p. 405-406.

<sup>221</sup> The IMDB – <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0268126/> – classification of the film was "Comedy Crime Drama" 2013 but had changed to "Comedy Drama" 2014-10-20.

<sup>222</sup> Gennelle Smith, *Authorial Proxies: Duplicated and duplicitous self-configurings in Kaufman's Adaptation*, Chapter 10 in *The Writer on Film: Screening Literary Authorship*, Editor: Judith Buchanan, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, Great Britain. 2013.

<sup>223</sup> Stam, Robert, *Reflexivity in Film and Literature: From Don Quixote to Jean-Luc Godard*, Columbia University Press, 1992 (1985), p. 132.

<sup>224</sup> Smith, *Authorial Proxies: Duplicated & duplicitous self-configurings in Kaufman's Adaptation*, p. 98.

<sup>225</sup> Stam, *Reflexivity in Film and Literature: From Don Quixote to Jean-Luc Godard*, p. 138.

demystification”<sup>226</sup>. The final words of the film – “I like this, this is good”<sup>227</sup> – reflect the film finally coming to terms with itself, through its wild ride of emotions and ideas. *Happy Together* (The Turtles, 1967)<sup>228</sup> plays as FCCCK drives away happily; while life begins again with flowers that wither and bloom. But if one traces the irony-laden story of the song in the movie (which Donald suggested to insert), Donald and FCCCK were never really happy together; and just when they learned to be, Donald died.

### An Ideational Deus Ex Machina

IRLCK's predecessor as a star screenwriter, William Goldman<sup>229</sup> means “the key to all story endings is to give the audience what it wants, but not the way it expects.”<sup>230</sup> The audience wants FCCCK to finish his screenplay, to find and express love and to thus achieve change. They don't expect it to happen due to FCRMK's advice, or by FCCCK killing/destroying his brother and characters with a change of genre and content in the third act. IRLRMK states: “Who determines which particular emotion will satisfy an audience at the end of a film? The writer. From the way he tells his story, he whispers to the audience: 'Expect an up-ending' or 'Expect a down-ending' or 'Expect irony.’”<sup>231</sup> And when the writer has “pledged a certain emotion, it'd be ruinous not to deliver”.<sup>232</sup> FCCCK gives the audience the promised experience of irony, but in unexpected ways. The use of a different Deus Ex Machina than implied illustrates this most clearly.

FCRMK tells FCCCK not to “dare bring in a Deus ex machina”<sup>233</sup> in the bar scene between the two that IRLRMK requested as a condition to participate in the movie, as Parker reveals: “He [IRLRMK] wanted a ‘redeeming scene,’ and he was given it: an Obi-Wan Kenobi moment, in a bar, between his character and the Charlie Kaufman character”<sup>234</sup>. Deus ex machina, DEM hereafter, means “God from Machine”, and refers to how ancient Greek playwrights dodged the problem of a true story climax by cranking a God to the stage, who solved and settled everything. According to IRLRMK, a “Deus ex machina not only erases all meaning and emotion, it's an insult to the audience”.<sup>235</sup> IRLRMK argues that the DEM is an insult since it's a lie, because no one will come to take the responsibility of choosing and acting from our own hands. The

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<sup>226</sup> Stam, *Reflexivity in Film and Literature: From Don Quixote to Jean-Luc Godard*, p. 138.

<sup>227</sup> Kaufman, *Adaptation: The Shooting Script*, p. 100.

<sup>228</sup> The Turtles, *Happy Together* [Pop Song]. Allan Gordon & Garry Bonner, White Whale, USA, 1967.

<sup>229</sup> Writer of *Butch Cassidy & Sundance Kid*, *All the President's Men* and *The Marathon Man* etc.

<sup>230</sup> McKee, *Story*, p. 344.

<sup>231</sup> *Ibid.* p. 346.

<sup>232</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>233</sup> Kaufman, *Adaptation: The Shooting Script*, p. 70.

<sup>234</sup> Parker, *The Real McKee: Lessons of a Screenwriting Guru*, p. 12.

<sup>235</sup> McKee, *Story*, p. 418.

idea of the DEM falls into *Adaptation's* theme of stasis versus change, as "[e]ach of us knows we must choose and act, for better or worse, to determine the meaning of our lives."<sup>236</sup> A DEM would destroy the notion of FCCCK deciding the direction of his own life, and make parody of the idea that our lives are ultimately in our own hands.

Most "regular" viewers, academics and critics, as prominent as Roger Ebert, believe that *Adaptation* uses a DEM: "[T]he final chapter on the DVD menu is titled 'Deus Ex Machina.' Wikipedia splendidly explains the term: 'improbable contrivance in a story characterized by a sudden unexpected solution to a seemingly intractable problem.' That is exactly what it is, writing Kaufman out of an impossible hole by violating all of his standards."<sup>237</sup> But – as evident from the discussion on art and Hollywood film, content and form – all standards are actually not violated here. The change of genre and content creates this belief, as it changes the feel of the film. The viewers feel violated as the adaptation by FCCCK to FCRMK's ideas is shown in a style that's different from the first two acts (even though the change has been foreshadowed). But as *Adaptation* is an archplot from beginning to end, it is only our surface reading of the content that fools us. Many viewers idea of the DEM – exemplified by countless reviews – is that it's the alligator that pops up unexpectedly in the swamp, as the fictional Laroche is about to kill FCCCK. However, one only has to read the description of the scene to see that the alligator has been foreshadowed to not seem coincidental:

Kaufman finds himself up against a lake. **Alligators swim in it. There's nowhere to go.** Orlean and Laroche arrive, stop, heave. The three stare at each other. Finally: LAROCHE (sobbing) "I'm sorry that I have to do this, dude. I'm not a killer. You put yourself in our --". Laroche **steps on something -- An alligator: it awakens, started and angry, and reflexively grabs Laroche's leg.** [///] [Laroche dies] The alligator is gone. Orlean pulls Laroche's body onto dry land. **Kaufman stands on another little island watching for alligators.**<sup>238</sup>

The alligator threat is present from the second sentence. In the film, we hear the sound of large creatures moving in the water, with additional waves. The danger is thus there already, which is why FCCCK stands on a patch of land rather than in the water. Even earlier, in scenes with the fictional Laroche and Orlean – not to mention the historical accounts of other orchid hunters – the lethal dangers of swamp alligators have been foreshadowed. Thus, the idea of an alligator in a Florida swamp is not a DEM.

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<sup>236</sup> McKee, *Story*, p. 418.

<sup>237</sup> Roger Ebert, *Great Movie Adaptation*, September 18, 2008. Available on: <http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/great-movie-adaptation-2002-2014-10-03> (PDF available).

<sup>238</sup> Kaufman, *Adaptation: The Shooting Script*, p. 95-96. Text marked in bold by the author of this thesis.

If anything is a DEM in this cerebral movie, it is the antagonist himself – FCRMK – descended as a God to lecture and save lost screenwriters, with solutions too good to be true. He is a "DEM" within quotation marks – teaching FCCK how to live and write change. Sophisticatedly enough, the DEM occurs exactly as FCRMK tells FCCK to not "dare bring in a Deus ex machina", as FCRMK himself constitutes the foundation for the film's change and FCCK starts to follow his advice. The DEM is completed when FCRMK's disciple Donald is called in to help, changing both genre and content into his/FCRMK's third act. Yet, this is only an ideational DEM, as it's organic and nothing happens that hasn't been discussed or foreshadowed earlier. The consciously playful and ironic change of feel and genre, from arty drama/comedy to Hollywood-ish action/adventure, helps create the mistaken illusion of a DEM.

Ironically, however, *Adaptation* makes use of the very thing IRLRMK writes the story climax doesn't have to be: "This crowning Major Reversal is not necessarily full of noise and violence. Rather, it must be full of meaning." IRLRMK continues "Meaning Produces Emotion. Not money; not sex; not special effects; not movie stars; not lush photography."<sup>239</sup> In *Adaptation* the major reversal is full of the noise and violence that IRLMRK – and the proponents of art, rather than Hollywood film (just as FCCK in his meeting with the fictional Valerie Thomas) – shuns. The sex, special effects, movie stars, lush photography and the money are all there as well – as parody. But that doesn't mean that the meaning is lost, even if this is another thing viewers disagree on. Spike Jonze has stated the following about the third act, prompted by IRLCK, in an interview David F. & Jeff Goldsmith made with both:

Throughout the process we wanted it to be...true to the characters that you watch. So we didn't want this to be a completely different level of reality; we wanted it to exist in the same reality. It goes back to being consistent to the first two-thirds of the movie, which is definitely funny and a comedy, but it's also emotional and heartfelt [///] it was important to be true to that tone, so that even though it's funny, it also has this other level. So, hopefully if it works on that level, it works because the drama doesn't just appear out of nowhere; it's been there all along and is founded from the beginning.<sup>240</sup>

The action that FCCK takes "becomes the story's consummate event, causing a positive, negative, or ironically positive/negative Story Climax."<sup>241</sup> In the Case of *Adaptation* it causes the ironically positive (for FCCK) and negative (for Donald, the fictional Orlean and Laroche) story climax. The irony is underlined by that the film becomes the opposite of what FCCK wanted to write, that he follows almost all the advice of his

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<sup>239</sup> McKee, *Story*, p. 343.

<sup>240</sup> Goldsmith, *Charlie Kaufman*.

<sup>241</sup> McKee, *Story*, p. 338.

nemesis FCRMK, and by that his subjects – Donald, the fictional Orlean and Laroche – are all destroyed by FCCK's positive change. A DEM is a last resort for a writer who doesn't know what else to do. This is only true for FCCK in the film, whereas IRLCK has so consciously created the illusion of it that the chapter on the DVD is named "Deus Ex Machina". This is what intentionally fools viewers that the third act is a DEM.

### The Education Plot and the Disillusionment Plot

IRLRMK asserts that *Adaptation* counterpoints and crisscrosses a disillusionment and education plot. A disillusionment plot "opens with a protagonist at the positive, with an optimistic view of the world, then arcs him/her to a defeated pessimistic end"<sup>242</sup>. Whereas an education plot portrays the opposite, and "begins with the protagonist at the negative, clinging to a dark, pessimistic mind-set. Experience teaches this character to see life a new, arcing him/her to an upbeat [...] sense of world and self"<sup>243</sup>. The disillusionment is the fictional Orlean's story; the education is FCCK's.

FCCK's plot and progression has already been explored. Regarding the fictional Orlean, she becomes FCCK's antagonist after he has "joined" FCRMK's side (as if Luke would join Darth). The opposite of what happens to FCCK happens to her, creating another aspect of irony to an up-ending: "If you cling to your obsession, your ruthless pursuit will achieve your desire, then destroy you."<sup>244</sup> She can't let go of her fixation, expressed in her voice-over, explicitly written by FCCK in the film: "I want to know how it feels to care about something passionately."<sup>245</sup> The fictional Laroche helps her achieve this – by being someone who feels and cares passionately – and by giving her the orchid drug (named "Passion" in earlier versions of the script<sup>246</sup>): "I think you'd like it, Susie. It seems to help people be fascinated."<sup>247</sup> It becomes like doping for the fictional Orlean, who is unable to feel passion without help from the illegal substance. She achieves her desire for passion with the fictional Laroche and the drug, cheats on her husband, lies in her book and becomes a drug baron, escalating to even more ruthlessness with the planned murder of Donald and FCCK – and is destroyed by it in the end. The last time we see her, she cries out the following monologue in the swamp: "It's over. Everything's over. I did everything wrong. I want my life back. I want it back

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<sup>242</sup> Robert McKee, *Critical Commentary*, appears in: *Adaptation: The Shooting Script*, p. 133.

<sup>243</sup> McKee, *Critical Commentary*, p. 133-134.

<sup>244</sup> McKee, *Story*, p. 154.

<sup>245</sup> Kaufman, *Adaptation: The Shooting Script*, p. 55.

<sup>246</sup> Charlie and Donald Kaufman, *Adaptation*, September 24, 1999, Second Draft, p. 105 and *Adaptation Revised, November 21, 2000*, p. 118.

<sup>247</sup> Kaufman, *Adaptation: The Shooting Script*, p. 81.

before it all got fucked up. I want to be a baby again. I want to be new."<sup>248</sup> *Adaptation* captures her inner transformation from serious, detached writer to passionate junkie and lover. As IRLRMK shows, in his analysis of the film, "[t]wo stories dance together, reinforcing each other, creating an ironic climax to an outrageous work. Orlean is lost, but Charlie is found"<sup>249</sup>; FCCK in an education plot, the fictional Orlean in a disillusionment plot. The event chain mentioned above reflect how closely IRLCK has used the disillusionment plot conventions that IRLRMK describes in *Story*:

The primary convention of the Disillusionment Plot is a protagonist who opens the story filled with optimism, who holds high ideals or beliefs, whose view of life is positive. Its second convention is a pattern of repeatedly negative story turns that may at first raise his hopes, but ultimately poison his dreams and values, leaving him deeply cynical and disillusioned.<sup>250</sup>

Replace he with she, and you have the fictional Orlean, lost and willing to murder. IRLCK uses her disillusionment plot as a subplot "to contradict the controlling idea of the Central Plot and thus enrich the film with irony."<sup>251</sup> (IRLRMK doesn't write this regarding *Adaptation*, but on how subplots can be used.) Again, *Story* is heavily, almost absurdly, reflected in the film, and Donald's previously mentioned lesson for FCCK – "You are what you love, not what loves you"<sup>252</sup> – ends in ironic tragedy for the fictional Orlean and Laroche. IRLRMK also asserts: "A subplot may be used to complicate the Central Plot."<sup>253</sup> Which is, quite literally, what happens when the fictional Laroche and Orlean try to kill off FCCK and Donald in their attempt to finish the screenplay.

### From Art Film Stasis to Hollywood Change

IRLRMK declares that "[t]he artist must believe in what he writes"<sup>254</sup>. Which is why FCCK wants to write stasis when he believes in stasis, and writes change as he comes to believe in change. IRLRMK continues: "You too must examine your motives for wanting to write the way you write."<sup>255</sup> A clear example is when FCCK reflects on having written himself into the scripts and bursts out "I'm insane. I'm Ourobouros"<sup>256</sup> (the snake that swallows its own tail). But as Carl Jung asserts: "The sacrificial priest's identity with his victim in the remarkable idea that the homunculus into whom [he] is

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<sup>248</sup> Kaufman, *Adaptation: The Shooting Script*, p. 97.

<sup>249</sup> Ibid. p. 134.

<sup>250</sup> McKee, *Story*, p. 104.

<sup>251</sup> Ibid. p. 267.

<sup>252</sup> Kaufman, *Adaptation: The Shooting Script*, p. 93.

<sup>253</sup> McKee, *Story*, p. 229.

<sup>254</sup> Ibid. p. 81

<sup>255</sup> Ibid.

<sup>256</sup> Kaufman, *Adaptation: The Shooting Script*, p. 60.



changed devours himself ... The homunculus therefore stands for the ourobourus, which devours itself to give birth to itself ... The ourobourus, and the sacrificer are essentially the same."<sup>257</sup> – What is FCCK but the Ourobouros/sacrificer, sacrificing subjects for his screenplay? Interesting, as the Ourobouros is “a being defined by its self-reflexivity, its capacity for both self-creation and self-destruction—and, thereafter, re-creation”<sup>258</sup>. FCCK is indeed Ourobouros, sacrificing his self of his first two acts, as Donald's death gives birth to the new FCCK; part Donald (and thus also FCRMK), part FCCK.

IRLRMK claims that each story is an assertion of the artist's belief of how life is, and that “[e]very moment must be filled with your passionate conviction or we smell a phony.”<sup>259</sup> The film leaves no doubt regarding the intensity of FCCK's emotions and his beliefs, as they affect him – and the film – with full force. IRLRMK asks: “If you write minimalism, do you believe in the meanings of this form? Has experience convinced you that life brings little or no change?”<sup>260</sup> FCCK argues that life brings little/no change for the first 2/3 of the movie, advocating the antiplot form. IRLRMK also asks, “are you convinced of the random meaninglessness of life? If your answer is a passionate yes, then write your Miniplot or Antiplot and do everything possible to see it made”<sup>261</sup>, something that FCCK tries to accomplish, but fails with (constituting the “failure” of the film), since his passionate yes is shattered by unhappiness with stasis in life and writing.

IRLRMK claims that “[f]or the vast majority, however, the honest answer to these questions [Do you believe that life brings little or no change? Are you convinced of its meaninglessness?] is no.”<sup>262</sup> IRLRMK means that it's not the intrinsic meaning of the forms that draws interest, but what they represent extrinsically. Thus, “[i]t isn't what Antiplot and Miniplot are, it's what they're not: They're not Hollywood.”<sup>263</sup> As FCCK is given TOT to adapt, he makes clear that what it represents to him is not Hollywood, but antiplot – a movie that just exists. IRLRMK asserts that people are taught that art and Hollywood are antithetical: “The novice, therefore, wanting to be recognized as an artist, falls into the trap of writing a screenplay not for what it is, but for what it's not.”<sup>264</sup> While IRLCK was not a novice when adapting *Adaptation*, FCCK (and perhaps also IRLCK) wanted to write the screenplay for what it wouldn't be (Hollywood). IRLRMK

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<sup>257</sup> Carl Jung, *Alchemical Studies*, Routledge & Kegan, 1967, p. 84.

<sup>258</sup> LaRocca, *Inconclusive Unscientific Postscript: Late Remarks on Kierkegaard and Kaufman*, p. 289.

<sup>259</sup> McKee, *Story*, p. 81

<sup>260</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>261</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>262</sup> *Ibid.* p. 82.

<sup>263</sup> *Ibid.* p. 81-82.

<sup>264</sup> *Ibid.* p. 82.

argues that many break Hollywood's rules because it makes them feel free. But, "angry contradiction of the patriarch is not creativity; it's delinquency calling for attention"<sup>265</sup>. FCCK's bitter non-adherence to the Hollywood patriarch is attended to by the very same figure; the archplot representative FCRMK. And it changes the whole film.

## The Intentional Failure

IRLRMK declares that art/Hollywood film constitute a "polarized attitude toward story"<sup>266</sup>. Hollywood insisting on positive change, while the art film insists on stasis or negative change. *Adaptation* also parodically insists on positive change, as if only the positive change for FCCK matters – even though Donald and the fictional Laroche die, and Orlean is destroyed. This while everything FCCK didn't want to happen in the film has happened, and he is happy that it has.

*Adaptation's* climax works along the lines of IRLRMK's assertion: "the protagonist either refuses to act on his obsession or throws away what he once desired"<sup>267</sup>. FCCK throws away the art film that he desired, and wins by succumbing to the teachings of his previously despised nemesis FCRMK, "[h]e or she wins by 'losing'"<sup>268</sup>; by failing, by writing a failed ending. IRLCK himself has stated that "[t]he end of '*Adaptation*' is an intentional failure, and I didn't want to make it a joke failure, [...] I wanted to make it a real failure."<sup>269</sup> – The failure being that neither FCCK nor IRLCK managed to write the antiplot they set out to create. Ironically, the film thus portrays not only the idea of life as static antiplot as untrue, but consequently renders the idea of filmic antiplot untrue. This as films – according to IRLRMK, and *Adaptation* accordingly (as the movie adapts) – are supposedly reflections of life.

Jameson puts this in an interesting light: " postmodernist art is going to be about art itself in a new kind of way; [...] one of the essential messages will involve the necessary failure of art and the aesthetic, the failure of the new, the imprisonment of the past"<sup>270</sup>. Correspondingly, in *Adaptation*, the envisioned aesthetic of the new art (and its non- or antiplot about flowers that just exists) fails. It's replaced along the way by the Hollywood archplot, and the film's real and fictional screenwriter is imprisoned by past

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<sup>265</sup> McKee, *Story*, p. 82.

<sup>266</sup> Ibid. p. 73 – not fully consistent, as he also complains about art and Hollywood being viewed as antithetical (a few footnotes up).

<sup>267</sup> Ibid. p. 153.

<sup>268</sup> Ibid.

<sup>269</sup> Verini, *Another head case*.

<sup>270</sup> Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism and Consumer Society*, p.4. Available on [http://art.ucsc.edu/sites/default/files/Jameson\\_Postmodernism\\_and\\_Consumer\\_Society.pdf](http://art.ucsc.edu/sites/default/files/Jameson_Postmodernism_and_Consumer_Society.pdf) – 2015-01-05 (PDF available).

ways of writing (neither of them being able to write simple plots, and IRLCK not yet being able to escape the archplot). As Barthes asked: “Is it not the characteristic of reality to be *unmasterable*? And is it not the characteristic of system to *master* it? What then, confronting reality, can one do who rejects mastery?”<sup>271</sup> One could argue that IRLCK contests mastery and totalization exactly by “unmasking both their powers and their limitations”<sup>272</sup>, as Hutcheon writes is typical of postmodernism. This as Hollywood and FCRMK are repeatedly criticized in *Adaptation*’s content, while the film simultaneously succumbs to a classical narrative structure and genre clichés.

Another intentional failure is how the third act climax plays out as an ideational DEM, written by Donald rather than FCCK, following the rules of FCRMK that FCCK trashed in the beginning. As Nørremark and Kristensen asserts, FCRMK comes to represent “the easy way out of Charlie’s artistic struggles”<sup>273</sup> after FCCK takes his brother Donald’s foreshadowing advice: “Don’t get mad at me for saying this, but Bob’s having a seminar in New York this weekend. So if you’re stuck ...”<sup>274</sup> The industry of fiction hence finds “in McKee and Donald (whose names together, coincidentally, sounds like McDonald) the solution to Charlie’s creative struggle.”<sup>275</sup> And just as in Mikhail Bakhtin’s concept of the carnavalesque “hierarchies are turned on their heads (fools become wise, kings becomes beggars)”<sup>276</sup>. As FCCK begs for help from his fool brother turned king and the previously despised FCRMK, he adapts to the arch shape of genre screenwriting that dominates his Hollywood context. He also adapts to the human adaptation of making “the choice to adapt to already set structures”<sup>277</sup>, and just as Rizzo asserts “successful adaptation to any system is a story of losing as well as winning”<sup>278</sup>. FCCK/IRLCK finish the screenplay, but fail with their initial goal of portraying stasis in an art film, consequently “Charlie Kaufman’s attempt to adapt a book on nature to a Hollywood screenplay will result in his own adaptation as a screenwriter to the

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<sup>271</sup> Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism*, p. 35

<sup>272</sup> Ibid.

<sup>273</sup> Kristina Nørremark and Lisa R.F. Kristensen, *Constructing Charlie Kaufman - A Study of Kaufman’s Postmodern Poetics*, Master Thesis, 2009, Aalborg University, p. 53.

<sup>274</sup> Kaufman, *Adaptation: The Shooting Script*, p. 61.

<sup>275</sup> Antonella D’Aquino, *The Self, The Ideal and The Real. The Artistic Choices of Three Creative Minds: Fellini, Allen and Kaufman*, Italica, Vol. 84, No. 2/3 (Summer – Autumn, 2007), p. 569.

<sup>276</sup> Selden, Raman; Widdowson, Peter and Brooker, Peter, *A Reader’s Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory*, 5th edition, Pearson, Longman, 2005, p. 41.

<sup>277</sup> Nørremark & Kristensen, *Constructing Charlie Kaufman...*, p. 54.

<sup>278</sup> Sergio Rizzo, *Adaptation and the Art of Survival*, M/C Journal, Volume 10, Issue 2, May 2007. Available on: <http://journal.media-culture.org.au/0705/02-rizzo.php> – 2015-01-02 (PDF available.)

Hollywood system"<sup>279</sup>. IRLCK describes himself as "a big proponent of failure"<sup>280</sup> however, and asserts that he "would much rather see an honest failure in a movie than a slick piece of trash."<sup>281</sup> The fictional Orlean's statement – "[f]or a person, adaption is almost shameful; it's like running away"<sup>282</sup> – adds yet another element to the drama of FCCCK succumbing to Hollywood structures, and giving up his art film about flowers.

Per Johansson, Ph.D. in Human Ecology, asserts: "Evolution is about adaptation. [///] The most suited to the circumstances survives".<sup>283</sup> This is because they are capable of change. In regards to filmmaking, the archplot – reflecting change – is the most suited to the circumstances. This in terms of both numbers of viewers and where *Adaptation's* production takes place: Hollywood. If one adapts in Hollywood, one adapts to the archplot. One adapts to change in screenwriting (and thus in life – which is the dream of all students at IRLRMK's seminars).

Even if the film is an intentional failure for IRLCK, it still seems more like redemption for FCCCK, who achieves both his conscious desire (finishing the script) and unconscious desire (changing as a person). Spike Jonze's assertion about IRLCK is useful to convey how and why events are still heartfelt: "He writes about how he feels in his life, [...] he relates to every character in his movies"<sup>284</sup>. That this occurs simultaneously with the parody of an intentional failure and an ideational DEM ending, as if written by Donald with advice from FCRMK, is the paradox that creates the depth.

### Complicity and Critique

Max Dedulle, in his *Change is not a choice: An analysis of the poetics of Charlie Kaufman, based on 'Being John Malkovich', 'Adaptation.'* and *'Synecdoche, New York'* (2010), runs through IRLRMK's "10 commandments" (which are not featured in *Story*) rather than *Story* itself and Linda Hutcheon's *A Theory of Adaptation* (2006), comparing them with *Adaptation*. It constitutes the approach most similar to my own, with Dedulle viewing *Adaptation* as a comment on "the structure, style and principles of

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<sup>279</sup> D'Aquino, *The Self, The Ideal and The Real. The Artistic Choices of Three Creative Minds: Fellini, Allen and Kaufman*, p. 569.

<sup>280</sup> Ibid.

<sup>281</sup> Ibid.

<sup>282</sup> Kaufman, *Adaptation: The Shooting Script*, p. 35.

<sup>283</sup> Per Johansson, *Sök och du ska finna (Seek and You Shall Find)*, in *Den andra världen* (the Other World) [Radio Program]. Producer: Eric Schöldt. Available on: <http://sverigesradio.se/p.a/avschnitt/44365?programid=4268> – 2014-12-17.

<sup>284</sup> Ibid.

screenwriting”<sup>285</sup>, and mentioning that the film can be seen as “an adaptation of Robert McKee’s theories”<sup>286</sup>. He goes on to argue that “[i]t is true that *Adaptation*’s screenplay does not comply with what the real McKee states”<sup>287</sup>. But as we have just seen, *Adaptation* does comply, and this at its deep formal core. Dedulle concludes that *Adaptation* “describes what, for Charlie Kaufman, constitutes a good screenplay”<sup>288</sup>, which is a simplification, and simply not true – as *Adaptation* is an intentional failure, with a conventional and classical form, that IRLCK only managed to escape from with *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* and *Synecdoche, New York*. I’m mentioning Dedulle’s work here as his approach is similar to my own, but his conclusions echo the opinions of many (shorter) texts on the subjects, such as David Poland’s previously mentioned statement on that *Adaptation* breaks all the rules of structure<sup>289</sup>, which, as here investigated, no longer stands as true when making a deeper formal analysis.

In an interview on *Being John Malkovich*, IRLCK stated that “I really don’t have any solutions and I don’t like movies that do”<sup>290</sup> and continued “I hate a movie that will end by telling you that the first thing you should do is learn to love yourself. That is so insulting and condescending, and so meaningless. My characters don’t learn to love each other or themselves.”<sup>291</sup> But exactly that happens for IRLCK’s fictional counterpart, FCCK, and – however parodical – it’s still gut-felt. In the 1999 draft of *Adaptation*, FCCK even tells his love interest exactly that, speaking about the film he is writing: “It’s about learning that if you can’t love yourself, you can’t really love anyone.”<sup>292</sup>

IRLRMK asserts that “[t]he vast majority of human beings cannot endorse the inconsistent realities of Antipplot, the internalized passivity of miniplot, and the static circularity of Nonplot as metaphors for life as they live it”<sup>293</sup>, and this turns out true for FCCK as well. The antiplot’s inconsistent realities (with FCCK’s film turning into Donald’s film), the miniplot’s internalized passivity (life as thought about rather than lived) and the nonplot’s static circularity (themes on not being able to act repeated, with the result of nothing happening) are all integrated into the content of *Adaptation*; and

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<sup>285</sup> Max Dedulle, *Change is not a choice: An analysis of the poetics of Charlie Kaufman, based on ‘Being John Malkovich’, ‘Adaptation.’ and ‘Synecdoche, New York’*, Dissertation, Ghent University, Faculty of Arts and Philosophy, 2010, p. 17.

<sup>286</sup> Ibid. p. 46

<sup>287</sup> Ibid. p47.

<sup>288</sup> Ibid. p. 48.

<sup>289</sup> In the chapter on “Verfremdung and Genre Violations...”.

<sup>290</sup> Sragow, Michael, *Being Charlie Kaufman*, Salon, November 11, 1999. Available on: <http://www.salon.com/1999/11/11/kaufman/> – 2014-10-03 (PDF available).

<sup>291</sup> Ibid.

<sup>292</sup> Kaufman, *Adaptation*, September 24, 1999, Second Draft, p. 116.

<sup>293</sup> McKee, *Story*, p. 77.

anti, mini- and nonplot are all discussed under the hovering form of the archplot. The viewer is engaged by the use of classical form, while the content provides the critique and challenges the spectator with its parody. This complicit critique is a doubleness typical of postmodernism, as “it both legitimizes and subverts that which it parodies.”<sup>294</sup>

The entertainment upholds the illusion while reflections on the most foundational aspect of filmmaking constitutes the critique, highlighting how illusion is created (in a not fully truthful way). But as Alduy asserts (not on *Adaptation*): "There is meaning, in life, and in texts, but it seems deceptive that it should only be in the ending, and deceptively simple, if not dishonest, to represent it as the end results of a nice, linear narrative arch."<sup>295</sup> This is what FCCCK/IRLCK set out to criticize. Yet *Adaptation* complies with Hollywood's happy end storytelling where everything is resolved (if parodically). IRLCK himself:

"To my mind, the main character in *Adaptation* is the screenplay itself, and the evolution of the screenplay from its initial intents to its ultimate ... corruption. And to me, that's kind of the tragedy of this creature, this screenplay that never was able [to] reach the fruition that Charlie had hoped. He never was able to make the movie about flowers."<sup>296</sup>

Interestingly enough, the real Susan Orlean's descriptions of John Laroche could be used to describe IRLCK's unconventional way of screenwriting and adaptation: “He loves doing things the hard way, if it means he gets to do what he wants and leaves you wondering how he got away with it”<sup>297</sup>, “he was temperamentally disinclined to do the job the easy way”<sup>298</sup> and “a prospect that appealed to him, especially if he could do it by some Laroche-style convoluted means”<sup>299</sup>.

## Part 5: The Screenwriting Process – Film Coming to Life

There's the truth and there are lies, and art always tells the truth, even when it's lying.<sup>300</sup> – Charlie Kaufman, *Being John Malkovich*

### A Film Inside the Mind of a Protagonist

IRLRMK writes about *Tender Mercies* (Bruce Beresford, 1983): "It is exquisitely

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<sup>294</sup> Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism*, p. 97.

<sup>295</sup> Cecile Alduy, *Against Narratives III. Or a Certain Kind of Narrative*, Arcade, 2010/01/28, <http://arcade.stanford.edu/blogs/against-narratives-iii-or-certain-kind-narrative> – 2014-10-14 (PDF available).

<sup>296</sup> Smith, *Duplicated and duplicitous self-configurings in Kaufman's Adaptation*, p. 1.

<sup>297</sup> Orlean, *The Orchid Thief: A True Story of Beauty and Obsession*, p. 62.

<sup>298</sup> Orlean, Susan, *Orchid Fever*, *The New Yorker*, January 23, 1995, p. 3. Available on: [http://www.susanorlean.com/articles/orchid\\_fever.html](http://www.susanorlean.com/articles/orchid_fever.html) – 2014-09-30 (PDF available).

<sup>299</sup> *Ibid.* p. 4.

<sup>300</sup> Charlie Kaufman, *Being John Malkovich: The Shooting Script*. London: Faber and Faber, 2000, p. 91.

plotted through some of the most difficult film terrain of all: a story in which the arc of the film takes place within the mind of the protagonist"<sup>301</sup>, and continues, "[h]ere the protagonist experiences a deep and irreversible revolution in his attitude toward life and/or toward himself"<sup>302</sup>. The description would not be inaccurate for *Adaptation*, as all the characters can be argued to be representations of the protagonist, FCCK, who interacts with them – or envisions them – to live and write the film we watch, with the process of screenwriting changing his attitude towards life, himself and the movies.

IRLRMK claims that "the protagonist creates the rest of the cast. All other characters are in a story first and foremost because of the relationship they strike to the protagonist and the way each helps to delineate the dimensions of the protagonist's complex nature."<sup>303</sup> In *Adaptation*, implicitly, FCCK also writes the world of the other characters. IRLRMK views "the protagonist as the sun, supporting roles as planets around the sun, bit players as satellites around the planets – all held in orbit by the gravitational pull of the star at the center."<sup>304</sup> All characters are projected through FCCK and Donald, while the fictional Orlean, Laroche and FCRMK all serve to accentuate FCCK's character. For a while, the fictional Laroche is projected through Orlean, but this has passed through FCCK as well – as he's written the film we're watching (and hence those scenes as well). As IRLRMK states, regarding the education and disillusionment plot, they are "two genres far more typical of a novel than a film, both running inside the mind of the central characters."<sup>305</sup> In *Adaptation*, we are spending much of the film directly with FCCK – inside his mind so to speak – hearing his inner, most intimate thoughts through voice-over. This forms a tight emotional bond between the protagonist and the audience. Because, as IRLRMK writes, the more time you spend with a character, observing his choices, the "more empathy and emotional involvement between audience and character."<sup>306</sup>

IRLRMK continues to assert that such stories are the most difficult for screenwriters. Why? Because "we cannot drive a camera lens through an actor's forehead and photograph his thoughts, although there are those who would try."<sup>307</sup> One of those would be IRLCK, who stated the following in an *Adaptation* interview: "I'm

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<sup>301</sup> McKee, *Story*, p. 50.

<sup>302</sup> Ibid.

<sup>303</sup> Ibid. p. 436-437.

<sup>304</sup> Ibid. p. 436.

<sup>305</sup> McKee, *Critical Commentary*, p. 133.

<sup>306</sup> McKee, *Story*, p. 423.

<sup>307</sup> Ibid. p. 51.

always trying to figure out a way to take a movie from here, out in front of you [Charlie framed something out in front of him], and put it here [he pulled his hands back even with his head]"<sup>308</sup>. IRLCK's way of putting the film not just in front of the spectator, but in their head, echoes Stam's assertion that "authentic reflexivity elicits an active thinking spectator rather than a passive consumer of entertainment"<sup>309</sup>.

### The Screenwriting Process: The Question of Voice-Over

IRLRMK claims that "we must lead the audience to interpret the inner life from outer behaviour without loading the soundtrack with expositional narration or stuffing the mouths of characters with self-explanatory dialogue"<sup>310</sup>. Which brings us to the spurned device of voice-over and its use in *Adaptation*. IRLRMK goes on: "Many writers choose to explain their meanings out of the mouths of their characters, or worse, in voice-over narration. Such writing is always inadequate. It forces characters to a phony, self-conscious knowledge rarely found in actuality."<sup>311</sup> IRLCK gives us excessive amounts of info through FCCK's voice-over narration. It's almost as if he has set out to prove that he can write it and make it work. IRLRMK continues: "'If the scene is about what the scene is about, you're in deep shit.' It means writing 'on the nose', writing dialogue and activity in which a character's deepest thoughts and feelings are expressed by what the character says and does—writing the subtext directly into the text."<sup>312</sup>

However, IRLRMK isn't as negative as he might seem: "Voice-over narration is yet another way to divulge exposition. Like the Flashback, it's done well or ill."<sup>313</sup> What decides if it works or not? IRLRMK asserts that: "If narration can be removed and the story still stands on its feet well told, then you've probably used narration for the only good reason—as counterpoint."<sup>314</sup> *Adaptation's* voice-over is so deeply integrated into the story that it could not just be removed. However, it either adds an element of drama to the action or directly contradicts it – as counterpoint/comedy. FCCK's deepest thoughts and feelings are conveyed by mismatching FCCK's voice-over with what happens on the screen, illustrating FCCK's pain over the gap between his thoughts and actions. E.g. when FCCK sits alone in his car after a date with Amelia, after he has failed to kiss her, we hear his thoughts: "I should just go and knock on her door right

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<sup>308</sup> Kaufman, *Adaptation: The Shooting Script*, p. 128.

<sup>309</sup> Stam, *Reflexivity in Film and Literature: From Don Quixote to Jean-Luc Godard*, p. 16.

<sup>310</sup> McKee, *Story*, p. 50.

<sup>311</sup> Ibid. p. 280.

<sup>312</sup> Ibid. p. 294.

<sup>313</sup> Ibid. p. 400.

<sup>314</sup> Ibid.



now and kiss her. [...] I'm gonna do that right now"<sup>315</sup> – at which point he does the opposite and drives away alone. This use of counterpoint is how we "directly invade the thoughts and feelings of characters"<sup>316</sup>, which IRLRMK writes that only novelists can.

IRLCK uses voice-over in a similar way to Woody Allen, offering “wit, ironies, and insights that can't be done any other way.”<sup>317</sup> IRLRMK concludes: "Voice-over to add non-narrative counterpoint can be delightful."<sup>318</sup> His point is that narration must add to the story, not just describe what's conveyed on screen. Compare this to *Adaptation*, where IRLCK paints the picture that FCRMK hates all voice-over: "God help you if you use voice-over in your work, my friends! God help you. It's flaccid, sloppy writing. Any idiot can write voice-over narration to explain the thoughts of the character."<sup>319</sup> Something rumors say has put IRLRMK in a hard spot: "Robert McKee now makes note that he is not against the use of narration, 'despite what Charlie Kaufman says."<sup>320</sup> By painting FCRMK as more simple-minded than his real self, IRLCK achieves a greater counterpoint. Again, the use of parody shows IRLCK's intentionality to make audiences respond actively and to “not enter a state of passive acceptance”<sup>321</sup>.

### The Production Apparatus: A Film Alive, Writing Itself

The means of production are reflected in *Adaptation* in their most foundational sense. Not only the technical apparatus that we see on the faked *Being John Malkovich* set, or the business of FCRMK dealing with Hollywood agents and "film executives". What we see goes deeper than the pragmatics of filmmaking; namely that a human being has imagined, shaped and created the film we are seeing. Because there's a character named “Charlie Kaufman”, we get the impression that IRLCK is simultaneously “autobiographer (of himself as author) and biographer (of himself as character).”<sup>322</sup> We get to see the inner life of the writer poured into a screenplay, and the film appears to come to life as we watch it by reflecting a pretend-real process of writing itself. *Adaptation* “ultimately re-writes reality”<sup>323</sup>, and the general viewer might, as

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<sup>315</sup> Kaufman, *Adaptation: The Shooting Script*, p. 19.

<sup>316</sup> McKee, *Story*, p. 400.

<sup>317</sup> Ibid. p. 402.

<sup>318</sup> Ibid.

<sup>319</sup> Kaufman, *Adaptation: The Shooting Script*, p. 67-68.

<sup>320</sup> IMDB, *Adaptation*, Trivia. Available on: [http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0268126/trivia?ref\\_=tt\\_ql\\_2](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0268126/trivia?ref_=tt_ql_2) – 2014-10-17 (PDF available).

<sup>321</sup> Nørremark and Kristensen, *Constructing Charlie Kaufman - A Study of Kaufman's Postmodern Poetics*, p. 47.

<sup>322</sup> LaRocca, *Inconclusive Unscientific Postscript: Late Remarks on Kierkegaard and Kaufman*, p. 280.

<sup>323</sup> Nick Weidenfeld, *Being Charlie Kaufman*, WYWS, 2003. On: [web.archive.org/web/20050209001149/http://www.wyws.com/wArticle.asp?art=1&p=1&i=21](http://web.archive.org/web/20050209001149/http://www.wyws.com/wArticle.asp?art=1&p=1&i=21) – 2015-01-02. (PDF available.)

Weidenfeld suggests, “forever think of Kaufman as the guy on screen” after viewing the film<sup>324</sup>. The screenplay itself could be seen as an Ouroboros consuming and turning on itself, drawing our attention to its existence. IRLCK describes the intention:

Take real people, take the person who really wrote it, make them characters, and have the experience of watching them write it be the experience that the moviegoer has. So, you're constantly being taken out of the movie. Even though you're watching the movie as a story, that plays as a story, there's this constant nagging thing that's, "Is this real, is this not real?" [///] There's something about movies that's very safe because they usually play out in a certain way, and also because they're done. They're dead. [///] So, if you force people to interact with the movie in a new way, then you're forcing them to see different things and their minds to interact.<sup>325</sup>

*Adaptation* knits a tight bond between its supposed writer and the viewer already in its opening scene, with a black screen and a voice-over<sup>326</sup>, creating the feeling of hearing someone's intimate thoughts. This close relationship is kept up all the way to the ending, when FCCK drives away, filled for the first time with hope – going home to finish writing the film we've just watched. What happens is that “the storyteller leads us into expectation, makes us think we understand, then cracks open reality, creating surprise and curiosity, sending us back through his story again and again.”<sup>327</sup> Similarly, IRLCK hurls us, and his fictional stand-in, back through his film over and over, showing how the movie writes itself. As IRLCK asserts: “One thing we do say is that the movie you are watching is the movie Charlie and Donald are writing,' says Kaufman. 'You are watching it as it is being written’”<sup>328</sup>. Then, “[o]n each trip back, we gain deeper and deeper insight into the natures of his characters and their world—a sudden awareness of the ineffable truths that lie hidden beneath the film's images.”<sup>329</sup> And while this happens we watch FCCK's life transforming into screenplay and his screenplay transforming into life. The film ponders the foundation of fiction film (screenplays) in an on-going meditation and evolving process over the very same transformative process.

IRLRMK quotes John Carpenter: “Movies are about making mental things physical”<sup>330</sup>. By following FCCK's process of adapting *TOT*, his inner neuroses – the stuff inside that constitutes part of the screenwriting process – become physical too, portrayed as entertainment for an audience in a fiction film. As we see FCCK come up with, or rather experience, key parts/scenes of the film that we are watching, it

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<sup>324</sup> Weidenfeld, *Being Charlie Kaufman*.

<sup>325</sup> Kaufman, *Adaptation: The Shooting Script*, p. 128-129.

<sup>326</sup> Described in the chapter on “Conscious and Unconscious desire”.

<sup>327</sup> McKee, *Story*, p. 279.

<sup>328</sup> Hagan, *Who's the Proper Charlie?*

<sup>329</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>330</sup> McKee, *Story*, p. 51.

highlights how *Adaptation* is, and how all films are, a construction – created in the mind of a writer (or writer(s)). This may seem obvious, but so is showing a film camera or an actor looking straight into that camera (a much hailed modernist technique). The function is the same, it fractions the illusion of the fiction. *Adaptation* goes deeper as it shows not only the screenwriter, but also his complicated *process*, cutting closer to the foundation of what films are – stories. By reflecting on itself, through the act of seemingly writing itself while we watch it, it creates the illusion of being alive rather than dead, and is put back into the viewer's head. Reality is cracked open and played with, illusion is constructed, destroyed and created again. The openness is enhanced by that the filmmakers discourage the idea of any interpretation as "correct". This since a film is not only constructed by a screenwriter and director; it is also constructed in the mind of a viewer. Just as IRLCK has stated: "This is your movie now. I'm done with it. Take it, leave it, interact with it. It's yours to do what you want with."<sup>331</sup>

However, it is not a documentary we're watching, but fiction pretending to be real, twisting itself around in a parody. *Adaptation* shifts between truth and lies regarding how films come about in the first place. IRLCK has taken the real writers (the real Susan Orlean and himself) and made them characters so that the experience of watching the fictional Orlean and FCCCK write/live the story, as the film plays, is the experience of the viewer. This authenticity makes the film believable, something it then continues to contradict by a highly imaginative/pretend-real storyline, enhancing the feeling of the film being "alive", writing itself, almost demanding that "viewers acknowledge that they are watching a film about its own scripting"<sup>332</sup>. Its postmodern approach – showing the real origin and most fundamental means of production, writing – nags with stubborn questions regarding what's real and what's not. Stam, writing about Machado de Assis, could almost be writing about *Adaptation*: "The text, in such instances, ceases to comport itself as a finished corpus, evoking instead some endlessly modifiable work-in-progress. The writing writes and rewrites itself under the reader's eyes"<sup>333</sup>.

### Play Reality

IRLRMK asserts: "Although an artist may, in his private life, lie to others, even to himself, when he creates he tells the truth."<sup>334</sup> These words rhyme strangely with the

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<sup>331</sup> Ty Burr, *Kaufman: This is your movie now. I'm done with it*, San Diego Union-Tribune, 2008. On: [http://www.utsandiego.com/uniontrib/20081109/news\\_1a09kaufman.html](http://www.utsandiego.com/uniontrib/20081109/news_1a09kaufman.html) - 2015-01-05. (PDF available.)

<sup>332</sup> Simerka & Weimer, *Duplicitous Diegesis: Don Quijote and Charlie Kaufman's Adaptation*, p. 92.

<sup>333</sup> Stam, *Reflexivity in Film and Literature: From Don Quixote to Jean-Luc Godard*, p. 152.

<sup>334</sup> McKee, *Story*, p. 158.

following dialogue from *Being John Malkovich*: "Art always tells the truth, even when it's lying"<sup>335</sup>, expressed by the protagonist, a puppeteer (a profession similar to a screenwriter's, often ridiculed, yet creating and dominating a fictional world). Earlier in the same film Charlie Sheen (playing himself) bursts out: "The truth is for suckers"<sup>336</sup> – something that could be *Adaptation*'s mantra as well. IRLRMK claims that "[i]n story, irony plays between actions and results—the primary source of story energy, between appearance and reality—the primary source of truth and emotion."<sup>337</sup> IRLCK uses this irony with everything, most apparently in the gap between FCCK's thoughts and actions, and with what's real, true and what's not – putting the film back in the viewer's head in its ongoing, illusionary process of creating itself. *Adaptation* says many things, but undermines them at the same time, with the postmodern device of parody.

A common factor for fiction to be enjoyed is that the audience must willingly suspend its disbelief. IRLRMK states that "the writer must keep us involved to fade out. To do so, he must convince us that the world of his story is authentic."<sup>338</sup> *Adaptation* is double-edged in this aspect: real people (IRLRMK, IRLCK and the real Orlean and Laroche) are played by famous actors (something the audience is used to suspending disbelief for), while famous actors play pretend-real versions of themselves (John Cusack, Catherine Keener and John Malkovich). Since the protagonist – FCCK – is named Charlie Kaufman, we suppose he is a representation of IRLCK. The same goes for the fictional Orlean as representation for the real Orlean, the fictional Laroche as representation for the real Laroche, FCRMK for IRLRMK, the fictional Thomas as representation for the real Thomas and so on. However: "There is no warning that *Adaptation* is fiction, that names, dates, and events have been changed and that any similarities to real people or places are mere coincidence. Quite the opposite."<sup>339</sup>

The material at the beginning (and middle) of *Adaptation*, from the set of *Being John Malkovich*, plays out as documentary and real, but is in fact fiction made for *Adaptation*. "Charlie Kaufman, Screenwriter"<sup>340</sup> is shown with a title to establish his identity. His low status is highlighted as FCCK leaves the faked *Being John Malkovich* film set after an assistant has told him: "You. You're in the eyeline. Can you please get

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<sup>335</sup> Kaufman, *Being John Malkovich: The Shooting Script*, p. 91.

<sup>336</sup> Jonze and Kaufman, *Being John Malkovich*, Astralwerks, 1:05:38.

<sup>337</sup> McKee, *Story*, p. 322.

<sup>338</sup> Ibid. p. 205.

<sup>339</sup> Weidenfeld, *Being Charlie Kaufman*.

<sup>340</sup> Kaufman, *Adaptation: The Shooting Script*, p. 3.

off the stage?”<sup>341</sup> This fake documentary footage deepens the impression that FCCCK is the representation of IRLCK. But IRLCK's actual involvement in the films he's scripted, with the exception of *Confessions of a Dangerous Mind*, is the opposite of how FCCCK is portrayed on the fake *Being John Malkovich* set. As Michel Gondry, director of *Human Nature* and *Eternal Sunshine*, asserts: "He's the author of the thing to the end. If you work with Charlie, you have to accept that"<sup>342</sup>. In real life, IRLCK is only present at the shoot for important scenes, but sits with the director in the editing stage. As IRLCK himself states: "I think actually my time on the set is the least of my involvement. I'm more involved in pre-production and post-production."<sup>343</sup>

Because *Adaptation* seemingly writes itself, it makes it seem as if directors and actors are puppets to the screenwriter's whim. Hence, the film interestingly shatters the idea of director as auteur, just to cast a new, equally false, illusion of the screenwriter as auteur. False, as film is still a collaborative process, and the script kept changing in the post-production process (in which IRLCK participated), just as director Spike Jonze describes: "It became a lot like Charlie the character's writing process, in terms of the movie constantly evolving into this other thing. By the end, it'd changed into something different from when we started editing."<sup>344</sup> This goes together with that IRLCK is very involved in the post-production. Another aspect of *Adaptation*'s play reality is that the published *Adaptation: Shooting Script* (referenced dozens of times here) is in fact not the shooting script, but the script as developed after shooting and in the editing process. As IRLCK comments: "We're doing post-production rewrites as things get moved around. There's a lot of stuff to finesse or fix"<sup>345</sup>, highlighting that filmmaking is a collaborative process, and that IRLCK's did not fully create the film in his own head before filming (pre-prod), but that it kept changing organically, in collaboration, through the practical process of production and (especially) post-production. As IRLCK states on the changes that the post-production process entailed for the script: "I think editing is most akin to writing the movie, more than any other aspect of production. It really is writing, [///] it requires you to really let go of what you've gone in with."<sup>346</sup>

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<sup>341</sup> Kaufman, *Adaptation: The Shooting Script*, p. 3.

<sup>342</sup> Jason Tanz, *The Kaufman Paradox*, Wired, November 2008. Available on: [http://archive.wired.com/entertainment/hollywood/magazine/16-11/ff\\_kaufman?currentPage=all](http://archive.wired.com/entertainment/hollywood/magazine/16-11/ff_kaufman?currentPage=all) – 2014-12-31.

<sup>343</sup> Topel, *An Unorthodox Adaptation: Deciphering Charlie Kaufman*.

<sup>344</sup> Brian Libby, *Writer's block? Insert self into script. Problem solved!* Christian Science Monitor, 2002. Available on: <http://www.csmonitor.com/2002/1206/p15s01-almo.html> – 2014-12-19 (PDF available).

<sup>345</sup> Goldsmith, *Charlie Kaufman*, p. 167.

<sup>346</sup> *Ibid.* p. 167.

That a fake set was re-created for *Adaptation* from a previously produced film illustrates to which degree the filmmakers consciously fake reality to confound viewers. In the same footage, *Being John Malkovich's* actual production crew – “John Malkovich, Actor”, “Thomas Smith, First Assistant Director” and “Lance Acord, Cinematographer” – play themselves and are showed with name titles.<sup>347</sup> This while the fictional character Donald, who ends up dead in the film, is dedicated the film's end credit – “In loving memory of Donald Kaufman”<sup>348</sup> – and was nominated for an Oscar as if he was a real person. But Donald only lives in *Adaptation*; his stretch from fiction into the outside reality, with award nominations and screenwriting credit, ends with the film. Yet, one of the most recognized film departments in the world, the University of Berkeley, lists both Kaufmans – “Charlie and Donald Kaufman (screenwriters)” – in their Bibliography of Materials in the UC Berkeley Library<sup>349</sup>. The credit to Donald serves to create more doubt about what is real and what is not, along with a marketing buzz. It is typical of the film's play on what's real that such a confusion-creating and thought-provoking device is combined with one that spins both commercial interest and audience involvement, along with questions of what's true and what's not in the film.

### The Screenwriting Process: Research

FCCK's research process constitutes so much of the film that the film writing itself occurs along with it. It is a realistic depiction of how scripts come alive through research, mirroring how screenwriting gurus such as IRLRMK assert research as a key part of the writing process. It is also false, as its depiction is not fully true for *Adaptation* – but pretends to be so. IRLRMK asserts how research is often followed by a phenomenon: “[c]haracters suddenly spring to life and of their own free will make choices and take actions that create Turning Points that twist, build, and turn again”.<sup>350</sup> In *Adaptation* we see how FCCK's research gives him new ideas, both when researching through books – “until the writer can hardly type fast enough to keep up with the outpourings”<sup>351</sup>, in line with the flashes of inspiration FCCK has at the typewriter and when speaking into his dictaphone – and when researching out in the world. When FCCK does the latter he – Donald, the fictional Orlean and Laroche – indeed come to life and take surprising actions that create unexpected turning points in the third act.

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<sup>347</sup> Kaufman, *Adaptation: The Shooting Script*, p. 2-3.

<sup>348</sup> Ibid. p. 100.

<sup>349</sup> <http://www.lib.berkeley.edu/MRC/kaufman.html> - books

<sup>350</sup> McKee, *Story*, p. 90.

<sup>351</sup> Ibid.

IRLRMK continues: "the sudden impression that the story is writing itself simply marks the moment when a writer's knowledge of the subject has reached the saturation point."<sup>352</sup> FCCK's knowledge of screenwriting and life reaches its saturation point in N.Y., where he comes to know FCRMK's teachings intimately. What happens is that he, "[the] writer becomes the god of his little universe and is amazed by what seems to be spontaneous creation, but is in fact the reward for hard work"<sup>353</sup>. After that, the story seemingly writes itself. FCCK also becomes God of his universe in the ironic sense that he is the only main character (besides FCRMK) that truly survives it.

### The Screenwriting Process: Planning vs. Writing to Discover

IRLRMK advocates a structured, planned way of writing: "successful writer's use the first two thirds of their allocated writing time with planning the story told in steps in a Step-Outline, and then goes on to write a treatment; 'then and only then does the writer move to the screenplay itself.'"<sup>354</sup> FCCK's process, and inspiration (followed by desperation), is more similar to IRLRMK's "unsuccessful writer's" way: "He dreams up an idea, noodles on it for a while, then rushes straight to the keyboard. [///] He imagines and writes, writes and dreams until he reaches page 120"<sup>355</sup>. By contrast to IRLRMK's opinion, *Adaptation's* real screenwriter, IRLCK, likes to find out what he's doing as he goes along and uses a Cassavetian method of writing to discover: "A screenplay is an exploration. It's about the thing you don't know. To step into the abyss. [...] there is a starting point, but the rest is undetermined, it is a secret, even from you."<sup>356</sup>

Regarding dialogue, IRLCK writes many pages just to find a few lines he can use: "If I have a scene, a dialogue between two characters that runs on for five pages, I might find three lines of really good dialogue four pages in"<sup>357</sup>, whereas IRLRMK argues that "the wise writer puts off the writing of dialogue for as long as possible because the premature writing of dialogue chokes creativity."<sup>358</sup> What IRLRMK opposes more precisely however is a loose writing stage; not a loose planning stage: "You've found your story because you've allowed yourself to think the unthinkable."<sup>359</sup>

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<sup>352</sup> McKee, *Story*, p. 90.

<sup>353</sup> Ibid.

<sup>354</sup> Ibid. p. 174.

<sup>355</sup> Ibid. p. 469.

<sup>356</sup> Kaufman, *Screenwriting Lecture*. Echoing FCCK's statement: "Writing is a journey into the unknown", mentioned in "The Fictional and Factual Premise, Controlling Idea..." as well as a few pages from here.

<sup>357</sup> Rob Feld, *In Praise of Confusion*, December 2002/January 2003 Issue of *Written By* (The Magazine of the Writers Guild of America, West). Available on: <https://web.archive.org/web/20040218094242/http://www.wga.org/WrittenBy/1202/kaufman.html> – 2014-10-01 (PDF available).

<sup>358</sup> McKee, *Story*, p. 475.

<sup>359</sup> Ibid. p. 284.

But *Adaptation* wouldn't have turned out as it did if it was planned, as evident by IRLCK's declaration of technique: "I write improvisationally. I write as though I'm having a conversation. If there's something that comes up that appeals to me, I don't resist it"<sup>360</sup>. By implausibly writing himself into the script, and dealing with the general theme of adaptation rather than just adapting *TOT*, IRLCK found a way in. IRLRMK continues: "Reasoning is secondary and postcreativity. Primary and preconditional to everything else is imagination—the willingness to think any crazy idea"<sup>361</sup>. We are shown FCCK's process regarding this. 1) Excitement over his ideas; 2) Terror over what he's done by writing himself into the script (I'm Ourobouros!), echoed in IRLCK's description of his experimental process with the film "I didn't tell anybody what I was doing, [...]. I thought I'd better do it rather than pitch it because if I did, they would say no and I had no other ideas. I wanted to try it even though I thought it was going to be a disaster. [...] I thought I wasn't going to work anymore."<sup>362</sup> Hence, IRLRMK and IRLCK are proponents of different writing processes, reflected in the antagonistic feelings of FCCK towards FCRMK in regards to this at the beginning of *Adaptation*.

### The Screenwriting Process: Write What You Live

FCCK doesn't see himself as the protagonist of his own life, as he can't act out his thoughts and feelings, express love nor fulfill romantic desires. The barrier between thought and action makes him view life as static and leaves him depressed. He wants to write a movie where nothing happens to depict the feeling. He can't as he discovers that "[t]he book has no story. There's no story!"<sup>363</sup>. Something he first appreciated, but has now realized isn't working for his script, nor – as the film implicitly, and parodically, comes to argue – for the medium of film itself. He realizes he needs change in his life, and thus also in his screenplay. But FCCK is still passive, just writing what happens in his life. He has a lack of own ideas (that work), and writes only what he experiences. The adapted parts from *TOT* aren't made up, but adapted. The only exception we are shown is the montage of the creation of life and of Darwin writing – adapted historical events rather than made up fictional ones. In short, FCCK needs to learn how to live to write the film, so he becomes a submissive to the ideas of FCRMK and Donald after two acts – as they seem to know how to live. How does this play out in the film?

1. FCCK takes Donald's advice and attends FCRMK's seminar.

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<sup>360</sup> Verini, *Another head case*.

<sup>361</sup> Ibid.

<sup>362</sup> Goldsmith D. and J., *Charlie Kaufman*.

<sup>363</sup> Kaufman, *Adaptation: The Shooting Script*, p. 51.



2. FCCK is skeptical at first, but FCRMK seems to speak directly to him. First about voice-over, then about change – as related to both screenplay and life.
3. FCCK follows FCRMK's advice and also takes help from FCRMK's disciple Donald with both screenplay and life. While chased by their subjects, the fictional Orlean and Laroche, Donald gives FCCK the gift of self-esteem.
4. The action gives FCCK's screenplay an ending. The gift of self-esteem makes him strong enough to act on his feelings. He's changed and is finally able to show his love for Amelia, finding it reciprocated, and can thus finish his (changed) script (on change).

The journey represents FCCK's journey from art film proponent in stasis to Hollywood movie advocate for change. FCCK uses his dictaphone for fits of inspiration, as IRLRMK describes: "Writers often carry notepads or pocket tape recorders and as they watch life's passing show, collect bits and pieces"<sup>364</sup>. FCCK's disgust, when he listens back to the things he has recorded, reflects how "we fall in love with an idea on Monday, sleep on it, then reread it with disgust on Tuesday"<sup>365</sup>. As Ebert asserts, *Adaptation* teases with the directions it might take and to "watch the film is to be actively involved in the challenge of its creation"<sup>366</sup>. IRLRMK states that "w]e observe, but it's a mistake to copy life directly to the page"<sup>367</sup>. But FCCK does exactly that, copying what happens in his life to the script, so that the film gives the impression of writing itself and that its fictional screenwriter FCCK is its real screenwriter – IRLCK.

When FCCK's agent tells him: "Nobody in this town can make up a crazy story like you. You're the king of that"<sup>368</sup> and FCCK replies "No. I didn't want to do that this time"<sup>369</sup>, it reflects IRLCK's true desire to do something different for *Adaptation*, as he asserts, "the way it plays out in terms of my decision to put myself in the screenplay is pretty close to the truth, and the reason I took this job. Charlie Kaufman's story of taking the job and becoming frustrated and deciding to put himself in the screenplay is true."<sup>370</sup> FCCK's meeting with FCRMK is like a fictional worst-case scenario of what would happen to IRLCK due to his writer's block. His agent refers to FCCK as the king of making up crazy stories, which is ironic – since, as discovered, FCCK only writes his experiences in *Adaptation*. For FCCK it's only true that writing is a journey into the unknown (as he states to Donald early in the film) if writing is interpreted as the trigger that makes his life take extraordinary turns. This while IRLCK is the master puppeteer, actively engineering the story without having it happen to him in real life.

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<sup>364</sup> McKee, *Story*, p. 443.

<sup>365</sup> Ibid. p. 93.

<sup>366</sup> Ebert, *Great Movie Adaptation*.

<sup>367</sup> Ibid. p. 443.

<sup>368</sup> Kaufman, *Adaptation: The Shooting Script*, p. 51.

<sup>369</sup> Ibid.

<sup>370</sup> Topel, *An Unorthodox Adaptation: Deciphering Charlie Kaufman*.

*Adaptation's* play on what's real and what's not dances along the two poles of truth and lies. As IRLRMK states, at "one end of reality is pure fact; at the other end, pure imagination."<sup>371</sup> The spectrum of fiction spans the poles, and IRLCK's film – based on real people and events, using documentarian techniques to express fantasies – strikes a balance around them. IRKRMK means that story talent is "the creative conversion of life itself to a more powerful, clearer, more meaningful experience."<sup>372</sup> *Adaptation* portrays the transformation of FCCCK's screenwriting life to a purposeful experience – the film we are watching. This is achieved by FCCCK seeking "out the inscape of our [his] days and reshap[ing] it into a telling that enriches life."<sup>373</sup> The process shows FCCCK what life is, and transforms his life from static to change, just as IRLCK adapted to the only way he could write the script – in the form of the archplot – by way of his own writing block and adaptation analogies. In *Adaptation*, FCCCK's storytelling process is life experience applied to the script and "the material of story talent is life itself"<sup>374</sup>.

That FCCCK only writes his experiences corresponds strangely with Alasdair MacIntyre's assertion that "[s]tories are lived before they are told"<sup>375</sup>. IRLRMK argues that "[t]he archetypal story unearths a universally human experience, then wraps itself inside a unique, culture-specific expression"<sup>376</sup>. FCCCK's self-loathing, not being who he wants to be, the lack of love in his life – as well as the process of writing something – are experiences everyone can relate to. The culture-specific expression in *Adaptation* is (Hollywood) screenwriting and filmmaking. IRLRMK argues that films are a dual pleasure, where we 1) "do not wish to escape life but to find life"<sup>377</sup> and 2) "use our minds in fresh, experimental ways, to flex our emotions, to enjoy, to learn, to add depth to our days"<sup>378</sup>. The unique thing here is that it's true not only for the moviegoer, but also for the screenwriter. The gift of story for viewers, screenwriting students and the real and fictional screenwriter of *Adaptation* alike "is to live lives beyond our own".<sup>379</sup>

## Donald's Third Act

Just for fun, how would the great Donald end this script?<sup>380</sup> – Charlie Kaufman.

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<sup>371</sup> McKee, *Story*, p. 30.

<sup>372</sup> Ibid. p. 31.

<sup>373</sup> Ibid. p. 31.

<sup>374</sup> Ibid.

<sup>375</sup> Parker, *The Real McKee: Lessons of a Screenwriting Guru*, p. 11.

<sup>376</sup> McKee, *Story*, p. 3.

<sup>377</sup> Ibid, p. 5.

<sup>378</sup> Ibid.

<sup>379</sup> Ibid. p. 167.

<sup>380</sup> Kaufman, *Adaptation: The Shooting Script*, p. 74.

There is one interesting exception of scenes that FCCK can't possibly have known as they occur to him, that are not described in *TOT* and that FCCK has not experienced<sup>381</sup>. These scenes (117-134<sup>382</sup>) happen after Donald begins to help with the script:

- The fictional Orlean confesses (in voice-over) that she lied about her change. Something happened in the swamp (that she didn't put in the book). She saw the ghost orchid but didn't care ("It's a flower. Just a flower."<sup>383</sup>)
- The fictional Laroche reveals the ghost orchid is a drug. He gives it to the fictional Orlean to help her be fascinated.
- The fictional Orlean takes the drug and becomes fascinated and engages in a relationship with the fictional Laroche.

Orlean doesn't take drugs and fall in love with Laroche in *TOT*. In *Adaptation* these things happen before FCCK can know and write them – as opposed to everything else so far in the film. As this is where Donald becomes involved, it is assumable that Donald is the one “writing” these things in, making the fiction happen. As Friedman asserts: "from the point when Donald takes up the script in the hotel room, *Adaptation* turns into Donald's film"<sup>384</sup>. This goes together with that FCCK doesn't actually make things up, but just writes what he experiences. Whereas Donald makes stuff up (e.g. "The Three"), and can make stuff happen. Here's an outline of his actions, after starting to help FCCK with his screenplay, before the mentioned scenes:

- Interviews the fictional Orlean: "People who answer questions too right are liars."<sup>385</sup>
- Spies on her booking a flight to Miami, taking it as a relationship with the fictional Laroche.<sup>386</sup>
- Finds a picture of the fictional Orlean naked on Laroche's porn site, and instigates his own and FCCK's travel to Miami after this.

After these scenes we start seeing the film through FCCK as he experiences it again. However, the scenes that Donald has written change what FCCK experiences. This creates the springboard for the third act action, where the fictional Laroche and Orlean are found out as junkies and lovers. As FCCK only writes what he experiences, Donald's actions change not only FCCK's life but also his film. FCRMK tells FCCK in the bar scene what his real counterpart, IRLRMK, requested as a requirement to be

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<sup>381</sup> The final shot of the film could possibly also be interpreted as a small exception. There, FCCK drives away "filled for the first time with hope", knowing "how to end the movie now", when "the film goes to time-lapse and days and days pass. Morning glories in a planter open and close with the shifts from day to night" – telling a small story about flowers (All: Kaufman, *Adaptation: The Shooting Script*, p. 100). Which, according to Joshua Landy, represents the film about flowers in *Adaptation* (Landy, Joshua, *Still Life in a Narrative Age: Charlie Kaufman's Adaptation*, Critical Inquiry, Vol 37, No. 3 (Spring 2011), p. 497-514, The University of Chicago Press).

<sup>382</sup> Kaufman, *Adaptation: The Shooting Script*, p. 79-85.

<sup>383</sup> Ibid. p. 80.

<sup>384</sup> Dan Friedman, *What is Charlie Kaufman Doing?*, Zeek, February 2003. Available on: [http://www.zeek.net/film\\_0302.shtml](http://www.zeek.net/film_0302.shtml) – 2014-10-20 (PDF available).

<sup>385</sup> Kaufman, *Adaptation: The Shooting Script*, p. 77.

<sup>386</sup> Ibid. p. 78.

featured in the film: "Wow them in the end and you got a hit"<sup>387</sup>. IRLCK confirms: "Always do that. Gotta wow 'em in the end. It's what we learn from McKee".<sup>388</sup> Thus, "Charlie Kaufman, the character, writes not the ending that he would write but the one that his brother, Donald, would write."<sup>389</sup> As IRLCK asserts: "the changes Donald suggests are there on the screen. That's why he is credited as the co-screenwriter"<sup>390</sup> – it's an "important element in understanding the movie"<sup>391</sup>. Hence, Donald creates the third act change and makes it possible for FCCK to successfully complete the script.

### The Screenwriting Process: The Birds-Eye View

At the root of *Adaptation* and *Story* is our human interest in stories: "What is the source of story energy? How does it compel such intense mental and sentient attention from the audience? How do stories work?"<sup>392</sup> *Adaptation* becomes alive by constructing and deconstructing stories. How? According to IRLRMK, "[t]he answers to these questions come when the artist [IRLCK] explores the creative process subjectively"<sup>393</sup>. IRLRMK asserts that to understand the substance of story, "view your work from the inside out, from the center of your character, looking out at the world through your character's eyes, experiencing the story as if you were the living character yourself."<sup>394</sup> *Adaptation* is constituted by the process of FCCK looking at the world – but also seeing the world through the eyes of his characters. By creating "himself" as the main protagonist/a living character, IRLCK re-enacts the screenwriter's process – even if it is fake.

In (screen)writing there is a differentiation between what the writer knows and what the viewer gets to know. IRLRMK means that "[t]he world of a story must be small enough that the mind of a single artist can surround the fictional universe it creates and come to know it in the same depth and detail that God knows the one he created."<sup>395</sup> The one that knows the most about the world where the film takes place is its – real, not fictional – screenwriter. As IRLRMK states: "'Not a sparrow falls that God does not know.' Not a sparrow should fall in the world of a writer that he wouldn't know."<sup>396</sup> What IRLCK does, in his portrayal of FCCK's pretend-real process of writing *Adaptation*, is to put the old mantra – "write about what you know", also mentioned by

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<sup>387</sup> Kaufman, *Adaptation: The Shooting Script*, p. 70.

<sup>388</sup> Feld, *In Praise of Confusion*.

<sup>389</sup> Verini, *Another head case*.

<sup>390</sup> Hagan, *Who's the Proper Charlie?*

<sup>391</sup> Topel, *An Unorthodox Adaptation: Deciphering Charlie Kaufman*.

<sup>392</sup> McKee, *Story*, p. 162.

<sup>393</sup> Ibid.

<sup>394</sup> Ibid.

<sup>395</sup> Ibid. p. 86.

<sup>396</sup> Ibid. p. 87.

IRLRMK – to literal use. We are watching a depiction of IRLCK's writing process in *Adaptation*, but it's fictionalized and we only see what IRLCK has chosen for us to see.

### The "Autobiographical" Professional Genre and Mockumentary

*Adaptation* is unusual in that it's a depiction of work, even if work in this case – screenwriting and reporting – equals life for the film's main protagonists. IRLRMK asserts: "We spend a third or more of our lives at work, yet rarely see scenes of people doing their jobs. The reason is simple: Most work is boring."<sup>397</sup> In *Adaptation*, we spend most of the film watching FCCCK do his work. If not writing, researching. The same goes for the fictional Orlean. In this sense, *Adaptation* is part of the uncommon professional genre film. The screenwriter at work is crisscrossed with the reporter on an assignment, and both FCCCK's and the fictional Orlean's professional lives are so closely intertwined with their personal lives that work comes to transform their lives fully.

The autobiography genre is also interesting in the context: "This idiom is popular with filmmakers who feel that they should write a film about a subject they know."<sup>398</sup> Which is exactly what FCCCK wants to do, writing about stasis and nothing happening in life, and IRLCK does – inserting himself into the script and writing about writing. IRLRMK argues that "autobiographical films often lack the very virtue they promise: self-knowledge. For while it's true that the unexamined life is not worth living, it's also the case that the un-lived life isn't worth examining."<sup>399</sup> This relates to the lesson IRLRMK's fictional self teaches IRLCK's fictional self at the seminar ("If you can't find that stuff in life, then you, my friend, don't know crap about life!"). What FCCCK does is teaching him to live, something he goes on to write in his "autobiographical" script.

In its portrayal of fake reality, *Adaptation* is closer to mockumentary: "This genre pretends to be rooted in actuality or memory, behaves like documentary or autobiography, but is utter fiction. It subverts fact-based filmmaking to satirize hypocritical institutions".<sup>400</sup> *Adaptation* claims to be rooted in actuality, behaves like autobiography, but is mainly fiction (with elements of truth). The satirized institutions are Hollywood, screenwriting seminars, and the sanctified "genius screenwriter" Charlie Kaufman. The fake documentary footage from *Being John Malkovich*, shot for *Adaptation* only, further enhances the autobiographical, docu-drama aspect (as the tone is not that of a mockumentary).

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<sup>397</sup> McKee, *Story*, p. 199.

<sup>398</sup> Ibid. p. 101.

<sup>399</sup> Ibid.

<sup>400</sup> Ibid. p. 102.

In the end, the film turns on itself in a final irony, letting the very institutions that have been criticized win out. IRLRMK argues that "[e]ach writer's homework is first to identify his genre, then research its governing practices. And there's no escaping these tasks. We're all genre writers."<sup>401</sup> FCRMK's disciple, Donald, echoes this: "He [FCRMK] says we have to realize that we all write in a genre and we must find our originality within that genre. There hasn't been a new genre since Fellini invented the mockumentary. My genre's thriller. What's yours?"<sup>402</sup> FCCK opposes this, but then succumbs; manifested in that *Adaptation* turns into a thriller (or action/adventure) when Donald gets involved. The art and Hollywood film conflict is also exemplified through Donald's and FCCK's beliefs in different genres. IRLRMK claims that "[g]enres are simply windows on reality, various ways for the writer to look at life. When the reality outside the window undergoes change, the genres alter with it."<sup>403</sup> So does the reality for FCCK, and his movie, when Donald gets involved in its writing. IRLCK has obviously thought about what his genre is: "Sometimes it's like, why shouldn't I do just a simple little movie? [///] Maybe it's not just what I can do".<sup>404</sup> Which is what FCCK realizes when he heeds his agent's advice to "make up" a crazy story. Neither FCCK nor IRLCK wanted to do that, but it might just not be the latter's genre: "Maybe it's just sort of a lack of imagination on my part that I can't write those other kind of things."<sup>405</sup> To respond to Donald's question, IRLCK "invents" a new genre when he marries drama comedy, mockumentary and action/adventure into the "crazy story" of *Adaptation*.

### Screenwriters and Reporters Putting Themselves in Their Stories

IRLRMK states, regarding a conceit called the Mind Worm, that it "had the power to burrow into the brain and come to know an individual completely—dreams, fears, strength, weakness"<sup>406</sup>, while having the power to cause events. Thus, it could "create a specific happening geared to the unique nature of that person that would trigger a one-of-a-kind adventure"<sup>407</sup>, just as the specific happening of being given *TOT* to adapt triggers a one of a kind adventure for FCCK. This as "a quest that would force him to use himself to the limit, to live to his deepest and fullest"<sup>408</sup> – what FCCK takes on with

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<sup>401</sup> McKee, *Story*, p. 103.

<sup>402</sup> Kaufman, *Adaptation: The Shooting Script*, p. 42.

<sup>403</sup> McKee, *Story*, p. 109-110.

<sup>404</sup> Rob Feld, *Q&A with Charlie Kaufman & Spike Jonze*, In: *Adaptation: The Shooting Script*, p. 129.

<sup>405</sup> Feld, *In Praise of Confusion*.

<sup>406</sup> McKee, *Story*, p. 432.

<sup>407</sup> Ibid.

<sup>408</sup> Ibid.

the assignment of adapting *TOT* – allowing him to live to his fullest. And regardless if leading to "tragedy or fulfilment, this quest would reveal his humanity absolutely. Reading that I had to smile, for the writer is a Mind Worm"<sup>409</sup>, IRLRMK concludes.

In *Adaptation* two mind worms, FCCCK and the fictional Orlean, are portrayed. IRLRMK argues that the writer "design[s] the event to fit the character, the precise happening needed to send him on a quest that reaches the limits of his being"<sup>410</sup>. While FCCCK and the fictional Orlean have different inciting incidents – adapting the fictional Orlean's book, and writing a story about an orchid thief, respectively – both quests send them to their limits. But while the screenwriter is fulfilled through his writing, the reporter experiences a tragedy. FCCCK finishes his script and fulfills his life in the process, while his subject, the fictional Orlean, is destroyed in an analogy for the writer as cannibal. FCCCK cannibalizes on his subject, just as the fictional Orlean exploited her subject Laroche. The writer cannibalizing on his/her subject is also true for IRLCK and the real Orlean, if less apparently so – since it hasn't killed or destroyed anyone (yet).

The processes of IRLCK and the real Orlean were also similar in that Orlean felt like she "was peeling an onion. Every aspect of the story seemed richer"<sup>411</sup> than imagined. Watching the writing process of FCCCK, one is hit by the same development. As IRLCK describes: "I started seeing connections between what my story might be and what Orlean's story was, and the idea of adaptation and evolution"<sup>412</sup> and concludes, "it opened up a whole lot of other ideas for me as I implemented it"<sup>413</sup>. The real Orlean found her answer without her fictional self's artificial help from drugs: "[a]t the end of the book, I realize I do have a single-minded passion. It is the passion to be a writer and a reporter."<sup>414</sup> This echoes FCCCK transforming all his experiences into screenwriting. The act of adaptation here transgresses not only the border between book and movie, between art film stasis and Hollywood change, but also between the man FCCCK is and what he wishes to be. FCCCK's passion as a screenwriter brings him to fulfillment, not only by adapting the book, but by adapting himself to thrive in his environment.

The real Orlean and IRLCK both put themselves in their stories for *TOT* and *Adaptation*. For Orlean, it is part of her preferred journalist technique: "[w]hen people

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<sup>409</sup> McKee, *Story*, p. 432.

<sup>410</sup> Ibid.

<sup>411</sup> Tim Henry, *Author Q&A (The Orchid Thief)*, Random House, 2000, on: <http://www.randomhouse.com/rhpg/rc/library/display.pperl?isbn=9780449003718&view=qa> – 2014-10-02 (PDF available).

<sup>412</sup> Topel, *An Unorthodox Adaptation: Deciphering Charlie Kaufman*.

<sup>413</sup> James Keast, *Postmodern Celebrity and the Knack of Adaptation*, Exclaim, 2002. On: [http://exclaim.ca/Features/FilmCommentary/postmodern\\_celebrity\\_knack\\_of\\_adaptation](http://exclaim.ca/Features/FilmCommentary/postmodern_celebrity_knack_of_adaptation) – 2014-10-03 (PDF available).

<sup>414</sup> Henry, Tim, *Author Q&A*.

say, 'you always put yourself in your stories', well, I am in my stories. It is a matter of acknowledging it."<sup>415</sup> In regards to film, it doesn't get more acknowledged than in *Adaptation*, where we watch the fictional screenwriter create the film as we watch it (at least that's the illusion). IRLCK is in his movies; with *Adaptation* he acknowledges it – and the film seemingly writes itself. Alan Bennett's words have a double meaning here: "You don't put yourself in screenplays, you find yourself there"<sup>416</sup>. IRLCK didn't intend to write himself into the film: "Putting myself in the [script] was a really hard thing to do. I wouldn't have done it if I had some distance from it and I wouldn't have set out to do it. And I don't think I would have been able to do it if I thought this movie was going to get made. I didn't think it was going to get made."<sup>417</sup> He did see the danger though: "I considered that it was not going to be appreciated by the studio, but I didn't have any other ideas. I had to turn in something"<sup>418</sup>, but wasn't fearless: "I just presumed that would be my professional suicide note."<sup>419</sup>

(Screen)writers get to live lives beyond their own through the story process, research and imagination (portrayed in *Adaptation*). This experience, living lives beyond one's own, is also at the core of the fictional Orlean's profession and calling – living life through her subjects. To return to the writer/cannibal discussion, her subject – Laroche – at one point calls her a leach: "Fucking leaches. You just attach yourself to me and suck me dry, spit me out. You know, why don't you get your own fuckin' life? Your own fuckin' interests? Fuckin' spoiled bitch!"<sup>420</sup> What the fictional Laroche says is something many with a negative take on the journalist profession might say. Just as journalists in one sense always "use" people, and slant their stories (out of storytelling necessity), so does the (screen)writer. Interestingly, both FCCK and the fictional Orlean fall in their love with their subjects. It's notable that *TOT* didn't send the real Orlean towards destruction but became her most popular work until today's date, along with unprecedented media attention. Whereas IRLCK/FCCK's film destroyed the fictional Orlean – *Adaptation* helped increase the real Orlean's book sales and public visibility.

### Adapting Literature to Film

As FCCK finds, "[t]he conceit of adaptation is that the hard work of story can be

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<sup>415</sup> Henry, *Author Q&A*.

<sup>416</sup> Smith, *Duplicated and duplicitous self-configurings in Kaufman's Adaptation*.

<sup>417</sup> Topel, *An Unorthodox Adaptation: Deciphering Charlie Kaufman*.

<sup>418</sup> Keast, *Postmodern Celebrity and the Knack of Adaptation*.

<sup>419</sup> Leigh, *Let's make a meta-movie*.

<sup>420</sup> Kaufman, *Adaptation: The Shooting Script*, p. 79-80.



avoided by optioning a literary work and simply shifting it into a screenplay."<sup>421</sup> IRLRMK asserts "[t]hat is almost never the case."<sup>422</sup> FCCK struggles because, according to IRLRMK, the first adaptation principle is: "The purer the novel, [...] the worse the film."<sup>423</sup> When discussing *TOT* in the beginning, FCCK says: "It's great, sprawling New Yorker stuff"<sup>424</sup>. One reason IRLRMK mentions for why attempts to adapt "pure" literature fail is "aesthetic impossibility"<sup>425</sup>. This since, "no cinematic equivalences or even approximations exist for conflicts buried in ~~the~~ extravagant language"<sup>426</sup>. In comes FCCK's re-evaluation – "It's that sprawling New Yorker shit"<sup>427</sup> – halfway into the film. What we have for much of the movie is the frustrating process of how "hundreds of millions of dollars have been spent to option the film rights to literary works [...] tossed into the laps of screenwriters who read them and go running, screaming into the night, 'Nothing's happens! The whole book is in the character's head!'"<sup>428</sup> Just like every screenplay is in the screenwriter's head – and some might argue that *Adaptation* takes place only in its fictional screenwriter's head.

Adaptation depicts this process, and IRLCK solves the problem by true adaptation; changing what character's head the book is in, inserting himself as the main protagonist, and making the film play out largely in FCCK's head. IRLCK adapts the purity in the novel, it being about inner longing. We watch how FCCK "to adapt, first read[s] the work over and over without taking notes until ~~you~~ [he] feels infused with its spirit"<sup>429</sup>, for a long period of the film. FCCK makes choices and plans moves early, and doesn't follow IRLRMK's advice to "not make choices or plan moves until you've rubbed shoulders with its society, read their faces, smelled their cologne"<sup>430</sup>, but when he literally comes to do what IRLRMK ascribes (after taking FCRMK's advice) – in close encounters with the fictional Orlean and Laroche – the whole film changes.

IRLRMK declares that "[i]f you must adapt, come down a rung or two from 'pure' literature and look for stories in which conflict is distributed on all three levels ... with an emphasis at the extra-personal."<sup>431</sup> While there is some extra-personal conflict in

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<sup>421</sup> McKee, *Story*, p. 423.

<sup>422</sup> Ibid.

<sup>423</sup> Ibid. p. 426.

<sup>424</sup> Kaufman, *Adaptation: The Shooting Script*, p. 5.

<sup>425</sup> Ibid.

<sup>426</sup> Ibid.

<sup>427</sup> Kaufman, *Adaptation: The Shooting Script*, p. 50.

<sup>428</sup> McKee, *Story*, p. 424.

<sup>429</sup> Ibid. p. 427.

<sup>430</sup> Ibid.

<sup>431</sup> Ibid. p. 426.

*TOT* (the real John Laroche's legal battle with the state), it is very limited. There is also personal conflict, but the focus is on inner conflict. *Adaptation* does the opposite of IRLRMK's advice by adapting "pure" literature, but keeps the conflict distributed among the three levels in the following ways (and order of importance):

1. Inner conflict (FCCK's thoughts/feelings battling his actions);
2. Personal conflict (FCCK with Donald and FCRMK, later also with the fictional Orlean and Laroche);
3. Extra-personal conflict (the screenwriter aspiring to write an art film vs. the Hollywood system, and the philosophy of static versus change).

Because of the purity of the novel, it's all the more important to recreate. IRLRMK's "second principle of adaptation: Be willing to reinvent"<sup>432</sup> becomes key in *Adaptation*. Limitation is a creative principle favored by many. As T.S. Eliot asserts, "[w]hen forced to work within a strict framework the imagination is taxed to its utmost—and will produce its richest ideas. Given total freedom the work is likely to sprawl."<sup>433</sup> IRLCK doesn't seem comfortable with a strict framework, so he extended novel adaptation to general adaptation. Similarly, he might have created the antiplot concept in the film's ideational world to provide breathing space from working in a formal archplot. The framework was extended by handling the meta-subject as well – of adapting a book, adaptation in life and adapting to one's environment (whether flower or Hollywood) – but was kept to the concept of adaptation. As mentioned earlier (on p. 71), IRLCK saw connections between what his story might be and Orlean's story and the concepts of adaptation and evolution: "I remember one day saying, 'What am I thinking about, where's my energy?' And my energy was on my complete blockage."<sup>434</sup> So, while IRLCK was adapting *TOT* – the idea of adaptation, adapting *Story* and inserting himself into the script followed along (triggered by writing block). As IRLCK concludes, "I decided, OK, that's what I'm going to write about. Then it started to fall into place. The whole adaptation parallel [...] opened doors for me and it started to snowball."<sup>435</sup>

### The Screenwriting Process: The Reel and the Real

In *Adaptation*, the audience sees how complicated a story construction can be and yet paradoxically only skims the surface, as all we see is IRLCK's finished work; what he has decided to include about his fictionalized stand-in. We see FCCK battle the writing process, rewriting and changing the film – with the finished film turning out differently

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<sup>432</sup> McKee, *Story*, p. 427.

<sup>433</sup> Ibid. p. 159

<sup>434</sup> Topel, *An Unorthodox Adaptation: Deciphering Charlie Kaufman*.

<sup>435</sup> Blackwelder, *Creative Licenses*.

from what he imagined – and are led to his discoveries as if spontaneously. We do not see what IRLCK decided to exclude, because we are not watching the real process of writing *Adaptation*. The film uses documentary elements, real persons and events to fabricate an illusion of truth – while creating doubt regarding what's real and what's not.

IRLRMK argues that "[i]f your finished screenplay contains every scene you've ever written, if you've never thrown an idea away, if your rewriting is little more than tinkering with dialogue, your work will almost certainly fail."<sup>436</sup> He continues to say that if you then make great choices, to find the 10% of excellence and trash the rest, every scene will be brilliant, and concludes: "[n]o one has to see your failures unless you add vanity to folly and exhibit them".<sup>437</sup> Through the use of FCCK as main protagonist and pretend-real writer of the film we are watching, IRLCK creates the impression that every idea he ever had for the movie is included, adding vanity to folly and exhibiting his failures (and compulsive masturbation) publicly. Contrast this with IRLRMK's assertion that "[w]hile no fine film was ever written without flashes of fortuitous inspiration, a screenplay is not an accident. Material that pops up willy-nilly cannot remain willy-nilly."<sup>438</sup> That these "accidents" are not enough to make up a script are portrayed in FCCK's despair when he listens back to his ideas. The material that has popped up willy-nilly is not enough to create a film. Yet, it seemingly is part of the film we're watching. We see "[t]he writer redrafts[ting] inspiration again and again, making it look as if an instinctive spontaneity created the film"<sup>439</sup> – but we don't see a true reflection of how much effort and unnaturalness that went into making it look natural and effortless. The film seems created through a spontaneous process; as if FCCK just wrote whatever happened to him, to make the movie we've been watching in real time.

IRLRMK declares "[f]ine writing is never one to one, never a matter of devising the exact number of events necessary to fill a story, then pencilling in dialogue"<sup>440</sup>, yet this is what the film portrays FCCK's writing to be, as it shows the film as if writing itself. We even get to watch FCCK's discarded scenes. But the simple fact that we get to see them means that they are really scenes that work, having made it through IRLCK's selection process. They may seem like just crazy ideas, and are made out to be just that, but the (real) screenwriter behind the (fictional) screenwriter has chosen them carefully. IRLCK on the subject: "When I talk the way I do about it and it's taken out of context,

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<sup>436</sup> McKee, *Story*, p. 94-95.

<sup>437</sup> Ibid. p. 94.

<sup>438</sup> Ibid. p. 49.

<sup>439</sup> Ibid. p. 50.

<sup>440</sup> Ibid. p. 92.

some people assume that I just wrote this thing in one night. But [...] I throw out so much more than I keep."<sup>441</sup> Much along the same lines, IRLRMK asserts that creativity is twenty to one, and that the "craft demands the invention of far more material than you can possibly use"<sup>442</sup>. Compare this to how IRLCK writes many pages of dialogue just to find a few lines he can use<sup>443</sup>. By contrast, FCCK only writes what he experiences – whereas IRLCK has the birds-eye view and chooses what to include. IRLRMK argues that "[f]rom the vast flux of life story the writer must make choices. Fictional worlds are not daydreams but sweatshops where we labour in search of material to tailor a film."<sup>444</sup> *Adaptation* shows this through the pain in FCCK's process. But it fools us in that it paints us a picture of this also being IRLCK's process, whereas in fact we are not shown all that he – the real screenwriter – has excluded. It is IRLCK's conscious choice to make an action ending, whereas for FCCK it happens only because he comes to live it – as everything in his life so far. What we see is a fictional, condensed portrayal of a screenwriter's process – we don't see all the scenes that IRLCK excluded, to make *Adaptation* look natural and effortless. IRLCK has consciously chosen the vanities and follies of FCCK to forward the story. So, while *Adaptation* showcases the most fundamental process of filmmaking, screenwriting, the process is only pretend-accurate.

While being complicit in illusionism in the above aspect, IRLCK challenges the following statement by IRLRMK: "Master storytellers never explain. They do the hard, painfully creative thing—they dramatize. Audiences are rarely interested, and certainly never convinced, when forced to listen to the discussion of ideas."<sup>445</sup> If anything, IRLCK present the discussion of ideas as content, and tells us what FCCK wanted to achieve with the film (with the device of parody). IRLRMK claims that dialogue is not a platform for the writer's philosophy, but in *Adaptation*, the fictional filmmaker's philosophy is indeed exposed – and at least partly reflects his real-life counterpart's. IRLRMK concludes that "[e]xplanations of authorial ideas, whether in dialogue or narration, seriously diminish a film's quality"<sup>446</sup>, but here there's nothing short of explanations and discussions of authorial ideas – in action, dialogue or voice-over – and it's all double. It works because so much of it is misleading and sparks discussion rather than provides easy answers. As IRLCK, explains: "We're trying to have a discussion

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<sup>441</sup> Sragow, *Being Charlie Kaufman*.

<sup>442</sup> Ibid.

<sup>443</sup> Mentioned under: "The Screenwriting Process: Planning vs. Writing to Discover".

<sup>444</sup> McKee, *Story*, p. 38.

<sup>445</sup> Ibid. p. 135.

<sup>446</sup> Ibid. p. 134.

with the audience, to hopefully generate further conversation after the film ends."<sup>447</sup> Which is why IRLCK won't provide too revealing answers, as he states: "I would make my work smaller if I didn't leave it open; and if I were working to make any conscious point it would become banal. The fact that people are analyzing the film and coming up with different conclusions is the most wonderful part of the experience."<sup>448</sup>

Just like Montaigne considered himself the subject of his own books, IRLCK frequently champions to "give yourself" as a main goal of writing: "I don't know what else there is to write about other than being human, or specifically, being this human."<sup>449</sup> Montaigne and Emerson were, like IRLCK, less concerned with "providing definitive answers to questions than with representing what it is like to live with them"<sup>450</sup>. With *Adaptation*, we find a way into FCCCK's head, just as Valerie Thomas wished: "I'd like to find a portal into your brain."<sup>451</sup> IRLCK's films are, in his own opinion, like "Rorschach blots, designed less to impose a given view of any particular subject than to present a complex whole and allow viewers to draw their own conclusions"<sup>452</sup> and "to have interactions with"<sup>453</sup>. FCCCK's ideas are part of his desire and what he set out to portray in the script, just as they constitute real emotions and much of the drama of the film. They also reflect IRLCK's own process: "The emotions that Charlie is going through [referring to FCCCK] are real and they reflect what I was goin' through when I was trying to write the script."<sup>454</sup> *Adaptation* thus provides a continuing reflection of the painful writing process all the way to the end. As Gene Fowler said, "writing is easy, [it's] just a matter of staring at the blank page until your forehead bleeds".<sup>455</sup>

## PART 6: Conclusions, Context, Complicity and Critique

Failure is a badge of honor. It means you risked failure. And if you don't risk failure, you're never going to do anything that's different from what you've already done or what somebody else has done. – Charlie Kaufman<sup>456</sup>

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<sup>447</sup> Hagan, *Who's the Proper Charlie?*

<sup>448</sup> Sragow, *Being Charlie Kaufman*

<sup>449</sup> Feld, *Q&A with Charlie Kaufman & Spike Jonze*, p. 130.

<sup>450</sup> Smith, *Synecdoche, in Part*, p. 242.

<sup>451</sup> Kaufman, *Adaptation: The Shooting Script*, p. 4.

<sup>452</sup> Smith, *Synecdoche, in Part*, p. 251.

<sup>453</sup> Kaufman, Charlie, *interview with George Stroumboulopoulos*, The Hour, 12 Oct. 2009, [www.cbc.ca/thehour/videos.html?id=906970410](http://www.cbc.ca/thehour/videos.html?id=906970410) – 2015-01-05, N/A.

<sup>454</sup> Spence D., *Spike Jonze and Charlie Kaufman discuss Adaptation*, IGN. On: <http://www.ign.com/articles/2002/12/05/spike-jonze-and-charlie-kaufman-discuss-adaptation> – 2014-12-19 (PDF available).

<sup>455</sup> McKee, *Story*, p. 128.

<sup>456</sup> Kaufman, *Screenwriting Lecture*.

## Screenwriting as the Holy Grail and Adapting Life as Story

Our investigation has shown that the suggested archplot of IRLRMK's *Story* and the book's discussion of ideas – regarding form, stasis, change, art and Hollywood – are incorporated into *Adaptation*. Whether IRLCK has adapted *Story* specifically and consciously, and to which degree IRLRMK's book is simply relevant for narratology generally, would make value judgments and verge on the speculative. But by doing all we can do, comparing book and film, we've delved into the previously unexplored subject of how *Adaptation* reflects *Story* deeply – shining new light not only on key aspects of *Adaptation*'s idea world, but why they are as they are.

To sum up the plot in relation to what we've found: with *Adaptation*, just as in FCRMK/IRLRMK's story seminars, screenwriting – with FCRMK/IRLRMK as a teacher – is the way to the Holy Grail. FCRMK sells the idea of change and Donald reaches it first, since he is not skeptical towards FCRMK. FCCCK achieves it as he surrenders to FCRMK's ideas. IRLRMK is a commanding figure in the lives of his real students, just as FCRMK is a dominant presence for his students in *Adaptation* (as shown in his relation to FCCCK and Donald). FCCCK's balance in life is restored by FCRMK, just as Parker asserts is the hope of IRLRMK's students. The film reflects the opposite of what IRLCK/FCCCK set out to do: writing a static antiplot to truly reflect life. FCCCK is changed by FCRMK's story seminar, as is his final script. Instead of showing that Hollywood films are lies and that life is static, *Adaptation* ends happily, with FCCCK finishing his script and finding love. It advocates and expresses life as change, with the logical consequence that films should reflect life = change. Hence, *Adaptation* passes on *Story*'s ideas and reinforces Hollywood ideals, opposite to its intention. The ending is an intentional failure, and the form of the archplot – at *Adaptation*'s underlying core – seems to have been too deeply ingrained in IRLCK to let it go at this stage in his (writing) life. We will now go on to explore the possible reasons why.

### The “Failure” of Adaptation

IRLRMK means that everyone enters the story ritual with classical anticipation: "Only by carefully and creatively shattering or bending the Classical form can the artist lead the audience to perceive the inner life hidden in a Miniplot or to accept the chilling absurdity of an Antiplot"<sup>457</sup>. Meaning that the archplot is the foundation of all storytelling, IRLRMK asks how a writer can reduce or reverse what he doesn't

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<sup>457</sup> McKee, *Story*, p. 80.

understand? He goes on to mention Bergman, Fellini and Godard as examples of "[w]riters who found success in the deep corners of the story triangle [who] knew that the starting point of understanding was at the top and began their careers in the Classical."<sup>458</sup> IRLRMK argues that the dream of avant-garde must wait until one, like previous artists, masters the classical. He concludes that a screenwriter's survival begins with recognizing that "[a]s story design moves away from the archplot and down the triangle toward the far reaches of Miniplot, Antipplot, and Nonplot, the audience shrinks"<sup>459</sup>. This goes well together with Robert Frost's assertion that "writing free verse is like playing tennis with the net down, for it's the self-imposed, indeed artificial demands of poetic conventions that stir the imagination."<sup>460</sup> Since we know that FCCCK's antiplot intentions reflect IRLCK's initial ones, it seems like IRLCK tried playing ball without a net – but failed. With *Adaptation*, IRLCK had to realize he only mastered the archplot. Thus, he had to resort to putting the challenging ideas in the content – not in the form (that remains classical). As Stam asserts, parody “emerges when artists perceive that they have outgrown artistic conventions.”<sup>461</sup> This is the confluence of content and form in *Adaptation*. FCCCK tries to write an antiplot, but *Adaptation* is fully an archplot, if with miniplot elements and a discussion of antiplot – echoing Hutcheon’s assertion that “parody always implicitly reinforces even as it ironically debunks”<sup>462</sup>.

It is not surprising that IRLCK's net was Hollywood and archplot dramaturgy, as he had only written for TV and Hollywood at the time. His earlier films – *Being John Malkovich* (1999) and *Human Nature* (2001) – and *Confessions of a Dangerous Mind* (2002), released at roughly the same time as *Adaptation*, are all in the archplot form. With *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (2004), the form can be discussed – as it could be argued to blend all three anti-, mini- and archplots of IRLRMK’s story triangle.

Ian Parker writes: "McKee is a subversive who teaches tradition"<sup>463</sup>. IRLCK, at the time of *Adaptation*, was a subversive who used tradition. In this sense, at the time, both IRLRMK and IRLCK were proponents of the most established form – even though IRLCK might not agree – yet anti-establishment in terms of content (in regard to how they see themselves). As IRLCK himself asserts in 2008: "*Adaptation* and *Eternal*

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<sup>458</sup> McKee, *Story*, p. 80.

<sup>459</sup> Ibid. p. 74-75.

<sup>460</sup> Ibid. p. 107.

<sup>461</sup> Stam, *Reflexivity in Film and Literature: From Don Quixote to Jean-Luc Godard*, p. 135.

<sup>462</sup> Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody – The Teachings of Twentieth-Century Art Forms*, University of Illinois Press, Urbana and Chicago, 2005, p. vii.

<sup>463</sup> Parker, *The Real McKee: Lessons of a Screenwriting Guru*, p. 9.

*Sunshine* ultimately have a safety valve—a clever conceit that you come to understand"<sup>464</sup>. This is true for *Being John Malkovich*, *Confessions of a Dangerous Mind* and *Human Nature* as well. With *Adaptation*, IRLCK didn't manage to express what he first intended. When he did so, with the art film antiplot of *Synecdoche, New York*, the box office numbers plunged to about 1/10 of those of *Adaptation*.

With *Synecdoche, New York*, IRLCK finally converts FCCCK's wish to make a film that's "more a reflection of the real world"<sup>465</sup>. As IRLCK himself has commented on the film: "this script is intentionally not like that. It's more like life. Things flying off and becoming unhinged and being incomprehensible seem to be the process of existence."<sup>466</sup> And as Hill asserts: "what *Adaptation* begins—and what Kaufman's directorial debut, *Synecdoche, New York*, continues—is the depiction of central characters struggling to portray 'real life' in their respective artistic modes. This struggle is Kaufman's own as well."<sup>467</sup> – *Adaptation* with the mentioned safety net, *Synecdoche, New York* without it. It is not until the latter that IRLCK truly reflects his feelings about life and endings the full way through in a script: "The 'happily ever after' notion, what does that mean? There really is only one ending to any story. Human life ends in death."<sup>468</sup> All IRLCK's previous works ended on a happy note and *Synecdoche, New York* doesn't, even if *Adaptation* depicts both Donald's and the fictional Laroche's death.

Parker writes that IRLRMK "urges students to earn a living doing something intelligent near the top of the [story] triangle—creating 'worlds we've never seen but a humanity we all recognize'—but they need not feel that they have turned their backs on the avant-garde. They can get to that later."<sup>469</sup> Which is what IRLCK did when he with *Synecdoche, New York* (2008) – after the success and Oscar award for *Eternal Sunshine* (Best Writing, Original Screenplay) – abandoned the mentioned net of the archplot fully. Only to lose viewers with its antiplot: "the following and acclaim he had built up as a screenwriter counted for nothing as his debut in the director's chair, *Synecdoche, New York*, flopped at the box office"<sup>470</sup>, with a budget of \$20 million and a lifetime gross of

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<sup>464</sup> Tanz, *The Kaufman Paradox*.

<sup>465</sup> Kaufman, *Adaptation: The Shooting Script*, p. 68.

<sup>466</sup> Ibid.

<sup>467</sup> Hill, *There's No More Watching*, p. 209-210.

<sup>468</sup> Tanz, *The Kaufman Paradox*.

<sup>469</sup> Parker, *The Real McKee: Lessons of a Screenwriting Guru*, p. 9.

<sup>470</sup> Kaleem Aftab, *Whatever happened to the great American film director*, The Independent, 3 July, 2009. Available on: <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/films/features/whatever-happened-to-the-great-american-film-director-1728883.html> – 2014-10-02 (PDF available).



less than \$4,400,000<sup>471</sup>. Compare this to *Adaptation's* budget of \$19 million and lifetime gross of almost \$33 million<sup>472</sup>. Proving audiences lack of interest in the antiplot, IRLCK hasn't had a film premiered in the 6-7 years since<sup>473</sup>. As Hill asserts: "Kaufman's characters struggle with the tension between art and commerce, the films themselves, situated firmly within the commercial marketplace, play out that exact tension."<sup>474</sup> Interestingly, when IRLCK consciously "fails" with *Adaptation*, it is a box office success. When he succeeds with *Synecdoche, New York*, it's a flop (perhaps appropriate for a film daring "to suggest that the process of creating is actually dangerous"<sup>475</sup>). An article in *Wired*, writing about the standing ovation the film received at Cannes before its general release, predicts its commercial aftermath to an eerily high degree, and points out to which degree film plots and endings are mirrored by reality.

Well, that's one ending. It's familiar to any moviegoer: the dedicated individual who believes in himself, takes every risk, and triumphs. That's been Kaufman's story so far—it's the story of *Being John Malkovich*, the story of *Adaptation*, the story of *Eternal Sunshine*. It wraps everything up with a nice bow and lets us all feel good [///] Maybe audiences don't flock to *Synecdoche* and maybe Kaufman doesn't emerge victorious. Maybe he spends five years pursuing the truest expression of his artistic vision only to find it misunderstood, or underappreciated, or—worst of all—ignored. Maybe this is a story of frustration and disappointment and failure. It may not be a happy ending. It may not be the kind of ending that would wrap up a successful Hollywood movie. But it is the kind of ending that Charlie Kaufman would write.<sup>476</sup>

Having evolved to actually write in another form than the classical, IRLCK's audience shrank – just as we've seen IRLRMK state that it would. To get back to *Adaptation*, IRLRMK asserts that "*Story* is about originality, not duplication. Originality is the confluence of content and form."<sup>477</sup> With *Adaptation*, neither IRLCK nor FCCK, could do a movie simply about flowers in the end. As IRLCK couldn't write a different form, he parodied the archplot – and the clichés of Hollywood: car chases, drug running, love stories and characters overcoming obstacles to succeed in the end – in the content and contrasted it with wanting to write a different film; an art film/antiplot. This way he creatively shattered and bent the idea of Hollywood film and its form in theme and

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<sup>471</sup> Box Office Mojo, *Synecdoche, New York*. Available on:

<http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=synecdochenewyork.htm> – 2014-10-03 (PDF available).

<sup>472</sup> Box Office Mojo, *Adaptation*. (\$33,801,173 to be more exact.) On:

<http://boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=adaptation.htm> – 2014-10-03 (PDF available).

<sup>473</sup> In 2012, however, IRLCK broke the crowdfunding record for a movie on Kickstarter, raising \$400,000 for *Anomalisa* (yet to premiere), skipping the Hollywood path completely. Available on:

<http://www.cbc.ca/strombo/news/new-ways-to-get-art-made-charlie-kaufman-breaks-crowdfunding-record.html> - 2015-01-05 (PDF available).

<sup>474</sup> Hill, *There's No More Watching*, p. 210.

<sup>475</sup> *Ibid.* p. 221.

<sup>476</sup> Tanz, *The Kaufman Paradox*.

<sup>477</sup> McKee, *Story*, p. 8.

subject matter, with a highly ironic intentional failure ending. This is the originality of *Adaptation* and its convergence of complicitous form and critical content. What other writers on the subject have missed is that the parody extends to surface content only, and that the underlying form is complicit. IRLRMK's ideas on screenwriting and *Story* are reflected in *Adaptation* to such a high degree that IRLCK, rather than proving IRLRMK wrong, is – parodically, paradoxically – closer to proving him right.

As Tomasulo writes: "few movies exhibit so frankly the dialectical marks of their artistic and industrial production as the paradoxical *Adaptation*"<sup>478</sup>. IRLCK's vision is still communicated and – in a content sense – incorporated. Without the tendency of film modernism to only criticize, and the purely commercial film's imperative to deliver entertainment only. This doubleness is typical of postmodernism – and the divide is not either/or, as Tomasulo suggests: "That tacked-on third act inscribes almost all of the negative plot and character elements that Charlie had railed against throughout the screenplay, thereby putting in question whether *Adaptation* itself is a conscious meta-text that critiques the Hollywood system (and itself) or one that capitulates to Tinseltown's standard shibboleths."<sup>479</sup> The Friedrich Hegel quote from early drafts of the script shows how art and Hollywood film, stasis and change, content and form dance together in *Adaptation*: "Each being is, because posited, an opposed, a conditional and conditioning, the understanding completes these its limitations by positing the opposite"<sup>480</sup> – in thesis, antithesis and synthesis. The latter is not final with *Adaptation*, but becomes the next thesis (and so on), as we can see with IRLCK's formal progress to *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* and *Synecdoche, New York*.

To which degree can complicitous critique be effective, and critical entertainment entertaining? *Adaptation* reflects its complex times, times that can also be called double, and provides a sensible response to a world where we seldom have the luxury to provide critique only – just as postmodernism "at once inscribes and subverts the [dominant] conventions and ideologies"<sup>481</sup>. We usually have to adapt to our surroundings, and the meta-movie that is *Adaptation* reflects this in its transformative screenwriting context. Whether it adapts itself so well that it becomes more complicit than critical? – That's the tightrope of postmodernism, and this essay's adapted story.

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<sup>478</sup> Frank P. Tomasulo, *Adaptation as adaptation: from Susan Orlean's The orchid thief to Charlie (and 'Donald') Kaufman's screenplay to Spike Jonze's film*, appears in *Authorship in film adaptation*, Editor Jack Boozer. Austin, University of Texas Press, 2008, p. 162.

<sup>479</sup> Ibid. p. 164.

<sup>480</sup> Kaufman, *Adaptation*, 1999, Second Draft, p. 17 and *Adaptation Revised*, 2000, p. 20.

<sup>481</sup> Hutcheon, *The Politics of Post Modernism*, p. 11.

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