

In this careful study of the works of Charlie Kaufman, Larson sets up the problem of the mind's relationship to reality, then explores it through a series of related concepts—how we project ourselves into reality, how we try to control it, and how this limits our ability to connect to others.

(Instructor: Victoria Olsen)

PLAYING WITH PEOPLE: PROJECTION AND CONTROL IN THE WORKS OF CHARLIE KAUFMAN

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John Malkovich is falling down a dark, grimy tunnel. With a crash, he finds himself in a restaurant, the camera panning up from a plate set with a perfectly starched napkin to a pair of large breasts in a red dress and a delicate wrist hanging in the air like a question mark. The camera continues panning up to the face that belongs to this body, the face of—John Malkovich. Large-breasted Malkovich looks sensually at the camera and whispers, “Malkovich, Malkovich,” in a sing-song whisper. A waiter pops in, also with the face of Malkovich, and asks, “Malkovich? Malkovich, Malkovich?” The real Malkovich looks down at the menu—every item is “Malkovich.” He opens his mouth, but only “Malkovich,” comes out. A look of horror dawns on his face as the camera jerks around the restaurant, focusing on different groups of people, all with Malkovich’s face. He gets up and starts to run, but stops in his tracks at the sight of a jazz singer with his face, lounging across a piano and tossing a high-heeled leg up in the air. A whimper escapes the real Malkovich. The buzz of “Malkovich” grows louder and the multiple Malkoviches become claustrophobic, closing in on him as he fights his way across the room, distraught.

This nightmarish scene is from *Being John Malkovich*, Charlie Kaufman’s breakthrough screenplay. The film revolves around puppeteer Craig Schwartz, who discovers a portal into the mind of the actor John Malkovich. In this scene, Malkovich descends into that dark tunnel and is greeted by a bizarre reality, answering the question

posed by Schwartz in the film: “What happens when a man goes through his own portal?” Or, as Kaufman seems to wonder, what would happen if we could view the workings of our own mind as an outsider? Malkovich looks out at a sea of Malkoviches, and perhaps, Kaufman suggests, we do, too. In his review of a different Kaufman film, *Synecdoche, New York*, Roger Ebert describes Kaufman’s work as containing “only one subject, the mind, and only one plot, how the mind negotiates with reality, fantasy, hallucination, desire and dreams.” Across his oeuvre, Kaufman struggles with this question: how much of one’s life is made up of reality—and how much does one create in the mind? In the Malkovich scene, Kaufman implies that everything we observe is really a projection of ourselves. On the surface, we look out into the world and see an expanse of diverse faces. But on a deeper, subconscious level, we are reflecting our existence—the only one we truly know—onto others. Everything we observe is only understood in the context of its relationship to ourselves.

This theme of projection continually appears, in different manifestations, in Kaufman’s work. His 2008 directorial debut, *Synecdoche, New York*, which he also wrote, is, in a sense, a projection, just as Malkovich had projected himself onto everyone he saw. The film is centered around a theatre director, Caden Cotard, who builds a replica of New York in a warehouse, and hires actors to play himself and the people in his life, in order to recreate his experiences and create an authentic picture of human life. But the narrative does not reflect reality. *Synecdoche, New York* is told entirely through Caden’s bleak and often unreliable perspective. We experience time just as he does; it moves forward in impossible jumps or lags behind in eternity. For example, the beginning sequence of the movie, which reflects a monotonous morning routine of married life, appears to take place over the same day when it actually spans half a year (as we see subtly from news headlines, calendars, and snippets of conversation). In the beginning, the film is relatively realistic, and Caden’s skewed perspective is more subtle. As the movie progresses, however, Caden’s theatre experiment and the real world outside the warehouse blur as the narrative spirals into the surreal.

While our entire lived experience is essentially a projection of ourselves, there are specific moments when we externalize what we feel

on the inside. In one scene in *Adaptation*, a frustrated Charlie, the screenwriter protagonist, stares at the book jacket of *The Orchid Thief*, which he is attempting to adapt for the screen. He begins to imagine the author, Susan Orlean, giving him advice to focus on “that one thing that you care passionately about and then write about that” (*Adaptation*). The film then cuts to an inspired Charlie dictating to his tape recorder, “we see Susan Orlean, delicate, haunted by loneliness, fragile, beautiful.” Commenting on this scene in his essay “Still Life in a Narrative Age: Charlie Kaufman’s *Adaptation*,” Joshua Landy writes: “Charlie projects his own frustrated desire—in his case, for reciprocated attraction, for release from the prison of solipsism—onto the subject matter” (507-508). Charlie externalizes his feelings of loneliness and frustration in the form of Susan Orlean as a character in his screenplay. *His* Susan Orlean is not the real Susan Orlean, but a version of her generated by Charlie’s mind—essentially, a projection of himself. Roger Ebert brings up the idea of projections and the reasoning behind them in his review of *Synecdoche, New York*, writing that “we place the people in our lives into compartments and define how they should behave to our advantage. Because we cannot *force* them to follow our desires, we deal with projections of them created in our minds.” In *Synecdoche, New York*, Caden’s reenactment puts him in control; he gets to direct the ‘characters’ in his life. He even goes so far as to play some of them. In the effort to attain control over the external parts of our lives—the aspects we can’t manipulate, the people with their own agendas and egocentric perspectives—we create versions of these people in our minds that we can control, all based on our biased points of view.

Solipsism, or “the theory that only the self exists, or can be proved to exist,” is a useful term to describe this egocentric perspective, and a word that keeps coming up in regard to Kaufman’s work (“solipsism”). Characters like Charlie Kaufman in *Adaptation* and Caden Cotard in *Synecdoche, New York* can’t escape their own selves—they are stuck in the bias of their points of view. We are self-centered creatures; it’s how we survive. Is it even possible to escape this ‘chronic egotism?’ Should we strive to? Kaufman himself is a testament to this perplexing dilemma; his films have a distinct Kaufman-esque persona. He doesn’t attempt to conceal his identity within these films, even going

so far as to insert himself as the protagonist in one. *Adaptation*, loosely based on Susan Orlean's book *The Orchid Thief*, is about a screenwriter named Charlie Kaufman who struggles to adapt a book about orchids. Sound familiar? In an interview for *Vulture*, Kaufman discusses how he turned his struggle adapting Orlean's book into the plot of the film:

I was stuck for a long time, and then I came upon this notion that I've used a lot since: *What am I thinking about now? What am I worried about? Where is my head at? What am I in the middle of? What am I drowning in?* And, literally, what I was thinking about was my inability to write the script, and that was a really literal translation. (qtd. in Sternbergh)

Kaufman doesn't try to escape his perspective. Instead, he embraces it. "I can't tell anyone how to write a screenplay because the truth is that anything of value you might do comes from you," Kaufman admits in a BAFTA lecture on screenwriting (qtd. in Han). "The way I work," he says, "is not the way that you work, and the whole point of any creative act is that. What I have to offer is me, what you have to offer is you, and if you offer yourself with authenticity and generosity I will be moved" (qtd. in Han). The truth is that our experience is all we have to give in the form of art. As the portrait photographer Richard Avedon once said, "Sometimes I think all my pictures are just pictures of me. My concern is . . . the human predicament; only what I consider the human predicament may simply be my own" (qtd. in Kozloff). Every film Charlie Kaufman writes is a projection of himself because anything else would be inauthentic or simply unoriginal. But at the same time, Kaufman struggles with accepting this fate. The characters in his films desperately fight to get out of their own heads, always to no avail. They often find superficial escape—for instance, Craig Schwartz taking over John Malkovich's body and life in *Being John Malkovich*. But it is only a change on the surface. Essentially, they remain prisoners to their selves and those selves' projections. Each one stands at the center of a solipsistic universe.

This solipsistic “prison” is where the desire for control originates. We strive for control of the facets of life that are the least changeable: people, events, and even the past. In Kaufman’s *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, characters attempt to manipulate their memories of each other. Joel discovers that his ex-girlfriend Clementine has had a procedure to erase him from her memory, so he proceeds to erase her from his. However, as he is forced to relive all his memories of their time together, he begins to have regrets and wants to reverse the procedure. Joel ends up manipulating his childhood memories by ‘bringing’ Clementine into them in an attempt to ‘hide’ her from being erased. He even reverses his biggest regret—not staying with Clementine on the day they met. The film is essentially a meditation on our desire to control our experiences.

Kaufman embodies this desire through his art. “For Kaufman, creation has always been inextricably linked to control,” writes David Ehrlich in an article for *IndieWire*, “control of a production, control of a body, control of space and time and memory.” *Synecdoche, New York* allowed Kaufman to gain immense control in his first stint in the director’s chair—a power Kaufman would like to hold on to. “I feel like the stuff that I write is personal, and I would like to be in charge of it,” said Kaufman when asked about the need to direct his own scripts (qtd. in Ehrlich). This need for control is a recurring pattern in his films. In *Being John Malkovich*, Craig creates puppet versions of himself and Maxine, the woman he lusts after, which he puts into situations he wishes would play out in real life. Eventually, he even uses a real person (John Malkovich) as a human “puppet” to make Maxine like him. “It isn’t just playing with dolls,” Craig says to Maxine, to which she responds: “You’re right, my darling, it’s so much more. It’s playing with people!” In *Synecdoche, New York*, Caden’s replica of his life that he controls is a sort of ‘puppet show.’ In *Anomalisa*, which Kaufman co-directed, the characters are actual puppets that move with the use of stop-motion technology. “The fact that they’re puppets being manipulated,” Kaufman remarks, “becomes an existential issue as well. You know someone’s manipulating them—they don’t know it” (qtd. in Romney). In the final scene of *Synecdoche, New York*, the new director speaks to Caden through an earpiece as he walks through the desolate warehouse—the decaying

remains of his experiment. “You have struggled into existence, and are now slipping silently out of it,” the director says. “This is everyone’s experience. Every single one. The specifics hardly matter. Everyone’s everyone. So you are Adele, Hazel, Claire, Olive. You are Ellen.” These characters are all a part of Caden because they represent his projections. They may look different on the outside, but he ‘created’ them all as director. Kaufman uses the creative process as a robust metaphor for how we view and control our experiences. “They say there is no fate, but there is,” says the minister in *Synecdoche, New York*. “It’s what you create.” We are the directors of our own lives.

But the characters in Kaufman’s films who ‘direct’ their projections are not hopeful. We don’t wish to be Caden Cotard or Craig Schwartz. Kaufman himself doesn’t “have any solutions and [he doesn’t] like movies that do” (qtd. in Sragow). “I want to create situations that give people something to think about,” says Kaufman. “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” (qtd. in Sragow). While Caden wastes away his life meticulously trying to control it, he loses all the people he had ever loved. Craig infiltrates John Malkovich’s body so Maxine will marry him, but she soon leaves him for Craig’s ex-wife. We *want* control—but will it really bring us happiness? Control is just a reinforcement of our egocentric perspectives. When the characters in Kaufman’s films try to control the world around them, they are declaring that *their* experience is the most important. But what control *really* does is kill connection.

The desperate desire for connection is a major theme in Kaufman’s most recent feature, *Anomalisa*, which he wrote and co-directed. *Anomalisa* is a stop-motion animation about Michael Stone, a customer service guru and author, who spends the night in a Cincinnati hotel for a business trip. To Michael, everyone has the same face and voice—from the taxi driver to his wife and son—until he meets and falls in love with Lisa, who looks and sounds different from everybody else. But Kaufman doesn’t do happy endings. After a night spent together, Lisa’s ‘uniqueness’ begins to disappear, and soon she looks and sounds exactly like everyone else. The film ends outside

of Michael's perspective with Lisa and her friend driving away with their own unique faces and voices. As in *Synecdoche, New York*, Kaufman provides an unreliable narrator in Michael Stone—not in terms of narrative, but in his perceptions of others. The monotonous uniformity that Michael observes around him is really a projection of what's going on inside of him. In an article for *IndieWire*, film critic Sam Adams writes that the film makes clear “that the other characters' apparent sameness is a function of Michael's own dissatisfaction. Being the only 'real' person in a universe of clones doesn't bring him any solace; it makes him feel like he's the only one who doesn't fit.” Michael feels alienated and projects those feelings of isolation and disconnect onto what he sees. Near the end of the movie, Michael makes a speech about customer service, urging the audience to view the customer as a human being: “Always remember the customer is an individual. Just like you. Each person you speak to has had a day.” Yet, he can't see anyone as an individual. There's a hypocritical tension there. Kaufman seems to be posing the question: Is it even *possible* to step outside of our tunnel-vision and see people for who they are?

In an interview for *The Guardian*, Kaufman discusses how difficult it is to look at strangers and empathize with them. Yet, “when I see something that's just kind,” he says, “I find it the most incredibly moving thing. . . . When someone looks at you warmly for a second as you pass them on the street—rather than just an obligatory nod—it gives you some sort of renewed faith” (qtd. in Shoard). This anecdote reveals a softer, more tender side to Kaufman. There is a deep yearning for connection, which reiterates a weaving pattern through Kaufman's films—characters that are unable to understand one another. “So much of what is wrong right now in the world is that people don't see each other,” says Kaufman (qtd. in Sternbergh). Michael Stone can't see his wife, his son, his love. Caden Cotard seems to be on a different wavelength from his wife and loses all connection with his daughter. In one scene, Caden goes to visit his estranged adult daughter at a sex club, viewing her naked body through a glass partition. He desperately calls to her, shouts, pounds on the glass—but she can't hear him. This theme of disconnect is repeated over and over again. In another scene, Sammy, the stalker-turned-actor who plays Caden in the warehouse, is about to throw

himself off a roof and begs Caden to see him: "I've watched you forever, Caden, but you've never really looked at anyone other than yourself. So watch me. Watch my heart break. Watch me jump." When everything we do is through the lens of self, how can we possibly empathize with another?

We fail to connect because we look out at a sea of Malkoviches: a sea of projections. We can't see people if all we see is ourselves. And, therefore, others can't see us, since all they see is themselves. "You spend your time in vague regret or vaguer hope that something good will come along," says the pastor in *Synecdoche, New York*. "I've been pretending I'm OK, just to get along, just for, I don't know why, maybe because no one wants to hear about my misery, because they have their own." We each live in our separate, distant worlds, inhabited by projections in an attempt to control the external. But living in this world of self-creation gets lonely, and we long for the day when someone will see our authentic selves instead of their own reflections. "Do you ever get lonely sometimes, Johnny?" Susan Orlean asks the orchid thief John Laroche in *Adaptation*. "Nobody liked me," answers Laroche, "but I had this idea. If I waited long enough, someone would come around and just, you know . . . understand me. Like my mom, except someone else. She'd look at me and quietly say: 'Yes.' Just like that. And I wouldn't be alone anymore." The characters in Kaufman's films rarely experience this authentic connection, and, when they do, it is both pure and fleeting. We tend to measure the worth of something by how long it lasts, its continuity. A 'happy ending' to a romantic comedy is the couple finally coming together. But according to Kaufman, "there really is only one ending to any story. Human life ends in death . . . Everything involves loss; every relationship ends in one way or another" (qtd. in Tanz). It's the barebones truth. It's the deal we get when we enter the world. "The end is built into the beginning," Hazel whispers to Caden on what will be their final, and only, night together. They lie in each other's arms in a burning house—a powerful metaphor for the ephemeral nature of both life and relationships. There's a romantic tenderness somewhere deep in Kaufman that believes, or wishes to believe, in these moments of magic—moments when two individuals can see each other without projections—when two worlds become one.

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