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FIDELITY, ADAPTATION, AND META-COMMENTARY: THE CASE OF SUSAN ORLEAN'S *THE ORCHID THIEF* AND SPIKE JONZE'S ADAPTATION

Abstract

Susan Orlean's *The Orchid Thief* has raised and defied questions about genre since its appearance in 1998. Though "research" and "facts" are at the foreground of the book, critics have described it by such terms as literary non-fiction, faction, personal journalism, and non-fiction novel because of its strong "literary," that is narrative, characterological, thematic, and even philosophical, qualities. Struggling to make a faithful adaptation of this "simple" and "beautiful" book "about flowers" for film, Charlie Kaufman, the neurotic and anxious protagonist/screenwriter of *Adaptation* (2002), a fictionalized avatar of the real-life Charlie Kaufman, works through the wide range of possible generic and narrative adaptive possibilities that the book invites. The series of apparent false starts eventually get resolved, in a desperate attempt at creating closure, by way of the "Hollywood ending" that the screenwriter ostensibly despises and insists he will avoid. This paper engages the complex relationships between these two objects – *The Orchid Thief* and *Adaptation* – first, by providing some interpretive analysis of Orlean's book and its potential adaptive

possibilities, and second, by examining what happens to those possibilities in *Adaptation*. On my argument, the film refracts the book's concerns into a meditation on the processes of reading, storytelling, and interpretation in the realm of explicit adaptation by way of metafiction, metalepsis, and other techniques associated with experimental narrative.

Keywords: Susan Orlean, *The Orchid Thief*, Spike Jonze, *Adaptation*, adaptive possibilities, meta-commentary

Sometimes this kind of story turns out to be something more, some glimpse of life that expands like those Japanese paper balls you drop in water and then after a moment they bloom into flowers, and the flower is so marvelous that you can't believe there was a time when all you saw in front of you was a paper ball and a glass of water. (Susan Orlean, *The Orchid Thief* 6)

“Why can't there simply be a movie about flowers?”
(*Adaptation* 05:30:00)

Introduction

Spike Jonze's 2002 *Adaptation*, the metafictional/metacinematic end-product of a screenwriter attempting to adapt Susan Orlean's non-fiction 1998 book, *The Orchid Thief*, presents us with an unusual case of adaptation. The book itself is relatively unknown, and so its adaptation is neither influenced nor marred by the issues related to fan culture inevitably present in the cases of such adaptations as *Pride and Prejudice*, *Harry Potter*, the Marvel comics, and so on. In fact, most people who have seen the film do not necessarily know anything about the book. This is the case even among adaptation theorists, who reference the film for its self-conscious reflections on the nature of the adaptation process. The events Orlean describes are not widely known, and therefore any screenplay and subsequent film version do not need to meet the expectations associated with, say, a narrative or cinematic adaptation of a widely known and much-discussed public event such as the JFK assassination, the death of Princess Diana, or the impeachment of Nixon. Organized around a single small legal case, the book defies genre categories, and appears to be an extremely unlikely candidate for adaptation.

Further, the intertextual, or perhaps transtextual¹ relationship between *Adaptation* and its precursor text, *The Orchid Thief* does not fall easily into any of the categories critics have suggested in recent years, such as translation, transposition, analogy, commentary, borrowing, transformation, or transcoding. At the same time, and although terminology of this kind is not my central interest here, an argument can be made that every single one of these terms, as well as some others, can be used to describe the ways in which *Adaptation* intersects with *The Orchid Thief*. In what follows, the paper discusses the nature of this particular adaptation in terms of genre, priority, fidelity, and experimental narrative.

1. Susan Orlean's *The Orchid Thief*: Real Life, Research, and Literary Non-fiction

Orlean's book is itself an adaptation in many respects, and it is engaged from the outset with the theme of adaptation. Orlean's first foray into her subject was in a *New Yorker* story focused on a tiny newspaper article about a trial in Florida involving orchid poachers led by John Laroche. Orlean subsequently adapts her research into a book-length study, in which she elaborates in great detail the following threads from the story: the events leading up to and culminating in the trial that became her entry into the world of orchids, the long and dangerous history of orchids and orchid hunting, the evolutionary (adaptive) powers of orchids, and the lucrative contemporary orchid industry, especially in Florida. As her work develops, the theme of obsession comes to dominate the evolving narrative. More precisely, as Orlean tells us in her book, she is motivated by the desire "to know what it feels like to care about something passionately" (40–41).

The narrative, characterological, and thematic literary qualities of Orlean's critically acclaimed book have raised questions about what category and/or genre it falls into. It is journalistic, relying on meticulous research. In this respect, the reader is introduced to an astonishing amount of information about orchids. At the same time, the book's trajectory is organized around Orlean's own evolution as the primary character in a narrative with a beginning, middle, and end. Her adoption of what is generally known as "personal journalism" allows her, the reporter of objective events, to express full subjectivity, thus eschewing a more traditional self-presentation as transparent conduit to her subject. A quick glance at just two of the many blurbs in the 2014 Ballantine edition of the book help demonstrate the extent to which Orlean's adaptation of real life facts into a story blurs the customary lines between fiction and non-fiction. James W.

Hall describes the book as a captivating tale whose characters “are so juicy and wonderfully weird they might have stepped out of a novel,” (Orlean, front matter) and the review from *Marie-Claire* suggests that “No author searching for a protagonist could have done better than Florida’s orchid thief John Laroche” (Orlean, front matter).

The words “based on a true story” in books and films imply that the foundation of the ensuing narrative can be subjected to fact-checking. At the same time, we know that any adaptation of a real-life event into a narrative necessarily relies on the interpretation and shaping of events into generic and characterological conventions.ⁱⁱ For example, reality TV requires substantial narrative organization to transform events into engaging stories. Interestingly, participants in such shows sometimes object to the ways in which they are portrayed, which implies that they become characters in someone else’s script. Readers of the autobiographies and biographies of famous people are often driven by curiosity about the significant events that account for the fates of the main character. Such stories necessarily engage in narrative conventions and genre-choices, and they express the desires, interpretations, and goals of the author. Even accounts of direct witnesses to crimes and traumas are mediated by such things as desire, fear, selective memory, and, most pertinent here, the demands of narrative. In his useful article on fiction/non-fiction distinction, Eric Heyne suggests: “The web of ways we use narrative conventions – and are ourselves constituted by those conventions – suggests that we need to develop a more subtle and complex theory of fiction and nonfiction, and abandon the beautiful dream of a simple sorting machine” (117). Put differently, Orlean’s “literary non-fiction” engages readers simultaneously in imaginative investments normally associated with fiction and the satisfaction that the foundation for the book is true. As Robert Weber puts it in “Letting Subjects Grow,” a 1978 article examining the type of writing explicitly encouraged, literary non-fiction stories:

balance the journalist’s search for correspondence with the facts of the world with at least something of the fiction writer’s creation of order and meaning, the role of observer with that of maker, and they ask the reader to respond simultaneously to the truth of history and the truth of art. (499)

2. Narrative Trajectories and Adaptive Possibilities in *The Orchid Thief*

The narrative Orlean weaves is not a straightforward one easily adaptable to film. In fact, she was quite surprised at the idea that anyone would buy the rights to her book for such a purpose. In “A Reader’s Guide,” one of the book’s appendices, she says:

I had never imagined, not for a minute, that anyone would see movie potential in *The Orchid Thief*. Talk about low concept! It was, to paraphrase Charlie Kaufman in *Adaptation*, that sprawling, shapeless *New Yorker* stuff – in other words, the kind of story Hollywood dreads because it takes its own time unspooling, with plenty of detours along the way. (288).

Before discussing what happens to Orlean’s materials in *Adaptation*, it is important to first describe the book and its more obvious adaptive possibilities in more detail. After all, while *Adaptation* is well-known, particularly among film buffs, adaptation theorists, and literary critics for its complex, funny, and intelligent meta-level engagements with the very idea of adaptation itself, *The Orchid Thief* is less well-known and not often discussed in detail.ⁱⁱⁱ In fact, most viewers of the film would neither know nor care, while watching the film and perhaps even afterwards, that both Susan Orlean and *The Orchid Thief* have an independent existence outside of the film. This is a testament to the success of the film as an independent cultural and aesthetic object as well as an intertext of *The Orchid Thief*. At the same time, a knowledge of the book, and the knowledge that it is based on “the real,” provides some important and interesting contexts for viewing *Adaptation*. Moreover, such knowledge helps shed light on the ways in which the film adaptation simultaneously supports and subverts the idea of fidelity in adaptation, especially when it comes to experimental narrative. I outline below several of the trajectories Orlean pursues in *The Orchid Thief*, and present some hypothetical adaptation strategies related to each one. To be clear, the suggestions made below are not in any way prescriptive. Rather, they indicate a dizzying array of possible trajectories for adaptation, and they set the scene for my discussion of how such possibilities are dealt with in *Adaptation*.

(i) *The Court Case*

Orlean’s journey into the world of orchids is initially sparked in 1994 by a small newspaper article that caught her eye for its odd combination of words:

“I was interested to see the words ‘swamp’ and ‘orchids’ and ‘Seminoles’ and ‘cloning’ and ‘criminal’ together in one short piece” (6). It is easy to summarize the case: John Laroche and three Seminole Indians are arrested while stealing 200 rare orchids and bromeliads from the Fakahatchee Strand State Preserve in Florida. Laroche’s defence is in two parts. First, he claims that he is an employee of the Seminole Indians, who performed all the actual cutting, and who have an exceptional right by state statute and treaty to take the plants. Second, his claim is that the plan was never to sell the rare flowers directly, but rather to have them cloned in large numbers in laboratories and then to sell those clones to collectors, thus potentially saving the rare flowers from any further poaching from their natural habitat. In the end, the three Seminole men are fined \$100 each, not for taking the orchids, but for taking the branches on which the orchids were growing. Laroche is fined \$500 and banned from the Fakahatchee Preserve for 6 months. The case does not resolve the issue of the Seminole’s right to take orchids and other rare flowers out of the Preserve.

Orlean’s 1995 *New Yorker* article, entitled “Orchid Fever,” focuses on the portrait of John Laroche and some details of the court case, including the Florida statutes involving Seminole and other tribes. She also weaves into the article different threads of information about the history of orchids, about the contemporary orchid market, and about Florida. It is less than 7,000 words, about 20 monograph pages, long. The book extension/adaptation is almost 300 pages in length, over 100,000 words. The specific details of the actual court case, which consists of about two days in court, take up less than a dozen pages of the text, although there is a lot of material that pertains to it, as Orlean patches together the story of the planning, the theft itself, and the legal and other consequences.

One possible way to think about a film adaptation of *The Orchid Thief*, on the surface such an unlikely candidate for it, would be to create a manageable narrative out of the events connected directly to the initial newspaper article Orlean comes across, to the exclusion of all or most of the other threads in the book. On this scenario, the adapter has a specific set of materials to work with: a plot-line, intriguing characters, a Florida swamp, courtroom drama, and even a range of complex environmental and legal issues. Beyond such basic ingredients, however, many choices need to be made to determine what kind of adaptation is to be developed. What does one have to do, and how many “liberties” need to be taken, to make the story a compelling narrative? How much fidelity does one need to have either to Orlean’s book or to the real people she describes? There is also

the question of genre: is the material to be presented as a kind of documentary or transformed into a drama, a mystery, a court-room thriller, a documentary, or a comedy? Whose point of view guides the film: Laroche's, Orlean's, or that of an omniscient camera? Such questions suggest multiple potential adaptations of this one thread alone.

(ii) John Laroche

Orlean starts both "Orchid Fever" and *The Orchid Thief* with this sentence: "John Laroche is a tall guy, skinny as a stick, pale-eyed, slouch-shouldered, and sharply handsome, in spite of the fact that he is missing all his front teeth" (*The Orchid Thief* 3). To be more precise, the article "begins" with a grainy photograph of Laroche standing in a greenhouse, staring defiantly at the camera. In the course of writing her book, Orlean "spent most of the next two years hanging around with him" (4), during which time she learns and then shares details about his life. Aside from vital biographical information, which includes violent hurricanes, tragic car accidents, and many business ventures involving a variety of collections, Orlean's primary fascination with Laroche, and the focus of her book, has to do with the nature of obsession.

Laroche is what we might call a "curiosity" for Orlean, as well as for her friends in New York and for *New Yorker* readers, one of those weird characters whose lives educated elites like to read about or see on a screen but whom they would be unlikely and unwilling to meet. Late in the book, she refers to him as "single-minded lunatic" (213–14). In an interview published at the end of the book, Orlean discusses the "mutually exploitative relationship between a reporter and a subject," and calls it an intimate but "unnatural" relationship, in which the two become "very connected" (296), though only for a while. Answering a question about the possibility of "novelizing" her experience, Orlean says "I don't think I could have imagined a character as eccentric and fascinating as Laroche" (291). Early in the book, she describes her view of him this way:

I was developing mixed feeling about spending time with Laroche. I didn't enjoy driving with him but I did enjoy hearing his version of his life. We weren't natural friends. He struck me as the late-sleeping, heavy-smoking, junk-food-eating, law-bending type, whereas I am not, but I am the sort of person who finds his sort of person engaging. Many things he said were incredible or staggering or cracked or improbable, but they were never boring. The current of his mind and behavior was more riptide than rivu-

let. I didn't care all that much whether what he said was true or not; I just found the flow irresistible. (29)

Orlean makes it clear that Laroche is a highly intelligent autodidact, who is persistent in pursuit of his goals. Though, to be sure, a "get rich quick" schemer, Laroche does not so much follow the money as dive deeply into whatever interests him and become an expert on it before he turns to the prospect of monetizing whatever it is: turtles, pornography, orchids. As the descriptor "rip-tide" implies, however, Laroche is also presented as a force of nature, driven by his passions, and associated with the swamp. His missing teeth are like a sign for his losses of property to hurricanes and of family to car accidents, and he seems an unlikely guide or advisor to anyone, especially a person like Susan Orlean. The final scene in the book, in which Orlean accompanies Laroche into the extremely disorienting Fakahatchee swamp to look for the ghost orchid, "to complete the cycle, to make sense of everything I'd been doing in Florida" (280), is the end of the story in more ways than one. First, it refuses both the writer and her readers the narrative satisfaction of that final moment of seeing the flower. Second, and more importantly, as it becomes clear to her that they are lost in the swamp, Laroche transforms in Orlean's eyes from an *aficionado*/expert into an almost criminally incompetent guide who has put her life in danger. In that moment, Orlean says, "I . . . very much wanted to kill Laroche, to actually murder him and leave his body here" (280). Of course, Laroche does bring Orlean back out of the swamp to the familiar and "civilized" world of roads, cars, writing, and culture.

Any attempt to adapt *The Orchid Thief* would need to grapple with the character of Laroche. One possibility is to simply focus on Laroche's life-story as told to Orlean, but substituting the camera for Orlean's perspective. This could be a linear or non-linear documentary: Laroche tells his own story directly to the camera in order to foreground the issue of point of view, or the camera follows Laroche and allows the story to unfold. Alternatively, rather than foregrounding the "true story," Laroche's story could be "based on a true story," cast in a specific genre, and subject to a range of creative liberties. In either case, Orlean's voice and perspective might well be preserved, even in the case of her absence, but by other means than her actual presence, or completely discarded. In either case, the adaptation could be more or less "faithful" to the facts of Laroche's story and to the nature of the book. As already mentioned, most viewers of the film

adaptation of *The Orchid Thief* do not necessarily know the book, so an adapter would have great latitude in developing the adaptation.

Another option would be to preserve the “odd couple” nature of the Orlean/Laroche relationship by focusing, perhaps even self-reflexively, on the reporter/subject nature of the book. The point of view might be external/objective or overtly subjective, either only from Orlean’s perspective or from both perspectives. In such scenarios, Laroche’s life-story is an important but not exclusive focus. As in the book, aspects of Orlean’s life might be examined, which would expand on the details, but nevertheless retain a fidelity to the ways in which true facts come under the gaze of “reporting,” and are simultaneously subjected to the demands of narrative in the book. One sub-option here is to develop the relationship beyond what it is in the book, picking up on the themes of passion, fascination, and obsession that are intrinsic to the personalities of both “characters,” perhaps even in the direction of romance. Such a choice would elaborate on an interpretation of Orlean’s fascination with Laroche as a desire to let go of the restraints of her cultured New York life, with its landmarks and numbered streets, and to succumb to the pull of passions, drives, and the compass-defying swamps. Just as Orlean’s depiction of Laroche transforms him into a “character,” this treatment transforms Orlean into one as well.

(iii) Susan Orlean

Many things can be seen as being the focus of Orlean’s book: Laroche, Orlean, orchids, evolution/ adaptation, Florida, and passion/obsession. One scenario for adaptation is to foreground Orlean as the main person of interest, with Laroche as perhaps the most interesting of the colourful characters, locations, creatures, and flowers she encounters. On one hand, this downgrades Laroche from the central role Orlean gives him in both the article “Orchid Fever” and in the book title *The Orchid Thief*. On the other hand, this choice constitutes an intriguing fidelity to the structure of the book, in which there are long stretches in which Orlean recounts her interviews with orchid growers and cloners, her meticulous research about orchids and orchid hunting, and her personal reflections on her work. As with the other possible adaptive approaches, this avenue opens up several possible routes. One way to proceed, for example, is to follow Orlean’s journey into the world of orchids precisely as it is described in the book, but to make it more linear and orderly. Alternatively, the sprawling character of the book can be preserved and closely followed, so that all the different threads

Orlean introduces into her account make an appearance, though not in the exhaustive detail possible in the book. This is perhaps a very fitting choice for the film medium, with its editing and special-effects possibilities. On the less “faithful” side of the equation, a focus on Orlean might include more biographical information about her than we find in the book, as well as information about the nature of her writing.

(iv) *Orchids*

The full title of Orlean’s book is *The Orchid Thief: a true story of beauty and obsession*. If the catalyst for her story is a small newspaper article about a trial in Florida, and the driving force for her research is to understand the passion of collectors, the topic that inspires Orlean to conduct exhaustive research is that of the orchid itself. She describes the attraction of orchids in this way:

Beauty can be painfully tantalizing, but orchids are not simply beautiful. Many are strange-looking or bizarre, and all of them are ugly when they aren’t flowering. They are ancient, intricate living things that have adapted to every environment on earth. They have outlived dinosaurs; they might outlive human beings. They can be hybridized, mutated, crossbred, and cloned. They are at once architectural and fanciful and tough and dainty, a jewel of a flower on a haystack of a plant. The botanical complexity of orchids and their mutability makes them perhaps the most compelling and maddening of all collectible living thing. (53)

Orlean’s research report includes, among other things, anecdotes about obsessive collectors, who organize their whole lives around the acquisition, collection, protection, and maintenance of their orchids, information about the enormously successful evolutionary strategies developed by orchids, and often gruesome historical accounts of orchid hunting from the Victorian period onwards. Her own growing fascination with the world of orchid collection is conveyed by way of intriguing details as well as good storytelling, and readers find themselves unexpectedly immersed in an extraordinary level of detailed information about these flowers that branches out in many different directions.

One trajectory in Orlean’s research is in the arena of mutation / evolution / adaptation. She documents the ways in which “orchids have multiplied and diversified and become the biggest flowering plant family on earth because each orchid species has made itself irresistible” (45) to insects for the purposes of pol-

lination. This is achieved through a variety of strategies, including aping a specific insect's appearance which can lead to *pseudocopulation*, aping an insect's enemy which can cause contact by way of *pseudoantagonism*, attracting insects by way of sometimes horrible and sometimes beautiful scents, or by secreting nectars (45–46) in what Orlean calls a “harmony between an orchid and its pollinator . . . that . . . is kind of eerie” (47). She points out that Darwin thought of orchids as “the pinnacle of evolutionary transformation” (47). Not only do the flowers find ways to perpetuate themselves through pollination but they also adapt to multiple environments and habitats. Perhaps the most interesting example of this second kind of adaptation are the “epiphytic” orchids which, rather than having a parasitic relationship with the tree branch that hosts them, “live on air” (49).

It is even possible that the orchid's “genius for seducing human beings” (49) can be understood as part of an evolutionary process that has now led to breeding, cross-breeding, and cloning in what is “more than \$10 billion a year” (51) orchid industry. Tracking this “powerful orchid devotion” (52) or “orchidelirium” (50), Orlean examines the roots of the name orchid to *orchis* (testicle), and tells us that “The British Herbal Guide of 1653 advised that orchids be used with discretion” because they “provoke lust exceedingly” (50), so much so that Victorian women “were forbidden from owning orchids because the shapes of the flowers were considered too sexually suggestive for their shy constitutions” (75). Ironically, Queen Victoria herself was a “passionate orchid fancier” (75–76), and her enthusiasm “added to their glamour in England and around the world” (76). In the chapter “A Mortal Occupation,” Orlean examines the relationship, “[f]rom the mid-1800s to the early 1900s, when orchid hunting was at its prime” (56) between the private and commercial orchid collectors, who mostly “stayed home” (57), and the orchid hunters they commissioned to travel to far-off places, often to meet gruesome fates such as “fever or accidents or malaria or foul play. . . . All of them traveled ready for violence” (56).

Aside from the problems in acquiring the orchids, Orlean notes that such collection required enormous numbers of plants to be removed from their habitats because so many would die while being transported back to England, and then more would die once transplanted into English soil, whether outside or in a hothouse (74–75). In this case, the plants did not adapt naturally to the conditions in England. Rather, orchid growers and scientists developed technologies and techniques for both the transportation and successful transplantation of

the flowers, although, even to this day, the care of orchids takes a special kind of devotion. Given this history, it is interesting to think of Laroche's commitment to orchid cloning as a new evolutionary method for orchid survival.

The extensive detail serves to demonstrate that the material on orchids – and the above summary barely scratches the surface – is central for readers of the book, not peripheral to Laroche's and Orlean's storylines. Put differently, what is so fascinating about *The Orchid Thief* is that Orlean draws us into the world of orchids in ways that are unexpected beforehand and surprising in retrospect, primarily because of her feel for narrative techniques and intriguing details. The book is, indeed, as Charlie says in *Adaptation*, “about flowers,” and any adapter needs to grapple with whether and how to contain and/or explore the multiple trajectories of research in the book. One possible approach is to select some of the concentrated passages about orchid evolution, about orchid hunters, and about orchid collectors, presented in an engaging documentary. In this scenario, Orlean's point of view might be present as voice-over, and Laroche can presumably emerge as a contemporary orchid hunter, who shares with his predecessors a passion for orchids that is inspired by “the difficulty and fatality of getting [orchids] almost as much as the flowers themselves” (55). Some of the detail in the book could be eliminated because the film medium allows for visual representations of, for example, the orchid-insect relationships, the violent scenes at the core of many of the stories Orlean recounts, the sites such as the Everglades, where orchids are to be found, and the large greenhouses, science labs, and flower shows that are part of the contemporary world of orchids. Another possible approach is to extend Orlean's research in the direction of one, two, or a handful of specific orchid hunting trips, with full-blown personalities in more explicitly “based on true stories” dramatic scenarios. Still another route is to focus on the contemporary personalities Orlean becomes acquainted with in Florida, in which case Laroche's prominence might recede slightly. In all cases, the question of whether or not to foreground Orlean herself is always present.

3. Research, Self-reflexivity, and the Hollywood Treatment in *Adaptation*

The preceding section has three purposes. First, it describes in some detail the relatively unknown precursory non-fiction intertext for *Adaptation*. Second, it explores the ways in which competing possibilities for adaptation of Orlean's book demonstrate different kinds of fidelity and require complex but necessary choices about genre, film technique, audience, and interpretation. Third,

it sets the stage for the following discussion of the film itself by highlighting the non-fiction basis of Orlean's "literary" book, which exerts a specific type of pressure on Orlean herself and also on *Adaptation's* protagonist, screenwriter Kaufman.

(i) *The Blank/Black Screen*

For the first few moments of *Adaptation*, we are presented with a blank screen and a stream-of-consciousness voice that goes over two and a half minutes. Here is the content of the first 37 seconds of the monologue we hear:

Do I have an original thought in my head? My bald head? Maybe if I were happier, my hair wouldn't be falling out. Life is short. I need to make the most of it. Today is the first day of the rest of my life. I'm a walking cliché. I really need to go to the doctor and have my leg checked. There's something wrong. The dentist called again. I'm way overdue. If I stopped putting things off, I'd be happier. All I do is sit on my fat ass. If my ass wasn't fat, I'd be happier. I wouldn't have to wear these shirts with the tails out all the time, like that's fooling anyone. Fat ass. (00:00:20 – 00:00:57)

The voice, it turns out, belongs to neurotic writer and protagonist of the film, Charlie Kaufman, played by Nicolas Cage, and who will be referred to in what follows as "Charlie." In the extra-cinematic world, Charlie Kaufman, who will be referred to as "Kaufman," to distinguish him from the "Charlie" avatar he creates in *Adaptation*, is a real person, the screenwriter of the film we are watching. This writer/character split is emphasized in the first visual scene of the film, in which the protagonist, screenwriter Charlie Kaufman, is skulking in the background of the set of the strange, inventive, and critically acclaimed *Being John Malkovich* (*BJM*), for which he wrote the screenplay, wondering why he is at the filming and, more generally, what has led him to this moment in his unhappy life. A couple of scenes later, in a meeting with Valerie Thomas, who has contracted him to adapt *The Orchid Thief* for film, and right after praising Charlie for the script of *Being John Malkovich*, she says, "Boy, I'd love to find a portal into your brain" to which he replies, "Believe me, it's no fun!" (00:04:30).

Just a few minutes into the film, then, we understand that Charlie's personality constitutes the perspective and the primary voice of the film. The lengthy blank screen acts as a kind of "foreword" for the film, and it has at least four different purposes. First, it gives us a "portal" into Charlie's mind. Throughout

the film, we witness the neurotic anxieties that constantly undermine him as he delves into a series of possible trajectories for his adaptation, each of them ostensibly a “false start,” but which, together, become the film that we watch. Second, the blankness of the screen acts as the corollary of the blank page the writer faces when developing his script. This connection is reinforced throughout the film, but none more overtly than in a very early scene in which Charlie sits down at his typewriter to start to write his script onto the blank page in front of him, an imposing and terrifying task that appears to defeat him several times (00:13:52). Third, the blank screen is the *tabula rasa* Charlie needs to create in order to develop an adaptation that has some independence as an artistic creation from Orlean’s book. We learn later that he is reluctant to meet Susan Orlean precisely because this would interfere with his creative process. At the same time, he feels a responsibility to Orlean and her material (00:49:00). Finally, the blank screen reminds us of the differences between the media of print and film. *The Orchid Thief* draws us into a world of words. *Adaptation*, by contrast, has access to what Marshall McLuhan famously referred to as audio-visual “allatonceness” (*The Medium is the Massage* 63). More specifically, Charlie’s craft as a screenwriter is also in words, but his words need to paint a picture of the visual and aural fields crucial to the film.

(ii) Life, Text, Metafiction, and Para-text

Just as Orlean’s desire to understand the passion of the collector drives *The Orchid Thief* in all its different trajectories, the screenwriter’s desire to change his life drives *Adaptation*. The dramatization of this process leads to the overt and metafictional fictionalization of the writer himself. As he tells his brother, “I’ve written myself into my screenplay” (00:59:17). Further, the invention of Donald, Charlie’s identical twin brother, also violates the usual text/paratext distinction because “Donald Kaufman” is given an official film writing credit on the film, even though he turns out to be a purely fictional character, created as an *alter ego* for the protagonist. Another example of such metaleptic and fact/fiction confusion is in the character of Susan Orlean, who is simultaneously: first, a real person (hereafter “Orlean”), who lives in New York and who has a writing credit for *Adaptation* in her paratextual existence as author of *The Orchid Thief*, second, a character in the film (hereafter “Susan”) played by Meryl Streep and closely resembling the author as she represents herself in the book, and, third, a purely fictional character (also “Susan”), who departs from the real person in dramatic and extreme ways by the end of the film.

The Orchid Thief is introduced to the audience in that first meeting, mentioned above, between Charlie and Valerie Thomas, when Charlie pulls a book out of his bag that has the original front of the book, and, on the back, a picture of Meryl Streep, identified as Susan Orlean (00:04:48). Unless Orlean's name means something to the viewer already, it does not register that the reference is to a real-world person, nor does this matter for an immediate understanding of the film's processes, concerns, and themes. Similarly, it is not clear whether or not Valerie Thomas exists outside of the film. In fact, her name does *not* appear as a producer on the list of credits for the film, though it is listed, for unspecified purposes, in the “thank you” section. This is mentioned because, while we can rely on the ontological reality of the contemporary and historical characters Orlean introduces us to in *The Orchid Thief*, *Adaptation* constantly blurs the boundaries between the real and the fictional. Charlie Kaufman, Susan Orlean, John Laroche, and Robert McKee are people who have an existence both in the real world and as characters played by actors in the film alongside purely fictional characters. Further, many of the cast and crew members of *BJM*, including its stars John Malkovich, John Cusack, and Catherine Keener, and the director (of both *BJM* and *Adaptation*), Spike Jonze appear as themselves in *Adaptation*, playing the parts of minor characters in Charlie's story.

It should be noted that *BJM* itself includes “real” actors playing themselves alongside fictional protagonists. The most notable of these is, of course, John Malkovich himself. Viewers who have seen the earlier film enjoy the constant and deliberate intertextual references back to it, as well as the occasional visits to the set throughout the film. Beyond enjoyment, however, such reminder-references serve to establish a very useful context for viewing *Adaptation*: the Charlie we meet in the film refers us to the Charlie Kaufman who writes innovative, complicated, sometimes outlandish, and genuinely experimental and metafictional scripts.

(iii) *Fidelity to The Orchid Thief*

In his meeting with Valerie, Charlie tries to explain his approach at the outset to adapting Orlean's book: “[I]t's great sprawling *New Yorker* stuff, and I'd want to remain true to that. I mean, I'd want to let the movie exist rather than be artificially plot-driven” (00:05:14). When Valerie reveals that she does not know what he means, he clarifies by saying: “I just don't want to ruin it by making it a Hollywood thing” or by having the characters learn “profound life lessons”

(00:05:14-00:06:09). Elsewhere, Charlie says that, for him, “writing is a journey into the unknown” (00:11:58). Given his admiration for *The Orchid Thief*, with its multiple and open-ended intersecting inquiries expressed in highly personal terms of desire and frustration, it seems a perfect text for Charlie to adapt, and indeed, this is what attracts him to the project in the first place. Once he starts writing, however, he discovers that his desire to remain faithful to Orlean’s text presents him with seemingly insurmountable problems. About halfway through the film, Charlie meets with his agent to find out if he can break his contract to produce the screenplay:

Charlie: The book has no story. There’s no story!!

Agent: All right, make one up. I mean, no-one in this town can make up a crazy story like you. You’re the king of that.

Charlie: No, I didn’t want to do that this time. It’s someone else’s material. I have a responsibility to Susan. . . . Anyway, I wanted to grow as a writer. I want to do something simple, show people how amazing flowers are.

Agent: Are they amazing?

Charlie: I don’t know. I think they are. (00:48:42-00:50:00)

What happens in between these two scenes – the initial meeting with Valerie, the meeting with the agent – is the complex process by which Charlie attempts to “faithfully” adapt Orlean’s text in a series of apparent false starts to the screenplay that take up all but the last 35 minutes of the film.

There is a pattern to these false starts: each one constitutes a visual scene in the film itself before we see Charlie describing it as a potential focus for the movie. For example, the third scene of the film shows a rapid sequence of images tracking evolution from its beginning up to the birth of Charlie himself (00:03:18-00:04:01). In the context of the film itself, the sequence is triggered as an apparent answer to Charlie asking himself “how did I get here?” (00:03:18). Later, Charlie wonders how he can really do a film about flowers. He thinks to himself: “To write about a flower, to dramatize a flower, I have to show the flower’s arc, and the flower’s arc stretches back to the beginning of life . . . that’s what I need to do, tie all of History together” (00:39:40-00:40:40 *passim*). He then dictates to himself most of the details from the earlier sequence: “Start right before life begins on the planet. All is lifeless and then life begins” (00:40:42). The figure of Darwin makes several appearances in the film, sometimes simply as an image (00:06:45), sometimes “speaking” his own words on orchids that are

quoted in Orlean's book (00:40:00), and once, during an exceptionally frenetic scene in which Charlie develops a new approach to writing his script, Darwin appears to punch the camera (00:47:38). Elsewhere, Darwin's words are spoken by Laroche (00:23:25–00:24:40), and there are some brief images in the film in which Susan and Charlie read aloud from Darwin's work.

Related to this opening, there are other scenes detailing the stories Orlean records about the evolutionary power of orchids, presented in a variety of ways, including voice-overs by Susan, explanations delivered by Laroche, and a wonderful array of visual spectacles that “show” what is being told. There are also some scenes in which details of the horrific stories that Orlean tells in the book chapter, “Mortal Occupation” are both recounted and shown (00:14:25). In these sequences, Charlie is clearly trying to remain as faithful as possible to the facts that Orlean discovers through her research, which were described in section 3 (iv) of this paper. In other words, he wants to translate, or perhaps “transcode,” as Linda Hutcheon might suggest, *The Orchid Thief* from print to screen with as little distortion or creative liberty as possible. The theme of research, performed by Darwin, Orlean, Laroche, and Charlie, is front and centre, and the narrative, such as it is, comes from verifiable historical and scientific records. As Landy points out, Charlie discovers that one cannot tell the story of a flower, because “stories belong to human time, and flowers have their being outside of that time” (500). In his view, all that Charlie, like Orlean before him, can do is write a “story *involving* flowers, a story that takes flowers as its pretext” (501).^{iv}

The fourth scene in the film (00:07:13–00:12:00) introduces another thread and potential point of focus, one that combines possibilities described in sections 3 (i) and 3 (ii) of this article – the theft itself, Laroche's plans, and the court case. The scene starts with our first view of Laroche, who is driving into the Fakahatchee in his van. Though more narrowly focused than the attempt to “tie all of History together” in the evolution scene that immediately precedes this one, and more comedic in its presentation, it is also tied as closely as possible to the facts as Orlean introduces them in her book. As with the evolution scene, the idea that produces this new point of focus is presented to us much later in the film, although it is not as precise in its description:

Charlie, into Dictaphone: Okay, we open with Laroche, okay, he's funny, he says “I love to mutatae plants.” He says “mutation is fun.” Okay, we show flowers, and, okay, we have the court case. Okay, we show Laroche, he says

“I was mutated as a baby. That’s why I’m so smart.” That’s funny! Okay, we open at the beginning of time. No, okay, *we open with Laroche driving into the swamp*” (00:47:38 – 00:48:17, emphasis mine)

The repetition here of the words “fun” and “funny” is important. Despite the fact that Laroche’s life-story is in many respects one of devastating suffering, Orlean’s presentation of their interaction in the book leads many people, including Valerie Thomas and Charlie’s agent, to call him “a fun character” (00:07:00, 00:46:00). Further, they encourage Charlie to focus on Laroche as the main subject of his adaptation and, perhaps most crucially, to take liberties in his fictionalization. The basic facts of the theft and court case are almost fully covered in the early scene, but the unfolding of Laroche’s larger story, including his collections, his losses, his ideas about his own intelligence, and his various schemes are covered in other scenes he shares with Susan, usually in his truck, but sometimes in invented and intimate phone conversations, and at other times in direct recreations/re-enactments.

The fourth trajectory Charlie introduces is the one described in 3 (iii), i.e. Susan Orlean herself. Her character comes into clearest focus in the film during and after a dinner party with friends in New York, when she finds that the animated, and somewhat condescending, conversation about John Laroche, inspired by her *New Yorker* article, is upsetting to her. Lying in bed afterwards, beside her sleeping husband, she has the thought that is so important to the book: “I wanted to want something. . . . I want to know what it feels like to care about something passionately” (00:25:53 – 00:26:34). As with the other opening scenarios, this one too comes to Charlie, later in the film, this way:

Charlie: We see Susan Orlean, delicate, haunted by loneliness, fragile, beautiful. She lies awake next to her sleeping insensitive husband. Her voice-over begins: “I suppose I do have one unembarrassed passion. I want to know how it feels to care about something passionately.” (00:54:40-00:55:06)

Where the reporter-subject relationship between Susan Orlean and John Laroche in *The Orchid Thief* is direct, personal, intimate, temporary, and potentially parasitic, the relationship between Charlie and Susan in *Adaptation* is even more complicated. Charlie feels a responsibility towards Orlean’s material that requires him to stay as close to it as possible and translate it faithfully into

the film medium. What that means, however, becomes a more and more open question. From the outset, Charlie tries to interpret the book's themes, select its crucial materials, and transcode the "sprawling" texture of the book into a cinematic medium by way of techniques such as voice-overs, sophisticated camera work and editing, invented dialogue, and stunning cinematography. About half-way through the film, Charlie starts to focus on the evolving character, Susan Orlean. He has sexual fantasies about her, and he "talks" to her photograph about his desire to please her (00:54:00). Throughout the film, we see Charlie duplicate Susan's research and writing process: she reads Darwin, he reads Darwin; she attends an orchid show, he attends an orchid show; he meets Valerie Thomas, she meets Valerie Thomas. The voice-over is used extensively in the film to show-case the intermixed voices of Laroche, Susan, Charlie, and Darwin. Given two opportunities to meet Susan, however, he runs away. Eventually, he comes to the conclusion that "This is not Susan Orlean's story" and, in a move that in its own way stays entirely faithful to *The Orchid Thief*, he decides that "the only thing [he is] actually qualified to write about is[himself]" (00:57:44).

The fifth trajectory that Charlie introduces, and which dominates the film, then, is to place himself and his creative process at the center of the film, starting with the previously described meeting with Valerie Thomas (00:04:05-00:06:05):

Charlie (into recorder): We open on Charlie Kaufman, fat, old, bald, repulsive, sitting in a Hollywood restaurant across from Valerie Thomas . . . (00:57:45-00:57-50)

(and a moment later, while pacing in his bedroom): Fat, bald Kaufman paces furiously in his bedroom. He speaks into his hand-held tape recorder and he says "Charlie Kaufman. Fat, bald, repulsive, old. . . ." (00:58:06-00:58:19)

Of course, the particular scene Charlie describes here is not the opening scene, but it comes after the blank screen, the scene on the set of *Being John Malkovich*, and the evolution sequence, all of which provide contexts for the film – Charlie's obsessive and neurotic personality, Charlie's background as an accomplished writer, and the totality of History leading up to Charlie's presence on the planet. Once this decision has been made to write himself into the screenplay as the protagonist, which is a kind of *analogy* of Orlean being the central character in her literary non-fiction book, the everyday scenes in which we witness Charlie's miserable life make sense, not only for the film as a stand-

alone object but also as a comment on the nature of Orlean's text, which is ostensibly about Laroche and orchids, but is in reality a story about her. Inevitably, given his personality, Charlie is ultimately just as dissatisfied with this focus as he is with all the others: "I've written myself into my screenplay. . . . It's self-indulgent, narcissistic, solipsistic, it's pathetic. I'm pathetic. I'm fat and pathetic. . . . I have no idea how to write. I can't make flowers fascinating. Because I suck" (00:59:17-00:59:42).

(iv) Charlie and Donald

The pattern mentioned above, in which each false start is introduced into the film as a scene and then later re-introduced into the narrative of Charlie's writing process, is broken when it comes to the invention of Donald, Charlie's twin brother. Perhaps this is because the narrative, structured in the "sprawling" fashion reminiscent of Orlean's book, is increasingly organized, as the film progresses, around the relationship between Charlie and his identical twin-brother, Donald, a purely fictional character. Donald is confident, talented, lovable, extroverted, sometimes crass and vulgar. He is seemingly the exact opposite of the sensitive, introverted, anxious, and irritable but brilliant Charlie. The presence of the fictitious Donald serves, among other things, as a reminder to us that, as Landy says, "Charlie is not quite Kaufman, and Charlie's film is not quite the one we have been watching, either" (510).

Shortly after Charlie signs on to adapt *The Orchid Thief*, Donald announces his intention, out of the blue, to take a seminar on the principles of screenwriting with Robert McKee, a real person in the world outside the film, with a view to writing his own screenplay. Charlie mocks the very idea of the seminar, and consistently derides all the ideas Donald runs by him over the following weeks: serial killers, multiple personalities, "image systems" (00:50:32). It is, therefore, extremely frustrating for Charlie that, while he suffers from writer's block that drives him into a frenzy of frustration and despair, Donald regularly and cheerfully reports on his successful completion and sale for \$1,000,000 of his script. To add insult to injury, Donald is very successful with women, and he has none of the neuroses that Charlie finds so paralyzing in both his personal and professional activities.

Desperate to finish his script, Charlie ends up seeking the advice of Robert McKee, who tells him to "go back, put in the drama" (01:10:51) and to "find an ending" (01:11:24). Unable to make progress in this fashion, Charlie asks Donald

for help. The last 35 minute sequence of the film is an abrupt and dramatic departure from the rest of the film and becomes, in the hands of “Donald,” a melodramatic mystery-thriller deploying all the Hollywood tricks Charlie wanted to avoid. The story is still focused on Charlie, but it lacks any of the introspection that dominates the rest of the film, and transforms into an action-packed and plot-driven script that includes chases, shootings, drugs, pornography, theme songs, morals, reconciliations, and *motifs*. Susan is transformed into a B-movie character that becomes addicted to the flower of the ghost orchid, which has hallucinogenic properties; she poses for pornographic pictures, which find their way onto the internet, and she has an intense extra-marital affair with Laroche. She shoots Donald, thinking he is Charlie, in order to prevent her secrets coming out. Laroche tries to kill the real Charlie, but cannot do it because he is attacked and killed by an alligator (the *deus ex machina* McKee insists Charlie should *not* use to find his ending). Donald dies, but not before the narratively inevitable reconciliation between the brothers. Put in what we might call *psycho-cinematic* terms, the Charlie/Donald *alter egos* are integrated, and at the end of the film, we see a newly optimistic and extroverted Charlie, finally able to kiss the girl he likes and write the last scene of his film script.

Conclusion: Real Life, Narrative, *The Orchid Thief*, and Adaptation

In a question period at the end of the screenwriting seminar, Charlie has this exchange with McKee:

Charlie: What if the writer’s 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.

Robert McKee: First of all, you write a screenplay without conflict or crisis, you’ll bore your audience to tears. Secondly, nothing happens in the world? Are you out of your fucking mind? (01:07:50 – 01:08:26)

For much of the film, Charlie holds onto the idea that he has a special responsibility to Orlean’s book not only because he has been hired to write a screenplay based on her materials but also because the “real life” nature of those materials imposes some extra requirements on him that are in part contractual and in part moral. This is not to say that the real Charlie Kaufman, in contrast to his character Charlie, is committed to such requirements. Rather, he creates

a screenplay that specifically comments on the nature of adaptation itself by building a multi-layered, mixed-genre, and self-reflexive story about the relationships, on the one hand, between an adaptation and its precursor text, and, on the other, between real life and art.

In the interview published at the end of *The Orchid Thief*, Orlean says:

The studio dithered for a while before showing it to me, knowing I would be—how shall I put this?—surprised. And I was. At first, quite frankly, I found the screenplay almost impossible to read. I couldn't get my own book out of my head—and I couldn't get over my own memories and story and expectations of what the movie might look like. I didn't understand why I was a character in the screenplay, or why the screenwriter (and his twin) was in it either. But when I was finally able to see it for what it was, I realized it was an ideal companion piece to the book: It contained all of the philosophical and emotional questions of my book, filtered through a kind of dream-state and narrated by crazy twins. (289)

She agrees to the screenplay Kaufman writes because she recognizes the film as “an interpretive dance” that presents her with “something wise and beautiful” in relation to the book, which has “already had a life of its own” (289). On this understanding, Kaufman's strange, obsessive, and metafictional screenplay stands in a non-parasitic, intertextual, and independent relationship to Orlean's book. At the same time, the relationship between this book and this film is by definition entirely different from all the other intertextual relationships that the film has with other cultural objects,^v and the film expresses a peculiar kind of fidelity to its precursor in the multiple and complex ways outlined above.

Endnotes

ⁱ In his recent essay on adaptation studies and pedagogy, Robert Stam describes the relationship between an adaptation and its precursor text this way: “Adaptation is of course a paradigmatic form of transtextuality, defined broadly by Genette in *Palimpsestes* as ‘relations between texts,’ and more specifically in an instance of Genette's ‘hyper-textuality’ as a case of transtextual variations on pre-existing texts (hypotexts).” Although Stam is discussing literary hypotexts, his idea of hypertextual spin-offs may be pertinent to a study of the relationship between *Adaptation* and *The Orchid Thief*.

ⁱⁱ See “Historical Pluralism.” White points out that historical events are almost always told as a story, or as several different stories, in which meaning is assigned, and narrative and generic conventions are used to craft them:

We may seek to give our lives a meaning of some specific kind by telling now one and now another kind of story about them. But this is a work of construction rather than of discovery – and so

it is with groups, nations, and whole classes of people who wish to regard themselves as parts of organic entities capable of living storylike lives. Neither the reality nor the meaning of history is “out there” in the form of a story awaiting only a historian to discern its outline and identify the plot that comprises its meaning. (487)

- iii In doing research for this paper, I was surprised to find that, although there is some interesting work on both *The Orchid Thief* and *Adaptation*, there is very little that addresses their connection at length. In terms of the work on *Adaptation*, there are articles on such things as “self-proclaiming rhetoric” (Matthew Anderson), “self-inscriptive narrative acts” in *Adaptation* and in *Don Quixote* (Barbara Simerka and Christopher Weimer), and the “gendered screenwriter” (Bridget Conon); yet, there are very few that directly address both the Orlean book and the Kaufman screenplay. Linda Hutcheon refers several times to the film in *A Theory of Adaptation*, but there is no extended analysis of Orlean’s book. Joshua Landy’s “Still Life in a Narrative Age,” addressed in this paper, is a notable exception.
- iv See “Still Life in a Narrative Age” for a close analysis of the ways in which, according to Landy, *Adaptation* addresses the desire for narrative that precludes attention to “atemporal phenomena” (498) such as flowers or personality.
- v In their introduction to their edited book, *Adaptation Studies: New Approaches*, Christa Albrecht-Crane and Dennis Cutchins suggest that “film adaptations are intertextual by definition, multivocal by necessity, and adaptive by their nature” (19). In a similar vein, Linda Hutcheon, in *A Theory of Adaptation*, claims that “multiple versions exist laterally, not vertically” (xiii). She also says, however, that although all texts are intertextual, or dialogic, adaptations acknowledge specific texts (21). Brett Westbrook points out in his essay, “Being Adaptation” that the basis of adaptation studies is necessarily comparison (26), even in cases that undermine traditional notions of fidelity or priority. I would add that, in the case of *Adaptation*, the priority of *The Orchid Thief* is precisely the obstacle for Charlie’s creative process, which is hampered by an idea of a strict fidelity that is not possible for many reasons, including the nature of Orlean’s text.

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VJERNOST, ADAPTACIJA I METAKOMENTAR: SLUČAJ ROMANA SUSAN ORLEAN *KRADLJIVAC ORHIDEJE* I FILMA *ADAPTACIJA* SPIKEA JONZEA

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Kradljivac orhideje Susan Orlean postavlja pitanja i suprotstavljao se postavkama o žanru od svog pojavljivanja 1998. Iako su „istraživanja“ i „činjenice“ u prvom planu knjige, kritičari su ga opisali pojmovima kao što su književna publicistika, faksija, subjektivno novinarstvo i publicistički roman zbog izraženih „književnih“, odnosno narativnih, karakteroloških, tematskih, pa čak i filozofskih, osobina. U pokušaju da ovu „jednostavnu“ i „lijepu“ knjigu „o cvijeću“ adaptira u medij filma, Charlie Kaufman, neurotični i anksiozni protagonist/scenarist *Adaptacije* (2002.), fikcijski avatar stvarnog Charlieja Kaufmana, iskušava širok raspon dostupnih generičkih i narativnih mogućnosti adaptacije koje proizlaze iz složene prirode književnog predloška. Cijeli niz prividnih promašenih početaka, koji nastaju u očajničkom pokušaju stvaranja koherentne cjeline, dovode u konačnici upravo do „holivudskog završetka“ koji scenarist navodno prezire i uporno pokušava izbjeći. Ovaj se rad bavi kompleksnim odnosima između književnog predloška i adaptacije, *Kradljivca orhideje* i *Adaptacije*, s jedne strane pružajući interpretativnu analizu Orleanine knjige i njezine potencijalne adaptacijske mogućnosti, te s druge ispitujući što se s tim mogućnostima događa u *Adaptaciji*. Rad ustanovljuje da film, koristeći se metafikcijom, metalepsom i drugim tehnikama povezanim s eksperimentalnim pripovijedanjem, prelama pitanja iz knjige u svojevrstnu meditaciju o procesima čitanja, pripovijedanja i tumačenja u okviru same adaptacije.

Gljučne riječi: Susan Orlean, *Kradljivac orhideje*, Spike Jonze, *Adaptacija*, mogućnosti adaptacije, metakomentar