

Adaptation in *Adaptation..* Or the Significance of Failure

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Lis-moi, en seras-tu jamais capable?

Jacques Derrida

“To begin... To begin... How to start? I'm hungry. I should get coffee. Coffee would help me think. Maybe I should write something first, then reward myself with coffee. Coffee and a muffin. OK, so I need to establish the themes. Maybe a banana nut. That's a good muffin.”¹

All beginnings are difficult, and the beginning of the screenplay based on Susan Orlean's *The Orchid Thief* proves to be no exception. We can relate to that, as Charlie Kaufman is about to start on a screenplay belonging to a genre that is both very complex and very susceptible to negative criticism: the film adaptation. And just as any writer ponders upon the question of originality every now and then, Kaufman asks himself: “Do I have an original thought in my head?” In the possibility – or rather the impossibility – to answer this very question lies the Janus face of the film adaptation: an affirmative answer would imply the inability to write a proper adaptation faithful to the source, while a negative answer would deny the possibility to write altogether. The realm of the film adaptation is thus sealed off to anyone that seeks to enter it.

And Charlie Kaufman is desperately seeking entrance. So much so that, after producing a couple of unusable beginnings for the script – all appearing in the final movie – he decides to create a character who is writing the script for the adaptation of *The Orchid Thief*. The screenwriter's name is Charlie Kaufman. This makes the screenplay written by a character in *Adaptation..* an account precisely the coming into existence of *Adaptation..*. This self-referentiality enables us to see Charlie Kaufman discuss the plan to adapt *The Orchid Thief* with film executive Valerie Thomas. He makes very clear that he wants to remain true to the novel, meaning that he does not want to make it into a Hollywood film about an orchid heist, drugs, guns, car chases, sex and characters learning profound life lessons. It has to be simply about flowers. Or more specifically, it has to be about orchids, their beauty, their magic, and their propagation, their evolution, the process of adapting themselves to their environment. The film thus evolves into a triptych about a screenwriter wanting to write something that differs from earlier successes (*Being John Malkovich*), about a project of renewing a novel into the medium of film, and about the process of organisms constantly renewing themselves in the struggle for existence. The order used to describe this triptych is not chosen arbitrarily: I will attempt to read *Adaptation..* as a film on the process and problematics of adapting novels to screen (central panel), flanked by the thematics of moving away from what has been and evolving into something new. Before arriving at this constellation, this triptych will take on several different forms which correspond to the different paragraphs.

The dynamics involved in this shifting of forms is exactly what is brought about by the formal structure of the triptych itself: classical as it may be as a form, it departs from the classical structure of supposedly stable oppositional thought in that it adds a third term. My analysis hinges on the formal traits of the triptych because of this destabilizing potential, which prevents me from measuring the film against a fixed theoretical background: the triptych's potential enables the film to interfere with the analysis both by changing the way the three leading concepts are related and by way of altering the semantics of such a concept.

¹ Quotations and paraphrases are taken from *Adaptation..*, unless otherwise specified.

Taking the film seriously in this manner entails adhering to quite a specific method.² Such a method, at the very least, claims the primacy of the cultural text over the possible fine points of theory that can be applied to it. This is not to say that theory can have no place in an analysis such as this one; it simply means that the cultural artifact, in confronting the analyst with its “complexity” or “unyielding muteness” (Bal 45), forms the thrust behind the development of the analysis by directing the analysis at certain times and by asking for a response at others. Theory can have its function at the moments of response. Ideally such a dialogical process not only enriches our understanding of the text but also refines the theories we use in understanding it: the text then makes a theoretical point of its own.

In letting *Adaptation.* take the lead in the following analysis, I will strive to articulate the ways in which the film thematizes the process of adaptation. I will argue that the film makes a case for considering this process as aporetic in nature in that it is structured according to an irreducibly double bind. This double bind is constituted by the criterion of fidelity (Leitch 161)³ on the one hand and the need for originality on the other. To give an account of such an aporia should not be taken to imply a resolution to it; one can only hope for an articulation of its structure.

Adaptation | Evolution | Hauntology

One of the first scenes of *Adaptation.* already makes clear that Kaufman has some specific and original ideas for the project: when film executive Valerie Thomas suggests creating a love affair between Susan Orlean and her main protagonist and subject John Laroche, Kaufman dismisses this idea with an unusually passionate argument about how the movie should be about flowers alone, implying a departure from Hollywood conventions. This ambition is further underlined when Charlie gets home. We meet his twin brother Donald who lives with him out of financial necessity. In an attempt to get his life back on track, Donald has decided to become a screenwriter too and tells Charlie he's started attending a screenwriting class with Robert McKee. Charlie immediately starts lecturing his brother on the uselessness of such classes, saying that “those teachers are dangerous if your goal is to do something new. And a writer should always have that goal. Writing is a journey into the unknown.”

This journey is also a quest in that it takes effort to determine in which direction to go: John Laroche (as part of the scenes from the book that mainly appear in the movie as unusable beginnings of the screenplay) considers evolution “a profound process. It means you figure out how to thrive in the world.” Kaufman hasn't quite made it through this quest yet: one of the first scenes shows a tormented Kaufman while a commentary voice asks: “Why am I here? What am I doing here?” And just as this question is followed by a very short history of the world (we see Hollywood some forty billion years earlier. We see the earth covered in what might be burning lava. Something happens, the world changes, water enters the scene. Animal life is introduced, plants, dinos. But then: a meteor hits, ice age kicks in. When the ice recedes, the world changes again, we see animals dying, their corpses turning into nutritious soil. Then: a monkey, picking food from the ground with his one hand and standing on his hind legs and his other hand. But he erects himself onto his legs and walks away. Cities are covering the earth. Final shot: a close up of a baby being born. That's why Charlie Kaufman is here.), Orlean replies to Laroche's celebration of evolution: “Yeah, but it's easier for plants. I mean, they have no memory, you know, they just move on to whatever is next. But a person, you know... Adapting is almost shameful, it's like running away.”

And adaptation is the issue here. Kaufman should not forget that his journey into the

² This method, or “rule”, is formulated by Mieke Bal, notably in the first chapter of her *Travelling Concepts in the Humanities*.

³ Thomas Leitch formulates this criterion in order to identify it as fallacious. However true that may be, the fact is that this criterion still occupies a prominent position in the discourse of most film critics (cf. Vincendeau xii-xiv).

unknown, his departure from Hollywood genres, is constrained by the novel he is adapting. And he doesn't forget; indeed he says to Valerie Thomas that he wants to remain true to the novel's typical *New Yorker* style and its subject matter simply being orchids. But coupled with the absolute originality he strives for, this is quite problematic, so much so that he develops a serious writer's block. He complains about this to his lady friend Amelia, to his brother, and pretty much to anyone who wants – or doesn't want – to hear about it. After thirteen weeks he still hasn't written anything. When talking to his agent Marty, he complains about the lack of structure and narrative in the novel, and wonders why he ever assumed he could write this script: "I should have stuck with my own stuff." When Kaufman concludes that the book has no story, his agent suggests that he make one up, as Kaufman is, after all, the king of "crazy stories." But Kaufman replies: "I didn't wanna do that this time. It's someone else's material. I have a responsibility to Susan..."

This brings us to the theme of hauntology. But before we are able to develop this theme we have to take a short sidestep. This sidestep involves the terraces of Elsinore and the figure of Hamlet, haunted by a ghost. The ghost is his father, the murdered king. The sidestep involves Shakespeare's *Hamlet* as interpreted by Jacques Derrida in *Specters of Marx*. This interpretation takes up several chapters of *Specters of Marx* – if not the whole book: I will have to involve myself with some of Derrida's ghosts while ignoring others.

The tragic history of Hamlet of Denmark starts at the moment of the appearance of the ghost of his father. This appearance is, for Derrida, semantically charged in at least three important ways. Firstly, it signifies the Other in its resistance to any homogenizing mo(ve)ment, be it by way of visual identification or by way of an attempt to arrest the specter by speaking to it, or even by speaking of it, as a spectator, a scientist, a knower. Secondly and because of that, it signifies the beginning of (a) history driven by the need to identify, to know and to make it its *property*, to settle (oneself with) the unsettling power of the ghost (which is the power to unsettle, to put the time out of joint). Enter Horatio saying: "This bodes some strange eruption to our state" (1.1.69). Enter Hamlet cursing time: "The time is out of joint; O cursed spite, / That ever I was born to set it right!" (1.5.188-89). Here's where the third aspect of the semantics of the ghost is articulated: the (appearance of the) ghost announces a strange sort of ethical appeal; the notion of responsibility figures prominently in Derrida's text.

This structure of a ghostly "*non-sensuous sensuous*" (Derrida 7)⁴ that haunts the present by forcing it to perform the impossible task of 'reading' and 'interpreting' the past, of bringing about the *event* of the end of history by being responsible – which means both to respond to the unsettling address of the ghost and to act upon one's responsibility to it – is described as follows:

Let us call it a *hauntology*. This logic of haunting would not be merely larger and more powerful than an ontology or a thinking of Being.... It would harbor within itself, but like circumscribed places or particular effects, eschatology and teleology themselves. It would *comprehend* them, but incomprehensibly. (Derrida 10)⁵

Hauntology is thus a way of provisionally naming the unnamable that is circumvented by the word *différance*. It names history as delay and deferring, as difference and differing: the infinite movement 'towards' the ultimate signified – which might have everything to do with fulfilling

⁴ The italics are Derrida's as he is paraphrasing Marx's *Capital* and Althusser's dealings with it.

⁵ The question might rise whether my use of this hauntology constitutes an abuse; a misuse or perversion. I might have responded to the wrong ghosts by instrumentalizing Derrida in this way. But while this is a legitimate concern, it is already charged with some normative notion of fidelity itself. And the argument put forth in this article will culminate in the idea that the impossibility of fidelity – and thus the perversion – marks precisely every sincere engagement in what one is perverting.

the Law, but we will come back to this later.

And back to the triptych that features this notion of a hauntology. We have heard Kaufman complain about the impossibility to adapt *The Orchid Thief* and the responsibility he has to Susan Orlean. This responsibility is mirrored in a responsibility to what he does not want to call the “industry”: the Hollywood movie business in general and film executive Valerie Thomas who gave him this job in particular. He is supposed to write the screenplay for a movie, which implies some sort of adherence to filmic genres. His brother Donald unknowingly reminds him of this after coming home from one of the McKee writing seminars: “[McKee] is all for originality, just like you. It’s just... We have to realize that we all write in a genre. We must find our originality within that genre.” But that is exactly the problem: “This script I’m starting: it’s about flowers. Nobody has ever done a movie about flowers before. So... so... there are no guidelines.” Donald, on the other hand, has the confidence of knowing that his screenplay perfectly fits the thriller genre. It comes as no surprise then, that his movie is finished in no time.

Charlie Kaufman is thus haunted by his own past, his background in the Hollywood movie industry. And if we dare to put forth a position in the debate about whether Donald is really an aspect of Charlie’s personality, we might indeed interpret Donald in this way: as Charlie to the extent that he is known for at least one Hollywood hit which creates a responsibility to deliver another great screenplay. That would mean that saying Charlie is being haunted by his own past as a successful screenwriter amounts to saying that Charlie is being haunted by his alter-ego Donald.⁶ This being haunted by “the industry” is further reinforced during Charlie’s meeting with his agent Marty: when Charlie asks him if he could get him released from the assignment, Marty answers that giving ‘them’ nothing after three months would be a, let’s say, other than brilliant career move.

The first triptych, then, can be considered as picturing Kaufman wanting to do something new, something that has never been done before (evolution). He is constrained, however, by both the novel he is adapting (adaptation) and the filmic genres in which he – to some extent – still has to write (hauntology).

Evolution | Hauntology | Adaptation

But as the film progresses, a possibility to rearrange these themes announces itself. The first part of the movie revolved around the evolutionary motives that can be interpreted as mirroring Kaufman’s attempt to adapt *The Orchid Thief* in an evolutionary – and a revolutionary – way; the second part of the film shifts towards an elaboration of motives of chasing – or of hauntology.

When Kaufman seems unable to deal with his writer’s block on his own, he – somewhat reluctantly – turns to others for help. The first person he wants to talk to is Susan Orlean, but he is too shy to actually introduce himself to her when he runs into her in New York. Back in his hotel room, he talks to his agent over the phone. Marty is quite convinced that Donald’s script could make a big hit, and suggests to Kaufman that Donald might be able to offer some help in structuring the screenplay. Donald flies over to New York, and at that moment the script takes an unexpected turn – which, of course, is reflected in the movie we are watching. To make a fairly long story short: Donald meets Susan in Charlie’s place, doesn’t believe in her being sincere, starts spying on her as a result, and finally convinces Charlie that they should follow Orlean on her trip to Miami where she’ll meet Laroche: there you have your conventional Hollywood story that Charlie was aspiring not to write.

When Donald and Charlie follow Orlean and Laroche to what turns out to be a greenhouse being used for the extraction of drugs out of a special orchid variety, Charlie gets

⁶ The idea of multiple characters really being different aspects of the same person also figures prominently in *The 3*, the script Donald wrote.

caught by Orlean and Laroche. Orlean (believes she) remembers him as the screenwriter she met with in New York and freaks out, as she fears that her career as a respected journalist will be over once her secret drug addiction comes out. She sees no other option than to get Kaufman out of the way and she and Laroche drive him out to the swamp to kill him. Donald, however, manages to prevent this at the last moment and the two brothers start running through the swamp, followed by Orlean and Laroche.

This particular scene, along with Donald's interference leading up to it, can be considered the key scene for the second triptych which is dominated by the theme of hauntology. One way to articulate this line of thought is to reformulate the three aspects of hauntology identified above in terms of the scene. The first aspect of the spectral semantics – the Other's resistance to the need for visual identification and discursive analysis – is mirrored in the fact that, in the perception of Donald, Orlean is insincere during the interview: he is not able to pinpoint, to arrest Orlean simply by talking to her. This leaves him and Charlie no other option than to follow her to Miami. She can be considered, in at least two aspects, a ghost: first of all because of the fact that she's successfully analyzed the ghost that haunted her – and analysis here means literally to lay out, to decompose the orchid significantly known as the Ghost Orchid that she desperately wanted to see and that turned out to contain a psychedelic substance now making Susan into what she always wanted to be; and second of all because both Charlie and Donald feel that she holds the ultimate secret to Charlie's screenplay, the *chiffre* that they can only hope to unlock in their attempts to stage an end to the tragic history of the adaptation process. And that is, at the same time, the second piece of spectral semantics that should be considered here: the fact that the secret locked in Orlean is what triggers the narrative history as she haunts Charlie while she is at the same time unwilling to unlock what is locked and make available to him the Holy Grail of the essence of the novel – which is to have a passion like the one she finally found in the orchid drugs. And while Charlie may say that he should have stuck with his own stuff, the real question is whether he really still had that choice after reading the novel: wasn't he already haunted by having the notion of passion figure as the central concern of his adaptation before he even started talking to Valerie Thomas? However this may be, the movie starts with one of Charlie's monologues in which his utter indecisiveness goes hand in hand with his self-loathing due to precisely this aspect of his personality. And exactly this indecisiveness also plays a part in the third aspect of the spectral semantics: the responsibility that he feels towards Susan and her "typical *New Yorker* style." Charlie seems to forget that taking one's responsibility is an act, and therefore an activity that takes action: one has to engage oneself with certain ghosts while dismissing others (Derrida 16). He cannot simply "remain true" to Orleans style – or her subject matter for that matter; he cannot not decide to focus on certain aspects of the novel while leaving out others.

To sum it up: Orlean chasing Charlie through the swamp is semantically significant in that it articulates the hauntological dynamics between the two characters. All this is brought about by Donald at the moment he starts assisting Charlie in the adaptation process.

When we shift focus, then, to the theme of evolution as it functions in this triptych, some other peculiarities present themselves. This time they have to do with the relationship between Charlie and Donald. Shortly after the brief overview of the history of the world, when Kaufman comes home and we meet Donald, we see him lying on the ground. He declares that his back hurts. Then, when he tells Charlie about the writing class and Charlie starts lecturing Donald, we see him enter Charlie's room crawling on hands and knees. The attentive viewer might see some reference to the apes erecting themselves in the previous scene, which announces at least the possibility that Donald can be interpreted in terms of the evolutionary motive. And after multiple occasions on which Charlie criticizes Donald who replies with a humble "Oh, OK, sorry...", this interpretive potential is actualized when Charlie, contemplating about a possible beginning of the movie (the one that features the history of the world), is interrupted by Donald

coming home from one of the McKee sessions. Donald starts talking about being original within your genre (previously cited), but instead of belittling his brother Charlie simply mumbles: “You and I share the same DNA....” The ‘ape-like’ Donald becomes Charlie’s equal: he’s evolved. And we have already seen that Donald’s development didn’t stop there. He delivers a winning screenplay and starts assisting his brother. And when the two brothers are hiding in the swamp, they start talking about when they were young. Charlie, still feeling that his brother is and always has been oblivious, recounts a high school episode in which Donald talked to a pretty girl and walked away smiling, when the girl started making fun of him. Charlie still supposes that Donald had no idea, but as a matter of fact he did; he just didn’t care: “You are what you love. Not what loves you.” Charlie starts crying, not knowing how to thank his brother. In other words: the student has surpassed the teacher. Charlie doesn’t have to lecture Donald on life anymore; it’s the other way around.

This in turn sheds an interesting light on the third theme. The process of adaptation again plays its role in this second triptych, but it differs significantly from its functioning in the first – which featured a troubled writer unable to organize his material and master his thoughts. The writer, as a subject aspiring for control and mastery, has disappeared. We see a fragmented self, a ‘Kaufman’ not unambiguously dividable in a ‘Charlie’ and a ‘Donald’. This fragmented self does not have one but multiple agents who, to make matters even worse, can barely be considered in control as they are being haunted through both the swamp and the adaptation process.

The ending of the movie, seen in this light, is quite interesting. After Donald is killed during the chase in the swamp, Laroche is taken down by a crocodile. Susan is crushed because of this, which gives Charlie the opportunity to escape. The last scene of the movie shows Charlie Kaufman driving out of a parking filled with hope because he knows how to end his script – which should feature Charlie Kaufman driving out of a parking filled with hope because he knows how to end his script. But where does the hope come from? He just lost what, in the reality of the movie, appeared to be his brother, and he is filled with hope? I would think that such a tragic loss would rob the world of its meaning, at least for a considerable amount of time. But Charlie is filled with hope. Or is this hope brought about precisely by the death of his brother? – or by Susan ceasing the chase? – or both? Did Charlie perhaps regain control? Did the death of his brother restore a sense of subjectivity, of mastery?

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But what, then, did he master? Has he finally found the Holy Grail? Is it really becoming clear to him how he has to finish the movie? And if so, why should we assume that he will not get home only in order to once again dismiss an insight he considered brilliant just a few minutes ago? But if that were the case, one might object, we would not have seen this movie, as such a scenario would essentially alter the movie due to its self-referentiality. What are we to make of this in light of what we have seen so far?

Let us first recapitulate. Charlie Kaufman has trouble positioning himself between the different norms that govern the discourse on screenwriting in general and adaptation practices in particular. On the one hand he feels torn between his responsibility towards both Susan Orlean’s “typical *New Yorker* style” and the movie industry that expects a story, however weird it may be. (In fact, that typical *New Yorker* style becomes “sprawling *New Yorker* shit” once Kaufman is confronted with the necessity and the impossibility to structure Orlean’s novel.) And if that is not enough of a problem, he is further weighed down by the norm of originality that results from his own aspirations to be a serious writer. We’ve traced Kaufman’s dealings with these norms throughout the movie in light of the themes of hauntology and evolution. The adaptation would then amount to a successful negotiation of these problems. If we remember the conversation between Laroche and Orlean on evolution and human memory, it becomes

clear that from the viewpoint of Orlean – to whom Kaufman should be faithful according to the norms imposed on him – adaptation, however it refers to figuring out “how to thrive in the world”, is “like running away.” A successful negotiation of the problems, then, is staking out one’s own place in the world by betraying what came before. These semantics make adaptation a potentially violent endeavor in that it implies the death of what is ancestral: the death of the ghostly father.

But let us not rush things. Let us first get back to the question of whether Kaufman succeeds in adapting. In the first analysis, this seems the case indeed: he – finally – has an idea about how to finish the movie as we have already seen. But to what thing will this ending provide the end? Or, to put it somewhat differently and in a negative fashion: Kaufman might have an ending for his script, but he does not have a script. The whole film is composed from false beginnings, ideas that Kaufman conjured up only to dismiss later on. He is not in charge of the film and he has never been; the film befell him. The mastery that is supposedly restored by the death of his alter ego is a mastery over nothing, and can therefore only be illusionary. He has never been able to stake out a position of his own at the expense of the ghosts that haunt him. On the contrary: what we see on the screen is what it is precisely because of his failure to properly adapt the novel and to make a movie simply about flowers – or about having a passion for that matter, as his passion precisely *is* to do a movie simply about flowers.

Does this then mean that there can be no such thing as adapting a novel to the screen? Of course not. Such a claim would even be counterfactual as it happens all the time; one only has to think of the film series based on J.K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* books – which is officially the most successful film series to date –, and the examples proliferate considerably as soon as one starts paying attention to it. What is denied in *Adaptation*, is not the possibility of the adaptation. After all, we are able to watch this movie based on Susan Orlean’s *The Orchid Thief*. *Adaptation*, only claims that the process of adapting is governed by laws, and it reminds us of the nature of these laws: they cannot be fulfilled.

Such a conception of the law is a recurring theme both in literature and literary criticism. One only has to turn to some of the works of for example Kafka or Coetzee to find some of the many literary examples, while the principal critical stand on the notion of law can be found in (Lacanian) psychoanalysis. But however interesting either a comparative study – focusing on the characters of Kaufman and Mr K – or a psychoanalytical interpretation might be, we will not get into this here.

We should, however, and in conclusion of our discourse, point to the relation between the structure of *différance* and hauntology on the one hand and the law on the other, as played out in *Adaptation*.. For if it is impossible to fulfill the law right now, one might want to know when this impossibility is lifted. Or does one? Is it really that tempting to once be able to pinpoint any given story for all eternity? To exactly capture its essence? Or could it be that the textual structure of any work of art, its elusiveness, its successful resistance to attempts at totalizing interpretations, in short its differing/deferring of meaning, is precisely what appeals to the interpreter and what makes it a work of art? It is difficult to imagine Kaufman being so fascinated by the novel if he would have adapted it overnight. If the delay of *différance* would ever end in the culmination of the transcendental signified as the point that fixes all meaning – even if only after the end of history – literature, as well as art in general, may well lose its appeal.

The form of the triptych itself might have been the first thematization of the relation between aporia and fascination. As triptychs were usually part of an altarpiece, it could be – and frequently was – closed, preventing the congregation from being able to see its contents at will. And although we should not speculate on the intentions behind closing such a triptych, we can certainly understand how its appeal derives from its inaccessibility and therefore its mystery. We should remember that when we feel the need to criticize an adaptation, for

precisely its necessary failure testifies to this fascinating thing called art – to which the adaptation itself belongs.

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Summary

Within the theoretical framework as formulated by Jacques Derrida in Specters of Marx, Spike Jonze's and Charlie Kaufman's Adaptation. can be interpreted as a generic account of what is happening when a novel is adapted to the screen. The film shows how this process is structured around the fidelity criterion on the one hand and the demand of originality on the other. In focusing on these two themes and tracing the ways in which they interconnect and ultimately seem to cancel each other out, the film proposes to consider failure to be essential to the process of adaptation.

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