

# THE PHILOSOPHY OF **CHARLIE KAUFMAN**

Edited by  
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THE UNIVERSITY PRESS OF KENTUCKY

# CHARLIE KAUFMAN, SCREENWRITER

*K. L. Evans*

Does the film *Adaptation*, written by Charlie Kaufman and featuring a protagonist named Charlie Kaufman, chronicle Charlie Kaufman's actual experience? Is it memoir? Undoubtedly the predicament that so overtaxes the character Charlie Kaufman (Nicolas Cage), his great effort to fashion meditative journalism into a feature film, is analogous to the difficult, unpleasant, and embarrassing situation the real Charlie Kaufman finds himself in. Before it becomes the stuff of his fiction, Kaufman has in fact been hired to adapt for the screen Susan Orlean's *The Orchid Thief*, and in his imaginative rendering of this event a writer's false starts, his confusion about the nature of his project, are truthfully depicted. In evidence, too, is something of Kaufman's own mortification about his professional position or standing—hagrin deeper than that occasioned by obligation, by his having accepted an advance for work he said he could do.<sup>1</sup> For Kaufman, taking on the orchid script means confronting a problem bigger than the task at hand. If he is going to continue to exist as a Hollywood screenwriter, if he's going to survive or remain relevant in the economically driven moviemaking "industry," he must show why imaginative writing (even—or especially—in films, where the temptation to think otherwise is great) doesn't merely reflect or transcribe Reality—why a *writer* is someone who keeps his audience in the affecting atmosphere of an event whose reference is not fixed.<sup>2</sup> Kaufman is charged, or feels charged, with making viewers formally aware of the puzzling character of fiction.

For these reasons we must learn to say that *nothing* in this film is referential. Even the name "Charlie Kaufman" is used to reveal the difference between works of the imagination and everything that can or has happened in real life. We can't say that the Charlie Kaufman who, in *Adaptation*, agrees to turn *The Orchid Thief* into a screenplay is the Charlie Kaufman who, in

his independent life as a screenwriter, agrees to the same, just as we can't say that the character Susan Orlean (Meryl Streep) is Susan Orlean, staff writer for *The New Yorker*, or that Robert McKee (Brian Cox) is screenwriting guru Robert McKee.<sup>3</sup> The difference is everywhere apparent. The difference is made obvious by the fact that the names are identical; if Kaufman had based his characters on these actual people and given them different names it would be easier to suggest a correspondence between the story and real life. As it is, the film's audience needs no reporter to inform us, as industry analyst Rob Feld does, that Kaufman is "slight and with a full head of wild hair—nothing like the overweight and balding Nicholas Cage in *Adaptation*."<sup>4</sup> We already *know* that Nicholas Cage as Charlie Kaufman is not Charlie Kaufman; and by the time this stale news arrives, we have enjoyed from inside the joke about who should "play" whom in a Hollywood production. When, for instance, avant-garde orchid poacher John Laroche (Chris Cooper) charms Orlean by asking, "Who's gonna play me?" in the movie about his life, then shrewdly suggests: "I think I should play me."<sup>5</sup>

If it's not going to remain an academic distinction, the contest, or contrast, between imaginative writing and reflective journalism should have a kind of life in the film itself. It ought to be part of the action—or, more accurately, power the action: Kaufman's preoccupation with the difference between making (*poesis*, the feat of giving form and pressure to an imagined reality) and imitating (*mimesis*, the business of reproducing or representing preexisting reality) must be what gives the film its tense, gripping quality. That is the reason Kaufman has included in the film's story line the same conditions that affect his life and are beyond his control. In *Adaptation*, both Orlean and Orlean's nonfiction account of Florida's flower-selling subculture, the widely celebrated piece of reporting titled *The Orchid Thief*, have actual existence. And yet Charlie Kaufman's adaptation of this material, the commissioned screenplay, must also exist, and on its own terms, which for Charlie means figuring out how to dramatize Orlean's prose without tapping into the "artificially plot-driven" master-patterns from which most movies are cut.

"I wanted to present it simply," Charlie tells Robert McKee, after he's begun to lose faith in his ability. "I wanted to show flowers as God's miracles. I wanted to show that Orlean never saw the blooming ghost orchid. It was about disappointment."

"That's not a movie," counters McKee. "You gotta go back, put in the drama."<sup>6</sup> According to McKee, a story's drama is ignited when characters' emotional or intellectual change brings about a big ending. ("Wow them in

the end and you've got a hit. You can have flaws, problems, but wow them in the end and you've got a hit.") But the spectacle that ends *Adaptation* can't be emotionally involving because, in an early scene, Charlie has already itemized these routine methods of animating scripts, and so highlighted their absurdity: "I just don't want to ruin it by making it a Hollywood thing," he tells Valerie, the literary agent (Tilda Swinton).<sup>7</sup> "Like an orchid heist movie or something, or, y'know, changing the orchids into poppies and turning it into a movie about drug running, you know?" Charlie is sweating and twitching but sincere, and his observations are deeply insightful: "It's like, I don't want to cram in sex or guns or car chases. You know? Or characters learning profound life lessons. Or growing, or coming to like each other, or overcoming obstacles to succeed in the end." The essential idea he tries to convey is nearly incomprehensible to Valerie, but not to the film's viewers, who begin to chafe, like Charlie, at the restrictions limiting a writer's freedom to think and work spontaneously.

"Why can't there be a movie simply about flowers?" Charlie repeatedly asks, and the refrain becomes a way to describe the kind of film he wants to make, the kind nobody has ever seen before.

"I wanted to do something simple," Charlie tells his vulgar agent, Marty (Ron Livingston). "I wanted to show people how amazing flowers are."<sup>8</sup>

"Are they amazing?" Marty asks skeptically, fairly representing mainstream movie audiences' aversion to work that departs from traditional forms.

"I don't know," Charlie replies. "I think they are." Then, as the hopelessness of his task presses down upon him: "I need you to get me out of this."

## Creatio Ex Nihilo

"Writing is a journey into the unknown. It's not . . . building one of your model airplanes!"<sup>9</sup> Charlie tells his twin brother Donald, a "writer" who is happy to imitate earlier works, who tries in various ways to convince Charlie that good writing requires learning a set of rules or guidelines, and who, as Charlie's script orbits ever wider from some ideal Hollywood template, becomes the means of reintroducing commerce with the real world—the world with which Charlie, surrounded by reams of his own writing, appears to have lost touch—the world in which Susan Orlean might really be a lesbian or porn-star junkie, in which people really do die, or fall in and out of love, or say wise things to each other. Forgotten, of course, as Donald coaches

his brother in the truth of cliché, is Charlie's early warning that these kinds of "teachers are dangerous if your goal is to try to do something new. And a writer should always have that goal."<sup>10</sup>

If Charlie is going to turn the orchid book into the kind of singular, inventive script he admires, if he is earnest about his desire to "grow as a writer," he must discover how it is possible to fulfill his obligation to what he calls "Susan's material,"<sup>11</sup> her compelling, personal observations on real-life events—what in his early stages of writing Charlie calls "that wonderful, sprawling, *New Yorker* stuff" and later, as he feels himself mired in it, "that sprawling *New Yorker* shit"—and simultaneously create something that has a life of its own, the imagined world of a feature film. He must bring *images* to life. Or, rather than imitate life, he must make something out of nothing.

This does not mean that in *Adaptation* Kaufman has taken for himself the role of God. True, at the film's close, Charlie puts the last touches on the world he's made, an orderly world wrought from an original chaos, by narrating his withdrawal from it. And in the darkness of the film's beginning it is Charlie's voice that brings about the fact of existence by constructing an account of it—an expression of remorse that, offered as a kind of apology for his existence, also formally justifies it. But as day follows darkness (for this is a *Jewish* story) and a hand-held video camera captures Charlie, standing awkwardly by himself, on the set of *Being John Malkovich*, the depiction of "Charlie Kaufman, Screenwriter" that the film offers is of a man struggling for the preservation of his status *as* a man, with all the anxiety about authority that that implies: "What am I doing here?" Charlie wonders in voice-over narration. "Why did I bother to come here today? Nobody even seems to know my name. I've been on this planet for forty years, and I'm no closer to understanding a single thing. Why am I here? How did I get here?"<sup>12</sup> Though these unanswerable doubts only intensify Charlie's loneliness and indecision, they confirm Kaufman's identification with the fallible human material from which God eventually chooses one man to bless with redemptive purpose.<sup>13</sup>

Whatever gets cooked up in *Adaptation* will be man-made, but—and here is where it gets interesting—assembled in a way that suggests supernatural, rather than natural, agency. That is the reason why the film feels internally generated, much like great works of literature. In these works of the imagination something is engendered, as celebrated literary critic Geoffrey Hartman writes, "from what is barely seen or grasped . . . [the] air, as in omens, thickens, becomes concrete, theriomorphic, auguring; and to air there corresponds the airy womb of the imagination,"<sup>14</sup> which likewise

thickens into a projection, a formation, a protuberance, like the one named Charlie Kaufman, for instance.

If we think of *Adaptation* as a story of creation (and the extent to which it resembles the book of Genesis encourages this view), it is the kind of story in which man is able to imagine people, things, and events—to bring them into existence—without needing to ground his imagination in a prior reality, and without having his imaginative powers held against him, as evidence, say, of his inability to perceive the world objectively. In the film, the second freedom is secured by the fact that Charlie’s incapacity to perceive the world without predisposition or prejudice is, from the beginning, the means of establishing his existence, and so can’t be understood as a disadvantage or weakness. And the first freedom, founded on the disjunction between imagination and reality (the reason, for instance, that the name “Charlie Kaufman” does not have a direct connection to the incontestably real man who goes by that name), is licensed by an initial establishing shot of original darkness, suggesting that the world *before* the world established by the space of agency was “tohu and bohu,” without form and void. Nothing exists or happens before this story, that is; nothing authorizes it but the telling.

## Genesis

Needless to say, beginning such a story is difficult, because it is hard to begin with this kind of beginning and not try to go further back. Charlie’s numerous false starts, his trouble meeting his deadline, have to do with his realization that in order “to write about a flower, to dramatize a flower,” he has to “show the flower’s arc. And the flower’s arc stretches back to the beginning of life.”<sup>15</sup> Given that “probably all the organic beings which have ever lived on this earth,” as Darwin hypothesized, “have descended from some one primordial form into which life was first breathed,” the orchid’s arc includes the entirety of life. If Charlie wants to understand the flower’s evolution (“How did this flower get here? What was its journey?”), he’ll have to make sense of, make story out of, the natural or artificially induced process by which *all* new and different organisms develop and relate: “Adaptation. The journey we all take. A journey that unites each and every one of us.”

However profound Charlie’s discovery, it is also debilitating. For what at first seems like the breakthrough he’d been looking for, the way to tie everything in the story together, in fact makes his own project that much less

manageable. “Darwin writes that we all come from the very first single cell organism,” thinks Charlie, puzzling over the orchid script, as usual, in the gloom and isolation of his bedroom. “Yet here I am . . . And there’s Laroche . . . And there’s Orlean . . . And there’s the ghost orchid . . . All trapped in our own bodies, in moments of history. That’s it. That’s what I need to do. Tie all of history together!” He grabs a mini-recorder and, shucking off weeks of dejection, speaks with the breathless anticipation of a man who at last has something to say: “Start right before life begins on the planet. All is . . . lifeless. And then, like, life begins. Um . . . with organisms. Those little single cell ones . . . Uh, from there we go to bigger things. Jellyfish. And then that fish that got legs on it and crawled out on the land. And then we see, you know, like, um, dinosaurs. And then they’re around for a long, long time. And then, and then an asteroid comes and, and . . .”<sup>16</sup>

But the longer this succession goes on, the more questionable it seems, and as Charlie listens to the tape-recorded playback of his new idea his mood shifts from unchecked enthusiasm to acute despair. “The insects, the simple mammals, the primates, monkeys”—Charlie’s taped voice is no less fervent, but his flat, listening face lends the monologue a frantic air, and we start to hear, as he has, the absurdity of his pedestrian logic: “The simple monkeys. The, the old-fashioned monkeys giving way to the new monkeys. Whatever. And then the apes—Whatever. And, and man. Then we see the whole history of human civilization—hunting and gathering, farming, uh, Bronze age, war, love, religion, heartache, disease, loneliness, technology . . .”<sup>17</sup>

By stringing together sequentially the very things and events whose nonlinear arrangement he’s promised to account for, Charlie exposes the gaps such chains of causation inevitably contain. From single-cell organisms he must leap to “bigger things,” to “Jellyfish,” and his “likes” and “ums” and “you knows” (“And then we see, you know, like, um, dinosaurs”) communicate his apprehension that this will not do: that the way “the old-fashioned monkeys” evolved into the “the new monkeys” is not at all clear; that the process by which “apes” undergo the change into “man” can’t be spanned by the conjunction “and”—that “apes” and “man” do not have the same nominal value, just as “Bronze Age” doesn’t quite follow “farming.” And yet if the links between adjacent but unlike organisms are weak, it is precisely this permeability that leaves room for something never before seen, something not from the first instance encoded.

Like Darwin, Charlie has discovered that there is no end to the number

of new life forms on the planet, no end to creation, which occurs not only in the beginning but also over and over again. This fortifies his initial hypothesis that there is no limit to the number of categories artistic works can be divided into, since, as his own film will demonstrate, new kinds of films are always emerging. (McKee might be a “genius,” as Donald insists, but there is something blinkered about his assertion that screenwriters must discover their inventiveness within preexisting genres, especially when this assurance is accompanied by the declaration, as Donald reports, that, “there hasn’t been a new genre since Fellini invented the mockumentary.”)<sup>18</sup> Charlie’s conviction that a writer must always “try to do something new,” however—that this is the way to create a “reflection of the real world,” where new things are emerging all the time—has less to do with originality than with history, with his desire to overturn a trite concept of history that informs his fellow screenwriters’ sense of story.

*Story* is the title of both McKee’s 1997 best seller and his screenwriting seminar, the transformative business in which people like Donald learn, in three days, how stories begin, and—through a long chain of causes and effects that push the story along—end. They learn about the way a protagonist undergoes change and how such changes are borne out by the story’s conclusion. According to McKee, a story’s end always justifies its means. But what happens when a story has no end? *Adaptation*’s final or concluding scenes (already undone, as we have previously said, by its premise) makes this a film without end, a film, we might say, that is all beginning. And as Kenneth Dauber argues, it is worth pondering the meaning of a beginning without end: “Without the idea of an end, causes and effects will appear not as a chain but as a network and not even as a network but as a set of reciprocal and overdetermined influences impossible to get behind. Without an end to recast the beginning as the beginning of an end, that is, beginnings will occur not only in the beginning but over and over again at every moment, in each and every action.”<sup>19</sup>

The idea of a beginning without end is one Dauber finds in Genesis, the history, or origin of our idea of history, most directly at odds with what McKee calls story’s “eternal, universal” form—the beginning, middle, and end structure that owes more to Hellenistic culture than Judaic tradition, in which, on the contrary, the idea of an end is a late addition, in which the beginning (“In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth”) goes on indefinitely, in which the beginning is “always now.”<sup>20</sup>

In Dauber’s reading, Genesis offers a genealogy that, in order to raise

questions about the continuity of its “chain of ‘begat’s,” officially includes spaces between its links—for example, “the nonlinked link” that “relates Jesus to the Davidic line through the nonfather Joseph.” By this measure Genesis itself draws attention to the uncertainty, the caprice, Darwin’s theory of evolution is at pains to accentuate.<sup>21</sup> This is hard news for man, who must discover in even “that most seemingly deterministic of histories . . . not the certainty of existence well placed, but the burden of placing [himself] instead.”<sup>22</sup> When Creation implies a beginning without end—a world, therefore, in which particular effects are no longer the certain or natural result of specific causes—the consequences for man’s actions, what is required of him *as* a man, are significant. Without underlying laws or principles to govern his behavior, despite his skepticism or even because of it, he must figure out for himself the extent of his capacity to act in the world. Who’s to say what effects his choices will have? But he is nevertheless responsible for the *means* by which these effects are achieved, for in the picture of history Genesis introduces, “there are no ends to excuse one’s means.”<sup>23</sup>

How different is McKee’s picture of the world (or is it Aristotle’s?), in which the final act, the big ending, the “big payoff,”<sup>24</sup> to turn from theology to the language of screenwriting, is what “makes the film,”<sup>25</sup> as McKee promises, and excuses whatever means were necessary to achieve it. A writer who can “wow them in the end” is released from any obligation to the film’s system of reasoning and inference—what Charlie, who is always observant of this logic, calls the “reality of the film,” and Donald, who doesn’t understand this logic and repeatedly abuses it, has no words for whatsoever.<sup>26</sup>

For all his savvy, then, McKee’s instructions are only suitable for writers who do not consider writing “a journey into the unknown,” a chance to make “something new.” That is why Charlie does not share McKee’s poetics, or why he feels the burden of writing in a way that Donald does not—why Donald is McKee’s natural heir, his right beneficiary, happy to discover a reliable method for putting together a script, and quick to make use of a set of established or fundamental beliefs. “A principle says this works,” intones Donald, reciting one of McKee’s tenets, “and has through recorded time.”<sup>27</sup> But time, the dimension that enables events to be distinguished by the interval between them, collapses when, as in Genesis, “everything becomes, as it were, a beginning of everything else simultaneously.”<sup>28</sup> In the tradition to which Charlie is intellectually beholden, we should understand, a principle is no different than a rule, and, since rule-following presupposes the existence of regular practices, a rule is no real help at all.

## The Orchid Script

So, between the twin screenwriters Charlie and Donald Kaufman, it is just Charlie who properly understands writerly agency, the extent of the writer's responsibility to the world he is making. That suggests a difference in kind, and not just quality, in the scripts they produce. What sort of script does Charlie create, after all? Is what makes his script different from Donald's *The 3* the fact that it is "about flowers," as Charlie says? Or, since Charlie's film takes part in its own reproduction, since it is sustained by the internal force of its style, could we say that the script is itself a kind of flower? Isn't the orchid script come into bud, *Adaptation*, the flower whose "arc" Charlie must show?

If flowers are "God's miracles," as Charlie suggests, and thus events that appear to be contrary to the laws of nature, thinking of the script as a flower means remembering that there is no broadly applicable principle that guarantees these phenomena—that, as with all flowers that aren't simple, self-pollinating weeds, much depends on circumstance, on the spread of pollen from one plant to another, either by the wind or birds or insects. Besides, if *Adaptation* is a flower, it's not just any flower but an orchid, which, as Darwin says, requires an almost perfect contrivance for its fertilization. "No one knows whether orchids evolved to complement insects or whether the orchids evolved first, or whether somehow these two life forms evolved simultaneously, which might explain how two totally different living things came to depend on each other," Susan Orlean (Susan Orlean)<sup>29</sup> reports in *The Orchid Thief*:

The harmony between an orchid and its pollinator is so perfect that it is kind of eerie. Darwin loved studying orchids. In his writings he often described them as "my beloved Orchids" and was so certain that they were the pinnacle of evolutionary transformation that he once wrote that it would be "incredibly monstrous to look at an Orchid as having been created as we now see it."<sup>30</sup>

Orchids have extraordinary requirements and conditions for life, in part because the schemes they use to attract pollinators are "elegant but low percentage," as Orlean writes.<sup>31</sup> Wild orchids, in particular, "will usually flourish and produce seeds only if they are in their own little universe with their favorite combination of water and light and temperature and breeze,

with the perfect tree bark at the perfect angle, and with the precise kind of bugs and the exact kind of flotsam falling on their roots and into their flowers. Many species of wild orchids aren't propagated commercially, either because they aren't that pretty or because no one has been able to figure out and reproduce exactly what they want and need to survive."<sup>32</sup>

If Kaufman's script is a flower, then like several species of orchid it is going to "either live wild or die." Its success or fruition will depend on what Kaufman in an interview calls "fortuitous accidents," something going on that he's "unaware of," a recurring or unifying idea that over time comes to the fore.<sup>33</sup> Most screenwriters don't operate that way. (In "How to Write a Movie in 21 Days," Viki King explains that "by page 45, your hero has reacted to what happened on page 30. He is now different, and we begin to see that here, in a symbolic scene.")<sup>34</sup> Because Kaufman can't predict what kind of flotsam will be falling into his life, his writing process is undomesticated, impulsive: "It's a bit scary and fun" for the reason that there's no way to know "how it's going to end."<sup>35</sup>

Thinking about *Adaptation* as a flower or flowering thing means, for a critic, thinking about the intricate, variable contrivance that enabled its production. This is not the case if we imagine the script as Kaufman's "way to dramatize the idea of a flower," as Rob Feld posits in his interview with Kaufman and Spike Jonze. "Do you know what the device was that manages to dramatize that flower?" Feld asks, inviting from the film's writer and director the same bemused silence an earlier bit of "industry" nonsense had solicited ("Are there common themes you each find yourselves gravitating towards, or that you find yourselves accentuating as you execute the material?").<sup>36</sup> The fact is, the idea of "dramatizing a flower" is just, well, stupid, unless it is interpreted to suggest the process of making a different kind of life from something that already has a kind of life. The ghost orchid, *Polyrrhiza Lindenii*, which grows nowhere in this country but the Fakahatchee, has a life, and John Laroche, "who'd been fooling around with ghost orchids for years" and "claimed he was one of the only people in the world who'd solved the puzzle of how to clone and grow them," had a plan to give it a different kind of life. For that matter John Laroche has a life, and when Susan Orlean decides to go down to Florida and "follow him around," recording the things he says and putting them into her book, she gives him a different kind of life. And of course Orleans's *The Orchid Thief* has a life as a "New York Times Notable Book," a best seller on the nonfiction lists, and when Kaufman adapts it into a screenplay, he must give it a different kind of life--which is all to

say that what Kaufman makes must have a life of its own; and although, as with orchids, his manner of realizing this living thing might appear to have “been modeled in the wildest caprice,” as Darwin writes, that “is no doubt due to our ignorance” of this living thing’s requirements and conditions.

What Kaufman shares with Laroche is an interest in, and talent for, simulating the conditions in which wild things can grow. “Almost anyone who wants a wild orchid now has to steal it from the woods themselves or buy it on the black market from someone else who had,”<sup>37</sup> Orlean reports. But Laroche planned to give the Seminoles a laboratory where they could propagate their own wild orchids. “Sure, the Seminoles could just go into their back yard and dig up grass and twigs and sell it at the nursery,” he tells Orlean. “Well, big fucking deal. On the other hand, a lab is a fucking *great* idea. It is a *superior* idea . . . I wanted to bring a little flair to the place. Screw wax myrtles! Screw saw grass! A lab is the way to make real money, not growing *grass*.”<sup>38</sup>

Understanding Laroche means understanding how his interest in remarkable, sublime achievements, in figuring out how to manufacture “God’s miracles,” far outweighs his concern for fast profits. Laroche is always talking about being a millionaire, about being “*completely* set for life,” but it’s easy to see from what he says to Orlean that for him wealth stands for the recognition of ingeniousness and that what really matters is cleverness and imagination, being resourceful and inventive. “If you could figure out how to housebreak any wild orchid, especially a pretty one like the ghost orchid, you would probably become a rich person,”<sup>39</sup> writes Orlean, somewhat skeptical of Laroche’s powers, and mistaken about the difference between commercialized domestication (the “How to Grow an Orchid in 21 Days” plan she imagines Laroche marketing) and what Laroche envisions for the lab—a “huge operation,” a strange and exceptional place in which Laroche and the Seminoles could cross-pollinate different orchids and invent hybrids, fool around with mutation and “end up with some cool stuff and some ugly stuff and stuff no one has ever seen before,” generate new living things, “and then get to introduce them to the world and, like Adam, name the living things.”<sup>40</sup>

“See, my whole life,” Laroche tells Orlean, “I’ve been looking for a god-damn profitable plant.” For Laroche that doesn’t mean finding “a really nice-looking lawn grass” and producing enough seeds to mass-market it, the way a friend of his did. “I’m not into lawn grass,” Laroche says. It means making homegrown ghost orchids that rich collectors—whom he loathes, who think

of him as “a criminal”—will clamor for. “I’m bad news in the plant world,” Laroche tells Orlean, sounding pleased. “They want me *dead*. I’m serious . . . And to be honest, I feel the same way towards them.”<sup>41</sup>

In a way, Kaufman is in the same boat. He must create a living thing from “Susan’s material”—something new, something no one’s ever seen before. And having his ingeniousness recognized (finding commercial success for the wildly inventive *Being John Malkovich*, for example) means convincing people he loathes and who loathe him, agents and industry types, to buy what he makes. Whatever he writes, moreover, must adhere to an internal logic. This logic, the “reality of the movie,” can’t be affected by exterior ties, as in the case of nonfiction, by what actually happens in the world, and can’t depend on devices not available to writers—for instance, the “trick photography” Donald wants to use in his thriller in order to “have somebody held prisoner in a basement and working in a police station at the same time,” the multiple personality “twist” Charlie tells him “there’s no way to write.”<sup>42</sup> And Charlie manages to do it. The orchid script grows, and he sells it, and it doesn’t really have an end but it does have “drama,” and not because he avoids the essential character of creative writing, the alarming, unpredictable, time-consuming work of the imagination, but because he’s accounted for those qualities that make writing creative—proven his responsibility to the world he’s made by showing there is nothing in the writing for which he is not responsible, nothing he’s just found in the backyard, nothing he’s simply imported from nature.

In that way, Kaufman and Laroche are the same. Orlean calls Laroche a “thief,” but in this she is wrong. She thinks he’s the definitive example of the sort of people who are “wrapped up in their special passion for the natural world,” who are “enthralled” by the things they find there, and who “pursue them like lovers.”<sup>43</sup> But Laroche, like Kaufman, is a creator. He’d rather make than find or steal. And when Kaufman makes characters of these real people, when he puts them in the real world of the film, behind which we never get, he gives us an Orlean who is bent on a romantic pursuit of something in nature, a Laroche who makes ghost orchids. Although Rob Feld describes *Adaptation* as a film “about a writer who becomes fixated on the woman whose experience he’s trying to represent in his writing,”<sup>44</sup> Kaufman in fact is absorbed by nothing like Susan Orlean’s actual experience, and the story he puts together features a writer who is able to survive as a writer—someone, that is, both genuinely interested in people like Orlean and Laroche and not at all interested in finding out about them.

## A Goddamn Profitable Plant

The irony at the heart of *The Orchid Thief* is that it is Orlean, and not Laroche, who makes money off the ghost orchid—that this talented but fastidious New Yorker is the one who finally manages to smuggle something precious out of the Fakahatchee. What Orlean takes home is not an orchid, of course (she was so leery of getting hooked on orchid collecting she gave away every plant she was given) but the man who wants to make them, the unnaturally adaptable Laroche himself, who, like all things gorgeous and good at surviving, thrives because he takes himself out of competition, because he learns to position himself above the common fray.

Orlean, who when interviewed describes Laroche as having “a grand self-image,” would no doubt find this view of him too generous. “Laroche has a vision of himself as something larger than life,” she says critically.<sup>45</sup> But Orlean’s misreading of Laroche, her condescension toward him, unchecked to the end (transformed in the film, where her disdain melts in the face of Laroche’s very real attractions), is a telling instance of the distance Orlean imagines between herself and her subject, a distance she describes in her writing and also preserves *through* her writing, the kind of storytelling that deals only with “what really exists” and what actually happens.

Perhaps that is why in *Adaptation*, Orlean, unlike Charlie, has no trouble at all beginning her story. We see her fingers move gracefully over the computer keyboard as she works, and we listen to her confident, mellifluous voice describing realms unknown yet not unfamiliar: “Orchid hunting is a mortal occupation,” she notes, and we believe her. “John Laroche is a tall guy, skinny as a stick. . . .” The writing comes easy because her subject is all before her. Her subject is something she happens upon—or fails to spot—in the world. For such writers the world *before* the world that writing opens up (the world itself, like Florida itself, to which Orlean keeps returning) is the one that contains riches, and an adept writer plunders them. That is why in *Adaptation* one of Orlean’s sneering New York friends says of Laroche, Orlean’s latest find, “Sounds like a goldmine, Sue.”<sup>46</sup>

Accordingly the outlook and tactics of the Orlean of *Adaptation* are not unlike those of the Orlean who authored *The Orchid Thief*, the Orlean who is not Meryl Streep. Orlean has interviewed Laroche. She’s logged countless hours with orchid collectors, horticulturists, and Seminole Tribe members. She’s even tramped through the Fakahatchee swamps, and though we’re delighted with her eloquence and her memorable, slightly haunting

observations (“Laroche loved orchids, but I came to believe that he loved the difficulty and fatality of getting them almost as much as he loved the orchids themselves”), her work is affecting because it provides instruction about mysterious, alluring worlds we previously had no sense of—orchid poaching and selling and cloning—and then shows why the more we learn about these worlds the better we’ll know our own. As admiring reviewer, James W. Hall, writes, “*The Orchid Thief* is everything we expect from the very best literature. It opens our eyes to an extraordinary new universe and stirs our passion for the people who populate the world.”<sup>47</sup> In Hall’s realist tradition, literature’s best use is the heightened feeling it gives us for the world we live in, and in this way wakes us to a “new universe.”

The basic premise of such work is that the untrained observer, who knows about orchids but doesn’t think about them, who reads the news but hasn’t a reporter’s nose for the *story*, is missing something the writer can provide, some insight about the world or the people in it that follows as the consequence of the special way the facts are gathered and presented. “Sometimes this kind of story turns out to be something more,” Orlean writes in the book’s introductory pages, “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.”<sup>48</sup> What makes the ball bloom is good investigative journalism and a steady hand. For Orlean there is “life”—grand, glorious, hard to decipher—and there are “characters” like John Laroche, people more eccentric and fascinating than she could ever have imagined,<sup>49</sup> and there is “writing,” the disciplined practice of “taking true stories and making them engaging to a reader,” the tradition which allows a writer to “whittle the world down to a more manageable size.”<sup>50</sup>

The reading strategy associated with this tradition is one in which a discerning public scrutinizes a text in order to find out who its “characters” really are—and, importantly, judges them accordingly.<sup>51</sup> This way of thinking about writing as a lens through which to view the world is demonstrated by a *New Yorker* subscriber, who writes that Laroche “belongs to a milieu whose members turn to horticulture partly as therapy, partly as a convenient refuge from the burdens of responsibility.” This verdict isn’t delivered with Orlean’s light hand (hey, *New Yorker* reader, don’t say “milieu”), but this subscriber shares Orlean’s sense that books like *The Orchid Thief* help readers form sound opinions, start them on a path of judgment,

and discover how writing can be used, practically, as a tool for revealing the world around them.

There is another way to think about literature, however, that is just as useful, though based on a concept of writing to which Orlean appears hostile. This is one in which the writer as “fabulator,” as Gilles Deleuze says, the writer in his endless capacity for invention, confronts readers with the fact that the text is an invention. (Naming one of his characters “Charlie Kaufman” is one strategy Kaufman has for confronting his readers. That way, as Kaufman says, the movie’s viewers are “constantly being taken out of the movie. Even though [they’re] watching the movie as a story that plays as a story, there’s this constant nagging thing that’s, ‘Is this real, is it not real?’ I like that.”)<sup>52</sup> Fabulators obstruct readers from making judgments about characters and instead enable them to think about characters *as* characters, an idea so unsettling that readers, forced to reposition *themselves*, see newly. The glimpse is not of a “new universe” but an old universe more adequately viewed.

That is what a conceptual reading of literature would teach. Literature that “exceeds closed, psychological, or personal narratives and opens itself up onto the endless conditions of its creation,” writes Anthony Larson, elegantly summarizing Deleuze, “achieves the form of a concept.”<sup>53</sup> When literature responds to the problem of its own creation, we might take this to mean, it becomes something larger than life, not a reflection of life but a *conception* of it. That is why writing that is not simply personal or historical but conceptual has the benefit, as Nietzsche also argues, of enlarging and strengthening its readers—just as, rather than “whittle it down,” this literature enlarges and strengthens the world. This is not to suggest that producing or even encountering this work isn’t hard. For Deleuze and Nietzsche (and for Spinoza, through whom this intellectual tradition might be seen to stretch all the way back to Genesis) the burden presented by an ontology of the middle, of perpetual being, or being that lacks an end to recast its beginning as the beginning of an end, is, as Larson writes, “that the process of composition must seize itself through itself and in itself without recourse to any ‘supplemental’ or transcendental category.”<sup>54</sup> In everyday terms, this means that Charlie Kaufman, struggling to compose the orchid script in the darkness of his room, cannot rely for guidance on a morality or material reality that exists outside of the one created and sustained by his composition process. That’s why it’s so funny—and, for those of us who suffer similarly, mortifying—that the world he must neglect in order to write is always tempting him, as the first scene in which we see Charlie in front of

his typewriter reveals: “To begin. To begin. How to start,” he thinks. Then, “I’m hungry. I should get coffee. Coffee would help me think. But I should write something first. Then reward myself with coffee. Coffee and a muffin. Okay, so I need to establish the themes. Maybe banana nut. That’s a good muffin.”<sup>55</sup> As the transcendent banana nut muffin scene makes clear, writing is hardest when one cannot turn for any real comfort to something exterior to, or outside of, the world the work itself generates.

This is not Orlean’s view of writing. For Orlean, writing is not what one is able to do only in the absence of an antecedent referent, but what one generates in order to refer back to something that happened or existed before the writing. Orlean’s writing draws attention to or gives further details about something that predates it. *Life*. The reason fiction holds little interest for her likely has to do with what she sees as a fiction writer’s loose attachment to past events. As a nonfiction writer, Orlean says, “You have to deal with what really exists. That is a greater challenge than thinking, ‘Gee, it would have worked out better if he had gone to jail for a year; I think I’ll just make him go to jail for a year.’ Instead, this is reality.”<sup>56</sup> Fiction writers—people who *create*—are obliged to little more than whim, Orlean seems to suggest. This is perhaps one reason she consistently depicts Laroche as someone driven by impulse, not insight. “I think he’s a person who can’t seem to live within the conventional bounds that most of us feel comfortable living within,” she reports. “And it is probably something to do with needing attention. He can’t just succeed, he needs to succeed in a complicated, interesting, unusual way.”<sup>57</sup> Here Orlean is unwittingly right about evolution’s criteria for success, but wrong about Laroche, who has already quite ably articulated that although he’s a “shrewd bastard” and could have been “a great con man,” it’s finally “more interesting to live your life within the confines of the law. It’s more challenging to do what you want but try to do it so you can justify it.”<sup>58</sup> Given Orlean’s blindness to Laroche’s voluntary—and thus righteous—submission to prevailing conditions, we can imagine her impatience with the idea of the “reality” of a fictional world, one that needs to be obeyed as closely as the reality she calls her own.

It may therefore not come as a total shock to discover that Orlean’s thoughts about writing are shared, essentially if not characteristically, by Donald Kaufman. How else might we make sense, in *Adaptation*, of Donald’s eager discovery of the paper-ball passage in Orlean’s book, after Charlie has asked for his help with the orchid script? “I feel like you’re missing something,” Donald tells his brother, and then takes *The Orchid Thief* from his

bag. “Look. I did a little research on the airplane.” He reads: “Sometimes this kind of story turns out to be something more . . .”

“For God’s sake,” Charlie responds. “It’s just a metaphor.”

“But for what? What turned that paper ball into a flower? It’s not in the book, Charles.”

“I don’t know. You’re reaching.”

“Maybe. But I think you actually need to speak to this woman. To know her.”<sup>59</sup>

So begins the contest between Charlie’s way of knowing Orlean and Donald’s—which, in the mock ending of *Adaptation*, Donald wins, and thus which, in the never-ending beginning that is *Adaptation*, Charlie wins. Charlie’s way of knowing Orlean depends on *not* finding out about her, on remaining altogether ignorant of her sexual history, recreational drug use, love life, and so on. This shrinking from the actual is established by the scene in which Charlie shares an elevator with Orlean—whom he does not address, though he has come to find her. The scene is an iteration of an earlier scene in which Charlie bumps into Valerie, who is having lunch with Orlean. Valerie tells Charlie that he should join them, that Orlean is dying to meet him. But Charlie flees after falteringly excusing himself (“I’d love to meet her, too, but I don’t want to be . . . beholden. And . . . Because once you meet somebody that you’re writing about it becomes very hard to . . . separate”).<sup>60</sup> Viewers who feel frustrated by Charlie’s inability to reach out to the tantalizingly near Orlean have perhaps forgotten Henry James’s warning that “the minimum of valid suggestion serve[s] the man of imagination better than the maximum”<sup>61</sup>—that as strong as the temptation to support oneself with facts may be, the writer’s capacity for invention comes from the endless capacity for invention that is language.<sup>62</sup>

Compare the elevator scene’s staging of the relation between Kaufman and the object of his interest that can never be reached with Orlean’s desire to see a ghost orchid. “If it was a real flower, I wanted to see one,” Orlean writes in *The Orchid Thief*; “I wanted . . . to see this thing that people were drawn to in such a singular and powerful way.” Seeing the blooming ghost orchid is something she desperately wants, because seeing one would “complete the cycle,” as Orlean reports, or “make sense of everything [she’d] been doing in Florida.”<sup>63</sup> In other words, even when her subject remains elusive, her story is still *about* something, something with physical reality, of practical or aesthetic value. In *Adaptation* Charlie says he thinks Orlean’s story “is about disappointment,” and that is because what are beautiful to him are stories about nothing—stories, as Flaubert says, sustained by the force

of their style, that have no subject, or in which the subject is almost invisible.<sup>64</sup> But in *The Orchid Thief* Orlean says it is “just as well” she never sees a ghost orchid because that way “it could never disappoint” her and would “remain forever something [she] wanted to see.”<sup>65</sup> Orlean uses language to describe events, even unrealized events. She does not think of herself as a writer who, by expressing that which has *up until the time of expression* remained unexpressed, invents or creates things. Sure enough, Orlean’s book is full of such writing, moments of seeing or hearing of which only a writer is capable; but Orlean mistakenly thinks these moments derive from real life—that “life” is what “is so interesting.”<sup>66</sup>

Not coincidentally, this is also what McKee tells the workshop audience in which, in *Adaptation*, Charlie Kaufman finds himself. Charlie has asked about the validity of screenplays that have no “inciting incidents” to which protagonists must react (thus throwing their lives out of balance and necessitating a restored balance which, according to McKee, they “may or may not achieve”). This question infuriates McKee, who bellows at Charlie, “If you can’t find that stuff in life, then you, my friend, don’t know crap about life!” Here “that stuff” refers to the kind of stirring event McKee has already catalogued—“genocide, war, corruption”—together with everyday calamity: “Every fucking day somewhere in the world, somebody sacrifices his life to save somebody else. Every fucking day someone somewhere makes a conscious decision to destroy someone else! People find love! People lose it! For Christ’s sake, a child watches a mother beaten to death on the steps of a church! Someone goes hungry! Somebody else betrays his best friend for the love of a woman!”<sup>67</sup>

McKee’s evisceration of Charlie’s stance on filmmaking or storytelling disorients both Charlie and the film’s viewers because it is so compelling, so true: such a list represents the realist’s best response to the fabulist’s stammered dreams, the final suppression of the writer who feels he has seen and heard things that haven’t already happened, as it were—things that, for a moment, only the writer is capable of seeing. This argument must be resisted, however; and *Adaptation* constitutes that resistance. In the Aristotelian tradition in which McKee and his acolytes work, stories are lived before they are told.<sup>68</sup> But in Genesis, creation begins with a word, behind which man never gets.<sup>69</sup> Only when we do not side with McKee, Susan, and Donald, that is, but find in Charlie’s narrative strategy exactly that willingness to traverse “the livable and the lived”<sup>70</sup> so essential to imaginative literature, can the dream of the artist take hold.

## Notes

1. See “Q & A with Charlie Kaufman and Spike Jonze,” by Rob Feld in Charlie Kaufman, *Adaptation: The Shooting Script* (New York: Newmarket Press, 2002), 115–30. In the interview Kaufman says, “The movie’s pretty accurate in its depiction of my false starts and my confusion, and how I just had to plug away because I was hired and because they had paid me a certain amount of money to proceed, and so I had to. I would have dropped it a hundred times if they didn’t give me that advance money, but I felt obligation.” *Ibid.*, 123.

2. For the scholarly source of this idea, see Geoffrey Hartman, *Criticism in the Wilderness: the Study of Literature Today* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980), 22–25. In his investigation of literary criticism, Hartman implicitly contrasts the kind of criticism in which a detective-critic, “confronted by a bewildering text . . . acts out a solution, [tries] various defenses, various interpretations, then [pretends] to come to an authoritative stance” with the criticism he admires, the kind of criticism-as-writing that puts a tremendous demand on readers and that often causes “perplexity and resentment” because “it does not see itself as subordinated in any simple way to the books on which it comments.” The resentment is to be expected because such criticism does not explain imaginative literature but “makes us formally aware of [its] bewildering character.” For Hartman, the image/phansm with which critics ought to concern themselves—that which is “engendered from what is barely seen or grasped” in the work, “that does not recall natural process so much as supernatural agency, not formation but transformation . . . the visible in the invisible, an absence that can turn into a devastating presence”—has come “out of nothing” other than the writer’s employment of language and thus “cannot be explained or grounded by the coordinates of ordinary perception, by stable space-time categories.”

3. For a splendid philosophical account of the difference between fiction and memoir (why we cannot say that the character Charlie Kaufman “is” Charlie Kaufman, or why a piece of imaginative writing cannot be considered a transcription of Reality) see Bernard Harrison’s “Imagined Worlds and the Real One: Plato, Wittgenstein, and Mimesis,” in *The Literary Wittgenstein*, ed. John Gibson and Wolfgang Huemer (New York: Routledge, 2004), 92–108.

4. “Q & A with Charlie Kaufman and Spike Jonze,” 119.

5. Kaufman, *Adaptation: The Shooting Script*, 61. Since the shooting script appears to be identical to the film, I cite the pages on which quoted dialogue occurs, rather than the time code.

6. *Ibid.*, 70.

7. *Ibid.*, 5.

8. *Ibid.*, 51.

9. *Ibid.*, 12.

10. *Ibid.*

11. *Ibid.*, 51.

12. *Ibid.*, 3.

13. Abraham, that is--the patriarch of the Israelites. God makes Abraham, and not his brothers, instrumental in bringing divine blessing after God's creation had been marred by man's persistent wickedness.

14. Hartman, *Criticism in the Wilderness*, 23.

15. Kaufman, *Adaptation: The Shooting Script*, 40.

16. *Ibid.*, 41.

17. *Ibid.*, 42.

18. *Ibid.*

19. "It is worth pondering the meaning of a beginning without end, of a causality that is ceaselessly, even ruthlessly, efficient alone," writes Kenneth Dauber in "Beginning at the Beginning in Genesis," from his coedited volume with Walter Jost, *Ordinary Language Criticism: Literary Thinking after Cavell after Wittgenstein* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2003), 331–32. In Dauber's brilliant reading, Genesis, the first genealogy to disqualify material, final, and formal causes, shows us how "the point of genealogy is not to establish continuity but to assure us that such newness and discontinuity as the line from Abraham to Ephraim represents are continuous enough" (334). Dauber's discussion of the "nonlinked link," for instance that which "relates Jesus to the Davidic line through the nonfather Joseph," clearly anticipates a comparable argument in this essay--see for example Dauber's suggestion that if the link between King David and Jesus is weak, it is also "what gives the birth of Jesus its revolutionary moment. Without spaces between the links to raise questions about the continuity of the chain, what space is there for something to occur that is not merely there in the first link? To speak theologically, without room for skepticism, what possibility is there of faith?" (332–33).

20. *Ibid.*, 343.

21. *Ibid.*, 332. I should be clear that this point about the relation between Darwin's theorizing and the writing in Genesis ("By this measure Genesis itself draws attention to the uncertainty, the caprice, Darwin's theory of evolution is at pains to accentuate") does not appear in Dauber's essay.

22. Dauber, "Beginning at the Beginning," 332.

23. *Ibid.*, 331.

24. Kaufman, *Adaptation: The Shooting Script*, 56. This is what Caroline (Maggie Gyllenhall) calls *The 3's* surprise finale, in which viewers learn that the cop, the killer and the girl all one person--Kaufman's lighthearted mockery of films like *Fight Club*, in other words.

25. *Ibid.*, 70.

26. *Ibid.*, 31. Instances of Donald's abuse include his decision to make the cop, the killer and the girl the same person. When Charlie asks Donald how he's going to do this, Donald's answer is "trick photography." "Okay, that's not what I'm asking," says a frustrated Charlie. "Listen closely. What I'm asking is, in the reality of this movie, where

there's only one character, right? Okay? How could you. . . . What, what exactly would. . . ." (Then, according to the shooting script, "Donald waits blankly." Charlie gives up and says) "I agree with Mom. Very taut. *Sybil* meets, I don't know . . . *Dressed to Kill*." Ibid.

27. Ibid., 11.

28. Dauber, "Begining at the Beginning," 331.

29. In these last two sections of the essay I talk often about the real-life Susan Orlean and her book *The Orchid Thief*. Given the likelihood of confusion between these Orleans I've tried to clearly mark the movement between film and book.

30. Susan Orlean, *The Orchid Thief* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2008 (1998)), 47.

31. Ibid., 46–48. About these low yielding schemes, Orlean writes: "There are orchids that smell like rotting meat, which insects happen to like. Another orchid smells like chocolate. Another smells like an angel food cake. Several mimic the scent of other flowers that are more popular with insects than they are. Some release perfume only at night to attract nocturnal moths." In a recent study of one thousand wild orchids for fifteen years, Orlean notes, "only twenty-three plants were pollinated."

32. Ibid., 24–25.

33. Kaufman, "Q & A with Charlie Kaufman and Spike Jonze," 125.

34. King quoted in Ian Parker, "The Real McKee," *The New Yorker*, October 20, 2003. Parker, like fellow *New Yorker* staff writers Tad Friend and Adam Gopnik, does not sound at all like someone who thinks of writing as a transcription of reality. His knowing but kind essay on McKee is not out of keeping with Kaufman's sensibilities, in other words, and suggests an ear perfectly tuned to the logical gap separating a person's conclusions from the propositions that form the basis of his or her argument.

35. Kaufman, "Q & A with Charlie Kaufman and Spike Jonze," 125.

36. Ibid., 119. Obviously these kinds of questions are ridiculed in the film, though in an interview with Tim McHenry published in the back of the 2000, 2002, and 2008 editions of *The Orchid Thief*, Orlean herself is asked such questions ("If there was one question you wished an interviewer would ask, but never has, what would it be?") and goes about the business of answering them.

37. Orlean, *The Orchid Thief*, 25–26.

38. Ibid., 24.

39. Ibid., 25.

40. Ibid., 17, 201. The last quote is actually something Orlean says about another orchid collector and smuggler, Lee Moore the Adventurer, but Orlean says herself it seemed as if the two men were "cut from the same flammable cloth" (199). Lee also tells Orlean, "I'm always looking for something new. That's been my goal all along. New things, really special things" (200).

41. Orlean, *The Orchid Thief*, 81.

42. Kaufman, *Adaptation: The Shooting Script*, 31.

43. Orlean, *The Orchid Thief*, 136.

44. Kaufman, "Q & A with Charlie Kaufman and Spike Jonze," 119.

45. Orlean, *The Orchid Thief*, 290, an interview between Susan Orlean and Tim McHenry.

46. Kaufman, *Adaptation: The Shooting Script*, 25.

47. Orlean, *The Orchid Thief*, 55. James W. Hall, from Orlean, *The Orchid Thief*, promotional quote in frontmatter.

48. Orlean, *The Orchid Thief*, 6–7.

49. *Ibid.*, 287: “I don’t think I could have imagined a character as eccentric and fascinating as John Laroche,” Orlean writes. Significantly, this nonliterary use of the word “character” is the same one adopted in the film by Valerie, the literary agent: “Laroche certainly is a fun character,” she says. Kaufman presses further on the difference between what he means by “character” and what Orlean and Valerie mean when, in *Adaptation*, he has a different-sounding Orlean, an Orlean turned—soon absurdly—into a character, report her conversation with Valerie to Laroche, who says charmingly, “No shit I’m a fun character.”

50. Kaufman, *Adaptation: The Shooting Script*, 55.

51. For a brilliant critique of this kind of realist reading strategy and the verdicts it encourages, see Anthony Larson, “First Lessons: Gilles Deleuze and the Concept of Literature,” in *Literature and Philosophy: A Guide to Contemporary Debates*, ed. David Rudrum (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 13–23. Here Larson elegantly describes what Deleuze sees as the problem with *this* kind of “practical” use of literature, a kind of professionalized or teacherly use of literature Orlean frankly admits appeals to her: “There is also a part of me that likes the pedagogical part of writing,” she says in the McHenry interview, “the challenge of bringing knowledge to readers, material they didn’t know they would actually want to know” (Orlean, *The Orchid Thief*, 220).

52. Kaufman, “Q & A with Charlie Kaufman and Spike Jonze,” 128.

53. Larson, “First Lessons,” 21.

54. *Ibid.*, 20.

55. Kaufman, *Adaptation: The Shooting Script*, 2.

56. Orlean, *The Orchid Thief*, 287.

57. *Ibid.*, 289.

58. *Ibid.*, 289, 30.

59. Kaufman, *Adaptation: The Shooting Script*, 75.

60. *Ibid.*, 58.

61. Henry James, *The Aspern Papers* (Mineola, NY: Dover, 2001), vii.

62. Larson, “First Lessons,” 18.

63. Orlean, *The Orchid Thief*, 280.

64. This is something Flaubert says is true of the “most beautiful works”: “What seems beautiful to me, what I should most like to do, would be a book about nothing, a book without any exterior tie, but sustained by the internal force of its style . . . a book which would have almost no subject, or at least in which the subject would be almost invisible, if that is possible. The most beautiful works are those with the least matter.”

Quoted in Kenneth Burke, *Counter-Statement*, 2nd ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), 6.

65. Orlean, *The Orchid Thief*, 281.

66. *Ibid.*, 286.

67. Kaufman, *Adaptation: The Shooting Script*, 69.

68. Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), 197. Ian Parker, in “The Real McKee,” quotes MacIntyre’s sentence incompletely, leaving off its crucial ending: “Stories are lived before they are told—except in the case of fiction.”

69. Dauber, “Beginning at the Beginning,” 335.

70. Gilles Deleuze, *Critique et clinique* (Paris: Minuit, 1993), 11. Cited in Larson, “First Lessons,” 19.