

On the Origin of Species: *Adaptation*

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Motto:

Adaptation is a profound process. It means you figure out how to thrive in the world.
(*Adaptation*, 2002)

Abstract

The question of literature and the media has always been of interest to writers and critics alike, and Charles Kaufman's Adaptation is no exception to the rule. Seen as an intertextual re-telling or transformation of the source text, Charles Kaufman's script discloses its own status not only as a pre-text but also as a theoretical co(n)text made up of universal principles according to which an adaptation works. As such, it is not memory – seen as intertextuality that controls the process or the product of adaptation but rather evolution, i.e. the capacity to adapt and evolve to any given circumstances.

Key words: *species, origin, evolution, adaptation, intertextuality, memory*

We live in a mediating (and mediated) contemporary textualised environment which has left its imprint on the way in which literature is translated into the *other* (written, audio or visual) and which is able to broadcast and recapture, to re-picture and disseminate *memories* in all possible ways. In present-day cinema there are enough adaptations based on everything from comic books to non-fiction novels. We are constantly told and re-told stories, we are shown and re-shown stories and all these diverse means of mediation allow us to rethink how *adaptation* as a process works so as to mediate *adaptation*, as a product.

Charles Kaufman's film *Adaptation* (directed by Spike Jonze, 2002), itself an adaptation of Susan Orlean's non-fiction book *The Orchid Thief*

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(1998) appears to be marked by – if not made up of – such adaptable *elastextity* that it is communicating an incredible amount of theoretical background on the condition of *adaptation* as a process of mutation and transformation, and information on how *adaptations* come to be what they are or what mechanical principles they undertake.

Far from being a mere passive and artificial imitation of the source text, Charles Kaufman's script is a mediator in its own right, a cunningly active carrier of meanings seeking to boost thinking about a set of theories on film adaptation seen as a process of evolution rather than as one of mimetic transposition. 'This natural selection process works solely by and for the good of each being, all corporeal and mental endowments will tend to progress towards perfection.' (*Adaptation*, 2002)

Closer to what could be labelled as an experimental film rather than an artistic film, *Adaptation* (2002) challenges its viewers with unconventional boundaries set between identity and a textuality that is stretched across time and media: it is this elastic textuality or *elastextity* that theorizes on questions related to the *who*, the *what* or the *how* of adaptation as product, in general and of adaptation as a process, in particular. 'What am I doing here? Why do I bother to come in 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?*' (*Adaptation*, 2002)

Accordingly, while apparently describing Charles Kaufman's anxious struggles to write a deceptively impossible script based on Susan Orlean's book *The Orchid Thief*, the film *Adaptation* aims at addressing yet unresolved questions of whether it is possible to adapt literary sources (namely a book on flowers) to the screen (nobody has ever made a film about flowers) or, more exactly, what elements from the written narrative should be transferred to the visual medium and how.

The script I'm starting is about flowers. Nobody's ever done a film about flowers! So ... so *there are no guidelines!* [...] Look! My point is that those teachers are dangerous. (...) *Writing is a journey into the unknown. And writers should always have that goal...* It's not building one of your model airplanes. (*Adaptation*, 2002)

Spike Jonze's film based on Charles Kaufman's script does more than simply re-tell the story of the orchid thief (which is the *pre-*

text/aforetext mediated in the foreground) and it even provides the theoretical principles that derive from the process (the pretext/ alleged theoretical co(n)text mediated in the background).

As such, questions on the relationship between literature and film adaptations are backgrounded in Kaufman's own story (Kaufman himself is an adaptation, *the process*; his script is an adaptation, *the product*), Kaufman's relationship to Susan Orlean is similar to the relationship between the literary source (*The Orchid Thief*) and its adaptation (*Adaptation*) and even Laroche's own orchid hunting symbolically becomes the very embodiment of the scriptwriter eager to create a new script, transferring/ translocating the original source from one medium into a new medium and the orchid hunting is his metaphorical journey into the unknown, hunting for the ghost orchid which shares the same features with a ghost, i.e. it only reveals itself when it chooses to do so, if ever.

[voiceover] *Do I have an original thought in my head? [...] 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. [...] Just be real. Confident. Isn't that what women [the source texts] are attracted to? Men [adaptations] don't have to be attractive. But that's not true. Especially these days. Almost as much pressure on men [adaptations] as there is on women these days. Why should I be made to feel I have to apologize for my existence? Maybe it's my brain chemistry. Maybe that's what's wrong with me. Bad chemistry. All my problems and anxiety can be reduced to a chemical imbalance or some kind of misfiring synapses. I need to get help for that. But I'll still be ugly though. Nothing's gonna change that. (Adaptation, 2002)*

Questions concerning the *what* or the *how* of the adaptation/ translation/ transmutation/ reinterpretation/ transposition process get their answers in the background especially because while the *film* tells the story of the orchid thief, it simultaneously allows for the parallel existence – or becoming, rather – of another story, that of the film's making, or rather of the genetic codes/ principles which have been borrowed from the original, once the evolution process has started.

In real life, families are characterised by generations of genetic information which is passed on from one bloodline to another, i.e. permutations of genetic extensions which resemble the forefathers but still are different in their unicity. The same applies to Charlie Kaufman's script which discloses its own status/ name/ existence as a genetic extension

from the very title (it is an adaptation called *Adaptation*) and which is a mere clone of Susan Orlean's book *The Orchid Thief* (while seemingly retelling Laroche's story it actually tells the story of every film adaptation as well as of their becoming), so that, what we are left with in the end is not a simple story (since the *plot* of the film cannot be abridged to a few main summarising paragraphs given the disruptive and meddling nature of the new *product*) but rather a system of universal *principles*, not rules, of what an adaptation *is* and how it *works* because while a rule says 'You must do it this way!', a principle says 'this works and has through all remembered time!'. (*Adaptation*, 2002)

To all appearances, when it comes to adaptations, *principles are safer* since, on the one hand, 'Writing is a journey into the unknown', and on the other, 'if you're goal is to try and do something new' (*Adaptation*, 2002) it is better to embrace originality and creativity rather than go the same acknowledged path because repeating the same *recipe* at all times would stifle originality and variety, and without variety there would be no extension, no evolution, but only imitation.

As a rule, changing a narrative into a film has tempted many film makers to transpose stories to the screen, sometimes so successfully that the adaptation has become a film classic or a 'better' version of the source story. However, in the case of *Adaptation* (2002) the transition from Susan Orlean's non-fiction book to film has been even more difficult mainly because the story (the common denominator, the core) revolves around the main character who is an inanimate thing, i.e. an orchid, so that, chances were that the filmed version, or rather transcoding, might have resulted in a poor adaptation of a great non-fiction story.

Both in Susan Orlean's book and in Charlie Kaufman's film, the orchid (and orchid hunting implicitly) is the common denominator which gives unity and coherence to the source story and to the adapted version as well. Even though from a different outlook, more or less overtly, the film adaptation reveals the double sense associated to the core: on the one hand, the orchid as a species and its own adaptation to evolution from the beginning of times, on the other, adaptation as a species and its own evolution throughout times. What matters is not the (non)plot of the original story, but rather the *core* in its prenarrative and abstract phase, i.e. the natural selection processes that finally result in the product called *adaptation*.

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Point is, what's so wonderful is that every one of these flowers has a specific relationship with the insect that pollinates it. There's a certain orchid look exactly like a certain insect so the insect is drawn to this flower, its double, its soul mate, and wants nothing more than to make love to it. And after the insect flies off, spots another soul-mate flower and makes love to it, thus pollinating it. And neither the flower nor the insect will ever understand the significance of their lovemaking. I mean, how could they know that because of their little dance the world lives? But it does. By simply doing what they're designed to do, something large and magnificent happens. In this sense they show us how to live - how the only barometer you have is your heart. How, when you spot your flower, you can't let anything get in your way. (*Adaptation*, 2002)

Quite an elastic adaptation, the script based on Susan Orlean's book seeks to conceive new ways of rewriting or interpreting preexisting texts and influences readers and viewers into expanding their understanding of texts and of textual influence. What seems to be a mere scientific observation on the nature of the relationship between flowers and insects, the text actually reveals an entire theoretical principle on *adaptation* seen both as a process and as a product, forcing us into rethinking the patterns that guide our reading and viewing habits: according to our individual and collective imaginations, we expand our understanding of such vocabulary pertaining to the *pollination* of orchids and grasp their true elastic meaning by association with a hermeneutic concept that has to do with the fertility of writing and of reading respectively. It is due to the insect (adaptation into a new medium) that the flower (any source text) gets reproduced and, by extension, becomes immortal (mainly due to the fact that bits and pieces of its genetic code get retransmitted/ passed of from one generation to another), serving thus a vital role in the process of cultural production. In fact, if we were to follow T.S. Eliot's *Tradition and the Individual Talent*, then we wouldn't be wrong to say that in our interpretation of the adaptation, the latter may be influenced by the canon itself but it may also alter the canon itself (providing a theoretical co(n)text which is foregrounded by a fictionalised one).

- Absolutely! And Orlean makes orchids so fascinating. ... I don't want to remain true to that! *I want to let the movie exist rather than be artificially plotted.*

- Great! I guess I'm not exactly sure what that means!

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- Oh! I'm not sure I know what that means either. I just don't want to ruin it by making it a Hollywood thing. Like orchid house movie or something. Changing the orchids into poppies and turning in a new movie about drugs, you know.

- Definitely!

- Why can't there be simply a movie about flowers?

- I guess that we thought that maybe Susan Orlean and Laroche could fall in love.

- Yes. I'm saying it's not about crime and sex or guns or car chases... you know... the characters... you know... learning profound life lessons or growing or coming to like each other or overcoming obstacles to succeed in the end... it's... it's ... *the book isn't like that! And life isn't like that! You know! It just isn't! And... I feel very strongly about this. (Adaptation, 2002)*

In the case of Charles Kaufman's *Adaptation*, Susan Orlean's *The Orchid Thief* is moved from the page to the screen where it is brought to life while simultaneously being cast in the shadow of its extended offspring which is privileged.

John Laroche: You know why I like *plants*?

Susan Orlean: Nuh uh

John Laroche: Because they're so *mutable*. *Adaptation* is a *profound process*. Means you figure out how to thrive in the world.

Susan Orlean: [pause] Yeah but it's easier for plants. I mean they have no memory. *They just move on to whatever's next*. With a person though, *adapting's* almost shameful. It's like running away.

By extension, *adaptation* is 'a profound process' that does not entail *intertextuality* (referred to as *memory*) but rather *change* and, most importantly, *evolution* 'to whatever is next' (which is another form of *memory*, a particular one, preserved in the genetic code of the source text). Moreover, neither infidel to, nor betraying of the source text, neither violating nor bastardising the source text, neither desecrating nor deforming the source text, the *adaptation* process implies above anything else, *evolution*. It is in keeping with this ability to evolve, mutate and adapt that the species survives.

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