



Adaptation (2002)

Production: dir. Spike Jonze, Columbia Pictures

Certificate: 15

Run time: 115 minutes

If you liked this try: *Barton Fink* (1991); *State and Main* (2000); *Confessions of a Dangerous Mind* (2002); *American Splendor* (2003); *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (2005); *Show Business* (2015).

Adaptation is, as its title suggests, an adaptation of Susan Orlean's *Orchid Thief* - which itself began as a 1995 article on orchid hunters and enthusiasts in *The New Yorker*, and became a book in 1998 not just on the plant collectors and experts but on Orlean's own personal journey to understand these people, their passion for their subject and her own interests and desires; it is a discursive book, not an overly narrative one. Given the book to adapt screenwriter Charlie Kaufman tells not only the story of the book, it's subjects and its writing, but his own struggles to adapt the book and to avoid the demands and cliches of Hollywood story structures. In a gently ironic jibe at the fashion for non-fiction works which place the author as investigative hero in order to give the subject a simple narrative form, of which *The Orchid Thief* is obviously one, Kaufman makes the film a parody of this genre featuring himself and his screenwriting rivalry with his brother being the framing device for telling Orlean's story of learning about John Laroche's orchids. In satirising the conventions of screenwriting the brothers were nominated for an Academy Award in 2003.

The film is writer Kaufman and director Spike Jonze's second collaboration. The first *Being John Malkovich* (1999) was the feature debut for both. Kaufman had been a writer for National Lampoon through the 80s and began writing spec scripts and sending them out to those he admired in Hollywood. *Malkovich* was written in 1994 and by 1998 found its way to Francis Ford Coppola who recommended it to son-in-law Spike Jonze. Jonze had been making BMX and skateboarding home videos through the 80s and was approached by Kim Gordon of Sonic Youth to make a music video for them, which led to a string of music video projects with the likes of REM and the Beastie Boys. While making their first film Kaufman wrote *Adaptation*, and because of its unusual approach offered it first to Jonze.

Adaptation's protagonists are largely based real people, Kaufman, Orlean, Laroche, and the scriptwriting guru Robert McKee. Filmmaking courses of the 60s and 70s had taught narrative analysis based on Russian formalists' studies of folk

tales, but this was as a method of appraising screenplays rather than of constructing them – when film student George Lucas decided that a good way to make his film feel like a fable would be to use Vladimir Propp's fairy-tale character and plot formulas the resulting film was so much of a success that the industry began looking at these formulae as a method of predicting box office successes. Two screen structure experts Robert McKee and Syd Field wrote books which became handbooks for producers and screenwriters thereafter, and a decade of terrible and predictable films followed, but most Hollywood productions are still pressured to adhere to them. Neither McKee or Field have written a significant produced screenplay. As unusual as Kaufmann's scripts may be, it is part of the joke that *Adaptation* fits McKee's structures perfectly, just as it satirises them; but the same is true also of *Being John Malkovich*, *Confessions of a Dangerous Mind* and *Eternal Sunshine*. Jonze and Kaufman approached McKee to play himself in the film but he declined, in another in-joke John Turturro who had played the washed up screenwriter in the Coen Brother's *Barton Fink* was approached, but when McKee suggested he would like his friend Brian Cox (with whom he shares a resemblance) to play the part the pair agreed.

The film takes its characters to places they never went in real life, and this is yet another adaptation – much of the film's discussion of orchids is about evolution, the need to adapt in order to survive, while those characters adapt to survive in situations they never faced in life. Jonze and Kaufman, in a moment before the oncoming storm of online file sharing and streaming services, perhaps suggest that filmmaking too, must adapt if it is to survive.

My first reaction was "Absolutely not!" They had to get my permission and I just said: "No! Are you kidding? This is going to ruin my career!" It took a while for me to get over the idea that I had been insane to agree to it, but I love the movie now. What I admire the most is that it's very true to the book's themes of life and obsession, and there are also insights into things which are much more subtle in the book about longing, and about disappointment. - **Susan Orlean** GQ magazine, 16 April 2012

For further reading see: Susan Orlean *The Orchid Thief* (Heinemann, 1998); Derek Hill *Charlie Kaufman and Hollywood's Merry Band of Pranksters, Fabulists and Dreamers* (Oldcastle, 2008); LaRocca, D. *The Philosophy of Charlie Kaufman* (University Press of Kentucky 2011); Syd Field *Screenplay: The Foundations of Screenwriting* (Dell, 1979), Robert McKee *Story* (HarperCollins, 1997).