



ADAPTATION, 2002

We open on Charlie Kaufman entering a Fre

THE Kaufman PARADOX

Hollywood’s brainiest screenwriter pleases crowds by refusing to be crowd-pleasing. His debut as director comes with the usual existential despair, absurdist humor, and intellectual mischief. Go ahead—have a little gray matter with your Raisinets.



SYNECDOCHE, NEW YORK, 2008

Scenes From the Creation of a Charlie Kaufman Profile Part 1 The Assignment Letter

Slug: Charlie Kaufman
Author: Jason Tanz
Editor: Nancy Miller
Issue: 16.11
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Hi Jason,

I am really excited about this Charlie Kaufman profile. You and I have discussed several approaches in capturing this brilliant screenwriter as he makes his debut as an auteur with *Synechdoche, New York*.

I think once you meet Kaufman, you’ll have a better sense of the story you want to write. But just to summarize our conversations so far: You’re going to request meeting with Charlie on three separate occasions in his hometown of Los Angeles. First, a standard in-person interview of a couple hours or so.

Second, you’ll be a fly on the wall as Charlie conducts some business related to the film’s release. If there’s any postproduction left, that would be ideal—would love to see him in the editing room, for instance. Maybe even riding along with Kaufman as he heads to the grocery store. Then you do a follow-up interview—by phone if necessary. I’m confident once you meet him and form a rapport, you will come back with plenty of material and we’ll strategize from there.

Secondary interviews will likely be Philip Seymour Hoffman and other cast members of *Synechdoche*. Also, collaborators Michel Gondry and Spike Jonze would be excellent sources to round out your story. If you need contact info for any of these guys, let me know. I’m happy to wrangle Gondry and Jonze if you need.

Your deadline is August 27, which is a quick turnaround, but I’m confident this story will come together once you’ve had time with Kaufman. This story is going to be great.

Nancy



BEING JOHN MALKOVICH, 1999

ADAPTATION, BEING JOHN MALKOVICH: KOBAL COLLECTION; SYNECDOCHE: SONY PICTURES ENTERTAINMENT

BY JASON TANZ

ench bistro in Los Angeles. He looks nothing like Nicolas Cage, who played Kaufman in the Kaufman-penned film *Adaptation*. The real Kaufman is slight, with a healthy serving of reddish-brown curls. Two vertical creases partition his eyebrows—the product, one imagines, of countless furrowings. His wardrobe is

standard-issue LA screenwriter: short-sleeve Penguin button-down, tan jeans, lime-green socks. Kaufman, 50, has a reputation for shyness, but as he takes a seat in the back corner of the restaurant, he speaks directly, rapidly, forcefully.

Kaufman recently completed work on his directorial debut, *Synecdoche, New York*. The film, which opens in late October, is his trickiest screenplay to date, which is really saying something. Kaufman's previous mind-bending work—a roster that includes *Being John Malkovich*, *Adaptation*, and *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, for which he won an Oscar—established him as the most distinctive and admired screenwriter of his generation. With *Synecdoche*, Kaufman is attempting to make the jump from writer to full-on auteur. It's been five years since he started batting around ideas with his friend and sometime collaborator Spike Jonze, five long years during which he worked on this bleak story of a man's anxieties, failures, flaws, and ultimate demise. The result is a deeply personal, borderline-obsessive story of heartache and death—not the fun, f/x-enhanced-fireball kind of

death that fills movie theaters, but the holy-crap-look-at-the-size-of-that-abyss kind of death that fills Sartre novels. This is not, in other words, an easy sell. And now he has to promote the thing. Which he is not very good at.

The first question is a softball—How do you feel about this film in relation to your other ones?—and the answer should be obvious: *I'm prouder of this movie than any I've ever done. Everyone should see it*. But Kaufman doesn't do confident. "This is a difficult period for me right now with this movie, because it's over and I want it to be over," he says. "Putting it out into the world, there's a lot of..." He trails off, stares at a point in the middle distance for a few seconds, then continues. "It's

Part 3 Logistics

On 8/11/08, at 2:07 PM, Nancy Miller wrote: So, the plan as I understand so far, is: You're meeting him tomorrow at Figaro. Then you go back early next week, then you do a phone follow-up, is that right?

On 8/11/08, at 2:08 PM, Jason Tanz wrote: Well, phone follow-up isn't down in writing, but I'll try to finagle that, yes.

On 8/11/08, at 2:11 PM, Nancy Miller wrote: OK. And how are you feeling about your angle? I know we batted around a few ideas right after the screening. My one concern is that lunch and editing room is pretty standard director profile stuff. Is that something you want to play off of?

On 8/11/08, at 2:16 PM, Jason Tanz wrote: I think I feel pretty good about the angle. I mean, who knows, but I came up with some cool ideas over the weekend, ways of framing this while also making him Wired. That being said, I don't think we're going to get super-amazing scenes here. We just aren't. But I'm hopeful that we'll get some good quotes and scene-setting and that will be enough to carry us through. And I always leave open the possibility of writing about these negotiations themselves, which as you sug-

so hard to know what I'm supposed to say. I'm participating in an article to sell this movie, but

what am I supposed to say? 'It's great and I'm loving it'? It seems to be a tricky thing to sell people on, and I'm frustrated with that."

The mind of Charlie Kaufman may not be the happiest place on earth, but it is one of the most fascinating. Kaufman merges the existential despair of Beckett with the absurdist humor of Monty Python and the intellectual playfulness of a natural-born puzzle geek. (He is particularly fond of Epimenides' paradox, a classic one-sentence brain-buster: "This sentence is false.") In *Malkovich's* most famous scene, the eponymous actor enters a portal into his own mind. In *Adaptation*, a screenwriter named Charlie Kaufman writes himself into his own movie, which becomes *Adaptation*. And the lead character of *Eternal Sunshine* witnesses his memories as they are being erased, including the memory of his decision to erase his memories. Cognitive scientist Douglas Hofstadter, in his Pulitzer Prize-winning tome *Gödel, Escher, Bach*, refers to such regressions as Strange Loops—circular paradoxes that contain themselves. And Kaufman's Möbius scripts contain some of the strangest loops ever



KAUFMAN, WITH ACTRESS ROBIN WEIGERT, ON THE SET OF *SYNECDOCHE, NEW YORK*.

put to film. "I've been told that my stuff is mathematical," Kaufman says. "There's like a hidden epiphany in it for me. You think you understand something, and then another version opens up."

For anyone who doesn't mind a little gray matter with their Raisinets, Kaufman is more than a writer; he is a cultural touchstone. "It's hard not to see his influence," says Anthony Bregman, who served as producer on *The Ice Storm* and *The Savages*, as well as three of Kaufman's films, including *Synecdoche*. "Every submission I get is 'We have a Charlie Kaufmanesque movie for you.'"

But it's hard to imagine anyone mimicking *Synecdoche*, Kaufman's most Kaufmanesque film yet. (Yes, that's a tautology.) Let *Stranger Than Fiction* and *Tropic Thunder* splash around the ontological kiddie pool; *Synecdoche* plunges to such murky depths that it makes *Adaptation* look like *Dude, Where's My Car?* The film revolves around theater director Caden Cotard (played by Philip Seymour Hoffman), who attempts to capture the "brutal truth" of his own existence by staging a real-time re-creation of it. He casts an actor to play him, who then must cast an actor to play *him*, and so on. Caden's girlfriend attracts the affections of the actor playing Caden, and Caden sleeps with the actress playing *her*. The entire

story, meanwhile, is filtered through Caden's perspective—further complicating matters, because his autonomic nervous system may be shutting down, and there are hints that he suffers from psychosis, chromosomal damage, and Capgras syndrome—believing real things are replicas. (Caden's last name, Cotard, is also the name of a delusion that causes sufferers to believe that they are dead or dying.) Meanwhile, Kaufman himself hovers around the outer rim of this infinite spiral, someone who—like Caden—is trying to capture and re-create the intricacies of a life with limited space and time.

If this all makes you yearn for a Kaufman decoder ring, dream on. This time, the puzzle master doesn't provide any answers.

"Adaptation and Eternal Sunshine ultimately have a safety valve—a clever conceit that you come to understand," Kaufman says. "This movie and this script are intentionally not like that. It's more like life. Things flying off and becoming unhinged and being incomprehensible seem to be the process

Part 2 Getting Access

On 7/17/08, at 6:06 PM, Jason Tanz wrote: Hm. How's this? Not sure how much detail/ass-kissing is required. Happy to revise.

We'd like to profile Charlie Kaufman—*Wired's* favorite screenwriter—as he enters this new, ambitious stage of his career. Why we're interested now: Kaufman recently finished his directorial debut, *Synecdoche, New York*, taking the reins from the A-list directors who have filmed his previous work. We want to capture this show-and-prove moment. And we're rooting for him; Kaufman is a *Wired* hero, a formal innovator who brings a bracing intellect and wonky humor to his work. By all accounts, *Synecdoche* is his boldest foray yet into Borges-Dick territory, the kind of stuff our readers would eat up. We'd like to paint a unique portrait of Kaufman at the crossroads, a glimpse at one of our best screenwriters as he tries to extend himself into honest-to-God auteurhood.

On 7/21/08, at 1:42 PM, Nancy Miller wrote: Hey, wanted to let you know I sent a version of this to [Kaufman's agent]. I'll follow up tomorrow.



ETERNAL SUNSHINE OF THE SPOTLESS MIND, 2004

Part 4 Packaging the Story

On 8/4/08, at 12:18 PM, Jason Tanz wrote: OK, I know we're still not clear on whether this Kaufman story is even happening, but I had a thought over the weekend, and wanted to run it by you.

The challenge we have is to—as every-one chillingly says—“raise the bar” here. The way I see it, that means explore Kaufmanian themes of how narratives and stories are constructed, how we battle self-consciousness and frailty in our pursuit of “truth,” etc. But of course, this threatens to become mere meta-gimmickry pretty quick (“I’m writing a profile of Charlie Kaufman!” etc.), which will make nobody happy.

Here’s what I propose: Let’s put every-thing online. I mean everything—the pitch, my notes, our emails, marked-up galleys, full interview audio and/or transcripts, etc. We’ll post it as a Web extra, or whatever, but it’ll be much more—a real behind-the-scenes look at how a feature, this feature,

“It’s really just watching a man’s life over 50 years, through a very subjective lens,” says Hoffman of his lead character role. “The risk of it not being as commercially successful as some other films is obviously there. But I do think, if it is seen, it will get legs.”

In the meantime, Kaufman waits—anxiously—for the market to render its verdict. He has been here before. When he submitted the screenplay for *Adaptation*, he says, he worried it would destroy his career. “Charlie’s nature is to set himself up in ways so that he can’t possibly succeed,” says Jonze, who directed *Malkovich* and *Adaptation*, “to set up goals that are impossible to pull off.”

Now Kaufman has presented himself with his most daunting challenge: convincing audiences to follow him into the darkest corners of his mind. “I’m not going to pander,” Kaufman says. “I’m going to anti-pander. But then the question I raise about myself is, *Is that pandering?*” Pause. “You can’t win.”

gets conceived, written, shaped, etc. I think it’s exciting from a journalism-and-tech POV; we’re using the Web to be completely candid and show how a piece goes from idea to data to completed story. But it also dovetails so nicely with the subject, in ways I probably don’t need to spell out. And it’d be optional, so we wouldn’t be knocking people over the head with the meta-ness of it all. Anyway, let me know what you think. It would be a pretty intense experience for both of us, I’m sure, but I think a potentially really interesting one.

On 8/4/08, at 12:20 PM, Nancy Miller wrote: I like this idea. Is there a version of this idea that will run in the mag?

On 8/4/08, at 12:21 PM, Jason Tanz wrote: Maybe we can include some elements as sidebars? Maybe even THESE VERY EMAILS?

Charlie Kaufman is darting through a courtyard and into the bathroom of a restaurant in Toronto, his hands to his face, bleeding from the bridge of his nose. It’s early September, the fourth night of the Toronto International Film Festival, and in two days *Synecdoche* will make its North American

premiere. Tonight, Sony Pictures Classics is throwing a splashy party to promote the 10 films it has at the festival and, with any luck, generate some early Oscar buzz. Outside, director Jonathan Demme chats about his new film, *Rachel Getting Married*, as the movie’s luminous star, Anne Hathaway, dazzles a cluster of reporters and industry bigwigs. Kaufman should be right here, sipping Cabernet Shiraz from Dan Aykroyd’s vineyard and shilling *Synecdoche*, but he bumped his head getting out of his taxi, his glasses sliced into his face, and now he’s in the john, convinced his nose is broken. So instead of schmoozing, Kaufman spends the cocktail hour in a dim corner of the restaurant, talking to actress Debra Winger about her farm in the Catskills while holding a napkin full of ice cubes to his face.

“I shouldn’t have come here tonight,” he sighs. “Then my nose would be fine.”

Kaufman can’t manage to celebrate, even at what should be his hour of triumph. Then again, Kaufman isn’t a big believer in triumph. He doesn’t buy the standard Hollywood story arc that culminates in a feel-good denouement. “The ‘happily ever after’ notion, what does that mean?” he says. “There really is only one ending to any story. Human life ends in death. Until then, it keeps going and gets complicated and there’s loss. Everything involves loss; every relationship ends in one way or another.”

It’s surprising, then, that Kaufman began his path to stardom laboring for that most artificial of formats, the half-hour sitcom. It’s less surprising that he was not very successful at it. (How do you know when you’re toiling in obscurity? When Chris Elliott’s cult series *Get a Life* is the best-known show on your résumé.) Throughout the early ’90s, Kaufman worked on such forgotten gems as *Ned and Stacey*, *Misery Loves Company*, *The Dana Carvey Show*, and *The Edge*. He developed a pilot for Disney called *Astronuts* (their title), which Kaufman remembers as “a throwback to *The Monkees* about a goofy rock band that were astronauts by day, and their biggest issue was getting back from space in time so they could make their gig.”

More than once, Kaufman wrote scripts that the networks refused to produce. He penned an episode for the short-lived Bronson Pinchot vehicle *The Trouble With Larry*, in which the title character mistakes his archaeologist-roommate’s rare child-king mummy for a piñata, and then has to replace it with an injured tightrope-walking monkey in a full-body cast. “They wouldn’t do it,” Kaufman remembers. “There

Part 5 Photo Issues

On 8/11/08, at 10:21 AM, Nancy Miller wrote: Hi, everyone. Wanted to loop everybody in here on Kaufman. He has agreed to do a lengthy interview but will not sit for a photo shoot. Before we send Jason down there tomorrow, wanted to alert everyone and discuss before we move forward.

On 8/11/08, at 11:10 AM, Scott Dadich wrote: I thought this was part of the negotiation, that he had never sat for an interview/shoot. This gives me serious reservations about doing the piece.

On 8/11/08, at 11:12 AM, Jason Tanz wrote: I know it’s a drag, but we are getting a good 2-3 hour interview with him on Wed., then going down on Monday to hang out with him. Editorially I think we’re OK.

On 8/11/08, at 11:24 AM, Scott Dadich wrote: Can we do a silhouette? Something not showing his face?

On 8/11/08, at 11:25 AM, Wyatt Mitchell wrote: We’ve got to get some kind of shoot here. A quick snap, something.

On 8/11/08, at 11:28 AM, Scott Dadich wrote: I’m happy to be the bad guy with the publicist. Wyatt’s right.

On 8/11/08, at 11:30 AM, Thomas Goetz wrote: We’ve been trying to do this story for about five years—we shouldn’t throw out the opportunity to finally execute for want of a photo. Why don’t we brainstorm some ways to creatively solve this?

was a woman on staff who was an animal-rights person, and she was crying. I was like, ‘Man, this is the stupidest thing. It makes no sense any way you look at it. The monkey’s in a human hospital. A mummy doesn’t look like a piñata. Why can’t you make a fake mummy instead of stealing the monkey?’ That’s what was funny to me about it. It was like saying ‘This form is such bullshit, let’s play around with it.’”

In between short-lived gigs, Kaufman worked on a screenplay about a hapless puppeteer who discovers a portal into the consciousness of actor John Malkovich. The script was audacious and silly, and Kaufman, who wrote it to attract more jobs, never expected it to be made. But in 1996, he was tapped by Jonze, a popular music-video director looking to get into feature films. “It was unlike anything I had ever read,” Jonze says. “Later, Charlie told me that the script had gotten around, and everyone said it was unmakeable. I guess I didn’t know any better.”

Kaufman had no idea who Jonze was, but the two quickly bonded. Jonze invited Kaufman, who lived in New York City at the time, to his Los Angeles home, where the two spent four days going over every line of the screenplay. Jonze had issues with the movie’s third act: Kaufman’s draft spun off into chaos, with the main character engaging in a puppeteering duel with the

devil, whose followers enter Malkovich’s body and rule Earth like a tyrant. Jonze pushed Kaufman to hammer out a new ending that felt less madcap and more emotionally resonant.

That collaboration provided a template for Kaufman, who has been deeply involved with the making of almost all of his films, a rarity for a screenwriter. In his subsequent movies, Kaufman submitted drafts to the directors, then worked hand-in-hand with them to revise and polish the script. “He’s the author of the thing to the end,” says director Michel Gondry, whose projects with Kaufman include *Human Nature* and *Eternal Sunshine*. “If you work with Charlie, you have to accept that.” (The one exception: *Confessions of a Dangerous Mind*, a 2002 biopic about *The Gong Show* host Chuck Barris. Kaufman says

that George Clooney, who directed the film, never consulted him, and he still holds a grudge. “My value to a director is to keep them aware of what the movie’s about,” Kaufman says. “He wasn’t interested in that.”)

Jonze was slated to direct *Synecdoche* as well. He was traveling with Kaufman to promote *Adaptation* when a Sony Pictures executive, Amy Pascal, suggested they work on a horror film together. Jonze and Kaufman had both recently suffered anxiety dreams; they agreed they would rather capture the eerie quality of those night terrors than re-create standard slasher-flick tropes. The two hashed out basic details—a man dying of an unidentified disease—and Kaufman left to write it.

He emerged after two years with a sprawling opus that spans five decades of regret and death. By that time, however, Jonze was committed to directing an adaptation of Maurice Sendak’s *Where the Wild Things Are*. Kaufman, who majored in filmmaking at New York University, always planned to direct someday. He asked if he could take over *Synecdoche*, and Jonze quickly agreed, signing on as a producer. “One of the reasons I wanted to direct is so I could make the final decisions,” Kaufman says. “I wanted to be even more personal.”

It was a thrilling prospect for Kaufman, but apparently less so for Sony. The studio dropped the project soon after Kaufman filed the script, requiring him to drum up financing from other sources. (He eventually got \$20 million from Sidney Kimmel Entertainment.) Meanwhile, Kaufman found himself growing defensive over some of his artistic choices. He says that he and Jonze had a few difficult conversations after screenings, when Jonze would suggest directions with which Kaufman disagreed. “There was tension,” Kaufman says. “But Spike loves the movie now. He has told me it isn’t the movie he would have made, but it shouldn’t be. It’s the movie that I made.”

Cut to the morning of the *Synecdoche* premiere in Toronto. Over breakfast, Kaufman seems uncharacteristically at peace. He spent the previous evening with his friends Bregman, Hoffman, and actress Catherine Keener. His nose appears to have healed. And the early, favorable notices out of

Canada have given him a boost. “I got a really gorgeous review, not that it was positive—which it was—but it really softened me,” he says. “There’s someone out there who’s responding to this. It was beautiful. And it’s like, who cares anymore? If that’s the only nice thing that happens out of this movie, I got someone to respond in a way that makes me feel like it moved them.”

Jonze recounts a similar moment of validation at Cannes. “I’d already seen this movie so many times in editing, but at that screening, somehow I still felt it very deeply,” he says. “The movie was over, and the credits were rolling, and I was still sitting in that space that the movie created. Then the lights came up, and suddenly I’m seeing thousands of other faces in that same space. They gave Charlie a standing ovation, and it had such *feeling* to it. That felt like the end of it. Now we have to release it, and there’s all this other stuff, but that felt like the ending.”

Well, that’s one ending. It’s familiar to any moviegoer: the dedicated individual who believes in himself, takes every risk, and triumphs. That’s been Kaufman’s story so far—it’s the story of *Being John Malkovich*, the story of *Adaptation*, the story of *Eternal Sunshine*. It wraps everything up with a nice bow and lets us all feel good about ourselves. Maybe this ends the same way, with *Synecdoche* finding a dedicated following and earning its place in cinematic history, even if it never does *Dark Knight* numbers.

But there’s another way to end this story. Maybe not with Kaufman’s flicker of adulation in Cannes or Toronto. Maybe audiences don’t flock to *Synecdoche* and maybe Kaufman doesn’t emerge victorious. Maybe he spends five years pursuing the truest expression of his artistic vision only to find it misunderstood, or underappreciated, or—worst of all—ignored. Maybe this is a story of frustration and disappointment and failure. It may not be a happy ending. It may not be the kind of ending that would wrap up a successful Hollywood movie. But it is the kind of ending that Charlie Kaufman would write. ■

JASON TANZ, a senior editor at WIRED, wrote about Julia Allison in issue 16.08. Go further behind the scenes of this story—including an audio interview with Kaufman—at blog.wired.com/storyboard.



SELF-PORTRAIT, CHARLIE KAUFMAN

On 8/20/08, at 10:18 AM, Anna Alexander wrote: The publicist has not gotten back to me about his possible self-portrait, but I expect sometime today I should hear from him.

On 8/27/08, at 10:18 AM, Anna Alexander wrote: Aw yeah. The publicist says Kaufman “has an idea he is thinking over”—and he’ll let him know a bit later this week. He’s going to get back to LA and see what he has in the house in order to pull it off.

On 8/27/08, at 11:07 AM, Anna Alexander wrote: It gets better. “He is THINKING of using some Japanese doll they had made that looks like him (from some past film) ... where he would shoot this doll in full frame and then he will hopefully place himself somewhere in the background of the shot as well ...”