

Screenwriters On Screenwriting.

The BAFTA and BFI Screenwriters' Lecture Series in association with The JJ Charitable Trust

Charlie Kaufman

30 September 2011 at BFI Southbank

Charlie Kaufman: Thank you very much. I'm actually really happy to be here; at least that's what I'm telling myself. I've never delivered a speech before, which is why I decided to do this tonight. I wanted to do something that I don't know how to do, and offer you the experience of watching someone fumble, because I think maybe that's what art should offer. An opportunity to recognise our common humanity and vulnerability.

So rather than being up here pretending I'm an expert in anything, or presenting myself in a way that will reinforce the odd, ritualised lecturer-lecturee model, I'm just telling you off the bat that I don't know anything. And if there's one thing that characterises my writing it's that I always start from that realisation and I do what I can to keep reminding myself of that during the process. I think we try to be experts because we're scared; we don't want to feel foolish or worthless; we want power because power is a great disguise.

I even feel odd calling myself a writer or a screenwriter. I do when I have to – I put it on my income tax form – but I feel like it's a lie, even though it's technically true. I write screenplays for a living but it's not what I am. When I was young I really wanted that label. I wanted to be something. I wanted to be a writer. There was this movie *Serpico*. Al Pacino is a cop with an artist girlfriend, and there's a party scene with all these different artist types. They're saying, 'I'm a painter but I work in a restaurant,' 'I'm an actor but I work in an office,' and this goes on for a while. Then Al Pacino says 'I'm a cop and I work for the police department.' But there's that feeling when you want to say you're something, and you have nothing to back it up because everyone says they're a writer, or everybody says they're this or that – this is what I felt – and everyone else thinks it's bullshit. It's funny now that I don't want to call myself that but at the time I did. I think that it was necessary at the time, but now it doesn't feel necessary because I think the thing I realise is: I'm not those things.

I'm a person who does this and I struggle with it. I think it was Thomas Mann who said, 'A writer is

someone for whom writing is harder than it is for other people,' which I thought was pretty cool. I think that's sort of it; if you take it seriously it's a struggle. And it's interesting to me that I've been struggling with this speech for a long time. I told them that I would do this months and months ago, and this has been my job in a way. I sit at my desk and I don't know what to do.

It is very much like when I have a job writing a screenplay. I think I wanted to do something true and I wanted to do something helpful. What complicates it, in addition to the fact that that's a hard thing to figure out, is that I also struggle with wanting you to like me. In my fantasy I leave here and people are saying, 'Great speech!' you know, and, 'Not only is he a great writer but boy, I really learned something tonight, he really brought it!' So as much as I know that this neediness of mine exists, I also have a difficult time extricating myself from it, or even fully recognising it when it's happening.

It's a tricky thing; no-one wants to come up here and bomb. It's really, literally the stuff of nightmares. I've had that nightmare a lot of times, and I know you want to be entertained, so for me to calculatedly not entertain you in order to be true seems sort of selfish. So I find myself in this push-pull relationship with my opposing desires, which I think is a big part of what characters are and what characters do in real life – people in real life, characters in movies.

But I've gone through a lot of different versions of what this evening would be. And some have been really crazy. You know, I was going to do a play, Tricia [event producer] can attest to that. They were very excited about it, so I was like, 'Holy shit, now I have to do a play!' because I wanted Tricia to like me, you know? But really, I ultimately decided that I need to come up here and be honest and not do a song and dance. So I've purposely kept it up in the air, I've taken notes but I've kept it up in the air and it's increased my anxiety a thousand fold because I have notes here and I honestly don't know if this speech is five minutes or three hours. I don't know, I haven't timed it; I just have no way of knowing.

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But it is the way it is with my work; I feel you sort of need to stay where you are, in the moment, with the work. So I thought it would be helpful to start with this, because if I were writing a screenplay about this event I would spend a lot of time thinking about what this event is, how it feels to the person speaking, how it might feel to the audience, what it means to be an audience, both as a group – because an audience is an organism – but also as something made up of individuals. I'll hopefully get to that later because I've written about that as well.

But another thing this introduction has done is to have allowed me to feel like I can go ahead and do this. It allows me to come up here and be a limited struggling human being, so what I'm offering here as a thing to take from this is that it's important to free yourself in any way you can so you can do your work.

Here's a recent quote that I found: 'We do not talk, we bludgeon one another with facts and theories gleaned from cursory readings of newspapers, magazines and digests.' That was actually written in 1945 by Henry Miller and I think it's timely. I think what it says is that the world has been on its present course for a long time. People all over the world spend countless hours of their lives every week being fed entertainment in the form of movies, TV shows, newspapers, YouTube videos and the internet. And it's ludicrous to believe that this stuff doesn't alter our brains.

It's also equally ludicrous to believe that – at the very least – this mass distraction and manipulation is not convenient for the people who are in charge. People are starving. They may not know it because they're being fed mass produced garbage. The packaging is colourful and loud, but it's produced in the same factories that make Pop Tarts and iPads, by people sitting around thinking, 'What can we do to get people to buy more of these?'

And they're very good at their jobs. But that's what it is you're getting, because that's what they're making. They're selling you something. And the world is built on this now. Politics and government are built on this, corporations are built on this.

Interpersonal relationships are built on this. And we're starving, all of us, and we're killing each other, and we're hating each other, and we're calling each other liars and evil because it's all become marketing and we want to win because we're lonely and empty and scared and we're led to believe winning will change all that. But there is no winning.

What can be done? Say who you are, really say it in your life and in your work. Tell someone out there who is lost, someone not yet born, someone who won't be born for 500 years. Your writing will be a record of your time. It can't help but be that. But more importantly, if you're honest about who you are, you'll help that person be less lonely in their world because that person will recognise him or herself in you and that will give them hope. It's done so for me and I have to keep rediscovering it. It has profound importance in my life. Give that to the world, rather than selling something to the world. Don't allow yourself to be tricked into thinking that the way things are is the way the world must work and that in the end selling is what everyone must do. Try not to.

This is from E. E. Cummings: 'To be nobody but yourself in a world which is doing its best night and day to make you everybody else means to fight the hardest battle which any human being can fight, and never stop fighting.' The world needs you. It doesn't need you at a party having read a book about how to appear smart at parties – these books exist, and they're tempting – but resist falling into that trap. The world needs you at the party starting real conversations, saying, 'I don't know,' and being kind.

My first writing job was on a TV show called *Get A Life*, starring Chris Elliott. The show was mostly in the voice of its creators Chris Elliott and Adam Resnick. They'd worked together on *The David Letterman Show* and Chris' character came from that show. So consequently Adam Resnick's scripts were the best of the show and we all tried to write in Adam's voice; that was the job.

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I was frustrated with my results, but it occurred to me that there was no solution to this problem as long as my job was trying to imitate someone else's voice. I could maybe get close but I was never going to get better at it than Adam. Rich Little can't be better than Johnny Carson at Johnny Carson, you know?

The obvious solution was not to throw my hands up but try to find myself in a situation where I was doing me, not someone else. Do you. It isn't easy but it's essential. It's not easy because there's a lot in the way. In many cases a major obstacle is your deeply seated belief that you are not interesting. And since convincing yourself that you are interesting is probably not going to happen, take it off the table. Think, 'Perhaps I'm not interesting but I am the only thing I have to offer, and I want to offer something. And by offering myself in a true way I am doing a great service to the world, because it is rare and it will help.'

As I move through time, things change. I change, the world changes, the way the world sees me changes. I age, I fail, I succeed, I am lost. I have a moment of calm. The remnants of who I have been, however, hover, embarrass me, depress me, make me wistful. The inkling of who I will be depresses me, makes me hopeful, scares me, and embarrasses me. And here I stand at this crossroads, always embarrassed, wistful, depressed, angry, longing, looking back, looking forward.

I may make a decision and move from that crossroads, at which point I find myself instantly at another crossroads. Therefore there is only movement. A screenplay is movement. It is written in time and expresses a passage of time. It is made in time, and it is viewed in time. It's a movie, it moves.

'That's two hours I'll never get back,' is a favourite thing for an angry person to say about a movie he hates. But the thing is, every two hours are two hours he'll never get back. You cannot hoard your two hours [sic].

So you are here, and I am here, spending our time as we must, it must be spent. I am trying not to spend this time, as I spend most of my time, trying to

get you to like me; trying to control your thoughts, to use my voodoo at the speed of light, the speed of sound, the speed of thought, trying to convince you that your two hours with me are not going to be resented afterwards.

It is an ancient pattern of time usage for me, and I'm trying to move deeper, hoping to be helpful. This pattern of time usage paints over an ancient wound, and paints it with bright colours. It's a sleight of hand, a distraction, so to attempt to change the pattern let me expose the wound. I now step into this area blindly, I do not know what the wound is, I do know that it is old. I do know that it is a hole in my being. I do know it is tender. I do believe that it is unknowable, or at least unable to be articulable.

I do believe you have a wound too. I do believe it is both specific to you and common to everyone. I do believe it is the thing about you that must be hidden and protected, it is the thing that must be tap danced over five shows a day, it is the thing that won't be interesting to other people if revealed. It is the thing that makes you weak and pathetic. It is the thing that truly, truly, truly makes loving you impossible. It is your secret, even from yourself. But it is the thing that wants to live.

It is the thing from which your art, your painting, your dance, your composition, your philosophical treatise, your screenplay is born. If you don't acknowledge this you will come up here when it is your time and you will give your speech and you will talk about the business of screenwriting. You will say that as a screenwriter you are a cog in a business machine, you will say it is not an art form. You will say, 'Here, this is what a screenplay looks like.' You will discuss character arcs, how to make likeable characters. You will talk about box office. This is what you will do, this is who you will be and after you are done I will feel lonely and empty and hopeless. And I will ask you for my two hours back. I will do this to indicate my lack of love for you.

I will do this to communicate that you are a waste of time as a human being. It will be an ugly thing for me to say. It will be intended to hurt you. It will be wrong for me to say. It will lack compassion. And it

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will hurt you. And you will either dismiss it or take it in, but in either case you will hear it and it will affect you. And you will think about what you can do next time so you can be more lovable, and with that your wound will be buried further. Or you will think about how hateful people are and how your armour needs to be thicker so that you can proceed as planned with your ideas. With that, your wound will be buried further.

As I'm sure you know, there is a fungus – *Ophiocordyceps unilateralis* – that infects the brains of carpenter ants and it turns them into zombie slaves, more or less. What happens is that the ants climb to the underside of leaves near the forest floor, secure themselves to the leaves and then die, becoming a food source for the fungus.

Eventually the positioning of the ant corpse serves to allow the spores to burst out of the ant's head and rain down on other ants. This is true. And it's very successful. There is fossil record of this occurring up to 48 million years ago. The thing that's fascinating about this to me is that the ant is acting mindlessly against its own interests and the interests of its fellow ants by becoming a tool of the fungus. I think a similar system has evolved in our culture.

When I first started to work in series television I didn't need to take a course in how to write a half hour comedy. I knew what to do because I had been raised as a consumer of TV series. I understood the rhythms, I understood the types of jokes that were acceptable, I understood the stock characters. And of course all of this was in service of the perpetuation of the same consumer culture that trained me and made me desire to be part of it. I was a zombie.

It's a massive issue because the business I'm in is the same business that politicians and corporations are in. It's a business of selling something that's important to them by disguising it as something that's important to you. And it's ubiquitous. And I don't think it's symbiotic. As far as I can tell the carpenter ants don't get a damn thing out of it, so my thinking as a carpenter ant is that I want to do what I can to understand my carpenter ant self and

not mindlessly disseminate the fungal spores of my masters. I like that line too.

I think the best way to begin to combat the systemic indoctrination is to look at intention. The aphorism, 'The road to hell is paved with good intentions,' doesn't ring true to me. I think intention is at the bottom of everything. My intentions are shifting and complex and often at odds with each other. And if I know what they are, and watch them closely as they slip and slide all over the place, I have a better chance of putting something honest into the world and this is my goal. My own Hippocratic Oath – I do not want to harm.

I am painfully conscious of the harm that occurs when participating in the media with unclear intentions. I do not want to be a salesman, I do not want to scream, 'Buy me!' or, 'Watch me!' And I don't want to do that tonight. What I'm trying to express – what I'd like to express – is the notion that, by being honest, thoughtful and aware of the existence of other living beings, a change can begin to happen in how we think of ourselves and the world, and ourselves *in* the world. We are not the passive audience for this big, messed up power play.

We don't have to be. We can say who we are, we can assert our right to existence, we can say to the bullies and conmen, the people who try to shame us, embarrass us, flatter us, to the people who have no compunction about lying to us to get our money and our allegiance that we are thinking – really thinking – about who we are, and we'll express ourselves and other people won't feel so alone.

This is Harold Pinter: 'A writer's life is a highly vulnerable, almost naked activity. We don't have to weep about that, the writer makes his choice and is stuck with it. But it is true to say that you are open to all the winds, some of them icy indeed. You are out on your own, out on a limb, you find no shelter, no protection, unless you lie. In which case, of course, you have constructed your own protection and, it could be argued, become a politician.'

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It's weird to be a human. We get to think about things, we get to wonder. It seems like quite a privileged position in the universe. And I wouldn't give it up for certainty because when you're certain you stop being curious. And here's the one thing I know about the thing you're certain about; you're wrong.

Of course this is a paradox, how is it possible to know that you can't know anything? It isn't, it's just a theory. And I remain open to being proven wrong. This is also Harold Pinter – I like Harold Pinter: 'There never is any such thing as one truth to be found in dramatic art, there are many. These truths challenge each other, recoil from each other, reflect each other, ignore each other, tease each other, are blind to each other. Sometimes you feel you have the truth of a moment in your hand, then it slips through your fingers and is lost.'

That's the end of that, because I'm going to go on now and I didn't want you to think it was Harold Pinter anymore. Now this is me for a while. I think. Yeah, it's me for a while. A manifesto is a valuable thing; it is everything else anyone tells you about; how to do things, something to react against. It gives you a focus, a framework with which to say, 'Why?' This is also true with any psychological or emotional insight you might have or might read or see expressed.

It's always a mistake to settle on any explanation for anything, because whatever you settle on you will be wrong, even if you're right. Everything is ephemeral; everything is in a constant state of flux. Thinking past any conclusion you've drawn will reward you with a more complex insight and a more compassionate world view. This is something I'm constantly trying to learn and re-learn.

There's another quote that I like, this one's a little long, but I think it's good. It's by a guy named John Garvey: 'I am increasingly convinced that the need to be right has nothing whatsoever to do with the love of truth, but to face the implications of this means accepting a painful inner emptiness; I am not now what I sense somehow I am meant to be. I do not know what I feel from the bottom of my

heart, I need to know. The beginning of wisdom is not to flee from this condition or distract yourself from it. It is essential not to fill it up with answers that have not been earned. It is important to learn how to wait with that emptiness. It is the desire to fill up that emptiness which leads to political or religious fanaticism.'

Think about your reaction to me, think past it. Why do you have that reaction? Why do you react a certain way to certain things? What does your reaction have to do with your wants? How does it correlate? How would your reaction to what I'm saying change if I were older? Younger? Female? A different race? British? What does it mean about you, that it would change? What does it mean about the subjectivity of your opinions? What if I was me but had a different demeanour? What if I was more confident? Less confident? What if I was more effeminate? What if I was less effeminate? What if I was drunk? What if I was on the verge of tears?

Think about all the assessments, all the interpretations that occur with each interaction. Think about all that you bring to each encounter. Multiply that by all the people here. How much is going on in this room and how do we weave that into a movie?

The challenge of multiple points of view forces us to come up with solutions, to throw away conventional approaches. Movies tend to be very concrete in their construction of events and characters. It's a tricky medium in which to deal with interior lives. But I think it's really a great medium for it. Movies share so much with dreams which, of course, only deal with interior lives. Your brain is wired to turn emotional states into movies.

Your dreams are very well written. I know this, without knowing any of you. People turn anxieties, crises and longing, love, regret and guilt into beautiful rich stories in their dreams. What is it that allows us the creative freedom in our dreams that we don't have in our waking lives? I don't know, but I suspect part of it is that in our dreams we are not constricted by worry about how we will appear to others. It's a private conversation with ourselves,

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and if we're worried about it, this becomes part of the dream. I think if we were better able to approach our work this way, the results would be different.

So what is a screenplay, or what might it be? Since we're talking specifically about screenplays tonight. A screenplay is an exploration. It's about the thing you don't know. It's a step into the abyss. It necessarily starts somewhere, anywhere; there is a starting point but the rest is undetermined. It is a secret, even from you. There's no template for a screenplay, or there shouldn't be. There are at least as many screenplay possibilities as there are people who write them. We've been conned into thinking there is a pre-established form. Like any big business, the film business believes in mass production. It's cheaper and more efficient as a business model.

But I don't want to talk about that aspect of screenwriting. Here's what I know about a screenplay; simply that it is a text which describes what happens in a movie. And I'm not even sure about this definition.

I think what might make this form of endeavour exciting for writers is that they find themselves in an environment where they're encouraged to use their powers to explore the world, their minds and the form itself. Think about the staggering possibilities of the marriage of light, vibration and time. I think craft is a dangerous thing. I saw a trailer for a movie, I don't want to say what the movie is, but it's coming out soon. And it was gorgeous, it was... gorgeous. And it made me really depressed, and I was trying to figure out why.

I think there was an amazing amount of craft and skill on the part of the filmmakers in this movie. And yet it was the same shit. I know that this movie is going to do really well, and I know that the people who made it are going to get rewarded for it, and so the cycle continues. So I think the danger of craft is that it needs to be in second position to what it is that you're doing.

It's seductive to put it in first position, often because what you're doing is meaningless or worthless, or just

more of the same. So you can distinguish yourself by being very, very good at it. I think you need to be willing to be naked when you do anything creatively in film or any other form, that's really what you have to do because otherwise it's very hard to separate it from marketing. I think that it just sort of becomes what it's about.

"The speaker stands on the stage, he looks out at the audience, he doesn't really know why he's here. Not really. More and more in his life he finds himself in places he can't explain, not really explain. He knows he's here to give a speech and he's told himself he intends to do some good with it. But he knows that reason crumbles to dust under investigation. What he wants is to change who he is. Each predicament such as this one, each challenge, he accepts. He accepts in order to move himself to the next level of truthfulness.

Each time he goes in hoping he will come out a real person. He knows if he just takes enough risks, eventually he will be something. Something that lives a real life. Sweat forms on his brow." How did I know [about the sweat]? It's amazing, because I wrote this a week ago, so...

"Pools under his arms." It is but I won't show you. "He can feel it dripping down his sleeves, further moistening his clammy hands..." Actually my hands aren't clammy, they don't get clammy. That's one of my blessings. The only part, for some reason. It's wet now, but that's because I rubbed my forehead.

He is to speak on a subject, he has been chosen as an expert, but the subject is unclear to him and he's lonely, is the truth of it. He feels trapped under burdens so immense, the history he carries, the thwarted relationships, the compromised relationships, the longing that drapes him like a shroud. The want. He is a wanting machine, ever wanting. He looks out at the audience. They don't know what to make of him. Why is he reading this story up there? He is to be giving a speech about screenwriting. Someone in the audience is happy, a train wreck is in progress and he is witnessing it. The speaker knows this. He believes he has considered every possible audience reaction. He

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wants to be liked by them, he wants to be admired and adored, he wants to be found attractive. He hates himself for this, this is the stuff that it always comes down to and his goal here tonight was to be different. He wants to be real. Real in this contrived place. But he can't be. The truth suddenly stares him in the face, this is who he is, this is the real him. This needy, wanting thing. Up here for the same aggrandisement as everyone else who does this. 'Look at me.'

But the pain and hollowness is real, the pain that stretches back into the haze that is his childhood. He leaves. That's it, it's nothing like anything he has ever done. He walks off the stage. 'People have paid money' he thinks, as he leaves. 'This will be on YouTube. I am finished, this life I lived until this point is now different forever, just by walking off the stage. Will they refuse to pay for my hotel room now? For my flight home? This was a terrible mistake. Maybe I can go back,' he considers.

'Maybe I can say 'I needed to get something backstage.' He looks around, grabs a water bottle and heads back to the lectern. He tells the audience he needed some water, and to please forgive the interruption. He pantomimes surprise when he sees that there is already water on the lectern, he makes a joke about all that water... something self-deprecating. The usual stuff he is known for, eunuch-y and easy. He gets a laugh, and he's back. Back in the comfort zone, back in Fakeville, and he's ashamed but he's got to make it through.

So he pulls the old standby on his subject of expertise, and he does his creaky modest bit and he gets through it. He's played the game and he's changed nothing in himself or the world, but the people who have brought him here seem satisfied. He is despairing. He had thought about this evening for months. The importance of it in his head had become unwieldy, he would change course with this lecture. This would be the real him revealed for the first time and then he would be free. And now it's over and it's all the same. He returns to his hotel and sits at the bar. There is no hope left."

I read an article about bullying recently. Everyone is up in arms about bullying. A vocal minority thinks it's a good thing. That it's part of growing up, that it builds character. What was left out of this article and doesn't seem to be part of the discussion is that bullying is a significant element of our culture. The bullying of children by children doesn't come from nowhere. The question remains whether bullying is an inherent aspect of human nature, but that doesn't change the fact that a culture which discourages rather than encourages bullying would have a better chance of curbing it.

Our culture is marketing. What is marketing? Trying to get people to do what you want them to. It's what drives our consumer culture. It's what drives our politics; it's what drives our art. Music, movies, books, fine arts, it's part of every research grant proposal. I don't want to participate. I don't want to tell you how to sell a screenplay or tell you how to write a hit, or tell you how to fit into the existing system. I want to tell you that I have a hope that there's another way to be in this world, and that I believe with courage, vulnerability and honesty that the stuff we put into the world can serve a better purpose.

The way movies work now, and I'm talking about mainstream industry, the only goal is to get you to buy a product. The only goal. *The only goal.* And this intention creates the movies that we sit through, and the movies that we sit through create us. In government we've been reduced to the same game. Through trickery, obfuscation, bullying and fear mongering, the goal of marketing a candidate is achieved.

I don't understand many things, I don't know as much as I'd like about anything, but I'm a human being and I won't be in competition for the right to be treated decently. I won't play that game. Nor should anybody have to. In turn, I will try not to use whatever access I have to the public's fear to sell things, including myself.

The world is very scary now. It always has been. But something grotesque and specific to our time is blanketing us. We need to see that it is not reality; it

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is a choice we are making or allowing other people to make for us.

I sincerely hope that I have something of interest or value to say tonight. I can't tell anyone how to write a screenplay because the truth is that anything of value you might do comes from *you*. The way I work is not the way that you work, and the whole point of any creative act is that. What I have to offer is me, what you have to offer is you, and if you offer yourself with authenticity and generosity I will be moved. You are born into a body, into a family, into a situation, into a brain chemistry, into a gender, into a culture, into a time – as am I. At times I can feel the massive gravitation pulling of all these various things, pulling me in different directions, creating me.

I watch the reactions I have, that are as much my father's as they are mine. I know they are inherited through genes and situation, just as they have been for my father. And I feel immense loneliness in this prison, coupled with a great shame because I can see that this prison has an open door. But I can't get through it. How weak I am. How can I not be a saner person? A healthier person? A more generous person? My sneaker company tells me that I can, and that it's up to me. It is a sign of great weakness if I don't 'Just Do It'.

And these are the priests of our culture, the therapists, the Dad with a firm hand but your best interests at heart. A sneaker company that runs sweatshops in Third World countries. This is our Dad. And I don't know about you but I can be moved to tears by these commercials that these people put out. And I think it's despicable.

Allow yourself the freedom to change as you discover... I'm, like, *dripping*. It's like I'm watching it rain off of me. It's not only nerves; it is actually hot up here. But this wool suit – which I wore because I was told London is a chilly place, you know – it's not working. It's really bad. I need a suit made out of stuff that's got holes in it, that athletes wear sometimes. Mesh stuff, a mesh suit would be good.

Allow yourself the freedom to change as you discover, allow your screenplay to grow and change as you work on it. You will discover things as you work. You must not put these things aside, even if they're inconvenient. Let's not disregard all the little voices in order to simplify. Do not simplify. Let's not worry about what it looks like, let's not worry about failure. Failure is a badge of honour; it means you risked failure. If you don't risk failure you're never going to do anything that's different than what you've already done, or what somebody else has done.

Just know that that's the choice you're making when you won't put yourself at jeopardy like that. Don't compartmentalise to make things simpler than they are, and don't work towards results. Allow yourself time, let things brew. You're thinking about it, whether you realise it or not. Letting the unconscious take over brings in freedom and surprise and removes judgement. At every single moment, every single person wants something. Often many things, often conflicting things. Understand this about your characters and yourself.

Storytelling is inherently dangerous. If you consider a traumatic event in your life, consider it as you experienced it. Now think about how you told it to someone a year later. Now think about how you told it for the one hundredth time. It's not the same thing. A few components enter into the change. One is perspective. Most people think perspective is a good thing to have in a story. You can figure out characters arcs, you can apply a moral, you can tell it from a distance with understanding and context. The problem is that this perspective is a misrepresentation of the incident; it's a reconstruction with meaning and as such bears very little resemblance to the event.

The other thing that happens in storytelling is the process of adjustment for the audience over time. You find out which part of the story works, which parts to embellish, which parts to jettison. You fashion it. Your goal, your reasons for telling it are to be entertaining, to garner sympathy. This is true for a story told at a dinner party, and it's true for stories told in movies.

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I'm sifting through now, to see if there's stuff... So I should stop soon?

Audience: No!

CK: I'll do this part now because this sort of relates. So in relation to that, don't let anyone tell you what a story is, what it needs to include or what form it must take. As an experiment, go out of your way to write a non-story. It will still be a story, but it will have a chance of being a different story. Our brains make stories. It is as basic to us as breathing; we cannot do otherwise. Free yourself – and by extension the rest of us – with your efforts. If you give yourself too specific an assignment you will keep yourself locked away from your work. Go where it takes you. If you say you want to write about homeless people, and in the end reveal their humanity, you'll end up with something illustrative and perhaps instructive.

If you say, 'There aren't words to put this moan I feel in me, but I'm going to swim in it and see what happens,' you'll end up with something real. But you'll have to throw away any predetermined notion of what real is. It doesn't mean you'll end up with a million dollar screenplay or that critics will love it. You can write to that if that's your goal. In the process you might lose track of who you are but that's okay. They'll assign you an identity.

LAUGHTER

With a screenplay you're creating a world; consider everything, every character, every room, every juxtaposition, every increment of time as an embodiment of that world. Look at all of this through that filter and make sure it is all consistent. As in a painting, every element is part of one whole composition, just as there is nothing separate in the actual world there should be nothing separate in the world you create.

This is a little thing that I wrote, that's just a personal thing for me, and it's very... I don't know, but you'll see. But I hate this, so I'm just going to share with you that I hate it. 'Do not write jokes to your readers in your stage directions.' You know what I mean by

that? People do that. Don't do that. Your job is to create an atmosphere. You're trying to establish a mood. You're writing a story and what you're trying to do is to help this large group of people who are going to come together to understand the tone and the spirit and the feeling of this movie so that they can come together and make it. That's what you should spend your time on, not with winks and stuff. Not winking at people.

This is all gold by the way [referring to his notes], but I'm... you know, some of this I've covered. I'll tell you this little story now, and I don't know why I'm telling it but it's interesting to me and it just seems like there's something inherently cinematic about it. I run in my neighbourhood, and one day I ran past this guy who was running in the other direction, an older guy, a big hulky kind of guy, really struggling, huffing and puffing. I was kind of going down a slight hill and he was coming up the hill. But it was very slight, and he was wearing a headband and his sweatshirt.

So he passes me and he goes, 'Well sure, it's all downhill that way,' and I love that joke because it's funny. And he made a connection and it was sort of a witty thing to say. So I had it in my head that I like this guy, this is a cool guy, you know, and he's my friend now. So a few weeks later I'm passing by him again, I see him in the distance coming towards me, we're going opposite ways, and I'm thinking, 'There's the guy, that's cool.' So as we pass each other he says, 'Well sure, it's all downhill that way.' And I was like, 'Oh, okay. He's got a repertoire, and doesn't know... I'm not that special. He's probably said it to other people. Maybe he doesn't remember me, he's an older guy, maybe there's some... but okay. I laughed. But this time my laugh was a little forced, because I've got all these things going on in my head and I'm disappointed.

And then I pass him again, and he says it again. And this time he's going downhill and I'm going uphill. So it doesn't even make any sense any more, it's not about anything. And I started to have so much pain about this, because I'm embarrassed for him and there's something wrong with him I think. And then it just keeps happening. It's all downhill

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that way. Probably heard it seven or eight more times. And I start to avoid him. I see him coming and I cross the street because you know... And if I can't cross the street then I look like I'm really focused on my running, he says it anyway if he passes me, even if I'm not looking.

I don't know why I'm telling you this story, except that I like the idea that changes over time and nothing has changed. What's changed is all in my head and has to do with a realisation on my character's part through time. There's no outward story here, and it can only be told in a form. It can't be told in a painting, I guess is the point I'm making. I wouldn't know how to do that, and... I'm probably reaching here to say this, but I do think that when you're doing a movie, when you're doing a screenplay, you have to know *why* it's a movie. And if it doesn't have to be a movie then you shouldn't make it.

It's very important that what you do is specific to the medium in which you're doing it. And that you utilise what's specific about that medium to do the work. And if you can't think about why it should be done this way or needs to be done this way, then it doesn't need to be done this way and then you should figure out what it is about this – if you want to do it – that needs to be told in the form of a movie.

I think about YouTube, I really do think about it, because this stuff just ends up on there and then everybody in the world says what a jerk you are or whatever, you know. It's a very weird thing to think about that as the thing that you're contending with when you come and do anything in public; this other sort of element of mindless aggression that exists on the internet.

I've got a bunch of other stuff, but I think it's 8.02 so I think I should stop and do the Q&A. Yeah? Okay, because my other stuff is my B material. Thank you.

APPLAUSE

David Cox: It's a great privilege to be asked to do this this evening. I'd just like once again to thank

Charlie Kaufman for his time and for standing up there.

Charlie Kaufman: My pleasure.

DC: That was super, thank you very much.

CK: You're welcome.

DC: You were nervous about doing that, you haven't done it before. Did you enjoy it?

CK: I don't know, I kind of liked it. I can't say yet. I have to go home and toss and turn all night in bed about it, and then I'll give you my answer.

DC: How much are your screenplays, to some extent, a direct address in the way that that was? Do you sometimes sit back and think, 'That screenplay was almost like having given a lecture,' but then filtered through the myriad voices that you would create?

CK: I don't know, like I said earlier, the idea that a screenplay should be something that has to be a movie... I try to do that with everything. I did a couple of plays a few years ago, and they were basically sort of radio plays, although they were staged. It was kind of like, 'What works for this and only this?' I was trying to do that with this tonight. Okay this is a speech, let me play with what that is and what that might be. I had a lot of different ideas, some more theatrical but I kind of felt like the point maybe was to be here. Not to be presenting something, just to sort of be myself because it just felt like that was what the job description was.

DC: Given the importance that you place on a certain degree of honesty and putting something out in the world that – as you say – does no harm, do you find yourself surprised that you've become involved in what is essentially a collaborative medium? Where to some extent you're giving your work over to other people to interpret? Do you ever feel compromised or vulnerable in that respect?

CK: I've had the good fortune of working with directors who have been very collaborative with

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me, so that I've had a voice in most of the things that I've written that I didn't direct. I do feel like I wanted to take the step to direct things as well, not because of dissatisfaction with those movies, but I like the idea of it, of having that kind of ultimate control.

DC: And you stayed in control of the scripts and of the projects from *Being John Malkovich* onwards?

CK: Yeah, with one exception. There was nothing... Changes that were made were changes that I made. And, you know, for the most part agreed with. I think there were a couple of battles that I lost, but they were honest battles.

DC: You talk about the dangers of manipulating an audience or feeling too manipulative as an artist, or as – for want of a better word – entertainer. Have you got to a point where you're writing scripts now and you're almost worried about entertaining too much, that you start second guessing and think a story has become too seductive or has become too quick and easy? Do you almost purposefully check yourself and try and go back to some of those values that you discussed?

CK: I check to see if I understand what I did, what I wrote and why I wrote it. I don't have anything against... 'entertaining' is a really hard word for me because I don't really even know what it means. But I like when people like my things. I'm not crazy – well, I am crazy, but I'm not that crazy. But it has to be on the terms that make sense to me. I want to like it. If other people like it that's really good, and great, because it means that something that I've said has somehow resonated with somebody and that's amazing. I want that. But it has to be the thing that I've said for my own purposes, you know?

DC: Is this a philosophy that you came into feature film writing with, or has it developed? When you were writing *Being John Malkovich* did you have these thoughts, or have you seen something over the course of this career...?

CK: No I did, very much so. That's what I did, I wrote it just because it was an idea that appealed to me. I

thought it was funny and there were a lot of issues in that script that were real issues for me. They were kind of put through a strainer of comedy, because I like comedy. That's not a compromise for me. But yeah, I wrote it for myself with no expectations that it was ever going to get made. None.

DC: But over the course of your years since *Being John Malkovich*, have you become more conscious of the fact that you're working within an industry which has the potential to do some harm, to some extent?

CK: I've become more aware of it, but I also think that the industry and the world have gone through some changes in the last few years. There used to be more of an opportunity for people, the industry used to be a little more welcoming to people who were at odds or eccentric or something. I don't think it is anymore. But yeah, I've gotten older and I've thought about things.

DC: When you're writing a script or you're writing something new, are you thinking of the business side of things? Are you thinking about how you're going to sell this? Are you thinking of the problems that could lie ahead? And have things become harder in that respect?

CK: No. I wrote one screenplay after my last movie. The economy and the business completely changed around that time. Plus the fact that my movie – the one that I directed – did very, very little business. That combined thing put me in a position of being aware of how difficult it was going to be to get things made for me. But in a way I wrote in response to that with the next thing I wrote. I didn't shy away from doing my own thing or try to fit into a form.

I almost just thought, 'I'm not going to do this anymore,' but then I thought, 'I'll do this, and do it on my terms and see what happens.' But it's a struggle. I pretty much thought that the movie wasn't going to get made when I wrote it. The studio wasn't interested in it at all. It took a lot of work to try to get financing after that.

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DC: To some extent you have a brand name, it didn't take long before the press coined 'Kaufmanesque' and people... they didn't anticipate the sort of work you would do, but there was a feeling that you would work in a particular style. Is that a dangerous thing for a writer, to suddenly believe that people expect a certain thing and that you've almost become a character to some extent?

CK: I don't feel that way about myself, I don't think that way. And I would never intentionally play on it. I always try to do something that I don't know how to do and I always try to do something different but I'm a person with a very specific existence and a very specific background, like everybody is.

And the stuff that comes out of me might resemble other things that have come out of me, but don't try for that. In fact I try for the opposite. This thing that I just wrote that hopefully is going to get made is a musical, you know? I've never done that before, so I did it.

DC: And that's a conscious thing, you sit down writing and you know there's a comfort zone, perhaps, there but how do you make sure that you take yourself out of that comfort zone? Is that something when you're actually writing you can really think, 'That's almost too easy'?

CK: No, the comfort zone for me is kind of the stuff I was talking about tonight. The lack of comfort zone for me is to say something that makes me vulnerable in the world. The movie is about stuff that is stuff I'm thinking about. I always try to write from what it is that I'm thinking about at the time that I'm writing. I always try to centre it on that, because that's the sort of lack of perspective thing that I was trying to talk about before. There are too many safeguards when you put yourself out of it, and say you're going to write about this.

The best way for me to find that place where I've got a lot of emotion and a lot of agitation and a lot of fear or whatever, is to make that what the story is or what the movie is. And not try to hide it. And the reason it's a musical is because I have a tendency

to write very interior things, and I'm always trying to figure out a new way to express that. And in this particular movie, a lot of which takes place on the internet, there are a lot of isolated people at computers. They're not talking to anybody, that's sort of by definition who they are, they don't have any friends. But I want to express their thoughts and I didn't want to do voiceover. I didn't want to do soliloquies, so I thought, 'What if they sing their emotional state?'

And I like writing songs. It's something to do when I can't think. I like to make things rhyme. It's fun for me. It has almost 50 songs in it, this movie, which is a lot. But they're not all whole songs, some of them are snippets. And they're not production numbers, they're very interior – no-one's breaking into song. So I think it will fit into the allotted time. I'm not sure.

DC: Having directed *Synecdoche*, and this is a film you're obviously going to direct rather than just write....

CK: Yes.

DC: When you're writing do you still have at the back of your mind, now that you've directed, you know what the practical difficulties could be of certain situations, certain things you're writing, or do you put that aside almost as if you're a writer who's going to hand the film over to a director later on?

CK: I try to put it aside, but it's hard. But I try. Ultimately that's my goal, to put it aside, but it's harder now if I'm doing something that I plan to direct, than it was before. After the movie looks like it's going to get made I'm kind of like, 'God, I don't want to make this movie...' you know? It's exhausting for me to even think about the process, but I'll do it, I guess, if they let me.

DC: You talk about taking stuff out of the comfort zone, about it being exhausting, about wanting to be lost when you start a project; do you still at heart enjoy screenwriting? Do you still think it's something that's invigorating as much as it obviously has so many things that take it out of you?

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CK: No, I don't think I ever felt that way about it, I don't think it's invigorating for me.

DC: Enjoyable and rewarding, at the time when a film is actually out perhaps?

CK: No, it's not. There are so many pitfalls when a movie comes out that it's hard to enjoy it when it comes out. Obviously if a movie does well and is critically well received I like it, but I'm so needful of it, that kind of response that it doesn't feel good. It just feels less bad, you know? Because it feels really bad when people say mean things. Really, it feels bad. And I kind of wish that it didn't, but it does for me.

DC: The screenwriting satisfies a need to some extent, obviously.

CK: I like the idea of the job a lot. I get to think about things I want to think about, I get to write jokes that sometimes make people laugh. I mean, it's a great job, but it's very hard for me. I don't sit at my desk and laugh. That's very, very rare. Mostly I sit at my desk and look at stuff online. That's mostly what I do, because I can't think. I don't recommend that because it's a terrible thing, and I'd like to fight against it in my life and in my offering tonight. It's not a good thing.

DC: Well, your pain reaps the reward for that suffering as an audience.

CK: I don't want to romanticise it and say it's pain and suffering. It's a pain in the ass maybe, is what it is.

Q (from the floor): It seems that no-one's done a really good job of integrating an understanding of the universe in scientific terms into characters and their view of the world, quite as well as you did in your speech and as I've detected in things like *Adaptation*. So in what sense does science inform your thinking and is it difficult to romanticise what science tells you?

CK: The thing in *Adaptation* is the beginning of the world stuff? Is that the thing you're talking about in *Adaptation*?

Questioner: You spoke about genetics, carpenter ants and parasites and there's a lot of that in *Adaptation*. And you spoke about genetic inheritance hinting at a lack of free will. Those kinds of things.

CK: Well some of that's philosophy maybe, I don't know. I'm really interested in philosophy and in science. I'm a layman and I have no mathematic skill because I became really interested in physics through the popular physics books. And in every popular physics book there's always this admonition, you don't really know what we're talking about. We're going to pretend that we're talking to you now but you have no idea what we're talking about. I found that really frustrating, but I didn't know what to do. I don't think I have any mathematical talent, I guess is what it is.

My father was an engineer. I used to go to his office and look at all that inscrutable stuff on the blackboards that they used to draw and I was awed by it. But it just looked like something there was no way I was ever going to understand. And I didn't. But I'm interested. I just saw this article the other day that was really crazy and fascinating to me. By studying with MRI the brain's reaction to certain visual imagery, they've been able to kind of put together a library of impulses so that they can now recreate, based on what's going on in the brain, in the neurons, they can recreate the image. Have you heard about this?

Questioner: It's Columbia University, it's pattern recognition, looking at neural patterns.

CK: But to the point where they show the image and the real thing. This work is being done by a guy named Jack Gallant at Berkeley. They have a picture of Steve Martin as Inspector Clouseau, and then they have the brain version of it. You can't tell it's Steve Martin, but you can tell it's a guy. I was like 'wow, that's going to get really freaky scary, really

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soon, what they're going to be able to do.' Are you a scientist?

Questioner: I'm working on a film which uses science to inform the narrative.

Q (from the floor): When you talked about your films, in classifying them, and the ones you feel least bad about... which of your movies do you feel least bad about, and why?

CK: I actually don't feel bad about any of the movies, so I don't know how to answer that question. Because I'm so involved with most of them, in the process of making them, I feel very attached to them and very sort of responsible for them. So I like things about all the movies I've done. I would say that the one that I'm least attached to is the one that I worked least on, but... 'I like my movies' sounds arrogant, but I don't feel bad about them.

Q (from the floor): Seeing you talk put to rest some of my disillusionment because there's very few people in a position of influential status, whereby they are still completely, truly honest. And I think you're one of those few people. Once you reach that state, is there any relief to the questions that made you write?

CK: Questions that make me write?

Questioner: Questions that were in your mind that you've thought of for a long time. Is there any relief to any of it once you've written and reached that acclaim?

CK: No, not for me. I'll tell you one thing though: Being well known doesn't solve any of your problems, and I didn't know that. I thought that it would and I had fantasies about having that. It solved certain problems practically, like I have a better chance of getting a movie made than somebody who doesn't have a reputation, that kind of thing. Not a great chance now, but better.

My own personal problems, the things that make me *me*, I've still got them. It's a good thing to know,

and I don't know if you can know that without having it happen and realising it. I'm so insecure; I'm such an insecure person. I've always been, and I am. I'll tell you this, ten years ago, what I'm doing tonight, no way in Hell could I have done this. No way in Hell could I have talked, sat here, got up on stage. So maybe there are some things that are better for me just because I've been exposed to it. And I think that's a good thing for me, because it was a big issue.

When I got my first writing job I couldn't talk in the writing room. I was working on a sitcom and I could not talk. It wasn't like I chose not to talk, or I didn't talk, I couldn't open my mouth. No words would come out. And that went on for six weeks. I thought I was going to get fired, and I probably should have been but they didn't. But I was so terrified in this room of six guys, you know? That's who I was.

Q (from the floor): I was wondering whether you feel that you've been influenced in your thinking and work by music, throughout your life?

CK: Not really. I don't know. I did a lot of musicals when I was a kid. When I did them I was the biggest non-singing part, because I can't sing. And then I'd be in the chorus and they'd listen and get close to everybody singing and then they'd go, 'Just mouth the words.' This happened more than once, and I got to a point where, I mean I'm so self-conscious about my singing that I can't do it. But I did a lot of musicals, so I knew a lot of musicals, which is really embarrassing because that's what I was into when I was a kid. But no, it hasn't been a big part.

Q (from the floor): Two questions. One, I'd love to hear what were the germs or inspirations that coalesced to produce *Being John Malkovich*. That's one thing. And then watching it, as you watched it, bounce around Los Angeles and eventually get made, what were you thinking?

CK: Mmmm, I just wrote it. I was off from my sitcom job and I just wrote it while I was waiting for hiring season. My idea was that I would write a script and maybe use it to try to get assignment work. So that's what I did. I had this idea that someone finds a

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portal into someone's head, and then I had another idea that somebody has a story about someone having an affair with a co-worker. And neither one was going anywhere in my head, so I just decided to see what happened if I combined them. And then I just wrote it.

It actually got a really positive response; I started to get kind of a little known because of it. People would read it and tell me how funny it was, and invite me in for meetings and tell me that nobody would ever make the movie. I had maybe 15 meetings like that so I believed that and I wasn't really expecting it to get made. It was like, oh cool, maybe I'll get a job offer and then it somehow got to Spike Jonze and he was in a position at the time to get a movie made and it was the movie he wanted to make.

So when that was happening then it was... I don't know, we were just making a movie, I didn't really expect it to be anything. It really ended up changing a lot for me, but I didn't expect it. I don't think Spike expected it either. I remember when they went to the Venice Film Festival, which was the first exposure that it had. I wasn't invited, but they went, Spike and Cameron Diaz and Catherine Keener and... I don't know if Malkovich was there. Maybe Cusack was there.

I just got the phone call that it was this big thing, and then we got these articles written about it, and it was cool. It was exciting. I don't know if that answers your question, I feel like you're dissatisfied.

DC: There's time for one more question, and it will be the gentleman who has the mike by the wall.

Q (from the floor): After being fortunate to hear *Theatre of the New Ear* a few years ago, and hearing you speak tonight about not having mathematical talent, and maybe about writing a play, I was just wondering as a writer, using words to communicate the truth that you feel motivated to share, whether in the future we can expect you to write in other forms; novels, plays, poetry. As a writer do you feel you have a relationship with language in that way?

CK: I'm serious when I said before that I don't consider myself a writer. And not only because I don't want to label myself, but I'll read something that somebody wrote and go, 'Shit, man! I don't know how to do that.' So I don't know, I don't really think I have writing talent either. But yes, I will continue to do it. I like quotes, Robert Benchley has a quote, something to the effect, 'By the time I realised I had no writing talent, I was too famous to give it up.' But I'm definitely going to write plays, that's my plan. I'd love to write a novel, I don't know if I know how to do that. I've thought about it, I really want to, but I always get scared when it comes to doing it.

DC: Time is up, I'm afraid. I'd like to thank you all very much for coming and join me in saying a very big thank you to Charlie Kaufman.

CK: Thank you very much. I really do appreciate you coming here and sitting through this thing that I had no idea what it was. I sincerely thank you for it.

DC: It was our pleasure.

APPLAUSE