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## Six Ways of Looking at Anomalisa

### Abstract

*Anomalisa* is a parable about the nature of human fulfillment that explores the tension between otherworldly desire (the conviction that real life must be “elsewhere”) and the kind of fulfillment that comes from a more transparent relationship to things as they are. The film explores this religious theme not only through its story, but through the way the story comments on its own embodiment as a puppet show—a work of stop-motion animation. In this paper, I try to tease out the film’s complex reflections on the real and the artificial (in particular, on the ways that a desire for “the real” can distract us from the actual world) by considering it from a number of angles: in relation to Charlie Kaufman’s other works; in relation to some of Kaufman’s statements about the purposes of his art; and in relation to some ideas from Nietzsche and religious nondualism about what is left to us once “the real” has lost its special status.

### Keywords

Anomalisa, Charlie Kaufman, Nietzsche, Buddhism

### Author Notes

David L. Smith is a Professor in the Department of Philosophy and Religion at Central Michigan University. His research explores the religious implications of Romanticism, the writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson in particular, and the Emersonian echoes that continue to inform American religion, literature, and film.

## Introduction

One thing the academic study of religion does well is to get people thinking about the nature of human fulfilment. What do we humans ultimately want or need in order to address what seems to be our primal sense of lack or incompleteness? How can the part reconnect with the whole? The various religions propose widely different answers or approaches. Most direct our attention “elsewhere,” insisting that fulfilment is possible only through an extraordinary or supernatural supplement to the ordinary world. Others—the Ch’an/Zen inflections of Buddhism, for example—hold that fulfilment is found in a more transparent relationship with things as they are. The effect of considering diverse perspectives on such an urgent question is curious. For some students, it is merely frustrating. For others, it becomes an enriching exercise in what Keats called “negative capability:” the ability to entertain contradictory points of view without attempting to reconcile them.<sup>1</sup> It suggests the idea that the human world may require an ambiguous description.

*Anomalisa* (2015), the latest film from writer and director Charlie Kaufman, raises this fundamental religious question and exemplifies the salutary irresolution or openness that it can inspire. Specifically, the film explores the tensions between the yearning for fulfilment “elsewhere” and the possibilities inherent in our immediate circumstances. It does not answer the question it raises, but it illustrates some of the ways we simultaneously frustrate and fulfil ourselves in pursuit of our answers. In the spirit of the film, then, what follows is a sequence of six perspectives on

*Anomalisa*, each of which is intended to illuminate important aspects of the film's concerns, and all of which open up more questions than they resolve. The aim is to show how the film's ambiguities mirror and comment on the perplexities that result from an engagement with religious questions concerning the sources of fulfillment in life.

### 1. *Anomalisa* is a “Charlie Kaufman Movie”

That is to say, *Anomalisa* is a member of an anomalous category.<sup>2</sup> Usually when a person's name is attached to a group of films, the name refers to a director, actor, or character whose mark is distinctive enough to set the films apart in some way (e.g., Bergman, Bogart, or Bond, respectively). But Kaufman first became known as a writer of screenplays directed by others: *Being John Malkovich* (1999) and *Adaptation* (2002) by Spike Jonze; *Human Nature* (2001) and *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (2004) by Michel Gondry. More recently he has begun to direct his own scripts: *Synechdoche, New York* (2008), and now, *Anomalisa*. All of these are “Charlie Kaufman movies” and all were written by Charlie Kaufman, so perhaps it is as a writer that he makes his mark. However, not all films written by Charlie Kaufman are clearly “Charlie Kaufman movies.” In the one case where Kaufman did not have a significant degree of creative control over the finished product (*Confessions of a Dangerous Mind*, dir. George Clooney, 2002), the results are dubious.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, let's say that a Charlie Kaufman movie is one that makes it

through production with the stamp of Kaufman's characteristic preoccupations intact. This definition works, at least for present purposes, because Kaufman's scripts *do* display a remarkably consistent set of preoccupations—a kind of thematic DNA that unfolds differently in each project but which is always traceable back to the mind of the maker.

This unifying theme begins where religious quests often begin—that is, with a sense of lack or incompleteness. A person feels that something is wrong with his or her life, that something very basic is missing. Although they are alive, they feel that they are not really living. What they think they need in order to overcome the gap that separates them from a real or more complete life varies from film to film. Usually the focus is on relationships—achieving some sort of ideal union with another person (*Being John Malkovich*, *Eternal Sunshine*). Alternatively, the quest may be for a more abstract goal: drawing the world itself closer (*Synecdoche*), becoming more natural or more cultured (*Human Nature*), or overcoming the distancing effects of our own reflective minds (*Adaptation*). Whatever the goal, the plot gives the protagonist a chance to pursue it, often through magical or unlikely means (e.g., the portal in *Malkovich*, the Lacuna apparatus in *Eternal Sunshine*, or the inexhaustible MacArthur grant in *Synecdoche*).

What results from these pursuits of happiness is sometimes farcical, sometimes tragic, but it is always disappointing. Even if Kaufman's protagonists get what they want, it turns out that the goal simply replicates the syndrome they sought

to escape. Attempts to bring the world or other people closer end by driving them away. The supposed cure turns out to be a symptom of the disease. What a Charlie Kaufman movie leaves us thinking about, then, is whether a meaningful life is possible under *those* conditions. What can we really hope for if our freedom songs are nothing more than the rattling of our chains? What are our chances of finding meaning if life just *is* disappointing? Cynical as that may sound, for Kaufman it seems to be a genuinely open question.

*Anomalisa*, as a Charlie Kaufman movie, can be read as another instance of this basic plot. Originally written as a play for voices in 2005—essentially a radio play conceived for live performers on stage—it became an animated film ten years later, co-directed by Kaufman with Duke Johnson, an experienced stop-motion animator. It tells the story of Michael Stone (David Thewlis), a middle-aged customer service consultant and the author of an influential book in the field called *How May I Help You Help Them?* His expertise, in other words, is human communication of an extremely artificial, deracinated sort—“communication” as it pertains to sales calls, technical support, and customer complaints.<sup>4</sup> He knows how to make that sort of communication work in business terms. (“Productivity up 90%!”<sup>5</sup>) But human contact is also his problem. From the first, Michael exudes loneliness and boredom—quiet desperation by any other name. His bleak environment of airports, conference centers, and up-scale hotels gives him no pleasure, for all its commercially-motivated attempts to please. (“Try the chili!”) In

effect, his world hands him the same kind of “customer support” that he dishes out, but what he sells to the world fails to satisfy him.

Michael’s heaviest burden is other people, all of whom have come to seem unreal to him. The entire film is presented from his point of view (with one possible exception—more on that later), so that what we hear and see directly represents what other people sound and look like to Michael. In short: they all speak with the same voice (Tom Noonan’s) and they all have the same face (a photoshopped composite of all the men and women who worked for the film’s production company).<sup>6</sup> Even his own wife and son are part of this pre-digested mass, or of what strikes Michael as a conspiracy to leave him cold.

But Michael wants something else, in the way that most of us do. He wants to feel alive. He wants love. And if Iris Murdoch is right in saying that “love is the extremely difficult realization that something other than oneself is real,”<sup>7</sup> then in longing for love, he is also longing for reality—a sense of a connection with something in the world that is at least as vivid to him as his own needs. And he seeks it in the ways that most of us do. He makes hesitant plans to look up an ex-lover, presumably in the hope that an old flame will warm him. He listens to yearning operatic music on his iPod (though to his ears, even the “Flower Duet” from *Lakmé* comes across in the voice of Tom Noonan). He responds to beauty in the few places he sees it, but it’s not enough to make much difference.

The film begins with Michael flying to a conference in Cincinnati where he is to be the key-note speaker. The scenes of his flight and arrival immerse us in the world as he sees it—its sameness, its business-class blandness. The name of the hotel he checks into confirms the impression we've been given. It's The Fregoli, "Fregoli delusion" being the name of a rare neurological condition in which sufferers are convinced that the people they encounter are a single person in disguise, like an actor playing multiple roles. Kaufman has used this trick before, planting allusions to neurological syndromes in his films to highlight his characters' quirks.<sup>8</sup> The intention, he says, is not to stigmatize his characters as clinically delusional, but to use the syndrome "as a metaphor"—to point out how close to madness our quotidian states of mind can be.<sup>9</sup> There but for a brain lesion go you or I.

Safely arrived in his quotidian room, Michael gets a drink from the mini-bar, practices his speech, orders dinner, calls home. All of it rubs him the wrong way. His wife, for example, speaks to him with edgy caution, as if knowing how easily he can spiral into ugly moods, and his own tone impatiently acknowledges and courts her apprehensions. So, seeking escape from anhedonia—wanting to feel *something* other than his vague state of irritation—he calls up Bella, an ex-lover who lives in town, the woman he abandoned eleven years ago whose angry, accusatory fuck-off letter he had been reviewing on the plane.

He talks her into meeting him for a drink. It doesn't go well. She demands that he try to explain why he left, to help her to understand what went wrong. It's



not something he wants to think about. He doesn't seem to know what he wants—probably just to feel better. In any case he's not prepared to deal with her overflowing resentment. Instead, he tries to excuse his state of mind, using phrases here for the first time that become his refrain: "I'm not thinking straight. There's something wrong with me.... I have psychological problems.... I've been bloody lonely." But Bella has too much pain of her own to be willing to put up with Michael's mixed motives. She storms out of the hotel bar, leaving him to sink deeper into his funk.

After a side-trip to an adult toy store (which we will take up in another context), Michael returns to his room, where we learn what might have been on his mind when he told Bella "there's something wrong with me." After a shower, he examines his face in the bathroom mirror, and begins to probe himself for evidence of something he apparently suspects and which the audience already knows: namely, that he is a puppet. His mouth contorts, slips out of his control, and issues ratchety, mechanical noises. He sees that his face is an assembly of separate sections (in fact, plates of 3D-printed gypsum powder<sup>10</sup>), and he is just about to peel one loose—to confront his own artificiality—when...abracadabra! His wish for human contact is fulfilled. A voice unlike the rest of the world's drifts in from the hallway—the voice of a woman presumably as "real" as he is. ("Jesus! Someone else!") And so, for the moment, he is able to forget about what he had just begun to see in the mirror.

Drawn away from the awful truth by the promise of “something else,” he hastens to track the woman down.

The voice belongs to Lisa (Jennifer Jason Leigh), a customer service representative from Akron, in town for the conference, who is a big fan of Michael’s book. Although there is nothing extraordinary about her, everything she says strikes Michael as “miraculous.” She’s nice enough (Zaddie Smith calls her “a lovely, homely girl”<sup>11</sup>), but Michael’s response is so disproportionate that one is led to wonder what makes the miracle: Lisa’s qualities or Michael’s needs. In fact, this film repeatedly invites us to think about how the qualities of things are often in the eye of the beholder. Lisa, for example, mentions her hobby of playing the Jew’s harp, and when Michael responds noncommittally that it’s an “underrated instrument,” she gushes back, “Oh, I *know*. People think of it as just this *thing*.” The hotel manager keeps an aquarium of fish that, to his eyes, have “Irish faces.” The Cincinnati visitors’ bureau sees qualities in the zoo and the chili that no one else is likely to see. And in a sense, the entire customer service industry is built on a similar kind of hype, conjuring up qualities and entities out of thin air. (“Always remember,” says Michael to his conference audience, “the customer is an individual. Just like you.”)

In any case, Michael is smitten with Lisa, who is drawn to him in turn by hero worship and gratitude. After drinks, he invites her back to his room, where she sings him a song (a shy, ludicrously earnest, but ultimately charming rendition of

“Girls Just Want to Have Fun”), and they end by making love. The sex scene has been widely noted by reviewers for its remarkable ordinariness.<sup>12</sup> Two lumpy bodies accept each other graciously, moving with awkward tenderness. We’ve never seen sex that’s quite so human in a film before. Apparently it takes puppets to show us how touchingly romantic sex can look when it’s not overly romanticized.

That night, Michael has a dream. The hotel manager calls him up and politely orders him down to his office in the hotel basement—a vast, arena-sized, low-ceilinged space that Michael has to traverse in a golf cart. What the manager wants to tell him, in sum, is that Michael is loved. He is loved by “them”—all the faceless, monotonous others. “We’re all here for you. We’re all good for you.” He knows that Michael has been carried away by his love for Lisa—that Michael thinks that Lisa is extraordinary. But he insists that Michael is making a mistake. In effect, his message as spokesman for “them” is, why give up the world as it is for this one thing you imagine to be “real?” What has she got that we haven’t got? Michael’s belief that there *is* a difference—that the world is a hollow fraud and that only he and Lisa are vivid—gives the manager’s plea a nightmarish quality, as if the pod people from *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956; remake 1978) were trying to seduce him into giving up his humanity. So Michael runs back to his room in horror to drag Lisa away, to defend her from “them,” believing her to be what his nickname for her implies: Anomalisa, “the only other person in the world.”

Interestingly, though, there are elements in this dream that point toward a different conclusion. For example, there is the moment when, as he runs down a hotel hallway on his way to save Lisa, Michael's face falls off. His dream confronts him, that is, with the truth that he was about to admit to himself when Lisa's voice first distracted him away from his bathroom mirror. What he discovers, in effect, is that he is already one of "them." He is an artificial construct, a puppet, no more or less real than the rest of his world. From Michael's entrenched point of view, this just adds to the horror. From a different angle, though, this realization has the potential to turn his nightmare inside out. For if *everything* is artificial, then the distinction between artifice and reality, things and persons breaks down. It is that distinction that underlies Michael's dissatisfaction with what is "merely" ordinary and his yearning for "something else"—his desire to find another person as special as himself. But if he is wrong about himself, then he must also be wrong about the world. If he is not "more" than other people—not one of those miraculous beings that stands apart from conditions—then the world is not less. He won't find what he's looking for outside of the ordinary world, that is, because the ordinary world has no outside.

Nietzsche, another ubiquitous reference point in the world of "Charlie Kaufman movies,"<sup>13</sup> put it like this: "We have abolished the real world: what world is left? the apparent world perhaps?... But no! *with the real world we have also abolished the apparent world!*"<sup>14</sup> That is, once we understand that the things we

yearn for so achingly that we call them “real”—things like God, the self, or a soul-mate—are all fictions of our longing, what is left? Not dust and ashes, Nietzsche assures us. It’s not a matter of settling for the left-over half of a false dichotomy. Rather, what remains after the categories are banished is life itself, the entire *field* we once tried to define by means of the polarity of reality and appearance, self and other. And life in this field still contains everything those polar categories represented in distorted form: love, other people, perhaps even the gods and goddesses of heaven. Whatever was *actual* in the things we once imagined to be elsewhere, that is, is still mysteriously available in *this* world to the person who has seen beyond the polarities. Real life is what we are already living. Where else could it be?

Michael does not immediately understand all this, of course, and perhaps he never does. When he wakes up, he is still in the grip of his special love for Lisa. He says that she’s changed everything for him, given him new life, “like a floodgate has opened.” He offers to leave his wife and live with her wherever she wants, to throw up everything for the sake of the “something else” that Lisa represents. But as soon as Lisa agrees, the magic he has invested in her begins to drain away. He is annoyed when her fork clinks against her teeth, possibly because it reminds him uncomfortably of the armature he has glimpsed beneath his own flesh. Everything about her and about the arrangements they will need to make begins to annoy him. By the end of breakfast, he is his old anxious, remote self and Lisa has lost her

distinctive voice. The miracle of her specialness has flipped over into its polar opposite: an illusory sameness. For Michael, she has become one of “them.”

The keynote address he gives to the convention is as confused and dissociated as his emotions have become. He swings back and forth between confessing, “I think there’s something wrong with me,” and exhorting the service workers to keep up their spirits: “Believe in yourself.” And what is this self that they should believe in? He doesn’t know. All he knows is that death is coming and “every person needs love.”

But love, as a relationship with actual persons, is precisely what Michael is incapable of giving or accepting as long as he holds out for “something else.” When he returns home to his family in Los Angeles, his wife, Donna, has arranged a surprise party, a gathering of all their friends. When Michael recoils, she tries to reassure him with words that echo the hotel manager’s: “Do you realize that we love you?” But Michael is too preoccupied by his own doubts and fears to take this in. “I don’t know these people,” he insists. And then he directs the same skepticism toward his wife, showing how bottomless it has become: “Who are you, Donna?”

Her reply to this is quite sensible for all her exasperation: “I don’t know who I am. I mean, who are you? Who is anyone? Who could answer that question?” As long as Michael is under the spell of “the real,” that is—as long as he holds out for “something else”—he will insist on assurances the world cannot provide. Nothing could possibly satisfy him.<sup>15</sup> On the other hand, Donna seems reconciled to

the actual unknowability of things. Her pragmatic rejoinder to Michael's worry is, in effect, that reality is not this remote, impossible thing. Reality is where you find it, or perhaps where you choose to find it.

Maybe Michael is struck by this. When Donna, in pain, pleads "I don't want you to leave," Michael answers simply, "Where would I go?" Is this just his discouragement talking, or does it indicate a dawning realization that there is no other world, nowhere else for his hopes to be realized—that, in the words of Robert Frost, "Earth's the right place for love: I don't know where it's likely to go better?"<sup>16</sup> Is Michael ready to renounce the desire for a "real" love that was draining the life out of his actual relationships? It's hard to say, because Michael still has other voices to listen to. One of those we will consider in a later section. The other—the final voice in the story, though not the last in the film—is Lisa's. The film opened with a letter from Bella, whose voice echoed in Michael's memory, loading him up with her hurt and outrage in the wake of his desertion. Now it ends with a letter from Lisa, responding to a similar situation in a very different way. It's an ambiguous, finely poised scene, and much of our sense of where the film ends up will depend on how we read it.

It begins with Michael, alone in the midst of his welcoming party. We do not see a letter in his hands, but we hear it voiced in his imagination. At first, the letter is read in "their" voice—the Tom Noonan voice. Then suddenly the scene shifts to the sun-drenched interior of an automobile—Lisa and her friend, Emily, presumably

driving home to Akron—where Lisa is composing her letter, and the voice we hear is Lisa’s own. Everything in the film so far has been presented to us from Michael’s point of view. So are we still in his frame of reference? Or have we been transported to a world freed from Michael’s limitations—a perspective from which the film can look back on his plight and comment on it?

If it is the former, and this scene is read as a development in Michael’s own inner world, then I think we might be able to say that Michael has learned something. The Lisa he now calls to mind is a person in her own right, as before. But now, Emily too has a face of her own—the face she presumably had all along, apart from Michael’s homogenizing vision. Moreover, this Lisa has thought things through to a resigned and hesitantly cheerful conclusion. She is grateful for the love she felt, however briefly, and guardedly hopeful for the future. The final line in the story is the postscript to her note. With the help of a Japanese-English dictionary, she claims, she has discovered or decided that the name Michael gave her, Anomalisa, is a rough equivalent of Amaterasu, the Japanese goddess of heaven. “Not that I think of myself that way,” she writes. “It’s just...interesting.” Yes. Isn’t it interesting the way we create these divine figures, invest them with our desires, and then suffer the consequences? For better or worse, these gods and goddesses fade away, but something of the original magic lives on in the scene that now fills Michael’s imagination: in the sun-drenched car and in the modest hopes of a perfectly ordinary woman.



An alternative reading would take the position that this scene really does shift away from Michael's point of view, in which case we would have to say that the film itself abandons him. The scene in the car would show us Lisa's escape from Michael's self-consuming vortex of gloom. Good for her! But Michael himself would be left trapped in his own bitter solipsism—his own self-defeating idealism—pining away for a goddess of heaven that has no place in the actual world.

Which is it? It's hard to say, because a "Charlie Kaufman movie" could go either way. *Being John Malkovich* ended with its protagonist trapped in the subconscious mind of a child, unable to make contact with a world he could still see and desire. Michael's withdrawal from his own welcoming party may leave him in a similar position. On the other hand, *Adaptation* and *Eternal Sunshine* end with something more positive—a sense of how life can go on even once its fatal limitations are understood. In these films, the way to transform a trap into a way forward is to say "yes" to it, just as Nietzsche transformed his revulsion from life into *amor fati* by saying "yes" to eternal recurrence.<sup>17</sup> So if, in the end, *Anomalisa* shows us a Michael who can imagine a reconciled Lisa, it would be voicing that "yes," however faintly. If it shows us Lisa herself looking back on Michael, it could well be consigning him to despair.

Not that we'll ever know for sure. It's just...interesting.

## 2. *Anomalisa* is a Puppet Show

It's an obvious point, but a telling one. For one thing, it adds to our understanding of *Anomalisa* as a Charlie Kaufman movie. Puppets have long held a special place in Kaufman's imagination. *Being John Malkovich*, his first film, was *about* puppets and puppeteers, using them as its central metaphor for human relations. Its protagonist, Craig (John Cusack), is a puppeteer whose puppets are instruments of his yearning—things he uses to pursue his rather unrealistic aim of “becoming someone else for a little while. Being inside another skin.”<sup>18</sup> When he discovers a portal into John Malkovich's mind, he gets the ability to do this literally, but it's not the intimate merger he thought it would be. Even when he turns Malkovich himself into his puppet, there is no real self-transcendence. The controlling ego can't bring the world closer through more control. Thus, *Being John Malkovich* uses puppets to call attention to the human trick of projecting desire into a representation—building little worlds “elsewhere”—the result of which is only to deepen our sense of alienation. The same point is echoed in *Anomalisa*. Like Craig, Michael has built up his desire for a “real” relationship into something the actual world can never live up to, and his actual relationships suffer in consequence.

There is another sense in which puppets relate not only to what people *want*, but to what people *are* in Kaufman's films. In *Eternal Sunshine*, for example, Kaufman takes a rather dim view of people's ability to change in significant ways. Even with the help of the Lacuna apparatus, people remain, in effect, the puppets of

their own predilections, doomed by their character traits to repeat the same patterns in their lives and relationships *ad infinitum*. This may be a discouraging prospect, but Kaufman seems to take it as a condition that must be acknowledged and affirmed if we are going to find any sort of meaning in life at all. The fact that we are fated to be who we are—the puppets of our own constitutions, so to speak—is one of those things that must be met with a resounding Nietzschean “Yes,” or at least with a shrug and a bemused “OK.” In any case, it is Michael’s inability to say “yes” in this way that makes his world seem unreal to him. By holding out for “something else,” he undermines his connection with the world as it is.

Finally, *Anomalisa* is closely related to *Synecdoche, New York* by the fact that it is not only a puppet show, but a film that takes place in an entirely constructed, miniaturized world. The central character of *Synecdoche*, Caden Cotard (Philip Seymour Hoffman), is a theater director who wants to create a play that will fully represent the truth of his own life. To do this, he constructs a model of his neighborhood in New York City, and hires actors to play himself and all the other people in his life. He never gets to the bottom of it, of course, because he soon discovers that to carry his idea through—to represent his life as it happens—he is going to have to hire actors to play the actors, build another model to represent the model, and so on. Attempts to grasp the whole of life inevitably tie us up in strange loops.

It is striking, then, that the entire project of *Anomalisa* can be seen as a version of Caden's theater piece. Kaufman and Johnson have undertaken to represent the world in a puppet theater. And given that they know the ending of *Synecdoche, New York*, they must be aware of the irony and futility of what they are trying to do.<sup>19</sup> That they are willing to try is a comment, I believe, on what it means to live in the face of futility. There may be no escape from the binds we get into when we try to possess our own lives—to make life “real”—but one can come to see the binds themselves as expressions of the life we seek. “Real” life may be an illusion, as long as we seek it elsewhere. But to seek it, however deludedly, may be that in which our real life consists. In other words, saying “yes” to our inevitable limitations can transform obstacles into a path. Taking a similar view of the redemptive possibilities that lurk in futility, Camus once wrote that one must imagine Sisyphus happy.<sup>20</sup> I like to imagine that Charlie Kaufman is happy.

A second set of issues highlighted by Kaufman's decision to present his story as a puppet show has to do with the complex relations of artifice and reality. Over and over, critics remark on the film's realism.<sup>21</sup> Enormous amounts of time and trouble went into creating this illusion of ordinariness—not only in the environment but in the characters and their movements. And yet, *Anomalisa* also goes out of its way to call attention to its own artificiality. The characters' facial expressions, for example, are exquisitely rendered, but the seams between the replaceable segments of their faces—the parts switched out to animate their expressions—are left visible.

Everyone's gait is a bit halting. Their clothes are ill-fitting, as doll-clothes tend to be. The film, that is, doesn't strive for *trompe l'oeil* effects. As the literature on virtual reality tells us, all previous attempts at *that* kind of realism have fallen into the "uncanny valley" that separates perfect reproduction from a near miss, the consequence being that they just look creepy.<sup>22</sup> To avoid this, *Anomalisa* takes an approach to realism that is better described as "fool the mind." It displays its artificiality openly in order to heighten the pleasure we take in our suspended disbelief.

That may sound paradoxical, but it is really no different from what we go through whenever we watch a film or a play. We know that the people we see on the stage or screen are actors, with identities separate from the characters they portray. But when the acting is what we call "good," the actors become transparent to the characters and we get drawn into "their" experience. We forget the distinction—we submit to the illusion—though in the back of our minds, we may well be saying to ourselves, "Boy, that's good acting!" Similarly, many viewers of *Anomalisa* attest to there being stretches of the film when they can "forget" that they are watching a puppet show,<sup>23</sup> though the delight they take in this illusion is certainly heightened by a background awareness of the technical finesse that went into its production. Knowing that an effect is produced through deliberate art may actually increase our pleasure in surrendering to it.

Thus, a strange double-consciousness—a simultaneous awareness of the artificial and the actual—accompanies our experience of fiction. Artifice and reality are not mutually exclusive categories in this experience. They are poles that define a *field* in which our response oscillates or hangs suspended. Thus, the very materials of *Anomalisa* relate to what I have identified as one of its deepest themes: the way life is enriched when apparently opposite categories are transcended. Artifice and reality, thing and person, this world and the beyond: these are the polarities that lead Michael into solipsistic distortions when he pursues one pole to the exclusion of the other, missing the point that life as such is a relationship of both. Nietzsche believed that joy emerges only when such dichotomies are overcome, much as mystics and Zen masters celebrate the coincidence or the transcendence of opposites. Put this way, the point sounds abstruse, but the condition it describes is one we all have a foretaste of through our experiences with theater and film.

One last point about puppets: there is a classic essay on the subject, Heinrich von Kleist's "On the Puppet Theater," that illuminates an important theme in *Anomalisa*. The main speaker in this dialogical essay begins by remarking on the extraordinary "elegance and gracefulness" of marionettes, and then goes on to try to account for it. His explanations don't really apply to *Anomalisa*'s relatively lumpish and pedestrian stop-motion figures (though they suit the astonishingly graceful dances of the marionettes in *Being John Malkovich* to a tee). The essay becomes relevant for present purposes, however, when Kleist's speaker goes on to relate the

extraordinary qualities of puppets to their unselfconsciousness. There is a “disorder that self-consciousness imposes on the natural grace of the human being,” he observes. Puppets, however, are innocent of this disorder. According to Kleist’s speaker, puppets never fell into the pit of self-conscious reflection that human beings consigned themselves to when they ate from the tree of knowledge. Thus, in matters of grace, it is “absolutely impossible for the human being to compete with a puppet. Only a god, on this field of contest, could prove a match for matter; and here is where both ends of the ring-shaped world interlock.”<sup>24</sup>

Kleist’s main interest seems to be to make this connection between the puppet and the god—between unselfconsciousness and transcendence. He also wants to float the notion that innocence can be regained through potentiated self-consciousness—a second bite of the apple, he calls it—but we don’t have to follow him on this dialectical excursion to see how his basic point relates to *Anomalisa*. Lisa’s nickname is linked to the name of the Japanese goddess of heaven. Thus, she too is both a puppet and a god, whereas Michael, in a sense, resists being *either*. He is horrified by the discovery that he might be “merely” a puppet—presumably because he clings to that sense of self-awareness and self-determination that most of us associate with being human. Meanwhile, he projects divine or miraculous qualities onto Lisa, unable to imagine those qualities having a home in the world he inhabits. But if only he could let go of his isolating self-consciousness—his solipsistic conviction that he is a unique individual—he might see his way clear to

becoming *both*. He might find that he is what Lisa already seems to know herself to be: a thing in the world that mysteriously participates in the divinity of the Whole, in the miracle of things as they are.

### **3. *Anomalisa* is a Music Box**

A music box is an intricate, self-contained artifact that sings. A song is a mysterious emanation of spirit from matter, surprising enough when it comes out of a person, but even more so when it comes out of a box, a string, a puppet, or a film. That is the charm of music boxes—that they can delight us in the way that people sometimes do, or the world sometimes does, with an unlikely display of gratuitous beauty. They remind us of the possibilities implicit in the most unpromising circumstances.

*Anomalisa*, likewise, is a deceptively slight, carefully constructed artifact, the whole of which could be said to sing in the way that genuine works of art do. Specifically, though, it contains several songs. First there is the song that Lisa sings to Michael, a good example of the kind of beauty that lurks in banality. There is another song, though, that is more closely identified with the film, in that Charlie Kaufman wrote it to be the film's theme song. It's called "None of Them Is You." The singer (Tom Noonan, of course) longs for an as yet unknown lover. His experience is like Michael's in that the world around him is a faceless mass of people who speak in "that other voice." It's a world he says he might actually love "if I had



the choice,” but he is possessed by the desire for something else—for the “you” that is still only a figment of his desire.

No, I've never met you my sweet dear  
And my friends, they say you don't exist.  
But friends are cowards, full of fear,  
Afraid to look at what they've missed.

The singer, then, feels justified in sacrificing the world to his dream, cutting himself off from every other possibility in the name of an ideal that may not even exist. In a song, the sentiment sounds conventionally romantic—unworldly and even quasi-religious, but in a familiar way. Thus, when the song plays as background music in the hotel bar where Michael has taken Lisa and Emily, we aren't surprised when Lisa exclaims that she loves it and begins to sing along. Nothing about it goes beyond the pale of pop convention. Transposed into Michael's real-life situation, however, this sort of world-denying desire takes on overtones of madness. Thus, by the time the song plays over the closing credits, we have a better idea of the potential costs and the damage done.

We also, whether we realize it or not, have a context for the song's sly reference to the possibility that the “you” of the singer's imagination does not really exist. The thing that arouses this suspicion is an actual music box (actual in the context of the movie, that is) which is a key element in the film's deep structure, though it is an almost expendable part of the plot. I managed to tell the whole story of the film in the first section without mentioning it. But at some point in thinking about *Anomalisa*, this sphinx has to be confronted.

The music box in question is an automated doll, another member of the puppet family, that Michael finds in a sex shop. His young son's demand for a homecoming present from Daddy has led him, through a series of misdirections, to the only kind of "toy" store in the neighborhood of his hotel. (Thus, one kind of desire leads to another.) The doll is a Japanese antique, the bust of a geisha, much decayed by time, with a cracked porcelain face and the right side of its chest fallen away to expose the gears. Its mouth is accommodatingly round and open, making its presence in a sex shop plausible, but really, its purpose is inscrutable. At first sight, all you can say is what Michael says: "It's pretty." We find out only later that it sings.

It's hard to know just what to make of the look of dazed wonder on Michael's face as this scene ends. It's clear, though, that he is smitten, just as he is soon to be smitten with Lisa. And from this point on, other parallels between Lisa and the doll begin to accumulate. Immediately after he buys the doll and brings it back to his hotel room (we glimpse it there in a shopping bag), Michael has his moment of near-revelation at the bathroom mirror and then hears Lisa's "miraculous" voice, almost as if the doll had called her into existence. By itself, this could be no more than a coincidence, but the film goes on to give us plenty of other reasons to think of Lisa and the doll as linked. The doll has a hole or flaw on its face beside its right eye, in exactly the same place Lisa has the mysterious scar that she always covers with her hair. When Lisa chats with Michael about the languages she especially likes, she

says, “And I love Japanese, obviously.” (“Obviously?” It’s never explained.) At the end of the film, she says that she found a translation for Anoma-risu/Amaterasu in her Japanese-English dictionary. (She just happens to have one? On a road trip to Cincinnati? When is this letter-writing scene happening, anyway, and how does it get into Michael’s head?) Lisa makes a point of liking to press buttons; the doll is activated by buttons. Michael has sex with Lisa; the doll later leaks something that looks like semen to Michael’s wife. Finally, to clinch the deal, when the doll starts to sing, it sings in Lisa’s voice.<sup>25</sup>

Thus we have the makings of a case that Lisa *is* the Japanese doll, at least in that literary/dream-logic way in which Leopold Bloom *is* Odysseus or a fur coat might be your mother. Both Lisa and the doll, that is, are so heavily colored by Michael’s projected desire that it’s hard to say what they are as things-in-themselves. Both direct our attention to the role of desire in creating our experienced worlds—the degree to which fantasy is involved in producing our sense of the real. Both thus get us thinking about the larger themes of the film, or the way desire simultaneously relates us to the world and alienates us from it.

The Japanese doll itself comes back into the picture only when Michael returns to his family in Los Angeles at the end of the film. In that scene, the doll is Michael’s wildly inappropriate homecoming present for his son, Henry. Maybe Michael thought that a toy that spoke so powerfully to his own desires would also satisfy the boy’s restless consumerism; maybe it was just all that he had to give. In

any case, while Michael is trying to rouse even a shred of interest in Henry, he switches the doll on to show that it moves. Its gears grind, its head oscillates jerkily from side to side, its arms flap, its round mouth opens and closes. And then, unaccountably, it begins to sing a nursery rhyme in Lisa's voice—a famous Japanese song for children about Momotaro, the peach boy. Henry, of course, is long gone, but Michael sits on the stairs to listen, lost in contemplation of this strange representation of the Eternal Feminine, the mother and the whore, alone in the midst of a crowd of well-wishers.

And that's pretty much the end. From there, the film transitions to that ambiguous final scene in which Lisa is writing her farewell letter, and the audience is left to decide: is Michael finally lost in an inward, downward spiral—possibly even a psychotic break? Or has he perhaps begun to understand how the people and things that make up this world can be simultaneously puppets and gods, matter and spirit—music boxes, in other words—and that this paradoxical conjunction is all we really know of grace? It's hard to say.

#### **4. *Anomalisa* is a Parable**

A parable is a story that refuses to explain itself. It hovers midway between having a point and evading all interpretation, because its “point” is precisely to goad the listener into an encounter with mystery—into thinking about the things in life that can't be neatly formulated. Thus, when Jesus talked about the Kingdom of God, he

used disorienting imagery related to field laborers, invasive weeds (the mustard seed), and investment strategies to challenge his audience into thinking differently. It's what John Dominic Crossan has called "participatory pedagogy"<sup>26</sup>—a kind of teaching in which teacher and pupil collaborate—and it is closely related to what Socrates called "maieutics" or midwifery.<sup>27</sup> "The point" of such teaching, that is, is not something imposed by the teacher, but is rather what the listener herself brings forth out of her own life in response to the situation she finds herself in.

Charlie Kaufman approaches his films with this sort of authorial reserve. He repeatedly refuses to explain "the point" of anything in them,<sup>28</sup> and yet he insists that "everything is intentional." Nothing is there by accident.<sup>29</sup> He constructs his films carefully, that is, but not for the purpose of controlling our response. Rather, the purpose is to stimulate reflection. With specific reference to the Japanese doll, for instance, he says that yes, all the details connecting it to Lisa are there on purpose, but as to what it means, that's "something [Duke Johnson and I would] rather leave for people to discuss and draw their own conclusions about."<sup>30</sup> And if people don't reach a specific conclusion, maybe that's even better. For as Michael at one point says to Lisa, "sometimes there's no lesson. That's a lesson in itself."

In this sense, Charlie Kaufman movies are constructed to be like the world itself—ciphers we participate in through the endless process of discerning their meanings. They call up recognizable existential issues around which our lives

revolve, like the problem of connecting with other people or the problem of finding what will suffice. Their realism, in turn, consists in leaving those issues unresolved.

It is also worth noting in this connection that the name of the production company Kaufman put together for his previous film, *Synecdoche, New York*, was “Projective Testing Service.” In psychotherapy, “projective testing” involves the use of Rorschach blots—inherently ambiguous images that patients are invited to “draw their own conclusions about.” A Charlie Kaufman movie certainly exercises more control over a viewer’s response than a Rorschach blot, but the ambiguities it leaves for us to contemplate have a similar self-reflexive function. How you respond to an inherently unresolved image or situation—say, to Michael’s state of mind at the end of *Anomalisa*—almost certainly says as much or more about you as it does about the maker of the image.

Which brings us to the vexed question of how *Anomalisa* has been received.

### **5. *Anomalisa* is Unforgivably Depressing**

Some viewers and reviewers have responded to the film with overt anger and resentment. They are a minority, but their reaction builds on the more generally held view that Kaufman’s previous film, *Synecdoche, New York*, was self-indulgently gloomy. Thus it is said that in *Anomalisa* Kaufman has “imposed” himself on us yet again.<sup>31</sup> He has made a film that is “aggressive” in its dullness,<sup>32</sup> and in Michael, he has created a character who is so “thoroughly awful”<sup>33</sup>—contemptible, even<sup>34</sup>—that

it is hard to imagine why anyone would want to spend time with this “one-man pity party.”<sup>35</sup> Kaufman, in short, is said to have made a film that is “self-centered in an ugly way,” with the “self” coming in for moral judgement clearly being Kaufman’s own.<sup>36</sup> In other words, it gets personal. Why are you doing this to us, Charlie?

I suppose there are legitimate points to be made about the responsibilities of artists to their audiences. Artists can indeed “let us down” when they are careless or thoughtless, or when they feel no basic delight in what they are doing. I don’t see how any of this applies to *Anomalisa*, however. By all accounts, its craft is impeccable. Its thoughtfulness is attested to by critical commentaries like this one, I hope. And a kind of joy is evident in the mere fact of its improbable existence. (Puppet sex! Ten years in the making!)

So why does it get under some peoples’ skin? As noted above, these condemnations have a moral edge, implying that it was *wrong* of Kaufman to have made this sort of movie. But is it wrong to point out that relationships tend to be disappointing? Is it a sign of pathological self-absorption to wonder why this might be so? Is it treason to the human race to suggest that we are something less than free? From a certain point of view, I suppose it is. If the goal of life is simply to keep the game going—to keep productivity climbing and all the customers satisfied—then of course negativity should be banned as a sin against the collective mood. But although this team-building, customer service mentality may be the

dominant note in American culture these days, there are surely other ways to think about what human beings can do for each other.

Another, less cranky way to think about the dark side of *Anomalisa* is to characterize it as a horror movie, as Manohla Dargis does.<sup>37</sup> It is fairly easy to tell the story that way. Michael, we could say, is a delusional freak who wants to pull the whole world down into his well of loneliness. Lisa is his latest victim, but thankfully she gets away in the end.<sup>38</sup> Alternatively, we could go all the way with the *Body Snatchers* analogy and focus on Michael's own horror as the lone hold-out in a world run by "them."<sup>39</sup> On this reading, the family and friends who surround Michael at the end of the film really *are* strangers, inhuman automatons, and nothing is left to him, poor monster, but to fantasize about real women while masturbating with his sex doll.

I don't know. It's a reductive way to look at the film, but then there are some who find considerable depth in horror stories. I guess it's all part of what Kaufman opens himself to when he invites people to draw their own conclusions.

## **6. *Anomalisa* is Less Depressing Than You Might Think**

The best reason *not* to conclude that *Anomalisa* is a horror story, I believe, is that it can just as easily be read as a perversely life-affirming film—a music-box jingle in praise of things as they are, perverse in the way it ultimately defies the weight of its own evidence. Like other Charlie Kaufman movies, it spends most of its time



analyzing how things tend to go wrong for us: how our attempts to bring the world closer end up driving it away, and how our yearning for “the real” ends by draining the world of meaning. It builds a persuasive, relatable picture of the ways our hearts and minds consistently work against us. And yet....

Think of the final scene—Lisa on the road with the wind in her hair, her scars on display for the first time. (They’re really not so bad after all.) She’s probably going to be alright. Like Tammy, Hazel’s stand-in in *Synecdoche*, she’ll be well served by her talent for feeling “OK mostly.”<sup>40</sup> Or think of Michael’s final scene, in which he admits to himself that he has nowhere else to go. Could it be that he is becoming reconciled to the world in which he actually lives, a world in which the ordinary and the ideal are as overlaid and interdependent as the actual Lisa and the “goddess of heaven?” Has he, like Nietzsche, seen beyond the polarity that separates this world from the elusive “elsewhere” of heart’s desire, and begun to experience his world as a *field* that includes both the ideal and the ordinary, the real and the apparent? If he has, it’s still no assurance of a happy ending. For as Nietzsche also understood, no matter how well you think you understand your situation, you’re likely to keep making the same mistakes. The same mournful nonsense is more than likely to come around again and again. And yet...what can you say? That’s life too. It’s all part of what you wake up to in those moments when you stop rebelling against things as they are and realize where you’ve been all along—riding in that sun-drenched car with Lisa, at play in the fields of the Lord.

Not that it's going to save you or anything. It's just...interesting.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> The phrase is first used in Keats' letter to his brothers, George and Thomas, dated 21 December 1817. In John Keats, *Selected Poems and Letters*, ed. Douglas Bush (Cambridge, MA: The Riverside Press, 1959), p. 261.

<sup>2</sup> The category is well established in the literature, and is discussed at length in works such as David LaRocca, ed., *The Philosophy of Charlie Kaufman* (Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 2011).

<sup>3</sup> Kaufman himself disowns *Confessions of a Dangerous Mind*, making it the exception that proves the rule. See his comments in an interview with Neil Smith for the BBC Online, "Inside Screenwriter Kaufman's Mind," 28 April 2004, accessed April 13, 2016, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/entertainment/3664683.stm>.

<sup>4</sup> Kaufman himself worked customer service jobs in the early 1980s. See his interview with Ty Burr, "Charlie Kaufman Answers Big Questions," *Boston Globe Online*, 15 January 2016, accessed April 13, 2016, <https://www.bostonglobe.com/arts/movies/2016/01/15/being-with-charlie-kaufman/pszw4JDPIIno0sA5wsGjQqK/story.html>.

<sup>5</sup> All quotes from the film are transcribed from *Anomalisa*. Dir. Charlie Kaufman and Duke Johnson. Perf. David Thewlis, Tom Noonan, Jennifer Jason Leigh. Paramount, 2016. DVD.

<sup>6</sup> See Nicolas Rapold, "Interview: Charlie Kaufman and Duke Johnson," *filmcomment*, 16 December 2015, accessed April 13, 2016, <http://www.filmcomment.com/blog/interview-charlie-kaufman-and-duke-johnson/>.

<sup>7</sup> Iris Murdoch, "The Sublime and the Good", *Chicago Review* Vol 13:3 (Autumn 1959), p. 51.

<sup>8</sup> In *Synecdoche, New York*, the central character is Caden Cotard, named after Cotard's syndrome, the delusion that one is already dead. His ex-wife later takes the name Capgras, referring to Capgras delusion, the belief that various people in one's life have been replaced by imposters. Capgras is usually associated with Frigoli in the literature. Kaufman himself briefly studied neuroscience in a period when he was having doubts about his writing career. See the interview, "Charlie Kaufman & Duke Johnson," in *52 Insights*, 10 March 2016, accessed April 17, 2016, <http://www.52-insights.com/charlie-kaufman-duke-johnson-life-on-film/>.

<sup>9</sup> See Ty Burr, "Big Questions."

<sup>10</sup> See Kaufman's interview with A. A. Dowd, "Charlie Kaufman and Duke Johnson on the Soulful Stop-Motion of *Anomalisa*," *AV Club*, 14 December 2015, accessed April 13, 2016, <http://www.avclub.com/article/charlie-kaufman-and-duke-johnson-soulful-stop-moti-229514>.

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<sup>11</sup> Zaddie Smith, "Windows on the Will," *New York Review of Books*, 63.4 (10 March 2016), p. 48. With its extensive references to Schopenhauer, this is the most sophisticated and insightful take on the film I have found.

<sup>12</sup> See Adam Sternbergh, "In conversation: Charlie Kaufman," *Vulture*, 16 December 2015, accessed July 9, 2016, [www.vulture.com/2015/12/charlie-kaufman-anomalisa-c-v-r.html](http://www.vulture.com/2015/12/charlie-kaufman-anomalisa-c-v-r.html). The interviewer calls it "the most realistic sex scene I've ever seen in a movie," and Kaufman replies, "Almost everybody we speak to feels that way."

<sup>13</sup> See Daniel Shaw, "Nietzschean Themes in the Films of Charlie Kaufman," in *The Philosophy of Charlie Kaufman*, pp. 254-268; and David L. Smith, "Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind and the Question of Transcendence." *Journal of Religion and Film* 9.1 (April 2005): 22 pars, accessed April 13, 2016, <http://www.unomaha.edu/jrf/Vol9No1/SmithSunshine.htm>.

<sup>14</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Penguin Books, 1969), p. 41.

<sup>15</sup> In effect, what we are dealing with here is skepticism as to the reality of other minds, of the sort whose consequences Stanley Cavell has devoted his career to unpacking. See especially Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979).

<sup>16</sup> Robert Frost, "Birches," *Mountain Interval* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1916), p. 39.

<sup>17</sup> See David L. Smith, "Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind and the Question of Transcendence."

<sup>18</sup> See the published screenplay, Charlie Kaufman, *Being John Malkovich* (New York: Faber and Faber, 2000), p. 30.

<sup>19</sup> Since *Anomalisa* was originally written during the years when Kaufman was hard at work on *Synecdoche, New York*, the parallels between the two stories are close and numerous. As usual, the subject of Kaufman's writing is what he is thinking about at the time. See his comments on this in his interview with Scott Tobias, "Charlie Kaufman," *AV Club*, 22 October 2008, accessed April 13, 2016, <http://www.avclub.com/article/charlie-kaufman-14322>.

<sup>20</sup> Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus and other Essays*, trans. Justin O'Brien, (New York: Vintage Books, 1955), p. 91.

<sup>21</sup> On the eerie realism of the hotel room, see Peter Bradshaw, "A Masterpiece About the Human Condition—With Puppets," *The Guardian*, 10 March 2016, accessed July 9, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2016/mar/10/anomalisa-review-charlie-kaufman-puppet-masterpiece-about-the-human-condition>. On audience reaction to the characters, see Dowd, "Soulful Stop-Motion."

<sup>22</sup> See Lawrence Weschler, *Uncanny Valley and Other Adventures in the Narrative* (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2011) pp. 1-20.

<sup>23</sup> See Dowd, "Soulful Stop-Motion."

<sup>24</sup> In Heinrich von Kleist, *An Abyss Deep Enough*, trans. and ed. Philip B. Miller (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1982), p. 214.

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<sup>25</sup> Kaufman confirms this in an interview with Tasha Robinson, “Charlie Kaufman and Duke Johnson Talk About the Technical and Emotional Work Behind *Anomalisa*,” *The Verge*, 18 January 2016, accessed April 13, 2016, <http://www.theverge.com/2016/1/18/10785198/anomalisa-clip-charlie-kaufman-duke-johnson-interview>.

<sup>26</sup> John Dominic Crossan, *The Power of Parable: How Fiction by Jesus Became Fiction about Jesus* (New York: HarperOne, 2013), p. 95.

<sup>27</sup> See David LaRocca, “Inconclusive Unscientific Postscript,” in *The Philosophy of Charlie Kaufman*, p. 276.

<sup>28</sup> See Ty Burr, “Big Questions.”

<sup>29</sup> In Tasha Robinson, “Technical and Emotional Work.”

<sup>30</sup> In Tasha Robinson, “Technical and Emotional Work.”

<sup>31</sup> Roger Moore, “*Anomalisa*,” *Movie Nation*, 20 January 2016, accessed April 13, 2016, <https://rogersmovienation.com/2016/01/20/movie-review-anomalisa/>.

<sup>32</sup> David Sims, “*Anomalisa*: An Agonizing Love Story, With Puppets,” *The Atlantic*, 8 January 2016, accessed April 13, 2016, <http://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2016/01/anomalisa-charlie-kaufman-review/423219/>.

<sup>33</sup> David Sims, “*Anomalisa*: An Agonizing Love Story.”

<sup>34</sup> Roger Moore, “*Anomalisa*.”

<sup>35</sup> Stephanie Zacharek, “In *Anomalisa*, Puppets Have Problems Too,” *Time*, 21 December 2015, accessed April 13, 2016, <http://time.com/4157259/anomalisa-movie-review/>.

<sup>36</sup> David Edelstein, “Stop-Motion Despair Comedy *Anomalisa* Is Pure, Unleavened Charlie Kaufman,” *Vulture*, 29 December 2015, accessed April 13, 2016, <http://www.vulture.com/2015/12/review-anomalisa-is-pure-dark-charlie-kaufman.html>.

<sup>37</sup> Manohla Dargis, “*Anomalisa* Pairs Charlie Kaufman and Lonely Puppets,” *The New York Times*, 29 December 2015, accessed April 13, 2016, [http://www.nytimes.com/2015/12/30/movies/review-anomalisa-pairs-charlie-kaufman-and-lonely-puppets.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/12/30/movies/review-anomalisa-pairs-charlie-kaufman-and-lonely-puppets.html?_r=0). It is significant that the script for *Synecdoche*, which he was working on at the same time, evolved out of a plan to write a horror movie. See Scott Tobias, “Charlie Kaufman.”

<sup>38</sup> This is actually close to the way David Sims reviews the plot in “*Anomalisa*: An Agonizing Love Story.”

<sup>39</sup> In this reading, in place of Kleist’s view of the puppet as god, we see something more like E. T. A. Hoffman’s view of the puppet as soulless and subhuman. See the discussion of Hoffman in relation to Kleist in Victoria Nelson, *The Secret Life of Puppets* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), pp. 65-67.

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<sup>40</sup> Charlie Kaufman, *Synecdoche, New York: The Shooting Script* (New York: Newmarket Press, 2008), p. 158.

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