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EVOLUTIONARY ADAPTATIONS

**A thesis presented in fulfilment of the
requirements for the degree of Master of Arts at
Massey University, Auckland, New Zealand.**

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2009

Abstract.

It is the contention of this thesis that the field of adaptation studies is struggling to emerge from a restrictive, outdated and static paradigmatic framework. It proposes that the field would benefit from widening its current frame of reference to include more input and perspectives from the evolutionary biological sciences. This thesis considers the implications for the study of culture of the Darwinian theory of evolution – how it might become a more integral part of how we understand culture generally, and of how we read specific texts. It attempts to re-contextualise adaptation studies within an ongoing, conceptual paradigm shift in Western culture, initiated by Darwin's publication of his theory of evolution by natural selection. It contends that the Darwinian Revolution is far from complete within the humanities and that the time is ripe for greater consilience and exchange between the bio-sciences and humanities disciplines.

This thesis explores the current state of adaptation studies as a discipline, referring in particular to recent work by adaptation theorists such as Robert Stam, Linda Hutcheon, Thomas Leitch and Julie Sanders and their efforts to reinvigorate and redirect adaptation studies. It considers how deeply ingrained, evaluative modes of thought could be holding back these efforts, and if an updated, mutable Darwinian paradigm could aid them. This thesis also speculates on the viability of an evolutionary unit of culture, the meme, and its possible relevance to adaptation studies and the wider study of culture. Finally, it applies a Darwinian perspective, on various levels, to an extensive, detailed textual analysis of the non-fiction book *The Orchid Thief* and the film *Adaptation*.

“There is grandeur in this view of life, with its several powers, having been originally breathed into a few forms or into one; and that, whilst this planet has gone cycling on according to the fixed law of gravity, from so simple a beginning endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful have been, and are being, evolved.”

Charles Darwin, *On the Origin of Species*.

“Mutation is great. It's the way evolution moves ahead. And I think it's good for the world to promote mutation as a hobby.”

John Laroche, cited in *The Orchid Thief*, by Susan Orlean.

"Change is not a choice.”

“Susan Orlean” in *Adaptation*, an adaptation of *The Orchid Thief*.

“Do I have an original thought in my head? My bald head?”

“Charlie Kaufman” in *Adaptation*, an adapted screenplay by Charlie Kaufman.

“Adaptation’s a profound process. It means you figure out how to thrive in the world.”

“John Laroche” in *Adaptation*.

Prologue: a short screenplay.

INT. ELSA MURPHY'S DINING ROOM – DAY

The dining table has been colonised by mountains of books from Massey University Distance Library. A potted paphilopedilum is in bloom in the midst of the chaos. The camera pans over some of the book titles: *Film Adaptation*; *The Meme Machine*; *Human Nature After Darwin*; *A Theory of Adaptation*; *Film Adaptation and its Discontents*; *The Selfish Gene*; *Literature and Film*; *On the Origin of Species*; *What Science Offers the Humanities*; *Darwin's Dangerous Idea*; *The Orchid Thief*; *Adaptation: The Shooting Script*. Elsa is hunched over a laptop, biting her fingernails.

MURPHY (VOICE OVER)

Is there anything to say about adaptation that's new? It's impossible to say anything new, everything's recycled. Damn, I forgot to put out the recycling. OK, so maybe not new, that's irrelevant anyway, but perhaps with a different focus... I must focus closely on the texts - I've just got to climb inside those texts and...but I've got to start from the beginning - what shape should the introduction take? And I have to get to grips with the cultural and theoretical context...can I write about evolutionary theory without getting way out of my depth? Or totally off the point...what *is* my point exactly anyway? Isn't a thesis teleological by nature? You have to know where you want to end up at the beginning, before you even get there...but I haven't got a map! OK, stop freaking out; just write something...but where do I *start*? I've got to show the *arc* of the idea – I've got to go back to the beginning and tie together all the threads. But how can I bring in the whole word/image dynamic and reference the texts and not pin myself down too much and try to approach it in a non-teleological way, from the bottom up? That's it! I've got it!

She starts frantically typing; attacking the keyboard with her stubby, nail bitten fingers.

EXT. SAINT MARY'S HOSPITAL, SOUTH LONDON.

TITLE: LONDON, 1972

CUT TO:

INT. HOSPITAL CORRIDOR

Long take. A steadicam follows a doctor along a corridor. He passes attendants, patients on gurneys, a couple of young nurses who make eye contact and giggle. His head turns fractionally as they pass. We follow him through double doors into a ward, past several beds to the far end. As we approach the camera pulls focus to a young woman in the furthest bed. She looks scared. We do not see the doctor's face, only the back of his head.

DOCTOR:

Mrs Murphy, I have good news and bad news. You were pregnant with twins. Unfortunately, you have lost one of the foetuses. But the good news is that the second foetus is hanging in there. Complete bed rest for a week or two and both you and baby will be just fine.

CUT TO:

INT. HOSPITAL BIRTHING WARD.

TITLE: FRIDAY, JULY 28, 1972, LUNCHTIME.

We see a baby being born. It has a lot of black downy hair. It is screaming lustily.

NURSE:

It's a girl.

CUT TO:

INT. CLASSROOM.

TITLE: 12 YEARS LATER. ALTON CONVENT OF OUR LADY OF PROVIDENCE, ENGLAND. BIOLOGY CLASS.

30 girls in neat, royal blue uniform are sitting at benches, scalpels in hand. 15 frog cadavers are before them, one between two. A girl holds up her hand.

12 YEAR OLD MURPHY:

Sister Helen, I feel sick, can I be excused?

SISTER HELEN:

But Elsa, surely you want to see the glory of Our Lord's creation? It really is a wondrous sight to behold. Such intricate design. Don't be afraid now child.

MURPHY:

But I'm a vegetarian Sister. Besides, my dad said I shouldn't have to do dissections if I don't want to. It's against my human rights. And anyway I saw this documentary on BBC 2 last week about evolution and this bloke called Darwin, he's the evolution chap, he said that we all come from monkeys and frogs and amoeba and stuff so really Sister, I can't dissect that frog 'cause he might be my long lost great-great-grandfather's second cousin twice removed or something.

(Giggles from the other girls)

But seriously, evolution isn't in our text book, I looked it up in the index. How come Sister?

SISTER HELEN:

That's quite enough from you for one lesson Elsa, thank you. You may be excused.

CUT TO:

INT. LIBRARY.

Young Murphy and a couple of her friends are talking in hushed voices.

FRIEND 1:

Well, we have to take Maths, English Literature, English Language, Biology and Religious Education. I'm going to do Chemistry, Physics and Law as well as the 5 compulsory subjects. What are you going to do?

FRIEND 2:

Gosh, you're so brainy. I'm choosing French, Art and Sociology. I can't wait to stop Chemistry with that bastard Mr Pluck. It's in the same timetable slot as Art anyway, and that's my favourite class. Do you reckon Mr Pluck's having it away with Miss Williams, the new Art teacher?

MURPHY:

Ew, gross. I wish we could stop Biology as well, it's so boring. That lesson on the facts of life was a joke. Maybe they should bring in Mr Pluck and Miss Williams for a practical demonstration, like in *Monty Python's Meaning of Life*. Anyway, I haven't a clue what's going on, Sister Helen keeps locking me in the lab cupboard for talking too much. It's spooky in there, all those pickled frogs and embryos and eyeballs in jars looking at me. I wouldn't mind doing Physics actually, but it clashes with Performing Arts, you can't do both. French, Sociology and Performing Arts I suppose.

CUT TO:

INT. UNIVERSITY CAMPUS PUB.

TITLE: UNIVERSITY OF EAST ANGLIA, 8 YEARS LATER

Several students huddle around a table drinking pints of lager and smoking rolled-up cigarettes. It's raining outside.

MURPHY:

Oh my god, I really should hit the library, I've got an essay on auteur theory due tomorrow morning.

MALE FRIEND:

Stay and have another pint first. I want to tell you about this amazing book I've been reading. It's called *The Selfish Gene* and it's about how we're all just these vehicles for our genes, like we're their survival machines, just keeping the genes alive and spreading them around

MURPHY:

You *wish* you were spreading them around, more like. Some survival machine you are. Oh, alright then, but it's your round.

CUT TO:

INT. HOSPITAL WARD.

TITLE: TAURANGA HOSPITAL, NEW ZEALAND, 8 YEARS LATER

Elsa and her partner Hamish are handed a new born boy. He lies quietly in their arms, looking at them.

HAMISH:

He looks just like you did in those photos at your mum's. All that black hair. He's really looking at us isn't he? I thought they couldn't see very well yet. He's very quiet.

CUT TO:

INT HOSPITAL WARD

TITLE: TAURANGA HOSPITAL, NEW ZEALAND, 3 YEARS LATER

Elsa and Hamish are handed another new born boy. He is red-faced, screaming and writhing.

MURPHY:

He looks just like you.

CUT TO:

EXT. CINEMA

It's a small, 'art-house' cinema. The signage reads: Now showing – Charlie Kaufman's *Adaptation*. Elsa Murphy and a female friend exit the front doors to the street.

FRIEND:

That was bizarre. Did the writer really have a twin that died d'you think? I thought he was made up but he was credited and everything.

MURPHY:

I don't know...I don't think so. I'll look it up on the internet when I get home. I'll have to watch that again a few times. Not sure what to make of it yet. Have you read *The Orchid Thief*? Wasn't that Laroche guy hilarious? "Fuck fish!"

They laugh.

CUT TO:

INT. CAR

The car stereo is playing *The Wheels on the Bus*. In the back seat are two boys, aged about 5 and 2. The eldest, Harper, is carefully writing his name on the steamed up car window. The youngest, Viggo, is pretending to drive the car with an imaginary steering wheel and gear stick, making loud revving noises and beeping a lot.

HARPER:

Mummy, who's God? Ethan says he has to talk to God every night before he goes to bed. He told God he wanted a new Optimus Prime transformer for Christmas. Is he like Santa then? Can I ask God for a Ben 10 watch?

The camera zooms in on Elsa's reflection in the rear view mirror. She does a double-take, looking horrified. It's straight out of *Taxi Driver*.

MURPHY (VOICE OVER)

Oh Christ. Here goes...

CUT TO:

INT. ELSA MURPHY'S DINING ROOM.

Elsa Murphy is frantically typing on her laptop. Suddenly, she stops.

MURPHY (VOICE OVER)

This is insane. I'm writing myself into a thesis. I must be going mad. Thesis neurosis. Right, scrap that. I'll just start with an overview of the evolutionary science I've been reading about and the current state of adaptation studies, then I'll get into the texts and - oh no is that the time? I'll be late for the kids.

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