

# Charlie Kaufman's often charming, moving *Anomalisa* (and Michael Moore's feeble *Where to Invade Next*)

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*Anomalisa*, directed by Charlie Kaufman and Duke Johnson, screenplay by Kaufman; *Where to Invade Next*, directed by Michael Moore

## *Anomalisa*

*Anomalisa* is an adult animated film created with stop-motion puppetry. The film is written by Charlie Kaufman, and jointly directed by Kaufman and Duke Johnson, a specialist in stop-motion animation. It is based on Kaufman's play, which he wrote under the pen-name Francis Fregoli.

Centering on an angst-ridden, middle-aged self-help author, the movie's remarkable features have won wide acclaim. *Anomalisa* collected the first Grand Jury Prize ever awarded to an animated film at the Venice International Film Festival. It was also nominated for a best animated film Golden Globe award and has been nominated for an Academy Award in the Best Animated Feature category. Produced outside the Hollywood studio system, a portion of *Anomalisa*'s budget was raised on Kickstarter.

The film uses the voices of only three performers: British actor David Thewlis as Michael Stone, Jennifer Jason Leigh as Lisa "Anomalisa" Hesselman and Tom Noonan as every other male and female character. This combination of voices breathing something human and recognizable into the visually arresting, inorganic puppets—made of silicone with 3D printed faces—is eerie and disturbing.

It is 2005 and Michael Stone, the Los Angeles-based author of *How May I Help You Help Them?* is on his way to Cincinnati, Ohio. He is the keynote speaker at a convention for customer service professionals. From the film's opening moments, one knows he is suffocating spiritually. While he gives advice to others, he is unable to extricate himself from a profound existential quagmire. He is a man waiting for deliverance, but from what exactly?

On the plane, he reads a crumpled letter sent him 10 years ago by a former girlfriend who lives in the destination city. After a ride in a cab whose driver's chatter grates on his nerves, Michael checks into the upscale Hotel Fregoli. (Fregoli is a delusional, paranoid syndrome that causes the sufferer to believe the different people he or she meets are in fact the same person who changes appearance or is in disguise.)

In a bland, soulless hotel room, he calls his wife and young son, nicknamed "Slugger." It is a strictly pro-forma conversation. Michael summons the courage to phone his old lover, who proves to be still traumatized by the abrupt manner in which he broke off their relationship a decade earlier. Their get-together in the hotel bar does not go well and Michael sets off to buy a toy for his son. He ends up in the wrong kind of toy shop—an all-night one for "adults."

Later, a depressed Michael walks along the seemingly endless, prison-like hotel corridor and passes a young couple in the midst of an obscenity-laden quarrel. Bleakness piles upon bleakness, until he hears an unusual voice. Knocking on a few doors, he eventually discovers the voice belongs to Lisa (Leigh), who is in Cincinnati with her friend Emily to hear Michael deliver his talk.

Lisa, an Akron, Ohio, baked goods service rep, is over the moon to meet the author. She tells him excitedly that his book led to a "90 percent increase" in productivity at her company. Lisa is a shy, small-town girl with a slightly disfigured face ("That's why I've always done phone work"), who has not been with a man in eight years. But Michael is immediately smitten, convinced he has found his muse and the salvation from his desperation. She is both an "anomaly," a deviation from the norm, at least for Michael, and "Lisa," hence ... "Anomalisa." Will it work out, or will she end up acting and sounding like everyone else?

Charlie Kaufman has created and directed some original, unusual work. He scripted *Being John Malkovich* (1999), *Adaptation* (2002) and *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (2004), and made his directorial debut with *Synecdoche, New York* (2008). He is creatively associated with figures like Michel Gondry, director of *Eternal Sunshine*, and Spike Jonze, director of *John Malkovich*.

The inventive trio specialize in creating quite personal, often self-reflexive movies that treat individuals afflicted by the alienating character of modern American life. The encroachments of technology often play a role in their efforts. (Jonze wrote and directed *Her*, 2013, a science fiction work about a lonely, professional letter-writer who falls in love with his female-voiced, intelligent computer operating system.)

In an interview about his new work, Kaufman comments that "[a]lienation is a big problem in this culture. I think it has a lot to do with computers and social media, and the inauthenticity of people's interactions. But we're going down that road, and there's nothing I can do about it." Of course, Kaufman seems to forget that *Anomalisa* is one non-alienating product of technological innovation in alliance with artistic imagination.

Technology is estranging under specific social and historic circumstances. The driving forces behind the current isolating and hostile conditions in America, more than anything else, are the combined effects of extreme social polarization, general economic decline and decay, and the lurch to the right by a widely hated political establishment. The Internet, for example, is not the guilty party here—as global events have already demonstrated, it has as much power to bring people together, and in enormous numbers at that, as to separate them.

There is something a bit shallow in this concentration on modern psychic alienation, which helps explain the tendency of Kaufman, Jonze and Gondry, at their weakest, to focus on the merely eccentric and

quirky—bulwarks presumably against the conformism and monotony of contemporary techno-dominated life—as qualities in themselves. Of the three, the French-born Gondry, in *The We and the I* (2012, about teenagers in the South Bronx), has come closest to showing an interest in the conditions of wide layers of the population in the US.

In any event, *Anomalisa* is remarkably crafted with some genuinely moving and amusing moments. That Tom Noonan's voice is used for every personality other than Michael and Lisa creates some delights on its own, including in the brief scene when Michael is listening on his iPod to his favorite opera star, Joan Sutherland, singing an aria—performed (horribly but with great sincerity) by Noonan!

Another inspired sequence takes place while Michael is watching television in his room and we see a quick glimpse of a well-known scene from Gregory La Cava's *My Man Godfrey* (1936). Actress Carole Lombard, as a rich, scatterbrained young woman, skips around happily because the man she imagines to be the family butler loves her. Lombard and the other cast members are all puppets, also voiced by Noonan. The Lombard puppet, like the performer herself, is wildly comic. Is there some significance in a reference to a Depression-era film that considered class relations? One doesn't know. Kaufman rapidly passes on.

The most telling, heart-breaking episode in *Anomalisa* comes when Lisa sweetly sings a couple of verses of Cyndi Lauper's "Girls Just Want to Have Fun." The lyrics she sings include these words: "Oh mother dear we're not the fortunate ones" and "When the working day is done / Oh girls, they want to have fun." Then repeating a line from the song, she says to Michael: "I want to be the one to walk in the sun."

It is notable that Kaufman has made Lisa a modest, working class woman from an industrial town—not a jaded cynic like Michael, but someone fresh and open to the world. Hers is the "magic" voice that distinguishes itself from all others in its individuality. (Leigh is magical and brings a lovely theatricality to the comedy-drama.) Lisa is at odds—an anomaly—with officially valued looks and tastes.

The use of puppets underscores Kaufman's theme of modern alienation. In Michael's most fragile, distressed moment, a section of his face falls off to reveal a mechanical interior. The character is also plagued by a Kafkaesque nightmare that points to the malignity of celebrity.

A puppet, of course, suggests the existence of a puppet-master. Is Kaufman hinting, or more than hinting, at the extent to which he believes the American population is manipulated from above? In another of *Anomalisa*'s remarkable moments, during Michael's eventual address to the convention, he loses composure and goes off script, suddenly blurting out that "the world is falling apart" and that "the president is a war criminal" (the movie is conspicuously set during the George W. Bush administration—do the filmmakers feel the same way, as they should, about Barack Obama?) It is the movie's only suggestive, but all-too-brief direct reference to bigger social concerns.

Unfortunately, *Anomalisa* is not consistent in its attitude toward humanity and their difficulties. It veers between genuine empathy, as in the initial scene with Lisa, condescension (other moments with the same character) and near misanthropy (in the case of the talkative cab driver and others). Kaufman has not worked out his views—and it tells, weakening the work.

While a movie with all-too-human puppets (and, like a Mel Blanc cartoon, the voices of only three actors) certainly commands and holds one's attention, that same element tends to disguise some of *Anomalisa*'s shortcomings. The fascinating and effective technological paraphernalia operate to make the spectator forget at times that he or she is watching a relatively slight and somewhat incomplete drama. Michael on his own is a rather self-pitying, tedious character. Much in Kaufman's film is left hanging in mid-air. In addition, one is not quite sure what to make of *Anomalisa*'s ending at which point Michael suffers from the opposite of the Fregoli Syndrome—that is, the inability to recognize his own friends.

Tellingly, the filmmakers only tentatively or unsatisfactorily address the question Michael asks: "What is it to be human?" They avoid taking a sharp enough look at the social environment, which generates not only psychological but, more significantly, social and political alienation, rooted in the vast class divide, as well as the possibility of mass opposition.

Nonetheless, at its best, *Anomalisa* suggests that human beings should think deeply about and reflect upon their relations with others. The movie also encourages a much-needed critique of conventional film narrative.

### **Where to Invade Next**

*American documentary filmmaker Michael Moore's latest movie is now opening in theaters. The following is a slightly edited reposting of the October 8, 2015 comment that appeared as part of the WSWs coverage of the Toronto International Film Festival.*

Michael Moore's *Where to Invade Next* is not a much-needed comment on the American government's never-ending invasions and wars. Far from it. Moore simply tells the generals to "stand down." The filmmaker then becomes a one-man army that "invades" various countries to appropriate not geopolitical advantage—but beneficial social or political ideas or practices.

From Italy, for example, he takes their lengthy vacations; from Finland, their education system; from Slovenia, free college; from Iceland, the dominance of women in politics and banking (we are told that women's DNA makes them less aggressive); from Norway, a more humane penal system; from France, gourmet school lunches; from Germany, the ability to confront the legacy of the Holocaust (as opposed to the situation in the US, where supposedly through the prison system the "white man" is once again resurrecting slavery); and from Portugal, the legalization of drugs (Moore happily poses with three cops who look like remnants of the Salazar/Caetano fascist dictatorship).

With *Where to Invade Next*'s potted racist history of the US and its view that women should rule the world, Moore has, of course, added identity politics into the mix in his "happy film," as he calls it.

It is hardly accidental that Moore has been so inactive since Barack Obama took office in early 2009. (*Capitalism: A Love Story* came out that year.) His new movie is a ludicrous attempt to cover for the Democratic Party, hoping against hope that he can convince it to adopt policies that, he takes pains to point out, all originated in the US. Moving the Democratic Party to the left is the most hopeless and pathetic of perspectives.

Moore has become a sometime critic of the Obama administration, after endorsing the Democratic presidential candidate in 2008 and supporting the auto bailout in 2009, which halved autoworkers' pay. However, he is hopelessly tied to the Democratic Party and capitalist politics by a thousand strings. While excoriating Obamacare, for example, as "a pro-insurance-industry plan," he termed the plan a "godsend" because it provides a start "to get what we deserve: universal quality health care."

The filmmaker is a seriously compromised and increasingly discredited figure.



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