

Q & A



WITH CHARLIE KAUFMAN

BY ROB FELD

Rob Feld interviewed Charlie Kaufman in Pasadena, California, on July 22, 2008. Feld is a screenwriter whose writings on film and interviews with noted filmmakers appear regularly in such publications as the Writers and Directors Guild journals, *Written By* and *DGA Quarterly*, as well as in the Newmarket Press Shooting Script® series.

*When I first heard you were making **Synecdoche, New York**—which was untitled at the time—it was just spoken of as a horror movie, with Spike Jonze directing. You eventually decided to direct it yourself, and, while the film is terrifying existentially, of course, it's not a genre horror film. Was that your original intent and did it evolve into something else?*

Charlie Kaufman: No, I think my original intention was to never do a genre movie. It was more to try and think of what is scary to me. I don't know if that's ultimately what I made, but certainly more than a genre film, it was to think about things that are troubling in the real world and work with that. At the time Spike and I pitched it, Amy Pascal at Sony had said she wanted to do a horror movie with us, and she basically didn't care what it was. She wanted to give us freedom. The way I've

always worked, especially in the last few scripts, has been to start and let the thing evolve. I don't have it outlined, so I don't know where it's going or how it's going to end. So, to say that it was at that time what it became would be impossible, but I don't think it's gone far afield in terms of things I was interested in, either illness, fear of death, loneliness, lack of meaning in life, guilt, passage of time. I think those are all things that I came into it with.

And how did the story itself start to develop? Did you have notions of terrifying things and then start piecing them together to become a whole?

CK: It's so tricky to use the term *terrifying* because I think, early on, it stopped being part of what I was thinking about. I found that when I started to think of things that would be perceived as terrifying, it felt very manipulative. It's kind of like when a cat jumps out in a horror movie, you know what I mean? At that point, it just becomes, What do you do to make that scary? And then it doesn't have anything to do with anything. It immediately falls into that sort of genre crap, and I wasn't interested in that. So it started out with illness, death, and relationship problems—which may be in everything that I do—and then I let it develop. It took a few years to write it.

Were you talking to Spike about things at the time? Was he contributing?

CK: No, the basic idea of Adele leaving and Caden never seeing her or his daughter again was built into the beginning. There was the issue of illness; getting sicker and sicker and trying to find some way of proving himself, his value; of feeling a lack of confidence and self-doubt in his work brought about by Adele, her leaving, and her lack of interest in his work. He was trying to somehow prove something in a vacuum, in a way, because she's not even there anymore. But in terms of the specifics, I don't really remember any more than that.

You worked with a string of very smart actors on this film. What was your collaborative process with them?

CK: They're all great actors I like, and really like working with them all, but working with each of them is different. They're different people, and every relationship with anybody is different. Some people wanted to talk a lot and some didn't, but they

certainly all contributed enormously to the process with what they brought. I think that's always true. I've always felt that the actors make it alive.

Did things change and evolve as you started talking to them and they started finding their characters?

CK: A little bit, not a lot. There are lines that changed, there are lines that people improvised. But there's Caden and Hazel on paper and then there's Caden and Hazel being played by Phillip Hoffman and Samantha Morton, and that's a different thing. What *that* feels like suddenly becomes a major issue. You have one issue when you're writing dialogue, and you have this other issue when you have personalities and chemistry between people. So you take what it is that you started with and then you see what works; there are things that get cut out or don't play the way you want them to or you thought they would, or maybe there's a developing dynamic between two people that can be played up. And then there's how you edit the movie when it's done.

I think it's definitely a big learning process when you're making a movie. You get more and more experience with these characters as the days go by. For example, I wanted to shoot as much as possible in chronological order for a bunch of reasons, not the least of which was that Phil's character ages forty years and you don't want to throw him into being a ninety-year-old man the first day. He didn't want to do that, and I certainly didn't want to do it. But in addition to that, we were able to schedule it in such a way that we were able to shoot all of Phil's relationship with Catherine Keener up front, the first thing we did. That served a bunch of purposes. One is that there's an almost mundane tone to those scenes compared to the rest of the movie, which was a good place to start. It's a relationship. Phil and Catherine know each other because they did *Capote* together. They're friends and comfortable with each other, and they did a lot of improvisation—not on-screen so much, but in rehearsal—to establish the relationship between these two characters. You come into the relationship at the end of it, but there's the implication that there's a long history, that they know each other very well, and I wanted to feel that on-screen. I felt like it worked very well, not only in establishing their relationship but giving Caden the basis for everything that was coming after. I think his feeling of being unmoored worked partially because we started with them together. We came in and did all this work but then, all of a sudden, Catherine was gone. The experience of making this movie was so intense, the days were so long and Phil worked so hard

that Phil and I would say to each other two weeks after Catherine was done shooting, “God, it feels like seven years since we saw Catherine.” We both felt it and there was a real sadness to it, which I really, really think helped. And that wasn’t planned. That was just lucky. I think it was a combination of the comfortableness of the early scenes and then how hard this shoot was. It made it feel that every day was five days ago. So that worked really well.

There is this one scene that stayed with me, or at least jumped out at me, both times I saw the film: the one where Phil comes back after his play opens to find Catherine and Jennifer there, stoned. It’s a simple scene but it’s very layered. There’s so much going on.

CK: Yeah, I love that scene. They’re great. It just came together so well—I think that’s the first scene that came together when we were cutting the movie. We just didn’t have to touch it, it was so good.

Was there much to talk about with them on that one? Was there some improv? How did it come together day-of?

CK: Well, it was very early, obviously, because it was while Catherine was still there. It was the first thing we did with Jennifer. You know, I just think it was on the page, they knew what they were playing, and the actors are really good. I think that’s what it is. Then it’s a straightforward scene to play. I loved the scene when I wrote it, and I feel like it played the way I pictured it. Catherine is really great; she’s second-guessing herself in everything, her anger and her dismissal, which I think is a real thing. She’s kind of behaving awfully in that scene, but she’s not in any way a demon or a villain.

As a director, how did you communicate big-picture ideas like tone with your cast, director of photography, and editor?

CK: With Phil, who I spent the most time with before and during the shoot—he was in virtually every scene in the movie, with two minor exceptions, when Hazel was by herself—we talked a lot but really about the character, aging, illness, and relationships, on a very personal level. I think we got to know each other that way. I talked to the production designer and the DP about the things I wanted to feel and

the point of view of the movie. I very much wanted to emphasize that it was from Caden's point of view. It's a very personal experience, so there's really little in the way it's shot that isn't from Caden's point of view. There's one moment in the movie toward the end where you have a bird's-eye view of him walking down the street when he's very old, but that's it. Everything else is seen as he sees it, which is a very specific choice, maybe even more than I realized.

We couldn't, and do not, have any establishing shots in this movie, not one, with the exception of that bird's-eye view, if you could call it that. And so it gives it a sort of uncomfortable feeling, I think—and maybe not for the good of the movie, I don't know—but it was decided that we wouldn't have them. And then we had to make decisions based on the enormous constraints of time and money. So we had to shoot it in a certain way, build only certain things, figure out how to fake the rest of it with special effects, and even then how to get the most out of the effects that we could afford. We shot 204 scenes in 45 days, which is, I think, physically impossible.

With a higher budget, how would you have shot it differently?

CK: I would have had twenty-five or forty-five more days to give me time with the actors because of all the different scenes and setups we had. We had to move more quickly than I would have liked. I think we did pretty well, but if we had more money to build sets, we could have exposed this world in a bigger way. Again, I wanted to make it very personal and to make it Caden's story, but I had all sorts of coverage issues because that takes time. We had to be very economical in shooting, and I think with more time I would have had more to choose from in the editing room. I would have had more time to think about what I wanted things to look like, whereas I had to be somewhat conservative because you've got to get what you've got to get and then you have to move on. So that became a modus operandi of the production. I am happy with the way the movie looks, and I think I learned a lot. This was an amazing education for me. If I ever do this again, I think I'll have the opportunity to experiment in different ways.

I've been wondering about the development of the title, Synecdoche, New York. It's kind of perfect and so clever, but you had to have known what you were writing before you found it.

CK: I had a bunch of titles as I was working on it and this was one. I don't know—I liked it the most. It isn't the cleverness that ultimately sold me on it; it felt mysterious and slightly creepy to me, I don't even know why. That appealed to me, but I don't think it feels that way to other people.

I don't get "creepy" from it, but I'm stuck on the chicken-and-egg thing. Again, you had to have known what you were writing before the title occurred to you.

CK: Not necessarily.

But then it wouldn't mean anything.

CK: Well, I don't know at what stage it came... You know what's so funny? God, I hate the Internet. Here's what happened: we were so careful about not letting the screenplay get out and seen by people, or stolen and put online. But somehow that happened, and in so doing the title page got taken off. This is my sort of detective work in guessing what happened here, but I imagine somebody retyped the title page as *Schenectady, New York*. So, now, in the lovely world of the Internet, people say—and it just becomes part of the truth of the story—that the original title of this movie was *Schenectady, New York*, and that somehow along the way I decided to change it to *Synecdoche*. The title was never *Schenectady, New York*. It's not a title I would ever use for anything. I mean, what the hell would I use that for? So, in the lore of the Internet, I changed it after I realized that there was a play on words here, but no, I didn't. But sometimes things are serendipitous. You're working on something and then you find out that it kind of connects in ways you didn't anticipate. I don't know; I don't remember, honestly. When I was going to turn in the script, I went over my list with some people, asking what they liked, and people seemed to gravitate toward this.

Caden has endless problems finding a title for his own work, so I'm wondering about the problem of meaning in general, of relying on a signifier like a word to convey meaning where language fails. Is everything just a poor approximation?

CK: Sure. Funny, I had this conversation with Amy Pascal when we were talking about this movie early on, and I was still writing it for Sony. I was explaining something that I had been going through, some kind of depression or really, really

anxious experience that related to the story in the movie. And I said that what was interesting to me was that, when I was going through it, I couldn't talk about it. The very act of talking about it has made it obvious that I'm not going through it anymore. There is this preverbal or nonverbal kind of thing that is the really-felt thing, and once you start to translate it into words, it loses its immediacy or its power. And so, yeah, I think that that's true. It's definitely an approximation, and I struggle with that a lot when I'm writing because my things tend to be very wordy. I like words.

Is there a point where the aesthetic representation of our experience just kind of fails? Does it always fall short?

CK: Yeah, but I think it's inherent to the species and I don't think we can do anything else. Metaphor is how we communicate. There's no other way to do it. When you're trying to explain something to somebody else, you have to say, "It's like this." If they haven't experienced it and you want them to understand it, you have to equate it to something that they do understand, and that's what language allows you to do. You can't do it any other way. You could do it with visual art, I guess. I think there's a real value to metaphor or analogy, but it isn't the *thing*.

After Eternal Sunshine but before finishing Synecdoche, you wrote and staged two one-act radio plays, Theater for the New Ear, to Carter Burwell's music. They were staged readings, but you directed them yourself. What did you take from that experience or how did it inform Synecdoche?

CK: I took Phil from that experience—who did a companion one-act written by the Coen Brothers—but on a very pragmatic level, I took from it a little bit of confidence. I mean, the idea that I could actually go into a situation and direct Meryl Streep is not something that would have been conceivable to me a few years ago. I wouldn't have even been able to talk to her. But she listened to me, took my direction, and seemed to not hate me. And the thing came out well, I thought. I really liked working with the actors and I think they liked working with me, so I felt like I had that going into this.

Did the fact that it was first staged at St. Ann's Warehouse in Brooklyn have anything to do with the fact that Caden's play is put up in a Brooklyn warehouse?

CK: No, that was already written. I was in the midst of writing this thing and kind of stuck when Carter approached me. I kind of thought it might free me up a little bit to do something else, and I would feel somehow that the three years in between wouldn't have been totally wasted. Ever since I was young, I've had the idea of creating a massive replica of something, and it being minutely detailed in the reproduction of it. I always have liked sets. When I went to plays in New York when I was a kid, there might be a set of a tenement apartment, and they might put dirty fingerprints around where the light switch is, for example. I love that stuff, I don't know why. I'd just be like, *Wow, they've got fingerprints there!* Or, *That's so cool the way they make the set paint look like it's peeling.* In *Synecdoche*, we shot Claire's New apartment in a real apartment in Dumbo, so we had the real version of the apartment but also the mock-up version built on the third floor of the scaffolding of Caden's set. You would go up there and it was an *exact* replica. If you didn't look this way where there's nothing but a big drop, you wouldn't know that you weren't in the real place. It's this old New York apartment and the floors were exactly the same, and it was gorgeous.

I don't know why, but that stuff is so exciting to me. And I think that was as big an influence on my wanting to write this as anything. I remember when I was in college I used to ride home on the F train, where it went above ground in Brooklyn, and look out and imagine that it was this thing that I had built and that all these people were actors and such. I think that if I'd had a bigger budget, I could have made people feel more of that giant version of the set, with thousands and thousands of people in it.

What can you do in theater that you can't in film, and what's Caden trying to do? What's your experience of theater, in that sense?

CK: The thing you can do in theater that you can't do in film is change it. And interact with the audience. That's what it has going for it, which is why I try to do that in film when I can, in sort of another way, having stuff be layered so that you can watch it again and feel like it's a different experience. But I think that's the main thing. It's always different and it's very hard to realize that because we're so used to watching movies and television, but you can watch a play and forget that this is actually happening as you're watching it. There is a certain kind of terror in that reality, for the actors and for me as an audience member.

It's so funny, I was doing the *New Ear* play and with a group of people talking about actors going up on their lines in theater. And Meryl said something like, "That's the most exciting thing." It never really occurred to me that an actor would feel that way. I used to act in plays and the idea of forgetting my lines, which has happened to me, is so terrifying, and I love the idea of approaching it from the other way; that this is actually kind of a cool thing to happen and watch because you're watching this thing, someone maneuver within it, and the other people on stage maneuver and figure out what they need to do, and suddenly you're awake.

I guess that's the difference, and I'm sure there are others. What was cool about the *New Ear* piece to me is that the play stops in real time and the actor yells at the audience, and in a movie you can't do that because they're not really yelling at you; they're yelling at an imagined audience or an audience that's on film with them. You don't feel the threat that you feel when you're at a magic show and you're terrified that the guy's going to pick on you.

As surreal as Synecdoche is, you don't have the characters behaving in not sensical ways, it seems to me. I mean, I feel like they come from emotionally real places. You referenced Pinter, Beckett (with Krapp's Last Tape), and Kafka (with The Trial), and you're working in an Existentialist voice, but where an ancillary character in a Kafka piece might come up with something out of left field, your characters are largely emotionally consistent.

CK: I hope that what you're saying is true. In everything I write I try to have the characters grounded in how this person would react in this situation, otherwise there's no point doing it. Otherwise there's no reason for it to exist, in my mind. It just becomes unrelatable. In Kafka I see the characters doing the same thing. The situation is absurd, but they have something that they need and they're trying to get it.

The protagonist, yes, but the peripheral characters might come in and throw a curveball.

CK: Right, right, right.

And I don't feel yours doing that in that sort of way. You have that one line when Caden asks the doctor if it's serious, and he replies, "We don't know, but yes."

CK: Yeah, but it isn't also, because to me that's the way doctors are. I mean, I think it's funny, hopefully, but that's the relationship I often feel with doctors; you're scared and they've got this God-like arrogance, and you feel like you're this wormy little sick thing. My favorite thing is when I find a doctor who tells me something is physically wrong with him. It's so rare, but it's happened on occasion and it's like, *wow*, because I'm surprised. Of course he's a human being and he's going to have whatever physical problems he has—he's not a god—but I can't get it through my head that they're not, and I think they love that, I think they foster it.

But, yeah, for any character I write, I need to feel like I'm writing from their point of view, so even if what they do is absurd, when I write it I have to know why they're doing it. Otherwise it becomes sort of silly to me. If you don't do that, it's a little Lewis Carroll or something, which there's nothing wrong with, obviously, but...

Actually Hope Davis's character does some of that, too, but she's a doctor as well.

CK: She's a doctor, yes. But I feel like she's...I think she's a really *bad* therapist.

[Laughter] Yeah, she does it, I guess.

I guess I felt that if there was one rule in the Synecdoche universe you created, it was like anything can happen, utter absurdity can happen, but that emotional link to reality will be maintained or relatable.

CK: Yeah, if you look at the movie like a dream—which is kind of how I thought of it—things can happen that are not naturalistic in a dream, but they've got emotional resonance. And I don't know if I was successful in that, but that was my goal...if you don't know why Hazel lives in a burning house, you might still be able to feel something because of it.

Metaphors seem to operate subconsciously as well, even if you can't verbalize their effect on us.

CK: Well, yeah, I think that's what dreams do. I'm so astounded by dreams, by my dreams, because I feel like I do my best writing in them, and I'm doing it in real time, or what seems to me to be real time. Like what you were saying about the title, *Synecdoche*, about which came first; I often have dreams that have a surprise

ending that works! And it's, like, *How the hell did I do that?* because I'm doing it. I'm thinking that I figure it out in real time, that all these pieces came together. I can't possibly have it planned for the dream to arrive at this surprise ending, because then I would know what it was, and then it wouldn't be a surprise. But you get somewhere and there's a reveal and it's like, *Oh, fuck!* As opposed to something that takes me three years to write when I'm awake, I can write a dream in my sleep in a matter of moments.

We're all brilliant artists in our subconscious, constructing these metaphors that we can't necessarily in our conscious lives.

CK: Yeah. I mean, I think it's really hard, or we don't know how to approach it to do it.

Do you use any of your actual dream elements in your writing?

CK: No, not that I'm aware of. But I think about structural things about dreams, and in some cases try to duplicate that, more than specific plot points or incidents—like, how things can move, or how you can be here and then be there, and how things can change, and how people can change. I think Hope's character, the way she becomes this other thing on the airplane, to me was intended to be dreamlike, sort of like an anxiety dream. But the way time passes in the story, the way Caden can't find his wife, is a very obvious dream thing. You know that feeling of not being able to get through to people on the telephone, or that kind of thing? I have that dream a lot. I have elevator dreams a lot and there seems to be elevators in almost everything that I write, I realize.

No monkeys in this one, though.

CK: I don't think I had monkeys in the last one, either.

No, you didn't.

CK: No, I'm through with monkeys.

Speaking of the way time moves, you've thought about it and our experience of that a good deal. Has your own experience of time changed?

CK: Yeah! I mean, I definitely tried to convey that in the movie. I feel like as I get older, it moves much faster. I feel like it's always about to be my birthday or Christmas or tax day. Every tax day I'm so ill prepared, and I have to scrounge around, find everything and get it ready. I vow to myself it will be different next year, and then next week it's next year, and I haven't kept things in order and I do it again. So, yeah, that element of time connects obviously to mortality and feelings of impending doom.

How does time function for Caden in a family scenario, as opposed to maybe after Adele leaves? What does time look like in that experience?

CK: Well, it's moving. In the very first sequence in the movie—I don't know if you've noticed this, but the day keeps changing. The dates on the newspaper keep changing, the milk goes sour. When he has the accident with the sink, it's Christmas at the doctor's office, it's New Year's on the ride home, and when he goes to the ophthalmologist, he thanks him for getting him in so quickly, but on the calendar behind him it says March 2006. So there's all that sort of stuff going on and one of those things I think a lot of people won't catch the first time, but I like that. I like that experience of finding things in movies. So, I think that's Caden's experience, and after Adele and Olive leave, he keeps thinking Olive is the same age; he thinks his wife's been gone a week, but he learns from Hazel that it's been a year. When he goes to Berlin, he finds out from Maria that Olive is now eleven. The next time he goes to Berlin, she's a stripper. Another dreamlike thing is that, for some reason, Olive keeps writing in her diary, even though she's not there anymore.

Caden's never happy where he is, either. He doesn't really exist in his moment.

CK: No, but who does? I mean, maybe somebody does. Is there a moment? I don't think there is. I've heard and tried a lot to do this "present moment" thing, in meditation and stuff, but there is no present moment. That's my new conclusion.

Synecdoche explores many of the themes you have in the past, and also tries to find ways to depict our actual experience of things, but in a more externalized way, maybe, than your other films.

CK: Well, sort of. I set out to do that. I set out to *not* have voice-over in this movie, for example. In order to have the internal experience of the character, which I'm interested in, I decided to project it externally, so that's why the world is interacting with him the way it is. It echoes back to it being the dream state that he's in, even though I don't see this movie as a dream. But it is using dream logic and that kind of symbolism and stuff. But, yeah, it was a conscious decision not to have voice-over—the only voice-over that exists in the movie is in the form of other people talking to him, like Millicent instructing him in somebody else's interior monologue.

It made me think about how one's reaction to the outside world is totally subject to what one is feeling at that very moment.

CK: Yeah, of course. Your brain chemistry is creating the exterior world. It doesn't exist the way you see it. Colors don't exist the way you see them. The world doesn't have colors. It's just your brain interpreting them in different ways.

And then I was relating that to the world falling apart outside the warehouse as things deteriorated inside it, or maybe it's the other way around, but one reflecting the other.

CK: Who knows? But, yeah, they're reflecting each other.

Again, you referenced Beckett, Kafka, and Pinter in the piece itself; did you set out to work in this Existentialist tradition?

CK: No, I don't set out to do anything, I guess I have a certain kind of interest and background. The reason that Pinter is in there is, when I started to write that first scene, I wanted to set it in a real world and then move into this more interior world. So, for that date when that supposedly takes place, I went to the front page of the *New York Times*. Pinter won the Nobel Prize that day, and I had the same reaction as Caden. I looked and thought, *Oh, fuck, Pinter's died*. So I put that in. That runner

who's referenced in that scene died that day, and there was avian flu found in Turkey. All that stuff is real, it was October 15 whatever year—2005, maybe. So the Pinter thing was an accident, which is funny because reviews were saying how the whole movie is obviously an homage to Pinter, and it's like, No, *it's not*. But people do that all the time. You know, they're also saying it's an homage to 8?, and no one seems to believe me that I've never seen 8?. Apparently there's a big set or something, and it's about the women in Fellini's life. The other thing they say is that it's referencing *All That Jazz*, which is a movie I've also never seen.

But there are conventions that you seem to at least draw on of that form, from Pinter and Beckett, like the verbal miscues.

CK: Well, it's not conscious, but I've been influenced by those guys. I've been influenced by Ionesco, Pirandello, I've read a lot of Kafka...but, I mean, other people do that sort of thing, too. I've been influenced by Woody Allen, Monty Python. You just read stuff that you relate to that makes sense to you. I think you read certain things when you're a kid and you feel like it articulates something that you've thought, or it even gives you permission to do something like that. Like when I read *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, it was like, *Oh, fuck, you can do that? That is so cool!* That's eye-opening.

How does humor function in Synecdoche, or how did you approach its use? There's a great deal of it, but you don't punch it.

CK: No, I don't. I think it goes back to the idea that I want everything to feel like it's justified within the story or the emotions of the characters. So I don't think there are any jokes in this script that are just jokes, but I feel like *Eternal Sunshine* is the same way. I was trying not to have anything just there as a punch line. I think *Being John Malkovich* and *Human Nature* are different in that there are jokes in those movies. Which is fun to write, but I still don't think that they're like sitcoms.

There are many elements to the film that function as metaphors in one way or another—for example, the burning house. How much are you thinking of such things as metaphors, and precisely what you want to evoke with them, and how much is it subconscious—you get an image, it feels right, and you go with it?

CK: I think that it's the latter. I'll have a feeling about a quality that comes from this image. It affects me in a certain way, in a general way. The name of my production company is Projective Testing Service. Projective tests are psychological tests, of which Rorschach is an example, but the ones I'm more interested in present a series of ambiguous scenes that you're asked to describe. I feel like if I get too specific with the metaphors, it limits somebody else's opportunity to take it and make it theirs. A lot of people come up to me and say that they don't have any idea why the burning house is there. But one guy in particular, who worked on the movie, was so moved by this house. He feels like it's such a reflection of his experience in life, it means something really profound to him. And I like that, I want that. I want that to be available to people.

So if I'm moved by something or affected by something or feel charged by an idea, to take it and make it too much mine is not necessarily anything I want to do. I feel like it works in this movie because it's a dreamlike reality to me, but when something like that presents itself in a dream, you can adjust to it as the dreamer very easily. If something unrealistic happens in a dream, what tends to happen is that I will explain it to myself within the dream: *Oh, well, yeah, that can happen because of this.* Then you just go on with it. I wanted to have that kind of thing. It's not like you're fixated on how she can live in a burning house for the whole movie. It's like, *She lives in a burning house, let's move on,* and it will continue to burn and that's where she lives. And, consequently, this guy was really affected by it and that, to me, is great.

As I was reading the script I was struck by the sense of carnality and human viscera, and, out of curiosity, I started jotting down words: blood, feces, piss, poop, urine, dump, veins, capillaries, "boy parts," bumps, plumbing, pipes, teeth, raw nerve, swollen calves, vomit, seizure, saliva, gum surgery...

CK: Well, it's real stuff and we don't ever have it in movies, so I decided to put it in just for fun, Yeah, we actually had more feces in the movie that has made it to the screen. Did you put down vaginal juices?

I did, yeah: nocturnal emissions, saliva, digestive, penis, vagina, lips, eyes, genital mutilation, rape, tattoos, scar, murder, defecate, snot, masturbation, violent sex, menstrual blood....I think maybe with the exception of spinal fluid, you got everything. There's no bile, but I was willing to include that in vomit.

CK: It wasn't calculated. The feces was calculated. I actually said to myself that every movie I do seems to have a masturbation scene in it, so this movie will not have any masturbation. I feel like I've kind of conquered that taboo, but now I'm going to do the feces.

I want to go back to the idea of art, in general, and Caden's attempts toward it. What do you think is success in art, and does it always fall short?

CK: Well, I don't know. Woody Allen said it always falls short, which I remember reading when I was younger and thinking that I liked that he said that. You never quite get what you want. And that's why you keep working. I'm sure that's true, but I can think of some great works of art that come pretty damn close, so...but I don't know what the artist's intentions were.

Martha Graham had this great phrase, "sublime dissatisfaction."

CK: Yeah, you know, speaking of dancers, Isadora Duncan has a line that I really like, "I've strived my entire life to make one authentic gesture," which I think is a great notion. I think it's a really hard thing to do, maybe impossible.

Does Caden finally do that by dying?

CK: I haven't thought of it that way. I don't know. That being a criterion, I think we have plenty of authentic gestures. I think what we do to communicate and express our experience to others is where we fall short. But I do think there are amazing things out there; it's very hard to see them now, I think, because everything is so commodified, it's very hard to know what you're looking at and what the significance of anything is; how much real stuff is being done that you will never see because it hasn't been co-opted and sold?

Caden's MacArthur gives him the freedom to do any project he wants. Did you feel that sense at that time? You had great success with Eternal Sunshine, and you were given seeming carte blanche by Sony to go do something.

CK: No, within that dreamlike world I wanted to give him the freedom, and I thought getting a MacArthur was funny...and I was trying to goad the committee into giving me one because I've mentioned them. I actually think I blew any chance I might have by doing this, especially finding the most absurdly German-sounding person to read the letter.

The minister's soliloquy...

CK: Yeah, it's not in the script.

It's not in the script, and it's an amazing statement of pain. Tell me where that came from.

CK: I wrote it the day before. I had some notes about it in my computer, and I really didn't know what I wanted to do with that scene. I wanted Millicent to replace Caden as director and do something that was stylistically completely different than he would ever do. I wanted it to be mind-blowing for Caden, to feel like he would never write anything like that. The speech is completely on the nose and presentational. I was trying to do something in the form of choreography instead, but when it came to the day, I didn't have anything. I had a bunch of extras, didn't know what I was going to do, so I put this thing together and hired this actor, Chris Evan Welch, who had auditioned for the movie and I really liked, but I hadn't had anything for. I was looking for someone who had the stage chops to do this, and at the time he was playing Mercutio in *Romeo and Juliet* in Central Park. He got the two pages of monologue the night before, came in, and was just great. He had the whole thing memorized perfectly and delivered it in such a dynamic way, it was like, *Oh my God, this is actually going to work*, even though it was completely counterintuitive to have that kind of speech late in the movie by a character you've never seen before and will never see again. It was intended to be effective but not good.

Because it's too on the nose?

CK: Often I might give myself permission to write something I wouldn't normally if it's housed in a certain context and not supposed to be coming from *me*. I did it in *Adaptation* with the speech that Donald gives to Charlie at the log: *You are what you*

love. And I actually believe that Donald thing, but I would never say it sincerely because I'd be embarrassed.

But it is what the whole movie was about, in a sense.

CK: Yeah, but it also is so on the nose and so Hallmark. And you can be affected by things like that, and Charlie is affected by it, which is true. I can be affected by really corny movies all the time and often I am. So that's where the preacher speech came from, but the impetus for it was to have Caden—who's completely exhausted and has tried to maintain integrity in the way that he would direct this massive project—be so affected and floored by something that is so on the nose with its moral and lesson, and delivered as a speech.

Let's talk about the ending. My obvious associations while watching Caden obey disembodied, staticky, and sporadic instructions from Millicent in his ear were to an absent or nonsensical god and to an idea of submission for him at that point.

CK: Yeah. I think there's a few things going on there. I think that there's something that happens in real life when people get old. It's a non-dramatic moment for them, after their spouse dies or something, there's this period of waiting and not being the center of the world in any way anymore; being kind of pushed aside. People stop being interested in you, and you're just sort of waiting it out.

Are you no longer the lead character in your own story?

CK: You're no longer the lead character in any story, yeah. And I think there's that element to what's happening. Caden's being told what to do—he's being told what the sadnesses of his life are, but they're not even the sadnesses of *his* life. They're of somebody else's life that he's submitting to. But I think everyone's going through the same thing, with different specifics and in different timelines. You're at *this* point in your timeline, while somebody else is at *that* point in their timeline, or someone's getting to *another* point, but it's basically the same timeline. You start here and you go there. You grow up and you get old and you get sick and you die, and you have your sadnesses and your frustrations and your loneliness and all of those things. And I guess to me there is a growth in knowing that and recognizing the parallel between your experience and other people's experience, and that there

really is, in a larger, philosophical sense, not only a parallel but you really *are* the other person.

I think we get very caught up in sort of protecting our identity and not looking at how we don't live in isolation from anything else in the world. It's very much like if you're an artist, the thing that you know if you're doing a painting is that there's positive and there's negative space, and positive and negative space don't exist without the other. It's not like you paint a person and they're just there. They're existing within the context of everything else in the painting, and that's true of us literally and that's true of us figuratively. You don't exist in any way outside of my brain. I mean, you exist in many other people's brains, but how you exist for me is my interpretation of that, and vice versa. And who knows what that means? I think it's much more complicated than we can ever know, and I think that that's the truth of it.

There was a lot of energy expended trying to get me to make the story about Caden looking back on his life at the end, while he's lying in the bed, to change the ending, so it's not about this person, Ellen—who, by the way, may or may not exist. There's no indication that there ever was really an Ellen. Where was she? She never shows up to clean. Caden's inhabiting her for whatever reason. Is his wife fucking with him? Is the world fucking with him? Is Millicent fucking with him? That to me is part of its dreamlike quality. But there is that element of sadness in this real or fictional story that is being told about this woman who's led a very unsatisfying life, and full of regret and loneliness. That mirrors this, even though it's completely different, you know? So, at the end, Caden is apologizing to her mother, who isn't even really her mother because it's an actress who played her mother. And the only human contact, acceptance, and warmth he's gotten in years and years is from an actress who played this fictitious person's mother, but it's enough to make him feel loved. He gets inspired by it, I think. He gets fed and he's able to sort of come alive again for a second. But then he dies.

There's no moment of grace for anybody.

CK: What do you mean by grace?

Any moment of inspiration or redemption is immediately undercut, be it forgiveness from Olive or Caden's last second of inspiration. Both are immediately met with die.

CK: It is, but you know what? I think that there's truth in that. That's the other thing about the whole idea of this movie: it's very hard to end a story honestly that doesn't end in somebody's death, because the story isn't over. Movies and books do that all the time, presenting a moment as *the end* but it's not *the end*. The end is always *die*, which gets back to what happens after Hazel dies: then it meanders and doesn't function like a movie structurally would function. People in early screenings wanted the movie to end after he has that night with Hazel. Maybe that's *their* movie, but it's not my movie. I would feel really dishonest ending it there, even if it would make it more popular.

Well, in *Adaptation*, Charlie says, "To write about a flower, to dramatize a flower, I have to show the flower's arc. And the flower's arc stretches back to the beginning of life. How did this flower get here? What was its journey?...That's what I need to do: tie all of history together."

CK: Well, you have to. You really have to. And it's true, if you look at any kind of written story. *Adaptation* starts at the beginning of time, and that's really true. I can't tell my story without telling my parents' story, and I can't tell my parents' story without telling their parents' story. Pretty quickly you're at the beginning of time. It's not that far back. And if you believe time doesn't exist and that it's all like a block, what they call the Block Universe Theory, then not only is all *history* part of the story but all *the future* is part of the story, too. You can't say *before* and *after* because there is no before and after.

There's a line in *Synecdoche* that "the end is built into the beginning." That seems to play for so much.

CK: Well, yeah, but it's true. I don't know what to say about that except it's true. You have a relationship that starts; it's going to end. You have a life that started; it's going to end. You don't know how it's going to end, necessarily, but it will end. Of that you can be certain.

Is ending on a resonant moment, then, not enough? An idea that resonates as unresolved, which is *Eternal Sunshine*, I think—is that not truthful or a different sort of truthfulness? Or it's just not the whole story?

CK: You mean the fact that *Eternal Sunshine* ends before the characters die? Yeah, I guess what I could argue in favor of *Eternal Sunshine*, or any story like that, is that you ordinarily have a traditional romantic comedy where they meet each other, they hate each other, they get together, and then they're happy. And that's the end and there is no sense of a life after that, other than they're happy, happy, happy, die. But I think the other kind of honest thing to do is to imply that there is movement after the story is over, and maybe leave uncertain what that movement is. I feel like *Eternal Sunshine* does that. It doesn't say that they're going to be happy, it doesn't say that they're going to be unhappy, but it leaves you with a question: *What is the projection for each of these characters?* And that seems fair to me.