



Charlie Kaufman

Charles Stuart Kaufman (/ˈkɔːfmən/; born November 19, 1958) is an American screenwriter, film director, and novelist. Having first come to prominence for writing *Being John Malkovich* (1999), *Adaptation* (2002), and *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (2004), he went on to direct films based on his own screenplays: *Synecdoche, New York* (2008), *Anomalisa* (2015), and *I'm Thinking of Ending Things* (2020). In 2020, he released a novel, *Antkind*.

One of the most celebrated screenwriters of his era,^{[1][2][3][4]} Kaufman has received an Academy Award, three BAFTA Awards, two Independent Spirit Awards, and a Writers Guild of America Award. Film critic Roger Ebert called *Synecdoche, New York* "the best movie of the decade" in 2009.^[5] Three of Kaufman's scripts appear in the Writers Guild of America's list of the 101 greatest movie screenplays ever written.^[6]

Early life and education

Kaufman was born in New York City to a Jewish family^{[7][8][9][10]} on November 19, 1958, the son of Helen and Myron Kaufman.^[11] He grew up in Massapequa, New York, before moving to West Hartford, Connecticut.^[12] In high school, Kaufman was in the drama club, performing in numerous productions before landing the lead role in a production of *Play It Again, Sam* during his senior year.^[12] After high school graduation, Kaufman attended Boston University before transferring to New York University, where he studied film. While attending NYU, Kaufman met Paul Proch, with whom he wrote many unproduced scripts and plays.^[12]

Career

Early comedy work (1983-1997)

Charlie Kaufman



Kaufman at the 2015 Fantastic Fest

Born	Charles Stuart Kaufman <div>November 19, 1958</div> <div>New York City, U.S.</div>
Alma mater	<u>New York University</u> (BFA)
Occupations	Screenwriter • producer • director • novelist
Years active	1983–present
Spouse	Denise Monaghan
Children	1

Between 1983 and 1984, Kaufman and Proch wrote comedic articles and spoofs for *National Lampoon*. His work included parodies of Kurt Vonnegut and the X-Men.^[13] Kaufman and Proch tried to get their screenplays produced, sending them to many people in the film industry. The only response the two ever received was a supportive letter from Alan Arkin about their screenplay *Purely Coincidental*.^[14] In hope of finding a talent agent, he wrote a portfolio of spec scripts based on television series such as *Married... with Children*, *Newhart*, *It's Garry Shandling's Show* and *The Simpsons*. While pursuing his writing career, he began working odd jobs in customer service to support himself and his wife, Denise.^[15] During the late 1980s, Kaufman lived and worked in Minneapolis, working at the *Star Tribune* circulation department for four and a half years, as well as the Minneapolis Institute of Art.^[12]

In 1991, one of Kaufman's spec scripts finally got attention, and he gained a talent agent. The agent suggested Kaufman move from Minneapolis to Los Angeles in search of more job prospects. He moved to Los Angeles alone for two months, interviewing for a variety of different television writing jobs. The only offer he got was a Comedy Central series titled *Access America*, hosted by actor Fred Willard, which coincidentally was being filmed in Minneapolis. Kaufman was prepared to accept the job and move back to Minneapolis until he was offered a job by David Mirkin, writing for the second season of his and Chris Elliott's sitcom *Get a Life*, starring Elliott.^[12] He wrote two episodes of *Get a Life* before its cancellation in 1992. At first, Kaufman found the experience of working on a writing staff nerve-racking and did not speak in the writer's room for the first few weeks. After his work was well received by other members of the staff, Kaufman overcame his timidity and became more amenable to showing others his work.^[15]

After *Get a Life*'s cancellation, Kaufman tried to get work on series such as *Seinfeld*, *The Larry Sanders Show*, *The Simpsons* and *Mr. Show*, but was not hired by any of them. He continued to work on other comedic series: Fox's sketch comedy show *The Edge*, *The Trouble with Larry* and *Ned and Stacey*, the last of which he also produced. The most notable series he worked on in this period was *The Dana Carvey Show*, which featured writers and performers such as Louis C.K., Robert Smigel, Greg Daniels, Stephen Colbert and Steve Carell. On all these series, Kaufman struggled to keep his material from being adulterated or not produced at all, because of his unconventional writing and his quiet nature.^[15]

Kaufman also wrote some pilot scripts of his own, but none of them was produced.^{[12][16]} These included two pilots for Disney, *Depressed Roomies* and *Rambling Pants* (the former a surrealist take on the "buddy sitcom" and the latter focused on the adventures of a time-travelling poet named Pants) and a pilot for HBO, *In Limbo*, a naturalistic look at a romantic relationship devoid of the usual tropes of romantic films.^[15] Before *Being John Malkovich* was released, he was hired to pitch and write scripts for film projects that were never produced. These unproduced projects included a script for an adaptation of Philip K. Dick's novel *A Scanner Darkly*, a pitch for a star vehicle for Don Rickles and Rodney Dangerfield in which they would play a washed-up, murderous comedy duo (an idea Kaufman used in *Antkind*), and a pitch for a R-rated version of the TV series *Gilligan's Island*.

Transition to films (1999-2004)

Kaufman first came to mainstream notice as the writer of *Being John Malkovich*, directed by Spike Jonze, earning an Academy Award nomination for his effort and winning a BAFTA. He wrote the script on spec in 1994, sending it to many companies and studios, all of which turned it down. The script eventually reached Francis Ford Coppola, who passed it on to his then-son-in-law Jonze, who agreed to direct the film.^[17]

After the success of *Being John Malkovich*, another of Kaufman's screenplays was produced: *Human Nature*, which was directed by Michel Gondry and produced by Kaufman and Jonze. Kaufman and Jonze reunited yet again as the screenwriter and director of *Adaptation*, which earned him another Academy Award nomination and his second BAFTA. *Adaptation* featured a fictionalized version of Kaufman and his fictional brother, Donald, who is credited as writer of the film along with Kaufman. The idea came to Kaufman while attempting to adapt Susan Orlean's book *The Orchid Thief* into film. Struggling with writer's block, Kaufman turned the script into an exaggerated account of his struggles with adapting the screenplay.^[18]

Kaufman wrote the screenplay for *Confessions of a Dangerous Mind*, a biopic based on the "unauthorized autobiography" of Chuck Barris, the creator of such popular game shows as *The Dating Game* and host of *The Gong Show*. The film focuses on Barris's claim to have been a CIA hit man. It was George Clooney's directorial debut. Kaufman criticized Clooney for making drastic alterations to the script without consulting him (instead, Clooney consulted Barris). Kaufman said in an interview with William Arnold: "The usual thing for a writer is to deliver a script and then disappear. That's not for me. I want to be involved from beginning to end. And these directors [Gondry and Jonze] know that, and respect it."^[19]

Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind, released in 2004, was Kaufman's second pairing with director Michel Gondry. Kaufman won his first Academy Award for Best Original Screenplay and third BAFTA for the film together with Gondry and French artist Pierre Bismuth. The trio also received the prestigious PEN American Center 2005 prize for screenplay for the film.^[20] David Edelstein described the film in *Slate* as "*The Awful Truth* turned inside-out by Philip K. Dick, with nods to Samuel Beckett, Chris Marker, John Guare—the greatest dramatists of our modern fractured consciousness. But the weave is pure Kaufman."^[21]

Directorial debuts and career struggles (2005–2014)

After agreeing to participate in Carter Burwell's *Theater of the New Ear*, a double bill "sound play", Kaufman wrote and directed the audio play *Hope Leaves the Theater*, while the other play in the production, *Sawbones*, was written and directed by the Coen Brothers. *Hope Leaves the Theater* follows a middle-aged woman, dissatisfied with her life and relationships, watching a play-within-the-play, and featured performances by Hope Davis, Peter Dinklage and Meryl Streep.^[22] *Theater of the New Ear* debuted in April 2005 at St. Ann's Warehouse in Brooklyn, New York.^[23] Due to scheduling conflicts, later productions of *Theater of the New Ear* did not feature the Coens' play, replacing it with *Anomalisa*, which Kaufman wrote under the pseudonym "'Francis Fregoli". *Anomalisa* centers on a man (David Thewlis) who perceives everyone in the world to be the same person (Tom Noonan) until he meets an exception (Jennifer Jason Leigh).^[24]

Kaufman made his directorial film debut with the postmodern film *Synecdoche, New York*, starring an ensemble cast led by Philip Seymour Hoffman.^[25] It premiered at the Cannes Film Festival in 2008. The idea for the film came when Kaufman and Spike Jonze were approached to direct a horror film. Rather than make a conventional horror film, the two agreed to have the film deal with things they found frightening, such as mortality and life's brevity.^[26] Kaufman decided to direct the film after Jonze left the project to direct *Where the Wild Things Are* instead. The film premiered at the 2008 Cannes Film Festival where it split critics, with some calling it the best film of the year and others finding it pretentious.^{[27][28]} In the years since its release, it has appeared on multiple lists ranking the best films of the 21st century.^{[29][30]} The film's poor box office resulted in Kaufman finding it difficult to gain funding for scripts to which he has attached himself as

director.^[31]

Kaufman was slated to write and direct a film with the working title *Frank or Francis*. Few details have been confirmed about the plot, except that it is a musical comedy about internet anger culture and was set to star Jack Black, Nicolas Cage, Steve Carell, Kevin Kline, Catherine Keener, Paul Reubens, Jacki Weaver and Elizabeth Banks.^[32] In July 2012, Black said that funding for the project had fallen through, as the studio was unsure about its chances for success after the financial failure of *Synecdoche, New York*. Although the future of the project is not certain, Kaufman says "It could still happen. It would have to be reinvented, though. We had a whole cast and we were headed into pre-production. So, I'd have to get people back and who knows if they would be interested anymore. But at this point, we don't have any money, so that's a secondary concern."^[31]

Trying to make a return to television when the funding for *Frank or Francis* fell through, Kaufman sold a series to HBO in the May 2012 with Catherine Keener attached to star, but the series did not get past the scripting stage.^[33] Kaufman also directed and wrote a pilot for FX titled *How and Why* in 2014. The plot was described as being about a "man (played by John Hawkes) who can explain how and why a nuclear reactor works but is clueless about life". Along with Hawkes, the pilot co-starred Michael Cera, Sally Hawkins, Catherine Keener and Tom Noonan. FX decided to not pick up the pilot.^[34]

While struggling to get his directorial work made, Kaufman continued to work as a writer for hire, writing numerous unproduced screenplays. These included a satire set on a planet inhabited by everyone who ever lived, to be directed by Spike Jonze; an adaptation of George Saunders's book *CivilWarLand in Bad Decline*, to be directed by Ben Stiller; and an adaptation of Arthur Herzog's novel *IQ 83*, starring Steve Carell.^{[35][36]} He later attempted to develop his *IQ 83* screenplay into a limited series for HBO, to no avail.^[37] He also did uncredited rewrites on films such as *Kung Fu Panda 2* and *Ad Astra*.^[35] In April 2012, Kaufman was hired to adapt Patrick Ness's *Chaos Walking* book series, of which he wrote the first draft before leaving the project. After multiple rewrites by other writers, the film was released in 2021 with Kaufman uncredited.^[38]

Continued film work and debut novel (2015-present)



Kaufman (left) and Duke Johnson accepting the Grand Jury Prize for *Anomalisa* at the Venice Film Festival in 2015.

Dino Stamatopoulos, a former colleague of Kaufman's from *The Dana Carvey Show*, became interested in adapting Kaufman's *Anomalisa* play script into a stop motion animated film. With Kaufman's permission, Stamatopoulos turned to the crowd-funding website Kickstarter to fund the film. The Kickstarter page was set up in August 2012 and by the time funding had ended \$406,237 was pledged.^[39] The rest of the \$8 million budget was funded by the film's production company, Starburns Industries.^[40] Kaufman co-directed the film with Duke Johnson, who had previous experience in stop motion filmmaking, and the original cast of the play production returned to reprise their roles. It had its world premiere at the Telluride Film Festival on September 4, 2015,^[41] receiving universal acclaim from critics.^[42] The film went on to win the Grand Jury Prize

at the Venice Film Festival and was nominated for an Academy Award for Best Animated Feature, but like *Synecdoche*, it did poorly at the box office.^[43]

Kaufman's debut novel, *Antkind*, was released in July 2020. Kaufman said in 2016 that the novel was being written so as to be unfilmable, and is itself about "an impossible movie".^[44] In *Antkind*, film critic B. Rosenberg attempts to recall a three-month long stop-motion animation film that perished in a fire. Believing the film to be his last chance at achieving the respect and admiration of his peers, B. embarks on an absurdist journey that explores comedy, film theory, philosophy, and social commentary across *Antkind*'s 706 pages.^[45]



Kaufman at the 2020 Dublin International Film Festival

In January 2018, it was announced that Kaufman was working on writing and directing an adaptation of Iain Reid's 2016 novel *I'm Thinking of Ending Things*.^[46] In December 2018, it was announced that Brie Larson and Jesse Plemons were signed to co-star as the leads; the film was described as "the story of a woman's trip to a family farm that leads to an unexpected detour leaving her stranded, [and] a twisted mix of palpable tension, psychological frailty and sheer terror ensues."^{[47][48]} The project began filming in March 2019, with Jessie Buckley having replaced Larson, and Toni Collette and David Thewlis joining the cast, and was released on Netflix in September 2020 to positive reviews.^{[49][50]}

In 2023, Kaufman directed his first short film, *Jackals & Fireflies*. Based on a poem by Eva H.D., who also portrays the lead character, the film was shot entirely on a Samsung Galaxy S22 smartphone by cinematographer Chayse Irvin.^[51] Kaufman has written a script about dreams for Ryan Gosling's production company that Gosling may star in and an adaptation of the novel *The Memory Police* that Reed Morano is slated to direct.^[52]

Themes and influences

Kaufman's works explore such universal themes as identity crisis, mortality, and the meaning of life through a metaphysical or parapsychological framework. While his work resists labels, it is sometimes described as surrealist.^[53] He uses metafiction as a literary device, and sometimes includes fictionalized "facts" about his life in his work, notably *Adaptation.*, *Hope Leaves the Theater*, and *Antkind*. Gender identity is also a recurrent theme in his work.^[54] Non-human primates also recur in Kaufman's early work: in *Being John Malkovich*, Lotte has a pet chimpanzee named Elijah; in *Human Nature*, Puff was raised as a chimpanzee; in *Confessions of a Dangerous Mind*, Penny dreams about a monkey; and in *Adaptation*, the original *deus ex machina* was a Bigfoot-like "Swamp Ape".^[55]

Some writers and directors Kaufman has named as favorites of his, or as influences, are Franz Kafka,^[33] Samuel Beckett,^[56] Eugene Ionesco, Stanisław Lem,^[57] Flannery O'Connor,^[58] Shirley Jackson,^[58] Philip K. Dick,^[59] Patricia Highsmith,^[59] Stephen Dixon,^[59] David Lynch,^[33] Lars von Trier,^[33] Roy Andersson,^[33] Woody Allen,^[60] and the Coen brothers.^[61] He has also mentioned Tom Noonan's *What Happened Was...* as a favorite of his.^[62]

Personal life

As of 2020, Kaufman lives in Manhattan,^[63] having lived in Pasadena, California, since 1998.^{[64][16]} He is married to Denise Monaghan,^[65] with whom he has a daughter, Anna.^{[63][66]}

Works

Film

Year	Title	Director	Writer	Producer	Notes
1999	<i>Being John Malkovich</i>	No	Yes	Executive	Nominated for the Academy Award for Best Original Screenplay
2001	<i>Human Nature</i>	No	Yes	Yes	
2002	<i>Adaptation</i>	No	Yes	Executive	Nominated for the Academy Award for Best Adapted Screenplay
	<i>Confessions of a Dangerous Mind</i>	No	Yes	No	
2004	<i>Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind</i>	No	Yes	Executive	Winner of the Academy Award for Best Original Screenplay
2008	<i>Synecdoche, New York</i>	Yes	Yes	Yes	
2015	<i>Anomalisa</i>	Yes	Yes	Yes	Nominated for the Academy Award for Best Animated Feature Co-directed with Duke Johnson
2020	<i>I'm Thinking of Ending Things</i>	Yes	Yes	Yes	
2023	<i>Jackals & Fireflies</i>	Yes	No	Yes	Short film
2024	<i>Orion and the Dark</i>	No	Yes	No	

Executive producer only

- Darkest Miriam* (2024)
- The Actor* (TBA)

Television

Year	Title	Director	Writer	Producer	Notes
1991–1992	<i>Get a Life</i>	No	Yes	No	2 episodes
1992–1993	<i>The Edge</i>	No	Yes	No	20 episodes
1993	<i>The Trouble with Larry</i>	No	Yes	No	Also story editor 7 episodes
1995	<i>Misery Loves Company</i>	No	No	Yes	6 episodes
1996	<i>The Dana Carvey Show</i>	No	Yes	No	8 episodes
1996–1997	<i>Ned and Stacey</i>	No	Yes	Yes	3 episodes
2014	<i>How and Why</i>	Yes	Yes	Executive	Also creator Unaired pilot ^{[67]}

Plays

Year	Title	Director	Writer	Notes
2005	<i>Hope Leaves the Theater</i>	Yes	Yes	
	<i>Anomalisa</i>	Yes	Yes	Under the pseudonym Francis Fregoli
2024	<i>Pre-Existing Condition</i>	No	No	Producer only

Literature

Year	Title	Publisher	ISBN	Length
2020	<i>Antkind</i>	Random House	978-0399589683	Novel
2024	"This Face Can Even Be Proved by Means of the Sense of Hearing"	Little, Brown Book Group	978-1646222636	Short story

Awards and nominations

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External links

- Charlie Kaufman (<https://www.imdb.com/name/nm0442109/>) at *IMDb*

- [Charlie Kaufman \(https://www.rottentomatoes.com/celebrity/charlie_kaufman\)](https://www.rottentomatoes.com/celebrity/charlie_kaufman) at [Rotten Tomatoes](#)
- [Charlie Kaufman \(https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=96023004\)](https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=96023004) on [National Public Radio](#)
- [Charlie Kaufman lecture on screenwriting \(http://guru.bafta.org/charlie-kaufman-screenwriters-lecture-video\)](http://guru.bafta.org/charlie-kaufman-screenwriters-lecture-video), [BAFTA Lecture Series](#), September 30, 2011. (1:10:08 hours)

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