

Charlie Kaufman's *I'm Thinking of Ending Things*: A neglected man neglected again

By Joanne Laurier
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Written and directed by Charlie Kaufman

I'm Thinking of Ending Things, the latest film from American writer-director Charlie Kaufman, is loosely based on Canadian author Iain Reid's 2016 novel.

Kaufman is known for writing and, more recently, also directing eccentric, self-reflective and sometimes self-obsessed works, which also often display genuine sensitivity toward marginalized and alienated individuals.

He scripted *Being John Malkovich* (1999), *Adaptation* (2002) and *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (2004), making his directorial debut with *Synecdoche, New York* (2008). Kaufman has been associated with figures like Michel Gondry, director of *Eternal Sunshine*, and Spike Jonze, director of *John Malkovich*.

The new film is an enigmatic work, at least at first glance. The reader should be forewarned that there is no way to discuss *I'm Thinking of Ending Things* seriously without revealing its various twists and turns, and "secrets."

One way of summing up the film's story might be the following:

A low-paid custodial worker at a rural high school is scoffed at, deeply isolated and generally ignored. His head is full of cultural references, both high and low. In the dead of winter, while a snowstorm rages outside his place of work, he laboriously mops up the school's hallways. In the moments before his final mental collapse and physical self-destruction, the janitor has his life—or, rather, for the most part, a fantasy version of his life—flash before his (and our) eyes.

Portraying the life and fate of a downtrodden, excluded individual with a rich inner world, who feels that he or she has never truly lived, is legitimate, potentially fascinating subject matter for a work of art. One thinks of a film like R.W. Fassbinder's *The Merchant of Four Seasons* (1972). And what would dramatists Ibsen and Chekhov be without such semi-tragic overlooked figures (albeit from a different social layer)? As a rule, plays, novels or films about "failed," stifled and suppressed lives tend to carry with them a left-wing social critique. They almost inevitably raise questions about a society that permits such human misery and waste. However, Kaufman's work has none of that quality. Why? What does he concentrate on instead?

This is what we see. Jake (Jesse Plemons) takes his new girlfriend Lucy (Jesse Buckley) on a road trip to meet his parents (Toni Collette and David Thewlis) at the family farm. During the drive in the snowy, dank landscape, Lucy, whose thoughts we hear in a voiceover, contemplates "ending things" with Jake (the film's

title is open to a more ominous interpretation as well), although she makes a point of mentioning the close, even telepathic nature of their union. Meanwhile, we see shots of an older man (Guy Boyd), apparently going to work as a school janitor.

"'Most people are other people. Their thoughts are someone else's opinions, their lives a mimicry, their passions a quotation.' That's an Oscar Wilde quote," Lucy observes in one of her many musings. At another point, Jake repeats William Wordsworth's famed line, "The Child is father of the Man" and refers to the poet's "Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood" (1804), while Lucy in turn recites a poem (as her own) from Eva H.D.'s collection, *Rotten Perfect Mouth*.

The 20-minute scene in the car has its oddities, but things become even less stable and reliable as soon as Lucy and Jake arrive at his parents' house. First, during a tour of the barn, Jake tells Lucy an unpleasant anecdote about the death of a maggot-infested pig. An awkward dinner ensues with his parents, who shape-shift between younger and older, dementia-inflicted versions of themselves. Meanwhile, Lucy discovers that the basement washing machine contains several janitorial uniforms (similar to the one worn by the old man of whom we catch recurring glimpses.)

People and things change and transform as in a dream. Lucy (or is she Lucia, Louisa, Amy?—her name slips from one to the other) is successively studying medicine, physics or gerontology, then a painter and a poet.

On the treacherous drive home, Lucy momentarily assumes the persona of film critic Pauline Kael critiquing John Cassavetes' movie, *A Woman Under the Influence* (1974). Various references are made to the musical *Oklahoma!* (1943) and despite blizzard-like conditions, Jake decides to stop at the Tulsey Town ice cream stand. He then detours to his local high school, describing its architecture with the details of someone who knows it intimately and professionally ("130 classrooms ... two locker rooms ... ten bathrooms," etc.).

Other cultural references include the final scene of a (non-existent) movie attributed to US director Robert Zemeckis and a ballet, which again seems to refer to *Oklahoma!*, that occurs in the school's corridor, involving a trio of dancers: A janitor dancer and a Jake-like dancer fight over a Lucy-like dancer.

The movie's climax takes place on the school's auditorium stage, with an aged Jake being honored in a retirement ceremony that morphs into John Nash's Nobel Prize acceptance speech

taken from the finale of Ron Howard's *A Beautiful Mind*. Jake tops it off with a song from *Oklahoma!*. In the movie's closing moments, there is a long shot of the janitor's pickup truck covered with snow in the school parking lot. It is now morning.

For his film, Kaufman assembled an immensely talented quartet of actors (Buckley, Plemons, Colette and Thewlis), a score composed by Jay Wadley that draws from Claude Debussy, Maurice Ravel and Igor Stravinsky and beautifully eerie cinematography contributed by Lukasz Zal.

Kaufman has unmistakable gifts, as his other films have also demonstrated. Bits and pieces of this movie are amusing in their unsettling and absurd logic. He captures something of the quality of a dream, during which the dreamer wills and directs its changes.

Overall, however, *I'm Thinking of Ending Things* is not successful. It is self-conscious, contrived and largely distant from its own nominal subject matter.

First of all, it is not a healthy sign when it takes an exegesis to make sense of a script. The average viewer will have a difficult time knowing that the film examines the last moments of an unhappy janitor's existence during which he colorfully imagines what his life might have been.

Although he is theoretically at the center of things, the passive custodian is unmemorable for the most part, uninvolved in the action and an unlikely repository of the various fragments of cultural and scientific knowledge. One is not asking for a linear, didactic piece of social realism from Kaufman, he has every right to bring dream and fantasy to bear, but, in the end, he has not treated this man's life with genuine seriousness.

Kaufman is not committed enough to telling that story. Behind that failure lie historical and social processes. The director belongs to a milieu uninterested in such tragedies, oriented to other issues ... and to themselves.

Bound up with that, the character does not add up. Not for an instant. If we accept the film's logic, everything that takes place occurs in the janitor's brain. How do feelings for Wordsworth, Wilde and *A Beautiful Mind* co-exist in the same being? What's more, there are references to painters Andrew Wyeth and Ralph Albert Blakelock, novelists Leo Tolstoy, Anna Kavan and David Foster Wallace, to physicists Marie and Pierre Curie, to German writer Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's theory of color, to Soviet Stalinist leader Leonid Brezhnev and, most absurdly, to postmodernist Guy Debord and his *The Society of the Spectacle!*

The filmmakers are so bent on being clever, on showing off, they don't notice that they have failed to create a coherent, believable human being. No one truly oriented to the janitor's situation would have been so cavalier. To a considerable extent, the character is a pretext, a springboard for the narrative fireworks and unusual framework.

Important facets of life are missing—genuine and spontaneous human vitality, social conflict, people learning from events and experiences—in short, existence itself, not simply a depressing, artificial endgame. Gloom hovers over the drama. The janitor/Jake refers to the high school as somewhere he has endured “every tortured day for so long.” “People can be cold to me,” he also explains. “I need to end it,” he says at another point. And further, “I suppose I watch too many movies ... I fill my brain with lies to

pass the *Mind*.” (2001).

The references to viruses, to animals eaten by maggots, to old age “as the ash heap of youth” and actress Bette Davis' comment that growing old is “not for sissies,” add to the general bleakness.

In one of the climactic speeches, Jake blurts out, “It seems hopeless ... Everything ... So many wrong turns ... The lie of it all ... That ‘it's going to get better,’ that ‘God has a plan for you,’ that ‘age is just a number’ ... ‘It's always darkest before the dawn,’ that ‘every cloud has a silver lining.’”

Unhappily, there is no discernible radical impulse associated with *I'm Thinking of Ending Things*, nor any great desire to confront the “real conditions of life.” The self-consciousness of the film calls attention to itself. Indeed it is the single most dominant feature in the work.

About Kaufman's 2008 movie *Synecdoche, New York*, the WSWS wrote: “Kaufman has written and now directed a number of clever, dark, playful works. They correspond to a certain period (which has now come to an end): of political and cultural stagnation, of a stock market and profit boom for a handful, of postmodern faddishness, of general unseriousness within artistic and especially film circles. He's accurately depicted some of his own frustration with, and ambivalence about, the time and place he's been inhabiting.”

Kaufman reveals something of his own pessimism when he has a protagonist assert: “Other animals live in the present, humans cannot, so they invented hope.” No one who looks at present-day society and the various social forces at work with a genuinely critical and thoughtful eye could draw such a banal, mistaken conclusion.

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