



# Anomalisa

**Director:** Charlie Kaufman  
**Country:** USA  
**Date:** 2016

A review by Peter Bradshaw for *The Guardian*:

The hell of other people fuses with the hell of loneliness in this strange miniature masterpiece from Charlie Kaufman. It's an eerily detailed puppet animation about a motivational speaker who spends one unhappy night in a Cincinnati hotel. It is really funny, and incidentally boasts one of the most extraordinarily real sex scenes in film history. It also scared me the way a top-notch horror or a sci-fi dystopia might. Being amused or scared at *Anomalisa* feels like choosing between the blue pill or the red pill in *The Matrix*.



Is it about a man having a midlife breakdown? Or is this the breakdown itself? Is this film just one long hallucinatory symptom of cognitive disorder? David Thewlis voices Michael Stone, an expatriate Brit in the US who has made a name and career for himself writing motivational books about customer service. He's in Cincinnati to give a speech on this subject – a little like George Clooney's sleek character in the

Jason Reitman comedy *Up in the Air*. But so far from being a dynamic or charismatic individual, Michael is clinically depressed: small, cowed. He is numbed and alienated from the world.

This is partly because Cincinnati has bad and guilty memories for him. It was here that, 10 years before, Michael broke up with his long-term girlfriend Bella in a spasm of commitment-phobic panic he still can't explain to himself, and he wonders if he ought to call her up for a drink while he's in town to apologise. His self-doubt and self-hate extend to his current relationship (he is married with a son) and to relationships in general. Yet while he's in the hotel, Michael has an intense encounter with a besotted fan: a call-centre worker called Lisa. They have a conversation about the word "anomaly" and how it applies in an illusory way to all of us. Everyone thinks they are anomalous; different from everyone else and special. Michael nicknames Lisa "Anomalisa". Is this a cruel if unintentional joke at her expense?

Jennifer Jason Leigh voices Lisa, but every other character apart from Michael – from the blandly complaisant hotel receptionist to Michael's variously testy and furious wife and ex-girlfriend – is voiced by Tom Noonan. This is partly what gives the film its dreamlike buzz. It lets you feel Michael's vertigo of existential fear.

Then, of course, there is the fact that they are all puppets. Michael sees his own puppet face in his hotel bathroom mirror and notes with a flash of anxiety that the mouthpiece and voice seem to be malfunctioning. Wait: what if everyone is just a robot-puppet – including you? Is there a human puppeteer somewhere else, somewhere outside the screen, like in Kaufman's surreal comedy *Being John Malkovich*? Michael is getting a sudden sense of horrified perspective: all human beings are creepily the same, with these faces in exactly the same configuration, the eyes, the nose, the mouth bunched together on one side of the head. They're all the same. Maybe sex will stave off this horror, and maybe not.

Anomalisa doesn't have to exert itself to be strange, although everything about it is unforgettably, skin-crawlingly strange, especially the banal boringness of dull things, painstakingly created in this puppetry universe. The simple experience of checking into a hotel and then going up in the lift and walking into your room is shown in real time: Kaufman and his co-director and animator Duke Johnson make it as riveting as any thriller. And the film brilliantly responds to the phenomenon of the hotel room itself: flavourless, corporate, dull, like the room service menu – but, like that menu, liberating and delicious in its lack of identity. One of the most fascinatingly bizarre moments comes when Michael is looking out of his window and sees a man in the building opposite masturbating to images on his computer. The man looks sharply up and it is Michael who looks guiltily away.



Like Kaufman's screenplays for *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* and *Being John Malkovich*, *Anomalisa* is about the mysterious prison of identity and consciousness, the need to be freed from this prison by love, and the sickening pain of unrequited passion or

post-coital letdown that reveals this hope to have been an illusion. Eight years ago, Kaufman directed another extraordinary film, *Synecdoche, New York*, about a yearning for artistic greatness. Kaufman achieved it then – and he achieves it again now. Is there anyone else in the movies doing such unique and extraordinary work?

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