

# Anomalisa (2015)

Rated R. Running time: 1 hour 30 min.

Our content ratings: Violence 0; Language 6; Sex 7/Nudity 7.

Our star rating (1-5): 4

A cheerful heart is a good medicine, but a downcast spirit  
dries up the bones.

Proverbs 17:22

Charlie Kaufman, who wrote the scripts of such intriguing films as [\*Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind\*](#) and *Being John Malkovich* again challenges us in this new stop-motion animated tale based on his stage play, which he also co-directed with Duke Johnson. Its characters may be puppets, but this is no children's film! The puppets are very life-like except for lines at the eye line and jaw which makes us wonder if we are watching androids. However, there are such minutia of details piled on in the early scenes of an airline flight, taxi ride into Cincinnati, and check-in at the hotel that this thought fades into the background. And they certainly do when the protagonist Michael Stone engages in sex with a woman he meets at the hotel, a scene so graphic that a few decades ago it would have earned the film a rating of NC-17 rather than an R. The film is bizarre in that just three actors provide the voice talent for a film that has a dozen or more minor characters—David Thewlis, Jennifer Jason Leigh, and Tom Noonan. Thewlis and Leigh play the two leads, and Noonan voices all the other characters, including females! As we will see, there is a purpose in this that reveals much about the mental and spiritual condition of the protagonist.

Stone (Thewlis) is a motivational speaker and author of the book *How May I Help You Help Them?* flying from Los Angeles into the Queen City to deliver the keynote speech at a trade

convention. In almost painful detail we see and hear him interact with a passenger afraid of flying; the taxi cab driver giving unwanted tips about taking in the city's zoo and chili; and the Fregoli (more on this name later) Hotel's bellhop prattling his insincere welcome. It is very obvious that Stone needs some motivation himself, his voice is so flat and his face so set with a vacant stare. As he makes a desultory phone call back home to speak with his wife and young son, we wonder how such a depressed guy can ever lift the spirit of an audience. He seems so spiritually dead that the old Simon and Garfunkel song came to mind with its line, "I am a rock, I am an island."

Stone calls Bella Amarossi, an old flame, to set up a rendezvous at the hotel bar, but this ends badly because the woman is still angry over the way he walked out on their relationship years before. He has better luck when he meets two women, Emily and Lisa, by happenstance and is immediately drawn to the plainer and less confident of the two by her voice (Jennifer Jason Leigh). They are taken aback that standing before them is Michael Stone because he is the reason they decided to attend the conference. Both are customer service representatives at a company in Akron Ohio that uses his book to train its employees. They eagerly accept his invitation to meet and talk in the lounge, after which Lisa shyly accepts his invitation to come to his room for a nightcap. After encouraging her friend, Emily gamely returns to their room, while Lisa accompanies Stone in the opposite direction. His spirit now animated, Stone gently coaxes the shy Lisa out of her shell, overcoming her reluctance with compliments. When she sings (not at all well), something deep within him is touched, and tears form in his eyes. The bed scene is as graphic as one is ever to find in an R-rated film, each thoroughly enjoying the tender experience of their mutual pleasure. We also learn the meaning of the unusual title, Charlie telling the insecure Lisa who sees herself as a person of no value that she is an anomaly. Her name being Lisa, he

calls her Anomalisa. Lisa takes this as a great compliment, because no one ever saw her as standing out. Emily had always been the one whom men found attractive, not her.

Their bed tryst is followed by a scary experience that I will leave for you to discover. The next morning, over a room service-delivered breakfast the rejuvenated Stone tells Lisa that he does not want this to be one-night stand. Lisa is reluctant to be a home wrecker, but he tells her that his wife and son no longer exist for him, that they and everyone are all the same person, except for her. And then, strangely, he begins to criticize her for some small things about her eating. Lisa's voice slowly changes from Lee's into that of Noonan's. What happens afterwards is a continuation of this downward spiral, which again, I do not want to spoil.

Michael Stone's feeling that everyone he meets is the same person, so strikingly conveyed by Tom Noonan's voicing all of the characters but his and Lisa's, is related to the name of the hotel at which Stone is staying, The Hotel Fregoli. Tipped off by another reviewer, I Googled the name and found lots of hits, the articles defining the word as, "*A disorder in which a person holds a delusional belief that different people are in fact the same person.*" (See more at: <http://glennmillermd.com/the-fregoli-delusion/#sthash.cwzvtyh1.dpuf>. One of the articles even reveals that it is derived from the last name of an early 20<sup>th</sup> century actor said to be "the man of a thousand faces.")

Thus Michael Stone, whose book advises readers dealing with the public to "Look for what is special about each individual, focus on that," is unable to follow his own advice—at least until he meets Lisa. His alienation and self-absorption has led him into a solipsism that we wonder if he will ever be able to escape. The film offers a bleak look at American society and makes us wonder about so much alienation among a people who have so much material wealth.

Viewed from a mental health perspective, the film makes us aware of a little known mental disorder that plagues some people. Indeed, my Google search for "Fregoli" turned up the article "Murder, Intrigue, and a Case Involving Fregoli Syndrome?" that examines John du Pont, subject of the film [Foxcatcher](#) as a victim of the disorder. Viewed from a spiritual perspective, Michael Stone seems like the "Hollow Men" of T.S. Elliot.

Kaufman cannot seem to bear leaving us with just poor, alienated Michael Stone, so he closes with the scene of Lisa and Emily returning in their car to Akron. Unlike Bella Amarossi, Lisa is not bitter at parting from Michael. Her illicit encounter has removed her shell so that she can emerge from her sense of low self-esteem. Can we contemplate a better future for her than for Michael?

Because Kaufman strays so far afield from the usual popcorn fare that clog our cinemaplexes, *Anomalisa* will not appeal to everyone. For me this has been a difficult film to process and write about. I hope the above provides some suggestions for your own thinking about a film that will linger in your mind for some time.

*This review with a set of discussion questions will be in the Feb. 2015 issue of VP.*