

Magyar cím:

A felnagyított tükörkép: művészet, őszinteség és identitás Charlie Kaufman *Kis-nagy világ*
című filmjében

Angol cím:

The Magnified Reflection: Art, Sincerity, and Identity in Charlie Kaufman's *Synecdoche*,
New York

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Introduction

Writer of fifteen films and director of four, Charlie Kaufman has established his place in today's American cinema. His filmography has been defined as 'indie' and 'arthouse', placing him in the cinematic era Kim Wilkins describes as "American eccentricity" (Wilkins 3) and Derek Hill as "American New Wave" (Wilkins 23). According to Wilkins, this era evolved from the New Hollywood movement—which unfolded in the 1960s and lasted till the 1980s—and it emerged in the late 1990s. Thematically, the films of American eccentricity explore the manifestation of existential crisis and reflexivity in the postmodern world. Thus, the attributes of American eccentric cinema are closely linked to the ideas of movements such as post-postmodernism and New Sincerity in which irony and sincerity reflect on one another, creating a renewed theoretical context. Concerning New Sincerity, David Foster Wallace's 1993 essay "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction" is regularly viewed as an "early manifesto" for the movement (Kelly 198). Irony, according to Wallace, "tyrannizes us": "Most likely, I think, today's irony ends up saying: 'How very banal of you to ask what I really mean'" (Wallace 183-184). It can be argued that postmodernism has offered a sense of liberation from sociocultural norms; critics of the movement have emphasized the issue of authenticity and significance within the realms of this liberation. In a 1987 lecture, philosopher Jean Baudrillard defines this liberated state as "the game is over" (Baudrillard, "Beyond the Vanishing Point", 182), emphasizing that art has been stuck in the variety of forms and themes, resulting in recycling. In response to postmodern conditions, New Sincerity and post-postmodernism have offered a desire for sincerity in what Jean Baudrillard defines as 'hyperrealism', but they have not rejected irony as a tool: "rather, irony is employed *with* sincerity" (Wilkins 9) to express the need for introspection and the exploration of existential dread.

Arguably, New Sincerity has become a prominent wave in American cultural production for the last twenty years, encompassing genres such as music, literature, visual arts, and filmmaking. As mentioned above, the movement characterizes American eccentric cinema in many ways: films like *Synecdoche, New York*, *Moonrise Kingdom*, and *Punch-Drunk Love* employ New Hollywood's 'old sincerity' but explore individual struggles through the lens of postmodern conditions. Featuring Sofia Coppola, Wes Anderson, Paul Thomas Anderson, and Charlie Kaufman, American eccentricity introduces "impossible puzzle films" (Kiss and Willemsen 56) that challenge one's viewing experience and give way to interactive storytelling. In that regard, it can be argued that this type of filmmaking shows deviations from the mainstream. Geoff King defines the notion of mainstream as a "shorthand for a set of

historically and institutionally predicated conventions that serve as a reference point against which other practices can be measured or defined” (qtd. in Wilkins 24). These films concentrate on the illustration of different narrative and genre techniques as well as intricate visual storytelling. However, they cannot be fully separated from the conventions of mainstream Hollywood filmmaking: Geoff King suggests that American eccentric films are located between indie and Hollywood cinema (qtd. in Wilkins 25).

Charlie Kaufman occupies a special position in this cinematic universe: his films rely on surreal, dream-like imagery to express the ultimate desire for meaning and introspection. Kaufman’s oeuvre is also characterized by two other aspects: the relationship between art and artist and the connection between role and actor. For instance, in *Being John Malkovich* (1999), Kaufman explores a puppeteer’s journey into the mind of John Malkovich: the puppeteer finds a real-life puppet, and by entering his thoughts, their identities become enmeshed. In *Adaptation* (2002), the viewer witnesses the struggles of a screenwriter who is hired to adapt a non-fiction book, *The Orchid Thief*. Not only does *Adaptation* present the issue of originality within adaptation but it also questions the border between fiction and non-fiction. These themes are universally represented in Kaufman’s directorial debut, *Synecdoche, New York* (2008). The protagonist, Caden Cotard is a middle-aged theatre director, working on the adaptation of Arthur Miller’s *Death of a Salesman*. The physical decay of aging as well as the closeness and incomprehensibility of dying encourage him to prioritize the fulfilment of an individual purpose and lead him to the reinvention of his artistic self. His wife, Adele also plays a role in this transformation: after the debut of his adaptation of *Death of a Salesman*, she argues that the notion of adaptation is inherently unoriginal and inauthentic. Caden later confirms this viewpoint and begins to work on his magnum opus. The importance of creation for Caden is amplified when Adele and Olive leave him for Berlin: he aims to mask the absence in his life by concentrating on creation. He stages a play that mirrors his life, using an abandoned warehouse in Manhattan. Caden’s real and staged life slowly become entangled while the viewer follows his introspective journey with the aim of finding truth and meaning.

The central goal of this work is to examine the ways *Synecdoche, New York* explores the quest for meaning in a hyperreal world using art. The first chapter of the paper will look at the theoretical background of New Sincerity, focusing on the relationship between irony and sincerity. It will also touch on the idea of fragmented language and its relationship with representation. The second chapter will deal with the metafictional idea of the film’s magnum opus and investigate the notion of adaptation and authenticity through the study of Kaufman’s *Synecdoche, New York* and Arthur Miller’s *Death of a Salesman*.. In the third chapter, I will

analyze the film's attempt to find compassion through the use of art. I will concentrate on the character of Caden, the struggling artist and his approach towards the thought of death, which often proves to be the motivation behind his actions. This concept will be explored through the analysis of three scenes from *Synecdoche, New York*, where the connection between Caden and death can be detected. Besides narrative aspects, I will also concentrate on the visual language of the scenes and explore the ways it enhances the narrative.

Chapter 1: Hyperrealism and Sincerity

1.1 Hyperrealism and Irony

In order to approach the oeuvre of Charlie Kaufman, Jean Baudrillard's essay "The Precession of Simulacra"—which is included in the collection titled *Simulacra and Simulation*—is a crucial work to consult. Baudrillard theorizes the postmodern paradigm shift, arguing that contemporary overproduction has resulted in the inability to differentiate real from copy. *Simulacra and Simulation* (1983) does not offer a definite alternative to this condition; however, theorists and artists of the 1990s, such as Jim Collins and David Foster Wallace, revisited the notion of sincerity, proposing the growing cultural need for recontextualizing postmodern methods. According to scholar Jeremy Green, postmodern artists have understood that their methods "have ceased to be compelling" (Green 13), they have reached their limits. Jesse Fox Mayshark argues that American eccentricity has responded to the "detachment associated with the cultural standard of postmodern pastiche and choreographed irony present in the literature, art, music, fashion, and film of the 1980s and 1990s", as well as the postmodern repetition of forms and themes (Mayshark 2). Thus, the matter requires the study of the effects postmodernism had on subsequent movements as well as the inspection of the ways these effects appear in the filmography of American eccentric cinema.

In his 1976 book *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, Baudrillard identifies a change in the social and cultural operation, claiming that it has become dominated by consumerism and constant production. He also marks the end of modernism, saying that the new era belongs to postmodernism (Kellner). He continues this idea in *Simulacra and Simulation*, where he introduces the notion of hyperrealism with a short story by Jorge Luis Borges (Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* 1). "On Exactitude of Science" describes an Empire whose cartographers undertake a monumental project: they create a map that is the exact size of the Empire, covering all its territory. As the Empire declines, the map falls apart as well. In our age, Baudrillard argues, the map creates its own territory, it is the collection of the signs of reality—it is a simulation. According to Baudrillard, these signs are constantly duplicated, resulting in the decomposition of reality. This also means that abstractions and ideas have lost their substance, the referent that has previously connected them to a specific slice of reality. This continuous production is inherently synthetic, producing matrices that are the replica of each other—this excessive copying legitimates the state of hyperrealism.

As mentioned before, Baudrillard finds that hyperrealism is rooted in the consumerist societal arrangement. He extends the effects of consumerism to media culture as well, arguing that advertisements are the epitome of the hyperreal condition. If one defines ‘hyper’ as more real than the real, advertisements demonstrate this schema thoroughly. By presenting an alternative reality, they enmesh the border between truth and falsehood, real and imaginary. In this sense, advertisements exceed the very thing they copy: they become a simulated reality, which feels truer than the reality surrounding it. As Baudrillard writes: “The simulacrum is never that which conceals the truth—it is the truth which conceals that there is none. The simulacrum is true” (Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* 1). *Synecdoche, New York* is particularly concerned with the relationship between advertisement, reality, and fantasy. The film presents advertisements that are the projection of Caden’s mind—thus, they represent more than his immediate reality, showcasing his repressed subconscious. Seeing oneself materialize on the television screen is also a simulation, Baudrillard argues. He defines this as a hologram, a synthetic double, which is similar to the act of looking in the mirror or having a photograph of oneself (Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* 106). The motif of reflection is a recurring element in Kaufman’s film—it will be further discussed in Chapter 3.

Baudrillard’s notion of the hyperreal evolved from the concept of postmodernism. The term was defined by Jean-François Lyotard in his 1979 book *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Gratton). The philosophy of Lyotard and Baudrillard—being influential theorists of the French postmodern discourse—cannot be separated from one another. Lyotard describes postmodernism in the following manner:

I will use the term modern to designate any science that legitimates itself with reference to a metadiscourse ... making an explicit appeal to some grand narrative, such as the dialectics of Spirit, the hermeneutics of meaning, the emancipation of the rational or working subject, or the creation of wealth ... I define postmodern as incredulity toward metanarratives. (Lyotard xxiii–xxiv)

Lyotard argues that science, in particular, has been deprived of the illusion of all-encompassing truths and theories (grand narratives). This leaves postmodern science with the task of producing more and more, gradually computerizing information (Denzin 199). Lyotard claims that the alienation from metanarratives should lead to the integration of *petits récits* or little narratives (Lyotard 60), which leads to the emphasis on individual stories instead of generalized narratives. The sense of distrust in absolute truths is further deepened in Baudrillard’s

philosophy of the hyperreal: here, the legitimacy of narratives—even little narratives—is questioned. Grand and individual truths are equally affected by the hyperreal condition since the reality they aim to portray is simulated. In this sense, I propose that Baudrillard takes Lyotard's idea further, applying it to the level of morphology and semantics: while Lyotard views deconstruction on the spectrum of grand and little narratives, Baudrillard argues that it operates at the level of 'signifier' and 'signified'. This classification belongs to the linguistic theory of Ferdinand de Saussure: he defines 'signifier' as the form of the sign and 'signified' as the very thing the sign refers to. According to Baudrillard, the connection between the two becomes blurred and eventually lost by simulation: the overproduction of signs—which ultimately results in the decomposition of reality—invalidates the distinction between the signifier and the signified. This means that the sign itself does not denote a piece of reality anymore: it refers to a simulated reality. Baudrillard argues that what was believed to be reality and truth cannot be restored "beneath the simulacrum" (Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* 27).

Postmodern irony embodies all aspects discussed above: according to Salvatore Attardo, it represents the disillusionment towards "totalizing narratives" and the use of art as "cultural artifice" (Attardo 589). This definition evokes Lyotard's theory on postmodernism as well as the deceiving nature of the simulated reality, presented by Baudrillard. Attardo claims that the purpose of postmodern irony lies in its reflective and dialogical attitude towards the hardened forms of cultural heritage. This aspect points towards the ostensible liberation this approach offered: it encouraged its audience to step out of formerly determined "metaphysical values" (Attardo 590) and create new interpretations. However, it can be argued that the stylistic and conceptual ways of postmodern irony became vacant on the trajectory of postmodernism: by the beginning of the 1990s, the illusory nature of irony started to show an "exhaustion of ideas and imagination" (Doyle 261). Since irony presumes an external, "game-playing" (Doyle 259) position, where the emphasis on compassion is often minimized or even excluded, critics of the tool urged the return to compassion and sincerity. As David Foster Wallace argues:

The next real literary "rebels" in this country might well emerge as some weird bunch of anti-rebels, born oglers who dare somehow to back away from ironic watching, who have the childish gall actually to endorse and instantiate single-entendre principles. Who treat of plain old untrendy human troubles and emotions in U.S. life with reverence and conviction. Who eschew self-consciousness and hip fatigue. These anti-rebels would be outdated, of course, before they even started. Dead on the page. Too sincere. Clearly

repressed. Backward, quaint, naive, anachronistic. Maybe that'll be the point. Maybe that's why they'll be the next real rebels. Real rebels, as far as I can see, risk disapproval. The old postmodern insurgents risked the gasp and squeal: shock, disgust, outrage, censorship, accusations of socialism, anarchism, nihilism. Today's risks are different. The new rebels might be artists willing to risk the yawn, the rolled eyes, the cool smile, the nudged ribs, the parody of gifted ironists, the "How banal." Accusations of sentimentality, melodrama. Credulity. (Wallace 192-193)

Wallace proposes one of the main ideas of New Sincerity: the shift from postmodern irony to the need for seeking truth and sincerity. "Ironic watching", as he puts it, cannot be sustained anymore. He maintains that the new direction for literature is the employment of vulnerability instead of the distant and meaningless attitude of irony. This approach could be addressed as post-ironic in which the prefix 'post' refers to a state past postmodern irony. Wallace's rejection of irony, however, has been altered by the New Sincerity movement, which does not abandon irony entirely: "irony and sincerity are enmeshed and entangled" (Wilkins 23). It views irony and sincerity to coexist on the two ends of a spectrum, which can be tilted to one side or the other according to the purpose of the plot. Thus, the game-playing attitude of postmodernism has gained a renewed context in New Sincerity. The movement acknowledges that its goals cannot be achieved with the same act of liberation which characterized the attempts of the avant-garde and partly postmodernism: sincerity can only be portrayed truthfully within the realms of the hyperreal condition. Nevertheless, the position of irony is arguably different in New Sincerity: its passivity and external approach is minimalized to express the seriousness of existential matters. Thus, it can be argued that New Sincerity is dependent on postmodern aesthetics—but chooses a different focus. Furthermore, the application of irony goes beyond the rhetorical use: it may be present in the form, style, register, and narrative of a piece (Wilkins 32). As mentioned before, grand narratives are avoided within postmodernism and the importance of personal interpretation is emphasized. I propose that New Sincerity adapts the approach associated with Lyotard's philosophy and moves away from it at the same time: it focuses on collectiveness through the portrayal of individual experiences.

The films of American eccentricity closely follow the aims of New Sincerity. They depict protagonists who struggle to cope with ontological matters, such as existential anxiety, the absence of individual purpose, and fear of death. As is the case with New Sincerity, American eccentricity does not totally dismiss postmodern attributes, such as irony and intertextuality, either. The use of irony and sincerity, however, is not specific to the American

eccentric cinema in the history of American films: the New Hollywood era produced several works that portray the contemporary American anxiety through the amalgam of irony and sincerity. Kim Wilkins mentions Terrence Mallick's *Badlands* from 1973, which employs seemingly unlikeable protagonists yet enables the audience to sympathize with them (Wilkins 41). This method, I believe, is continued in the 1989 young adult satire, *Heathers*, where the use of black comedy elements is balanced with the exploration of mental health in the high school environment. The difference between New Hollywood and American eccentricity lies in their focus: the former depicts matters that are mainly rooted in socioeconomic struggles while the latter focuses on collectiveness through individual anxieties in the hyperreal world.

Charlie Kaufman unites the themes of American eccentricity: existential anxiety, introspection, and vulnerability are all present in his filmography. However, Kaufman's film language relies on surreal, symbolic imagery, which makes his works distinct. I suggest that this method allows Kaufman to further investigate the ways the mind depicts its reality. In *Synecdoche, New York*, the relationship between the outside world and the individual is a fundamental theme. Kaufman portrays the internal and external life of Caden by presenting how his anxieties and insecurities show up in his environment. This can be detected in the scenes featuring television, where Caden imagines himself appearing on screen several times. These programs are either cartoons or advertisements, two genres that are highly fictitious themselves. For instance, Caden finds himself in a cartoon with a rotting carcass and a jackal who reminds him: "When you are dead, there's no time" (*Synecdoche, New York* 22:06). In another cartoon, a sheep and a cow carry Caden into a corral. He also envisions himself in an advertisement for chemotherapy medication. The use of television in Kaufman's film recalls Wallace's "E Unibus Pluram" again. Wallace proposes that American television and irony go hand in hand: television presents an altered version of reality, which does not take itself seriously and is eventually devoid of meaning. The use of television in *Synecdoche, New York* represents New Sincerity's conception of irony: it makes the superficiality of television and the seriousness of Caden's existential anxieties collide.

I propose that the main goal of the protagonist, Caden—which is the creation of a life-imitating, ever-growing theater piece—can be interpreted as ironic or parodic as well. Linda Hutcheon defines postmodern parody the following way:

It is rather like saying something whilst at the same time putting inverted commas around what is being said. The effect is to highlight, or "highlight," and to subvert, or "subvert," and the mode is therefore a "knowing" and an ironic—or even "ironic"—one.

Postmodernism's distinctive character lies in this kind of wholesale "nudging" commitment to doubleness, or duplicity. (Hutcheon 1-2)

However, Kaufman does not approach irony and parody from a postmodern viewpoint. It can be argued that the attempt to embrace, imitate, and thus, comprehend reality in its wholeness goes back to the aims of modernism. By placing this modernist attempt into the succeeding era of postmodernism, Caden's project inadvertently becomes dependent on modernism and postmodernism. Thus, its connection to irony should also be investigated within these aesthetics. The idea of condensing the world into one theater piece proves to be doomed by the end of the film, which points to its parodical and ironical interpretation. Caden cannot find all the answers he seeks. Moreover, the degree of detail he employs to achieve meaning may hide the essence he aims to discover. As Mayshark writes, "Once you know so much—about how stories are constructed or movies are made, about genre conventions and their social and political ramifications, about the complex relationships between author, the characters, and the audience... How do you create and convey meaning?" (Mayshark 2-3). The element of parody is extended to Kaufman, the external director, who places himself in the narrative discourse as a subject of parody by going through the process of creation. However, this ironical approach is not equivalent to the criticizing attitude of postmodernism: it shows that although the aim is doomed due to the disintegrated sense of reality, it is still worth trying, since it is a necessary part of Caden's artistic journey and his very own "bildungsroman". Kaufman plays with the idea of completing a modernist artistic project in an era which denies its necessity.

1.2 To Capture the Uncapturable

The discursive transition from grand to little narratives could be viewed as a form of fragmentation. In the postmodern and hyperreal condition, the loss of meaning and the rejection of conventional truths result in fragmented narratives. The process extends to the fragmentation of language as well: it is also subject to decomposition. The postmodern paradigm views language as arbitrary, bound to inaccuracy—it can be argued that in this theoretical context, language is a form of manipulation. According to the Baudrillardian philosophy of the hyperreal, the connection between language elements ceases to exist since the reality these elements aim to refer to has turned into simulation. According to David L. Smith, the purpose of language is to "build ourselves models of a world we can live in" (Smith 243). Therefore, language is used to create a habitable mental space from which one organizes external elements.

The question then arises as to what type of model one can build in a hyperreal world. If language is subject to fragmentation, its mental representation is also bound to be incomplete—and thus, its validity can be questioned. Since language is closely connected to the notion of the individual, I suggest that the individual is also fragmentary in the postmodern and hyperreal context. I argue that one of the aims of New Sincerity and American eccentricity is to explore the existential matters that make these fragmented pieces unite. In the Kaufmanesque universe, the effort to complete the incomplete is greatly emphasized. Regarding *Synecdoche, New York*, one of the central concerns is the issue of art as an inherently incomplete form of representation. Caden attempts to depict every aspect of reality by creating a *mise-en-abyme*, “an endless succession of internal duplications” (Baldick 212), that aims to portray the life of everyone. He has a highly specific role in this project: the directorial position allows him to control the process of constructing reality. Nonetheless, he is not able to be an objective viewer since he is also part of the representation. As Richard Deming suggests, “it becomes impossible to get outside what one is trying to represent” (Deming 203). In a 2008 interview, Kaufman confirms this observation:

We constantly put the exterior world into stories that come from inside us. That's how we organize things. That's what we try to do to make sense of this very confusing existence we have. Again, we think this is reality: the projection of ourselves onto the outside world, all of it in fact, down to what we see. I think it's really interesting that visually the world doesn't exist. It only exists as our brain's interpretation. My interest is in what is happening in the moment with all of its confusion and my inarticulation, my inability to put it into words. When I'm having a profound experience—and I'm thinking mostly of profound depression because that's when I realize it the most—I can't articulate it. Once I'm able to articulate it, I realize I'm no longer in it and that's not as interesting because then I'm telling a story about it, as opposed to this movement that's going on that's so much bigger than I am, that's so scary, that's so confusing, that leaves me feeling so alone. How do you present that as a work of art? That is the challenge that excites me. (Kaufman, “Interview”)

The exploration of this liminal space—the moment before articulation—shows Caden’s “own blindness to his limitations” (Deming 204). However, the artistic act of pursuing this challenge remains constant for both Caden and Kaufman. The continuity suggests that the struggle to precede the thought, to look behind the mirror is what defines human existence.

The instability and insufficiency of language is of great importance in the Kaufmanesque cinematography as well. In *Synecdoche, New York*, Caden's daughter, Olive moves to Germany at a young age. Caden later finds her diary, which reports on her present life in Berlin. This is a surreal instance by itself, but it shows Caden's perspective on Olive's gradual estrangement from him and her identity as a child. As Caden reads the diary, Olive's older voice can be heard: she has a strong German accent. Later, when Caden visits her dying daughter, Olive can only speak a couple of words in English and she needs a translator device to communicate. The expanding language barrier between Caden and Olive expresses their mutual alienation from each other: Caden does not proceed to learn German, while Olive ceases to practice her mother tongue.

The anxiety stemming from language also extends to Caden's struggle to title his play. As his relationship with others and himself transform throughout the course of his life, the play simultaneously reflects these changes. The titles, then, may represent Caden's difficulty with capturing and encapsulating the essence in one word or phrase. He comes up with several solutions throughout his creative process, which are all present in the film with the exception of one. These are the following: 1. *Simulacrum*, 2. *The Flawed Light of Love and Grief*, 3. *Unknown, Unkissed, and Lost*, 4. *Verisimilitudinous*, 5. *The Obscure Moon, Lighting an Obscure World*, and 5. *Infectious Diseases in Cattle*. The characteristically postmodern tool of intertextuality is also present in most of the titles. Here, I will use the concept of intertextuality according to Gérard Genette's definition: "a relationship of co-presence between two texts or among several texts" (Genette 1). The use of external text segments emphasizes the postmodern and hyperreal idea that originality cannot be achieved anymore—one can only select from already existing sources and recreate narratives from those. Consequently, I suggest that postmodern originality lies in the dialogue between intertexts. As mentioned before, Kaufman does not reject postmodern tools: intertextuality is one of the devices that he employs, especially with Caden's titles.

The first solution, *Simulacrum* comes to Caden's mind after a day of work, walking with his second wife, Claire, their child, Ariel, and Caden's doppelgänger, Sammy. As they exit the warehouse, they meet a group of people who are waiting to find out the date of the premier:

MAN

When is it opening?

CADEN

When it's ready.

MAN

We need to get in. It's bad out here. (SNY 1:04:24)

According to the *Concise Oxford English Dictionary*, the word ‘simulacrum’ has two meanings: 1. “an image or representation of someone or something” and 2. “an unsatisfactory imitation or substitute” (Soanes et al. 1344). The second meaning can be aligned with Baudrillard’s idea of simulacrum: hyperreality—the state of constant simulacrum—is unsatisfactory: by overproducing segments of reality, it loses its essence. Caden strives to find this essence and create order in the simulacrum. In this context, the role of the waiting crowd is particularly significant. It should be mentioned that during the scene, the outside of the warehouse seems chaotic: soldiers are instructing shivering people and suspicious sounds can be heard. I argue that not only does the crowd demand to view the play as an audience, but it also feels the need to participate in it in order to escape from the external hyperreality to a seemingly organized world.

Caden comes up with the second title directly after the first, asking Claire’s opinion on both. *Simulacrum* and *The Flawed Light of Love and Grief* are equally dismissed. The second idea is a direct intertextual reference to “The Alchemist” by Louise Bogan. The borrowed line is located at the end of the first stanza: “I broke my life to seek relief / From the flawed light of love and grief” (Bogan 15). The poem depicts a speaker who sacrifices her emotions for the mind—in the end, she finds that one cannot exist without passion. Caden also observes his life objectively through the lens of his theatrical project: he seeks to understand himself and others from an external position.

The third title, *Unknown, Unkissed, and Lost* depicts many of Caden’s fears: the lack of artistic acknowledgement, loving relationships—and the inability to find meaning. At this point of the film, the project is still not finished, and Caden believes that he has not managed to get closer to his goal. This title is also an intertext: it evokes the following line from the epic poem *Troilus and Criseyde* by Geoffrey Chaucer: “Unknow, unkist, and lost that is unsought” (Chaucer 31). The line is uttered by Pandarus who warns Troilus that if he does not begin to woo Criseyde, his love will remain unrequited. However, the love of Troilus and Criseyde is doomed—Caden is also afraid that his relationship with Hazel cannot be revived. Thus, the title is mainly influenced by Caden’s current situation, yet it also expresses his general apprehensions.

The title *Verisimilitudinous* only appears in the Goldenrod revision script of *Synecdoche, New York*, in an omitted scene featuring Tammy and Caden (Kaufman, *Goldenrod*

Revisions Script 101). The word, meaning “the appearance of being true or real” (Soanes et al. 1606), coincides with Caden’s first title idea, *Simulacrum*, both expressing the interchangeability of reality and fiction.

When Caden and Hazel reunite for the last time, he tells her about another possible name for the project: *The Obscure Moon, Lighting an Obscure World*. The use of intertextuality is also apparent here: the title is a reference to the poem “The Motive for Metaphor” by Wallace Stevens. The verse sentence, broken by an enjambement, is the following: “The obscure moon lighting an obscure world / Of things that would never be quite expressed” (Stevens 288). Stevens’ poem depicts the desire for association: the aim to discover the human mind within the elements of life. The second line of the verse sentence might express Caden’s regrets about missed opportunities: for instance, keeping his love for Hazel undeclared or not being an active father figure in his daughter’s life.

Caden’s last title idea is *Infectious Diseases in Cattle*, which creates a symbolical frame for the film. The motif of animal virus is apparent in the beginning as well: “They found avian flu in Turkey”, Caden remarks, reading the newspaper (SNY 03:28). The theme continues with an educational cartoon, featuring a sheep, a cow, and “Mr. Virus”. The cow says the following to the sheep: “There is a secret, something at play under the surface, growing like an invisible virus of thought. But you are being changed by it. Second by second. Every breath counts off time” (SNY 03:39). The speech alludes to the film’s recurring theme, the passage of time that eventually culminates in death. In this sense, the virus or infectious disease—which contaminates everything and everyone—is aging and death. The series of titles is ended by Caden’s death, which leads to ambiguity: is *Infectious Diseases in Cattle* intended to be the final title? I suggest that the play is supposed to remain untitled, emphasizing the continuity of life.

Chapter 2: Creating the Magnum Opus

2.1 In Search of the Real Self

The initial step toward the analysis of Caden's grand theatrical piece is examining the narrative progress which leads to the idea itself. Although the need for a very own, authentic masterpiece is only articulated later in the film, the introductory scenes reveal that the matter of individual purpose is of great importance to Caden:

CADEN

Harold Pinter died.

ADELE

Well, he's old, right?

CADEN

No, wait. He won the Nobel Prize. (SNY 02:53)

This dialogue reveals a hidden intertext. In a talk featuring Harold Pinter and critic Michael Billington, Pinter mentions that after winning the Nobel Prize, a television channel mistakenly announced his death. They corrected the error by stating that he, in fact, had won the Nobel Prize. Pinter concludes that he has "risen from the dead" (Pinter).

Caden's words imply that he believes a widely acclaimed achievement—in this case, the Nobel Prize—is the reification of a purposeful life as an artist. I suggest that in his judgement, this achievement also means the accomplishment of authenticity. Early on, he fails to express the yearning for authentic creation, but I argue that it is already detectable in his adaptation of *Death of a Salesman*. "We have five hundred and sixty lighting cues. I don't know why I made it so complicated", remarks Caden about his adaptation to which Adele replies: "It's what you do" (SNY 14:06). This dialogue provides an early insight into Caden's directorial style. Lightning cues, also called LX cues, are used in theatrical productions to indicate individual lighting positions (Primrose). The number of cues Caden uses shows his attention to detail and need for perspective: he wishes to present a story and its characters in their entirety, illuminating each angle. This method is also applied to his directorial work for the magnum opus. The emphasis on perspective is a technique that Caden employs in order to create a sincere representation. He seems fairly satisfied with the outcome of *Death of a Salesman* until his wife, Adele reflects on it:

ADELE

I can't get excited about your restaging someone else's old play, it just-- There's nothing personal in it.

CADEN

People are coming out of the theater crying.

ADELE

Great. Be a fucking tool of suburban, blue-haired, regional-theater subscribers. But what are you leaving behind? You act as if you have forever to figure it out. (SNY 21:44)

Not only does Adele criticize the concept of adaptation, but she also reflects on the idea of niche and universality in art. She implies that Caden's directorial work does not surpass the specific preferences of the audience, in other words: it lacks the authentic, personal aspect that would elevate it to a universal degree. Adele concludes with reminding Caden of the passage of time. Her reflection embodies the apprehensions that dominate Caden's thoughts from the very beginning: the realization that death is inescapable cripples him, further amplifying his struggle with creation. After Adele and Olive leave for Berlin, Caden confirms Adele's observation during a therapy session: "I think Adele's right when she says I'm not doing anything real" (SNY 26:58). The vocal expression of the need for authentic creation is a turning point in the film; and as a symbolic reward, Caden's upcoming project receives financial funding as well. He is given the MacArthur grant, which enables him to "create something unflinchingly true, profoundly beautiful and of unremitting value" (SNY 35:13). The grant acts as a magical object or as a *deus ex machina*, enabling Caden to purchase a grandiose warehouse in the Theater District of Manhattan, New York City.

In the beginning of the directorial work, Caden has no concrete plan about the play: he only knows that it must be "massive", "uncompromising", and "honest" (SNY 37:15). These expressions reveal the motivation behind his magnum opus, which can be divided into three aspects. Primarily, Caden wants to understand himself—he seeks introspection. Nonetheless, he does so indirectly, observing the process of human existence from an objective standpoint in order to achieve the sincerest representation. Through the act of self-discovery, Caden also aims to investigate how an individual and its relationships operate. Besides these factors, the other fundamental motivation lies in the desire to be original. This can be connected to the need for introspection: Caden seeks to discover his artistic core, the originality which stems from his individuality. However, this proves to be a great challenge in the world of hyperreality from which Caden strives to break free. The inner struggle to be original lingers over the creation of

the magnum opus. After Caden presents his idea at the first rehearsal, Claire remarks that “It’s brilliant. It’s everything. It’s Karamazov” (SNY 40:44). Caden is not satisfied: he does not want to be compared to anyone; he wishes to achieve something that nobody has before. Paradoxically, he also aims to dissolve his identity by recreating the life of others as a detached observer—but is inherently blocked by his own individuality. This leads to the inevitability of reinterpretation, which I define as extended adaptation.

Prior to the directing process of the magnum opus, the notion of originality and authenticity are challenged by the idea of adaptation in Caden’s former project, *Death of a Salesman*. In her book *A Theory of Adaptation*, Linda Hutcheon describes adaptation to be commonly viewed as a subordinate form of the original work (Hutcheon xii). This approach may stem from the Romantic trope of originality and the genius as a desired artistic state. *Synecdoche, New York* reflects on these ideals, incorporating them in the character of Caden, the artist. However, the idea to create something that Caden can put his “real self into” (SNY 35:26) is preceded by his adaptation. This raises the question as to whether adaptation lacks authenticity and originality. Hutcheon adds that the uniqueness of adaptation lies in its way to divide form and content and manipulate them separately (Hutcheon 9). In regard to Caden’s *Death of a Salesman*, the alteration of form is apparent in two aspects: the use of lighting and actors. As I already mentioned, lighting seems to be a focal point for Caden as his goal is to depict the narrative from several perspectives. With lighting, he is also able to create new interpretations. This method, as Rebecca Davers points out, recalls Jo Mielziner’s set design for the 1949 Broadway production of Miller’s play (Davers 27). A further method to manipulate form is the choice of actors. Caden deliberately casts young actors to play the character of Willy and Linda Loman, who are middle-aged in the original play. He explains this significant decision at a rehearsal: “Try to keep in mind that a young person playing Willy Loman thinks he’s only pretending to be at the end of a life full of despair. But the tragedy is that we know that you, the young actor will end up in this very place of desolation” (SNY 09:49). By casting young people, Caden reflects on the ultimate human experience of death, loneliness, and unfulfillment and reminds the audience of their inevitability. To enhance the cyclical nature of human existence, the film shows the first and last scene of the play at the premier—and thus, it initiates a dialogue with the play it represents. Caden extends this symbolism to the actors and incorporates their off-stage identity into the narrative by reminding them that their role is also partly their destiny.

Death of a Salesman serves as an intertextual allusion in the film. Here, the application of intertextuality is not between two texts but between a text and a visual narrative. Willy

Loman's character creates an allusive dialogue with Caden, allowing for a comparative analysis. The connection between the two characters can be divided into two main categories: 1) the clash of reality and imagination; and 2) the search for purpose and the struggle to fulfill it. Willy creates a fictional narrative for himself, which he can navigate and be content in. According to Davers, "Willy's daydreams help him to rationalize his life" (Davers 37) and provide him with a sense of escape. His daydreams also represent his successful, financially stable alter ego; in this sense, Willy's imaginary self can be connected to Caden's doppelgänger, Sammy. Sammy's otherness lies in his ability to articulate what Caden is unable to. The difficulty with expression is echoed in Willy's climactic monologue before his death: "Ben, where do I...? Ben, how do I...?" (Miller 108). This line is also uttered in Kaufman's film during the rehearsal. In the ending scene, the dying Caden fantasizes about a new idea: "I know how to do this play now. I have an idea. I think --" (SNY 1:55:04). However, the solution, the "how to" remains unexpressed forever. The unrevealed plan alludes to the idea that Caden's goal, universal representation, cannot be attained. Similarly, Willy is unable to achieve the American Dream as well as the perfect family he envisions.

2.2 The World of Doppelgängers

As the real estate agent remarks, the dilapidated New York warehouse was once a theater itself, giving home to plays by William Shakespeare. In this symbolic context, Caden's life-imitating magnum opus could be viewed as the materialization of the Shakespearian proverb "all the world's a stage" (Shakespeare 2.7.139). Upon first glance, Caden is hesitant to believe that the warehouse could be used as a theater. However, he realizes that his play requires a location that can expand internally as the narrative evolves. Indeed, the rehearsal starts in a smaller-sized room within the warehouse; however, as the individual role of each actor increases, the space also widens. The expansion reaches the borders of the warehouse and the streets of New York, incorporating more and more elements from reality: the warehouse becomes a city within a city. At one point, the film even shows a map within the warehouse, presenting the intricate arrangement of the complex. The cycle of construction is echoed in the play's narrative. Each person employed in the theater project acquires three identities: the real persona, the on-stage persona, and another on-stage persona playing the former on-stage one.

This *mise-en-abyme* recalls Gérard Genette's definition of the metalepsis. However, before analyzing the term, the presentation of the narrative levels is essential. Genette distinguishes three narrative—or diegetic—levels. The first and the highest is the extradiegetic

level: this contains every narrative feature outside the narrative, exhibiting the voice of the narrator. This is followed by the diegetic and metadiegetic level. Both refer to events within the narrative; nonetheless, the metadiegetic level contains those narrative segments that are embedded in the primary diegetic level (Genette 228). Genette, thus, defines metalepsis the following way: “Any intrusion by the extradiegetic narrator or narratee into the diegetic universe (or by diegetic characters into a metadiegetic universe, etc.), or the inverse [...], produces an effect of strangeness that is either comical [...] or fantastic” (Genette 234-235). However, *Synecdoche, New York* presents a different type of metalepsis. Here, the dialogue is mainly perceivable between the diegetic and the metadiegetic level. The diegesis is presented as the first layer of reality, which can be separated from the metadiegetic narrative segments in the beginning of the film. The characters perceive this reality as nonfictional, but the viewer recognizes its fictionality (Gáncsos). This seemingly realistic level eventually collides with the metadiegetic level when Caden begins his project. Hereby, the continuous reproduction of each character creates an internal metalepsis. In this sense, this narrative discourse could be likened to a set of matryoshka dolls: the biggest piece represents the diegesis, which contains the smaller but structurally joined elements, the metadiegetic layers.

According to Kármén Gáncsos, each part of this internal metalepsis could be viewed as a synecdoche. *The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* defines ‘synecdoche’ as a figure of speech—a type of metonymy—where a specific part is made to represent the whole and vice versa (Baldick 329). It does not replicate the other object in its entirety: its purpose is representation. The title *Synecdoche, New York* also alludes to this poetic device. Caden lives in Schenectady, New York, which phonetically recalls the word ‘synecdoche’. The connection exists on a thematic level as well: the part-whole relationship of synecdoche is apparent in the similar relationship between a smaller city (Schenectady) and the state which it is part of (New York). Caden’s theater project is an embodiment of synecdoche as well. However, its purpose is to surpass this systematic pattern. Caden decides to replicate his reality, incorporating the reality of others as well so as to cross the boundaries of synecdoche. He expresses his need to grab the collective human condition in the form of a theater play:

Here’s what I think theater is: it’s the beginning of thought. It’s the truth not yet spoken. It’s what a man feels like after he’s been clocked in the jaw. It’s love... in all its messiness. And I want all of us, players and patrons alike, to soak in the communal bath of it, the mikvah, as the Jews call it. Because we’re all in the same water, after all. You

know, soaking in our very menstrual blood and nocturnal emissions. This is what I wanna try to give people. (SNY 37:22)

The Goldenrod Revisions script presents another, additional analogy in Caden's speech: he likens theater to "a blackbird in winter" and "the moment before death" (Kaufman, *Goldenrod revisions script* 47). These, along with the final form of the monologue show the ambiguity of theater: for Caden, it is both unexpected and inevitable, complex yet effortless. The remark about nocturnal emission and menstrual blood also represents this duality, showing the collectiveness of the human condition.

Caden begins the rehearsal of the magnum opus by "talking honestly" (SNY 39:44)—he implies that a theater piece can only emerge from sincerity and vocal expression. In this sense, the first rehearsal resembles a therapy session. However, as the project progresses and more actors join the work, the capacity for such rehearsals ceases to be sufficient. In the beginning, Caden does not explicitly tell the role of each character. He examines their scene but eventually leaves them unfold naturally. His passiveness is deliberate: he believes that to achieve authenticity, he has to present situations in their purest form, without any external impact. Nonetheless, this directorial attitude is gradually modified. Caden feels as though something is missing. He begins to work in a manner similar to a traditional director, handing out scraps of paper as daily instructions. These notes support Caden's wish to show the "brutal truth" (SNY 59:39): they focus on tragedies, feelings of hopelessness, and uncontrollable habits. These include the following: "nothing matters anymore", "your wife just had a miscarriage", "you were raped last night", "you keep biting your tongue" (SNY 1.00:43). This is a turning point for Caden for another reason as well: he decides to hire an actor who plays him. "All right, I'm not excusing myself from this either. I will have someone play me, to delve into the murky, cowardly depths of my lonely, fucked-up being. And he'll get notes, too. And those notes will correspond to the notes I truly receive every day from my God" (SNY 1:00:07). The appearance of transcendence could be viewed as a play on the metalepsis between the extradiegetic and the diegetic narrative level. Here, the extradiegetic level is represented by the transcendental messages Caden receives.

One of the reasons behind Caden's magnum opus is introspection. Until this very moment, he believed that this was achievable solely through the observation of other people. However, after seventeen years of stagnation, he decides to cast another Caden. He hires Sammy Barnathan, who reveals that he has been following Caden for twenty years—and thus, persuades him that he is the perfect candidate. This time, Sammy and Caden follow each other

simultaneously: Sammy follows Caden to perfect his role while Caden follows Sammy to understand who he, Caden is and has been before during his past. Besides Sammy, there is another character whose identity becomes enmeshed with Caden's identity. Caden takes the job of an Ellen Bascomb, the cleaning lady of Adele's apartment. Ellen never shows up—yet Caden continues the role. When he decides to retire as director, he becomes the on-stage impersonator of Ellen. This transformation provides Caden the opportunity to distance himself from his identity as Caden Cotard. In the end, his role as director ceases to exist at each narrative level: he receives an earpiece, which controls his actions by replacing his inner voice.

Besides the fantastic element of the ever-growing play, the lack of an audience reinforces the parodical interpretation of the magnum opus. The idea that reception is negligible recurs in the beginning of the film as well. After Caden's rendition of *Death of a Salesman*, he asks Adele and her friend Maria to critique it, but they refuse to do so. For Caden, the role of the audience is critical in the beginning: he monitors its reaction at the premier of *Death of a Salesman* and pays attention to the reviews of theater critics. When he decides to create his masterpiece, he aims to distance himself from this attitude—thus, the importance of the audience gradually decreases. Furthermore, he seems to recontextualize the idea of reception altogether: he wishes to eliminate the distinction between the audience and the members of the theater group. The aim to include viewers is extended to the extradiegetic narrative level: Kaufman addresses the audience of his film, encouraging the spectators to participate in the self-discovery of Caden and simultaneously, the self-discovery of themselves.

Chapter 3: The Inside of His Head¹

3.1. The End is Built into the Beginning²

One of the factors that motivate Caden to create an authentic masterpiece stem from his existential anxiety and fear of death. These are the contrasting elements of the ironical interpretation of Caden's theater play and thus, they must be mentioned. The audience is introduced to Caden Cotard in his home in Schenectady, New York. Caden's fear of death is already apparent in the opening scene: the film starts off with Olive's voice in the background, singing a song about living and dying in Schenectady. The song preludes the visuals: the screen slowly fades from black to grey, and finally to the first shot. When the song reaches the line "And when I'm married, and I'm dead / Upstate worms will eat my head" (SNY 00:25), the film shows a close-up of the exact time on the radio, continuing with a shot of Caden's reflection in the mirror. Thus, not only does the film reveal death as a significant theme, but it also determines its inseparable connection to the protagonist. Caden examines himself resignedly: the visible signs of aging remind him of the inevitability of death. The contrasting perspective of the radio and the mirror may also signal the objectiveness of the passing time and the subjectiveness of the individual experience. The theme of decay continues: the radio host announces that it is the first day of fall. He proceeds to interview a university professor about the trope of autumn in literature. The professor reads out the last five lines of the poem "Autumn Day" by Rainer Maria Rilke, in the translation of Stephen Mitchell:

Whoever has no house now, will never have one.
Whoever is alone will stay alone,
will sit, read, write long letters through the evening,
and wander the boulevards, up and down,
restlessly, while the dry leaves are blowing. (SNY 01:24)

During the reading, the camera remains focused on Caden's reflection, yet his blurry movements are also visible in the foreground, the area closest to the audience. The silhouette of the radio is still detectible. The image of Caden's body and the radio morph into each other,

¹ The original title of Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*. See Davers 36.

² See *Synecdoche, New York* 1:37:27.

creating a contrast between the sharpness of the background and the dimness of the foreground. At the start of the scene, Caden observes his reflection still lying on the bed. However, when he finally sits upright, he faces a mirror again. This continuity indicates that for Caden, self-reflection is unavoidable. Here, the duality of the image and the physical self signifies the fractured identity of Caden. It can be argued that one's reflection is always distorted: it presents a virtual image. The act of looking in the mirror also entails a sense of identification. This identification repeats itself with each perception: no two images are exactly alike. In this sense, Caden faces his fears every time he observes himself in the mirror. Hereby, the aim to create a magnum opus could also be interpreted as a type of perception, a magnified, expanded reflection. However, the theater piece represents more than the act of looking in the mirror: it shows the need to step inside of it, to see the construction of an image.

The identity of the professor should be further explored. She is called Elke Putzkammer, which could be translated as 'cleaning storeroom' (Eisenhauer). This foreshadows Caden's later role as Adele's cleaning lady, Ellen Bascomb. Furthermore, Elke's voice resembles the adult, German voice of Olive: this could indicate her future in Germany and her early death as well since she talks about autumn. Thus, Elke's character encompasses the fate of two individuals: Caden and Olive.

Synecdoche, New York places great emphasis on funerals. It presents four ceremonies: the funeral of Claire's mother, Caden's father and mother, and lastly, Caden's impersonator, Sammy. However, I will now focus on the scene that precedes the burial of Caden's father. This part provides evidence of Kaufman's attention to the symbiotic nature of the narrative and visual film language. The scene begins with a contrasting episode. Caden comes back to his second wife, Claire and they begin to make love. While the scene unfolds, the camera shows Ariel, Caden's daughter, sitting on the lap of Sammy, the doppelgänger whom Caden is not yet aware of. The lovemaking is interrupted by a phone call, announcing the death of Caden's father. During the call, a man-shaped shadow appears behind the curtain. Based on its form, I suggest that the shadow belongs to Sammy, who has previously disappeared from the chair. Sammy plays two roles here: first, he observes Caden's reaction to the bad news. Second, his shadow, which leans near Caden, symbolizes the closeness of death Caden is suddenly faced with. Sammy's figure behind the bed is contrasted with Ariel, who stands in front of it. Thus, Caden is framed by the beginning (Ariel) and the end (Sammy).

The death of Caden's father is the death he aims to avoid at all costs:

They said his body was riddled with cancer and he didn't know. That he went in because his finger hurt. They said he suffered horribly. And that he... that he called out for me before he died. They said that he... He said he regretted his life. And they said he said a lot of things. Too many to recount. They said it was the longest and saddest deathbed speech any of them had ever heard. (SNY 54:41)

The fear of death is an integral part of Caden's identity, so much so that it is reflected in his surname as well. 'Cotard' alludes to the condition named Cotard's syndrome: according to the American Psychological Association, this condition is characterized by severe depression, which causes the individual to believe that their body and reality have ceased to exist ("Cotard's syndrome"). While it cannot be stated with certainty that Caden suffers from this condition, his intensifying hypochondria reveals the death anxiety he experiences. Furthermore, he emphasizes the information that his father was not aware of his illness until a seemingly insignificant physical pain. To avoid a similar fate, Caden frequently visits medical specialists who reinforce his fears. However, a specific diagnosis is never identified. Besides the fear of physical decline, Caden is also apprehensive about leaving behind an unfulfilled life, just like his father. The camera slowly zooms on his dimly lit face during the monologue, further implying that he identifies with the fate of his father. The colors of the scene are also worth mentioning. Here, the dominant color is red, which appears on the walls and the curtain. Both places feature Sammy: he sits in front of the walls and then appears behind the curtain. Furthermore, red is reflected on the face of Caden, which further amplifies the connection between him, Sammy, and death.

After the analysis of the former scenes, the final sequence of the film is of particular interest. As the ending could hardly be interpreted by a single scene, I will examine the sequence from the moment Caden enters the warehouse. As mentioned before, Caden receives an earpiece in the final stages of his life, which replaces his inner voice. As he walks around the warehouse he has created, the camera first shows the building in its entirety, which has become a giant city closed with the outer shell of the warehouse ceiling. In contrast, the streets are demolished: earlier, the sounds of bombing could be heard. The decay of the building is paralleled with the closeness of death. Caden finds objects lying on the street that were once a significant part of his life: self-help books by his therapist and the map of the warehouse, which contains four inner buildings altogether. He continues his journey to the center, which is the very first warehouse. His walk is presented with long camera shots, emphasizing the distance from one place to the other. The innermost warehouse is covered with plastic wrap: Caden

enters through a tear. This could be viewed as a symbolical return to the womb, a reversed birth, which culminates in death. Before arriving at the final place, Caden walks by the dead body of the actor who played Sammy: this means that each replica of Caden is dead and only the original character remains. Caden continues his journey by car, while the voice in his earpiece reminds him: “As you begin to lose your characteristics one by one” (*SNY* 1:52:05). Finally, he arrives at a place where there is only a sofa and an unknown woman, the only living person in the warehouse besides Caden. The appearance of this woman reinforces the symbolism of returning to the womb: Caden finds out that she played the mother in Ellen’s dream. Indeed, the connection between Ellen and Caden here is evident. The earpiece talks to Caden in Millicent’s voice, the actress who played Ellen. Thus, it is Ellen, Millicent, and Caden who approach the anonymous woman simultaneously—their dialogue will be explored in the next part of this chapter.

In terms of cinematography, the last scene recalls the beginning of the film. Both scenes feature the exact time, 7:45 AM, emphasizing the cyclicity of life. Furthermore, the last shot—in which Caden dies—employs the technique of fade-out, which is the opposite of the technique used in the very first scene, called fade-in. A fade-out is “often used as transitional device when one scene closes with the image disappearing” (Konigsberg 111). There are two types of fade-outs: fade-to-black and fade-to-white (Konigsberg 111). In *Synecdoche, New York*, the last color of the fade-out is grey, which resembles the first color of the fade-in in the beginning. The use of the same color reinforces the message that the end is coded in the beginning. I suggest that the color grey is applied to indicate the fusion of life and death, mixing the color white and black. Additionally, the grey fade-out also recalls the phenomenon of static noise, during which the television receives no signals and shows flickering grey dots as a result. Besides the similarities, the last scene shows Caden in a different environment. The opening depicts Caden in his bed, alone—his life is seemingly stable, yet he feels lonely and isolated from other people. Nevertheless, in the final shot, Caden lays his head on the woman’s shoulder: while his world has collapsed, he does not die alone.

Caden’s connection to others is a significant motif of the film. His relationship with Olive is a ubiquitous element throughout the narrative. In the beginning, Caden and Olive embody the harmonious father-daughter relationship. After Adele and Olive leave, Caden seeks to regain this long-lost connection. However, he finds that the new environment in Berlin—as well as the transformation of her family’s structure—has gradually altered Olive’s personality and physical self. Caden learns from a magazine that at the age of ten, Olive is the first child to be tattooed from neck to ankle. The magazine also shows that the “Flower Girl” has changed

her surname from Cotard to Wittgart, a German name. Later, it is revealed that Olive is the artistic project of Maria, the lover of Adele. I suggest that Olive's character is an allusion to the concept of art. In this sense, Caden, Adele, and Maria are the artists behind the creation. Hereby, Caden's despair about the appropriation of his daughter could be viewed as the inability to accept the legitimacy of different interpretations. The death of Olive is also symbolical: her tattoos get infected and eventually cause her death. This suggests that each piece of art is transient.

The character of Ellen holds a mirror in front of Caden, revealing the hidden parts of his personality. Ellen, the cleaning lady of Adele's old apartment is never shown explicitly during the film. However, she appears as a painting by Adele. Her mysterious figure gives way to narrative play. When Caden accepts the job of Ellen, the fusion of the two characters begins. For Caden, cleaning has always been a coping mechanism, especially after Adele and Olive left him. The role as Ellen allows him to regain a piece of his past and be closer to Adele. The identity of Caden and Ellen becomes enmeshed when Millicent (the actress who impersonates Ellen) and Caden switch roles—however, the film alludes to the shared identity of Caden and Ellen from the beginning. Following the move of Adele, Caden calls her to which she replies: “Who is this... Ellen?” (SNY 28:24). This absurdist element points to the fluidity of identity and implies the connectedness of each individual.

3.2 In Search of Sincerity

Besides their deteriorating relationship, the disharmony between Caden and Adele is also apparent in the way they understand and create art. While Caden strives to achieve authenticity by an ever-growing, grandiose theater play, Adele's paintings depict microscopic models, which, by the end the film, can only be seen with special magnifying glasses. The aim to showcase the human condition in its entirety is already present in Caden's rendition of *Death of a Salesman*; however, adaptation, as a form, is finite. Caden's goal is to create a piece that “goes on for eons and eons” (SNY 1:43:07), together with the continuity of the world. He creates in order to overstep the boundaries inherent to each piece of art. On the contrary, Adele's pieces indicate that the human condition can be condensed into a molecular painting. Simultaneously, the microscopic size of her paintings also suggests that art is ingrained in everyone at an atomic level. In this aspect, Adele's art also involves synecdoche, but it does not aim to be an exact replica of the whole. Her paintings are nude portraits, featuring only one person—these are depicted with quick, expressive brushwork. At Adele's retrospective at the Metropolitan

Museum of Art, she discusses the early influences of her style in an autobiographical manifesto featured on a poster (the remaining text is not visible in the shot):

Adele Lack was born in 1965 in Lawton, West Virginia. Recounting her childhood, she says, “Lawton is a mining town. The only art I ever saw was the smear of coal dust on my father’s shirts but that was enough to stimulate my fascination with the idea of markings on fabric, traces of the real world left to linger as memory. The first portraits I did were in that very coal dust: my mother, my father, the sad and oppressed minors of Lawton. I can’t say I was understood by my family but...” (SNY 1:07:05)

According to Adele, one of the main themes of her paintings is the depiction of memory. The fading bodies express the liminal state between the physical and the abstract realm, the category between objective and subjective existence. Besides the manifesto, the poster also displays a portrait of Caden. The piece illustrates a man—shown from the back—who wears a white gown. The most interesting part of this painting, however, is the faded silhouette of a man or woman behind the main figure. This could either be Adele or another manifestation of Caden, similar to a reflection. Adele’s art is significant in terms of narrative discourse as well. Here, the interchangeability of reality and imagination appears as the metalepsis of the diegetic and extradiegetic level: the artist behind Adele’s micro paintings exists in the reality of the viewer. In real life, he is called Alex Kanevsky (Chocano).

Besides visual arts and theater, literature also plays a part of the narrative as an emerging artform. Its use could be viewed as an intertextual element. Two novels appear in the film: *The Trial* by Franz Kafka and *In Search of Lost Time* by Marcel Proust, both read by Hazel. *Synecdoche, New York* reinterprets many Kafkaesque tropes present in *The Trial*. Caden’s life is determined by the struggle to comprehend an indefinable power. Josef K., the protagonist of Kafka’s novel is also in the grip of a power he cannot escape. The struggle to grasp and simultaneously avoid a predestined fate connects the two characters. This wrestling also results in utter alienation for Josef K; however, the ending of *Synecdoche, New York* shows that this state of being can be resolved. *In Search of Lost Time*—the first volume, *Swann’s Way* in particular—is not specifically mentioned in the film, only shown for a brief shot including the first page. Proust’s novel is characterized by the intricate, symbiotic relationship between art and memory: the act of creation triggers pieces of the past, which contributes to a better understanding of the self. Kaufman also uses the process of creation as a means of narrative

construction. Furthermore, Caden seeks truth and self-discovery through the depiction of the present, yet he cannot detach himself from his past.

The presentation of a diverse range of art forms points to the idea of *Gesamtkunstwerk*, which is the term for a unified work of art, displaying theater, music, visual arts, and poetry simultaneously (M. Kennedy and J. B. Kennedy 290). Caden and Kaufman both aspire to embody the Wagnerian *Gesamtkunstwerk*: the portrayal of all art forms coincides with the aim to capture the entirety of existence. However, this pursuit seems to change by the end of the film—more precisely, its focus shifts. The transformation begins with the death of Sammy who commits suicide upon seeing the revived love between Caden and Hazel. Until that point, Caden perceived Sammy as a *doppelgänger*, deprived of individuality to mimic Caden's personality. Nevertheless, when Sammy commits suicide—which Caden also attempted to do earlier—he realizes that Sammy is more than a mere copy of him. The incident forces him to recontextualize the motivation behind creation. "I know how to do it now. There are nearly thirteen million people in the world. Can you imagine that many people? And none of those people is an extra. They're all leads in their own stories. They have to be given their due" (SNY 1:35:51), Caden remarks at the funeral of Sammy. The number 'thirteen million' continues the use of synecdoche: it may refer to the population of New York City and its suburbs. Although Caden's initial desire is to understand others, he soon becomes aware of the significance of compassion in creation. His perception changes: he begins to concentrate on the individual rather than the role that the individual represents in the whole. This renewed approach could be likened to Adele's microscopic but detailed paintings, which focus on one person.

There are two additional occasions where Caden shows a sense of certainty regarding the creation of the play. The three incidents are joined by death: 1) Sammy's death; 2) Hazel's death; and 3) Caden's death. While the first death reminds Caden of the importance of compassion, the second one complements this knowledge with the experience of love and connection. Hazel's death also catalyzes the ability of expression: "I know how to do the play now. It'll all take place over the course of one day and that day will be the day before you died. It was the happiest day of my life. And I'll be able to relieve it forever. See you soon" (SNY 1:39:51). This monologue also supports the change in perspective mentioned earlier. Caden gives up the goal to capture the entirety of the human condition: the repetition of the happiest day of his life fulfills his expectation. Caden's death combines the experience of compassion and connection. Here, Caden acquires compassion for himself as well. First, he admits that his project is doomed to failure: "There's everyone's dreams in all those apartments. All those thoughts I'll never know. That's the truth of it" (SNY 1:53:49). The cycle of creation and

destruction is also apparent in the warehouse, which was once filled with actors but is now deserted. As mentioned before, there is another person in the warehouse besides Caden: the actress who played Ellen's mother. When Caden talks to the woman, he also conveys the emotions of Ellen. Their dialogue demonstrates this connection:

CADEN

I wanted to do that picnic with my daughter. I feel like I've disappointed you terribly.

WOMAN

Oh, no. I'm so proud of you. (SNY 1:54:03)

Ellen's dream depicts a scene where the young Ellen and her mother are having a picnic. Ellen promises that she will have the same picnic with her daughter in exactly twenty years. However, as the viewer learns from Millicent, Ellen's plan is never fulfilled: she does not have children and thus, she thinks of herself as a disappointment. Caden also repents his tragic relationship with his own daughter. The concept of disappointment recurs in the beginning as well: according to Adele, everyone is disappointing. However, Ellen's figurative mother eliminates this idea and emulates the role of the forgiving mother. This culminates in ultimate expression: Caden declares his love for the woman. Although he has not achieved his initial goal, he realizes that the essence of human existence lies in the ability to connect and show compassion. This newly gained knowledge encourages him to recommence his project—but his thoughts are interrupted by the suddenness of death.

The conclusion Caden is faced with appears in the paradox of individuality: uniqueness is illusory. However, the belief that it is true is an undeniable part of existence. The film suggests that the life of one person can represent the completeness of human condition: "You realize you are not special. You have struggled into existence and are now slipping silently out of it. This is everyone's experience. Every single one. The specifics hardly matter. Everyone's everyone. So you are Adele, Hazel, Claire, Olive. You are Ellen" (SNY 1:50:40). In this sense, Caden's magnum opus is unnecessary—but the aim to try is utterly human. Kaufman's ode turns to its viewers with understanding and compassion, while also acknowledges that its very existence is an insurmountable mission in itself. The meaning Caden has been looking for lies in this duality: the realization of the impossibility of achieving complete understanding leaves the artist with the sincerest option, which is the act of compassion towards humanity.

Conclusion

I have argued throughout this work that *Synecdoche, New York* utilizes art to showcase the pursuit of meaning in a hyperreal world. The main objective of my work was to analyze the way artistic creation appears in the film by emphasizing its theoretical background, its manifestation in the narrative and visual film language, as well as its expression through the characters and their interrelatedness. I have argued that the aims and process of Caden's magnum opus have transformed throughout the film. Initially, he strives to capture the completeness of the human condition and find his authentic voice as an artist. Nevertheless, I found that the gradual dissolution of Caden's individuality has moved him closer to his goal, which simultaneously results in the destruction of his masterpiece. He realizes that his idea has been doomed from the beginning and the only thing he can do is connect with others.

The theoretical background for my research was based on Jean Baudrillard's notion of the hyperreal the concept of postmodern irony and parody. I have found that by highlighting the Baudrillardian idea of the absence of reality in the postmodern world, I could interpret the response of New Sincerity and the American eccentrics. The experience of simulacrum defines consumerist societies, meaning that the overproduction of images, signs, and ideas has led to synthetic realities. Baudrillard's idea creates a dialogue with Jean Jean-François Lyotard's earlier theory of the succession of little narratives over metanarratives. The two philosophies form the context in which New Sincerity and American eccentricity place themselves. These movements have responded to postmodern disillusionment by focusing on sincerity and the portrayal of existential matters. However, they integrate postmodern tools, such as irony and intertextuality in their discourse. I argued that Kaufman's film utilizes irony to express the need for imitating a modernist attempt in a post-postmodern or hyperreal world, which might not find it necessary.

The second chapter examined Caden's magnum opus in detail. First, I demonstrated the narrative progress towards the idea. The magnum opus is greatly influenced by Caden's rendition of *Death of a Salesman*: it initiates the ambition to create an all-encompassing piece. I found that Miller's play establishes an intertextual relationship with the film's narrative, and I discussed its manifestation. I also examined Caden's relation to adaptation and authenticity: he finds that the formal finiteness of adaptation is not adequate. In the second part of the chapter, I looked at the *mise-en-abyme* structure of Caden's theater piece and analyzed the dialogue between narrative levels according to Gérard Genette's classification. Finally, I exhibited the process of Caden's changing directorial attitude.

In the third chapter, I explored Caden's character through the presentation of his relationship with death. In the first part of the chapter, I focused on three scenes from the film and analyzed their narrative and visual aspects. I found that Caden eventually leaves behind the crippling fear of death which has characterized his life and is able to find connection at the end of his life. Lastly, the chapter analyzed the art forms that appear in the film: Adele's microscopic paintings, Caden's theater piece, and two novels. The final part of the chapter focused on the shift in Caden's perspective: he leaves behind the illusion of authenticity and individuality and accepts the impossibility of his project.

The trajectory of this paper demonstrated the journey of creation in a world characterized by the passivity of irony and the loss of established concepts. Although Caden leaves behind an incomplete piece of art, he manages to overcome his failure by discovering a new interpretation: the act of connection. Kaufman portrays this struggle with sensitivity, embodying the ideals of New Sincerity. His own magnum opus, *Synecdoche, New York* emulates the endeavor to rediscover what it means to be human in the postmodern heritage of the twenty-first century.

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