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

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

Absztrakt: Az 1990-es évek amerikai kulturális gondolkodása egyre inkább elmozdulni látszott a korábbi posztmodern vonulattól. Az Új Őszinteség, illetve a poszt-posztmodern irányzata egy, az irónia külsődleges attitűdje helyett az emberi lét drámáját megértő, az őszinteség igényével fellépő váltást szorgalmazott. Ez a vonulat az amerikai filmművészetben is megjelent az 1990-es évek végétől, többek között Sofia Coppola, Paul Thomas Anderson, Wes Anderson és Charlie Kaufman filmjeiben. A cikk azt vizsgálja, miként mutatja be Charlie Kaufman 2008-as szerzői filmje, a *Kis-nagy világ* a posztmodern utáni művész feladatait és kihívásait Caden Cotard alakján keresztül. Ugyan Kaufman filmjének konklúziója szerint a magnum opus és a megismerhetőség eszménye illúzió csupán, csak ez vezetheti el a művészt az emberi kapcsolatok őszinteségéhez, a kortárs szimulált világ egyedüli valóságához.

Abstract

The American cultural thought of the 1990s appeared to withdraw from the previous postmodern paradigm. New Sincerity and post-postmodernism advocated for a change that, in contrast to the external attitude of irony, was rooted in a sense of sincerity and compassion for the drama of the human condition. The American cinema of the late 1990s was also affected by this trend, best represented by the films of Sofia Coppola, Paul Thomas Anderson, Wes Anderson, and Charlie Kaufman. This article examines the ways *Synecdoche, New York* – Kaufman's 2008 auteur film – explores the duties and challenges of the post-postmodern artist through the character of Caden Cotard. Although the film's conclusion states that the ideal of the magnum opus and complete cognizability is illusory, only that can lead the artist to the sincerity of human connections – the sole reality of the contemporary simulated world.

Introduction

The filmography of screenwriter and director Charlie Kaufman has been associated with many terminological categories, ranging from indie to arthouse. In her seminal work *American Eccentric Cinema*, Kim Wilkins categorizes Kaufman's oeuvre as an example of "American eccentricity" (Wilkins, 2019, 3), which has its roots in the realist-sincere movement of the New Hollywood era. American eccentricity evolved in the late 1990s, involving writers and directors such as Sofia Coppola, Wes Anderson, Paul Thomas Anderson, and Charlie Kaufman. The common denominator that connects these artists lies in their approach towards the artistic and ontological issues of the end of the postmodern condition. Thus, their attempts can be closely linked to movements such as New Sincerity and post-postmodernism, which appeared around the same time. These movements situate postmodern concepts, such as irony and parody in a renewed

conceptual framework. In this context, the main quest of the artist lies in their pursuit of sincerity. Concerning New Sincerity, David Foster Wallace's 1993 essay "*E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction*" is regularly viewed as an "early manifesto" (Kelly, 2016, 198) for the movement. 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, 1993, 183–184). Arguably, 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, Jean Baudrillard defines this liberated state as "the game is over" (Baudrillard, 1989, 182), emphasizing that art has been stuck in the variety of forms and themes, resulting in the recycling of content and style. In response to this postmodern condition, New Sincerity and post-postmodernism have expressed a desire for sincerity in what Baudrillard defines as the state of hyperrealism. However, they have not rejected irony as a tool: "rather, irony is employed with sincerity" (Wilkins, 2019, 9) to express the need for introspection and the exploration of existential dread.

This also manifests in the world of American eccentric cinema, which creates a common ground for the New Hollywood tradition, contemporary mainstream Hollywood filmmaking trends, and independent cinematic endeavors. Arguably, the work of Charlie Kaufman occupies a special position in this cinematic universe: his films rely heavily on surreal, dream-like imagery to express the ultimate desire for meaning and introspection. The main themes in his oeuvre – e.g. in films such as *Adaptation* (2002) and *Being John Malkovich* (1999) – could be summarized as the relationship between art and artist, the connection between role and actor, and the exploration of the liminal space between reality and fiction. These themes are universally represented in Kaufman's directorial debut *Synecdoche, New York* (2008). The protagonist Caden Cotard is a middle-aged theater director in Schenectady, New York, who works 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 over staging adaptations 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 Miller's play, 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 Caden's daughter 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 aim of this study is to examine the ways *Synecdoche, New York* explores the quest for meaning and sincerity in a hyperreal world using art. The analysis will begin by the examination of Baudrillard's thesis on hyperrealism and simulation. This

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will lead to the ways in which post-postmodernism and American eccentricity reflect on
the manifestations of the simulated condition. The examination will continue by the
exploration of the metafictional elements represented in Caden's magnum opus, and
lastly, it will touch on the character of Caden, the struggling artist and his approach
towards the thought of death, the main motivator behind his actions. This concept will
be explored through the narrative and visual analysis of three death-related scenes
from *Synecdoche, New York*.

Hyperrealism and Sincerity

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 (Kellner, 2020). He marks the end of modernism, a paradigm shift
also expressed in Jean-François Lyotard's seminal work *The Postmodern Condition: A
Report on Knowledge* from 1979. Baudrillard further elaborates on this idea in *Simulacra and
Simulation* (1981), where he introduces the notion of hyperrealism with a short story by
Jorge Luis Borges (Baudrillard, 1994, 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 creates matrices
that are the replicas of each other. This excessive copying legitimates the state of
hyperrealism. Baudrillard notes that "the simulacrum is never that which conceals the
truth – it is the truth which conceals that there is none. The simulacrum is true"
(Baudrillard, 1994, 1).

According to Gratton (2020), the postmodern thought was first defined by Lyotard,
without whom the work of Baudrillard cannot be discussed. The oft-quoted passage
from *The Postmodern Condition* describes a ubiquitous "incredulity toward
metanarratives" (Lyotard, 1984, xxiii–xxiv), a general distrust towards all-pervading
explanations. Thus, postmodernism produces fragmented *petits récits* or little narratives,
focusing on individualized understandings instead of overarching ones. This notion is
intensified in the Baudrillardian hyperreal: here, each narrative is questioned, be it
grand or little. Since the tangible reality-base of these narratives ceases to exist, the
connection between the Saussurean signifier-signified becomes lost by simulation. 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 once believed to be reality cannot be
restored "beneath the simulacrum" (Baudrillard, 1994, 27).

Arguably, one of the most crucial tools with which postmodernism responded to the invalidation of metanarratives is irony. Irony presumes an external, "game-playing" (Doyle, 2018, 259) position where the emphasis on compassion is often minimalized or even excluded. In the wake of postmodernism, the aesthetics of New Sincerity expressed a disillusioned approach towards postmodern irony and 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. […] Real rebels, as far as I can see, risk disapproval. […] 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, 1993, 192–193)

In "*E Unibus Pluram*", Wallace proposes the need for a shift from "ironic watching" to truth, sincerity, and credulity. He maintains that the new direction for literature is the employment of vulnerability instead of the distant attitude of irony. However, irony cannot be discarded entirely: according to Wilkins, "irony and sincerity are enmeshed and entangled" (Wilkins, 2019, 23) within New Sincerity. The movement acknowledges that its goals cannot be achieved with the same act of liberation that 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. 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 the fear of death. As is the case with New Sincerity, American eccentricity does not totally dismiss postmodern attributes either. The joint use of irony and sincerity, however, is not specific to the American eccentric cinema in the history of American motion picture: the New Hollywood era produced several works that portray contemporary American anxiety through the amalgam of irony and sincerity. Wilkins mentions Terrence Mallick's *Badlands* from 1973, but the young adult satire *Heathers* (1989) could also be noted (Wilkins, 2019, 41). 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.

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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, and further enhance the "precession of simulacra" (Baudrillard, 1994, 1) and the loss of reality in its traditional sense.

To Capture the Uncapturable

Besides the aspects mentioned above, post-postmodernism also reflects on the fragmentary nature of the postmodern state. Arguably, the discursive transition from grand to little narratives is inherently fragmentary. The fragmentation of narratives also extends to the area of language, which is deemed arbitrary and inaccurate in postmodernism. As mentioned before, the Baudrillardian idea of the hyperreal assumes that the connection between the Saussurean language elements cease to exist since the reality of these elements aim to refer to have 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, 2011, 243). Therefore, language is utilized 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. Thus, I suggest that the hyperreal condition also creates a fragmented individual. I argue that one of the aims of New Sincerity, post-postmodernism, 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, 2008a, 212) that aims to portray the life of everyone. As director, he wishes to remain an objective viewer in the process of creation and comprehension. Nonetheless, he cannot be separated from the process of model-creation as he is also part of it. As Richard Deming suggests, "it becomes impossible to get outside what one is trying to represent" (Deming, 2011, 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. [...] 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 [...], 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. (Guillen, 2008)

According to Deming, the exploration of the liminal and inaccessible space before articulation showcases Caden's "own blindness to his limitations" (Deming, 2011, 204). However, both Caden and Kaufman continue their pursuit to grab the image before its representation appears. This suggests that in this artistic framework, the struggle to precede the thought, to look behind the mirror is what defines human existence.

Synecdoche, New York also thematizes the issues surrounding language. This is most noticeable in Caden's struggle to title his magnum opus. As Caden's relation to himself and others transforms, so do the titles of his play. These titles, then, may represent Caden's difficulty with capturing and encapsulating the essence in a short format. He produces five solutions throughout his creative process, out of which three employ the characteristically postmodern tool of intertextuality. For instance, the second title is a reference to the poem "*The Alchemist*" by Louis Bogan, the third title evokes a line from Geoffrey Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*, and the fifth title pays homage to Wallace Stevens's poem "*The Motive for Metaphor*". 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 the idea of *postmodern originality* lies in the dialogue between intertexts. Regarding the first title *Simulacrum*, the Baudrillardian hyperreal cannot be neglected. According to the *Concise Oxford English Dictionary*, the second meaning of 'simulacrum' can be summarized as "an unsatisfactory imitation or substitute" (Soanes et al., 2008, 1344). This definition can be aligned with Baudrillard's idea of simulacrum: hyperreality – the state of constant simulation – is unsatisfactory as by the overproduction of reality segments, it loses its essence. Caden strives to find this essence and simultaneously create order in the simulacrum.

In Search of the Real Self

Caden's wish to create order is accompanied by his desire to be authentic. Early on, he fails to express the yearning for authentic creation although it is already detectable in his adaptation of *Death of a Salesman*. Here, his conscious use of lighting and his decision to cast young actors instead of middle-aged ones already showcases his need for authenticity. After the premiere, he seems fairly satisfied with the outcome until Adele reflects on it: "I can't get excited about your restaging someone else's old play, it just –

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There's nothing personal in it. […] Great. Be a fucking tool of suburban, blue-haired, regional-theater subscribers. But what are you leaving behind?" (Kaufman, 2008, 21:44). Not only does Adele criticize the notion of adaptation, but she also reminds Caden of his own apprehensions concerning death. This motivates him to "create something unflinchingly true, profoundly beautiful and of unremitting value" (Kaufman, 2008, 35:13). He soon receives the MacArthur grant, which enables him to purchase a dilapidated warehouse in the Theater District of Manhattan, New York City. Caden soon realizes that his magnum opus requires a place that can expand internally. 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 City, 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. Genette distinguishes three narrative (diegetic) levels: 1. the extradiegetic level that represents the outside features of the narrative, e.g. the voice of the narrator, 2. the diegetic level, the primary narrative level, and finally, 3. the metadiegetic level, narrative features embedded in the diegetic level (Genette, 1983, 228). Genette, thus, defines metalepsis as "any intrusion by the extradiegetic narrator or narratee into the diegetic universe" (Genette, 1983, 234–235). However, *Synecdoche, New York* presents a different type of metalepsis: the dialogue 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, 2013). 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. According to Gáncsos (2013), 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, 2008b, 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 '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.

Caden begins the rehearsal of the magnum opus by "talking honestly" (Kaufman, 2008, 39:44) – he implies that a theater piece can only emerge from sincerity and vocal expression. However, as the play progresses, he abandons this method and lets the scenes unfold on their own, observing the system from the outside. Nonetheless, this directorial attitude cannot be sustained: Caden eventually returns to the position of a traditional director, handing out instructions on scraps of paper. These notes support Caden's wish to show the "brutal truth" (Kaufman, 2008, 59:39): they focus on tragedies, feelings of hopelessness, and uncontrollable habits. 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" (Kaufman, 2008, 1:00:07). The appearance of transcendence could be viewed as a play on the metalepsis between the extradiegetic and the diegetic narrative levels. Here, the extradiegetic level is represented by the transcendental messages Caden receives.

Caden's decision to cast a doppelgänger showcases his need for introspection. He hires Sammy Barnathan, a man who has been following him for twenty years. 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. The identity of Caden becomes even more dissected when he takes the job of Adele's cleaning lady Ellen Bascomb. 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. Caden's play never premieres despite its constant evolution for more than fifty years. This element could be viewed as a coexisting state of sincerity and postmodern parody. Caden, the authenticity-striving Romantic genius is faced with the impossibility of his mission. This echoes the film's self-reflective, metafictional frustration as well: Kaufman, the external director of his own magnum opus places himself in the narrative discourse as a subject of parody. Thus, both Kaufman and Caden are asked the question: could a magnum opus answer all questions without simultaneously creating new ones?

The End is Built into the Beginning[1]

As mentioned before, the journey towards introspection is marked by Caden's constant battle with the inevitability of his own death. The opening scene of *Synecdoche* already showcases this coexistence. 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

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[1] See *Synecdoche, New York* 1:37:27.

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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" (Kaufman, 2008, 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. While Caden comes to terms with the reality of aging by observing himself in the mirror, he listens to the poem "*Autumn Day*" by Rainer Maria Rilke broadcast on the radio. During the reading, the camera remains focused on Caden's reflection, yet his blurry movements are also visible in the foreground. The image of Caden's body and the radio morph into each other, 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 bed, and when he finally sits upright, he faces the mirror again. This continuity indicates that for Caden, self-reflection is unavoidable. The duality of the image and the physical self signifies Caden's fractured identity; the act of looking in the mirror entails a sense of identification. This identification repeats itself with each perception. This way, 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 it, to witness the construction of the image.

The next scene to be analyzed directly precedes the burial of Caden's father. 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, 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 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). Caden learns that his father has died of an illness he was not aware of, an ending Caden is terrified of. The camera slowly zooms on his dimly lit face during the monologue, further implying that he deeply identifies with his father's apprehensions and fate.

The last sequence – a set of multiple scenes – to be examined begins when Caden enters the now empty warehouse for the last time. As he walks around his theater, 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 continues his journey to the center, the very first warehouse. The innermost warehouse is covered with plastic wrap: Caden enters through a tear. This could be viewed as a symbolical return to the womb, which culminates in death. Finally,

he arrives at a place where there is only a sofa and an unknown woman, the only living person in the building 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. In terms of cinematography, the last scene recalls the opening. Both scenes feature the exact time, 7:45 AM, emphasizing the cyclicality of life. Furthermore, the last shot – in which Caden dies – employs the technique of fade-out, which is the opposite of the fade-in used in the very first scene. Two types of fade-outs can be distinguished: fade-to-black and fade-to-white (Konigsberg, 1988, 111). In *Synecdoche*, 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. 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. Nevertheless, in the final shot, Caden lays his head on the woman's shoulder: although his world has collapsed, he does not die alone. During the scene, the actress reassures him that she is proud of him. This motivates Caden to declare 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 the 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" (Kaufman, 2008, 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 acknowledging that its very existence is an insurmountable mission. The meaning Caden has been looking for lies in this duality: the realization of the impossibility of achieving complete cognizability leaves the artist with the sincerest option, which is the act of compassion towards humanity amidst the hyperreal condition.

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