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Final Essay

Time, Interpretation and Identity in *Synecdoche New York* (2008)

Charlie Kaufman's magnum opus *Synecdoche New York* (2008) starring the late Philip Seymour Hoffman is one of my favorite films of the last decade. It tells the story of a theater director named Caden Cotard (Philip Seymour Hoffman) who is constantly suffering from numerous physical health ailments, which seems to be severe depression and anxiety, while being neurotically obsessed with the persistent idea that he is dying. These continuous psychological issues begin to alienate his wife Adele (Katherine Keener) and daughter Olive and ultimately they leave him for a new life in Berlin. Suddenly Caden receives an unexpected MacArthur Fellowship which gives him the financial means and artistic freedom to create any project he wants.

Caden gets emotionally invested in a life-long project of constructing an epic and significant theater piece that brutally reflects his own bleak life, keeping it artistically real in its bold, pessimistic and unflinching honesty. While watching *Synecdoche New York* I immediately thought of Federico Fellini's biographical surreal masterpiece *8 1/2*, (1963) as the story of Caden is extremely parallel to the character of Guido, two artists who constantly feel trapped and a prisoner of their own life and profession. There are three fascinating key elements behind the meaning of *Synecdoche New York* which I want to explore throughout this paper. They are 'Time', 'Interpretation', and 'Identity' and I want to use these three key points to explain the meaning behind Kaufman's entrancing and masterful cinematic enigma of a film.

Kaufman frighteningly explores the theme of 'Time' in *Synecdoche New York*, on just how fast time passes us by and moments quickly slip through our fingers. Immediately in the opening breakfast sequence of the film Kaufman brilliantly presents a shot that feels like one day but is really numerous months flying by. For instance, the film starts with the first day of the 22nd of autumn which is essentially the beginning of death. When Caden gets out of bed and goes downstairs to read the newspaper the date on the paper states it is Oct 14th. And yet when he's in the middle of reading the paper it cuts to the date which now says Oct 17th. When Caden gets up to grab the milk carton the date on the carton reads it is Oct 20th. What Kaufman seems to be suggesting is that Caden's mundane domestic life with his wife and daughter is nothing but a meaningless and unfulfilled routine; and they all essentially can blend in as one entire day.

The breakfast-morning sequence also suggests how unhappy Caden and Adele's marriage is and it is quite understandable why Adele eventually chooses to leave him. The next shot shows Caden in his doctor's office and if you observe carefully we now are currently in December as you can see Christmas lights and decorations in the office. When in the car with his family you can hear the New Year's theme on the radio suggesting it is now New Years Eve. When Caden goes to see his eye doctor we can see we are now in March by the calendar presented to us on the right side of the frame. All these different sequences show us that we can't even trust time within the narrative of the film. When Adele leaves him to go to Berlin to become her own artist Caden begins to have a relationship with the box-office girl Hazel (Samantha Moron) and she informs him that he needs to move on because it's been a year since Adele left him. Caden explicitly states that it's only been a week and Hazel says, "I need to buy you a calendar." This suggests that not only can we not trust the time that is flowing within the narrative of this story but we can't even accurately trust the point of view of the main protagonist.

The second theme I want to explore is 'Interpretation' as *Synecdoche New York* is a film full of juxtaposed dreams, memories, fantasies, and existential realities in a cinematic version of the director's own stream of consciousness. Moviegoers have to constantly guess what is real and what is imagined with little help from the director, and almost no one knows for sure what everything truly means simply with just one single viewing. Many critics believed the film was about compartmentalizing people to fulfill certain roles or expectations and Caden later comes to realize people cannot be contained like that. After Adele leaves, Caden remarries a beautiful actress in his cast named Claire (Michelle Williams) and they have a daughter together. Their relationship ultimately deteriorates because not only does Caden suggest that Claire fulfill the role as the compliant and content house-wife, but he seems to still be obsessed with Adele and the location of his first daughter Olive whom he discovers has now become an exotic dancer in Germany. After Clair leaves, Caden continues his awkward relationship with his long-time friend and romantic companion Hazel who is now married with children.

One fascinating interpretation in the film is Olive's symbolic tattoos. In one of the most emotionally excruciating scenes in the film Caden finally reunites with an adult Olive as she is slowly dying in a German hospital. Olive's tattoos are symbolic in that they represent what had been done to her when she was 10 by Maria (Jennifer Jason Leigh), a lesbian lover of hers who was her mother's best friend and who had disturbingly known Olive since she was a child. It's also revealed that Maria had poisoned Olive with these tattoos that she had given her and planted ideas in Olive's head that her father abandoned the family because he wanted to take up a gay lover named Eric. The death-bed scene is the bleakest scene in the entire film, in which Olive wants Caden to apologize for things he never even did to her and when he actually does apologize she in the end still doesn't forgive him. Some critics interpreted this sub-plot as an

interpretation that Caden did in fact have a secret homosexual lifestyle (which would be why Adele took Olive and left him) and that this film is simply a distorted interpretation of a sexually repressed homosexual.

Another interpreted sequence is the yellow house on fire which Hazel knowingly buys. She says to the real estate agent that she's worried she will die in the fire and the agent tells her, "It's a big decision how one prefers to die." Ironically she does die in the house many decades later from smoke inhalation which can be interpreted as Hazel accepting her fate by choosing to live in a burning home. Unlike Caden, instead of running away and being afraid of her death Hazel courageously accepts it. This is also where she meets her future husband Derek who is strangely living in the basement of the home when she moves in. Other symbolic meanings in the film are the tiny paintings that Adele makes while in Berlin. As the film progresses you see Adele's paintings get tinier and tinier, so tiny in fact that one has to use a magnifying glass to actually view them. And yet Caden does the exact opposite with his art, as the scale of his theater project becomes larger and larger, so impossibly gigantic that it becomes a full-size replica of a city all constructed in one enormous warehouse. The interpretation of the size of these art pieces seems to suggest that Caden doubts himself as an artist and lacks the creative skill and determination that Adele embodies, which is why Caden feels the need to continue to expand his theater piece; never successfully completing it.

Many of these surreal, dream-like interpretations can be looked at as obvious metaphors of Caden actually being deceased. After my third time viewing the film I came to a conclusion that Caden committed suicide, probably by a gunshot to the head. The reason for this is the metaphor of the faucet (the gun) and of the water pressure from the faucet pipe (the bullet of the gun) hitting him in the head causing him to bleed profusely. The reason for his suicide was

because of his deteriorating marriage and of Adele and his daughter Olive abandoning him. The rest of the film seems pretty self explanatory: The burning house; the updating child's diary; the endless prize money that supports Caden's theatre project; the massive towering sets of the city which reach the skies and the endless and endless rooms and compartments on top of one another; the psychiatrist's infinite amount of written books in her office and her mysterious appearance on the airplane; the guiding voice in his earpiece which could represent mental illness most obviously schizophrenia; the apocalyptic ending where everyone appears to be dead or incinerated along with the world's healthcare system in rapid decline; and finally the leaf that magically falls off dying Olive's tattoo. All these things are extremely fantastical, inexplicable and purely not possible in the realm of the living world.

The third theme is 'Identity' as the character of Sammie (Tom Noonan) never seemed to have one of his own. When he is introduced the only real thing we get to learn about his character is that he is clearly obsessed with Caden and Caden's tormented life. Sammie actually appears four times earlier in the film: When Caden walks out to get the morning newspaper; behind a tree watching Caden and Hazel; when Caden is on a walk with young Olive; and Sammie's distorted shadow watching Caden have sex with his wife Claire. When he finally makes his official appearance in the story it is when Caden is having a casting audition looking for an actor to play himself. Sammie arrives and tells Caden he's been following him for twenty years stating that sometimes a person from the outside can understand you better than you can understand yourself. In many ways Sammie is less like Caden's guardian angel and more like his external conscious, because Sammie will call out things that Caden is thinking and wants to say but is simply too afraid to. When Sammie gets the part of Caden he essentially takes over Caden's identity by walking in the shoes of the man he has been constantly obsessed with for

several years. But eventually he meshes with him so much that Sammie, like Caden, begins to fall in love with Hazel. Since Caden is so caught up with his theater project he doesn't even realize that Hazel has been single for some time now which drives Hazel closer to Sammie. When Caden finally realizes this he quickly wins back Hazel's affections which drives Sammie to commit suicide by jumping off one of the set's artificial buildings. Throughout the film Caden will hire on many more doppelgänger's that will fulfill the roles of Adele, Sammie, Claire and Hazel (Emily Watson); all the people that had an important role or made a powerful impression throughout Caden's life, which takes the story in a more abstract and surreal direction.

Earlier in the film when a younger Caden first discovered that Hazel gotten happily married and had children Caden attempts suicide by trying to jump off a building but is immediately rescued by a stranger. And so when Sammie eventually does it and succeeds later in the film it projects a powerful image on how art can imitate life. What's truly disturbing about Sammie's suicide sequence is that Caden's reaction to his friend's death is so full of coldness, arrogance and self-centeredness. Instead of being shocked and saddened by this tragedy Caden instead remains in the role of the director and shouts over Sammie's dead body, "I didn't jump Sammie. A man stopped me before I jumped, now get up!" Caden has such a selfish and narcissistic ego that he seems more worried that Sammie actually broke character than the actual reality of his friend's tragic death.

With the introduction of all the different doppelgänger's who impersonate all the major players of the story, the meshing of identities can ultimately get confusing. The blurring of the line of the roles we play and who we really are begin to get skewed and it becomes difficult to separate the person playing the role or the character they are impersonating. It gets more surreal when Caden takes on the identity of a cleaning lady named Ellen who is supposedly cleaning his

ex-wife Adele's apartment. In many ways Caden gets a key to enter back into Adele's life which gives him the chance to be closer to his old life. Interestingly enough the door of Adele's room is titled 'Capgras' which is a delusional disease that suggests that all of your friends are imposters. Later in the film Caden eventually casts the character of Ellen (Dianne Wiest) and for some inexplicable reason the gender roles between the two of them reverse and Ellen begins to take on Caden's directorial role, while Caden takes on her role. The two of them merge together metaphysically and Ellen's childhood memories become Caden's. At the climax of the film Ellen slowly directs Caden towards his inevitable death in what looks to be a post-apocalyptic world of obliteration and destruction, all through an audio earpiece.

Synecdoche New York brilliantly explores the struggles involved in the creative process of movie making, both technical and personal, and the fears, lusts, guilt and doubts all artists face when expected to deliver something personal and profound, on a constricted schedule, while simultaneously having to deal with the regrets of their own personal failures. It is, in a larger sense, about finding true personal happiness and purpose in a difficult, fragmented life. With the abstract visuals of juxtaposed dreams and hallucinations, existential fears on aging, sickness and death and the repressed jungles of the Freudian; *Synecdoche New York* expresses parallels that life imitates art within a nihilistic godforsaken universe. I still stick by my suicide theory and believe *Synecdoche New York* is essentially Caden's own allegorical Dante's Inferno and purgatory, presenting all the hopes and dreams Caden always dreamed of wanting but unfortunately never had. But the most revealing moment that supports my deceased theory is the sequence where the psychiatrist mentions a book written by a 4 year old who had committed suicide. When Caden asks her why the child did it the psychiatrist says to him, "Why did you?"