

SYNECDOCHE, NEW YORK
Directed by Charlie Kaufman

“The surface may daunt you. The depths enfold you. The whole reveals itself, and then you may return to it like a talisman.” – Roger Ebert

Exploring the life of the mind, its complex inner tickings, is a tough row to hoe cinematically, but writer-turned-director Charlie Kaufman has made a career out of mining that insular subject for a profoundly moving communal experience. “With SYNECDOCHE, NEW YORK I was trying to make a movie that reflected the interior life of a person,” he explained in a 2008 Time Out interview. “There’s so much stuff going on in your brain every moment of your existence, there are so many things that you’re thinking about, things that you’re seeing, reflections on your past and anxiety about your future.”

In his directorial debut, SYNECDOCHE, NEW YORK, Kaufman funnels “so much stuff” into an epic telling of 50 years in the life of a playwright and director named Caden Cotard (Philip Seymour Hoffman). Early in the film, the middle-aged Caden receives a MacArthur “genius” grant. He uses the money to mount an ongoing theatre piece that is shaped from his own life and rewritten on the fly to accommodate every new contour to his life’s landscape – marriage collapse, health crises, the birth of a child, the death of a parent, and so on. As years go by, the production gets larger, more unruly, and Caden discovers the problem with trying to reflect life as it happens: The only truly fitting curtain fall will be his own death. (We’ll get to that.)

All of Kaufman’s scripts in one way or another have tangled with the interior life. Consider the dissatisfied puppeteer who discovers new possibilities in a portal into another’s consciousness (BEING JOHN MALKOVICH); the game show host who invents a shadow life as a spy (CONFESSIONS OF A DANGEROUS MIND); the quiet illustrator at war with his own mind to preserve cherished memories (ETERNAL SUNSHINE OF THE SPOTLESS MIND); and the screenwriter so flummoxed by a writing assignment that he spins fact into spectacular fiction and writes himself into the story (ADAPTATION).

SYNECDOCHE, NEW YORK continues Kaufman’s interest in the creative struggle to make something meaningful, of lasting value. The project was initially pitched as a horror film to be written by Kaufman and directed by Spike Jonze, but Jonze got held up with work on 2009’s WHERE THE WILD THINGS ARE, so Kaufman took over the reins. He says he was never interested in boilerplate horror tropes (“that sort of genre crap”), and the film eventually evolved into a darkly comic drama, or a dramatic dark comedy – take your pick. Its latent horror is harvested from the mundane (or eternal, universal) laundry list of, as Kaufman puts it, “illness, fear of death, loneliness, lack of meaning in life, guilt, passage of time.”

Kaufman's movies aren't just about the inner workings of the mind; they're also about creative expression. But then the two – thought and creativity – are inextricably intertwined, aren't they? His haters call him an elitist – Rex Reed, in his mind-blowingly off-base 2008 review for *The New York Observer* wrote that "I have hated every incomprehensible bucket of pretentious, idiot swill ever written by this cinematic drawbridge troll" – but I'd venture Kaufman's entire body of work is one long populist argument that everyone with a brain is a creative person, or at least has the capacity to be one. I guess one man's "pretentious, idiot swill" may be interpreted by another as a powerfully soulful attempt to understand what it means to be a human, artistic being. (Tomato, tomata?)

On first watch, the density of the thing is overwhelming. Kaufman embeds wordplay throughout: The title – sounds like "Schenectady" – is a figure of speech in which a part is subbed for a whole, or the whole for a part (the play for a man's life? one man's inner search for the whole of human experience?); Caden Cotard's name hat tips the Cotard delusion, a mental disorder in which the sufferer is convinced he's already dead; and another surname, only glanced at, references something called the Capgras syndrome, in which a person is convinced his friends and family have been replaced by impostors. Kaufman plays fast and loose with timing, too: The opening sequence seems to chronicle a single morning, until you start to notice the subtle time stamps throughout and realize whole days and even months are whizzing by. (Life moves fast – and so very slowly.) And then there are the bewildering visuals: a tattoo of a flower that wilts real petals, a house forever engulfed in flames. All of the films in our *Creatives in Crisis* series have involved fantasy sequences, but *SYNECDOCHE, NEW YORK* is notable for how completely it collapses the distinction between real life and dream. Actually, "dream" is a misnomer. What Kaufman is getting at with this at-first-glance befuddling imagery is a concrete expression of intangible anxiety: The literal blood poisoning and figurative mental poisoning of a dying woman is manifest in the symbolic shedding of her toxic tattoo, while Hazel, Caden's inamorata and a prospective home owner (played by Samantha Morton), sensibly assesses a house on fire (she worries she'll die of smoke inhalation) and decides it's worth the risk. Or, more aptly, she embraces her fate in a way that the death-obsessed Caden cannot.

Caden suffers no end of mysterious ailments that send him, somewhat comically, to a small army of -ists he keeps confusing (ophthalmologist, urologist, neurologist); he's so busy anticipating his death that he sometimes forgets to live in the now. In a moment of insight, he says, "We're all hurtling towards death, yet here we are for the moment, alive. Each of us knowing we're going to die, each of us secretly believing we won't." But *SYNECDOCHE*'s epiphanies don't triumph in a third-act, *carpe diem* yawp. I'm hesitant to argue a definitive reading of the film (Kaufman has been quite vocal that the movie means whatever you want it to mean, so stop asking questions), but for me, its most stirring conclusion is that there are no small stories. Every bit player, every walk-on, has his or her own story to tell – anathema to the traditional Hollywood hero's journey – and their stories are just as worthy as the so-called hero's.

In the introduction to the published shooting script of the film, Kaufman writes: "Each of

us in our own mind is the center of the universe, and everything falls of in direct relation to its proximity or importance to us. But if you move to the periphery of your own existence, you find it to be the center of someone else's. ... It's a weird and daunting experience to let other people in their fullness into our minds. It is so much easier to see them as serving a purpose in our own lives."

Caden has devoted his life's work to the artistic expression of his own wants, needs, neuroses, and heartaches. It's only as his clock ticks down that he awakens to the periphery, divines that there is the same fullness of sensation and desire in everyone else's life. In his last moments, Caden cedes control of the production to one of his actors (played by Dianne Wiest). She will direct, and he will take over her small part as a cleaning lady. The demoted, diminished Caden takes his director's cues from an earpiece. As he wanders through the apocalypse-scape of his city-stage, strewn with dead bodies, rubble, and army tanks (the production has collapsed without him), Caden sincerely embraces the headspace of another person: her wants, her needs, her neuroses and heartaches. Obsessive self-reflection is replaced by compassionate connection to another's experience. Life that once whizzed by is now clocked by the minute, and becomes more precious for it. There's little sound but for the voice in Caden's ear. Her final directive: "Die." And so he does. But he doesn't die alone: There's that voice in his ear, and the audience, too, exhaling together as one.

SOURCES:

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"Interpreting Synecdoche, New York." Video essay by Amy Nicholson (*L.A. Weekly*) and David Chen (*Slash Film*). Feb. 5, 2014.

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