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**"Constructing Charlie Kaufman"**  
**- A Study of Kaufman's Postmodern Poetics**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Film critics have characterized screenwriter and film director Charlie Kaufman with various labels such as 'American Eccentric', 'the New Fantastic' and 'anarchist' which all attempt to group together independent, contemporary American writers and filmmakers. Derek Hill along with several other critics place Charlie Kaufman within the context of directors such as Richard Linklater, David O. Russell, Wes Anderson, Spike Jonze, Sofia Coppola and Michel Gondry, and Hill discusses whether or not these filmmakers form 'An American New Wave' (Hill 2008: 11-36). While the mentioned directors do not have a common manifesto, which links them together, the American New Wave films do share several unifying trends and themes:

"Highly idiosyncratic yet intricately realised, accessible yet willing to overthrow the constraints of formal storytelling, surreal yet always grounded in human emotions, this new breed of American film captures the angst of its characters and the times in which we live, but with a wryness, imagination, earnestness, irony, and stylish wit that makes the slide into existential despair a little more amusing than it should be." (Ibid.: 35)

Although it might be true that the filmmakers share these themes, they are, however, also considered independent, and it becomes somewhat arbitrary to place them within one specific movement. Repeatedly, Kaufman rejects being labeled as belonging to one specific school, genre or style. It is, however, obvious that Kaufman has a unique voice and style both as screenwriter and director as evident from his works. In this way, Kaufman creates a specific artistic identity as unconventional within the Hollywood industry. Due to this, he holds an exclusive position as screenwriter since he is credited as the maker of the film<sup>1</sup> – a position otherwise reserved for the director. This attests to the strong Kaufmanesque voice which makes him an interesting artist and therefore the focus of this thesis.

Kaufman's new film *Synecdoche, New York* is his directorial debut which, however, has not won the same recognition as his earlier films such as *Being John Malkovich*, *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* and *Adaptation*. Nevertheless, *SNY*<sup>2</sup> testifies to Kaufman's specific style and adds to the idea that Kaufman has a specific artistic agenda as pointed out by his consistent focus on and discussion of the role of the artist and the process of creating art. This process becomes allegorical to the process of constructing and performing one's reality and self manifested through *SNY*'s main character Caden Cotard's massive play, which is an in-the-moment dramatization of his own life. Also the one-to-one play on Caden's life, taking place on a set which is an exact replica of a part of New

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<sup>1</sup> In 2004 Kaufman shared an Academy Award with Michel Gondry and Pierre Bismuth for the screenplay of *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*.

<sup>2</sup> We will refer to *Synecdoche, New York* as *SNY* throughout this thesis.

York, illustrates the synecdoche-theme<sup>3</sup>, which of course is pointed out by the title of the film. The synecdoche theme functions on many levels as for instance in the discussion of the relationship between individual and the world and art and reality. Kaufman discusses the role of authenticity through Caden's desire for creating an authentic, original and honest piece of art, ideals which Caden strives towards in his life in general. Caden's never-ending struggle to fulfill his artistic vision testifies both to the metafictional discussion of the process of creating art and to the inevitable human struggle with life. Through Caden's personal apocalypse the film can be characterized as a tale about the human condition in a postmodern world. Kaufman explores the existential themes of loneliness, sickness, death, love and interrelations in relation to the constructedness of reality and self that characterizes the postmodern condition.

The formal structures of *SNY* point towards Kaufman's general intention of creating representations of alternative realities through his films. Kaufman employs an excessive use of postmodern techniques such as the fragmented formal structure due to the extreme amount of shifts between scenes, metafiction, parody and the dissolving boundaries between real and imaginary. This formal structure together with the surreal, absurd and fantastic elements create his alternative reality and support his unique artistic style. The contrast between the experimenting and exaggerated formal style and the serious, familiar existential themes defines Kaufman's style and with this artistic agenda his works become a contradiction to a more dominating interpretation of postmodern art as recycling and imitating former works of art with the sole purpose of deconstruction. Therefore, it is relevant to consider whether Kaufman moves beyond the more typical postmodern film.

Due to this, it becomes interesting to explore Kaufman's artistic agenda and what can be termed his postmodern poetics. Kaufman's poetics is highly relevant to discuss since he challenges the established meaning and power structures within film and artistic representation in general. Through innovative and demanding narrative structures, he encourages his audience to become interpreters who actively communicate with and respond to his works. In this master thesis, we will work from the following problem formulation in the exploration of Kaufman's artistic agenda:

With special reference to the film *Synecdoche, New York*, this thesis is a study of Charlie Kaufman's postmodern poetics as they are laid out in his work. In this relation, we will adopt

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<sup>3</sup> The term 'synecdoche' is a figure of speech in which a part represents a whole or a whole represents a part, like e.g. wheels for car, or society for high society (Britannica Online Encyclopædia).

the idea that Kaufman's work moves beyond what can be termed a conventional postmodern tradition.

In the first section of this thesis we will piece together what we call Kaufman's Postmodern Art Manifesto and discuss his cultural identity and artistic agenda. By exploring Kaufman's artistic position through his own statements, his use of paratexts in relation to his art and his authorial function, it becomes possible to map out and discuss Kaufman's art manifesto. This manifesto will be useful in the analysis of *SNY* to support the interpretation of Kaufman's postmodern poetics. The second section of the thesis will include introductions to and discussions of selected postmodern theories and existentialist philosophical ideas relevant to Kaufman's works in general and *SNY* in particular. In these theory sections we will include examples from *Being John Malkovich*, *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*<sup>4</sup>, *Adaptation* and *Synecdoche, New York* to discuss Kaufman's position in relation to the theories presented. The third main section will present a thorough analysis of *SNY*, focusing on the main themes both in relation to form and contents. In the analysis we will apply the postmodern theory and existentialist philosophy presented in the previous sections while relating this to Kaufman's art manifesto. Finally, we will include a discussion section which will compare and relate the three main sections to each other in order to discuss and conclude on what we find to be Kaufman's postmodern poetics.

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<sup>4</sup> We will refer to *Being John Malkovich* as *BJM* and *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* as *Eternal Sunshine*.

## **APPROACHING CHARLIE KAUFMAN**

Charlie Kaufman uses numerous metafictional techniques in his works which centralize the role of art and the artist. In *SNY* Kaufman illustrates an artist's struggle in the process of creating art. With such metafictional references, Kaufman points to the roles of art and the artist and thereby his own position as an artist becomes interesting. Following this elicitation, it becomes relevant what he expresses about being an artist, what he communicates about his art and about the world that receives his work. Due to his constant focus on the artist's creative process, the task of approaching a broader understanding of Kaufman's often layered works must necessarily involve an investigation of what he communicates. Hereby it becomes important to consider what Kaufman expresses through his works but also through the paratexts and other surrounding texts which reveal his artistic agenda. In this light, the following will attempt to piece together what we can call Kaufman's postmodern art manifesto built on interviews, introductions and other material. Also this section will deal with the cultural and authorial identities of Charlie Kaufman since these are important contributions to an understanding of Kaufman as an artist and what we outline to be his art manifesto.

### **KAUFMAN'S POSTMODERN ART MANIFESTO**

First it seems in order to point out why we classify Kaufman's manifesto as postmodern. This is due to the fact that Kaufman's scripts display a heavy use of typical postmodern features, such as metafiction, intertextuality and the breakdown of conventional structures, shown with for instance the blurry distinctions between reality and fiction. The somewhat exaggerated focus on the play, actors, understudies, production and not least the artist in *SNY* becomes a comment on the act of producing fiction which shows how Kaufman is creating metafictional references in *SNY* (cf. 'Summary of *Synecdoche, New York*'). The way Kaufman uses postmodern elements almost erases the lines between reality and fiction in the frame of the film. As the following sections will show in greater detail, Kaufman makes substantial use of postmodern trends and often to such an extent that it leans towards something that goes beyond the postmodern tradition. In this regard, Jesse Fox Mayshark points out that figures like Kaufman use "[postmodernism] as a starting point rather than a conclusion" (Mayshark 2007: 6) which complies with the idea that postmodern features are very prominent and evident in Kaufman's work.

Kaufman shares certain characteristics with other postmodern filmmakers, as for instance the screenwriter and film director, Quentin Tarantino. Nevertheless, Kaufman seems to have a somewhat different aim with his art. The use of elements like metafiction, intertextuality and an experimenting style can be seen in for instance Tarantino's *Natural*

*Born Killers* and in *Pulp Fiction*<sup>5</sup>. *Pulp Fiction* demonstrates a substantial use of metafictional techniques and intertextuality and it is very playful in its form since it is told antichronologically. According to Mayshark, Tarantino's aim with *Pulp Fiction* was to create an awareness of the construction itself, since it reminded "the audience that it was an audience, watching a movie" (Mayshark 2007: 2). Mayshark also writes that "Tarantino was relying on his viewers' shared assimilation of pop culture as starting point for riffs that were not really about story or characters so much as they were about pop culture itself. [...] the form became the content" (Ibid.). In spite of the fact that some common features between Kaufman's and Tarantino's styles appear in their use of postmodern techniques<sup>6</sup>, it seems that Kaufman does not comply with the idea that form actually becomes content. The form of Kaufman's work is, nevertheless, also essential since it supports the content of his films. Mayshark points out that *Pulp Fiction* "was ultimately a movie about movies" and that a later group of postmodern directors including Kaufman "found ways to reveal something more than the workings of their own clever construction" (Ibid.: 5). Hereby, it is implied that Kaufman wants something more with his art than just complying with a postmodern tradition. Kaufman and the directors which Mayshark refers to "take deconstructionism as a given, and redirect its analytical toolkit toward something more holistic; reconstructionism, maybe" (Ibid.: 6). In this thesis, we will look into what Kaufman says about his art and thereby discuss whether he moves beyond conventional postmodern tradition, as Mayshark seems to indicate.

As a means of discovering what it is Kaufman wants to communicate in his postmodern wrapping, clues are given various places, as for instance in the introduction to the published Shooting Script of *SNY*. Here Kaufman points out that there is a connection between him as an artist and the receivers of his texts. With the use of the metafictional technique of frame-breaking, which will be defined in 'Between Reality and Fiction: Metafiction', Kaufman creates a recurrent focus on art and the process of creating art. This element is something he takes all the way and seems to never let go of. In the introduction to the script of *SNY* he incorporates himself and his aversions about writing the introduction: "They want me to write an introduction to this thing. They're pestering me. [...] I'm not motivated and a little pissy" (Kaufman 2008: vii). In a very humorous manner Kaufman hereby makes the reader aware of the process of writing, which may lead one's thoughts to his screenplay for *Adaptation* where the fictive Charlie Kaufman does exactly the same. Not

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<sup>5</sup> *Natural Born Killers* is directed by Oliver Stone, while *Pulp Fiction* is directed by Tarantino himself.

<sup>6</sup> To give a few examples, Kaufman uses intertextuality with for instance the character Kaufman, Robert McKee and Susan Orlean in *Adaptation* and John Malkovich in *Being John Malkovich*. Furthermore, he frequently uses metafictional techniques in *SNY* and *Adaptation*. Finally, he tells *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* antichronologically.



only does Kaufman incorporate himself, he also addresses the reader directly: "...they have the idea that I really need to explain in an introduction why I chose to publish this version of the screenplay, the one in the book you're holding, if anyone is holding this. Is anyone holding this?" (Kaufman 2008: iv). By making himself and the reader visible and by his humorous complaints, he makes this introduction somewhat "alive". Not only can this be seen as a deliberate focus on the act of writing, also it may be perceived as an honest introduction. For instance, Kaufman points out that he does not get paid for writing it, and that he does not find it interesting since "nobody buys these things and nobody reads these things" (Ibid.: vii-viii). He seems to manifest himself as someone who tells the truth. What becomes the turning point of his mood in the introduction is when he incorporates a letter from Keith, who asked Kaufman to write the introduction. Of course, Keith may be a fictional character just as Charlie Kaufman's fictional brother Donald Kaufman, who is credited as co-writer on *Adaptation*. On Kaufman's request, Keith writes a letter about his life. This letter leads to following insight: "...if I try to broaden my view of the world, which I just did, I realize that every moment I exist as me, Keith exists as Keith. He is not the occasional letter in my e-mail box" (Ibid.: viii-ix). This realization, spontaneous as it may seem, becomes the whole point of the introduction since it leads Kaufman to discuss the relationship between human beings. He uses the example with Keith to show how we usually consider other people as only being peripheral to our own lives. So when Kaufman includes himself and the reader in the introduction in a very obvious and playful way, he suggests that in art, as well as in real life, human beings collide. The receivers of his works are not only irrelevant and peripheral persons and it is suggested that Kaufman wants to deliver works that interact with and move the receiver. The receiver will with his or her individual perspective add something new to the work and as Kaufman says: "I try to keep it kind of like a conversation with the audience" (Kaufman 2007a). Exactly this interaction seems important to Kaufman and part of his agenda with his art.

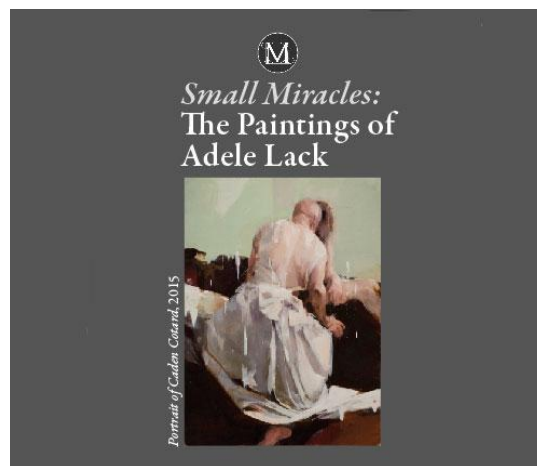
"Maybe it's easier to see people as peripheral. Maybe that's why we do it. It's a weird and daunting experience to let other people in their fullness into our minds. It is so much easier to see them as serving a purpose in our own lives. In any event, this somehow seems to lead me to some of the things explored in the screenplay that you, imaginary person, are holding in your hands right now. And the relentlessly experienced life of yours that has brought you to this book at this time will now perhaps interact with the relentlessly experienced life of mine as it is represented by this script. I hope we recognize each other" (Kaufman 2008: xi)

Here Kaufman points out how interaction between artist and audience is important since it illustrates how we are brought together by art which functions as an interaction with life. In this relation Kaufman's mixing of fact and fiction is relevant since it also illustrates how the

construction of fiction is parallel with the construction of our lives and how fact and fiction can be difficult to separate in real life as well as in Kaufman's works.

## **KAUFMAN MIXING FACT & FICTION**

In relation to the idea of interacting with the audience, Kaufman approached this in a rather unconventional way right before the American premier of *SNY*. Kaufman chose to announce the display of the following:



### **Small Miracles: The Paintings of Adele Lack**

**Private Opening Reception: Tuesday, October 21, 2008 7-11pm**

This display shows how Kaufman engages in blurring the lines between fact and fiction outside his films. He uses a well-known postmodern element of transgressing conventions in relation to what is real and what is imaginary in order to set forward a specific idea. In this case, he communicates that reality and fiction to some extent cannot be separated; they are both representations of the world. On [www.beingcharliekaufman.com](http://www.beingcharliekaufman.com) there is a link to the site about Adele Lack's paintings and different writings about the display can be found several places on the internet. There is even a little 'Artist Bio' to be found describing Adele Lack:

**"Artist Bio:** Adele Lack (1965- ) was born in New York. Her first major show would not be until she reached the age of 41 when she would first bring her work to Berlin. Lack's paintings were once again on display for her next major show at Kunst Galerie. Adele Lack: Anstriche consisted of one inch paintings where visitors were given magnifying glasses to fully see the details of the paintings. Her innovations in scale and content have proven her to be an important contemporary artist." (<http://flux.net/small-miracles-the-paintings-of-adele-lack-los-angeles>)

This is of course interesting in the aspect that Adele Lack only exists as a fictive character, namely Caden Cotard's wife, in Kaufman's *SNY*. It is clearly suggested on these web sites that Adele Lack exists and that it is her paintings being displayed and it demands an effort of those coming across this display to find out if she really exists. Kaufman mixes fact with fiction and confuses the receiver in order to raise questions about the nature of reality and David L. Ulin also points to this in his article 'Why Charlie Kaufman Is Us' from L.A. Times:

"This is a subjective era, when every story is fluid, every truth—political, personal, cultural, historical—is up for grabs. We're no longer certain even of the line between fact and fiction, actual and imaginary. For Kaufman, this is a defining issue. From John Malkovich to Susan Orlean to (yes) Charlie Kaufman, his films are full of real people in unreal situations, which raises fundamental questions about the nature of reality itself." (Ulin 2006)

The relationships between real and imaginary, fact and fiction play a crucial role in Kaufman's works, which is also captured by the quote above. Therefore, these relationships become defining in terms of coining Kaufman's Postmodern Art Manifesto and something we will discuss continually throughout this thesis. In more than one wrapping Kaufman puts forward questions about what are real constructions and what are not and thematizes the difficulty of determining the difference between these oppositions. For instance, the fictive Adele Lack's paintings may touch a person who is not aware that the real artist's name is Alex Kanvevsky (Kaufman 2008: 159) – but would it matter as long as it has touched that person? This raises the question about the importance of the artist's role. How does knowing the artist affect the receiver's understanding of a given piece of art? Does this understanding change when finding out that it is Alex Kanvevsky's paintings and not Adele Lack's? We will return to this discussion of the artist's role in 'Tasteful Branding or a Revival of the Author?'.

Another example of the mixing between fact and fiction is the before mentioned fact that the authorship of the screenplay for *Adaptation* was not only credited to Charlie Kaufman but also to Donald Kaufman, the fictive twin brother of the fictive Charlie Kaufman in *Adaptation*. About this Kaufman says:

"Donald's existence or non-existence is something that we don't want to address because the movie is credited to Charlie and Donald. That is an important element in understanding the movie. What happens in the movie is tied to that fact. To say Donald's a creation of mine is something I don't want to do. We're presenting this movie as written by Charlie and Donald." (Murray and Topel)

It is almost as if Kaufman insists that fact and fiction must be interwoven. In Kaufman's works it is difficult to separate fact from fiction, which can be said to apply in real life as well. In the before mentioned article from L. A. Times Susan Orlean comments on the fact that Kaufman wrote a fictitious story about her instead of adapting her book: "It's interesting that he likes to interweave fact and fiction [...] but it's also a very modern issue, since we live in a culture

where we seem to have some confusion about what is truth and what is invention, where you can invent yourself in any number of ways” (Ulin 2006). Here Orlean points out that when inventing oneself both fact and fiction play a role. For example fictitious stories will have grounds in something real whereas our real life can be somewhat staged from ideas brought to us by fiction. Thereby it can be difficult to determine what comes first and what is in actual fact real or fictitious. A fictitious representation of something real can outdo real life and blur our expectations to real life. It seems as if Charlie Kaufman wants to do away with this idea and contribute to the illustration of something real with his art. About *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, he says:

“I tried to make a movie that was truthful to me about relationships because I’ve seen so many movies that have been so damaging to me. They’re lovely but then you go into your real existence and they’re not recognizable so you feel *less than*. You long for something that isn’t even really true. It’s always been my goal to be honest in my way that maybe would give someone else solace.” (Guillen 2008)

Kaufman implies that he wants to deconstruct the agenda of the Hollywood cinema, which may actually be damaging to you, and reconstruct something real and honest with his art. He indicates that he wants art to make one think and feel something real. In one aspect this illustration of something real may seem somewhat odd since his movies at times illustrate dream logic and confusion about fact and fiction connoting the more “unreal” or surreal to the viewer. However, this highly fictitious and unconventional wrapping draws attention to the recognizable elements in his films, such as love, relationships, existential crises, the process of creating meaning in one’s life and the issue of death. These elements, as demonstrated with Kaufman’s characters, are some which the viewer can easily relate to even though the wrapping of the films may seem somewhat alien. Kaufman says:

“I take [my characters] seriously. And no matter how outlandish or weird their situation, their situation is real and a little tragic. I think that’s what gives people something to hang onto as they watch the film. We had to find a way to make everything play on a very naturalistic level, so it didn’t just turn into wackiness. I’m not interested in getting crazier and crazier.” (Sragow 1999)

Kaufman also points out in an interview about *SNY* that “...if you look at the movie like a dream—which is kind of how I thought it—things can happen that are not naturalistic in a dream, but they’ve got emotional resonance” (Kaufman 2008: 142). This attests to the idea that even though what happens in Kaufman’s films does not directly represent something “real” it may evoke something real. For instance, the character Hazel in *SNY* lives in a burning house about which Kaufman says: “if you don’t know why Hazel lives in a burning house, you might still be able to feel something because of it” (Ibid.). Hereby, Kaufman’s idea of the real is brought forward in more than one way. He wants to illustrate something real and

honest which may be situations, feelings, dreams or maybe just trigger a “real” reaction or association in the audience.

## **THE PHILOSOPHICAL KAUFMAN: THE CONNECTEDNESS**

About SNY Kaufman points out: “I’m trying to let this interaction be personal” (Guillen 2008) and thereby he wants his work to engage with the audience in a personal way, the viewer dragging out specific things which are especially interesting to him or her. The idea of illustrating something that speaks to you is appealing to Kaufman and this point of view sets out what he is trying to do:

“when I read something that speaks to me or makes me feel connected to other beings like, “Oh yes! I feel that or I’ve felt that!” [...] I feel a connectedness to human beings that I don’t normally feel because of the culture that we live in, which commodifies everything and makes things about selling to us, about abusing us, manipulating us, so that other people can make profits.” (Ibid.)

Kaufman distances himself from the commodification of art which the Hollywood film industry is an example of. Typical Hollywood movies are ‘damaging’ in the sense that the specific way of illustrating for instance utopian love stories and happy endings actually contributes to a sense of alienation between fiction and real life. Hollywood films symbolize commodification in the sense that the Hollywood industry aims for a broad audience with the mission of making most profit. As screenwriter and director, Kaufman does not want to take part of this commodification but rather he seems to want to reconstruct the core of what can be felt, what is real and honest, and thereby illustrate something real with his fiction instead of something utopian which may have an alienating effect on the viewer’s sense of reality. The process of getting to this point is, he claims, to some extent based on something intuitive: “The basis is always the emotions [...]. The ideas are in service of that. So, yeah, it is an intuitive process. In this case I thought of images or events that felt emotionally moving to me and I trusted that” (Ibid.). Hereby, Kaufman’s agenda about communicating something honest is put into play. He follows what he feels is real and honest to himself and sets this out to touch his audience: “...it was my goal to sort of try to be honest about something that is part of everyone’s life and then maybe by putting that out in the world, there would be some sort of connection that I could make with other people by speaking about something that we all live with” (Kaufman 2007b). This honesty which Kaufman mentions revolves around basic mutual human life conditions. Kaufman is preoccupied with the idea that our lives as human beings are intertwined and that we share the same premises:

“You start here and you go there. You grow up and you get old and you get sick and you die, and you have your sadnesses and your frustrations and your

loneliness and all of those things. And I guess to me there is a growth in knowing that and recognizing the parallel between your experience and other people's experience, and that there really is, in a larger, philosophical sense, not only a parallel but you really *are* the other person." (Kaufman 2008: 149)

As apparent from Kaufman's works, the theme of connectedness is central. In *SNY*, for instance, his choice to have numerous understudies for one actor each of whom represents a "real" person in the "real" *SNY*-world, mirrors the idea that we are all part of each other's lives and play the same kind of roles in our own lives as others do in theirs; we share the same conditions and it is inevitable that our lives are parallel and similar. Taking this point of view into consideration, it seems that Kaufman has a philosophical message which he explores and sets out in his works. The connectedness of human beings is thereby a central aspect in relation to piecing together Kaufman's art manifesto. In the further elaboration on central aspects in Kaufman's art, the role of desire becomes interesting in that it, as well as connectedness, is an important characteristic of human life, which is also reflected in Kaufman's works. What the following will introduce is that in relation to Kaufman, desire as such plays a prominent role in that it can be argued to exist both in the frame of Kaufman's works, for his readers and for Kaufman himself, all of which the following section will elaborate on.

## **DESIRE IN THE SCOPE OF KAUFMAN'S WORKS**

This section will point to three ways in which Kaufman's works can be connected to an idea of desire. The first aspect of desire is connected to how the layeredness of Kaufman's works elicits a narrative desire in the viewer, namely the viewer's desire to piece together the plot and to grasp the meaning of the particular work. The second aspect involves the desire which Kaufman frequently illustrates with his characters and the third will comment on the desire which Kaufman himself has in terms of producing something authentic and original.

### **NARRATIVE DESIRE**

In her book *Desire – Love Stories in Western Culture*, Catherine Belsey points out how desire, which she introduces as being the "most familiar of emotions", has been discussed in many diverse genres by for instance "poets, dramatists, novelists, sexologists, moralists, psychoanalysts, sociobiologists" (Belsey 1994: 3). According to Belsey, desire is a very prominent theme which at all times exists but which cannot be defined; its core cannot be reached which elicits a desire for writing about it and for exploring the nature of it in order to come closer to its definition. She points out: "The truth of desire can neither be seen nor

shown" (Belsey 1994: 71), which indicates that a straightforward definition is impossible. It is, however, possible to say something about some aspects and mechanisms of desire which can be related to the desire that Kaufman expresses and demonstrates with his work. Belsey discusses desire using, among others, Freud's and Lacan's theories. The most important point to note in this relation is that desire is stressed to be something unattainable "since we desire what we don't have" (Ibid.: 70). The complex Freudian and psychoanalytical interpretation of desire is attached to the childhood where the child seemingly desires the people who take care of it. This desire will later on be "translated" to involve other people outside one's family and this desire will in some way be a repressed version of the original desire, which can never be restored (Ibid.: 49-52). Belsey points out how desire according to Freud and Lacan is inevitable: "In Freud, and even more emphatically in Lacan, desire is not a disease but a structural inevitability; in consequence, it is neither good nor bad" (Ibid.: 15). In other words, desire seems to be inherent in human beings as a feature which cannot be captured or defined and in relation to Lacan, Belsey points out that: "...desire inhabits the unconscious, and its motive is a lack, an absence at the heart of identity" (Ibid.: 75). Desire in the psychoanalytical school involves something unavoidable since it is attached to a proclaimed human instinct. This hunt seems ongoing since the fulfilment of one's desire may be impossible to attain. The interpretation of desire, the craving for what the individual lacks, can be transferred allegorically to the type of desire which involves, for instance, the quest for meaning.

To engage with one of Kaufman's works, for instance *SNY*, means that the viewer must be driven by a desire to make sense of what is presented to him or her, since it is far from being a straightforward narrative. Belsey also connects desire with fiction and points to the desire of the receiver: "Stories are about desire. This need not be sexual desire [...] They also seek to elicit the desire of the reader, if only the desire for a closure that is finally withheld" (Ibid.: 208). This means that the reader (or viewer) desires to find meaning in the particular work or desires some sort of resolution or closure. In his book *Reading for the Plot*, the critic Peter Brooks also points to the presence of desire when engaging with a text. Brooks defines the plot as "the organizing line and intention of narrative, thus perhaps best conceived as an activity, a structuring operation elicited in the reader" and states how the reading of the plot therefore depends on the reader: "Plot [...] belongs to the reader's 'competence'" (Brooks 1984: 37). This means that what the author has set out in his or her work in terms of narrative structures, intention and so forth are up to the individual reader to grasp. Thereby, the individual reader has a task when engaging with a text, namely to piece together the plot, which is what drives the reader forward. The plot is in this aspect "a key

component of that 'passion of (for) meaning' that Barthes says, lights us afire when we read" (Brooks 1984: 37). The passion and desire for meaning thereby become central for Brooks, who concludes:

"We can, then, conceive of the reading of the plot as a form of desire that carries us forward, onward, through the text. Narratives both tell of desire—typically present some story of desire—and arouse and make use of desire as dynamic of signification." (Ibid.)

Brooks thereby points to a double effect of desire, namely the desire which may appear in the frame of the story, the characters' desire, and that of the reader. This applies for Kaufman's works since the reader is driven forward by the complexity of his works and simultaneously his characters expose desire for e.g. love, authenticity and originality. Kaufman's often very layered works demand an active decoding process from the viewer – which may either be enticing or lead the viewer to long for closure because the works are too layered. Often, the viewer will be met by frustration since Kaufman does not give final answers to the complicated issues he discusses in his works. This demonstrates that what we desire, in this case meaning, is not always attainable – but that the process and the desire in itself are important, since they may both form and educate you as a human being. Narrative desire can be argued to exist in all texts and what is specifically interesting in the scope of Kaufman's *SNY* is that this narrative is filled with absurd happenings and layeredness especially in terms of the many metafictional levels which may elicit a more extreme narrative desire in the viewer. The layeredness in *SNY* is especially caused by the fact that Caden's life and world, his vast play and the many layers which grow out of his production melt together. The fact that these layers point to themselves as being fictive constructions creates a metafictional aspect of the layeredness. This metafictional layeredness causes some sort of meta-frustration in the viewer who tries to keep track of which layer is which and why, and this elicits a specific narrative desire in the viewer. The fact that *SNY* is such a demanding work also calls for the viewer's competence and effort, and for the viewer to grant this to the work, it presupposes that the viewer is driven by a narrative desire – which due to for instance this meta-frustration may be stronger here than in a more simple work. Also, the meta-frustration makes relevant Brecht's idea of the *Verfremdungseffekt* since Kaufman's use of such upsetting structures and elements invites the viewer to struggle with and react to his works. This we will return to in 'Parody and the 'Unfamiliar'.



## THE DESIRES OF KAUFMAN'S CHARACTERS

Kaufman frequently illustrates how his characters are led by certain desires and how what they desire is most often not attained. For instance, in *BJM* it is illustrated how numerous people desire to be someone else and line up to enter a portal into John Malkovich's brain in order to fulfil this. The main character, who is a passionate puppeteer, desires various things, as for instance a career as a puppeteer and Maxine, who only wants him when he is in the portal of John Malkovich's brain. Therefore, Craig comes to desire the full control of John Malkovich, so he can have Maxine and use Malkovich's fame to come through as an artist. In the end, however, Craig loses both his wife, Maxine and the control of Malkovich.

Desire is also a prominent theme in *Adaptation* where we follow Larouche's desire for finding orchids, Orlean's desire of desiring something as strongly as Larouche does and Charlie's desire of producing something original, which is not just the typical Hollywood movie. Furthermore, in *SNY* the main character Caden spends more than 50 years on his play, which he wants to be an original expression of his artistic self; he is, however, never able to set the play into production. The striving towards an original piece of art or an authentic expression as an artist, which Craig, Charlie and Caden represent, can be allegorically read as a process of desire directed towards something which may be unattainable.

When Kaufman introduces themes like art, love, sickness and death, he thematizes how human beings constantly desire to find meaning with such issues mirrored by the struggles of his characters. This is also underlined by the many levels on which desire exists where its goal is not necessarily reached; this applies for Kaufman's characters and the viewer, and as we will touch upon shortly, it can also be said to apply for Kaufman himself. Desire in Kaufman's works is often connected to the characters' quests for authenticity and originality but desire also exists in relation to love, and to finding meaning in one's life and world etc. For all the versions of desire presented by Kaufman it is common that the presented desire is directed towards something which one seems to lack. In terms of achieving what one desires, Kaufman does not have any answers but he is persistent in mirroring desire as being an inevitable part of human life, whether it is for love, art, structure, meaning or other things. Belsey describes how desire is present in our lives as well as in fiction. Fiction may elicit a desire in the viewer for a portrayed world, feeling, character or relationship, etc. and therefore desire which has emerged out of fiction may affect the viewer's life.

“...desire transforms our own lives into narratives full of uncertainty, suspense and challenges. In its citationality, it turns us all into protagonists, heroic or

legendary; it turns our objects of desire into figures from fiction, whether folktale or romance. Desire writes us 'like living stories'. Its narrative links our past with an imagined future which might possibly make up for an unnamable loss. Equally, the future might simply reaffirm the loss irrevocable. Desire enlists us in this danger. And it is by definition unsatisfied." (Belsey 1994: 208)

This quote expresses the permeating aspect of desire; it exists in life as well as in fiction. Evident links to Belsey's definition of desire as being unsatisfied can be found in relation to both the artist Charlie Kaufman and his works. Kaufman's characters often have a hard time achieving what they desire and Kaufman himself also expresses that this may be impossible. Kaufman seems to stress the importance of the process of desire rather than its actual goal.

## **THE HONEST KAUFMAN AND HIS DESIRE FOR AUTHENTICITY**

In terms of Kaufman's idea of presenting real and honest art, he strives towards bringing his audience original and authentic art. He resists the idea of making "damaging" productions, as quoted above, by which he means that films influence our expectations in real life. By staging something fictitious, you depict a possible reality and this reality may seem attainable in real life. An example of this is the typical Hollywood romance which Kaufman would instantly reject as depicting something real and honest in comparison to what his works seem to aim at. Kaufman wants to create a truthful piece of art and he criticizes the general way of depicting possible realities on films:

"I just think that there's a very one route way of making movies in this culture and that there seems to be sort of this mindset that it has to be this one thing, and this is the structure of it and this is what has to happen to the characters, and I think that in anything, in any art form, the world opens up when you take that away and you allow yourself to kind of think in a kind of larger and more creative way about the process. So, it's not movies that I'm questioning, it's what is being done with movies." (Kaufman 2007b)

Kaufman's questioning of what is being done with movies in general points to the fact that he wants something else. He does not want to present his movies in the same 'one route way' as many others do. However, he does not want to make it 'crazier and crazier', as quoted earlier, just in order to be different. In an interview with Kaufman in The Times, it is pointed out that he has "become his own adjective" to which he says: "Kaufmanesque! [...]" "There's a lot of marketing bulls\*\*t that happens around that. I don't want to be a part of it, and I certainly don't want to write something that is deliberately 'Kaufmanesque'" (Maher 2008). Kaufman rejects the idea of his works being pinned to a specific style and rejects that they are made in order to belong to a specific self-produced genre. However, Kaufman's works have a very distinct style and therefore it does not seem out of order to use the term "Kaufmanesque". An explanation to why Kaufman rejects this may be that in order to

produce something authentic, honest and original he does not want to be captured within one specific style.

In the interview printed in the shooting script to *SNY*, Kaufman engages in a discussion about producing something authentic. In this relation he quotes the dancer Isadora Duncan: “I’ve strived my entire life to make one authentic gesture” after which Kaufman comments “which I think is a great notion. I think it’s a really hard thing to do, maybe impossible” (Kaufman 2008: 147). Hereby, he points out how one strives towards achieving authenticity and originality in different respects and he emphasizes the difficulty of accomplishing an authentic product that you are satisfied with. Also, he stresses the importance of authenticity and originality as something one may spend a whole life time seeking. As will be introduced shortly with Charles Lindholm, it can be argued that there exists a permeating desire for authenticity in today’s society which for instance accounts for art, experiences, products, and so on. In a postmodern world of commodification, mass production and copies, the wish to leave one’s personal mark on one’s little narrative may produce a desire to create something original and authentic in order to stand out from existing things and trends and from other people. In relation to Kaufman this shows with his expressed wish to distance himself from the Hollywood industry and his wish to express something real to people. He recognizes that producing something authentic may be impossible by which he implicitly introduces the Baudrillardian idea that the postmodern world consists of copies where no originality can be found (cf. ‘On the Horizon of Simulation’). In spite of his skepticism towards possessing authenticity, Kaufman still advocates that one tries to reach something original and authentic, since it is this process which is actually important: “You never quite get what you want. And that’s why you keep working” (Kaufman 2008: 147). Exactly the idea of making something original and authentic is what drives you forward.

In *Culture and Authenticity* Charles Lindholm discusses how authenticity is a concept which is visible in many different aspects and he also points out how people seem to desire authentic products and seek authenticity:

“The quest for authenticity touches and transforms a vast range of human experience today – we speak of authentic art, authentic music, authentic food, authentic dance, authentic people, authentic roots, authentic meanings, authentic nations, authentic products. A desire for authenticity can lead people to extremes of self-sacrifice and risk; the loss of authenticity can be a source of grief and despair.” (Lindholm 2008: 1)

According to Lindholm, this concept of authenticity is widespread and vital for people. Authenticity is something that we may seek in ourselves or in other people, as for instance in some sort of authentic role models:

“The hope for an authentic experience draws us to charismatic leaders, expressive artists, and social movements; it makes us into trendy consumers, creative performers, and fanatical collectors. Authenticity, in its multiple variations, exalted and ordinary, is taken for granted as an absolute value in contemporary life.” (Lindholm 2008: 1)

Here, Lindholm thematizes the desire and quest for something authentic which also can be seen in relation to Kaufman and his works. He quests originality and authenticity, and his works may entice people who are drawn toward these ideals. Also, by insisting on mirroring something real and honest with his art, Kaufman wants to evoke something authentic like, for instance, a feeling in the viewer. His way of illustrating and discussing themes like love, sickness and death is done unconventionally, truthfully and somewhat brutally and hereby this may seem authentic and real to people, which is what he aims for.

In relation to producing something authentic, Kaufman underlines that when you are drawn towards something you must be truthful in the exploration of it. He points out that the process of exploring things, as he calls it, must be done “truthfully” and he advises that you must “continue to try to find your voice which is kind of I think an ongoing lifelong process”. And he continues: “I’m still trying to do that. I mean, I don’t feel like I’ve arrived anywhere. Just be diligent and somewhat courageous in your attempts to do your stuff in the world” (Kaufman 2007b). Besides advocating what one should do in terms of finding a unique voice in life, Kaufman here stresses what he attempts to do when producing art. In numerous interviews, he underlines that his art is about setting out something honest in the world. He wants his integrity to be intact and does not want to compromise his ambitions about being true to himself as an artist in order to, for instance, make profit. In an interview published in The Times, Kaufman asks himself if he is “going to have to break his golden rule, to ignore the need for honesty, and write a trashy thriller script for the money?” To this, he answers: “I can’t do that. I’ve just arrived at a place where I’m doing something that I feel good about. Regardless of quality, I’m trying to put something honest into the world. And that’s all I can, and all I will, do” (Maher 2008).

## **DESIRE AND FREUD’S LIFE AND DEATH INSTINCT**

The exploration of desire has been divided into three categories relevant for Kaufman’s works. In terms of connecting these types of desire, Freud’s definitions of the life instinct (or Eros) and the death instinct (also referred to as Thanatos) are interesting since the literal understanding and allegorical reading hereof encompass the points just made.

In ‘Narrative Desire’ we introduced the idea that erotic desire may be paralleled with the quest of finding for instance meaning since both types are defined as being an

ongoing desire for something we lack. In this relation, Freud's concept of 'the life instinct', which describes how an individual aims at preserving its self, can also be juxtaposed with the desire to develop the self by questing meaning, beauty or truth, hence the allegorical reading we referred to earlier. In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920) Freud discusses the life instinct, which is equated with the sexual instinct and Eros, the latter defined as "the preserver of all things" and "the preserver of life" (Freud 1955: 52-54). These definitions point to the self-preservative nature which can be ascribed to life instincts.

Furthermore, Freud points to how sexual instincts or life instincts bring about progress: "[sexual instincts] preserve life itself for a comparatively long period. They are the true life instincts" (Ibid.: 40). On this, he further comments in a footnote: "Yet it is to them alone that we can attribute an internal impulse towards 'progress' and towards a higher development" (Ibid.). Thereby, self-preservation and progress can be ascribed to Freud's life instincts which can be sublimated into the desire one may have for something new, original, authentic, true, and meaningful etc. which is expressed by Kaufman's characters. These types of desire involve something that develops the self and preserves the self as thirsting for life and for desiring something which drives this self forward.

Opposed to this idea of development, progress and life-preservation is the death instinct: "The hypothesis of self-preservative instincts, such as we attribute to all living beings, stands in marked opposition to the idea that instinctual life as a whole serves to bring about death" (Ibid.: 39). As pointed out in *Freud – A Modern Reader* "Some instincts do not strive towards pleasure but towards death" (Perelberg 2005: 143), which is paraphrased from Freud's statement: "the aim of all life is death" and his utterance that "inanimate things existed before living ones" (Freud 1955: 38). The argument is that all which is living will necessarily die and that the aim of life is actually death, the return to the state from which one derives, hence the inanimate state (Ibid.: 38-39). Freud suspects that: "instincts other than those of self-preservation operate in the ego" (Ibid.: 53) and points to a more dualistic movement between life instincts and death instincts: "One group of instincts rushes forward so as to reach the final aim of life as swiftly as possible; but when a particular stage in the advance has been reached, the other group jerks back to a certain point to make a fresh start and so prolong the journey" (Ibid.: 41). According to Freud, there may both be an instinct layered in human beings for preserving life as well as there might be a longing for one's life to end, when the burden of carrying one's life becomes hard to cope with (cf. 'Choosing Your Life'). The latter is for instance exemplified by Caden Cotard in *SNY* where he says: "I'm aching for it being over" (*SNY*: 1:41:33) and he expresses his desire for reaching the end and peace by dying.

Allegorically, the life instinct, defined as the wish to preserve the self and make progress, can be juxtaposed with the desire to find meaning with a particular work while another analogy is also possible, namely that between the death instinct and the reader's desire for closure of a text. Thus, the duality between life and death instincts allegorically opens up for a duality existing in relation to the reader of the text, namely the desire to find meaning versus the desire for closure.

In Caden Cotard's life there is also a desire to reach something true and meaningful with his play, but also a desire for its closure, as expressed above. Thus, the suggested duality pointed to by Freud also exists allegorically in relation to Caden Cotard's desire for authenticity. He desires reaching his goal of producing an authentic, original art piece as encouraged by the MacArthur Committee along with his desire for it all to be over since he cannot achieve this goal.

### **KAUFMAN SUMMED UP**

Conclusively, Kaufman's postmodern art manifesto can be said to revolve around certain elements. Numerous times Kaufman underlines that fact is intertwined with fiction and thereby he stresses that art is powerful and vital in our lives and has an important impact on the individual. On the other hand, human conditions and our perceptions of reality also affect art and the artist. For Kaufman, art is a passion and he seems very much consumed with the fact that we must endeavor to explore something truthfully. Kaufman wants his art to influence the audience by making the viewer think, feel and grab something out of his works and be touched or moved by them. If he succeeds in this, the receiver interacts with his works and thereby brings something to the work. To be able to do this, Kaufman intentionally builds his works on emotions and intuition and he constantly strives towards being true to his artistic self. In this way, he tries to meet his vision of being authentic and original in order to communicate with the receiver. This interest of interacting with the receiver mirrors one of Kaufman's more philosophical points of view, namely, that our human lives are intertwined. By expressing this, he reconstructs the idea of interrelatedness between human beings instead of maintaining a more postmodern idea of individuality. His art continues to engage in those mutual life conditions which all human beings share. Kaufman wants to be honest about for instance the fears we have, about the love and the hatred that we feel towards the other person. Kaufman hereby engages in an ontological discussion where he stresses the necessary relation to the other human being, this being both the restricting and rewarding aspects. These issues have been discussed by many existentialists and life philosophers

and we will elaborate on these theories in the section 'Existentialism and Human Interrelations'.

In the study of what Kaufman's postmodern art manifesto revolves around, there are certain characteristics important to emphasize, namely, his desire to create authentic and original art, which invites the audience to actively engage in a dialogue with his works. Through his discussion of real versus imaginary, he thematizes the permeating constructedness of our lives. In the illustration of these subjects, Kaufman underlines his attempt to be honest and truthful. As Kevin Maher points out in the interview published in The Times:

"Kaufman is big on the truth. While other screenwriters are content to trade in formula and cliché in the writing of "big stupid cynical blockbusters that say to the world, 'I'm an a\*\*hole, I don't care and I'm going to make money off you!' " Kaufman is stringently honest in his work. "Every time I sit down to write," he says, "I have to do what feels truthful to me. Otherwise what's the point?" (Maher 2008)

Here, Maher paraphrases Kaufman's critique that other movies do not engage in telling something honest, real and true which together is what Kaufman sets out to be his agenda.

## **TASTEFUL BRANDING OR A REVIVAL OF THE AUTHOR?**

### **– THE CULTURAL IDENTITY OF CHARLIE KAUFMAN**

The dramatic and well-known statement that the author as institution is dead (Barthes 1977: 142-148) uttered by Roland Barthes in his article "The Death of the Author" from 1968, has had a great impact on the way we consider the role of the author and for that matter the role of the reader. The privileged position held by the author was challenged by structuralist criticism, of which Barthes was a part: "Structuralism replaces the author by the reader as the central agency in criticism" (Abrams 1999: 302). In structuralist criticism, the focus is the reader's process of decoding the underlying "system of invariant conventions and codes" (Ibid.) that determines literary meaning. Poststructuralism, however, subverted this claim by arguing that there was not one fixed system of meaning but rather several different codes of meaning from which the reader can produce his or her own meaning of a text.

This is a view which is well adopted into the postmodern tradition, where there seems to be no deification, in the traditional sense, of the relationship between the author and his or her text. The substantial use of intertextuality in postmodern texts can be seen as a proof of this, since it allows the author to borrow and imitate freely from other texts without any specific concern for the original text and its author. This form of textual recycling underlines the fact that the meaning of a text is not controlled solely by the author, but will

rather continue to acquire new meanings as it is communicated and read in different contexts. That Charlie Kaufman is concerned with the relationship between author and textual recycling seems evident from the film *Adaptation* in which the Charlie Kaufman character struggles with the task of adapting Susan Orleans novel *The Orchid Thief* into a screenplay (cf. 'Adaptation'). With *Adaptation* Kaufman underlines the fact that an artist does not have complete ownership of his or her work. Once it is put out in public, you have little control over how it will be received and interpreted both by the public in general but also within what Pierre Bourdieu calls the cultural field of production. Kaufman seems very preoccupied with the relationship between author, text and reader, since he does not want to meet the expectations of conventional meaning structures. Rather he seeks to awaken the audience by focusing directly on the interpretative activity and communication that art representations call for. So, Kaufman emphasizes the role of the reader, even though it seems clear that he as an author is very concerned with how the audience can and will understand his work. He definitely does seem to have an overall agenda and message with his work, which is why it is relevant to look at what we call his postmodern art manifesto.

Roland Barthes, who in his later work moves toward poststructuralist criticism, operates with a distinction between 'readerly' texts and 'writerly' texts. The 'readerly' text, he claims, tries to limit the reader's interpretation, since it has a specific meaning to bring forth, whereas the 'writerly' text enhances the reader's act of interpretation, since it "aims at the ideal of 'a galaxy of signifiers' and so encourages the reader to be a producer of his or her own meanings according not to one code but to a multiplicity of codes" (Abrams 1999: 302). This distinction between 'readerly' and 'writerly' texts can easily be held applicable for films as well as any other kind of text.

It seems somewhat overt that most mainstream Hollywood movies, often referred to as Blockbusters, have a specific meaning and moral to communicate and they often do not leave much interpretation open for the viewer. This, however, is not the case with Kaufman's films and other films of a more 'Avant Garde' character, like for instance the Dogma films, where the film director operates with specific filmic limitations in order to explore new narrative structures. These films can be considered 'writerly' texts, since they to a greater extent invite the reader to navigate freely within "a galaxy of signifiers". One of the most evident indications that these films try to separate themselves from the Blockbuster films, is the film language they employ. A film language that moves beyond what the audience expect, which for instance is the case with Kaufman's use of dream-logic as a narrative structure in his films. This leaves more interpretation open for the viewer and it also demands



more attention from the viewer since the meaning of the film is not immediately evident from a conventional film language and narrative structure.

Charlie Kaufman hereby seems to agree with the importance of the role of the reader, since he emphasizes how he wants to leave a text open for the reader to make his or her own interpretations: "I feel like if I get too specific with the metaphors, it limits somebody else's opportunity to take it and make it theirs" (Kaufman 2008: 146). As mentioned before, Kaufman, nevertheless, is very preoccupied with the role of the author and artist as well, which becomes obvious as he in the majority of his films tries to communicate and create images of the artist and of the process of creating art. The acts of representation and interpretation are central to the realities we are presented with in Kaufman's works and this is exactly the aim of an artist. Also, on a broader level this becomes the aim of any kind of communication and relation between human beings. In the light of this, it seems impossible to believe that in the eyes of Kaufman the author is dead. The author may very well be dead in relation to the traditional role of being the only authority of interpretation, but it is important to understand the process of creating art and thereby communicating with other people. Kaufman seems to insist that he as an author does stand in a communicative relationship with his readers and viewers, but it should be a conversation rather than a monologue.

From these above observations, one can argue that the author is alive and well in our present cultural environment, but not in the traditional role as the only source of a text's meaning. Hereby it seems relevant to ask what the role of the author has become. Michel Foucault approaches that same question in his article "What is an Author?" from 1969 where he talks about "the author function" (Foucault 1969: 108), which is not identical to the actual writer of the text or the fictitious speaker of the text. Rather the author function relates to some kind of governing and categorization of the author's texts within the cultural environment. We, as the public, help construct the author, who still is not identical to the actual writer.

In relation to the author function it becomes relevant to talk about an author's cultural identity. An author's name is an evident part of the author function, and Foucault says: "the name seems always to be present, marking off the edges of the text, revealing, or at least characterizing, its mode of being. The author's name manifests the appearance of a certain discursive set and indicates the status of this discourse within a society and a culture" (Ibid.: 107). This does, however, seem to restore a great deal of the authorial power that exists in the traditional image of the authoritarian author. Nevertheless, this authorial power seems, to some extent, to be exterior of the text and not an absolute governing of the interior meaning of the text. Even so, it is difficult to make this kind of distinction between where the

author does have authority and where he or she does not. It is clear, though, that what Foucault calls the author function still exists in the present, although it might have changed slightly as to where it exercises its authority.

In relation to Kaufman's work it is relevant to talk about the author function, since his name has been so closely linked to his works. Usually it is the film director who is presented as the maker of a film, but when it comes to Kaufman's films they are indeed presented as his (in collaboration with the director, of course). It is very rare that a screenwriter is credited on the same level as the director, as Charlie Kaufman is, and this indicates the amount of influence and distinctiveness that Kaufman puts into his work. Hereby, he also achieves a characteristic expression in his films that makes it easy for the public to place his texts within a Kaufmanesque discourse. The author function becomes strong in relation to Kaufman's work because of his more or less diverging narrative expressions. Again this seems to further indicate that Kaufman has a specific agenda with his work, which does not necessarily have the purpose of limiting the reader's or viewer's interpretation. Rather, Kaufman underlines the importance of creating a text which people can relate to in many different ways. However, it does appear somewhat impossible for a viewer to disregard Kaufman's presence in his work, and this can be seen as an author function. Kaufman seems to understand this and even enhances the awareness about this when he constantly incorporates metafictional elements pointing to the role of the artist and the process of creating art in his films. This is again done most clearly in *Adaptation* where he places a Charlie Kaufman character within the film, pointing toward the fact that 'Charlie Kaufman', the artist, is just a constructed character.

## **PERTINENT PARATEXTS**

This somewhat broad discussion of what role the author has in present cultural environments is important in relation to approaching Charlie Kaufman as an artist. Nevertheless, it is also a very extensive and ongoing debate which becomes too expansive to continue here. Rather we will limit the following to deal more specifically with Charlie Kaufman's role as an author, which includes a discussion of what can be termed his cultural identity. A way to do this is by looking at what Gerard Genette calls paratexts, which can be defined in this way: "the frame containing both the text itself and all the liminal devices – titles, signs of authorship, dedications, epigraphs, prefaces, notes, intertitles, epilogues, and the like – that mediates the relation between text and reader" (Genette 1997a: xi). This means that paratexts are

what surround and contextualize a text in order to present it in a specific way. Genette says in his introduction to *Paratexts – Thresholds of Interpretation*<sup>7</sup> that paratexts constitute:

“a privileged place of a pragmatics and a strategy, of an influence on the public, an influence that – whether well or poorly understood and achieved – is at the service of a better reception for the text and a more pertinent reading of it (more pertinent, of course, in the eyes of the author and his allies)” (Genette 1997a: 2).

Genette here focuses on the authorial influence on the public as to how his or her text should preferably be received and read. The paratexts can be seen to reveal the intentions of the author since they are, as Genette claims, a threshold of interpretation. They are both facing the inward of the text and the outward of the text and thereby become the link between text and public that the author inhabits with his or her intentions for the text. By their disclosure of the author's intentions, the paratexts also enable us to say something about the kind of author, we are dealing with. This is obviously interesting in the attempt of specifying Kaufman's art manifesto and his cultural identity as it is presented through his work. Through for instance *SNY*'s paratexts Kaufman performs a specific cultural and artistic identity, which can be seen as closely connected to his intentions as an artist.

Genette's theory on paratexts is comprehensive and in great detail, since it deals with all types of paratexts. Of course, it is not all paratexts of a text that are equally interesting, and in relation to our present discussion we will look at selected paratexts from *SNY*. The first paratext which seems significant in relation to Charlie Kaufman's authorial and cultural identity is the title, which belongs to the category of peritexts, meaning a paratext within the text. Genette mentions several aspects of the title which can be relevant to look into, such as place, time, senders, addressees and functions. What become most interesting in relation to *SNY* are time, addressee and function, since these aspects reveal something about the thoughts and intentions of the title choice. In order to learn how and when the title came into being, we may consult another paratext that belongs to the public epitext, which means a paratext outside the text, namely in this case an interview.

In this interview<sup>8</sup> with Charlie Kaufman, Rob Feld, the interviewer, asks Kaufman about the development of the title, which indicates the temporal aspect of the title. In this case it is relevant because, according to Kaufman, the screenplay was stolen and put online

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<sup>7</sup> By the title *Thresholds of Interpretation*, Genette creates a very useful metaphor in the understanding of how the paratexts function. He describes the threshold of interpretation in this way: “It is an ‘undefined zone’ between the inside and the outside, a zone without any hard and fast boundary on either the inward side (turned toward the text) or the outward side (turned toward the world's discourse about the text), an edge, or, as Philippe Lejeune put it, ‘a fringe of the printed text which in reality controls one's whole reading of the text’” (Genette 1997: 2). This means that the paratexts are on the threshold of the inside of a text and the outside of a text and hereby mediate between text, author and reader.

<sup>8</sup> This interview is included at the end of the shooting script of *SNY* and comes to function almost as an epilogue, which definitely also belongs to the paratexts.

before the film was done, but the title page was removed and someone made a new with the title 'Schenectady, New York', which refers to the specific location in New York where the main character Caden Cotard lives with his family. Kaufman says: "So, now, in the lovely world of the Internet, people say – and it just becomes part of the truth of the story – that the original title of this movie was *Schenectady, New York*, and that somehow along the way I decided to change it to *Synecdoche*" (Kaufman 2008: 138). All this is a part of the title's prehistory and it becomes, as Kaufman also indicates in the quote above, a part of its story whether Kaufman wants it or not. In this way the prehistory of the title is created in cooperation with the public, since *Synecdoche, New York* is taken to be a clever word play on the title *Schenectady, New York*, which according to Kaufman is not the case. Rather, Kaufman indicates that the title came into being in an almost intuitive and spontaneous way: "I had a bunch of titles as I was working on it and this was one. I don't know – I liked it the most. It isn't the cleverness that ultimately sold me on it; it felt mysterious and slightly creepy to me, I don't even know why" (Ibid.: 137). It is, however, difficult to believe that Kaufman has given the title as little thought as that<sup>9</sup>, and this statement could be interpreted as Kaufman's way of constructing his cultural identity, since it leaves the reader with a feeling of artistic intuition and immediacy in the way he works. This is, nevertheless, not the consistent image Kaufman gives of himself, since he also underlines his many struggles in his work<sup>10</sup>. Yet, all of Kaufman's statements do point to the construction of an image indicating artistic authenticity and compassion; if it feels right, then it is right. Of the addressee aspect of the title, Genette states the following:

"The title is directed at many more people than the text, people who by one route or another receive it and transmit it and thereby have a hand in circulating it. For if the text is an object to be read, the title (like, moreover, the name of the author) is an object to be circulated – or, if you prefer, a subject of conversation." (Genette 1997a: 75)

This is an important function of the title, since it comes to serve as a kind of branding for both the text and the author. No matter how much an artist discredits the commodification and commercial viability aspects in relation to his or her art, it is a fact that a strong branding of the artist and his or her art functions much in the same way as regular corporate branding. When Kaufman distances himself from mainstream Hollywood productions in various ways, it is his way of branding himself and his art. In this way, cultural identity construction and

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<sup>9</sup> Especially since the same kind of wordplay exists within the film as the main character, Caden, tries to explain to his daughter Olive the difference between the two similar sounding words 'psychosis' and 'sycosis'. The first is a mental condition and the second a physical condition, and Olive points out that Caden could have both (SNY: 0:25:17).

<sup>10</sup> In *SNY* the specific struggle of finding the right title for an artistic work is emphasized by Caden Cotard's repeated and somewhat comic attempts to find the right title for his play. A struggle which is never resolved just as the play is never finished.

branding become closely linked, and it seems that an artist also cannot escape the commodification discourse of modern society. Being aware of this 'branding function', it is relevant to look at paratexts such as the title, since the title choice comes to reflect the way an artist tries to brand him or herself.

Furthermore, the public reception of e.g. the title reflects how the public's discourse becomes a part of the branding and identity construction of the artist. This is interesting in relation to *SNY* because the title has received a substantial amount of attention. On the website YouTube there are several videos on precisely the subject of the title. One video is from the film festival in Cannes 2008, where the film was presented, and in this video the aim is to have people pronounce the title, which no one can actually do<sup>11</sup>. Also, the interviewer, Michael Guillen, opens his Kaufman interview with this comment on the title:

"Topping the childhood tongue-twister of saying "unique New York" 10 times in a row, Charlie Kaufman's titular pun on Schenectady, New York arrived fraught with the hazard of mispronunciation (and just when I finally got *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* to trill liltily off my tongue)." (Guillen 2008)

These comments, among others, attest to the fact that Kaufman has chosen a title that most people do not know the meaning of and cannot pronounce. This is presumably a very deliberate choice and indicates that Kaufman wants his film to be noticed and talked about in a specific way, which raises the question of whether Kaufman ascribes himself and his art an inherent elitism or his intention is another.

Overall, it can be argued that Kaufman's main intention does not seem to be a discrediting of the Hollywood mainstream film in order to place himself in an elitist league of artists, but rather an attempt to distance himself and his art from the existing discourses of power within the film industry. By for instance choosing titles that do not have the conventional commercial viability, Kaufman indicates that he has another purpose with his films than making them belong to the Blockbuster category and make as large a profit as possible. But is he not narrowing his target audience by choosing titles like *Synecdoche, New York*? Probably, Kaufman's titles will scare away some people, but the ones who actually take the time to look up the meaning of 'synecdoche' will notice that this is actually a figure of speech which is very common in all kinds of discourse, both everyday communication, slang and poetic representation. In this way, Kaufman relates the title to more than the upper cultural society, even though his films must be considered to have a somewhat limited audience in comparison to big Hollywood productions. The audience who knows the previous work of Kaufman will probably consider the title, *Synecdoche, New York*,

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<sup>11</sup> See [www.youtube.com/watch?v=jA6c7DcvES0](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jA6c7DcvES0)

as belonging to the Kaufman brand or a Kaufmanesque discourse, and this again becomes a part of the author and branding function.

Besides contributing to a specific branding of Kaufman as an artist, the title *SNY* also functions thematically, since the subject of representation is fore fronted in the film. The main character, Caden, struggles with the artistic representation. For his play he makes an exact replica of a part of New York, which supposedly will represent the whole of a specific reality. This struggle with representation permeates the film and thereby comes to function as a metafictional comment on Kaufman's own representational struggles. The questions he raises are, what kind of reality do we construct from a specific representation and how do we construct a representation of a specific reality. In this way it becomes clear that *SNY* is a title that relates to the thematic whole of the text. Genette quotes Leo Hoek's definition of the title's function: "A set of linguistic signs ... that may appear at the head of a text to designate it, to indicate its subject matter as a whole, and to entice the targeted public" (Genette 1997a: 76). When Hoek points to the aim of enticing the public, this partly covers what can be termed the 'branding function' of the title. This is significant to consider in relation to the cultural identity of the author since the title has the purpose of circulating and presenting both the text and the author in a specific way.

A second kind of paratext which is interesting to look at in relation to Kaufman's cultural identity, is the introduction which is included in the shooting script of *SNY*. We also refer to this introduction in 'Kaufman's Postmodern Art Manifesto', so the following will merely add some comments to previous observations. The reason why it is an important paratext to consider, is the fact that this was written by Kaufman himself in relation to the text, and this gives us a clearer image of how he constructs his cultural identity. This could also be the case with public epitexts such as interviews and other statements from Kaufman which have been made public. The introduction to the shooting script nevertheless provides us with the author Charlie Kaufman as he wishes to present himself, and not some interviewer leading him in a specific direction.

As pointed out previously, Kaufman wants to give the impression that he is a very honest person with his highly humorous annoyance with the pressure from the publishing company and the industry in general. As he gets the idea of letting Keith from Newmarket Press write about himself and put the letter in the script as part of the introduction, it becomes clear that Kaufman does not want to act as the authoritarian author, who explains the meaning and importance of his text. Rather, Kaufman breaks the conventions of an author-written introduction and leaves the floor to another man, whom he actually does not know, but feels connected to after having read his letter. Hereby Kaufman states that if you

take your time to do it, you will feel a connection to other human beings. Kaufman feels connected to Keith through his textual representation of himself just as the reader should feel a connection with both the characters and Kaufman through his texts. That seems to be an important goal for Kaufman and he hereby constructs his authorial and cultural identity as honest and authentic with a real interest in the relationship between art and reality, human relationships and the representation of these. Furthermore, the unconventional style of the introduction underlines the construction of Kaufman as an artist who generally tries to break with conventional forms of communication in order to reach a more authentic representation and content. Furthermore it points to the fact that he does not like the pressure from the film industry and focuses more on his readers and audience than the public in general and the commercial viability in specific.

In relation to this discussion of the artistic and cultural identity of Charlie Kaufman, it seems relevant to ask the question whether the representation of Kaufman the artist is a kind of tasteful branding, where he presents the public with a specific cultural identity that becomes his 'brand', or an actual revival of the author. Since we earlier established that the author's death does not seem to account for all authorial roles and especially not the cultural function of the author, it is perhaps not as relevant to talk about a revival of the author as much as a shift of focus. But even this shift of focus does not seem groundbreaking, since the cultural significance and categorization of an author's name has been an unavoidable element in cultural environments forever. Clearly, Kaufman is aware of the significance of how he as an artist chooses to perform his cultural identity. By his careful construction of his artistic identity, he emphasizes the importance of creating awareness of the permeating constructedness and performativity in our culture in general, a point which is underlined by the focus on performance in *SNY* where Caden Cotard's play, and his reality, become a massive labyrinth of representation and performance. The idea that we perform and construct our identities from the existing cultural discourses in power is a common theory in the thinking of recent postmodern identity theoreticians such as Judith Butler, and we will return to this in the section 'Identity Construction and Performativity'.

In Kaufman's performance as an artist, he is particular in communicating his views on art through his various public appearances, this being especially the self staged events like the art exhibition of the fictive character Adele Lack and his fictive twin and co-writer on *Adaptation*, Donald Kaufman. He wants the audience to notice the blur between reality and fiction within their own reality. It seems important to Kaufman to be an innovative, sincere and authentic artist and this can be said to contribute to a kind of tasteful branding of him and

his work. Kaufman attempts to distinguish himself from the conventional Hollywood films and thereby he performs a certain kind of taste within his work and through his cultural identity.

The French theoretician Pierre Bourdieu divides taste into three zones, according to educational level and social class, which is constituted of a person's inherited and acquired amount of cultural capital. The zones of taste are 'legitimate' taste, 'middle-brow' taste and 'popular' taste (Bourdieu 1984: 16). This categorization of taste, however, seems to become more or less dissolved in postmodern art, since it is perfectly legitimate for a postmodern artist to adopt references and methods of popular culture into his or her work without being excluded from what Bourdieu refers to as the cultural field of production, where artists struggle for cultural power (Bourdieu 1993: 37-61). Although Kaufman distances himself from the Hollywood mainstream genre, which can be categorized as 'popular' taste, he does not seem to have the intention of creating high art in order to place himself firmly at the top of the cultural field. Rather, with his films he attempts to challenge people in relation to their idea of filmic representation and meaning structures, and this does not necessarily require enormous amounts of cultural capital. He is aware that people will interpret and relate to his films differently, but is of the opinion that the films deal with subjects that all people can relate to. However, he does not deny the fact that his films are complex and often requires multiple viewings: "I think it makes it more interesting for an audience to have some complexity in the material" (Sciretta 2008).

Kaufman's films do differentiate themselves from what can be termed 'popular' taste and Kaufman even discusses this issue of taste as a metafictional element within the films, as for instance in *Adaptation* and *SNY*, where the issue of being original, truthful and authentic in creating art is problematized. The importance and difficulty of creating something truthful and authentic that people can relate to is what Kaufman intends to communicate through the performance of his cultural and artistic identity. Whether or not this is a revival of the author, it does seem to be a kind of tasteful branding that becomes part of the author function. Kaufman's attempt to avoid being trapped in the conventions and capitalistic conditions of the Hollywood film industry becomes part of his artistic strategy and thereby he performs a certain cultural identity that automatically brands him and his work.



## **THE POSTMODERN WORLD AND INDIVIDUAL**

As this thesis works toward an investigation of Kaufman's postmodern poetics, it becomes important to elaborate on central postmodern theories and techniques, in order to reveal Kaufman's position in relation to these. In the following sections we will focus particularly on what characterizes the postmodern world and individual. A dominant theme both in relation to postmodern theory and Kaufman's works is the constructedness of our worlds and our selves, which opens up for a discussion of the relationship between real versus imaginary and reality versus fiction. In this discussion, we will elaborate on postmodern techniques such as metafiction, parody and adaptation which point to the fact that there are no clear boundaries between real and imaginary. This makes the role of art interesting in relation to the idea of our realities and selves as discursive constructs, making the theories of identity construction and performativity relevant. In this discussion of Kaufman's work in relation to postmodern themes and techniques, we will present the theories of thinkers such as McHale, Lyotard, Baudrillard, Waugh, Hutcheon and Butler. Furthermore, the theories presented in the following sections will be applied in the analysis of *SNY*.

### **THE POSTMODERN CONDITION**

Postmodernism is not an easy concept to define in a short and concise manner as the term has been used to describe our culture since the 1960s, and due to this rather long time span it has undergone some changes. Nevertheless, what can be considered essential is that from modernism to postmodernism there has been a change of dominant in the sense that the established structures of meaning are questioned and deconstructed. Roman Jakobson defines the concept of the dominant as "the focusing component of a work of art; it rules, determines, and transforms the remaining components" (Jakobson 1971). Jakobson here defines the dominant as the structuring component of a work of art, but the concept of the dominant can also be said to characterize a whole historical period or a specific art form, depending on the focus as several dominants can exist in different contexts. In relation to this thesis, it becomes interesting to look into what characterizes the dominant of postmodernism. Several theorists and philosophers contribute to this idea of a postmodern dominant in their thinking and provide possible answers to what the new dominant is. In the following we will look into some of these ideas as a way of introducing essential postmodern themes and trends. Furthermore, the theories and ideas presented in this introduction and the following sections are selected because they are relevant in the analysis of Kaufman's work.

In 1979 Jean-Francois Lyotard wrote *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, which presents some of his central ideas on postmodern culture and society. In

relation to the shift of dominant in postmodernism, Lyotard states that grand narratives have been replaced by little narratives: "I define *postmodern* as incredulity toward metanarratives" (Lyotard 1984: xxiv). What Lyotard terms grand narratives refers to underlying structures of meaning which dominate society and are referred to as all-encompassing truths. A grand narrative of this sort could for instance be seen in the concept of God as the absolute authority of meaning and truth. This is no longer a valid grand narrative as Friedrich Nietzsche already pointed out in 1882 with his famous statement of the death of God.

In *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, Leitch introduces Nietzsche with the following statement: "A few powerful phrases – 'the death of God,' 'overman,' 'will to power,' 'herd morality,' and 'beyond good and evil' – suggested his blasphemous demystification of progressive, 'enlightened' values" (Leitch et al. 2001: 873). Nietzsche had a disbelief in these "progressive, 'enlightened' values", which can be seen as analogue to what Lyotard terms metanarratives. By proclaiming the death of God, Nietzsche seems to abolish religion, and especially Christianity, as a grand narrative, and he argues that what is needed is a re-evaluation of all values. Instead of looking toward metaphysics as the authority of value, truth and meaning, Nietzsche believes that we must dissolve the metaphysical "reality" in order to establish a value system based on worldly existence (Nietzsche 1918: *The Antichrist*). The fact that Nietzsche centres his attention on secular and human life conditions, attests to a shift of dominant, which complies well with postmodern thought and cultural development. Nietzsche emphasizes the individual's role in advancing own values, beliefs and truths, and this clearly undermines the authority of the grand narratives and favours the little narratives. Several postmodern theorists refer to the philosophy of Nietzsche because his writings comply well with postmodern thinking.

The postmodern philosopher Jean Baudrillard argues that we live in a world where the real no longer exists as a referent of definitive truth and knowledge. Furthermore, he agrees with Nietzsche on the idea of God's death, in the sense that the concept of God is, and has always been, a sign without a real referent. This gives evidence to a certain amount of relativism in determining what is true and real, and thereby the individual is left with the task of constructing and navigating within different truths and realities. Furthermore this points towards the disintegration of the grand narratives. As mentioned above, Lyotard argues that little narratives replace grand narratives, and thereby the truths, standards and ideals only exist within the little narratives. Lyotard brings our individual lifeworlds<sup>12</sup> into focus

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<sup>12</sup> This concept (*Lebenswelt*) is first introduced by the phenomenologist Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) in his *Crisis of European sciences*. A definition of the concept of lifeworld is the sum of an individual's lived experiences, which include the social, perceptual and practical experiences. This idea brings focus on the subjective world rather than the objective world of for instance that of science (Britannica Online Encyclopædia).

as different little narratives that coexist and compete in the world. Every little narrative will bring forth a specific interpretation and view of the world, and thereby the narratives will compete over the validity of their interpretations.

Lyotard does not only emphasize the focus on individuality but also the interrelations between individuals. The postmodern individuals might not share a common set of all-encompassing truths, but they do share the premise of existing in the world, and thereby they are bound to connect and interact with other individuals. This is further underlined by Lyotard's focus on interrelational language games, which he believes constitute an important part of little narratives (Lyotard 1984). Lyotard borrows the term language games (Sprachspiel) from the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, who in his work discusses the problematic relationship between language and reality. Lyotard argues that the language games in their diversity come to reflect the little narratives and this attests to the idea that our realities and truths become discursive constructs. In *A Reader's Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory*, it is argued in relation to Lyotard's theories that "The criteria regulating the 'truth claims' of knowledge derive from discrete, context-dependent 'language games', not absolute rules or standards" (Selden et al. 2005: 205). This means that within each language game a certain set of rules and standards exists, but there are no overall rules and standards which involve all language games. Hereby it becomes clear that the language games can be seen as separate but interrelated narratives.

In the Kaufmanesque worlds the emphasis on little narratives is also brought out as a very essential characteristic, and in this way Kaufman's films can be seen as manifestations of central postmodern themes. In all of his films Kaufman portrays the worlds of the individual characters and, not least, he underlines the importance of the interrelation between these. In *SNY* the main character Caden Cotard stages a play which portrays how the world consists of little narratives that interrelate. On set the characters, who mirror real persons in Caden's life, are situated within their own separate rooms, which are replicas of the characters' real homes. Each replica represents the little narrative of a character's life, and as the play evolves, more and more replicas and little narratives are added. Besides emphasizing how the world consists of multiple little narratives, the interrelation between these is also stressed with Caden's play. It seems that Kaufman agrees on the fact that a shift of dominant has taken place in the sense that the postmodern attempts to deconstruct former dominants and sets up alternatives.

In this relation, the postmodern thinker Brian McHale becomes relevant since he further elaborates on what can be termed the shift of dominant from the modern to the postmodern. McHale argues that this shift of dominant can be described as a shift from the

epistemological to the ontological. He sets up a line of questions to describe the existential focuses important to consider for the individual's relationship to the world. With the epistemological dominant these questions are: "How can I interpret this world of which I am a part? And what am I in it?", and with the ontological dominant the questions are: "Which world is this? What is to be done in it? Which of my selves is to do it?" (McHale 1987: 9-10). McHale argues that the questions reflecting the epistemological dominant are dealt with through modern fiction, art and culture, and the ontological questions become the focus of the postmodern era. The epistemological questions place the individual in the world and the individual needs to relate to this world by figuring out what to be in it. Opposed to this, the ontological questions encourage the individual to reconsider the idea of a unified world and a unified self. McHale concludes:

"An ontology is a description of a universe, not of the universe; that is, it may describe any universe, potentially plurality of universes. In other words to 'do' ontology in this perspective is not necessarily to seek some grounding for our universe; it might just as appropriately involve describing other universes, including 'possible' or even 'impossible' universes – not least of all the other universe, or heterocosm, of fiction." (Ibid.: 27)

Through his work, Kaufman also argues that the individual needs to navigate between different worlds and this attests to a perception of the world as consisting of plural realities rather than a unified world with a fixed set of standards and structures of meaning. Between the world and the individual a mutual influence exists in the sense that a world consisting of plural realities causes the individual to navigate between multiple selves, which again makes the individual able to navigate between different realities. In the attempt of relating to these different realities it can be argued that the individual is left with a high degree of relativism and construction in its perception of the world and in its effort of trying to figure out what is real and what is not. The discussion of the relation between real and imaginary is precisely one of the main issues in postmodern thinking and we will explore this in the following sections.

## ON THE HORIZON OF SIMULATION

“The real is produced from miniaturized units, from matrices, memory banks and command models – and with these it can be reproduced an indefinite number of times. It no longer has to be rational since it is no longer measured against some ideal or negative instance. It is nothing more than operational. In fact, since it is no longer enveloped by an imaginary, it is no longer real at all. It is a hyperreal” (Baudrillard 1998: 167)

The French theorist and philosopher Jean Baudrillard is known for his theory on what he terms ‘hyperrealism’, which means that the real is no longer real and we are left with a simulated reality: “[a] world constructed out of models or simulacra which have no referent or ground in any ‘reality’ except their own” (Poster 1998: 6). Baudrillard concurs with Lyotard’s attentiveness towards the disintegration of the grand narratives. Metanarratives, as for instance religion, Marxism and Liberalism, which formerly constituted underlying structures of meaning providing valid references for concepts and signs, no longer exist. Instead we live in a world dominated by consumerism, which results in the fact that our “reality”, as well as “knowledge” and “truth”, amount to discursive constructs, which complies well with a postmodern point of view, where there is a distrust in the idea of absolute truths. That the grand narratives are dissolved as underlying structures of meaning indicates that structuralism becomes deconstructed, and in this relation Baudrillard invalidates Ferdinand Saussure’s theory of the sign. Whereas Saussure divided the sign into signifier, signified and referent, Baudrillard argues that the post-industrial world engulfed by consumerism consists only of ‘floating signifiers’, which means that “[t]he distinction between object and representation, thing and idea are no longer valid” (Ibid.: 5). Images have a self-contradictory effect, since they can be seen to function both as intelligible and visible mediations of the real and as murderers of the real. When we have an image which is not consistent with any referent to something real and nevertheless simulates a reality that becomes more real to us than our actual reality, then the image kills the real and creates a hyperreal.

A good example of such images, or ‘floating signifiers’, are images mediated to us through TV ads in which the image of a product never just refers to the product itself. Although we have come to learn over time that the “reality” created through TV ads is certainly not real, it has been proven that they still wield a tremendous amount of power over us. This is definitely also the case with other cultural and artistic products and mediations, including films, which are consumed in great quantities. We are repeatedly introduced to specific mediations and images of our world and the mediated “reality” replaces the real and creates a simulacrum, which is not the same as imaginary or unreal.

Baudrillard explains that the real disappears when the difference between real and imaginary is threatened by simulation. To simulate is to pretend to have something that you in fact do not have, which implies an absence, and in this case it is reality that becomes absent. However, to simulate is not only to feign, since the simulator will have to believe in the simulated in order to maintain the simulation. This marks a difference between feigning and simulating, since the reality principle remains intact when feigning, while it dissolves when simulating: "simulation threatens the difference between "true" and "false", between "real" and "imaginary" (Baudrillard 1998: 168). The disintegration of the distinction between real and imaginary is one of the most emphasized themes in Charlie Kaufman's work. With the use of for instance metafiction and intertextuality, Kaufman points to the fact that reality and fiction cannot be distinguished from each other and we do not necessarily have some underlying structure of meaning which tells us what is true and what is false. Kaufman seems to agree with the fact that our reality to a great extent is a discursive construct. In this relation Baudrillard's theories become interesting when discussing and analyzing Kaufman's work.

Baudrillard's theories are closely connected to a theory of language as a reality constructor, since images and signs are influential parts of our language, and language is considered essential in our construction and understanding of the world. The relationship between language and reality has through centuries been a subject of great concern, since language and communication are the immediate links between humans and their surroundings. Historically, linguistic science and philosophy have been discussing whether language is constituted as a system which attempts to describe the inherent characteristics of the real object it refers to, so we can learn the truth about our surroundings, or it is an arbitrary system that humans construct and understand reality from (Pahuus 1989: 20-26). Modernism and postmodernism, as seen with Baudrillard's thinking, acknowledge the arbitrariness of language and recognize that the reality we construct and understand through language might not correspond to the reality which we claim to describe through language. In *Culture and the Real*, Belsey argues how poststructuralists have discussed this distinction between the real we construct and understand through language, and the real we might never grasp because of the insecurity as to whether language actually corresponds to the reality it sets out to describe. She concludes that "[w]e have no evidence that the meanings we know match the world they seem to map" (Belsey 2005: 4). This opens up for a questioning and exploration of how we view reality and how reality is constructed through language, images and representations in general.

Through Kaufman's works it becomes clear that language and representation as reality constructors is a subject of great importance to him. An example of this is the very

humoristic way in which Kaufman puts focus on the subject of language in *Being John Malkovich*. With the character of the secretary who is employed at Lester Corp, situated on the seventh and a half floor of the Mertin Flemmer Building in New York, Kaufman comments on language as a fundamental part of how an individual understands his or her surroundings. The secretary consistently misunderstands what is said to her and is convinced that it is not her understanding of what is said that is wrong but the speaker who is talking nonsense. In the most arrogant way she exclaims “I’m sorry, I have no idea what you are saying to me right now” (*BJM*: 00.09.15), when Craig tries to tell her his name. Nevertheless, as it turns out the boss of Lester Corp is convinced that the secretary understands everything right and that it is he who has a speech impediment. This confuses Craig, who is confident that he understands the situation right, and it leaves the audience with three different interpretations of what is actually being constructed through language. With his satiric and exaggerated style, Kaufman points out that we are subjects to the inescapable power of language as an arbitrary system that constructs our reality. This is interesting in relation to the relationship between real and imaginary and also the thinking of Baudrillard, who brings the matter to a head with his theory of the hyperreal where we no longer have any connection to the real behind the representation.

With the disappearance of the real and the creation of a hyperreal, Baudrillard also argues that we can no longer sustain a hierarchical relationship between original and copy. He points to this fact when stating that the real “can be reproduced an indefinite number of times” (see the quote at the beginning of this section), which produces copies of copies rather than copies of originals. Baudrillard argues that it is impossible “to restore the truth beneath the simulacrum” (Baudrillard 1998: 182), which points to the fact that it is impossible to restore the real referent, the original, beneath the copy. In our present cultural environment, popular culture and consumerism have the effect of textual and artistic recycling to a degree where texts, art products and images in general refer to each other rather than reality. We as consumers even refer and compare our situations to texts and images rather than reality, which testifies to the dissolving of a hierarchy between real and imaginary. With the consistent use of intertextuality in postmodern art and culture, it becomes clear that we are reproducing images in different contexts and there is no sustained hierarchy between what can be considered the original and the copy either. Baudrillard, first of all, explains this with our history of industrial mass production, which has led to consumerism; a clear adaptation into a world of copies. Secondly, as the signifiers have become floating by disintegration from their original referents, they no longer have any anchorage in the real or the original. Does this mean that we live in a world where it is

impossible to create anything original or real? According to Baudrillard this would be true, since we cannot restore the real and referentiality in a world that has become a simulacrum:

“So the prophecy has been fulfilled: we live in a world where the highest function of the sign is to make reality disappear and, at the same time, to mask that disappearance. Art today does the same. The media today do the same. That is why they are doomed to the same fate.” (Baudrillard 2008: 5)

Baudrillard claims that we are living in a world of spiralling negativity, an “elusive twisting of meaning” (Baudrillard 1998: 176)<sup>13</sup>. So, it seems that Baudrillard has a quite pessimistic view on what he terms hyperreality. It becomes a world where we from a rather nostalgic point of view want to reinstall the real without being able to.

This pessimistic viewpoint, however, does not seem to be shared by Charlie Kaufman in his version of the world as a place of “elusive twisting of meaning”. Kaufman’s works deal with the difficulties of existing and creating a good life within a world where the larger structures of meaning seem to have disappeared, a world where you have to create yourself as an individual and at the same time deal with inescapable existential conditions. These thematic settings could be considered pointing towards the same negativity that characterizes Baudrillard’s viewpoint, but when Kaufman enters the discussion of meaning structures and “reality” in our hyperreal world, he does seem to have an agenda that leads towards a more positive attitude.

When Kaufman creates texts that are highly self-referential and metafictional, he does not only question the boundaries between real and imaginary, he also emphasizes the process of constructing a specific discourse, a specific image of our world. By pointing directly to the construct rather than concealing it, he creates diegesis rather than mimesis in order to remind the audience that we live in a world of discursive constructs and we have to actively decide what we want to consider part of our reality. In this way it seems that Kaufman wants to reveal rather than conceal the fact that the reality principle in the traditional sense no longer validates. If our reality is created through the mediation of floating signifiers, then we might need to learn how to filter the constant flow of images we are presented with. Kaufman claims not to present any answers or solutions in his work, but he nevertheless challenges the conventional mediations of reality by his experimental narrative structures and his focus on the characters’ navigation within the discursive constructs that form their “realities”. In this way Kaufman seems to accept a kind of artistic responsibility which complies well with his critique of conventional Hollywood productions. The revelation of hyperreality, a simulated reality, is dangerous according to Baudrillard, since it erases the

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<sup>13</sup> Baudrillard uses the metaphor of the Möbius strip, which is defined like this on The Free Dictionary: “A continuous one-sided surface that can be formed from a rectangular strip by rotating one end 180° and attaching it to the other end.” (<http://encyclopedia.farlex.com/Mobius+strip>)



possibility of deciding what is right and wrong or good and evil, and hereby comes to mean the destruction of every human goal (Baudrillard 1998: 179). This apocalyptic scenario, which includes a panic of meaninglessness, is also reflected in *SNY* as we watch Caden fail in his struggle to find meaning and literally experience his own apocalypse. In this way Kaufman seems to agree on the relativism of truth and meaning, but he does not agree on the fact that this destructs all human goals, since he emphasizes the importance of a desire for authenticity and honesty.

To Kaufman it seems important to communicate and discuss the fact that we live in a world largely consisting of signs and discursive constructs. When Kaufman creates alternative and experimenting narrative structures and dissolves the boundaries between real and imaginary, he reminds us that the mediated realities we have come to believe more real than reality itself are indeed constructed. That Kaufman engages in this discussion of real versus imaginary in the sense that we might live in what Baudrillard terms a simulacrum or a hyperreal is pointed out in *SNY* when Caden Cotard ponders over the title of his play: "I was thinking about calling it Simulacrum" (1:07:22). This might be a direct reference to the theory of Baudrillard and at the same time a clue to the audience of the dissolving boundaries between real and imaginary, which are also at play in *SNY*.

As mentioned earlier, Kaufman is of the opinion that the "realities" which Hollywood productions construct are damaging, because they indoctrinate the audience into believing that this constructed reality is in fact more real than the actual reality. Kaufman's work appears to be a way of interrupting this procedure of creating a Hollywood hyperreal, or at least make the audience aware of the fact that it exists. Kaufman definitely does not deny the fact that reality to an extensive degree is a construct, but he seems to advocate that it is important to realize this and have the opportunity to choose from more than one mediated reality. Through his work he gives us his vision of what "reality" is, what it is not, and why it is important to communicate this. It is difficult to decide whether Kaufman agrees with Baudrillard on the fact that there can no longer be anything original or real in the world. Kaufman obviously attempts to be original and authentic in his work in order to create what he considers to be a real image of the real, but at the same time he underlines in his work that everything is a construct and replicas or adaptations of something else. Nevertheless, Kaufman seems to communicate that there is something real within our hyperreality and he uses the postmodern language almost excessively to point toward the real.

## BETWEEN REALITY AND FICTION: METAFICTION

Baudrillard's idea about the hyperreal, as presented above, opens up a discussion about what is real and what is just a simulated reality. As mentioned in 'Kaufman's Postmodern Art Manifesto' Kaufman presents reality and fiction as interwoven. With the constant juggling of these elements, he seems to question, as well as Baudrillard, whether reality and fiction can be separated and thereby if the lack of distinction erases the traditional idea of the "real".

Engaging in this discussion about fiction versus reality, Kaufman employs a well-known postmodern technique, namely metafiction. Patricia Waugh defines this term in *Metafiction – the theory and practices of self-conscious fiction*:

"*Metafiction* is a term given to fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality." (Waugh 1984: 2)

In Kaufman's works the frequently used metafictional techniques propound his constant focus on art and elicit a discussion about reality versus fiction. Kaufman also uses this discussion to comment upon issues such as the human condition in today's world and on how fiction interplays with the real. For example, in *SNY* Caden Cotard's play keeps expanding and as the layers are added and constructed, the metafictional aspects expand just as well, because the construction is the constant focal point. Kaufman uses this awareness about the production of art to bring forward the idea of striving towards the creation of something meaningful in life, namely the production of a unique and original piece of art, which is an idea that Caden mirrors. Also, the piece of art constructed by both Caden and Kaufman must reflect something real, true or authentic for the individual, like for instance feelings, common human life conditions and the perception that our lives also are constructions. On a broader level, the focus on art and Caden's quest for something original and meaningful represent a more existentialistic idea about creating a meaningful existence for oneself in a world which does not provide any answers – not even when it comes to the question about what is real and what is fiction. As Waugh indicates, today's notion of reality is not a straightforward term but something which constantly alters:

"Contemporary metafictional writing is both a response and a contribution to an even more thoroughgoing sense that reality or history are provisional: no longer a world of eternal verities but a series of constructions, artifices, impermanent structures." (Ibid.: 7)

As this quote suggests, individuals are left with the task of constructing their realities and worlds, which is a fact that applies for every human being. In relation to metafiction this is interesting in the sense that the construction of one's reality can be seen as somewhat parallel to the construction of a fictional reality, which is what the use of metafictional

techniques seems to point out. As Waugh says about metafictional writings: “In providing a critique of their own methods of construction, such writings not only examine the fundamental structures of narrative fiction, they also explore the possible fictionality of the world outside the literary fictional text” (Waugh 1984: 2). As mirrored by the fictive character Caden in *SNY*, his process of creating a world<sup>14</sup> is not very different from the construction of a reality which any real person has to make; in both cases, whether real or fictional, it is about one creating a meaningful world. This idea of constructing points to a permeating fictional aspect in both the fictional and the real world and it thematizes how reality and fiction can be understood as inseparable. As Waugh says: “...what is generally taken to be ‘reality’ is also constructed and mediated [...]. ‘Reality’ is to this extent ‘fictional’ and can be understood through an appropriate ‘reading’ process” (Ibid.: 16). In *SNY* this mixture is especially underlined by the fact that Caden’s life melts together with his art production and in *Adaptation* when the screenwriter Charlie Kaufman becomes a part of the story he is adapting.

Due to this similarity of construction in fiction and real life, it is difficult, or even impossible, to determine what in actual fact is reality. Metafiction highlights this difficulty, which Waugh also comments on: “Contemporary metafiction draws attention to the fact that life, as well as novels, is constructed through frames, and that it is finally impossible to know where one frame ends and another begins” (Ibid.: 29). Frames can in this aspect be defined as constructions, systems or orders and as Waugh points out “both the historical world and works of art are organized and perceived through such structures or ‘frames’” (Ibid.: 28). Since the same frames apply both to the fictional as well as to the real world, fiction can to some extent seem real to the viewer since the frames of the narrative can be recognized from the real world and vice versa. Waugh points to the fact that the receiver of a piece of art will often empathize with fictions as if they were real: “Of course we *know* that what we are reading is not ‘real’, but we suppress the knowledge in order to increase our enjoyment” (Ibid.: 33).

As a way of interrupting the possibility of reading fiction as reality, metafiction can be seen as a way of breaking these frames or structures by making evident that the fiction in question is constructed, and metafiction can therefore be seen “to *expose* the levels of illusion” (Ibid.). Waugh continues by pointing out: “We are forced to recall that our ‘real’ world can *never* be the ‘real’ world of the novel. So the frame-break, while appearing to bridge the gap between fiction and reality, in fact lays it bare” (Ibid.). Hereby, Waugh suggests that the use of metafictional techniques indicates that there is a difference between the constructed fiction and the constructed reality. She also points out how frame-breaks may both enhance

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<sup>14</sup> It is actually two worlds: both Caden’s own world but also his New York replica.

the affinity between fiction and reality as well as separate these two. She refers to minor frame-breaks, such as commentaries made directly to a reader, as intrusions which in some respect “reinforce the connection between the real and the fictional world” (Waugh 1984: 32). In metafictional texts intrusions such as major frame-breaks, like for instance a total mixture of historical facts and fiction, “expose the ontological distinctness of the real and the fictional world, expose the literary conventions that disguise this distinctness” (Ibid.). This means that the metafictional technique of frame-breaking seeks to make evident that though reality and fiction may be constructed on the same premises, within the same frames, it is to some extent also necessary to separate these worlds. Kaufman criticizes the Hollywood industry for planting illusions when producing utopian fictions, which may color the expectations in the viewer’s reality, and in this relation Kaufman advocates that one does not take Hollywood fictions as a truthful depiction of reality. By commenting on the damaging effect which fiction may have, Kaufman indicates how a certain degree of responsibility is attached to the task of producing fiction, since it affects our realities, and he emphasizes the difficulty of separating fiction and reality due to the strong and inevitable affinity which exists between these two.

The close relationship between the construction of fiction and reality has an effect on the individual navigating in the world. Besides the collapse of a clear-cut distinction between fiction and the real, the collapse of the grand narratives also plays a role for the individual. Now, little narratives are more dominating and individuals are more inclined to undertake a process of attitude relativism. The confusion about what is real and what is fiction may come into play when we construct our identity and may entail that our construction of the self can be seen as fictitious, and as if the individual is playing different roles when navigating in a somewhat confusing world. In this relation, Waugh writes:

“If, as individuals, we now occupy ‘roles’ rather than ‘selves’, then the study of characters in novels may provide a useful model for understanding the construction of subjectivity in the world outside novels. If our knowledge of this world is now seen to be mediated through language, then literary fiction (worlds constructed entirely of language) becomes a useful model for learning about the construction of ‘reality’ itself” (Ibid.: 3)

With this, Waugh indicates that through a study of fiction, one may learn how to construct one’s own reality since one may parallelize the construction of fiction with the construction of reality. The term metafiction throws light on this discussion and Waugh comments on the role of play in this relation: “Play is facilitated by rules and roles, and metafiction operates by exploring fictional rules to discover the role of fictions in life. It aims to discover how we each ‘play’ our own reality” (Ibid.: 35). Waugh points out that “all art is ‘play’” and that art with its playfulness has a “definite value” in our society and the real world because of its exploration of alternative realities contributing to the construction of realities (Ibid.: 34-35). With its self-

conscious aspect, metafiction points to the fact that fiction is valuable and with metafiction the nature of the realities which human beings construct and play out is explored.

As mentioned earlier, Kaufman expresses a wish to put forward something real with his art. For instance, he often expresses a need to illustrate what the “real” relationship looks like, and thereby he contributes to the idea that something real can be illustrated through fiction. This can be seen in relation to Waugh’s indication that what happens in fiction and what happens in reality can be parallelized and affect the individual. Kaufman’s idea about affecting the individual with something real is, however, a thought which struggles with the general idea of postmodernism. In *Postmodernism and the Contemporary Novel*, Nicol writes:

“The rhetorical thrust of postmodern social theory, taken as a whole, is that to live in postmodernity is to find oneself divorced from those aspects of life which are regarded as authentic, genuine, *real*. In postmodernity we are no longer able to appreciate the particularity of our historical location, we can no longer create original works of art, we live and work in ‘virtual’ space rather than reality.” (Nicol 2002: 5)

Even though Kaufman implies that finding something original may be hard or even impossible, he maintains that striving towards it is important. He stresses that he wants to illustrate something real, which he may turn to because of the fact that something “real” is rare in the film industry. This indicates that Kaufman’s way of being postmodern is different. It is as if he accepts the postmodern premises and tries to do something more or something else from this point on. Another example to support this thesis can be found when looking at his use of metafictional techniques as a postmodern trend. Waugh says: “Metafiction [...] offers both innovation *and* familiarity through the individual reworking and undermining of familiar conventions” (Waugh 1984: 12). Kaufman’s way of using metafictional techniques can be seen as an example of this since he in *SNY* uses a very unfamiliar innovative and exaggerated style opposed to the very familiar “real” dealings with for instance relationships, death and love. A notable innovation, which one may ascribe to Kaufman, is the exaggerated metafictional style which he uses in his art; it becomes fiction about metafiction. His reworking of metafiction almost moves the term to another level that lies beyond how the term is commonly used in postmodernism. Even though Kaufman by his use of metafictional techniques suggests that fiction and reality are intertwined, he also believes that something real can be communicated. And by his near re-invention of metafiction into a more dramatic term, he seems to lean towards the idea that something new, or even original, is still possible to attain.

Self-awareness in literature and fiction is not a new trend anymore, but rather postmodern trends, as metafiction, have been somewhat exhausted or at least frequently

used. According to Waugh this trend of self-awareness projected in art may rather be a positive development full of possibilities than a sign of literary exhaustion:

“...critics have discussed the ‘crisis of the novel’ and the ‘death of the novel’. Instead of recognizing the positive aspects of fictional self-consciousness, they have tended to see such literary behaviour as a form of self-indulgence and decadence characteristic of the exhaustion of any artistic form or genre.” (Waugh 1984: 9)

Waugh seems to be of the opinion that self-consciousness in art may be a way of grasping the reality we are presented with today. Here, it is especially important to consider our relationship to reality and fiction as being interrelated. A method of addressing the difficulty of separating these elements could be by making the artificial more visible – thereby the viewer is more aware of the construction and will not take this constructed reality as real. Metafiction is able to parallel the construction of our world with that of fiction and as Nicol expresses it: “fiction is fictional, but no more so than reality” (Nicol 2002: 7). Addressing art is addressing the world and metafiction is a unique tool when thematizing this. Metafiction does not seem to be a sign of exhaustion and especially with Kaufman’s work it has been proven how metafictional techniques still can be used in new ways in order to communicate something which is still relevant. With his works, Kaufman wants to hit something real and the interrelation between the poles of reality and fiction is constantly presented mainly through metafiction. Waugh points out how metafiction is not just about playing with structures and form but that it with its playfulness actually thematizes important issues:

“Metafiction [...] does not abandon ‘the real world’ for the narcissistic pleasures of the imagination. What it does is to re-examine the conventions of realism in order to discover – through its own self-reflection – a fictional form that is culturally relevant and comprehensible to contemporary readers. In showing us how literary fiction creates its imaginary worlds, metafiction helps us to understand how the reality we live day by day is similarly constructed, similarly ‘written’.” (Waugh 1984: 18)

With this description of metafiction, it becomes clear that the term poses relevant questions of the nature of our realities and this can also be seen to sum up what Kaufman sets out to discuss by his use of metafictional techniques.

## PARODY AND THE 'UNFAMILIAR'

In her work *Parody//Meta-fiction*, Margaret A. Rose argues that parody is closely related to metafiction, if not to say a form of metafiction. In the previous section focusing on the scope and function of metafiction, we emphasized the self-reflexive character of postmodern fiction, which comments on the complex and intertwined connection between reality and fiction. According to Margaret A. Rose, parody also contributes to this discussion and analysis of the relationship between reality and fiction, and she sees "parody as a reflexive form of meta-fiction which 'lays bare' the devices of fiction to refunction them for new purposes" (Rose 1979: 14).

The concept of 'laying bare' the devices and techniques of art derives from Russian Formalism, where Victor Shklovsky employed the concepts of 'defamiliarization' and 'laying bare' in order to "define the techniques which writers use to produce specific effects" (Selden et al. 2005: 32). 'Defamiliarization' refers to the effect that Shklovsky believes art should be able to create, and he says in his article "Art as Technique" that "The technique of art is to make objects 'unfamiliar', to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged" (Shklovsky 1917). This points toward a great emphasis on the process and techniques of presentation in order to affect our perception of art, which is also what lies in the concept of 'laying bare'. Although the Russian Formalists lacked the concept of metafiction, it seems that a certain emphasis on reflexivity within fiction and art is present, and the concept of 'laying bare' the devices and techniques of fiction fits very well with postmodernism's self-reflexive nature. Shklovsky's two concepts, mentioned here, directly influenced the dramatist Bertolt Brecht, who created the 'alienation effect' (*Verfremdungseffekt*) as a way to further affect and discuss the presentation and perception of art. By including unfamiliar and upsetting structures and elements in his art, Brecht sets out to make the audience actively respond to his art and become consciously critical observers: "To avoid lulling the audience into a state of passive acceptance, the illusion of reality must be shattered by the use of the alienation effect" (Selden et al. 2005: 90). This attempt to create a stir in the conventional perception and reception of art is also important to Kaufman. In his work he makes use of several upsetting structures and elements in order to make the audience respond actively to and struggle with the meaning, perception and intention of his films.

One of the elements which has been, and is still, used to defamiliarize and upset the conventional orders of perception is parody, and in this relation Mikhail Bakhtin's concept

of the 'carnavalesque' becomes interesting. In *A Reader's Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory*, the 'carnavalesque' is described as follows:

"hierarchies are turned on their heads (fools become wise, kings become beggars); opposites are mingled (fact and fantasy, heaven and hell); the sacred is profaned. The 'jolly relativity' of all things is proclaimed. Everything authoritative, rigid or serious is subverted, loosened and mocked." (Selden et al. 2005: 41)

In this way Bakhtin, like Brecht, underlines the importance of upsetting and defamiliarizing the artistic presentation. The carnival is an event where everything is presented as something different than it normally is, conventions of good manners are abandoned and people are imitating and parodying other people, social positions, conventional behaviour, styles, etc. This becomes a strong metaphor since parody in this context can be seen as authorized transgression with the purpose of making people actively respond to the presentation in question. People are incited to see things from a different viewpoint than usual, and the exaggerated style presented with the carnivalesque enhances their perception. Consequently, parody becomes a technique which allows for a text to critically comment on the parodied, the contexts it is presented in, and not least the text itself. Hereby, the artist's intentionality comes into play, which also demands of the receiver that he or she has enough cultural capital to decode the parodied elements. In this way intertextuality and parody are closely related, since they are both used to include and recycle other texts and thereby exercise self-reflexivity. Like intertextuality, parody makes it impossible for art to be owned by an individual, and, furthermore, it seems to require a common language between artist and audience in order to accomplish the intended connection between the text and the reader. This is something that Linda Hutcheon also discusses in her book, *A Theory of Parody*, since she is concerned with the fact that parody is much more than the sort of ridiculing imitation it was defined as in the past (Hutcheon 2000: 5).

Hutcheon and Rose agree on the fact that parody is one of the major modern forms of self-reflexivity. Hutcheon further argues that "the art forms of our century have been extremely and self-consciously didactic" (Ibid.: 3), which gives evidence of a certain kind of intentionality accompanying the use of parody. In *A Theory of Parody*, Hutcheon defines modern, or postmodern, parody with these words: "Parody is [...] repetition with critical distance, which marks difference rather than similarity" (Ibid.: 6). This is to say that parody is more than what can be understood as simple imitation, since parody adds a critical comment on the parodied and the text itself, often with the use of irony and a playful style. Hutcheon sets out to define modern and postmodern parody, since she argues that parody has



developed into a much broader and more complex concept than in the past: "It will be clear by now that what I am calling parody here is not just that ridiculing imitation mentioned in the standard dictionary definitions" (Hutcheon 2000: 5). She argues that modern parody's "range of intent" is remarkable as it reaches "from the ironic and playful to the scornful and ridiculing" (Ibid.: 6). What Hutcheon feels the need to make clear, is the fact that parody is a rather ambivalent concept that is used for more than just ridiculing and mocking the parodied. This is something that Rose agrees on, as she says:

"an ambiguity exists in the word 'parodia' – in that 'para' can be translated to mean both nearness and opposition. The ambivalence of great parody – from Aristophanes to today – of apparent empathy with and distance from the text imitated – can be said to be implied in the classical term itself" (Rose 1979: 33).

This kind of ironic ambiguity, which allows for a text to create both distance from and nearness to the parodied, can be seen as always present "[b]ecause parody always implicitly reinforces even as it ironically debunks" (Hutcheon 2000: vii). Hutcheon goes on to argue that the ambivalence of parody can be seen as a "double-directed" discourse, a term borrowed from Bakhtin's theory on parody. In this way, parody becomes dialogic in its voice and does not dismiss the parodied. Parody takes up a discussion with the texts and discourses it parodies, and although this is done in an ironic, playful or mocking way, it still creates a dialogue between the parodied and its new context, which incites the audience to enter into this discussion. The double-voiced characteristic of parody also manifests itself in the fact that it becomes "discourse *within* and *about* discourse" (Ibid.: 72), which leads us back to seeing parody as a form of metafiction. Hutcheon also sees parody as a kind of metafiction and she furthermore argues that Bakhtin's ideas of the carnivalesque are highly relevant in postmodern parody. Our language might still not be entirely free and democratized, and therefore "a battle [...] against uniform meaningless babble" (Ibid.: 71) is needed again, as Bakhtin believed it was in medieval and Renaissance society. Of parody as a metafictional element and of metafiction in general, Hutcheon concludes: "Contemporary metafiction, as we have seen, exists – as does carnival – on that boundary between literature and life, denying frames and footlights" (Ibid.: 73).

When discussing Hutcheon's theories on postmodern parody, the critic Fredric Jameson becomes important, since he disagrees completely on the function and characterization of postmodern parody. He claims that in the postmodern age parody has been replaced by pastiche, which can be characterized as "blank parody, parody which has lost its sense of humor" (Jameson 1988: 1963). What Jameson refers to with this claim, is that parody in the postmodern age has lost its ability to satirically, ironically and humorously

create a connection to the past and create effective political critique, and thereby it has become pastiche:

"Pastiche is, like parody, the imitation of a peculiar or unique, idiosyncratic style, the wearing of a linguistic mask, speech in a dead language. But it is a neutral practice of such mimicry, without any of parody's ulterior motives, amputated of the satiric impulse, devoid of laughter" (Jameson 1988: 1963)

This is clearly a claim which Hutcheon cannot support, since it does not fully cover the characteristics of postmodern parody as she sees it. She advocates a great difference between Jameson's idea of pastiche, which is a neutral and nostalgic imitation of past texts, styles and genres, and postmodern parody, which she argues is used to 'de-doxify'<sup>15</sup> accepted beliefs and ideologies. Jameson's view on postmodern parody has come to be the prevailing idea among most postmodern critics, but Hutcheon challenges this:

"The prevailing interpretation is that postmodernism offers a value-free, decorative, de-historicized quotation of past forms and that this is a most apt mode for a culture like our own that is oversaturated with images. Instead, I would like to argue that postmodernist parody is a value-problematizing, de-naturalizing form of acknowledging the history (and through irony, the politics) of representations." (Hutcheon 2002: 90)

In relation to postmodern artists like Kaufman, it seems useful to look towards Hutcheon's characterization of parody. She underlines that parody is a form of 'de-doxification', or value-problematizing, of established discourses, and that it is a metafictional double-directed discourse that, instead of simply dismissing the parodied, takes up a discussion with the discourses it parodies and entices the audience to take part in this discussion. In this way postmodern parody cannot be characterized as neutral and this fits well with the way Kaufman employs parody in his work. It would be wrong to characterize Kaufman's use of parody as what Jameson terms pastiche, since Kaufman's parody certainly does not seem to be neither neutral nor "amputated of the satiric impulse" (Jameson 1988: 1963). Furthermore, what can be seen as a clear difference between Jameson's pastiche and Hutcheon's parody is the fact that parody works to create difference rather than similarity to the parodied, whereas "In pastiche [...] difference can be said to be reduced to similarity" (Hutcheon 2000: 38). This is also significant in relation to Kaufman's work, in which the parodied often comes to function as a way of laying bare the differences between specific discourses.

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<sup>15</sup> Hutcheon uses the term 'de-doxification' to describe how postmodernism through various tools such as parody, metafiction, experimenting narrative structures, etc. attempts to denaturalize the constructed reality that ideology accepts as truth. The term 'doxa' is developed by Barthes and means public opinion or "The Voice of Nature" and hereby refers to accepted beliefs and ideologies (Hutcheon 2002: 3-4).

As we shall return to more thoroughly in the analysis section of this thesis, Kaufman employs parody in *SNY*, which can be seen to support many of the aspects in Hutcheon's characterization of postmodern parody; from the metafictional, double-voiced elements to the 'defamiliarizing' or 'dedoxification' aspects of the concept. A good example of the metafictional element is the fact that Kaufman parodies the artist and the process of creating art in several of his films, as seen with Craig the puppeteer in *BJM*, Charlie Kaufman and Donald Kaufman in *Adaptation*, and Caden and Adele in *SNY*. The parody used here, however, does not seem to be of a ridiculing and dismissing nature. Instead, Kaufman can be seen to use these parodies as a way of re-contextualising himself as an artist and discussing the artist's and art's role in today's world, that is the relationship between fiction and reality. This testifies to a use of parody in which Kaufman denies conventional frames between real and imaginary and between nearness and opposition to the parodied. In this way he shows the audience that we are both dependent on and independent from the object of the parodied. Although Kaufman claims not to give any answers through his work, he does however, engage in discussions on the relationship between real and imaginary through for instance the use of parody. Even if parody is one of the most conventional elements and methods of postmodern fiction, it can still be used to defamiliarize certain structures of meaning, styles, discourses, etc. which might have created an illusion of reality that needs to be shattered. Kaufman shows his intentionality with the use of parody, since he demands that the audience respond actively to his films and do not enter a state of passive acceptance.

## ADAPTATION

"Adaptation is a profound process, it means you figure out how to thrive in this world"  
(*Adaptation*: 00:34:10)

In Kaufman's film *Adaptation*, the viewer is presented with the fictional character Charlie Kaufman's struggles when adapting a novel into a film and by this connection between the title and the plot, the most straightforward meaning of the term adaptation is set forth. However, as it turns out, *Adaptation* not only thematizes the act of adaptation but the term is also presented as a concept which comprises many forms of adaptation. As the character Laroche is quoted above for saying, adaptation is also the process of finding your place in the world. In other words, there are many nuances of adaptation some of which this section will introduce.

In her book *A Theory on Adaptation*, Linda Hutcheon describes how adaptation is not only the final product but also the process of creation and of reception. She defines the product of adaptation as: "An acknowledged transposition of a recognizable other work or works" (Hutcheon 2006: 8). Hutcheon's definition encompasses here the straightforward interpretation, namely that with an adaptation there can be a shift from one medium to another. This could also be another type of shift, for instance a real story can be rewritten into something fictitious. The second perspective is that adaptation is a process of creation, and in this relation the adaptation is: "A creative *and* an interpretative act of appropriation/salvaging" (Ibid.). Along with this perspective, Hutcheon points out that when doing an adaptation the process involves both "(re-)interpretation and (re-)creation" (Ibid.). This means that one consults and re-interprets the original work and re-arranges it either to reject it or to state the importance of the essence of the work, etc. The third perspective involves adaptation as reception, and this type of adaptation is according to Hutcheon: "An extended intertextual engagement with the adapted work" (Ibid.). About this she further argues that adaptation is "a form of intertextuality" (Ibid.) since the adapted work will connote the text which has inspired the adaptation.

In this relation, Genette's definition of hypertextuality is interesting since it points to a more massive interrelation between texts opposed to how intertextuality interweaves texts. The hypertextual relationship does not only involve direct references, but also indirect ones: "What I call hypertext, then, is any text derived from a previous text either through simple transformation [*transformation*] or through indirect transformation [*imitation*]" (Genette 1997b: 7). Hereby, a text can refer to another text explicitly by a direct reference or implicitly by using or imitating elements from a pre-existing text. Genette's writes about hypertextuality:

“By hypertextuality I mean any relationship uniting a text B (which I shall call the *hypertext*) to an earlier text A (I shall, of course, call it the *hypotext*)” (Genette 1997b: 5). Genette points to a strong affinity between texts which for instance encompasses references, genres and interpretations and not only direct references. In case of *Adaptation*, there is a direct intertextual reference to the hypotext which is being adapted, namely Susan Orlean’s book, *The Orchid Thief*, and this can be seen as an example of Hutcheon’s idea that adaptation is a form of intertextuality. Besides this, *Adaptation* involves a hypertextual relationship to, for instance, style and genre since there are implicit references to the style of previous produced adaptations and the genre of Hollywood, which are also hypotexts. Hypertextuality thereby points to an interwoven network of texts, which for instance consists of imitations and transformations of other texts involving e.g. paratexts and intertextuality.

The use of characters such as Charlie Kaufman, Robert McKee and Susan Orlean in *Adaptation* can be seen as an example of intertextuality. The viewer may wonder to which extent these fictional characters mirror the actual persons and hereby the fictional characters create intertextual references to the real persons and this contributes to making the distinctions between fiction and reality blurred. Besides being just intertextual references, one may also consider these hypertextual since the real Kaufman’s adaptation, the fictional Kaufman’s adaptation and Orlean’s story altogether as texts point to common features in for instance the plot, style and construction of texts, which thereby emphasizes their affinity. In short, when pointing to the common elements in the construction of stories and adaptations in *Adaptation*, Genette’s idea of the interrelatedness of texts is exemplified.

In relation to Kaufman’s *Adaptation* all these technical definitions are relevant. For instance, there is a clear intertextual reference to a recognizable other work, being Orlean’s book, which the character Charlie Kaufman is hired to do an adaptation of. In this act of adapting, Charlie has many reflections about being true to Orlean’s book. However, the storyline built on Orlean’s book is re-written into an unrecognizable Hollywood drama in spite of his expressed wish to make a direct adaptation, namely a movie simply about flowers (*Adaptation*: 00:05:28). As it turns out, the adaptation as a whole develops in many directions. Not least because Charlie writes himself and his brother into the work, the re-interpretation and the re-creation become so severe that the adaptation of Orlean’s book becomes almost secondary to the story about the actual act of adaptation.

In *Adaptation*, the film guru Robert McKee, played by himself, comes to represent the easy way out of Charlie’s artistic struggles since he in his book *Story* gives all the to-do’s and not-to-do’s when it comes to screenwriting. At first Charlie rejects to give in to McKee’s structures, but in the end he consults McKee, embraces him and his answers and changes

his mind. In this way, Charlie adapts to the already underlying “system” of screenwriting and this represents another form of adaptation in the film, which is less technical but more connected to some sort of human adaptation, namely the choice to adapt to already set structures. The character Susan Orlean, played by Meryl Streep, comments on this human adaptation when saying: “For a person, adaption is almost shameful; it’s like running away” (*Adaptation*: 00.34.30). In Charlie’s case this is somewhat true since he, after stating that he will not indulge himself to adapt to given Hollywood structures represented by people like his brother and McKee, still compromises his artistic vision about making a film simply about flowers.

In *SNY* Caden has, as did Charlie, many difficulties when it comes to doing the original work he aims for. Caden had great success with setting up *Death of a Salesman*, which was a play already made and structured. His own masterpiece evolves over more than 50 years and during this period it expands, but is never finished. This mirrors the constant striving towards something original, which may not be possible. Caden had success with his adaptation of the already structured Miller-piece and Charlie is relieved and able to finish his script when allowing himself to turn to McKee’s rules. Though this might appear successful judged by some parameters, this adaptation seems secondary opposed to finding the core of one’s own artistic expression. Thereby, it can be discussed whether adaptation, on a more technical level, can be leveled with the next-best thing opposed to the original and whether one suffers defeat as an artist when adapting to already given structures.

Hutcheon points out that the original piece has been argued to have a privileged position over the adaptation: “...an adaptation is likely to be greeted as minor and subsidiary and certainly never as good as the “original” (Hutcheon 2006: xii). Furthermore, she lists the following words used about adaptation: “middlebrow” “culturally inferior” [...] “interference,” “violation” “betrayal,” “deformation,” “perversion,” “infidelity”...” (Ibid.: 2). Hutcheon does not concur with this idea, but claims that: “...adaptation is [...] a work that is second without being secondary” (Ibid.: 9). Hereby, she criticizes the notion that adaptations are inferior to the “original” work. She quotes Walter Benjamin for saying: “storytelling is always the art of repeating stories” and supports it further by repeating a substantial view, which, according to herself, has prevailed through centuries: “art is derived from other art; stories are born from other stories” (Ibid.: 2). Hereby, Hutcheon states how art and stories are always somewhat interrelated with other types of art and stories, and due to this steadfastness of recycling it does not mean that adaptations are culturally and artistically inferior. Hutcheon asks the question: “If adaptations are [...] such inferior and secondary creations, why are they so omnipresent in our culture and, indeed, increasingly steadily in numbers?” (Ibid.: 4).

Hutcheon firmly believes that adaptations have something unique to offer, which indicates that an adaptation can also be an original work. She argues:

“Stories do get retold in different ways in new material and cultural environments; like genes, they adapt to those new environments by virtue of mutation—in their “offspring” or their adaptations. And the fittest do more than survive; they flourish” (Hutcheon 2006: 32).

With *Adaptation* Kaufman seems to have moved into this category where the adaptation “flourishes” into something new. In *Adaptation* the fictive Charlie Kaufman borrows a storyline from Orlean’s book and transforms it into a Hollywood drama, which is only part of the plot. Alongside this, the character Charlie writes himself into his script where the viewer is presented with his difficulties and obstacles. This added layer where the viewer follows the screenwriter and the process of doing the adaptation is what makes this work new. Also, with this total re-invention of the original work by Orlean, it seems that Kaufman has managed to prove Hutcheon’s thesis that there are new and many possibilities when borrowing from other works.

Kaufman frequently uses recognizable elements in his works. In *Adaptation* for instance, Kaufman incorporates intertextual references to real persons like e.g. Susan Orlean, Laroche and himself, and he incorporates people who play themselves like Robert McKee and John Malkovich, and besides he has intertextual references to *Being John Malkovich*, McKee’s book *Story* and Orlean’s *The Orchid thief*. Hutcheon points out that part of the pleasure found in adaptations “comes simply from repetition with variation, from the comfort of ritual combined with the piquancy of surprise. Recognition and remembrance are part of the pleasure (and risk) of experiencing an adaptation; so too is change” (Ibid.: 4). This pinpoints what Kaufman does to a great extent in *Adaptation*. As mentioned earlier, Kaufman uses something familiar, as for instance intertextual references, and mixes it with something new and more unfamiliar, namely the incorporation of himself and his process, instead of doing an actual straightforward adaptation. In *SNY*, the issue of repeating is also set forth, which is illustrated with the many actors and understudies from Caden’s play who mirror real persons from Caden’s life. In short, there is a whole series of repetition within Caden’s play; a series of personalities which are first adapted by an actor, then by an understudy and then by an under-understudy. This takes us back to the issue of human adaptation since the adaptation of personalities reflects how the construction of our identity is also based on recycling; we constantly learn from and use other people when developing our personalities. This also stresses the interrelation between human beings; our connectedness is so severe that adapting something from another human being to yourself becomes inevitable.

## THE POSTMODERN INDIVIDUAL

In Charlie Kaufman's work in general, his interest in human existence, human interrelations and the relationship between the individual and its world is prominent. Therefore it becomes relevant to look into the question of what characterizes the postmodern individual. In the section 'The Postmodern Condition', we introduced Brian McHale's idea of the shift of dominant; that is the shift from the epistemological to the ontological. The questions he raises in connection with the ontological, and thereby the postmodern world, indicate what becomes attributed to the postmodern individual. With the questions "Which world is this? What is to be done in it? Which of my selves is to do it?" (McHale 1987: 9-10), it is indicated that the individual actively has to figure out how to navigate between different realities and be able to create an identity which can adapt to these worlds. This conception is further underlined by Lyotard's theory of the replacement of grand narratives by little narratives. The little narratives can be seen as different realities and discourses which the individual has to opt in and opt out of. So, the shift of dominant generated from the modern to the postmodern, which McHale and Lyotard attempt to define with the above theories, is clearly important to the theories and questions regarding the role and substance of the postmodern individual.

If we return to the questions posed by McHale in relation to the epistemological and the ontological, we might get an idea of the consequences and developments that the self has undergone through this shift of dominant. The questions raised in relation to the epistemological are the following: "How can I interpret this world of which I am a part? And what am I in it?" (Ibid.). Here it is clear that the 'I' is a central, unified agent in the world of which it has to make sense. With the questions posed in relation to the ontological (see above), it is obvious that the shift of dominant is crucial to our perception and understanding of the subject. Especially the question "Which of my selves is to do it?" testifies to a rethinking of the subject as unified and fixed. What McHale indicates with these questions is that in the postmodern age the subject is no longer conceived as a pre-made and unified self, rather the subject consists of multiple selves which are constructed from institutional and discursive practices in the surrounding culture.

The questions which follow from this discussion of the subject formation could easily be the ones posed by Jonathan Culler in *Literary Theory - A Very Short Introduction*: "Two basic questions underlie modern thinking on this topic: first, is the self something given or something made and, second, should it be conceived in individual or social terms?" (Culler 1997: 108). From a postmodern point of view, the self is not given; it is not essential, unitary and pre-made, and it should be conceived in social terms rather than individual terms. Robert Stam gives the following description of the postmodern subject formation:



“A self is constituted by acquiring the ambient languages and discourses of its world. The self, in this sense, is a kind of hybrid sum of institutional and discursive practices bearing on family, class, gender, race, generation and locale.” (Stam 1988: 120)

The conception of the self as a construction and as fragmented or multiple, is a somewhat common idea among postmodern theorists, and Michel Foucault is an important figure in establishing the postmodern philosophy and theories of what the self is: “The Foucaultian position denies the self any internal “being” – there is no inner and outer self, merely practices and ideologies that constitute the self as a consciousness in language” (Glass 1993: xi). Foucault emphasizes the fact that the individual is constructed from different discourses and institutions in its specific social, cultural and historical context and this leaves the self “decentred” in the sense that it is not a source or centre to which one refers to explain events. It is something formed by these forces” (Culler 1997: 109). This point of view denies the self any agency of its own, since it is completely constructed and determined by existing power structures.

These theories have been acknowledged and developed further by postmodern identity theorists as for instance Judith Butler with her theory on identity performance. What more recent theorists, such as Judith Butler, do not accept, though, is the total determination of the self, in the sense that the subject, or our multiple selves, can no longer function as agents. This becomes clear when Butler for instance argues that if identities are constructed from institutions, practices and discourses, which are human creations, then we have the possibility of changing the power structures which cause and create us. This kind of theory opens for a fight against the tight grip on identity, and Butler advocates that a first step in this fight would be to make evident identity’s constructedness (Leitch et al. 2001: 2487). Postmodern culture, art, philosophy and theory in general seem to find fault with the rigid concepts of identity and emphasize the idea of multiple selves and identities rather than a unitary and pre-made self.

In this relation, Kaufman’s work becomes interesting, since he also seems to be critical towards fixed concepts of identity and furthermore he creates awareness of identity’s constructedness through his films. When he explores the possibility and desire of becoming someone else (John Malkovich) in *BJM*, he playfully puts focus on the question of identity and the possibility to construct oneself in a different way. Furthermore, when he employs the concept of doubles and triples, etc. of the characters in *SNY*, he points toward the possibility of multiple selves and our performance of different identities. Nevertheless, although Kaufman points toward the constructedness of the self then he also seems to emphasize the fact that our lives are not left within a world of absolute relativism. Repeatedly, Kaufman

explores what can be seen as our inevitable life conditions and our permeating human instincts, and in his films he discusses the relationship between the constructedness of our lives, of our realities and our worlds and the pervasive human desires and life conditions. We are presented with images of the individual's struggles in a postmodern world, struggles which Kaufman points out that we have in common in spite of a world consisting of separate little narratives and multiple selves.

With the aim of creating awareness about the constructedness of identity and reality, Kaufman's films are also taking part in constructing the identity of the viewer as an active and reflecting interpreter. This leads us back to the central role of art in the discussion of our realities and our selves as discursive constructs. In the following section we shall take a closer look at the concept of identity construction in relation to art in general and Kaufman in particular.

## **IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION AND PERFORMATIVITY**

"Identity is not something planted in us to be discovered, but something that is performatively produced by acts that effectively constitute the identity they are said to express or reveal." (Butler 1990: 2487)

As revealed from this quote, Judith Butler argues that identity is not an inherent essence in human beings. Rather identity is constituted by how an individual acts within the meaning structures of its lifeworld, and by the specific acts, the individual performs and constructs identity. Since Butler emphasizes the constructedness of identity and reality, it is useful to situate her theories within the philosophical school of constructivism. Constructivist philosophy has developed in different directions as for instance constructivism in psychology, mathematics and learning, but as a foundation for these is the epistemological and philosophical thought of constructivism. As first suggested by philosopher Immanuel Kant, human cognition is essential in our understanding of reality, since we can never know the thing-in-itself, but only our perception of it. In relation to this, Martin Ryder says:

"the only reality we can know is that which is represented by human thought. Each new conception of the world is mediated by prior-constructed realities that we take for granted. Human cognitive development is a continually adaptive process of assimilation, accommodation, and correction." (Ryder 2009)

The constructivist thought is argued to have been highly influential in the postmodernist age, since postmodernists dismiss the static reality of objectivism, which is independent of human cognition. Due to this objection towards the objective truth, constructivism has been criticized for being a completely relativist thought, which creates a solipsism in which no knowledge

can exist outside the individual's own mind, that is the external world and other minds cannot be known to us. This is of course to bring the relativism of constructivism to a head and in relation to postmodernist thinkers like Judith Butler, solipsism is not a risk. She does, however, emphasize that reality and identity are created through the power discourses of our society and therefore an objective and static reality does not exist.

If our identities and realities are constructed through different discourses, as postmodern theoreticians claim, then it becomes important to consider which role art plays as a constructing discourse. Whether a novel, poem, film or song, the form of address demands identification from the receiver, and as Culler points out: "identification works to create identity" (Culler 1997: 113). As pointed out previously, Kaufman points to the fact that art can have a bad effect on us as receivers, since it might alienate us from each other and ourselves through our culture's constant commodification (cf. Manifesto). This viewpoint also testifies to Kaufman's concern with the way that existing discourses of power construct our identities and realities. As argued above, his agenda is to make evident the constructedness of our identities and our realities, and by doing so, attempt to subvert the power structures that exist within his domain; namely American film, and art in a broader perspective.

When Kaufman enters the discussion of how art and discourse construct identities, he repeatedly returns to the issue of artistic identity and in this metafictional way addresses his own constructedness and performance as an artist. This is obvious in *Adaptation*, where Kaufman incorporates the character Charlie Kaufman, and in *SNY* where he also uses the identity performance of an artist as an analogy of identity construction and performativity in general. The character Caden Cotard constructs a play in which he directs someone else to play him in order to understand himself as artist and human being. Kaufman hereby brings the performativity and constructedness to a head and he comments on the layered meaning of 'the artist' in this relation, since the artist is both a creator of identity discourse and created through identity discourse. By using this analogy of the artist in the majority of his films, Kaufman is able to discuss both the role of the constructing discourse and the constructedness of our realities and identities, and how these are often inseparable elements. Furthermore, he is able to comment on the responsibility he believes an artist has towards the receiver, when knowing that life imitates art, which imitates life, which again imitates art, etc., which is a kind of dialectic process. Furthermore, he touches on the way this dialectic extends to the relationship between discourse and identity construction, since both discourse and identity can be seen as representing and producing at the same time.

This kind of dialectic view on identity construction is interesting in relation to the theories of Judith Butler, whose work on identity construction and performativity is described

by Sara Salih as “part of a process or a becoming which has neither origin nor end; indeed, in which origin and end are rejected as oppressively, perhaps even violently, linear or ‘teleological’ (i.e. moving towards a specific end or a final outcome)” (Salih 2002: 3). This way of working represents her thinking and theories of identity, which in its construction can be considered a dialectic process. Her theories are influenced by the philosopher G.W.F. Hegel’s (1770-1831) notion of dialectic, which can be defined as the philosophical analysis based on a thesis which is negated by an antithesis and resolved by a synthesis, which is not final but becomes the next thesis. Salih juxtaposes the dialectic way in which Butler works with her theories of performative identity, since the constant and open-ended process of identity performance and construction is always in focus. This never ending process of creation without origin or end seems to be reflected well by Caden Cotard’s play in *SNY*, since it keeps expanding and never has a finished result. The only thing that can end the somewhat exhausting process of the play is death, and this testifies to the ongoing dialectic of life’s constructedness, which only ends when life itself does.

Judith Butler argues that since identity is a performance based on cultural expectations and conventions, it can have no natural origin, no pre-made essence and it can never, or rather should never, become fixed and static. The dialectic way of thinking attests to the fact that Butler advocates for “actions that will ‘resignify’ our received meanings – actions that will lead to a ‘proliferation’ of the ‘constitutive categories’ into which all selves are now constrained to fit” (Leitch et al. 2001: 2486). Butler’s theory on identity performance is based on J.L. Austin’s theory on performative speech acts, which Jacques Derrida also includes in his philosophical and literary theories. Performative speech acts refer to the idea that words and language become “citational repetitions” (Ibid.) that constitute a truth and a reality to its speakers; that is, reality is created through our use of language. This is also the case with the identities we consider real and natural, as Butler for instance exemplifies with our gender identities. The dominating discourses have already defined what it is to be a “real” woman or a “real” man and when we live by these conventions, we perform a specific identity of being a woman or a man. Although some identity performances can be seen as more inherent than others, as for instance gender and sexuality, this idea of identities as performances is one which can be seen as applicable to all kinds of identities. This appears also to be the case when Kaufman uses the performance of artistic identity as an analogy of identity construction and performance in general in several of his films<sup>16</sup>.

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<sup>16</sup> It is relevant to mention that in the films where Kaufman does not use the artist to discuss the constructedness of our reality and identities, he still engages in this discussion. This is for instance the case with both *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* and *Human Nature*. In *Eternal Sunshine* he uses the memory erasure treatment to put focus on what most certainly is a construction of reality, and in his comedy *Human Nature*, identity

When Butler calls for an awareness of the constructedness of identity and a resignification of our perceptions of different identities, it is to make people question and destabilize “the very distinctions between the natural and the artificial, depth and surface, inner and outer” (Butler 1990: 2489). In *The Norton Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism* Judith Butler is introduced as having the following goal:

“In a limited sense the goal is to create more space for and recognition of the various actions performed daily in a social landscape blinded and hostile to variety. But the broader goal is a general troubling, an attempted unfixing, of the links between acts, categories, representations, desires, and identities.” (Leitch et al. 2001: 2487)

These goals can be seen as constituting a somewhat political agenda and Butler is also an important thinker within gender, feminist and queer theories, which often are concerned with political issues. But in general, Butler claims that normative identity is a straitjacket and demands a homogeneity which is unrealistic and limiting in its scope. Unlike the psychoanalytical theoretician James M. Glass, who is rather troubled by what he calls the postmodern “praising and celebration of the multiplicity of self” (Glass 1993: 4), Butler seems to advocate the necessity of a world which makes room for multiple identities. Whereas Glass sees the multiplicity of selves as resulting in a painfully fragmented, schizophrenic and sickening world, Butler argues that we cannot have what she calls a ‘pure’ identity, instead we need a culture in which different identities and selves can exist, not as fragmented but as coexisting (Butler 1990: 2487).

As it is in present society, Butler argues that “social power hardly leaves us much freedom to choose our ways of being in the world” (Ibid.), and this calls for a questioning of identity performativity, which will create awareness of the powerful social forces which create our identities. Kaufman and Butler seem to agree on the fact that the postmodern language such as metafiction, parody and defamiliarizing are useful tools in the discussion of identity construction and performativity. Furthermore, Kaufman’s focus on adaptation of the self in several of his films creates attention of the postmodern individual’s struggle with his or her identities. If our identities are in fact discursive constructs which become real to us when we perform them, then we are ambivalently left with both the freedom to choose how our identity should be constructed and the knowledge that our identities are not essential but constructed from the discourses of power, which we might not have the power to change. This leaves us with the question of how to make sense of the arbitrariness of identity and the lack of control over the construction of our selves. Kaufman appears to feel a responsibility to create a

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construction is clearly an issue as an uncivilized man who lived his whole life isolated from other people is captured and instructed by force into being a civilized gentleman.

discourse which both discusses the identity performance of the artist and the receiver, since this can be seen as an analogy to the dialectic in identity construction in general.

In relation to the identity performance of the artist, it becomes relevant to link this concept to our earlier discussion of Kaufman's cultural identity, which as discussed in the section 'Approaching Charlie Kaufman', evolves greatly around his desire for authenticity. In connection herewith, it is interesting to pose the question of whether authenticity is something you can perform as part of your identity. Offhand, authenticity and performativity seem contradictory, but in relation to Butler's theory, authenticity would be something which we perform just as we do all other aspects of identity. This is due to the fact that we have a specific perception of what authenticity means and when being authentic, we perform that perception. This is interesting in connection with the authenticity Kaufman attempts to manifest as part of his artistic and cultural identity as he can be said to 'brand' himself the authentic artist through his performance. Nevertheless, Kaufman seems to underline the difficulties of performing authenticity, when he problematizes and parodies the desire for authenticity in several of his characters (cf. 'The Desires of Kaufman's Characters'). This may attest to Kaufman's awareness of the performativity and constructedness of our identities and realities, even when it comes to authenticity.

## **EXISTENTIAL FREEDOM AND HUMAN INTERRELATIONS**

In *SNY* it is evident that Kaufman is concerned with themes such as the human condition and human interrelations. Issues such as death, loneliness, love relations and how we (per)form our lives are prominent in the film and articulate a familiarity to the viewer as opposed to the film's experimental and somewhat upsetting structure. When mapping out Kaufman's postmodern poetics, these ontological themes become important as he continually centralizes them in his works. As argued in 'The Postmodern Condition', McHale emphasizes that an ontological focus is dominating postmodernism and this seems adequate when approaching Kaufman's work. Existentialism and life philosophy are ontological philosophies that share some of the postmodern ideas as for instance the constructedness of our lives and the focus on little narratives rather than grand narratives. Furthermore, existentialism and life philosophy underline how the relationship to the Other is part of the human condition as the other person influences our construction of reality and self. In the following sections we will elaborate on central aspects of existentialism and life philosophy which become important to the analysis of *SNY*. In doing so, we will present ideas of Sartre, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Løgstrup and Buber.

### **CHOOSING YOUR LIFE**

As presented above in 'The Postmodern Individual', it is a goal for the individual in a postmodern world to be more conscious and active in terms of choosing his or her own life and identity. As also thematized by many prominent figures in the sphere of life philosophy and existentialism, individuals are the centre of their lives and they can to some extent choose the life they want to live. In this relation, it becomes interesting to look into some of the thoughts of Kierkegaard, Nietzsche and Sartre, who all present the idea that you are free to choose and form your life, or in Lyotard's terminology, your own little narrative. In a postmodern context, it can be pointed out that we are subjects to dominating constructed power and meaning structures and that the individual has the possibility of choosing between these structures, difficult as it may be. First, the individual has to become aware that it is in fact a subject to dominating power and meaning structures and that it possesses freedom to navigate between these. Then, the individual has to engage in the task of being active and conscious in terms of relating to the reality dominated by these various structures and in this lies the individual's freedom to choose the shape of his or her life. One may adapt to given meaning structures<sup>17</sup> or try to escape or change these, but either way the individual holds the

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<sup>17</sup> The idea of the passive individual who is not aware of his or her existential choice and passive in terms of pursuing such a thing corresponds to Kierkegaard's idea of the "bourgeois philistine" (in Danish: spidsborger). As

responsibility for this choice. Regarding Kaufman's films this is a subject which becomes interesting since the viewer is constantly confronted with characters who face existential problems connected to the issue of constructing and choosing their lives in a postmodern world.

Already in 1843, Søren Kierkegaard expresses the point of view that human beings must choose their ways of life, which he propounds in his work called *Either-Or* (original title: *Enten-Eller*). As revealed by the title this work focuses on the possibilities and mechanism of choices which are related to human life. Kierkegaard is of the opinion that the vast number of possibilities available to the individual contribute to the fact that the individual is filled with dread arising as a result of the freedom and independence which he or she is presented with (Jessen 2004: 148-153). Solomon argues in his book *Existentialism* that *Either-Or* manifests that "human existence [...] is choice" and it is expressed in the work that "the crucial thing is rather choice itself, because it is through choice that humans discover and create themselves" (Solomon 2005: 1). Understood in this way, choices are a fundamental part of the human life condition and Kierkegaard believes that human beings are responsible for the shaping of their own lives and that one must bring passion, authenticity and sincerity to one's choices.

The much later Jean-Paul Sartre ascribes freedom as being an essential part of human life and this echoes Kierkegaard's philosophy. Sartre is famous for stating that for human beings existence precedes the essence, which means that there is no given and predetermined essence of a human being, which can be paralleled with the predominant postmodern incredulity towards pre-given structures. First comes the existence of a human being, then its essence is formed, which contrasts how the existence-essence concept works in relation to for instance a specific object. Here, a craftsman has an idea of a function and a sketch before creating it and so the object's essence precedes its existence. For human beings there is no sketch, which means that we choose and form our lives; there are no preexisting orders and structures that determine the essence of human beings; we create and choose our existence ourselves, according to Sartre (Sartre 1996: 28-33). As will be introduced later on, this task is far from easy, but is rather problematic and does often entail feelings as anxiety and dread.

In between Kierkegaard and Sartre, Friedrich Nietzsche stated, as mentioned earlier, the death of God and the fact that human beings face a re-evaluation of all values,

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defined in the journal article *Kierkegaard on the Limits of Christian Epistemology*: "...the bourgeois philistine is the accidental man who takes no interest in how his will is determined [...]. He lives what appears to be a life of civic virtue simply because he can't envision any alternative. He suffers from a failure of imagination and has no deep interest in the life he lives" (Wisdo 1991: 105).



meaning that finite answers in questions of morals, ethics and way of life cannot be found in for instance religion or other dominating grand narratives. In *The Antichrist* Nietzsche points out: "Let us not underestimate this fact: that we ourselves, we free spirits, are already a 'transvaluation of all values.' A visualized declaration of war and victory against all the old concepts of 'true' and 'not true'" (Nietzsche 1918: 36). The individual is left with the task of setting the values which he or she wishes to live by. This adds up to the conclusion that meaning, values and guidelines for true and false cannot be found by turning towards metaphysical concepts, such as God, and cannot be explained by something supernatural. These structures must instead be generated directly from human beings. Nietzsche's theory involves the view that human beings should move the focus from the religious to the secular and in this way his theory can be read as an encouragement to reconsider the validity of all constituted power and meaning structures, cf. his wanting to re-evaluate all values. This means that not only religion but also governments, communities, traditions, family norms should be reconsidered and re-evaluated.

Nietzsche's idea of God's death and that the individual is free are attitudes which Albert Camus and the two prominent French existentialists, Simone De Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre share. They further argue that this freedom may provoke a so-called nausea coming from the dread which overwhelms the individual when facing this all-encompassing openness and the inescapable responsibility attached to it, which may also contribute to a feeling of absurdity and meaninglessness regarding your existence (Sartre 1996: 33-36). Sartre states that human beings are "condemned to be free" indicating that human beings cannot escape their freedom, but are bound to choose a life project and to be responsible for all the choices and actions linked to this: "I am absolutely free and absolutely responsible for my situation" (Sartre 1969: 509). You cannot even escape choosing by not choosing since this in itself is a choice: "To make myself passive in the world, to refuse to act upon things and upon Others is still to choose myself" (Ibid.: 556). Summed up, the individual possesses the freedom to choose his or her life and carries the responsibility hereof.

As mentioned, this freedom may entail some sort of fear and dread – or even nausea – since the openness reminds the individual that he or she is alone in determining right and wrong. This idea of an absolute freedom can, however, be questioned since one may argue for several factors which can be said to limit the freedom of human beings. As pointed out with Judith Butler in the previous section, we are subjects to constructed power and meaning structures which may limit us when trying to navigate freely in the world, since the ideal of trying to escape these structures and choosing new constructions may be difficult. This can be parallelized with Sartre's idea that we are not determined by a pre-given

essence and that we can choose our own life projects but that this freedom also entails some restrictions, which the following will introduce.

David Detmer points out in his book *Freedom as a Value*, in which he discusses Sartre's attitude toward freedom, that Sartre has been frequently criticized for his idea of absolute freedom, because of the fact that there will always be circumstances which human beings cannot control (Detmer 1986: 36). Human beings are for instance powerless in terms of choosing which color, sex or nationality, etc., they are born with, and Sartre has been criticized for not taken this into consideration. Nevertheless, these circumstances are in fact considered by Sartre<sup>18</sup>, who for instance deals with facticity describing how the nationality, sex and color which a person is born with are unchangeable circumstances. In spite of the restrictions which this facticity may produce, human beings are free in terms of how they choose to deal with the circumstances inherent to one's facticity. The individual must take over the responsibility for both the facticity and for the choice made in terms of how to relate to this.

Sartre's idea of the human condition is interesting, since this also encompasses his idea of a restriction of the human freedom. Detmer paraphrases the human condition as being: "the sum total of all elements which are found in every human situation" (Ibid.: 49). The human condition is with Sartre's words in *Existentialism and Humanism*: "...all the limitations which *à priori* define man's fundamental situation in the universe" (Sartre 1996: 54). This involves what is common for human beings, for instance that one lives and dies: "what never vary are the necessities of being in the world, of having to labour and to die there" (Ibid.). Such circumstances apply for every human being.

In terms of choosing your life, one has according to Sartre a wide range of freedom, but may also meet obstacles when engaging in freely chosen projects. According to both Sartre, Nietzsche and Kierkegaard, the individual chooses and shapes his or her own life and has the responsibility for it. There are also restraints to our freedom and besides those which are set forth in this section in relation to Sartre, there is another important factor to mention, which in its essence is very different, since it involves our relationship to other people. According to Sartre, other people constrain our freedom:

"the Other's existence brings a factual limit to my freedom. This is because of the fact that by means of the upsurge of the Other there appear certain

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<sup>18</sup> Sartre deals with four concepts attesting to the restrictions of the human freedom. These are: Facticity, situation, coefficient of adversity and human condition. We deal with facticity and human condition, but important for the concept 'situation' is that individuals have limited freedom because they are always situated: "my situation limits me in the sense that only a certain range of choices are possible within any situation" (Detmer 1986: 47). Coefficient of adversity encompasses those external factors which individuals cannot control and the idea that individuals cannot undertake any kind of project like e.g. deciding that a crag is really an egg and undertake the project of eating it for breakfast (Ibid.: 46).

determinations which I am without having chosen them. Here I am—Jew, or Aryan, handsome or ugly, one-armed, etc.” (Sartre 1969: 523-524).

The following section will elaborate further on this idea which will be contrasted to the life philosophical idea that the relationship to the other is actually rewarding. All this is presented in order to be able to discuss how the relationships between Kaufman’s characters are displayed and how the illustration of these is a way of addressing the problematics of the inevitable relationship we have to other human beings.

## THE RELATIONSHIP TO THE OTHER

When working towards defining the postmodern poetics of Charlie Kaufman’s work, it is necessary to look at his constant emphasis on human interrelations. In his films, great attention is given to the many aspects of human relationships, as for instance the relationship between the identical twins Charlie Kaufman and Donald Kaufman in *Adaptation*, the lovers Clementine and Joel in *Eternal Sunshine*, the love triangle between Craig, Lotte and Maxine in *BJM*, or the many relationships Caden Cotard moves between in *SNY*. Common to all the relationships Kaufman portrays in his work, is the ambivalence of both conflict and enrichment. The relationship to the other person seems to both restrict and expand the self, and most importantly it plays a crucial role in the creation and perception of self and identity. In relation to postmodern identity theoreticians as for instance Judith Butler, the theories on the relationship to the other person are interesting, since they contribute to the idea that we construct and perform our identities and realities.

In this relation, it is relevant to look into the philosophy on human interrelations discussed by existentialists and life philosophers. Common for existentialism and life philosophy is the perception that existence is always directed towards something, meaning that the fundamental ontology of existence is based on what takes place between a consciousness and the object it is directed toward. This phenomenological perception testifies to the importance of the relationship to the other person, which according to both existentialism and life philosophy is not only necessary to our being, but fundamental (Nørremark & Kristensen 2008: 1). An interesting difference between the two philosophical schools of thought is revealed, however, since existentialists such as Sartre tend to see the relationship to the other person as basically conflictual, while life philosophers as for instance Martin Buber and K.E. Løgstrup emphasize the possibility of a rewarding relation.

In several of Kaufman’s works, he underlines the fact that individuals always seem to desire a successful relationship to the Other and that this rarely is fulfilled. In this way, it appears that Kaufman agrees with the Sartrean idea that the relationship to the Other is always conflictual and doomed to failure. Nevertheless, he is not consistent in this viewpoint

since his films continue to discuss both the restricting and rewarding aspects of the relationship to the Other. In *SNY*, Caden Cotard's relationships to Adele, Claire, Hazel and Tammy are most often characterized by defeat and failure. Nonetheless, Caden experiences a moment of success in his relationship to Hazel the day before she dies. That this success of their relation only lasts a split second and is interrupted by Hazel's death testifies to the transience of the successful interrelation. In general and in relation to Kaufman's works, it proves important to discuss the restricting and rewarding aspects of human interrelations, since one does not necessarily rule out the other. Instead of revolving solely around a core of conflict and restriction of existential freedom, the human interrelation might be a kind of dialectic between the restricting and the rewarding effects of the relationship. Nevertheless, it is essential to point to the fact, as also indicated by Kaufman, that the conflictual side often dominates the interrelation since the successful relation cannot be maintained. In the following we will look further into this duality of the interrelation as it is reflected in the discussion between existentialism and life philosophy.

In Sartre's *Being and Nothingness – An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, he argues that “[m]odern thought has realized considerable progress by reducing the existent to the series of appearances which manifest it” (Sartre 1969: xxi). This attests to the idea of phenomenological ontology, which means that the existent has no underlying essence, but consists of its total of appearances. Accordingly, the perceiving consciousness occupies a central role in determining the nature of the existent, and this complicates the relationship between humans, since both individuals in a relationship are perceiving subjects objectifying the Other through the look. The paradox in the relationship to the other person hereby lies in the fact that my being can only be manifested through someone else's perception of me, and at the same time the other person's perception of me objectifies me and creates my being in a way which I cannot control. This compromises my freedom since I struggle with the task of seizing back control over my being from the other person, just as the other person attempts to seize back control over his or her own being from me:

“Everything which may be said of me in my relations with the Other applies to him as well. While I attempt to free myself from the hold of the Other, the Other is trying to free himself from mine; while I seek to enslave the Other, the Other seeks to enslave me” (Ibid.: 364).

To Sartre this clearly underlines how the relationship to the other is restricting, and in his play *Huis Clos (No Exit)* from 1944, he spells out this viewpoint for us with the famous words “l'enfer, c'est les autres” (Hell is other people). What is interesting in relation to Sartre's theories on our relationship to the other person, is the central role the other person inhabits in relation to the construction of my being. The other person can be said to become a

communicator between me and myself, since he or she, through the objectification of me, creates my being outside myself as a secret which I cannot fully come to know. This is interesting in relation to the postmodern idea that our beings, identities and realities are created through the powerful social discourses of our cultures, which can be said to compromise our freedom. It seems that a parallel exists here, since our existential freedom is compromised in both cases, and we have to struggle to win back control over our beings.

In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre describes the concrete relationship to the Other and enhances two dominating attitudes which human beings have toward the Other. Sartre's first attitude is altogether constituted by love, language and masochism and he defines this first attitude as being when a person "tries to assimilate the Other's freedom" (Sartre 1969: 364). Opposed to this is the second attitude which is constituted by indifference, desire, hate and sadism and which Sartre characterizes as being a freedom's confrontation with another freedom (Ibid.: 379). Sartre argues that "these attitudes are produced and destroyed in a circle" (Ibid.: 363-364) which attests to Sartre's idea that none of the two attitudes is primary, as he says: "neither of the two is really first; each of them is a fundamental reaction to being-for-others as an original situation" (Ibid.: 379). Generally described, the two attitudes we undertake toward the other person are both destined to fail and when this happens, the failed attitude will be replaced by the other attitude in a circular movement that continues and thereby sustains the interrelation in perpetual conflict.

This is, however, not how the school of life philosophy sees the relationship to the other person. The above mentioned idea that the other person becomes a communicator between me and myself, is a thought which life philosophers such as Løgstrup, Buber and Pahuus see in a positive light. This is due to the fact that as the relationship to the other person is both inevitable and necessary, it is also rewarding in the creation of a self. In the relationship to another person there is a unique interaction present which makes it possible for the 'I' to become this 'I' in the first place. In his work *Ich und Du (I and Thou)* from 1923, Martin Buber argues that the relationship to the other person (the I-Thou relation) is a dialogue and the only relationship in which the 'I' is able to constitute its being. In the encounter with another person the 'I' creates its existence and this makes the relationship to the other person rewarding. This dialogic relation is what creates and defines human beings, who according to Buber are in a constantly ongoing process of creation (Winther 2003: 105), which fits well with the postmodern idea of an ongoing construction of reality. Buber furthermore claims that the rewarding and creating relationship to the other person exists when we meet this person with a spontaneous and intuitive attitude, which is also an important viewpoint to the Danish philosopher K.E. Løgstrup.

Like Sartre and Buber, Løgstrup discusses our relationship to other people and points to the inevitable interrelation between human beings: "vi er hinandens verden og hinandens skæbne" (Løgstrup 1991: 25-26). Løgstrup says that due to this interrelatedness, we constantly shape and affect the life of the other human being: "Med vor blotte holdning til hinanden er vi med til at give hinandens verden dens skikkelse. Hvilken vidde og farve den andens verden får for ham selv er jeg med til at bestemme med min holdning til ham" (Ibid.: 28). The outcome of how we meet another person can therefore be significant in the shaping of the other person's life since we become co-creators of each other's existences. Each individual has a voice in terms of determining the success or failure of the Other's life and thereby also responsibility for how one affects the Other's life.

In *Opgør med Kierkegaard (Controverting Kierkegaard)* from 1968 Løgstrup argues that the relationship to the Other consists of different life expressions of which he characterizes some as being forced and others as being sovereign and spontaneous (Løgstrup 1994: 92). The spontaneous and sovereign life expressions constitute what Løgstrup proposes to be the rewarding aspect of the relation to the Other. These arise in specific situations where human beings collide and they encompass a positive outcome of our interrelatedness. Løgstrup for instance points to trust, mercifulness and the openness of speech as examples of this (Ibid.). For instance a sovereign life expression of mercifulness would be when one spontaneously throws oneself in the ocean to save another person from drowning – without considering the danger of oneself drowning. The sovereign life expressions exemplify how our interrelatedness is not only characterized by conflict and limiting to our freedom as Sartre expresses, but how these may also elevate the essence of our individual lives. These sovereign expressions demonstrate how we unselfishly and even spontaneously safeguard the life and wellbeing of the other human being (Nørremark & Kristensen 2008).

In relation to the issue of being spontaneous, Mogens Pahuus also points to the oversight of one's self in given situations, meaning that self-absorbedness is sometimes pushed aside when we are engaged in a situation with other human beings.

"I denne åbenhed, selvforglemmende optagethed, hvor man udfolder en aktivitet, som går af sig selv, og hvor man har sluppet grebet om sig selv, og hvor der altså bestandig sker forvandling, vækst i en selv, får man bestandig noget, modtager man noget, som holder en i ånde, holder en i gang." (Pahuus 2002)

Here, Pahuus points out how our lives can be transformed and elevated through our relations to other human beings. This type of human intercourse brings something to the individual's life and thus this sort of human interrelation is rewarding for the individual. Buber, Løgstrup and Pahuus all express the possibility of a rewarding relationship to the other person which

contrasts Sartre's idea of the permeating conflictual relationship between human beings. Nevertheless, the life philosophers make certain reservations since they point out that the rewarding and evolving relationship to the Other is momentary. For instance, Buber admits to the fact that human beings at some point objectify each other which changes the nature of the relationship. Løgstrup also makes his reservations by introducing the forced life expressions, as for instance resentment, jealousy and envy. When undertaking these life expressions, the individual is withdrawn and distanced from other human beings, absorbed with this feeling of being wronged and does therefore not enrich the Other's life. In this way the mentioned life philosophers all point out that the human interrelation does not only contribute to success in our lives but also limits our freedom. Nevertheless, they believe that there are in fact aspects of the relationship to the Other which can succeed, and this focus outweighs the reservations. Overall, this is in great contrast to Sartre's pessimistic view on the successful interrelation. A common point of criticism regarding both Sartre and the life philosophers is their somewhat fixed focus on either the rewarding or the restricting aspect. It seems unlikely that there can be no success in the relationship to the Other and on the contrary it seems naïve to have such a distinct focus on the interrelation as successful. This leads us back to the dialectical relation between the restricting and rewarding sides of the human interrelation, which is a discussion that Kaufman also expresses through his works.

The focus on human interrelations becomes relevant in the following analysis of *SNY*, since the interrelations that the main character, Caden Cotard, engages in become defining of his different life perspectives. In this connection, it is relevant to include the points made in this section on the relationship to the other person. Furthermore, this will be supported by and discussed in relation to the postmodern theories presented in this thesis. In the previous sections we have elaborated on the theories relevant to Kaufman's work in general. In the following analyses, we will apply the presented theories on selected aspects of *SNY* in order to reveal how they manifest what we consider Kaufman's postmodern poetics.

## **ANALYSIS OF SYNECDOCHE, NEW YORK**

In this section we will apply the theories presented in 'The Postmodern World and Individual' and 'Existential Freedom and Human Interrelations' in the analysis of *SNY*. The first analysis section will deal with the main character Caden Cotard's perception and construction of his reality and self. The second analysis section takes this a step further by focussing on how Kaufman uses parody to critically discuss different identity discourses and the constructedness and performativity in this relation. The third deals with the ontological themes prominent in *SNY* as for instance our inevitable human life conditions and the defining role of the Other. The analysis of *SNY* is an important means in the exploration of Kaufman's postmodern poetics which is the scope of this thesis. In the discussion section following the analysis, we will compare what we have mapped out as Kaufman's poetics with his own artistic intentions and agenda as presented in 'Kaufman's Postmodern Art Manifesto'.

### **CADEN'S PERCEPTION**

*SNY* revolves around the main character Caden Cotard and his experience and perception of the world he lives in, which is at times rather absurd. These strange elements often reflect the fact that the viewer is offered Caden's subjective perception and experience of the world; what he hears, sees and feels is presented to the viewer in all its absurdity. However, Caden does not produce all the craziness represented in *SNY* since there are many examples of absurd situations and strange factors which set the tone of this Kaufmanesque world. The first section 'Caden's Reality' will deal with Caden's perception in general whereas the following section 'The Mediated Caden' will deal more specifically with how Caden literally reads himself into several TV-clips throughout *SNY*. In short, these sections point to how Caden's perception is central to the focus of the film which testifies to the recurrent theme of constructedness of reality and self.

### **CADEN'S REALITY**

During this analysis of Caden's perception, we will touch upon the majority of the themes suggested in 'Kaufman's Postmodern Art Manifesto'. The first focus on the flow of time and its relationship to the permeating theme of death attests to Kaufman's expressed wish to deal with "something that is part of everyone's life" as mentioned in 'The Philosophical Kaufman: The Connectedness'. Freud's theory on life and death instincts along with Sartre's idea of death as being part of the human condition will here be used to support the idea of shared



life conditions, attesting to Kaufman's wish to express something honest about issues which people are familiar with (cf. Manifesto). In *SNY*, these "real" themes, which one may easily relate to, often contrast the form that tends to be confusing because of the mixture of imaginary and real and because of many absurdities.

The confusion produced by the mixture of real and imaginary, as also introduced in 'Kaufman Mixing Fact and Fiction', will in this analysis be connected to our theory on metafiction and enhanced as intertwined with Caden's perception of the world, since he often mixes real with imaginary. Furthermore, the Kaufmanesque universe of absurdity as presented through Caden's world makes Shklovsky's theory on defamiliarization relevant since this theory meets Kaufman's tendency of employing many unfamiliar and absurd elements which "increase the difficulty and length of perception" (cf. 'Parody and the 'Unfamiliar'). As pointed out in relation to Brecht's alienation effect in the same section, such unfamiliar or absurd elements encourage the viewers to become critical observers; Kaufman invites the audience to respond. Hereby, what we suggested in 'Narrative Desire' also becomes interesting since the viewer is always pushed forward by a desire to grasp the meaning of this layered work.

In short, the postmodern language in *SNY* is somewhat alienating and unfamiliar and this makes the more down-to-earth themes such as sickness, death and love stand out as familiar. Furthermore, the absurdities which produce this defamiliarization are metafictional means of making apparent that *SNY* is a construction which is to be met by an interpreting viewer. The focus on construction is at all times evident because of metafiction and absurdity but also, not least, since we through Caden's perception see how he constructs imaginary narratives which become part of his real world and how he absurdly starts performing the role of Ellen. Thus Judith Butler's ideas of identity construction and performativity also become interesting, which we will introduce in 'Caden's Absurd Transformation and Performativity'.

## **CADEN'S PERCEPTION OF TIME & DEATH**

In the opening scene, Caden lies in his bed at 7.44 and at 7.45 his clock radio wakes him up with an interview about writers' use of autumn as a theme in literature. The viewer learns that it is the 22<sup>nd</sup> of September and, as the radio host says "the first day of fall" (*SNY*: 0:00:45). The professor being interviewed explains that fall is seen as "the beginning of the end" and says: "If the year is life, then September, the beginning of fall, is when the bloom is off the rose and things start to die" (0:01:00). This introduces what the viewer is about to witness in this film, namely, the decaying years of Caden's life and his heading towards death. His

death occurs in the end of the film, where the actress Millicent becomes the director of Caden's play and of Caden's life. She dictates his every move and says to him as he walks through the devastated streets on set: "Now you are here at 7.43, now you are here at 7.44, now you are gone" (1:56:58). Just as it is predicted here, Caden dies at 7.45, which is shown by a drawn clock on the wall behind him which metafactively points to the fact that he is part of a fictional narrative and that his life is a construction.



Thus, Caden's time of death is the exact same time as when he woke up on the first day of fall in the opening scene in 2005 and this has a symbolic value. What is exemplified here is that from the point where the viewer is introduced to Caden, his life starts decaying and his inevitable death is thus built into the beginning of the narrative, as well as the prominent theme of death is forestalled. Later on, Hazel says to Caden: "The end is built into the beginning" (1:41:39) and this exemplifies how the introductory shot of the clock showing 7.45 in fact inscribes Caden's death. This line also points to the inevitable premise that all things with a beginning also have an end, as for instance art productions, stories and lives. As Caden says to Claire and his cast later on: "I will be dying and so will you" (0:41:41), which points to the fact that it is inscribed in all things living that these will someday die, also attesting to Freud's idea that we strive back to the inanimate state and that the aim of all life is death (cf. 'Desire and Freud's Life and Death Instinct').

The Kaufmanesque concern with those life conditions which human beings inevitably share is presented here, also pointing to the connectedness of human beings; we are all bound to live and die in the same world. This echoes Sartre's idea of the human condition, hence, the circumstances which human beings are limited by and a priori share as for instance death and the inevitable involvement with other human beings (cf. 'Choosing Your Life'). As we argued in 'Kaufman's Postmodern Art Manifesto', these are themes also frequently explored by Kaufman.

The drawn clock as a prop on the picture above testifies to the idea that the end, Caden's death, has been prewritten and predestined by a scriptwriter, which also suggests that for human beings death is inscribed beforehand. Thereby, there is a prearranged destiny in terms of unwavering human life conditions and human facticity, as previously introduced with Sartre, set in opposition to how we somewhat freely construct and choose our lives, narratives and identities. In the end, Caden is a powerless character who does not have a say regarding his choices since he is directed through an earpiece and thus becomes the definition of Kierkegaard's bourgeois philistine as a passive individual (cf. 'Choosing Your Life'). There is an extreme example of Caden's loss of agency in his life when he is on the toilet and Millicent directs him: "Wipe yourself" (1:50:53). However, Caden does come up with an idea for his play: "I know how to do this play now, I have an idea, I think, if...", but here he is interrupted by Millicent, directed and forced to: "Die!" (2:00:00). Here Millicent's voice as director, is a symbol of what is inscribed in Sartre's term of facticity; she upholds that we cannot escape our own death. Even though Caden earlier expressed a longing for it all to be over (1:41:33), he demonstrates here that he also wants to preserve his life, since he cannot stop producing artistic ideas and clearly expresses a need to "prolong the journey" as quoted from Freud in 'Desire and Freud's Life and Death Instinct'. With Caden it is thus demonstrated how a struggle or duality between Freud's life preserving instinct and death instinct takes place; Caden is both "aching" for closure and for progress in his art.

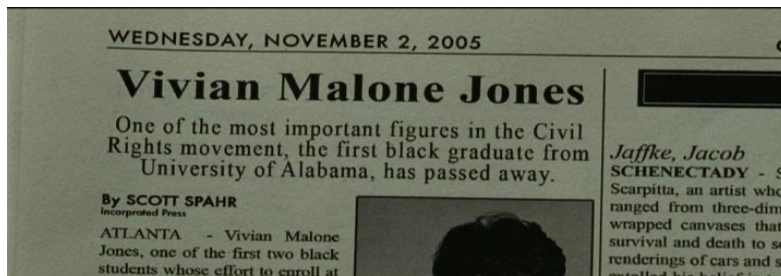
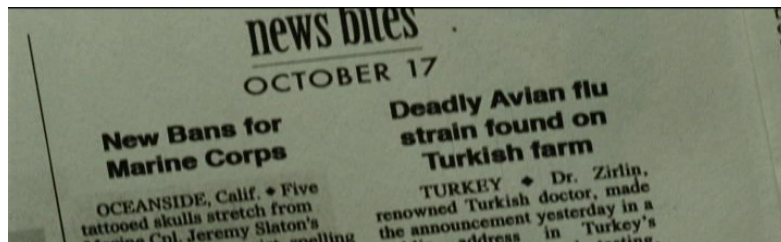
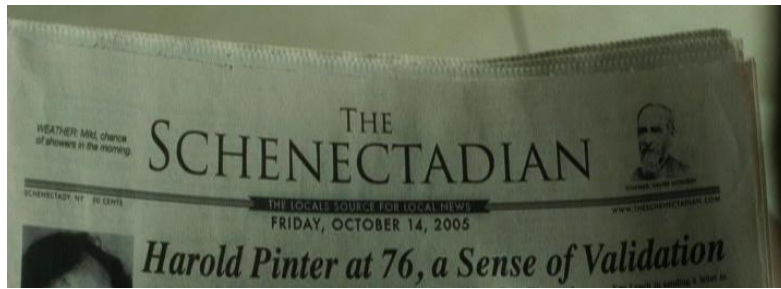
Death continues to be a permeating theme throughout the film as indicated in the opening scene introduced by Olive's song that for instance has the line: "and when I'm buried and I'm dead, Upstate worms will eat my head" (0:00:31). This focus is instantly supported by the radio host, who interrupts Olive's song that fades out, uttering the prophecy that things start to die. Shortly after, Caden notes "I don't feel well" (0:02:37), which introduces the also prominent focus on sickness, and he goes to the mailbox in which he finds a magazine addressed to him called 'Attending to your Illness'.



This becomes a portent of the following events where Caden is sent to a variety of doctors, such as an ophthalmologist, a neurologist, an urologist and a periodontist, and it introduces Caden's dominating paranoia in relation to illness and death along with his constant focus on these themes. Caden proclaims to the people around him quite early in the film that he is dying, even though a definite diagnosis is never established. As it turns out, Caden survives most of the people closest to him, namely Adele, Olive, Hazel and Sammy, which suggests that Caden's idea of his imminent death is mostly in his mind and thereby somewhat delusional.

Caden's constant focus on death is further underlined by the fact that he is completely off in his perception of time, which in Caden's experience progresses unnaturally fast, leading his life towards its end. That time is an important theme is illustrated by its evident effect on the characters, who are clearly aging, and by a frequent focus on calendars, dates and clocks. This represents Caden's perception and reminds the audience that time is progressive and pushes human beings closer to death by the second, thus becoming a marker of death.

In the opening scene, the viewer is, on the face of it, introduced to a typical morning at the Cotard's; Olive is watching cartoons, Caden reads the paper and Adele makes breakfast for Olive. However, the alert reader may observe that something happens here with the progression of time. When Caden woke up, the radio host stated that it was the 22<sup>nd</sup> of September. Shortly after at the breakfast table, Caden sits with his newspaper and falsely proclaims that Harold Pinter died, when the voice on the radio reveals that it is October 15<sup>th</sup>, only the newspaper shows October 14<sup>th</sup>. This confusion continues as Caden comments on an article about a deadly flu found in Turkey, the newspaper here showing October, 17<sup>th</sup>. Caden puts down the paper and goes to the fridge to get some milk, looks at the carton on which the printed expiration date is October, 20<sup>th</sup> and says: "The milk is expired" (0:04:02) suggesting a time progression of three days or more in a few seconds. This progression continues as the voice from the radio states "Happy Halloween, Schenectady" (0:04:14) only to proclaim "today, November 1<sup>st</sup>" (0:04:26) all the while the date on the paper in the same instant shows November 2<sup>nd</sup> 2005, as Caden comments on the death of the first black female graduate from the University of Alabama.



The details presented here are not plastered out in the film, in fact, they are easy to miss, which suggests that Kaufman does not try to clearly illustrate a severe time progression. Rather, this discrete and extreme progression testifies to Kaufman's idea of enticing the audience to engage actively in the interpretation of the particular work. Due to this layeredness, the audience is invited to engage in a dialogue with the work more than once to discover more details and levels of meaning (cf. 'Narrative Desire'). On the face of it, this scene as a whole could be taken as one random morning, since the characters wear the same clothes throughout the scene and since there is a logical progress of events. But as the dates reveal, it is rather a whole discrete storyline encompassing a period of time. Since this illustrated morning is in fact a whole period of time, it is illustrated how Caden is generally preoccupied with death. It is apparently standard that he comments on sickness and death in the newspaper in the morning which is a preoccupation further underlined by his trip to the mailbox and details such as the expiration, or death, of his milk.

There are other little clues to support this discrete time progression. For instance, Caden grabs a bite of Olive's sandwich, which in the next clip is lying untouched on Olive's plate, also suggesting that this scene is rather intended to be understood as a scene compounded by various morning episodes testifying to Caden's subjective experience of time:



Overall, this scene suggests an existing pattern and routine in the daily life of the Cotard's and mirrors Caden's well-known experience that time flies as illustrated with the fast forward of time. As a result of the discrete film language used here, the viewer may have a similar experience to Caden's since this extreme time progression may suddenly strike the viewer and thereby come as a surprise mirroring Caden's experience that much time has passed without him noticing. Hereby, Kaufman discretely touches upon something real and familiar and elevates this with his distinct but discrete film language. The example with the sandwich supports the notion that days often look much alike due to routines and other similarities and therefore can be hard to separate from each other. The experience human beings have of time may not always correspond to real time and in our memory we may confuse days and dates due to similarities and routines. This is demonstrated with Caden in this scene, where time not only progresses unnaturally fast, but also occasionally moves back which is exemplified with the shift from the 15<sup>th</sup> of October to the 14<sup>th</sup>.

It is further demonstrated how Caden's subjective perception shows to be inaccurate compared to real time when Hazel makes a pass at him and he rejects her since Adele is only on vacation. To this Hazel says: "It's been a year" and Caden answers "It's been a week" (0:32:39). When he later on goes to Germany to see Olive, he meets Maria who tells him that Olive is tattooed and Caden yells: "She's a fucking four-year-old!" to which

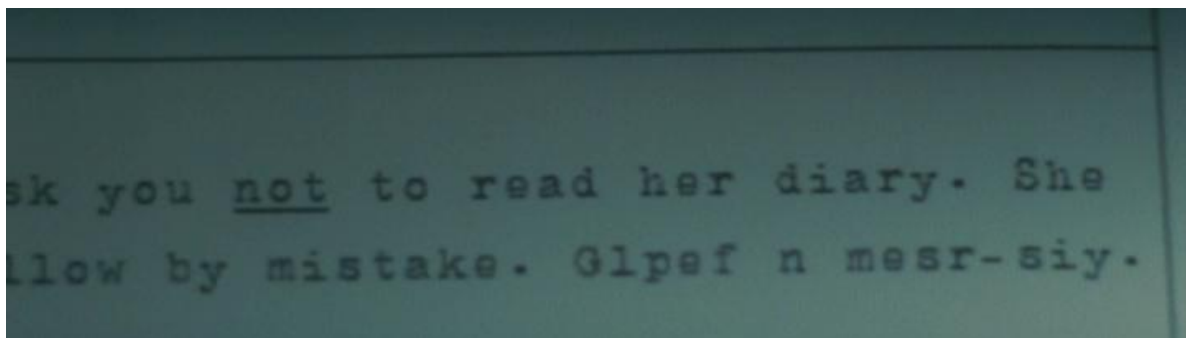


Maria says: “She’s almost eleven now” (0:50:45). In these examples Caden’s perception of time is off and he seems to be stuck in the moment where Adele left him. Also, this subjective perception of time can be characterized as part of a dream logic. In dreams it is possible to travel back and forth in time, to age in a minute, and to shift places in less than a second without it being weird because everything is possible in a dream. Caden’s time experience resembles that of a dream in which it is possible that one’s eleven-year-old child is once again four. Even though this film may be perceived as being only a dream in order to explain these alienating elements, these may also demonstrate how we in the construction of ourselves and our perception of the world often construct images which are pure imagination, images which play an important role when constructing one’s self.

## **CADEN’S ABSURD EXPERIENCES**

Caden experiences many absurdities throughout *SNY* and these do often not seem weird to him, but the viewer on the other hand may feel alienated because of these unfamiliar elements (cf. ‘Parody and the ‘Unfamiliar’’). Kaufman uses Caden’s absurd experiences to keep the viewer alert, since the sense-making of these elements demands an active decoding process (cf. ‘Narrative Desire’). First we will present examples of absurd details which appear in fragments to make the viewer alert and to mirror the absurdity Caden feels in his perception of the world. Then, we will present the more significant absurdities which tend to point to more familiar themes which Kaufman tries to depict in an honest way. Both these types of absurdities are part of Caden’s perception and influence the construction of his self.

After Adele and Olive leave Caden, Adele faxes a message to Caden asking him not to read Olive’s diary. The fax ends with complete rubbish which mirrors Caden’s experience of it. These words may actually be German, but since the viewer sees what Caden experiences, the words are incomprehensible. This alienating ending of the fax also suggests that the distance between Caden and his family has magnified:



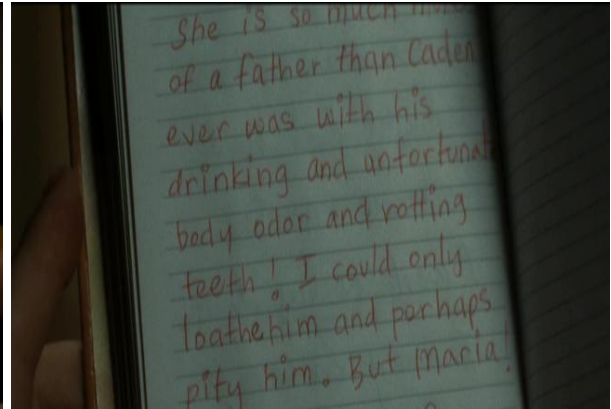
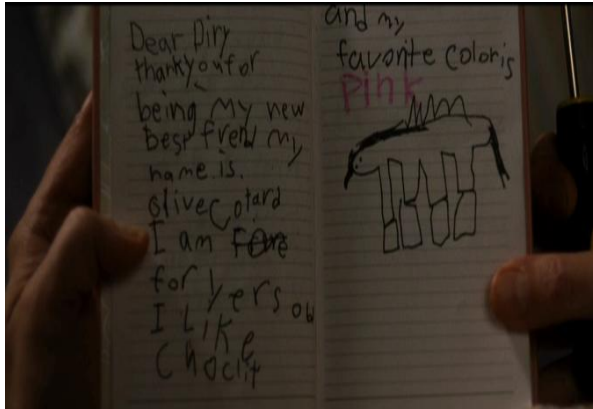
This exemplifies how Kaufman writes unfamiliar objects into his narrative which are intended to dialogue with the viewer who can produce meaning out of it. Thereby, such absurd objects may initiate a desire for meaning in the reader or alienate the viewer from the work finding it meaningless or pointless. This is also the case when Claire in a discussion about Olive and tattoos reveals her back and says: “Everyone is tattooed” to which Caden says “I’ve never seen that before” (0:48:02):



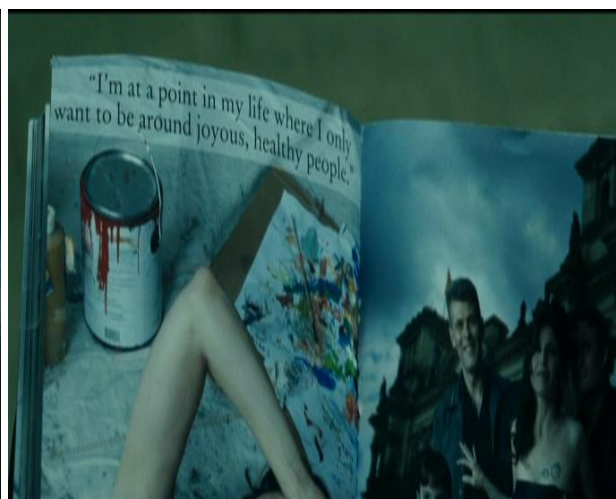
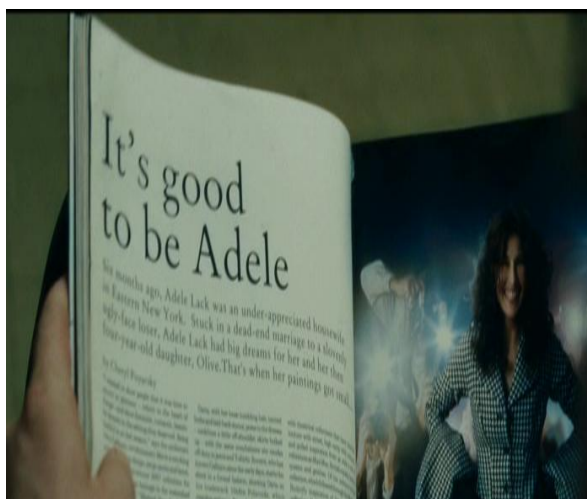
Since Caden and Claire at this point have been together for years, this is completely absurd. However, one may suggest interpretations, as for instance that Caden sees Claire as the ‘devil’ or other inferences. Nevertheless, this is rather an example of how Kaufman layers his work with unfamiliar elements for the viewer to struggle with, or to be amused by since the absurdities are comic in all their meaninglessness. A similar comic example is when Caden meets Hazel in New York and she updates him on the fact that she now has kids: “Twins. Robert and Daniel and Allan” (0:54:37). Such absurdities call for the individual viewer to produce his or her own meaning from the narrative and each interpretation serves as a dialogue with Kaufman’s work (cf. Manifesto). Also, these absurdities mirror the general desire of human beings to elucidate meaning from what is presented, as argued earlier in relation to narrative desire. Thereby, these unfamiliar or absurd elements also work metafictionally since they not only involve Caden but also the viewer’s process of making meaning out of these. This mirrors the common feature of constructing meaning which exists for the characters in *SNY* and for the viewer.

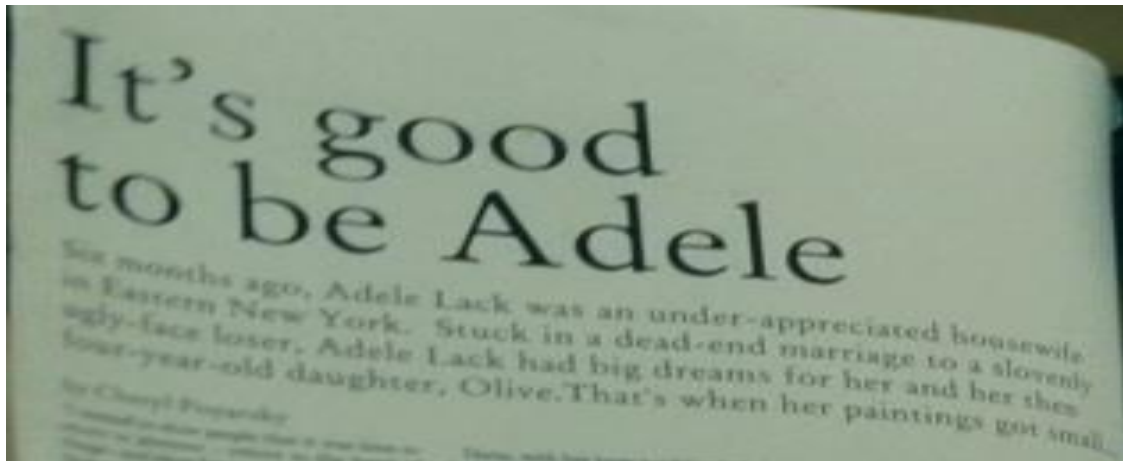
There are also examples of more interpretable absurdities, for instance when Caden does the exact opposite of the request in the fax and instead reads Olive’s diary. The first pages were written by Olive when she was four and still lived in the States. Oddly, Caden is able to follow her life in Germany since text is added to the diary from across the Atlantic:





Here, it is clearly illustrated how Caden's perception consists of self-produced images and text; his imagination produces a fictional narrative concerning Olive's feelings and perception of him. He imagines that Olive considers him a bad father and his aversion to Maria transforms into the specter that Maria has replaced him in his role as a father, hence Olive's words: "She is so much more of a father than Caden ever was with his drinking and unfortunate body odor and rotting teeth!" When finding out that Olive has two substitute fathers he hears Olive's voice in his head saying: "Dear Diary, Germany is wonderful, so many friends here. My new dads are great and handsome and brilliant directors of theater (0:49:57). Not only does he create fictional narratives regarding how Olive sees him, but from his paranoid thoughts he imagines Olive's fathers being great artists, attesting to an inferiority complex in relation to his art. There is a similar example regarding Adele's whereabouts and feelings when Caden at the doctor's office reads about her in the fashion magazine, Elle:





Apparently, Adele should have stated to this fashion magazine "I only want to be around joyous, healthy people" which is the complete opposite of what characterizes Caden at this moment. Also, the article illustrated above reads that Adele was: "Stuck in a dead-end relationship to a slovenly, ugly-face loser". This is another example of how Kaufman layers his works, since the viewer hardly notices this (except for when pausing the film), and this becomes one of those details that invites the viewer to consult this narrative several times. As is the case with Olive's diary, this article may be pure imagination illustrating Caden's fear that Adele is better off without him and it exemplifies how Caden cannot distinguish between what is imaginary and what is real. That there should be an article in Elle Magazine about Adele's failed marriage involving a cruel description of her ex-husband as being ugly-faced is highly unlikely. Rather, Caden reads his situation into his surrounding world and thus constructs an image of himself through Olive and Adele mirroring him as an inadequate father, a sick and repulsive man whom you can only pity and an unsuccessful artist compared to Adele and Olive's substitute fathers. Also, Caden's imaginations concerning Olive and Adele maintain him in a state of grief and self-pity. Instead of moving on and engaging in a successful relationship to Hazel or Claire, Caden's reality is stuck in the past. These self-produced images and perceptions are part of constructing Caden's reality since they weigh just as much as what really happens for Caden.

Caden's imagination thus produces a fictional narrative about his family. This illustrates what we suggested in our section 'Between Reality and Fiction: Metafiction' that reality and fiction are often mixed in a postmodern world, mirrored here by Caden's fictive imaginations as part of his reality. The impossibility of Olive's ongoing writing in her diary after they move to Germany is an example of a metafictional frame-break exposing the level of illusion. With such absurd and unrealistic events, the viewer becomes aware that what happens in *SNY* is pure fiction, attesting to the idea of construction and in this relation the similarity between the construction of fiction and of one's reality. On the other hand, as

Waugh also points out in her theory, metafiction can also reinforce the affinity between reality and fiction. In spite of the absurdity of Olive's diary writing, Caden's imagination regarding what his family thinks of him along with his construction of a narrative concerning their whereabouts are not absurd thoughts. Naturally, Caden thinks of his family who left him, and the viewer, who is committed to share Caden's perception, is let in on these imaginations. Thereby, the metafictional aspect might both enhance the viewer's experience that what happens in *SNY* is impossible and absurd pointing to it being a fictional construction but also these elements bring forth familiar situations and feelings to identify with.

The interlacing of reality and fiction in Caden's world is further illustrated when he is on his way to Berlin. On the plane he reads 'Getting Better' which he got from his therapist Madeline. There is a voice-over saying. "Life moves to the south, there's only a now and I am always with you. For example – look to your left" (0:48:14) and as he turns left, he sees Madeline. Caden expresses his confusion about her book but Madeline assures him that he is "unrecognizable" (0:48:49) and she lifts up her skirt and shows him her leg. Unable to react on it, indicating that he is still rooted in the thought of his relationship to Adele, Caden thanks her and Madeline is clearly offended that he does not react on her exposure. When Caden returns to Madeline's book, it reads: "I show you my leg, I stand close and you inhale my perfume. I offer my ripe flower to you and you deny it. This book is over" (0:49:06). In this way the lines between fiction and reality are transgressed due to the impossibility that this episode should have been foreseen, written and printed in over a million books. This may once again be Caden's experience which is at focus exemplifying his difficulty with separating real from imaginary, or, since it actually involves Madeline, it might not just be in Caden's mind but rather an episode marked by pure absurdity. Either way, it represents how Caden again reads himself into narratives, which in this case is Madeline's book.

Furthermore, the scene serves as a metafictional element since the construction of fiction is very obvious here where something is written as it happens and the author, Madeline, possesses the full control of the narrative. By suddenly cutting Caden off, it is indicated that she can even alter her printed narrative as she pleases. By pointing to the author's control (Madeline even has the power to prevent Caden from 'getting better'), Kaufman comically throws light on the author's role to text and reader and the absurdity enhances the focus on this. A more general Kaufmanesque notion is expressed here (cf. 'Tasteful Branding or a Revival of the Author?'), namely, that the author is not completely dead but still important since he or she dialogues with a reader through fictional works, which is done explicitly and comically in this scene. Also, Caden's role as the reader exemplifies

how we identify with fictional narratives and how these become part of our worlds and color our own narratives.

Madeline shifts from her statement that she is always with him to cutting him off and typical for Caden, he is once again abandoned since Madeline shuts down the narrative and their real-life relation at the same time. This rather absurd and comic scene metafictionally thematizes the author-text-reader relation which again explicates Caden's failure with women and once again it is demonstrated how the feeling of abandonment is frequently enhanced by the imaginations he reads into his surrounding world.

Overall, the absurd elements testify to how Caden perceives his world; how his reality consists of self-produced images which he often constructs based on his overwhelming fears. On the level of the reader, these elements have an alienating effect since they often transgress what is possible thus inviting the viewer to respond to the work as Brecht suggests. At the same time these elements enhance familiar problems and themes as for instance how to relate to the fact that time progresses fast and we are dying, how to achieve something in life before it is too late, how to be authentic, original and truthful in our lives and in art, how to deal with people abandoning us and how to perform and construct our identities and lives, or in other words how to choose one's life and fill it with meaning.

Hazel's burning house is for instance an absurd element which serves as an extreme example of an existential choice. When a realtor displays the house in the beginning of *SNY*, Hazel talks about the buy of this house as a scary decision because she is alone and as she says she is "concerned about dying in the fire" to which the realtor remarks: "It is a big decision how one prefers to die" (0:20:24).



Hazel decides to buy the house and later she dies of smoke annihilation attesting to the existential fact that we choose our lives and are responsible for the outcome of our choices (cf. 'Choosing Your Life'). Hazel's house may thus seem alienating to the viewer, while the message that we choose our own destiny is quite familiar; something which is part of everyone's life. Through Caden's perception, the viewer learns the difficulty of distinguishing between reality and fiction, as for instance exemplified with the unbelievable time progression, Madeline's instant interaction with the book while in the hands of its reader, and Olive's diary. It is also exemplified how the fictional images we produce are part of creating our realities and constructing our lives, since these become parts of our perception of the world.

### **CADEN'S ABSURD TRANSFORMATION AND PERFORMATIVITY**

In relation to Caden's subjective perception presented to the viewer, there are often lingual misunderstandings. When Caden consults Madeline they talk about the suicide of a five-year-old artist and Caden asks Madeline "Why did he kill himself?" (0:38:03) to which Madeline says "Why did you?" This triggers a reaction in Caden who asks "What?" and Madeline repeats: "I said, why would you?" Hereby, Caden's perception is exemplified as the centre of this depiction; the viewer hears what Caden hears. This misunderstanding revolves around his preoccupation with death whereas there are other examples that function as anticipations of Caden's absurd transformation into the woman Ellen. In this relation, Butler's theory on performativity is relevant since Caden comes to perform the role as Ellen.

When Caden calls Adele in Berlin, she cannot hear anything and shouts to Caden "Who is this....Ellen?" indicating that she cannot even recognize the voice of her own husband. This really rubs salt in the wound for Caden but also it forestalls his later performance of Ellen. Shortly after this phonecall, Caden calls an ambulance shouting in the receiver "I'm sick" to which a voice replies: "Maam?" (0:30:09) and he is also here mistaken to be a woman. There is a further anticipation of his becoming Ellen when he is at Adele's apartment and Adele's neighbor asks him: "Are you Ellen? Ellen? Are you Ellen Bascomb? I am to give the keys to 31 y to Ellen Bascomb" (1:11:06). To this Caden first replies with astonishment to be taken for a woman and asks her "What?" several times only to agree shortly after: "Yes, I'm Ellen". After cleaning Adele's apartment, as Ellen was meant to do, Claire accuses him of smelling like he is menstruating and asks him if he is wearing lipstick (1:12:51) which further indicates the shift which Caden is about to undergo.

Towards the end, Caden actively performs the role as Ellen Bascomb and the character, Millicent, who originally played Ellen, now plays the role as Caden. Here, Caden



again meets Adele's neighbor, who calls Caden "Ellen" and "young lady" (1:50:10). The neighbor gives him an earpiece and says: "Caden asked me to give you this", which indicates that Millicent has completely taken over the role as Caden while Caden performs the role as Ellen. Nevertheless, this performance is not sticking to usual theater norms in that Caden does not speak differently, for instance with a lighter voice as a woman, and he does not dress up as a woman playing this part, except for the feeble chosen costume in terms of a wig which rather serves as a parodic element. When he meets the neighbor, nothing indicates that Caden is a woman, which again contributes to a sense of absurdity. Also, this exemplifies what we touched upon in 'The Postmodern Individual' that we perform our identities and are discursive constructs. In particular Judith Butler's definition of identity as being "performatively produced by acts" is interesting here since Caden performs the role as Ellen the cleaner, agrees verbally to being Ellen and even wears a wig in his becoming Ellen, suggesting his performativity of Ellen.



Here Caden adapts into the role of Ellen while she adapts into the role of Caden, which suggests that when choosing our lives it is possible to perform another gender and perform multiple identities. In Caden's case, he performs several roles, as for instance the genius artist, the sick and dying man, the lonely and abandoned husband and Ellen the cleaner. He constructs these performances by for instance acting like Ellen the cleaner, repeating to everybody that he is lonely, sick, dying and abandoned. Also, Caden's performance as Ellen might be seen as a way out of his misery, as he says to Ellen: "I'm outta ideas, I'm dead" (1:49:17) and he thereby admits that he is not successful. Millicent takes over Caden's role and offers him the role as Ellen. Thereby, it is suggested that Caden may engage with a new role, a new identity, and try to succeed with this as he says: "I do like to clean" (1:49:54). In a conversation with the Hazel-understudy Tammy, she asks Caden: "You wish you were a

girl?” to which Caden replies “Sometimes I think I might have been better at it” (1:34:24) and as Ellen, he gets the chance to successfully perform the role as a woman or a cleaner. Millicent also directs his every move through the earpiece, and thereby Caden is in the shift to Ellen relieved of his burden of carrying and choosing his life; he is relieved from his role as a struggling artist and as an abandoned man trying to rise from his misery.

## **THE MEDIATED CADEN**

In *SNY* the mediation and representation of a self is a recurrent theme, and it initiates a discussion of how we construct ourselves and our realities, which is important in relation to the theme of Caden’s perception. Furthermore, this discussion includes how a self, different identities and realities are constructed and performed through the various discourses that surround us. In *SNY* it is interesting that when Caden Cotard is at home, that is the home he shares with his first wife and child, the media play a central role in the house and in Caden’s life in general. One of the first things we hear in the film is the radio that Caden listens to while lying in bed, and from there on the TV and radio are most often heard in the background when he is in the house. Occasionally TV clips are brought to our immediate attention showing commercials, images or cartoons. The TV clips play an important part in creating an awareness of how our surrounding media and discourses are active contributors in the construction and perception of our lives.

While an emphasized focus on the role of the media is considered conventional and at the core of postmodern society, Kaufman contributes to the subject in a distinctive way by spelling out to the audience how we read ourselves into the mediations and discourses that surround us. One direct way in which Kaufman conveys this theme is by letting Caden Cotard become a character in the TV clips that from time to time interrupt the story of the film. These mediated interruptions or contributions have the thematic function of drawing attention to how we identify with the images and discourses we are presented with through the media, and through art for that matter, and how the boundaries between ourselves and the discourses we construct our world from are blurred. This opens up for a discussion of real versus imaginary and reality versus fiction, since we have to consider how our realities and selves become discursive constructs, which both testifies to and restricts our existential freedom. Also, the TV clips contribute to the many metafictional layers that Kaufman constructs in the film. When we see how Caden reads himself into the discourses on e.g. TV, we are reminded of the fact that we as viewers are in the same process of trying to identify with and interpret what we see, when watching the film.

Eventually, in the attempt to understand his life and his situation, Caden Cotard turns to the classic form of theatre (although his play cannot be considered classic in style), which is also the strongest symbol of performativity. He stages his own life and himself as a character and feels certain that his play will reveal “the brutal truth, brutal, brutal” (1:02:38). In this way, Caden creates a discourse through which a reality is constructed that he considers more true and real than reality itself. In this section we shall analyze selected scenes which convey the points discussed in this introduction, and in doing so, we will apply relevant theoretical aspects from our theory sections.

## **CADEN ON TV**

As argued in the previous analysis section *SNY* is constructed around Caden’s perception of himself and his world, and this is further underlined when Caden literally becomes a character in the TV clips presented to us in the film. By explicitly mediating a Caden representation we cannot miss Kaufman’s comment on the role of discursive construction in our postmodern culture. Hereby the film language and form explicate a central postmodern theme.

The first TV clip in which Caden is a character (0:23:04) is a rather unconventional educational cartoon for children, which we have seen before, since his daughter, Olive, watches this show while eating breakfast (0:04:01). The cartoon is presented in a conventional children’s cartoon discourse and style in relation to audio frame, picture frame and e.g. the use of farm animals as conveyors of information. When it comes to content, however, the cartoon seems rather advanced and depressing considering its supposed target audience; namely the children. We learn that this cartoon is simply presented to us in a conventional wrapping while its content opposes the childish and cheery style of the cartoon and instead supports Caden’s situation and perception of his world; that is a world where the transience of life and a lack of meaning dominate. The cow in the first cartoon clip, where Caden is still not an actual character, says: “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” (0:03:54). This statement can be seen to comment on several different aspects which are discussed in the film.

First of all, it comments on Caden’s condition; his disease which is at play within his body, and his thoughts which become infected by fear of death, lack of meaning, truth and authenticity, and a feeling of failure in all aspects of his life including his relationships to women and to his children. This both bodily virus and virus of thought changes Caden’s life “second by second” since he is controlled by it and sees his whole world through a specific



perception of his situation. This underlying “virus of thought” contributes to Caden’s construction of himself and his reality, since he identifies strongly with discourses and images of time, death and disease. In this way, the discourses he identifies with enhance his construction and perception of a specific self and they become the underlying virus which constantly changes and defines him.

This reveals a second way in which the statement quoted above can be seen to work. It refers to the secret something which is at play under the surface when we construct ourselves and our realities from the discourses that surround us. We read ourselves into the different discourses and we understand the discourses specifically from our own distinctive perceptions of them. The fact that all kinds of discourses to a certain degree demand identification from the reader and that the reader seeks to either identify with or create distance from the discourses are powerful means in the construction and perception of our selves and our realities. In this relation, Baudrillard’s notion of hyperrealism becomes relevant, since we through discursive constructs simulate a reality which becomes more real to us than reality itself. The simulation becomes the secret something which is at play under the surface. This idea leads us to a third level on which the above quoted statement can be seen to operate, namely on a meta-level which directs us back to Kaufman’s critique of mainstream representations leading the audience to a passive acceptance of the constructed reality presented through these discourses. The TV clips that Caden reads himself into are parodies of conventional TV discourses, and it seems that he cannot stop himself from identifying with the images he is presented with on the screen. Kaufman creates these rather absurd identification processes in order for us to recognize the power the media and other discursive representations hold over us due to our inevitable urge to identify with something, in order to understand and construct ourselves. The identification process revealed here is also metafictional in the way that it reminds the viewer that he or she is in the same situation while watching the film. This points toward Kaufman’s intention of revealing the constructedness of our realities and the interdependent relationship between reality and fiction.

As can be seen from the following two examples of the mediated Caden, his wish to understand himself and his situation is a powerful motive force in these identification and construction processes. The first TV clip is, as mentioned above, the same cartoon as Olive watches in the beginning of the film. The Caden character sits smoking on the grass and watches a jackal standing before a decomposing carcass, while a ghostly alarm clock floats from the smoke of the cigarette and starts to chime, signalling that time is up. The jackal says: “When you are dead there is no time” (0:23:09). Behind the tree in the background



there is a person secretly watching Caden; another secret something at play under the surface of Caden's world. This cartoon character anticipates Sammy, who actually admits to having followed Caden around for twenty years before he ends up playing Caden in Caden's play (1:04:00). Sammy becomes Caden's double who is supposed to reveal the true Caden to Caden himself. But at this point in the film, Sammy is only a shadow whom the alert audience stumble upon occasionally in his observations of Caden's life. Caden does not become aware of the more and more visible and intruding role that Sammy obtains in his life until Sammy auditions to play Caden. Another reason why Sammy appears in this TV mediation of Caden might be that he needs to observe every construction of Caden, all of Caden's perceptions of himself in order to perform as Caden. This testifies to the fact that we, as Judith Butler argues, perform different identities which all become part of who we are. If Caden is to hope for any revelation of his true self and the truth about his life in general, he needs Sammy to perform every aspect of Caden's reality, that is perform the realities and identities that Caden performs. In this way, a circular movement develops in which a simulation of Caden's life is supposed to reveal the absolute truth about his real life, a truth which does not seem possible to attain.

Another point which is relevant in relation to the cartoon clip, in which Caden is a character, is the fact that Caden does not watch this clip himself; it is Olive who actively watches it along with the film audience, of course. This can be seen as a counterargument of the fact that the mediation of Caden indicates his own identification process leading to the construction and performance of a certain identity and reality. Nevertheless, the fact that Olive watches the cartoon simply reveals how other people are an important part of the

construction of a self and a reality. It can be argued that the performance of a certain identity or reality does not become manifested as real or unreal until there is someone to perform to. This is a relevant point considering the fact that Caden never gets an actual audience for his play<sup>19</sup>. Nevertheless, it can be argued that the characters in the play perform to each other, to their understudies and not least to Caden. For instance, when Sammy plays the character Caden to Caden, he contributes to a manifestation of a certain Caden identity and reality, and this can be said for all the characters in the play, not least Claire who plays herself. In this way, the play becomes a whole world in itself where both actors and audience exist, and this indicates how the play can be seen as a part of a whole; namely a reflection of the performativity and construction which take place in real life. The thematic function of the title *Synecdoche, New York* is hereby brought to our attention.

The TV mediations of Caden work to underline how we unconsciously construct our perception of reality by reading ourselves into the surrounding discourses, and again they also underline his situation and his state of mind. While Olive watches an image of her father on TV learning about death, Adele and Caden's marriage is on the verge of dying out, as Adele declares that she is going to Berlin with just Olive. Right before she announces this, we see the Caden cartoon character being wheeled away to the animal corral.



This image underlines how Caden feels trapped by his life situation which he does not understand. He is just another one in the herd of dying creatures without meaning in their lives, a creature which is obviously not in control of his own life, since someone else is

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<sup>19</sup> Caden chooses to stage his play in New York "to get it seen by people, you know, who matter" (0:38.23), as he tells the realtor who shows him the warehouse. But it seems a fact from the start that there will never be an audience, as for instance symbolized with Caden's accept of a decaying and remote situated warehouse as the surroundings of his play.

pulling the wagon. This is what Adele encourages him to do before she leaves him; take control over his life, achieve something meaningful, true and authentic instead of just blindly follow the herd and reproduce what has already been seen a thousand times before. After seeing his production of the classic American play *Death of a Salesman*, she says: "I can't get excited, you know, about restaging someone else's old play. You know, there's nothing personal in it. [...] What are you gonna leave behind? You act as if you have forever to figure it out" (0:22:50). She questions his art, and his life, in relation to originality and authenticity, and Caden is weighed down by the burden of breaking free from the fixed meaning structures which have existed in his life and his art until now. With the question "What are you gonna leave behind?", Adele refers to the fact that we all want to leave our mark on the world to be remembered by after we are dead, a small part of us which lives on. This points toward the inherent struggle between the life and death instinct, or Eros and Thanatos in Freudian terms (cf. 'Desire and Freud's Life and Death Instinct'). That we strive towards death in order to return to the state from which we derived is opposed by our wish to preserve our selves. In relation to the artist this means creating a piece of art, which will be brilliant enough to live on after the artist dies. Allegorical to this is the desire to construct and perform one's identity and self in a way which will make the self able to live on after one dies. Of course these two aspects are interdependent to Caden as his play is supposed to make both his self and the play immortal. But Adele is not going to stick around to see if Caden actually acts upon her advice to do something meaningful with his life and his talent. She leaves him, and the next TV mediation of Caden shows how his situation has become worse as he sits alone in front of the TV and reads himself into different discourses, which in a somewhat parodic way conveys his perception of himself and his situation.

The first clip Caden watches is a commercial for a drug which will "allow you to live life when it's your turn to face the challenges of chemotherapy" (0:26:48). Although the people in the commercial supposedly are sick, they run around smiling and laughing together with the people they love. The commercial is a complete opposite image of Caden's situation, since he is alone and miserable with his disease, or his presumed disease, which most of all seems psychosomatic. Caden sits in front of the TV and he longingly reads himself into the commercial and feels worse doing so, since the reality of the commercial is strikingly far away from the reality which is Caden's. This is somewhat ironic since the commercial is depicting people suffering from an often fatal disease, and Caden does not have cancer and he is not terminally ill. Still the commercial seems to convince him that he is far worse off than the cancer stricken people. This attests to the power of both the commercial discourse and Caden's perception of his own situation.



In this way the commercial creates a reality which Caden longs for, a reality which to some extent makes his own situation even worse. The reality in the commercial is, however, a reality created to make a profit on a specific drug; that is, it is not truth or authenticity which is the premise of the commercial, rather it promotes a drug which will help you forget your real situation and live in a different reality. The commercial is mocking and parodic in style, since it plays upon clichés within the commercial discourse. The music is carefree and relaxing in a keyboard tune typical for commercials, and the images we see are all of people who enjoy being together, playing outside without a care in the world, although they are very sick. It plays on the feelings of the viewer and it seems to work on Caden as he wishes to be part of the commercial's reality rather than his own. That this is not a possibility is stated through the shift from the commercial to a cold, grey and smoky atmosphere, where Caden as an old man (or maybe Sammy playing Caden) walks on what looks like the future set of his play.



There is a threatening kind of music playing, his head is lowered, and there is not a single person around him, which all reveal and enhance his fear of a lonely death. When we reach the end of the film, we recognize this scene as similar to the last scene before he dies. This seems to indicate that you cannot run away from your life conditions and that Caden's reality is as far from the previous commercial as possible.

This can be seen as Kaufman commenting on the trivial and damaging discourses which we are exposed to all the time. He is laying bare the identification process and the constructedness which influence our perception of self and reality. The parodic style of the commercial is in this case used to emphasize the contrast between the commercial and Caden's situation and in this way it creates a situation which the viewer might recognize; namely the longing for another reality than your own and the wish to make sense of these different realities. It seems that although Caden may realize how unreal the reality of the commercial is, it makes a deep impression on him. An indication of this is that later in the commercial there is a scene with a girl and her mother having a picnic, and Caden returns to this scene several times both in his dreams and in his thoughts.



The scene eventually becomes a depiction of the character Ellen, whom we have not met yet, having a picnic with her mother, and since we never meet the real Ellen, but only Millicent who plays Ellen, it is difficult to decide whether the picnic scene is real at some point or pure fiction created from Caden's memory of this scene. The image of the girl and her mother can be said to be reproduced as real from what Baudrillard refers to as "memory banks" (cf. 'On the Horizon of Simulation') and becomes a part of the simulated reality in the film.



The last TV mediation of Caden, which we shall mention in this section, is in the same scene as the commercial. Caden has started cleaning Adele's work room obsessively while we hear different TV programs in the background. But suddenly the focus is back on the TV screen and Caden is once again a cartoon character. This little clip, where the Caden character is falling down through the air and the water, due to a broken parachute, is accompanied by a woman's voice singing: "There is no real way of coping when your parachute won't open. You're falling down, you're going down. You fell, then you died, maybe someone cried, but not your one time bride" (0:27:35).



Obviously this rather childish song and cartoon comment on Adele and Olive leaving Caden and that he feels lonely and not able to cope with his situation. The use of the cartoon discourse again comically, or tragicomically, underlines the absurd contrast between the TV discourses and Caden's real situation. The TV clips do not work to reveal the truth about his life, they only enhance his perception of his situation as miserable and of himself as a failure.

When Caden receives the MacArthur grant, or the so called genius grant, for his previous play, he decides to create a play which will reveal the secret something which is at play under the surface of his life and of human life in general. Instead of being more or less passively dragged into the meaning structures of discourses as the ones on TV, he needs to actively construct his own life, have it performed to him and at the same time direct the performance. This again centralizes the matter of real and imaginary, and the relationship between art and life. The performativity and constructedness that characterize our realities are discussed in relation to the inevitable life conditions which define us as human beings.

## CADEN ON THE STAGE

In this section we shall look into Caden's staging of himself and his reality in his massive theatre piece, which he envisions to be "uncompromising, honest" (0:38:58). In his attempt to understand his situation and give people something true and brutally honest, Caden plans to stage a play about the one inevitable life condition that we cannot avoid and yet repeatedly try to ignore, namely death. The great theatre director and playwright Caden Cotard places himself right in front of, and at eye level with, the entire cast and explains that his play will explore death:

"Regardless of how this particular thing works itself out, I will be dying. So will you. So will everyone here. And that's what I want to explore. We are all hurtling towards death. Yet here we are for the moment alive. Each of us knowing we are gonna die; each of us secretly believing that we won't." (0:41:50)



In his attempt to be honest as this is the premise of the play, Caden's tone of voice and manner reflect his fragile situation, his loneliness and his worsened health condition. Nevertheless, Caden's honesty and truthfulness are immediately contrasted by the fact that the actor sitting right in front of him is taking notes and thereby distancing himself from the reality of Caden's words. He is underlining that the play will become a text which he as an actor will try to perform in a specific way. Furthermore, the actress Claire, whom Caden ends up marrying, compares Caden's vision for the play to Dostoyevsky's major novel *The Brothers Karamazov* (0:42:38). This can be seen as her way of saying that it will become an original masterpiece, but it also attests to the inevitable textualization of the play. In this way, it is underlined how art and life are intertwined and interdependent, since Caden needs to



stage his life situation as a play to explore the truth about his reality. This also testifies to the constructedness of our realities, since they cannot avoid being seen in reference to some kind of discourse. Caden wants to come closer to the truth of life by imitating life; an imitation which can be argued to turn into a simulacrum of life as Caden also seems to suggest when he proposes *Simulacrum* as the title of the play (1:07:22).

Caden's play does not have a final manuscript or a traditional plot structure from which it evolves; rather its anchor is more or less freely to explore the ontology of the human condition. As the play evolves, Caden realizes that in order to do this, the play cannot be about just one thing, it needs to be about everything. When Sammy plays Caden and is directing the actors on set, he says to them in a sharp voice: "I've told you before; it's not a play about dating it's about death. Make it personal, move along" (1:23:40). Caden and Hazel are following Sammy around while he is playing Caden, and the real Caden remarks to Hazel: "It is a play about dating. It's not a play just about death. It's a play about everything. Birth, death, life, family, all that" (1:24:00). This testifies to the massive expansion that the play undergoes as it keeps adding different layers and little narratives in order to explore what Caden assumes to be the truth about human life. In this way, all the little narratives which become part of the play can be seen to coexist and create a larger narrative of the human condition by making central our common inevitable life conditions and the fact that we construct and perform our lives from our surrounding discourses. Although this to some extent may contrast Lyotard's theory on the disintegration of the grand narratives, it nevertheless testifies to a focus on the different little narratives constituting what can be considered an attempt to mirror the human condition. The starting point of this particular narrative is the little narratives which will attempt to explain a larger narrative instead of the grand narratives explaining all the little narratives.

In relation to Caden's intention of creating a true, honest and original piece of art, which will help himself and other people understand their situation, it is relevant to look into how the play gradually becomes a simulacrum of the real, in the way that the reality of the play seems to become more real than reality itself. In this way, Caden does not have any control over the reality constructed through the play, which points to the film's consistent discussion of the dissolving boundaries between real and imaginary and between art and life. The following scene will exemplify how Caden's play and his reality become intertwined to a degree where they can no longer be seen as two different discourses. In this way, Kaufman again brings attention to the very constructedness and performativity of our realities; a fact which to some degree contributes to a characterisation of what can be considered a postmodern human condition.

The following scene takes place on set in a replica of Caden's and Claire's apartment. Claire plays herself, Sammy plays Caden, the real Caden sits at a table watching their acting, and Hazel stands in the background (1:14:58).



This scene starts out as an exact imitation of a situation which has just taken place between the real Caden and the real Claire (1:12:35). Caden has been to Adele's apartment in New York pretending to be her cleaning lady, Ellen, whom he as mentioned earlier ends up playing both inside and outside the reality of the play. Contrary to the real Caden, Sammy actually tells Claire that he went to Adele's place. Claire is upset and as the scene evolves it becomes impossible to tell if Claire is being herself, playing the part as herself, if there is even any difference between these, and lastly if she talks to the real Caden or Sammy playing Caden, or both, when she says: "Do you have any idea what I have given up for this, for you, for you" (1:15:24). She says this in reference to her role in the play and her relationship with Caden, and she looks first at Sammy then at Caden, which underlines the confusion of what is in the play and what is not.

The confusion becomes even greater as the actress Tammy, who plays Hazel, enters the set and Claire exclaims "That's great. That's all we need around here; two Hazels" (1:15:45), referring to the one in the play and the real Hazel. The scene ends with Claire leaving Caden for good when Sammy says that maybe he will clean Hazel's toilet as he cleans Adele's. The real Caden tries to prevent Claire from leaving by pointing out that it was Sammy and not him who said this. But to Claire Sammy and Caden are the same in this situation, as Sammy only says what Caden is thinking. Caden admits to this and we are left

with a total disintegration of the boundaries between the play and what can be termed Caden's reality.

This scene is an example of how *SNY* points to the constructedness and performativity which permeate our lives and realities in the way that there are no distinct lines between the discourses we construct ourselves from and our realities. There seems to be a kind of circular movement between art and life in the sense that both influence each other to a degree where they are impossible to clearly separate. This scene of the film is one of many examples of the complicated metafictional layers which underline Kaufman's intention of making the audience aware of the act of interpretation, the search for meaning. This is also what concerns Caden along with the discursive construction of our realities referring to the interdependent relationship between art and life. Kaufman creates a rather complicated situation in which performativity of different identities is being explored, since Caden has to fill many roles during this film. In this way, Caden's mediation of himself does not seem to bring him closer to an absolute truth about his life and the human condition in general, rather the mediation of his own world overtakes his reality and leaves him in what can be termed a hyperreality.

## **PARODY OF IDENTITY DISCOURSES**

As discussed in the section 'Parody and the 'Unfamiliar'' postmodern parody can be seen as double-directed discourse, since it becomes discourse both "*within* and *about* discourse" (Hutcheon 2000: 72) and since it creates both "nearness and opposition" (Rose 1979: 33) to the parodied. Hereby the artist, in this case Kaufman, can use parody to entice the audience to enter into a discussion of the parodied. The film becomes dialogic and self-reflexive as it critically comments on the parodied, its specific context, and the text itself, which all in all puts the intentionality of the artist into play.

In *SNY* Kaufman engages in what can be termed parody on identity discourses, and hereby he makes parody a tool to discuss and comment on the constructedness and performativity of identity and reality in relation to the concept of authenticity and originality. In this analysis section, we shall look into how the parody on identity discourses functions in relation to Caden's identity performance and search for an authentic understanding and depiction of his self and his reality. Furthermore, we shall look into the metafictional aspects of the parody on identity discourses, since these may contribute to an understanding of the film's self-reflexivity and Kaufman's artistic intentions.

## **PARODY OF PROFESSIONALS**

The examples used in this section are of the doctors and the therapist, Madeline, whom Caden visits in his attempt at learning the true facts of his condition. In both cases, Caden turns to these people in order to understand his situation and receive some kind of help. Nevertheless, the doctors and the therapist cannot help Caden, since they do not seem to understand him at all<sup>20</sup>, and this situation is underlined by the parody of what can be called the archetypical identity discourses within the doctors' and the therapist's professions. The parody is made so obvious that we do not take the characters seriously as professionals, and also we cannot avoid being aware of their very constructed identity performances. Their secure but rather unoriginal and unauthentic identity performances in this relation simply create distance to Caden who feels insecure of his identity in several aspects.

As argued in the previous analysis sections, we are mainly seeing reality through Caden's eyes. This means that the parody on identity discourses also becomes an image of how Caden pigeonholes these people as according to his prejudices of their professional identity. They are parodied in this much exaggerated manner in order to create the absurd, humoristic and at the same time very uncomfortable situations which characterize Caden's perception of his visits with the professionals whom he is to trust will help him understand and maybe even better his situation. His meetings with both the therapist and the doctors come to stand as contrasts to his artistic and personal aim of authenticity, honesty and originality, since they act in a highly uncommitted and unauthentic manner towards Caden. In the following examples from the film, we shall see how the parody on these identity discourses functions.

The first example we will present is the parody on the doctors' identity performances. Caden sees several different doctors throughout the film and none of them is able to give him any satisfactory answers to his questions about his health condition. Rather, all the doctors seem indifferent to his situation and secretive and distrusting when approaching Caden. An example of the parody on the doctor discourse is when Caden goes to the hospital and the doctor takes him into an office within "The Department of Evaluative Services" (0:31:20). This title loudly points to the parody and irony of this scene, since Caden never receives any useful evaluative services from any of the doctors.

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<sup>20</sup> This is also emphasized through the linguistic misunderstandings that occur both between Caden and the therapist and between Caden and the doctors.



Caden asks the doctor: "Is it serious" and the doctor answers: "We don't know. But yes." (0:31:27). The ambiguity of the doctor's answer is a parody on the conventional image that doctors are inevitably reluctant to give a simple and straight answer to their patients. This parody is put to a head when Caden visits another doctor and has the following conversation with him:

Caden: "Ok, you're a doctor, right? Am I dying? Can you tell me that?"

Doctor: "No."

Caden: "No, you can't tell me?"

Doctor: "I can't tell you."

Caden: "You can't tell me if you can't tell me?"

Doctor: "No."

Caden: "No, you can't tell me because you're not allowed to?"

Doctor: "No."

(0:53:16)

The viewer is as confused as Caden after this kind of miscommunication, and it does not seem possible that Caden will get any kind of explication or clarification of his situation from the doctors. Nevertheless, the doctors act with great authority when responding ambiguously as expected, and thereby they perform their identities as doctors successfully. By parodying this identity construction we are reminded of the un-authenticity which is often related to the discourses within service industries that we enter in many different situations. The doctors all

seem uncommitted and indifferent to Caden and they certainly do not help him understand himself and his situation any better.

Through this parody on the doctor identity discourse, a great contrast is created to what Caden seeks when he turns toward art in a serious attempt to understand and help himself and other people. He seeks honesty, authenticity and originality, all features of which the doctors come to represent the opposite; that is along with the other identity discourses parodied in the film, as for instance that of the therapist and the realtor who shows him the warehouse which becomes the set of his play (0:38:15). Caden understands that the professional doctors, and for that matter the therapist, cannot help him, and his art seems to be the only solution to his problem of reaching his real self, or performing his real self, which means to construct himself as the artist and person he seeks to be. Nevertheless, Kaufman does not leave what can be seen as the identity discourse of the artist undiscussed, as we shall see in the following analysis section.

The next example we will introduce in relation to this analysis on identity discourses is the parody of the therapist, Madeline. The first visit at Madeline's office is a relationship therapy session with both Adele and Caden present (0:11:37). We are immediately presented to Madeline's exaggerated therapeutic voice, gestures and style in her work of calming and helping the couple in their attempt to talk through their problems.



The way the parody works in this situation is through Madeline's performance as a therapist, since her performance is so exaggerated in the use of clichés and archetypical therapeutic behaviour that she most of all reminds us of a very bad actress playing a therapist. Added to this are, nevertheless, several small oddities which make the parody very humorous and make the audience aware of the critical parody in its wholeness.

Examples of these oddities are when the therapist utters statements that are so close to the recognizable therapeutic clichés we know from other representations and discourses, but then we realize that they are different and rather odd. For instance when Adele and Caden are in therapy together, Adele says that things between her and Caden did

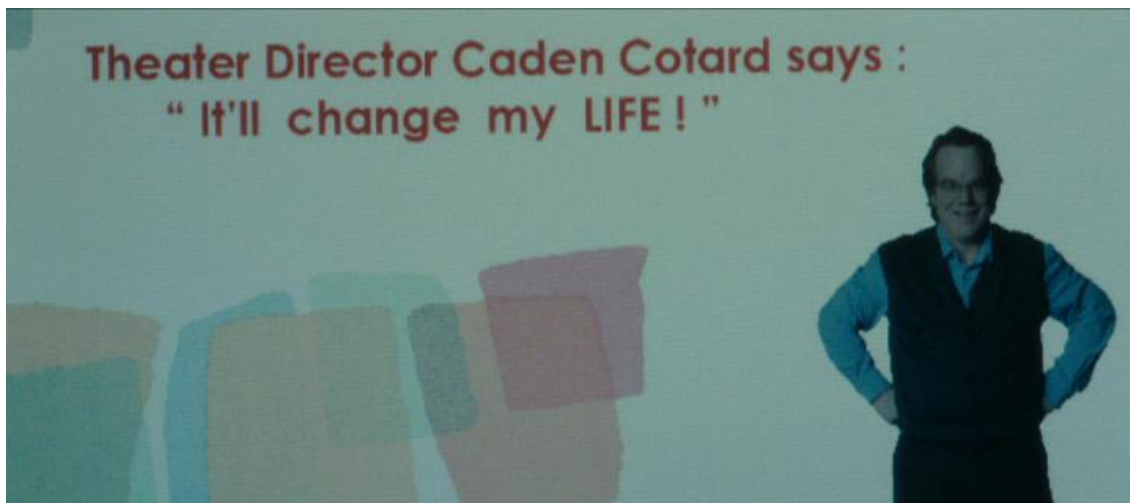


not change as much as she had hoped when they got pregnant with their daughter Olive. Adele feels that this is a terrible thing to say to Caden, but Madeline concludes in all her therapeutic authority that “There are no terrible things to say in here, only true and false” (0:12:01). Instead of this statement, which makes Madeline ironically un-therapeutic in her approach, we would expect her to say that in a therapy session and in relation to emotional issues there is no right or wrong. Instead she claims without hesitating that everything they say to her can be categorized as either true or false. First of all, this can be seen as a parodic element which comments on Caden’s situation, a situation that most people presumably recognize; namely that he does not know what is true or false anymore, or even what is real. With the help of the therapist, he seeks to understand his real self and his situation; what is real and true. Nevertheless, it seems obvious that he will not learn this from Madeline, since she is more concerned with her own performance as a successful therapist than actually helping Caden in any way. This is for instance exemplified by the way she generally responds to Caden, asking him questions that parodically only repeat what he just said and interrupting him continually when he speaks without ever looking directly at him.

Madeline’s uncommitted and unauthentic attempt to help Caden is further underlined by the way in which she uses Caden to serve her own purpose of making as large a profit as possible and becoming as successful as possible. This focus on own interests is humorously pointed out when Madeline intends to help Caden by selling him one of her many self-help books: “I have a book that will help you get better [...]. It’s called *Getting Better*” (0:28:00). The title is here suggesting the unoriginality and cliché of the self-help genre in general, and it adds to the parodic elements used to portray Madeline as a therapist.



That Madeline has authored an entire bookshelf of therapeutic books, which can be bought at 45 dollars a piece and guarantee that you get better, is a parody of the un-authenticity and dishonesty which are often associated with therapists and so-called service industries in general. As with the commercial discourse commented on in 'The Mediated Caden' we know that a therapeutic book probably does not live up to all that it promises, but we are still drawn to it since its promises are so desirable. The important elements here are profit and success and not the methods of reaching these goals. This is underlined by Madeline's exploitation of Caden's fame as an artist on her website.



Without his approval, she uses Caden as a marketing device and this indication of the powerful capitalistic market becomes a metafictional comment on how the artist's attempt to portray something real and authentic might be compromised through the market forces of the industry. The parody on identity discourses in this way critically points to what can be seen as the un-authenticity, unoriginality and dishonesty which permeate specific discursive constructions.

This is also an indication of how Kaufman's artistic intentions are mirrored through the parody, as the unoriginality and un-authenticity can also be seen to apply to the mainstream Hollywood film discourse that Kaufman strongly feels the need to differentiate himself from. Caden also seems to gradually realize that he needs to seek other methods in the attempt to understand himself and his situation, and so he turns to art in the belief of its authentic and honest disclosure of his self and his reality as a representation of the human condition in general. That Caden and his therapist disagree in their priority of the real and authentic is revealed when Caden says to her: "I'm afraid Adele is right when she says that I am not doing anything real", and Madeline brushes aside his serious concern by answering "What would be real?" in a light voice while shrugging her shoulders (0:28:17). This points to the fact that Caden, unlike Madeline, is not ready to accept that there is nothing real or

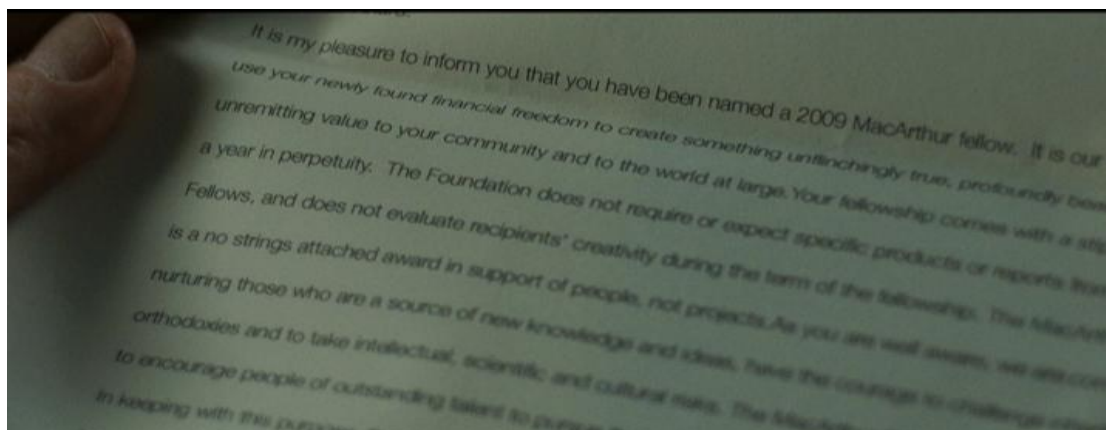


authentic left in the world. Due to this he turns to his art in order to pursue the real, but is actually not able to create his vision of an authentic and brutally honest piece of art. This is highly relevant in relation to what can be seen as the most permeating identity discourse in *SNY*; namely that of the artist, which is also discussed through the means of parody as argued in the following analysis section.

## **PARODY OF ART AND THE ARTIST**

As previously argued in 'Caden's Perception', Kaufman uses unfamiliar elements for different purposes and this section will deal with the comic and parodic tone he uses when thematizing art. This comic tone does not ridicule the presented topic but rather encourages a discussion, and in this case Kaufman parodies the discourse on art and as will be dealt with, the parody creates both nearness and opposition to the topic. The following will give examples of how Kaufman parodies discourses on art and the artist and how this parody works metafictionally in terms of discussing the role of art and the artist. This will be done with special reference to the parody of the dominating ideals of authenticity and originality in art, the artist craving these, and how these ideals can be difficult to achieve. This parody is furthermore interesting to look into since it contributes to the discussion on the performativity and constructedness of our identities, in this case that of the artist.

In *SNY* the idea of 'the artist' plays an important role, not least enhanced by Caden's attempts to perform the identity as a successful and original artist. After his artistic success with *Death of a Salesman*, Caden faces a difficult challenge of producing something which is his own, as encouraged by Adele and the MacArthur Committee. When receiving the letter informing him that he is awarded the MacArthur grant, there is a voice-over reading the letter out loud. It is a voice of a man who speaks with a strange accent and this becomes an odd feature, or in other words a Brechtian *Verfremdungseffekt*, which attracts the viewer's attention, inviting a decoding process. The voice-over is comic and contrasts the very serious encouragement given to Caden by the MacArthur Committee, involving the creation of "something unflinchingly true, profoundly beautiful and of unremitting value to your community and to the world at large" (0:36:37).



As previously mentioned, Bakhtin's concept of the carnivalesque points to that "Everything authoritative, rigid or serious is subverted, loosened and mocked" (cf. 'Parody and the 'Unfamiliar)'), which complies well with the parodic tone used here, subverting the significant occasion that Caden, as a serious artist, is awarded the honourable MacArthur grant. As argued earlier, the exaggeration of the carnivalesque incites people to see the presented from a new angle which thereby calls for an interpretation. In this case, it is the message of the authoritative MacArthur Committee contributing to a specific discourse on art, which is questioned by being presented in a mocking tone.

As pointed out with Linda Hutcheon, postmodern parody is not only intended to mock the presented but it also has the function of addressing and discussing certain topics. Here, the role of art is addressed since the parodied topic is "unflinchingly true" art. Furthermore, parody is a feature which 'lays bare' its fictional construction and thereby works metafictionally pointing to the role of Kaufman's art and of art in general. This mirrors what is suggested in 'Parody and the 'Unfamiliar' that parody as a metafictional means can be double-directed by discussing the presented topic and simultaneously inviting the viewer to participate in this discussion.

Furthermore, the parody used here has the function of creating both nearness and opposition to the parodied. The nearness to the topic is suggested as Caden participates in the hunt for an original and authentic piece of art as suggested by the committee, here symbolizing the existing discourse that art should be "true". As Caden says to Madeline, after receiving the letter, he wants to do: "something big and true and tough" (0:37:59) and thus he becomes a part of this discourse, pursuing the "unflinchingly true" in his art. By this, it is exemplified how Caden wants to perform a specific artist identity; he wishes to be part of the identity discourse classifying him as an original and true artist, a label which is also ascribed to him by the committee and which Caden desperately wants to earn. On the other hand, the parodied implies an opposition, not least because of the comic accent which by its contrast to

the seriousness of the subject comes to parody the idea of being able to actually achieve the unflinchingly true and beautiful, being valuable to the entire world. This is further underlined by the fact that the play Caden ends up producing is never finished and thus fails; the unflinchingly true may be impossible to reach.

Kaufman's use of parody can here be said to encapsulate what we introduced in 'Kaufman's Postmodern Art Manifesto', involving Kaufman's concerns in relation to art, since the same nearness and opposition apply here to the presented discourse that art needs to be unflinchingly true. As mentioned, Kaufman publicly expresses his need to present something honest that touches people and is real to people – unlike the Hollywood industry. Thereby, Kaufman, as well as Caden, can be said to pursue something honest or authentic, which then places him "near" the presented parodied issue, namely to the idea of true art. On the other hand, Kaufman distances himself from this thought as he explicitly says that achieving this "may be impossible" (cf. 'The Honest Kaufman and his Desire for Authenticity') and is thus in opposition to the parodied issue. The mocking tone in *SNY* involving Caden's quest for true art therefore comes to function metafictionally through its ironic self-reflexivity indicating that being authentic is not easily achieved, not for Caden and not for Kaufman himself.

By engaging in a discussion of discourses on art, the parody used here is also value-problematizing, as Hutcheon calls it (cf. 'Parody and the 'Unfamiliar)'). Kaufman elevates the art discourse which expects artists to seek original and true art, and at the same time, this implicitly comes to involve a competing discourse involving mainstream productions, thereby reflecting two contending discourses. The encouragement proposed by the committee enhances the societal expectations for artists to be original and not exclusively mainstream, which is something Kaufman continues to discuss (cf. Manifesto). Thus the parody here works value-problematizing as it discusses societal expectations and the difficulty of meeting these expectations and being authentic.

As previously argued with Charles Lindholm in 'The Honest Kaufman and his Desire for Authenticity' there exists a permeating need and demand for authenticity in today's society, which is a discussion Kaufman engages in. In *SNY* this focus is evident through Caden's situation, where the need for authenticity is enforced by Adele, his cast, the MacArthur Committee and not least by himself. The societal demand is namely also imposed by the artists who, as exemplified with Caden, have high expectations to themselves about producing nothing less than original and authentic art. As mentioned earlier, Kaufman himself rejects commodification and due to his artistic visions, he does not want to do a film just for profit (cf. Manifesto). In *SNY*, it is demonstrated how originality is not something one can just

decide to deliver, hence Caden's failure with his play, and thus the difficulty of being original is enhanced. This again reflects the existing discourse that art needs to be authentic and original, which in the light of Baudrillard's theory is problematic since everything is a hyperreal or rather, a copy of a copy (cf. 'On the Horizon of Simulation'). This is a discussion which Kaufman also engages in by illustrating the copy-syndrome with Caden's many understudies and replicas in *SNY*. However, this discussion on authenticity and originality also has the function of pointing to what we suggested in the manifesto, that Kaufman elevates these ideals as some which one should strive towards even though reaching such goals seems rather impossible.

Kaufman also uses parody to discuss the role of the artist and art when Caden consults Madeline and expresses his concerns about living up to having received 'the Genius Grant'. Madeline and Caden agree that this must necessarily involve that Caden discovers his 'real self' – meaning that in order to be original, he must deliver what he considers his own unique self through which he intends to reach his goal of making true art. However, one may argue that an original and authentic personality is not just layered in a person's essence for him or her to discover. Rather, as emphasized by the prominent focus on identity construction in *SNY*, an original personality is something which is constructed and performed.

Immediately after Caden has expressed his concerns, Madeline tells him about Horace Azpiazu, a four-year-old author of the novel *Little Winky*<sup>21</sup> on which Caden comments "cute" which is immediately rejected by Madeline:

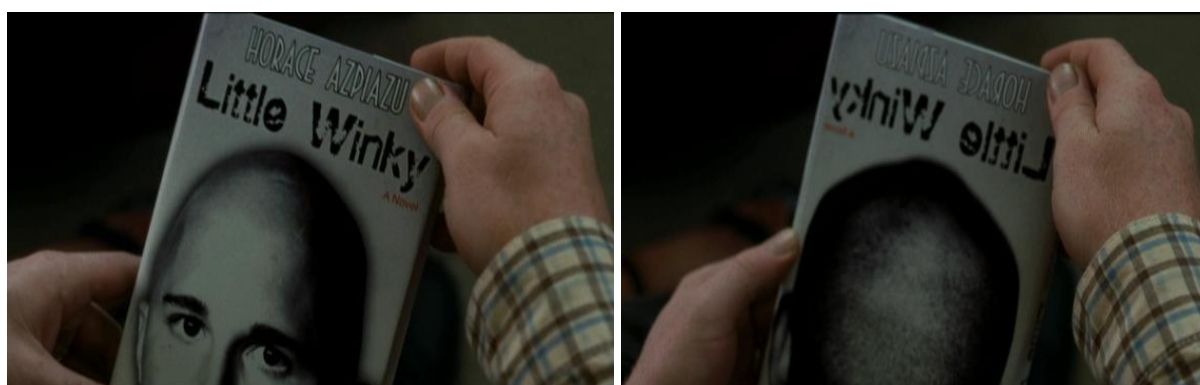
"Hardly. *Little Winky* is a virulent anti-Semite. The story follows his initiation into the Klan, his immersion in the pornographic snuff industry and his ultimate degradation at the hands of a black ex-convict named Eric Washington Jackson Jones Johnson... Jefferson." (0:37:37)

Madeline stresses Azpiazu's brilliancy with *Little Winky*, which is obviously very inventive, yet bordering on pure absurdity considering the hardcore themes versus this author's age. Here, the thought that art has to be original is brought to the extreme since this example demonstrates how originality is withheld in the discourse on art; there is a permeating need to be inventive when being an artist, for example by letting one's main character embark on a variety of dirty affairs or by giving this character no less than five last names. However, these examples only parody the thought of being inventive since they are highly exaggerated – being inventive would at least mean not having four out of five last names starting with a J.

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<sup>21</sup> 'Winky' is a word used in many different ways, for instance, 'Winky' is often used in discourses involving children and children's products. For example, one might recall the Teletubby Tinky Winky. However, 'winky' is also used completely differently as slang for penis.

It almost verges on cliché that the artist shall produce new complex and extreme plots along with brilliant and difficult titles symbolizing something specific. That the title is important and should be original is not only enhanced with *Little Winky*, but also with Caden's many, many title proposals for his play as well as with *Synecdoche, New York* itself, which is a title that has been subject of much attention. The paratexts are part of constructing a specific artistic identity and through these, the artist can also perform the role as an original artist; striving towards originality means that one's paratexts should be original too. The importance of finding the perfect, original paratext and present this properly to the viewer enhances the focus on originality as withheld in the discourse on art, which in this example is further enhanced by the inventive cover of *Little Winky*:

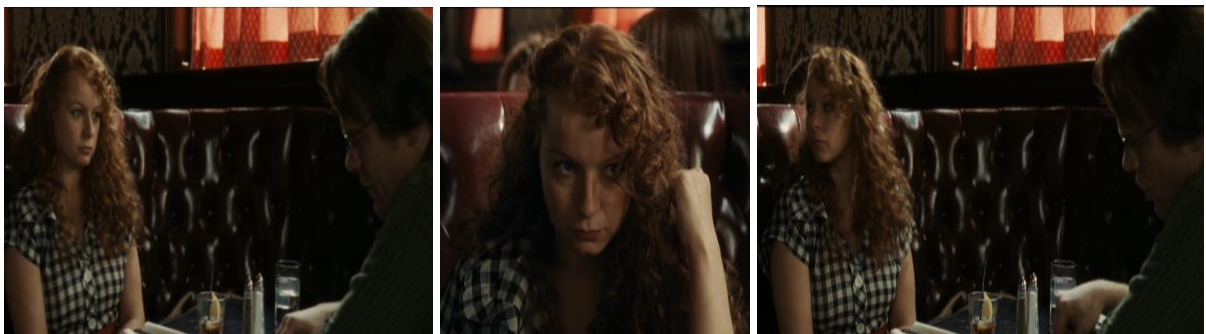


With *Little Winky* it is demonstrated that Azpiazu, contrary to Caden, has been able to find his artistic self delivering this “brilliant” work to the world. Caden's own vision about being brilliant is here ironically exceeded by a four-year-old and the extremity of this example also serves to parody the tendency of over-using labels such as ‘brilliant’, ‘original’ and ‘authentic’, used here even about a four-year-old. Also this example points to the permeating need and ongoing hunt for something original in a world filled with copies; one needs to be different from others in order to gain artistic success. Caden expresses his astonishment by repeating “written by a four-year-old?”, which testifies to the fact that it is absurd that a little boy could actually do this, and it further enhances Caden's inferiority complex when acknowledging that he is being beaten in his own game by a child.

Caden is a product of this discourse on art and this plays a role when he constructs his artistic identity. As well as Kaufman, Caden cannot avoid being a discursive construct since he actively tries to perform the identity as an original and authentic artist, thus complying with the existing art discourse withholding a demand for originality. That he is a discursive construct is especially exemplified later on when presenting his original, artistic visions for Hazel, where the idea of the original artist is once again parodied:

“Here’s what I think theater is: it’s the beginning of thought. 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 [...] to soak in the communal bath of it, the mikvah, as the Jews calls it. We’re all in the same water, after all, soaking in our very menstrual blood and nocturnal emissions. This is what I want to try and give people.” (0.38.51)

Caden here comically performs the role as the original artist presenting his artistic thoughts to Hazel in an attempt to impress her. With this, he prepares the ground for exploring the “brutal truth”, as he says later on, and stresses the interrelation of human beings as part of the human condition. However, this is well-concealed being wrapped in an advanced, dramatic language. This episode functions parodically since Caden’s passionate speech, which should encapsulate his original, artistic vision, here amounts to a metaphor involving menstrual blood, which is clearly not well-received or judged as ‘brilliant’ by Hazel. She thereby undermines Caden’s originality with her silent reception and consistent, indifferent and distant look, which she maintains until the food comes in.



Caden’s artistic language is here too advanced for Hazel as his message is presented in an almost incomprehensible metaphor. This exaggerated and, as judged by Hazel, unintelligible metaphor rather becomes a comic attempt to describe his vision, and thereby his endeavour to outlive his artistic identity as being original is parodied. Here, the discourse on art as involving profound originality is mocked since the artist’s idea of something which is irrefutable original may not always make sense to others, suggesting again that originality and authenticity are issues difficult to successfully achieve. Caden here performs the role as an artist being part of the existing discourse that art should be original, attesting to nearness to the theme of original art, and at the same time, this idea is comically and parodically opposed by the recipient Hazel, who finds a salad much more interesting.

## **INTERRELATIONS IN *SNY***

In relation to *SNY* and Charlie Kaufman's work in general, we have argued that the forms of his films are constructed and structured partly around conventional postmodern techniques, such as metafictional techniques, parody and an experimenting narrative structure. Another part of his formal structures is the use of absurd or fantastic elements which create a blur between reality and fiction and establish a so-called dream logic within the films. As a contrast to these formal structures that are discussing and upsetting conventional meaning and power structures, Kaufman employs images in his films which are very familiar to the audience and therefore easy to identify with. This leads to the idea that Kaufman presents something familiar in a highly unfamiliar wrapping. This first analysis section will focus on what is a very familiar theme in *SNY*, namely Caden's love relationships, whereas the second focuses on Caden's relationship to his double, Sammy, and the theme of connectedness.

### **CADEN'S RELATIONSHIPS**

Throughout *SNY* Caden engages in one relationship after another. When his first wife Adele leaves him, he starts something with the box office girl Hazel, and when that does not work out he goes out with the actress Claire and ends up marrying her and having a child with her. After breaking up and getting back together, Caden's and Claire's relationship finally ends and he reconciles with Hazel, who unfortunately dies immediately after their established happiness. As we shall see from this analysis, Caden's complicated relationships to the three women become reflections of the never-ending search for the authentic and real, while at the same time reflecting the circular movement between the life instinct and the death instinct that, as suggested by Freud, partly defines the human condition.

What also defines the human condition is the relationship to the Other as argued in the section 'The Relationship to the Other'. All of Caden's different relationships become a part of how he constructs his reality and his self. In performing his identity as an artist, his identity as a dad, and his identity as a husband or lover, he is very much affected by his relationship to the other person in question. In this way the interrelational issues presented in *SNY* become a way to discuss how the other person becomes an inevitable and necessary element in the construction and understanding of our realities and our selves. Due to this, it is also interesting to look into whether or not the relationship to the Other is restricting or rewarding, or maybe both. As we shall see in this analysis section it seems that Kaufman leans toward the Sartrean idea that the relationship to the Other is mostly if not entirely

permeated by conflict. Nevertheless, Kaufman underlines in *SNY* as well as in his other films that the relationship to the Other is central in our lives, regardless of the suggested never-ending struggle and conflict it bears with it. In this way, Caden's struggle in trying to create an honest and authentic work of art can be seen as allegorical to the struggle of trying to obtain a rewarding and authentic connection to another human being. In the following we shall look further into how Caden's relationships reflect the ideas presented above.

The first love relationship we are introduced to in the film is Caden's and Adele's failing marriage. They are in marriage counseling and their whole relationship is permeated by disappointment, conflict and guilt. It is obvious from the beginning of the film that the focus in connection with Caden's relationships is that of conflict, his feeling of insufficiency, failure and loneliness. Adele decides to leave Caden and take their daughter Olive with her, which is devastating to Caden, and Adele and Olive come to symbolize the failure in his life that Caden strives to correct. As mentioned in 'The Mediated Caden', Adele strongly encourages Caden to do something real with his life and his art. She hereby demands something from him that comes to influence and construct the rest of his life with his desire to achieve an original and authentic artistic masterpiece. By accusing him of being unoriginal and dishonest to himself as an artist and then leaving him with the words: "Everyone is disappointing the more you know someone" (0:25:48), Adele contributes to Caden's desire to break with this image. To Caden she becomes a representation of the authenticity and honesty that he seeks, just as she also represents the successful artist. They never reach some kind of closure of their relationship, because even though Adele says she will only be away for a little while, he never actually sees her again. Nevertheless, he keeps returning and focusing on Adele and Olive as his real wife and real daughter, as opposed to his second wife and daughter. In this way, Caden's relationships to Adele, and their daughter Olive for that matter, become symbols of the circular movement between the life preserving instinct and the death instinct that defines the human condition. Caden does everything he can to regain his lost relationship to both Adele and Olive, but is disappointed as he never achieves this and reaches some kind of closure of the conflict. This is rather similar to his artistic process where he also seeks the authentic and real, but never gets the desired result and closure.

Adele and Olive hold a piece of Caden's identity and life that he continually attempts to regain. Despite his several attempts to meet with Olive, Caden does not talk to her again until she is dying from a tattoo infection and wants him to beg for her forgiveness, and when he does, she cannot forgive him for what she wrongly thinks that he has done; namely left her.





He realizes that he can never restore the relationship to his daughter as she, with the help of Adele's homosexual friend Maria, has constructed him as completely different than he is; namely a homosexual and selfish man who left his daughter to “have anal sex with [his] homosexual lover, Eric” (1:22:01). Olive hereby constructs Caden in a specific way and he can do nothing to correct this as she is dying. This symbolizes how Caden loses the struggle in his relationship to Adele and Olive, as he cannot win back his identity as a husband and father.

Another way to attempt winning back his identity as a husband and father is by remarrying and starting over with a new wife and child. This is exactly what Caden does when he marries the actress Claire and they have Ariel. He creates a kind of parallel or copy-family to Adele and Olive where he seeks what he has lost in his first marriage. As opposed to Adele, Claire is at first openly impressed by Caden's artistic talent and she thinks that he is original, brilliant and interesting. As Caden wishes to see himself as this kind of artist he gladly accepts Claire's construction of him as such. With her he starts anew as underlined by his wedding vow: “There will be no other before you” (0:46:50) which is immediately succeeded by a scene of Caden sending a present to his first daughter Olive.



It is further underlined that Caden's attempt to move on and replace Adele and Olive by Claire and Ariel is not going to be a success, when Caden uses the words “real daughter” (0:47:54) about Olive in front of Claire. Later on he also begins to perform as Adele's cleaning lady, Ellen, in order to have access to Adele's apartment and life (although he never meets Adele in person). Claire finally says stop and kicks Caden out, whereupon he moves into Adele's closet still performing the role of Ellen. This clearly reveals Caden's difficulties of letting go of his original family. He keeps seeking what he sees as the authentic relationship in his life, but he never reaches any form of closure before his death.

Caden's relationships to Adele and Claire represent the circular movement defining the human condition. The process of regaining the lost, striving towards preserving and obtaining the original, authentic and rewarding connection to another person, is juxtaposed to Caden's attempt of discovering his real self and his desire for authenticity in all aspects of his life. This is in order to create an artistic masterpiece which will be honest, revealing and relevant to its audience and to Caden himself. But just as Caden never attains a rewarding and real relationship to either Adele or Claire, he never reaches his artistic goals, and regarding the relationship to the Other, this points toward a permeating conflictual condition.

It is pointed out by the role of Caden that the relationship to the Other is centralized in our lives, since the relation is necessary in order for us to be. In the relationship to another person our existence, identity and self are constructed and manifested just as we contribute to the construction and manifestation of the Other's existence, self and identity (cf. 'The Relationship to the Other'). However, this seems to lead to inevitable conflict in the relationship to the Other, and the question to consider is whether the relationship to another person can be successful at all, that is a rewarding relation

without the permeating conflict between two subjective existences. It seems that Kaufman asks this question in *SNY* through Caden's different relationships, and as we have seen from both his relationship to Claire and Adele, there is not much chance of a successful love relationship.

Nevertheless, there is a small glimmer of hope in Caden's relationship to the box office girl Hazel, who is in love with Caden until her death in the last part of the film, and who Caden finally realizes is the woman he will be happy with. As with Claire, Caden is together with Hazel on and off in the film, again establishing and adding to the circular structure describing the struggle of human life. Caden and Hazel have a short affair a year after Adele leaves Caden, but this ends when Caden disappoints and angers Hazel by crying while they are in bed together. Hereafter Hazel distances herself from Caden and marries Derek, but Caden and Hazel meet again and Caden keeps seeking back to Hazel whenever he feels miserable, lonely and needs help with his artistic thoughts. Also Hazel seeks Caden's help when she gets fired, and Caden of course hires her as his assistant in his work with the play. In this way they help each other and their relationship therefore differentiates slightly from his other relationships. Little by little it seems that Caden acknowledges that he does not have to be a specific person with Hazel. She more or less accepts him as he is with all his miseries and failures and stands by him through 50 years while awaiting his move to resume their love relation. This, however, does not seem free from conflict at all, since Hazel waits for Caden all her life and when they finally reunite as lovers, she dies the following morning from smoke inhalation due to her burning house<sup>22</sup>.



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<sup>22</sup>This incident also contributes to the circular condition of human life as Hazel commented when buying the burning house that she was afraid to die in the fire. This attests to Hazel's idea that the beginning is built into the end, as also previously mentioned, and altogether this indicates the human condition which is defined by the fact that we know we shall all die at some point.

This ironic end to the one love relationship which could be seen as successful indicates that the rewarding moments in the relation to the Other are transient as is life itself. When Caden and Hazel finally attain happiness with each other this is ended by the most final situation; namely death. In this way loss, death and loneliness are thematized as inevitable in our relationship to the Other, which further indicates how the relationship to the Other is a defining element in our lives for good or bad. Even though the relationship to the Other is defined by conflict we still desire it, just as we desire life in general in spite of its occasional hopelessness and meaninglessness. The desire for a rewarding and successful relationship can be seen as allegorical to the desire for true meaning, honesty and authenticity. In this way Caden's struggles in his relationships come to reflect his struggles in general to constructing his self and his reality in an original and authentic manner.

What is important to note in relation to this analysis is the fact that the film through Caden's conflictual relationships discusses how we rarely, if ever, reach the goals of our desires in life. It is rather the conflictual process of our struggles to reach the desired end which reveals something about our lives and the way we individually have chosen to construct our lives and selves within our common conditions of life. Through the depiction of Caden's relationships an emphasis is placed on the unfulfilled desire for the original, authentic and meaningful in life, and this is an obvious allegory to the elements Caden seeks in and through his art. In this way, Kaufman thematizes the relationship between art and life in an unconventional manner, while also discussing identity and self construction in relation to human interrelations. In the following analysis section we will look closer into the theme of connectedness in *SNY*, while also elaborating on Caden's relationship to his doppelgänger Sammy.

## **CONNECTEDNESS**

As pointed out in the previous section, the relationships Caden engages in are part of constructing his self, and this section will elaborate on Sammy's role in this, who as Caden's double has another type of relationship to him than do the women in *SNY*. The death of Sammy evokes something in Caden which he tries to express through his art by incorporating Sammy's funeral into the play. But his skills as a director seem more and more inadequate and therefore he hires an alternate, Millicent, who up till this point has played the role as Ellen. She presents her version of Sammy's funeral, a scene which stands out as very different in tone and style compared to all other scenes in *SNY*, and here Kaufman uses parody to critically comment on mainstream trends versus true art. Also, Kaufman is, as mentioned, concerned with the connectedness of human beings and of the nature of relationships, and in this scene these themes culminate.

The viewer learns that Sammy stalks Caden from the very beginning of *SNY*, thus introducing the idea of a doppelgänger, which further develops as Sammy auditions for the role as Caden. Sammy performs a little sketch as Caden in order to demonstrate his understanding of him and get hired. He admits that he has been following Caden for 20 years and due to this exploration, he considers himself able to perform Caden in the play, as he says: "So hire me and you'll see who you truly are" (1:04:30). Sammy indicates that through his performance of Caden, Caden will be able to gain an understanding of his self which is exactly what he wants in order to produce true art, as he earlier said to Madeline (0:36:58).



Sammy can be considered an adaptation of Caden and so Hutcheon's idea that an adaptation may flourish into something new allegorically applies since Sammy constantly adds something to his adaptation of the Caden character (cf. 'Adaptation'). In his

performance of Caden at the casting, Sammy is able to spell out to Hazel that he desires her: "I've never felt about anybody the way I feel about you and I want to fuck you until we merge into a chimera" (1:05:43), representing Caden's secret and hitherto unarticulated wish. Acknowledging this difference between Sammy and himself, Caden hires him; Sammy might be able to articulate what Caden cannot and thus, through Sammy, Caden may find the core of his self and thereby he seeks something real through this relationship.

Sammy continues to demonstrate that he as a double is different, for instance, he flirts with Hazel and makes her laugh (1:28:56.). At one point, Caden confronts him in his flirt and Sammy excuses it with: "I was being you" (1:29:10), which is hardly the case since Sammy here adds something to the character which Caden obviously lacks. Just before Sammy kills himself, he points to Caden's inability to notice other people, also mirroring the viewer's experience that everything is about Caden and his perception of things. Sammy says: "I've watched you forever, Caden, but you never really looked at anyone other than yourself. So watch me. Watch my heart break. Watch me jump" (1:39:07).<sup>23</sup> Sammy here breaks out of his role as the Caden-double and clearly demonstrates how he differentiates himself from Caden, since Caden earlier attempted to commit suicide but failed. As previously mentioned, Caden desires to finish his play and "aches for it all being over" which is a desire we earlier juxtaposed with the death instinct. Here Caden's desire to finish, an ability which he lacks, is contrasted with Sammy's suicide which demonstrates that Sammy is in fact able to finish.

Some of Caden's lacks are mirrored in Sammy and these contribute to Caden's construction and understanding of himself, since Caden reacts on these differences and thus becomes aware of them. After Sammy's flirt with Hazel, Caden finally admits how he feels and thus Sammy's extra out-of-character abilities contribute to the construction of Caden. Even though Caden through his relationship to Sammy is rewarded the ability to learn new things about himself, this relationship is highly conflictual. Caden never shows interest in Sammy and therefore Sammy kills himself, and everything in this relationship revolves around Caden's expansion of his self, his art production, his love relations and his sickness. Caden gets angry with Sammy because he acts out of script and kills himself and thus demonstrates that he is oblivious to Sammy's individuality. There is no reciprocal love, trust or interest in this relationship, which inscribes its failure.

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<sup>23</sup> It is a common notion that when seeing one's double, it is a bad sign, as Slethaug argues: "human beings who see their doubles [...] will according to popular folklore soon die" (Slethaug 1993: 10). Again the death theme is elevated and Caden's constant obsession with his own imminent death is ridiculed as the people around him die long before he does, here, ironically pointed to by the death of his double.



However, Sammy's death ends up giving Caden a useful insight which he can use as an artist: "I know how to do it now. There are nearly 13 million<sup>24</sup> 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" (1:30:58). Due to Sammy's profession as a double and a stalker, he is not exactly a lead in his own story. However, his suicide demonstrates how his personality breaks through, indicating his refusal to continue being a copy and his wish to be an original person. Baudrillard would reject the possibility of reinstalling the original while Kaufman often, here with Sammy, points to the existing desire of wanting to be original – e.g. in one's life projects, as a person and in art. With Sammy, Kaufman also points to the difficulty of this, as Sammy out of script kills himself attempting to demonstrate his originality and break with the copy-role. At the funeral, Caden seems to acknowledge that Sammy was in fact a person and not only an extra – an individual story rather than just a repeat of Caden's. The theme that everyone has their own little story connotes Lyotard's idea of the little narratives, every narrative being locally determined and not ruled by one grand narrative. This idea can be further supported by what we proposed in 'Choosing Your Life', that we construct our own lives and narratives. The story of Sammy also brings forth the theme of loneliness since Sammy feels neglected by Caden and lonely as Hazel chooses the original Caden rather than his double. Also, the apocalypse of Caden's relationship to others here increases when even his stalker for 20 years abandons him. The apocalypse of Caden's world is clearly illustrated with the last scenes where Caden's warehouses, his life project, are deserted, destroyed and inflicted with death and desolation.



Caden hires Millicent as the new Caden and her first scene as a director is Sammy's funeral. Caden earlier directed this scene (1:40:16) in an almost exact illustration of

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<sup>24</sup> This number is again an absurdity on Kaufman's part.

the actual event and when the actors play the scene for Millicent with Caden's directions, she states: "This is tedious. This is nothing" (1:46:25). Millicent begins a vast transformation of the scene involving gospel music, artificial tears and rain, and not least the addition of a priest's monologue (see appendix 2 'The Funeral Scene' / *SNY*: 1:46:15). At Sammy's funeral, there was silence and no rain, which suggests that Millicent has added this speech and these features to make something more exciting and non-tedious, demonstrating a totally different style compared to the scenes which Caden directs. Thereby, Millicent also adds something new in her adaptation and performance of the Caden character, and Caden's assistant Michael objects as Millicent directs: "She does not have the feel of you Caden. You don't move around like that. You don't talk to people" (1:46:42) pointing to Millicent's new, completely different style.



Millicent's style can be seen as an example of Genette's idea of hypertextuality (cf. 'Adaptation') since there is clearly a relationship between Millicent's style and the typical Hollywood style, where there is a resolution scene or morale scene where climax is reached. The incorporation of this scene parodies and imitates the mainstream conventions of the Hollywood style as a hypotext. With this scene in *SNY* Kaufman repeats the hypotext but adds a critical comment and as Hutcheon points out, parody can be used as a way of criticizing a topic. The parody exemplifies Kaufman's aversions against the Hollywood industry which by its mainstream productions contributes to the viewer's perception that real life often seems flat compared to the flamboyant depictions of the film industry. In this scene, the priest's monologue is built on repetitions, alliterations, rhymes and rhythm conveying the style of an inflammatory speech, creating an evocative atmosphere, not least supported by the gospel music and the corny metaphor of water pouring down as heavenly tears on the



mourners. This style is clearly a success when judging from Caden's profound look, Millicent's self-satisfaction and not least Michael's surprise that Millicent had those skills, clearly expressed afterwards as he comments: "Delightful!" (1:49:14).



This familiar Hollywood style suddenly played out in *SNY* symbolizes Millicent's specific agenda which inclines towards the ideal of making something that actually works, something more mainstream which through artificial props and music magnifies the impact on the viewer by playing on mood and feelings. Caden never comes back as a director after this; Millicent finishes what Caden cannot, suggesting that an artist's visions may not always be fulfilled.

Millicent's style contrasts Caden's since he wished to mirror Sammy's funeral as it was – as close to real as possible. Since there are many positive reactions to Millicent's illustration, it is suggested that this Hollywood style satisfies the audience by being conventional in its film language and by bringing resolution to the awaiting audience contrasting the otherwise complex style of *SNY*. The contrast exactly points to the difference between the mainstream genre and the idea of true art, Millicent representing the first and Caden the second. This contrast metafictionally demonstrates how Kaufman is able to employ this style, but the mocking parody suggests that he refuses to lean on such conventions – even though this may seem easier and may satisfy both artist and audience.

Even though Millicent's style is highly conventional, the substance of the priest's monologue works contrary to what you would expect a priest to say since it is not in line with what the church usually communicates. This is due to a frequent use of the swear word "fuck" along with the angry message in the end "Fuck everybody. Amen" suggesting a general indifference towards others contrasting the church's usual message of being charitable and benevolent. Thereby, the authority of the church is subverted through a

carnavalesque style, hence the definition given in 'Parody and the 'Unfamiliar' that with the carnivalesque "the sacred is profaned". The priest is here a symbol of a grand narrative and as he transgresses churchly conventions by swearing, the grand narrative of Christianity is mocked and thus questioned and thematized, and Kaufman uses this parody to throw light on the role of the individual choice and the construction of one's life.

This speech is at Sammy's funeral but functions as a more general morale, no names are explicitly mentioned and the people listening are clearly affected by this speech, not least Caden. Although Sammy and Caden have been proved to be different in some ways, the circumstances of their lives are much alike, for instance they are both lonely and have difficulties choosing right. The speech touches on loneliness and on the choosing of your life and spreads this out to involve a more general discussion of human conditions and of our connectedness. For instance, Sammy's life becomes a stepping stone for discussing religion versus an existentialistic thought involving the individual having the absolute choice and responsibility of his or her own life, hence the line saying that you create your own fate. Sammy chooses to follow Caden for 20 years and as indicated with his suicide, he chose wrong, as the priest indicates when he says "you destroy your life every time you choose, but maybe you won't know for 20 years". This expresses what we introduced in 'Choosing Your Life' with Nietzsche, Sartre and Kierkegaard that you are the creator of your own life but also responsible for your choices, even when they are wrong; life can be a heavy burden to bear and one must live with the risk of choosing wrong.

The priest stresses how human beings waste their living years waiting for "a phone call or a letter or a look from someone or something to make it alright" which "never comes", which wraps up Sammy's disappointment that Caden never looked at him, and also, this encompasses the general human need to be noticed. The priest continues "you spend your time in vague regret or vaguer hope that something good will come along, something to make you feel connected, [whole], [loved]", which articulates a general desire also exemplified with Caden in *SNY*. He constantly strives towards the feeling of being whole and connected in his relationships, but as the quote also encompasses, this tends to fail. Hereby, a general circularity between the rewarding and restricting relationship to the Other is suggested in that we continue to search the rewarding but that this, in this case, "never comes" pointing to the permeating conflictual aspect of interrelations. We depend on the Other in our striving towards happiness and hereby the Other withholds our freedom to be happy. The priest concludes that happiness never comes and thus the relationship to the Other is here defined by restriction and indifference, hence the conclusion "Fuck Everybody.

Amen” which is a wrap-up of Sammy’s lonely life filled with indifferent people – which also accounts for Caden, who swallows this raw.

This conclusive message functions as some sort of morale on Kaufman’s part. Whereas a conventional Hollywood morale often provides answers, Kaufman uses this conventional set-up to give his account of what he finds truthful; that he does not have any recipe on how to be happy and cannot provide a resolution. Rather, he stresses the view also presented in ‘The Relationship to the Other’ that we are bound to engage in relationships with other human beings and furthermore he emphasizes that these cannot but be conflictual. Thus, Kaufman presents something which is truthful and recognizable; that relationships are hard and conflictual but that we are inevitably connected. When Millicent talks into Caden’s earpiece and wraps up his life, connectedness is also a theme:

“It was once before you - an exciting mysterious future is now behind you. Lived, understood, disappointing. You realized 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 is everyone. So you are Adele, Hazel, Claire, Olive - you were Ellen .....all her [...] sadnesses are yours. All her loneliness.” (1:55:22)

Kaufman again points to shared life conditions; we live on the same premises from life to death, we build our lives differently, but what we experience is in many ways parallel. Everyone is disappointed and everybody misses someone as evidently stressed when the voice of Ellen repeats “Where’s my little girl” while there is a crosscutting between Ellen, who wanted a daughter but never got one, and Caden, who thinks of Olive (1:52:50) – the specifics hardly matter, the feeling is the same. As Kaufman says it inspires him when recognizing a feeling through fiction that makes him “feel a connectedness to human beings” (cf. ‘The Philosophical Kaufman: The Connectedness’) which is what he sets out to do here. The mixture of identities as so often seen in *SNY* is also suggested to mean that our lives, experiences and identities are alike. So when Hazel says she misses her daughter, even though she does not have any (1:40:46), it is really a comment that we are all connected, our lives intertwined with that of the Other and bound to share the same world, though experiencing this world completely subjectively.

In the following we will sum up the points made in our theory and analysis sections in relation to Kaufman’s art manifesto, in order to discuss Kaufman’s postmodern poetics.

## **KAUFMAN'S POSTMODERN POETICS**

In this section we will sum up and discuss what characterizes Kaufman's postmodern poetics and discuss whether Kaufman moves beyond a conventional postmodern tradition. With *SNY* Kaufman creates a film which through its idiosyncratic film language upsets conventional filmic narrative structures. When Kaufman for example uses the postmodern techniques such as artistic self-reflexivity, metafiction, parody, and dissolving boundaries between real and imaginary, he does it excessively. Due to this, it becomes Kaufman's artistic intention to upset the predictable relationship between film and viewer that exists within the mainstream film industry. In this way, Kaufman inscribes himself into the Brechtian didactic by discussing the presentation and perception of art through a kind of *Verfremdungseffekt*. Through this effect the viewer is challenged and encouraged to engage in a discussion with the film. Adding further to the *Verfremdungseffekt* are the many defamiliarizing, absurd and fantastic elements in the film, which have the function of creating an alternative representation of reality; in this case Caden Cotard's subjective reality.

As presented in the art manifesto, Kaufman feels the need to distinguish his artistic representations of reality from those presented in the Hollywood mainstream film. Hereby, Kaufman critically discusses the construction of art and the relationship between art and reality, which also becomes evident from his consistent focus on art and the artist in *SNY*. With his use of the absurd and unfamiliar in his construction of alternative realities, parallels can be drawn to the absurd theater and literature with prominent figures such as Samuel Beckett, Franz Kafka, Luigi Pirandello and Harold Pinter. Kaufman also mentions these sources of inspiration, but claims that he is not consciously influenced by any particular artist or tradition, and thereby he rejects the critics' need to pin him to a specific label (Kaufman 2008: 144-145). Nevertheless, it is obvious that Kaufman shares characteristics with these artists both in relation to the use of absurd formal structures but also in relation to his discussion of existential themes, as *SNY* is a tale of the human condition and of one man's personal apocalypse.

By introducing existential themes in the form of inevitable life premises such as death, the relationship to the Other and the never-ending attempt to grasp one's self and the meaning of life, Kaufman discusses the human condition and hereby entices the audience to identify with such familiar themes. Kaufman mentions Woody Allen and Monty Python as inspiration sources, and these can be traced as Kaufman mirrors heavy existential themes through parody and comic absurdities working in a carnivalesque manner. With the experimenting and exaggerated formal style on the one hand and the familiar existential themes on the other, Kaufman both alienates and attracts his audience. With this

combination he points out the constructedness of art and our realities as well as what connects human beings.

Constructedness and performativity are (as discussed in our theory section) permeating postmodern themes, and it becomes obvious from our analysis of *SNY* that Kaufman engages in a discussion of these themes in several different ways. In *The Play of the Double in Postmodern American Fiction*, Gordon E. Slethaug points out that,

“The worlds that humans create are essentially artistic products of their lively imagination and their knowledge of cultural and literary forms, but they are simultaneously their prisons. There are multiple constructs, plural ways of perceiving reality, frames within frames, doubles upon doubles.” (Slethaug 1993: 32)

These characteristics fit well with Kaufman’s discussion of constructedness in relation to art, reality and identity in *SNY*. As pointed out through our analysis of Caden’s perception, Kaufman shows how reality is a construction created from our subjective imagination and understanding of the meaning structures and cultural discourses that surround us. Through their art, Kaufman as well as his character Caden center attention on “multiple constructs, plural ways of perceiving reality, frames within frames, doubles upon doubles”, and this artistic premise testifies to an allegory between art and life. This allegory is clearly manifested in *SNY* through the double depiction of Caden’s life incorporated with his play. The play literally creates multiple frames and constructs as it has doubles upon doubles living in warehouses within warehouses. By pointing so directly to the construction of art and reality Kaufman creates a thorough self-reflexivity within the film, which directs the audience’s attention toward the very constructedness of the film and art in general. This becomes a metafictional technique serving the purpose of critically discussing the relationship between art and reality.

In this discussion, Kaufman points to the dissolving boundaries between art and reality, real and imaginary, since he frequently emphasizes how art and reality imitate and affect each other. This reciprocal influence between art and reality contributes to the synecdoche-theme in *SNY*; when reality is constructed from the different discourses surrounding us, we become a part of these discourses and the discourses become a part of us. As previously discussed, Baudrillard states that the distinction between real and imaginary has become disintegrated to the point where a hyperreal is created that becomes more real than reality itself. When Caden suggests the title “Simulacrum” for his play, it becomes obvious that Kaufman is concerned with the fact that reality through its very constructedness becomes a simulation of the real. Through the focus on the artistic construction, Kaufman emphasizes how Caden constructs a reality which simulates his life

and ends up taking over his reality. This again returns attention to the relationship between art and reality and our realities and selves as discursive constructs.

As discussed in the section 'The Postmodern Individual', Judith Butler argues that in the construction of a self and a reality, we perform certain identities based on the surrounding discourses. Through the performance constituted mainly by language and acts, one's identities are manifested. In *SNY* Kaufman brings this postmodern theme of performativity to a head with the massive one-to-one play depicting Caden's life. Furthermore, as pointed out in the analysis section, there are several identity discourses parodied in the film which demonstrates Kaufman's concern with identity construction and performativity.

Kaufman wants to depict our subjective reality and identity construction since his claim is that our subjective perceptions constitute our realities:

"when you try to represent something in a way that is honest and reflects honestly your understanding of the world you're left with that: Your world is a subjective world. I feel fairly certain that if there were any way to experience the world objectively it would look nothing like it looks to us. Nothing. I mean it wouldn't be recognizable in the least." (Kaufman 2009a)

This statement reveals Kaufman's artistic intention of creating an honest representation of the world as a subjective construction. In 'The Postmodern Condition' we presented Lyotard's idea of the little narratives having replaced the grand narratives. Kaufman's focus on subjective worlds mirrors the dominance of little narratives. However, one may argue that some sort of grand narrative does exist within *SNY* in terms of the narrative about the human condition. In spite of the permeating focus on the subjective world, Kaufman also stresses the connectedness of human beings. As pointed out in our analysis, the characters in *SNY* feel connected when recognizing the struggle of human life in each other, as well as the viewer feels a connection to the characters when recognizing their familiar existential problems.

Two very prominent themes within Kaufman's depiction of the human condition are the problematic relationship to the Other and the inevitable fact that we will eventually die. While the relationship to the other is necessary in the manifestation of our being as argued by Sartre, it is problematic since it restricts our existential freedom, is permeated by conflict and can only succeed transiently. This becomes evident from Caden's many relationships that all fail, leaving him desolated and lonely. Kaufman suggests an allegory between relationships and life:

"You have a relationship that starts; it's going to end. You have a life that started; it's going to end. You don't know how it's going to end, necessarily, but it will end. Of that you can be certain." (Kaufman 2008: 151)

With this statement, Kaufman points toward the circular movement between the life preserving instinct and the death instinct, as suggested by Freud. Because of the fact that human beings are aware of the transience of life, these instincts arise and become defining for the human condition. On the one hand we desire to prolong and preserve our lives and on the other we desire to end our existential struggles in life. This theme works on several levels since it also points to a metafictional layer in the sense that the viewer struggles with both a desire to understand Kaufman's layered work and at the same time longs for its closure due to its complexity.

In relation to the life preserving instinct, the desire for authenticity is a prominent theme in *SNY*. By Adele and the MacArthur Committee, Caden is encouraged to be authentic, honest and original in his artistic work, and this desire for authenticity hereafter becomes defining for his entire existence. Through an authentic representation in form of his play, Caden seeks to grasp the meaning of his life and the human condition in general. However, Caden does not succeed in his attempt to create an authentic piece of art since he is not able to complete the play and ends up handing it over to Millicent. This failure is mirrored in the other aspects of Caden's life, especially in his relationships to other human beings. Through this depiction of Caden's struggle to reach authenticity, Kaufman discusses the difficulties of being original and authentic in a world full of copies and a world dominated by a commodification of art. As stated in the section 'On the Horizon of Simulation', Baudrillard claims that it is impossible to create something real and authentic, since our world has become a hyperreality which is not real in the first place. Although we attempt to reinstall the real, Baudrillard argues that this is unattainable, which means that from his pessimistic viewpoint we cannot obtain anything authentic and original. What Kaufman discusses in *SNY*, however, is that despite the permeating constructedness defining both art and life, the desire for authenticity is important in the process of creating art, and life for that matter. Even though it might not be possible to ever reach authenticity, Kaufman points out that the desire for this must necessarily be present in order to communicate something real, although not in the sense of an absolute truth. The form of authenticity that Kaufman underlines in his artistic work is that he wants to communicate something which is truthful to himself, attesting to Kaufman's subjective experience of the truth.

As evidently exemplified with the struggling artist Charlie Kaufman in *Adaptation* and the struggling artist Caden in *SNY*, Kaufman creates an obvious metafictional parallel to his own artistic struggles. Even though Kaufman is not identical with these characters, he nevertheless shares the refusal to compromise own artistic visions. When Kaufman insists on emphasizing the artistic process, it elicits an exploration of Kaufman's poetics as dealt

with in this thesis through his art manifesto, the theoretical discussions of Kaufman's work along with the analysis of *SNY*. The main characteristics in Kaufman's poetics and his view on art are the themes emphasized in this section. The first major issue is the relationship between art and reality as depicted through his illustration of fact and fiction, real and imaginary as intertwined, which thematizes that both art and reality are defined by constructedness and performativity. Through his consistent use of metafictional techniques, Kaufman underlines the parallel between and interconnectedness of art and life. This theme is mirrored through Kaufman's focus on authenticity which becomes important both in existential and artistic struggles. Kaufman deploys a defamiliarizing postmodern film language which has the effect of calling attention to familiar existential themes and through this he challenges and attracts the viewer. In spite of our subjective reality constructions, Kaufman underlines the feeling of connectedness created through our shared, inevitable life conditions.

When exploring Kaufman's postmodern poetics, it becomes important that he uses the postmodern techniques in order to create an honest representation of the world as he sees it. For instance, his use of parody does not ridicule the parodied but rather creates a critical discussion of certain representations of reality. Kaufman deconstructs the idea that reality can only be represented in a certain way; the world is a construction which cannot be perceived objectively. However, Kaufman's agenda is not only to deconstruct as he engages in an illustration of alternative representations of reality, revealing his artistic agenda of distancing himself from mainstream Hollywood films.

In our thesis we claim that Kaufman moves beyond what can be called conventional postmodernism, and in this relation it becomes important to point to the fact that Kaufman does more than ridicule and deconstruct former artistic discourses and styles. Slethaug defines traditional postmodern artists with the following words: "They strip away texture and depth to emphasize insignificant surface detail and designify the signified" (Slethaug 1993: 32). In relation to Kaufman, however, this does not seem to be true, as he reinstalls the depth in postmodern art since he is driven by the desire to honestly and truthfully depict and discuss what he holds to be a real representation of the world. This reinstallation of depth is furthermore underlined by the fact that Kaufman does not make the postmodern film language the content of the film but uses it to debate his take on the human condition. This existential focus does, however, fit well with McHale's claim that the postmodern dominant is ontological, which thereby again places Kaufman within the postmodern frame. Furthermore, as argued with Hutcheon's theories, the postmodern artist is no longer as Jameson claims neutrally imitating former styles without any political agenda.



With these arguments Kaufman does, nevertheless, seem to belong to a trend already existing within postmodernism. Still Kaufman creates such a unique style that the term 'Kaufmanesque' has been coined, and he thereby becomes a rather autonomous artistic institution. Nevertheless, Kaufman rejects this term as he rejects all attempts to label his work in general, claiming that he never works deliberately towards one specific artistic expression:

"I don't want to become a commodity or brand or repeat myself trying to establish something to people. Given that there are certain things I guess I think about, there's maybe some stylistic similarities and things that I do over time, but I'm not trying for it." (Kaufman 2009b)

As discussed earlier, the artist's cultural identity along with his or her works of art contribute to a kind of branding of the artist and this also accounts for Kaufman although he tries to escape this process. Nevertheless, his resistance along with his careful staging of himself as an honest artist contribute to what we may call tasteful branding.

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**Kaufman's Postmodern Poetics:** Kristina and Lisa

# **SUMMARY OF 'CONSTRUCTING CHARLIE KAUFMAN – A STUDY OF CHARLIE KAUFMAN'S POSTMODERN POETICS'**

This thesis is a study of the American screenwriter and director, Charlie Kaufman's postmodern poetics with main focus on his new film *Synecdoche, New York* (2008). The thesis consists of three main sections which together analyze and discuss Kaufman's view on art, his artistic agenda and his position within a postmodern context.

The first section is called 'Approaching Charlie Kaufman' and pieces together what can be termed his postmodern art manifesto, his cultural identity and artistic brand. Through interviews and other material containing Kaufman's own statements about his work and artistic position, we discuss what he communicates as essential in the process of creating art and being a great artist. The result is that Kaufman attributes great importance to authenticity, originality and honesty in his art, which also become themes working in many levels in *SNY*. Kaufman points to the fact that art and reality has a reciprocal influence on each other, which is underlined in his illustration of the dissolving boundaries between real and imaginary through his heavy use of postmodern techniques such as metafiction, parody and an experimental narrative structure. Besides Kaufman's own statements about his artistic position, we explore his cultural identity by looking into his artistic identity construction and the paratexts (Genette) surrounding *SNY*. This includes a discussion of Kaufman's authorial function and whether or not his artistic identity construction is a kind of tasteful branding.

The second main section is called 'The Postmodern World and Individual' and introduces and discusses selected postmodern theories and existentialist philosophical ideas relevant to Kaufman's works in general and *SNY* in particular. The first sub sections present the theories of thinkers such as McHale, Lyotard, Baudrillard, Waugh, Hutcheon and Butler in order to characterize the postmodern world and individual. Main issues discussed here are the constructedness of realities and selves, the dissolving boundaries between fact and fiction and parody, adaptation and metafiction as tools to critically discuss the relationship between art and reality. In the following subsection we introduce ideas of the philosophers Sartre, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Løgstrup and Buber. Existentialism and life philosophy are ontological philosophies that share some of the postmodern ideas as for instance the constructedness of our lives and the focus on little narratives rather than grand narratives. Furthermore, existentialism and life philosophy underline how the relationship to the Other is part of the human condition as the other person influences our construction of reality and self.

In the third main section we analyze *SNY* applying the previously presented theories in order to discuss and map out Kaufman's postmodern poetics and compare this to Kaufman's own statements about his artistic position. The film conveys how Kaufman is concerned with how the individual relate to problematic existential conditions in a postmodern world. An allegory is created between art and life in the sense that desire for authenticity and meaning define both the artistic process and the life process, while we at the same time, in both art and life, seek closure. In the analysis we focus mainly on Kaufman's depiction of the main character Caden Cotard's reality and identity construction, the parody of identity discourses and the existential themes depicted through the use of an experimental postmodern film language.

Following these three main sections is a discussion and conclusion of Kaufman's postmodern poetics in which we sum up, compare and discuss the points made in the previous sections. Important to this discussion is Kaufman's agenda of distinguishing himself from the mainstream Hollywood film industry and reinstalling the depth in postmodern art as he is driven by the desire to honestly and truthfully depict and discuss what he holds to be a real representation of the world.

## **APPENDIX 1: SUMMARY OF SYNECDOCHE, NEW YORK**

*Synecdoche, New York* depicts the life and struggles of theater director Caden Cotard. The film takes its starting point in Schenectady, New York where Caden lives with his wife Adele and daughter Olive. In his career, Caden is about to have premier with his restaging of Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*. After the premier, the reviews celebrate Caden's production and shortly after this success, he receives the honorable MacArthur Grant encouraging him to produce something unflinchingly true. Adele does not define Caden's Miller-production as successful and she also pushes him to do something more original. In spite of the plan of the whole family going to Berlin for a couple of months to display Adele's miniature art, Adele decides to pursue an artistic career in Berlin with just Olive. Thus Adele leaves Caden for good and he is left devastated and when the box office woman Hazel tries to seduce him, he manages to blow this chance as he is too indulged in his own self-pity and sadness.

Caden feels that something is at play under the surface and is from the very beginning preoccupied with illness and death and is getting lonelier by the day. He consults a variety of doctors among whom the most prominent figure is the no-good therapist Madeline Gravis. Caden consults her on several occasions and even though he buys her book *Getting Better*, his situation is far from bettering judged from the status of his relationships and his state of mind. Caden attempts to start a new life by marrying the young actress Claire with whom he has the daughter, Ariel. However, Caden does not succeed in forgetting his past since he insists on going to Berlin to find his "real" daughter, as he calls Olive. This too turns out far from successful since he only meets Adele's closest friend Maria, against whom he has many aversions. These aversions are even more emphasized as she refuses him to see Olive. Later on, Caden meets Olive on her dead bed dying from a tattoo infection and here she reveals her lesbian relationship to Maria and concludes that she cannot forgive him for abandoning her. Also, Caden's hunt for his past ends up ruining his relationship to Claire and he is once again left alone.

After receiving the MacArthur grant, Caden is determined to depict something brutally true and honest and this becomes Caden's life project around which everything revolves. Caden buys a gigantic warehouse which becomes the set of the play and inside it he creates a replica of the outside real world and of his life. As it develops, Caden's life becomes intertwined with his art project. For instance, it often happens that Caden hires an actor to play someone from his life and when Caden gets to know this actor he or she comes to play a role in his life and therefore also in the play. The result of this is that the play contains doubles, triples and quadruples, who are all present on set at the same time. The

fictional world of Caden's play becomes intertwined with his reality and what takes place on set ends up being just as real – or perhaps even more real – than Caden's reality itself.

Due to the vast expansion of the play, Caden constantly hires new actors and after years and years, the play has still not been finished. Out of these actors, especially Caden's double Sammy and Hazel's double Tammy become part of Caden's real life as Sammy functions as Caden's companion and Tammy as a substitute for Hazel. After being married to Derek for many years, Hazel is divorced and engages in a short termed fling with Sammy, which pushes Caden to declare his devotion to Hazel and they again try to engage in a relationship. Devastated by this, Sammy kills himself and shortly after Caden also loses Hazel who dies from smoke annihilation caused by her many years of living in a burning house (!).

Lonelier now than ever, Caden's artistic drive decreases and he ends up playing Adele's cleaning lady, Ellen Bascomb, whereas Caden's role is filled out by the woman Millicent who previously occupied the role as Ellen. In the end, more than 50 years have passed and the vast set has come to consist of three warehouses within each other representing the complexity and extreme evolvement of Caden's play. Caden's life's work was never seen by an audience and was never even given a title in spite of Caden's numerous attempts to find the right one. In the moments prior to his death, Caden walks around the warehouses, a set now completely desolated and abandoned illustrating the apocalypse of Caden's world. After getting a new idea for how to finish his play, Caden dies in the arms of a stranger.

## **APPENDIX 2: 'THE FUNERAL SCENE'**

“Everything is more complicated than you think. You only see a tenth of what is true. There are a million little strings attached to every choice you make – you destroy your life every time you choose, but maybe you won't know for 20 years and you may never ever trace it to its source and you'll only get one chance to play it out. Just try and figure out your own divorce. And they say there is no fate, there is, it's what you create. And even though the world goes on for ions and ions, you are only here for a fraction of a fraction of a second. Most of your time is spend being dead or not yet born, but while alive, you wait in vain wasting years for a phonecall or a letter or a look from someone or something to make it alright, and it never comes or it seems to but it doesn't really. So you spend your time in vague regret or vaguer hope that something good will come along, something to make you feel connected, something to make you feel whole, something to make you feel loved. And the truth is, I feel so angry, and the truth is, I feel so fucking sad, and the truth is, I've felt so fucking hurt for so fucking long, and for just as long I've been pretending I'm okay just to get along, just for...I don't know why, maybe because no one wants to hear about my misery because they have their own... Fuck everybody. Amen”