

**How Charlie Kaufman presents and critiques characters  
searching for meaning in *Synecdoche, New York* and *I'm  
Thinking of Ending Things*.**

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## **SUMMARY**

In the films *Synecdoche, New York* (C. Kaufman, 2008) and *I'm Thinking of Ending Things* (C. Kaufman, 2020), writer and director Charlie Kaufman explores flawed protagonists who create fantasies of their lives in order to try and discover meaning within them. Kaufman inspects the reasons for the construction and destruction of these fantasies, primarily solipsism, self-pity, fear and regret, with the intent of encouraging the audience to overcome these vices and connect with others.

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Jonze, S. (1999) *Still from film* (Being John Malkovich) Focus Features.

Jonze, S. (2002) *Still from film* (Adaptation) Sony Pictures.

Kaufman, C. (2008) *Stills from film* (Synecdoche, New York) Sony Pictures Classics.

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## Introduction

A grand meaning to life is perhaps the ultimate discovery humanity has been scrambling to unlock for millennia. It could be said that the primary purpose of art itself is to explore this question through simile and metaphor, creating simulations of reality that allow artist and audience to experience a fictitious situation. If this situation is truthful and the audience see themselves in the story – perhaps even mistake the illusion for reality for a short period of time when deeply immersed – then the lessons the characters are left with from their mistakes and conquests can themselves be passed on to the audience.

Charlie Kaufman uses film as a way to challenge the search for this meaning, through telling stories centred around flawed, solipsistic characters. Each of his characters becomes obsessed with finding a grand narrative of meaning, whether it is trying to figure out where a relationship fell apart or trying to find out why their life is unfulfilling. In each of these searches for meaning the characters delve too deep as they increasingly fail to find a simple answer. In the end his characters often end up in either the same place as when they started or have destroyed themselves looking for truth that remains undiscovered.

Focusing on *I'm Thinking of Ending Things* and *Synecdoche, New York*, this dissertation will explore how and why Kaufman portrays and constructs these characters searches for meaning within their lives and what he is trying to achieve by doing so.

## Chapter One – The Kaufman filmography

### Kaufman's Scripts

Kaufman is an American screenwriter-turned-director who has an obsession with the philosophical value of art. He first came into the world of the feature film as the screenwriter of the Spike Jonze-directed *Being John Malkovich* (1999), a surprise-hit comedy. While the all-star cast and pop-video visuals captivated American audiences, the core tale of an unfulfilled puppeteer who gains the opportunity to become someone else, only to lead them down the same path of self-destruction, was surprisingly substantive for a John Cusack and Cameron Diaz starring Hollywood vehicle.



Fig. 1: Labelled screenshots from six of the most significant films Kaufman either wrote or directed.

From this first film several themes are apparent that run through many of Kaufman's works. Self-indulgence and especially its place within art are explored through a male protagonist who ends up becoming - and in the process destroying - his own art.

Kaufman's return to the mainstream several years later with *Adaptation* (Spike Jonze, 2002) once again showed a screenwriter critical of the artistic process, this time turning the spotlight on himself and his own struggles to adapt the (real<sup>1</sup>) non-fiction book *The Orchid Thief* by Susan Orlean. Just as the protagonist of *Being John Malkovich* becomes a living representation of his puppetry, Kaufman puts a representation of himself (Nicolas Cage plays the character 'Charlie Kaufman') into the novel, as he struggles, both in the film and seemingly also in reality, to bring his screenplay to a satisfying close that will excite audiences. Once again, the puppeteer ends up as the puppet.

In 2004 Kaufman scripted the Michel Gondry directed *Eternal Sunshine of The Spotless Mind*, another film where a character is trapped within their own mind, this time with a focus on memories.

### Kaufman's Directing

This obsession with modernist ouroboros reached a peak in 2008 as Kaufman released his directorial debut *Synecdoche, New York*. In keeping with *Malkovich* and *Adaptation* this is a film about a theatre director, Caden Cotard (Played by Philip Seymour Hoffman) who begins creating an autobiographical play that seems to directly mirror his own life. This play is in development for almost forty years before it is destroyed by what seems to be a world-ending apocalypse and also by the death of Caden. It is a confusing and complicated film, with Kaufman much less willing to

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<sup>1</sup> Because Kaufman's work often deals with multiple levels of reality (plays within plays within a film and so on), actual reality, outside of his films will be referred to as 'reality' while the default state of reality within his film worlds will be referred to as 'film reality'.



explain to his audience what is happening and why than other directors who have turned his screenplays into popular successes.

After co-directing a comparatively small-scale animated film *Anomalisa* in 2015 with animator Duke Johnson, Kaufman directed the spiritual follow-up to *Synecdoche*, 2020's *I'm Thinking of Ending Things*, adapted and modified significantly from the novel by Ian Reid. In this film the protagonist Jake (played by Jesse Plemons), an old, depressed janitor, reminisces about his life and regrets as he prepares to commit suicide, which he attempts at the end of the film by freezing himself to death in his van. The majority of the film presents this reminiscence as the film reality.

## Chapter Two – Caden and Jake

In many ways Caden and Jake are similar characters. They are both crushed by what they see as their inadequacies, specifically in their failure to reach their own standards of artistic achievement, their failure to connect meaningfully to those around them and in their failure to romantically connect with women. Both attempt to diagnose where these problems originate through re-constructing their past as fantasies, which in turn takes them further away from reality and further obscures their perspective on how to go about solving the issues in their lives.

### Caden

The largest difference between the characters is that Caden has ample (missed) opportunities to correct the course of his life, while from the beginning of his film Jake has already led a failed life. In *Synecdoche, New York* Caden is haunted by problems that are only of his own perception, best exemplified in his hypochondriac conviction he is constantly ill or dying. Caden has a similar attitude to his art. He is convinced he has made little of note, while in reality he is seen by many as a successful playwright, receiving the prestigious MacArthur ‘genius grant’ for his re-staging of Arthur Miller’s *Death of a Salesman*.

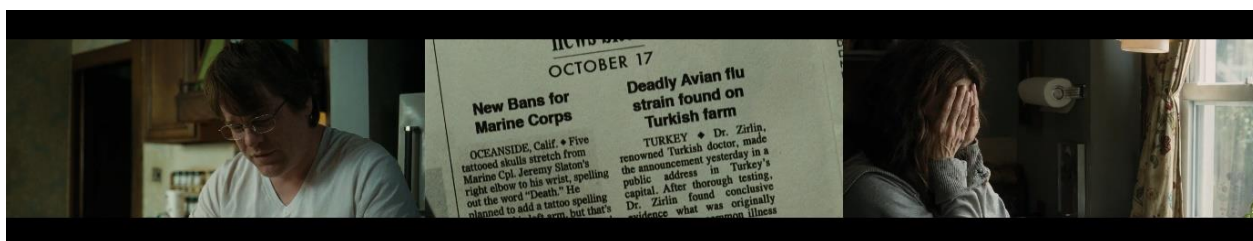


Fig. 2. In the opening sequence of the film Caden reads out distressing news headlines to his wife rather than helping her get their daughter ready. He does not see that his lack of care and depressing attitude is frustrating her. This is the first of many instances of Caden fixating on his own fears to the extent he does not notice other problems he has power to solve.

Jordan Siron (2013) wrote in his analysis of the film, "Caden is a fairly self-involved person. While his wife, Adele, wears herself ragged trying to support herself, their daughter, Olive, as well as Caden's mounting insecurities, Caden seems concerned only with what exists within his own private universe." Caden constantly laments his total loneliness, while he has many relationships with women, having two children and having an extended on-off romance with the woman Hazel (Played by Samantha Morton), all ruined by his lack of empathy and inability to truly care for those who need him. Ultimately Caden is a man who fails to appreciate what he has until it's too late, as he is trapped by his solipsism and self-pitying depression.

This is in stark contrast to Jake, who begins and ends the film with nothing and nobody to live for. At least through what we are shown he believes about himself, he has used up his life caring for his deteriorating parents and then once they had both died, working as a janitor for many years. Because he lived on a farm, he was very isolated throughout his life, was misunderstood by his parents while they were healthy and had too much social anxiety to ever have a romantic connection.

He is also caught in arrested development. "Jake's invocation of Wordsworth's "Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood" defines him as a young man who has never entirely grown up." (Porton. R, 2020) Jake seems to have not developed properly into a responsible adult, his embarrassment lodged deeply in childhood loathing<sup>2</sup> and his current elderly existence taking place as a janitor in a school.

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<sup>2</sup> Jake obsesses over how he was embarrassed in primary school to be awarded a badge for 'diligence', describing how he sees it as the school signaling "You're not that bright, but we're impressed that you try anyway."

While Caden believed himself to be a failure despite the evidence, Jake actually did fail to live what many would consider a happy or fulfilling life.

Both characters share one vital similarity that is paramount to their failures – their inability to tell the story of their lives. Like Kaufman in *Adaptation*, Caden and Jake are both characters with a stunted ability to describe their life experience to others, or even themselves in a meaningful way. They both hold the flawed belief that by looking into the past they can find where their lives went wrong, and by fixating on attempting self-dissection they waste their lives looking for meaning in the wrong places.



Fig. 3 “Sometimes it feels like nobody sees the good things you do. That you’re just alone.” – Jake cares immensely about validation from others but seems to have never connected with anyone on an intimate level.

### Chapter Three – Re-constructions

In their attempt to find meaning within their lives, Caden and Jake both construct fantasy re-creations of their own past that eventually break down, revealing nothing.



Fig. 4. "I can't get excited about your restaging someone else's old play, it just... there's nothing personal in it." After showing her his staging of *Death of a Salesman* Caden does not get validation from his wife, Adele.

#### Simulacrum

Many scenes within the first act of *Synechdoche, New York* take place around Caden's re-staging of Arthur Miller's classic play *Death of a Salesman* (1949). While on a metaphorical level this play has many parallels with Caden's life, it acts more mechanically as an example of the standards Caden believes he needs to meet as an artist. It is not enough for him to successfully re-convey and re-contextualise Miller's classic, as although the play seems to be wildly successful it barely impacts on Caden because his immediate family seem distasteful of it. As a result, Caden feels artistically impotent and this seems to drive his next project to be ambitious

beyond compare, as well as intensely personal to avoid the accusations that he is great only because of another's greatness.

Caden's core search for existential meaning takes place in and around this new play, which I will refer to as *Simulacrum*, as the audience never discovers its final title.

Caden begins his play with improvisational workshops, which morph into representations of his own life. It is suggested at several points that the gigantic cast are all playing different characters living their own lives with their own struggles at once in an increasingly detailed 'set' of New York City, but for most of the film we only see the scenes of *Simulacrum* that revolve around Caden's own experiences.



Fig. 5. One scene Caden directs in *Simulacrum* Sammy (Tom Noonan) plays Caden listening to Claire (played by Michelle Williams) complain about Sammy – an example of the often convoluted results of Caden's play being so closely autobiographical.

## Jake's Fantasy

In *I'm Thinking of Ending Things*, as put by Karin Lowachee, "Kaufman explores the idea that perhaps the deepest fantasies in life are the ones we build in our own minds, and the urgency of understanding them often arrives as we are faced with death." (2020) Like Caden, Jake constructs a play but it exists only as a fantasy within his own head as he goes through his last day of janitor work before his suicide. It is initially a dissociative fantasy in second person, as he imagines himself to be a woman initially called Lucy, who will be referred to here as 'The Girlfriend', visiting a substantially younger Jake's parents with him. At the end of the film, it is revealed that The Girlfriend is seemingly not someone Jake ever had a meaningful connection with and may have just seen for several moments one night many years ago. Jake uses his fantasy to try and figure out where his life went awry, but it increasingly breaks down until it dissipates completely.



Fig. 6. The real, janitor Jake (Right) projects his younger self (Left) into his fantasy

## Chapter Four – Metatextuality

Both Caden and Jake attempt to find the meanings of their lives through their own interpretations of existing media, with Kaufman suggesting that art cannot give us all the answers to our existential worries, perhaps even obscuring it further.

### *Death of a Salesman*

Kaufman's choice to have Caden produce a version of *Death of a Salesman* is meaningful, as the play shares several similarities with Caden's life: It is a play about a flawed male character who refuses to accept his own failure. He is past his prime trying to keep his job, but all his old customers have moved on. This is what happens to Caden who grows older while failing to perfect his play and dies without anyone having seen it. Arthur Miller was able to weave tragedy and meaning into the events of *Death of a Salesman* by setting them all within the last day of Willy Loman's life, suggesting that each scene and flashback we see in the play is not just a fragment of life but one of a series of meaningful events that lead to Willy's suicide. Even as director, Caden seems to be unable to extract the importance of Willy Loman's death within the play. Kaufman is certainly aware of its importance, as two of the three scenes from this reproduced play that the film audience witnesses are the death and funeral of Willy Loman.





Fig. 7. Caden's version of *Death of a Salesman* is overly faithful to previous reproductions, with the exception of casting young actors, showing an inability to express his personality.

Caden strives towards this “brutal honesty” but is unable to replicate it with *Simulacrum* because his play is autobiographical and as a result will never have an end point until he dies, at which point he can of course no longer create the play. Caden comes up with many names for his own play but none of them seem to fit – it is only when he is moments away from dying, he finally comes up with a title, which the audience never discovers. In *Death of a Salesman* the titular event is similarly only achieved in the last moments of the play. Until he is dying himself Caden fails to grasp the importance of an ending in giving a work meaning.

Like Willy Loman, Caden exists in a fantasy world where he sees things as he wants to see them rather than as they really are, ruining his life in the process. Kaufman draws comparisons between the characters with a layer of metatextual irony – Caden wants to create something meaningful that will help people in their lives but is himself unable to realise the core meaning of his own work.

### Jake and *Oklahoma!*

This idea that people will take what they want from art is taken to a dangerous extreme in *I'm Thinking of Ending Things* as Kaufman presents a character whose self-hatred has been exacerbated by media, causing him to conflate fantasy with self-loathing.

Jake has a keen interest in the American film/stage musical *Oklahoma!* (1955, dir. Fred Zinnemann), watching it performed by students every year at his school. During the specific school day the film spans it is especially prominent in Jake's mind because rehearsals for a student production are taking place in the film reality.

*Oklahoma!* is a representation of the American dream, where a beautiful woman living in the idyllic American West is swept off her feet by a dazzling singing cowboy, Curly. However, to reach this goal of romance the characters must overcome the stumpy, macho evil of Jud, representing an isolated, envious, and manual-labour class villain. He is threatening and selfish, especially in the 1955 film adaptation of the musical which cuts Jud's only solo number, *Lonely Room* (Oscar Hammerstein II, 1943). This song reveals a loneliness full of romantic fantasy behind Jud's hard exterior. There is an element of sadness to this song too where Jud feels not just envious of Curly but victimized by him – "I'm better than that smart Alec cowhand, who thinks he's better than me".

Jake confronts the reality that he may be more like Jud than Curly. In the school where he works as a janitor, Jake imagines himself (in his young form) and Lucy as the two dancers of the dream ballet sequence from *Oklahoma!* until the young Jake is killed by a representation of elderly Jake in a janitor's uniform, playing the role of Jud. While Caden fails to grasp the significance of Willy Loman's death and apply it

to his own play, Jake grasps the significance of Jud all too well, that he is a representation of the undesirable American, exacerbating his self-hatred. Jud is barely sympathetic in the film adaptation of *Oklahoma!* and when he is killed the townspeople even seem relieved he is dead. In his final moments before death, Jake sings the entirety of *Lonely Room*, a final confirmation that he believes himself to be Jud, worthy of death.

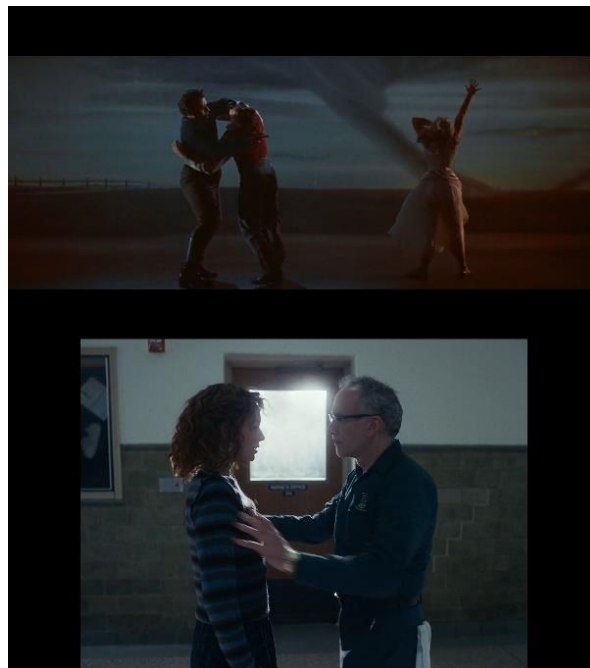


Fig. 8. The dream ballet sequence from *Oklahoma!* (above) is mirrored by Jake's fantasy in *I'm Thinking of Ending Things* (below), where a representation of himself plays the violent role of Jud.

There is also an undercurrent in *I'm Thinking of Ending Things* about how movies and other pieces of media present a largely unanimous picture of love being the main purpose of human existence. In *Oklahoma!*, in a fake Robert Zemeckis rom-com and in Jake's final speech, lifted directly from the Ron Howard film *A Beautiful Mind* (2001), love is presented as not only the goal of the characters but also the end of the story – the meaning of a character's life. Without love Jake must create his own ending to the story of his life – suicide.



Fig. 9. There are very clear parallels between the closing scene of *I'm Thinking of Ending Things* and *A Beautiful Mind*, to show how Jake is constructing a fantasy idea of 'the perfect ending' for himself based off the media he has consumed in the past.

Caden and Jake both exist in the shadow of these creations. They search for meaning within them but are blinded by self-hatred and self-importance, fail to recognise the core meanings behind the characters and events. Caden is obsessed with replicating the “brutal honesty” of *Death of a Salesman* but ends up living a life mirroring that of Willy Loman. Jake sees himself as Jud because of their superficial similarities – social isolation, unflattering jobs, romantic fantasies – but fails to recognise that what makes Jud an ‘evil’ character is his aggression, involving attempting to kill Curly and trying to rape his love interest. The characters see what they want to see, not what they need to see, deluding themselves further.



Fig.10. Soon after getting into Jake's car the Girlfriend sees his visor mirror is cracked. This could be interpreted as a literal metaphor for Jake's inability to accurately self-reflect.

## Chapter Five – Subjective perspectives and surrealism

In both of these films it is unclear upon an initial viewing whether events are taking place within the film reality or whether they are a memory or dream from the protagonist. In *Ending Things*, it can be worked out what is reality and what is fantasy, because there are not only differences in presentation between the two but also because the actor playing Jake changes between a young version of Jake within the fantasy (Jesse Plemons) and the elderly Jake of the film reality (Guy Boyd).

### Subjectivity in *Synecdoche, New York*

Meanwhile reality in *Synecdoche, New York* is much harder to identify. Certain moments, such as a character buying a perpetually burning house and the flower tattoos on one character gaining a wilted appearance as they become infected could be interpreted as either dream-like hallucinations, symbolic embellishments added to memories of real events in the fantasy of the protagonist (as it is in *Ending Things*) or just as features of a surreal, heightened film reality (as in *Being John Malkovich*).

In her essay highlighting links between *Death of A Salesman* and *Synecdoche, New York*, Rebecca Davers (2011) speculates this subjective realism may be inspired by the on-stage presentation of Willy Loman's daydreams; "Kaufman's focalization on Caden throughout the film forces viewers to understand Caden's world through Caden's perception. Kaufman is able to translate onto film what Mielziner<sup>3</sup> was able to achieve with easily moved props and fluid lighting effects on the 1949 [production of *Death of a Salesman*], which allowed Willy's day dreams to be performed without any stoppage or curtains". As a device used in many Kaufman works, subjectivity is

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<sup>3</sup> Jo Mielziner, original stage designer for *Death of a Salesman*

likely not used singularly or primarily as a reference to Miller's play but Kaufman is certainly drawing parallels between the works by including *Death of a Salesman* within the film, perhaps included as a way to help viewers familiar with the play to untangle the reality of the film.

No matter the interpretation the viewer chooses, Kaufman has made it clear that this is an intentional attempt to convey how the characters are experiencing reality, "I've always felt that naturalism — in both movies and literature — is not a natural representation of the experience of being alive. The subjects my work explores is the real world, the dreaminess of it is an attempt to explore the world as it is actually experienced. It's not an attempt to be purposely weird, eccentric or silly." (2020).

Kaufman occasionally breaks the film realities of his work by having a fictionalised version of himself in the film, as in *Adaptation* and his novel *Antkind* (C. Kaufman, 2020), or by highlighting the artificiality of a work, such as having the animated protagonist of *Anomalisa* realise that he is a puppet. In *Synecdoche, New York* a similar blurring takes place. As essayist David Crewe (2016) has written, "This reflection on artificiality is subtly emphasised even before Caden's theatre piece begins, with his character framed as a fictional construct even within this universe. He inexplicably watches a cartoon version of himself on television, drowning; on the same TV we see a flash forward to the film's final moments, as an aged Caden drifts through thick white fog."



Fig. 11. Further convoluting the reality of the film are several hints that Caden may himself just be an actor in a play, such as when he has to use tear substitutes to cry. Kaufman draws a large amount of attention to this using the framing above. This reinforces the idea that Caden is a character in a story rather than a real human being, drawing on the idea of artifice once again – reminding the audience what they are seeing is not real.

The mixture of often surrealist elements with fourth-wall scraping moments like these adds a meta level of hopelessness to the characters, as Kaufman highlights the lack of control characters have over their own lives, bound as they are to the machinations of plot. This makes the searches these characters go through in their own lives seem even more pathetic, as the audience is made aware that they are characters, who, like most fictitious characters, have very specific purposes set by a writer, a God that is impossible for them to see but known by the audience. Through this comparison Kaufman suggests that human beings are similar, unable to see the machinations that rule us, therefore highlighting the uselessness of trying to find objective meaning in our lives.

The subjective realism and fourth-wall-referencing of these films is what gives them much of their philosophical power, as Kaufman is not only telling the audience a story about a character but is allowing the audience to see the stories his

protagonists have constructed around themselves. By highlighting the strangeness of reality and adding fictitious and hallucinatory elements into the film realities of his characters, Kaufman suggests the impossibility of finding truth within reconstructions of the past, as it becomes warped by perception and feeling into something that barely resembles what was once itself warped by perception and feelings.



## Chapter Six - Solipsism

Caden and Jake are obsessed with finding the meaning to their lives because they are sure there is some specific, unknown problem with them both. Kaufman heavily suggests that the issue both characters really have is not some extraordinary bad luck or past trauma but a narcissistic solipsism. Kaufman's films collectively argue against the idea of solipsism, by showing the Hell of a solipsistic existence.

### Kaufman's war on solipsism

In *Anomalisa*, the protagonist begins and ends the film seeing every single character outside of himself as an identical looking and sounding person regardless of gender, Kaufman's ultimate visualisation of solipsism. During the release of the film Kaufman said,

“To me, *Anomalisa* is political. It's about being able to see other people, and I think so much of what is wrong right now in the world is that people don't see each other as human beings — as people with fear and desires and longings. And therefore, you're able to treat other people as objects that you can use to get what you want. It's a hard thing to do, to see people on a personal scale. I think if we could do that, we'd make better decisions as societies and individuals, be better and kinder, and just by that alone, the world would be a better place.” (2015)



Fig. 12. In *Anomalisa* every character except from the protagonist and his love interest have identical faces and voices.

This statement can be used as a key to unlocking the reason solipsism is presented as a nightmarish prison in *Synecdoche, New York* and *I'm Thinking of Ending Things*, because Kaufman sees it as a destructive problem that is consuming the world and wants to encourage his audience to think more empathetically.

### Caden's self-importance

In *Synecdoche, New York* Caden experiences an arc where he gradually loses his solipsistic self-importance and gains a sense of empathy with others, culminating in his total change of identity as he gives up the role of 'Caden' in his play to instead exist as 'Ellen', a cleaning lady. For much of the film Caden seems to lack self-awareness about how his constant self-focused misery harms his relationships with those around him. He finds himself unable to sexually perform with Hazel because he is reminded about his daughter leaving him a year ago. He is unable to accept that Adele and Olive moved away from him because he was neglectful, blaming it instead on Adele's friend Maria.

Caden's play is a monument to the tragedy of his own life. It is only when Sammy dies Caden finally realises that everyone else is just as significant and human as him – he is at this point in his seventies. Kaufman shows Caden realising the importance of others too late in his life not just to create tragedy but to suggest to the audience that they learn from Caden's mistake and realise the humanity of every person, something he encourages by allowing his characters to be extremely flawed, in comparison to the simplistic characters in *Oklahoma!* And the fake Robert Zemeckis film that have made Jake feel wrong for his neuroticism.

### Jake's desperate loneliness

In *I'm Thinking of Ending things* the loneliness of the character seems not to be from this sense that he is more important or unique than everyone else, it is involuntary, adding a tragic note to the film. Caden and Jake share the same desire to be with and connect to other people, but while Caden is incapable of realising these people are all around him, Jake is truly alone. Too nervous to ever ask a woman on a date Jake can only construct an imaginary girlfriend – and in his self-hatred imagines that even she would want to leave him. He clearly has both sympathy and hatred towards his parents. In his memory/fantasy he reminisces on feeling embarrassed, as his parents misunderstand who he is and who he wants to be. Jake feels kinship with the bullied outcasts of his school but as an elderly janitor understands there is little chance for emotional connection with them.



Fig. 13. Jake imagines a girl he has seen at his school who seems to be an outcast working at the tulse town stall. He imagines a scar on her hand and a matching one on his own, as a metaphor for how he feels a connection with them based on their shared loneliness.

## Chapter Seven - Kaufman's universe of symbols

One of the most idiosyncratic features of Kaufman's films is his heavy use of symbols, often in the form of unusual sets and props. Kaufman uses meaningful symbols to represent worlds that are themselves full of meaning for the characters. Often these props are not drawn attention to, adding a layer of discovery for the audience, as they are encouraged to rewatch the film to pick up on details. In *Synecdoche, New York* the most obvious symbol is that of Hazel's burning house, which also acts as a good example of how Kaufman implements a symbol. In the film reality Hazel simply walks up to the flaming house and begins inspecting the interiors with a real estate agent. There is no introduction to the house or why it may be on fire – the characters simply acknowledge the burning as if it's ordinary.



Fig.14. The Burning House from *Synecdoche, new York*

In *I'm Thinking of Ending Things* the symbols are initially presented as more obviously incongruent, as The Girlfriend notices and remarks on odd changes in props and in chronology. However, while some of these changes are drawn attention to, others are less immediately noticeable, such as the un-addressed changing outfits of the girlfriend between scenes.



Fig 15. Every costume worn by The Girlfriend in *I'm Thinking of Ending Things*.

### Why the characters see symbols

“The audience may find themselves caught in a self-referencing loop, like Jake himself and all of his intellectual obsessions strewn through his childhood home, trying to play detective to mysteries of meaning with no promise of answers.” (K. Lowachee, 2021) Both Caden and Jake are shown to be consumers of high-brow art. Caden is not only re-staging Arthur Miller, but it is suggested he is a fan too of Kafka’s writing. Meanwhile Jake discusses many pieces of media, including the writings of David Foster-Wallace, Pauline Kael, and an interest in the films of John Cassavetes. As consumers of so much art both men are looking for symbols of meaning within their own lives as they would in the books they love, and since they are so familiar with finding meaning within fiction, they create a fiction of their own lives where every symbol has meaning – but these are fictions without endings being analysed in real time as they created, making the symbols uninterpretable for the protagonists, just as it is impossible to understand foreshadowing until it is known what future event it was referencing.

As a result many of these symbols only make sense once they have exited the film. When Hazel dies in the burning house from smoke inhalation many decades after buying it the audience then realises why the house was constantly burning – as a kind of foreshadowing.

Jake seems more aware of the symbols around him as they are more obviously creations from within his own mind. The changing outfits of the girlfriend are not only metaphorical, but they also represent Jake switching the costumes of the characters he has created in his fantasy, as he struggles to maintain the consistency of a mostly fictionalized scenario. This reaches an apex when the actress playing his girlfriend changes completely for several lines into the actress from the fake Robert Zemeckis film the real janitor Jake was watching during his lunch break. Jake, consciously or otherwise, is fictionalizing his life so it can gain the meaningful symbolism of fiction.

This allows him to try and decipher the meaning of his life, a process which breaks down as Jake realises the incongruous elements of his fantasy have taken over, a process shown through The Girlfriend becoming increasingly angry towards Jake. The turning point seems to be when The Girlfriend goes to the basement in Jake's childhood home and finds a washing machine full of the Janitor's uniforms, representing the beginning of Jake's realization that his fantasy is untrue.

Only when this fantasy completely breaks down does Jake finally decide to kill himself. In his final hallucinatory speech, as he freezes to death from hypothermia on purpose in his truck, he seems to suggest that, as he has always been taught in movies and plays, romantic love is the true meaning of life. Unable to accept his failure to find someone real to love Jake sings *Lonely Room*, a song that tellingly ends with the lyrics "I'll find me a woman to call my own!". As he dies Jake retreats

into the fantasy that his story is not ending and that he is in fact about to go out into the world and find a woman to love. The last person he sees before fading away is The Girlfriend. The audience sees that having failed to find the meaning of life in his earlier romantic fantasy, Jake now once again retreats into a new fantasy where he is old and has had a hugely successful life with a supportive wife (Directly referencing the events of *A Beautiful Mind*). Jake dies without ever facing up to the realities of his life.

## Chapter Eight - Ending Things

Both *Synecdoche, New York* and *I'm Thinking of Ending Things* end with the death of the protagonist. While broadly this is common in fiction, Kaufman's deaths are unusual. Rather than a sacrifice or the logical conclusion to a dramatic descent, Jake and Caden die mostly alone. They find some kind of final peace but only after a lifetime of prolonged anxiety. Both characters seem content to die only because they have nothing left to live for. Caden's play and everyone he knew is seemingly dead and Jake has seemingly made no real connections to others since the death of his parents.

The titular phrase "I'm thinking of ending things" is a double entendre, ending a relationship on one hand and ending a life on the other. Even more than this, the title hints at Kaufman's ultimate point about the meaning of life – The meaning of a story is only clear when it's over. We should not expect to find the meaning of our lives until it too has run its full course.



## Chapter Nine - It's Crazy to Think This Stuff Doesn't Affect Us

What does Kaufman want the audience to take from these characters largely failed searches for meaning? "I want people to see others as human beings." (Kaufman, 2015). Kaufman presents a two-pronged attack on solipsism and self-obsession within these two films. He creates flawed, highly intelligent characters that the audience may see themselves in. He shows us their self-obsession by putting us into their subjective viewpoints, allowing us to experience Jake's self-criticising and self-pitying fantasies and spend time with Caden in his most pathetic and anxious moments.

Caden lives in a Hell formed by self-obsession. He worries so intensely about his death and his legacy that he neglects the people around him. He is obsessed with finding a meaning to his life in a beautiful, brutal play about himself, but seems distant and disconnected to the real people he interacts with. He ends up handing the control of the play over and spends his final years living inside the recreational play of his own life.

Jake has spent his life too nervous to do the things he wanted to do – to ask a woman on a date, to commit to his love of painting, to make his parents proud, and has spent his time consuming films, books and plays celebrating these fundamental parts of human existence he never had, primarily love. As his life draws to a close he can only deal with the tragedy of his reality by escaping into a fantasy where he did have everything he longed for.

In a 2020 New York Times interview, collated by Jon Mooallem, Kaufman stated "I don't have any lessons to impart, and I want to make sure I can't." Kaufman does deliver messaging within his films but it is interpretable and rarely didactic.

By creating depressed characters with failed lives and showing us their experiences of life from a subjective, expressionist viewpoint, I believe Kaufman is giving the audience a complex message about meaning in *Synecdoche, New York* and *I'm Thinking of Ending Things* – that every life is full of chaos and tragedy and is often out of our control. Attempts to dissect our existence can take up our whole lives if we let it. We should focus on what we can do to connect with other people rather than focusing on our past mistakes or worrying over our future ailments. Life is short, so do not spend it alone, wondering why you feel so lonely. Reach out to those around you before they are gone forever and all you can do is evoke their ghost for comfort.

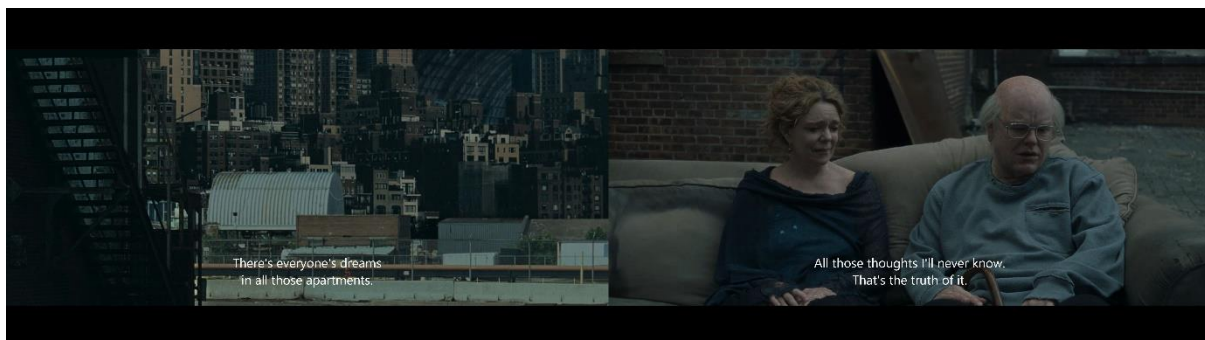


Fig. 16. These final sentences from Caden in *Synecdoche, New York* show him finally acknowledging there are mysteries of life that can never be uncovered.

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