

Beyond *The Matrix*: Today's Hyper-fictional Hyperreality and *Synecdoche New York*

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*Charlie Kaufman's curious little art film turns 15 this year. What can it tell us about our current political moment that *The Matrix* can not?*

At first glance, *Synecdoche New York*, a film that turns 15 this year, is a reflection of the existential absurdity of life and death. From the start, Caden is dying, plagued by mysterious illness. His daughter, too, notices her stool is an improbable colour of green. The first scene with an obvious break from reality provides the image: mortals are all living in a house on fire; we won't last long. Other moments of unreality reflect the nature of aging: Caden is quickly plagued by time slippages. Where it seems like a week has gone by it has in fact been months, the four year old is now eleven. Time is slipping through his hands.

This alone would make a perfectly presentable existentialist absurdist play, Beckett for 2008. But Caden's woes are also about perception and its muddy relationship to reality and art. As one of his doctors reminds him, "the eyes are part of the brain, after all" - and indeed, through the rest of the film, reality is not just elusive but part of a Mobius strip whose indistinguishable other side is a fiction partly of his own devising. Time slippages are not just a phenomenon of aging, after all, they are also central to fiction; in movies and books we jump forward and flash back; the more we engage with fiction, the easier this can become. We see signs of this unstable relationship between art and life throughout: Freudian slips provide spoilers for later parts of the film. People's lives are references to Camus. Clare attends a funeral and discovers the eulogy is somehow her own. Hazel seems to improbably know things she should not, as if in touch with the script itself. Tellingly, many of these odd ellisions and disjunctions in perception happen via the media: Caden finds himself in his daughter's television cartoons and, without permission or causation, on his therapist's website. The movie is overall highly attuned to - and perhaps even anxious about - the way art makes life as much as the other way around. "I don't get this book", Caden tells his therapist. "Oh, but it is getting you," she says with unrepentant glee. The art in the film 'gets' its audience, more than the audience gains mastery via art.

It is for this reason that the movie is perhaps most commonly tied to the works of the French theorist Jean Baudrillard, who argues that modern life involves living inside a sort of simulation. Baudrillard does not mean a computer simulation; he is not suggesting that in the facile way Elon Musk does. Rather, he means we are living inside a system of signifiers that stand in for the real things, in such a way that they essentially become the real things for those using them, untethered from any wider reality. If you are a public figure (and to some degree, even if not!) your social media profile is a signifier that may at this point take up more space in

people's mind than anything about the 'real' you. It is more real, in this sense, than you are. In some cases entire systems of representation are created that only vaguely approximate anything from the material world (consider the stock market!) and yet these *simulacra* - representations of things that either never have existed, or no longer exist - are incredibly real in their effects. This is of course especially relevant for politics. We do not experience most political events firsthand; we see them only through the lens of the media. Baudrillard's most famous example is the Gulf war. In a series of essays entitled "The Gulf War Will Not Take Place", "The Gulf War Is Not Taking Place" and "The Gulf War Did Not Take Place", written before, during, and after the Gulf War respectively, Baudrillard notes that for most people on earth, the war was only observable through mass media, where it was portrayed, propagandistically, as a true two-sided war, whereas it was in fact a mostly one-sided atrocity, with the reality of civilian deaths largely obscured. The insight was powerful in 1991, of course, but it's all the more true today: we relate to the world through the lens of a particular diffuse set of media that may have very little to do with some reality on the ground.

Like Baudrillard, and perhaps conscious of his larger point, *Synecdoche New York* demonstrates our reality is not just perceived through art or the the media but created by them, until fiction and reality merge. Indeed, a more intelligent version of the reactionary psychologist Jordan Peterson would love this movie for its gentle jabs at the sort of strawman postmodern aesthetic in which there simply is no fixed signifier anywhere for subjects to refer to what is good or beautiful or true. Caden, for one, hopes that he can find this fixed signifier through the creation of his own great work of art, claiming "theater is the beginning of thought" and hoping that in the process of making his magnum opus "something honest will evolve." But that honest thing remains, to a significant degree, elusive. There is similarly something eerie and unconvincing about Maria's assertion that "it's all about your artistic satisfaction, Caden." Art is not enough for a good life, and unmakes us as much as makes us.

This is particularly true when it comes to relationships. As each person in the film increasingly preoccupies themselves with acting like someone else, recognition becomes impossible, even as the characters increasingly long for one another. "There's a side of Caden I can't explore without Hazel," Sam says. Absolutely; so it is with us all. We rely on others to construct and maintain our sense of self, to access our own possibilities for being. But this is a risky business, especially in a world of intentional fictions - the world of the giant warehouse play, to be sure, but also the world of 2023 (more on this shortly). No matter how beautiful, our fictions have a tendency to misbehave, as Caden most obviously learns when the actor who plays him secretly dates the woman he, real Caden, desires.

The theme here, without putting too fixed a signifier on it, is the way we are cast without consent in roles in others' lives. And of course, we also do this casting all the time ourselves. When we face loss, we tend to replace one person with another; when we have emotional needs, we might force a stranger to step in and play a crucial role, as Caden does in the last moments of the film. This is not only a matter of the human condition but also a matter of the insidious influence of fiction in our lives, of our too-passionate adherence to our own stories. What ultimately follows from this unstable world is something recognisable to anyone who has

had a difficult relationship with their parents, a gut wrenching breakup, or even a falling out with a friend: two people can come to see the same situation so differently that no recognition is really possible. We can love deeply and become indecipherable to one another, and thus unreachable, untrustable. Caden's last scene with his adult daughter is a perfect depiction of the impossibility of recognition in a world where both life and fiction have torn understanding asunder. There is no closure there, no way of making the two people's stories align or even touch. There is a reason that some of the most moving moments in the movie are about romance between old people: older people are perhaps most likely to have lived long enough to recognise the painful difficulties of having played a large role in one another's fictions, often at the expense of a more satisfying reality. Mutual recognition is rare and, counter to our current cultural obsession with therapy-as-salvation, sometimes impossible. Meanwhile, as the film's instance of suicide suggests, it is often unbearably painful to be part of other people's fictions.

It is notable that Caden and those around him are not just victims in this story, but highly complicit in their own pain: they are literally creating a fiction that is meant to replicate modern life, and in the process of performing this they make perception, for themselves and others, all the more difficult. It is perhaps telling that Caden's original medical diagnosis is a "fungal degradation of the nervous system", one that means he must re-learn, via "bio-feedback", how to do things like salivate, swallow, and cry. He must, in effect, learn to perform humanness all over again. It is not a pretty process, literally or figuratively. As Sam predicts, he loses himself repeatedly in the process of making his art, even lapsing into becoming his ex-wife's cleaner. That is the irony of turning to art to find truth: it is just as possible that we will discover we no longer know who we are, that we "lose another part of [ourselves]" as Sam puts it. We may take an active role in all this striving to find truth via art, but is not always liberation; sometimes it can be torture.

The above is a rough outline of how the film functions. It is a self-aware, even wryly humorous reflection on a set of existential anxieties about a modern world in which signifiers are not fixed and in which fiction takes on a life of its own as we rush towards death and reach for each other. It is not, however, uncomplicated in its attitude towards art, for at times art still speaks truth: the actors within the play tell Caden things he cannot know about himself, or beautifully articulate the human condition. Art is a synecdoche, yes, a part that signifies the whole, while remaining within it. And while life does emulate art problematically, it can also sometimes enlighten us, especially by reminding us that everyone we meet is a lead in their own story. The film is itself an instance of this.

Which brings us back to the pressing question: what can we make of this film today, some 15 years after it was released? 2008 was, if anything, a *premature* time to release a film about the metafictional nature of modern life. Facebook had just become popular among students, most news was still received from mainstream channels, and it would be eight years before Trump the reality TV star became a viable presidential candidate. Today, Facebook has become the metaverse, Trump is the model for a whole host of parasocial political relationships,

and TikTok determines what music we listen to. We have willingly embraced the constructed media world as real more than ever before, and it in turn determines much about how we live. The same dislocation of signifiers that made for a trippy art film on the human condition in 2008 has now become a shared societal unreality. Today, Putin's lie that "it's not a war, it's a special military operation" is an almost eerie inversion of what happened during the Gulf War. It will certainly appear true to most people in Russia, given the media they can see. More than in 2008, far more than in 1991, we are facing a radical untethering of a shared social vision. In fact, today we are so immersed in intentional performative fictions that the film, which is meant to unsettle us, at moments seems still naive and hopeful.

I want to suggest, however, that it does have one important insight to offer that is not found in other films, and specifically not in the most famous pop representation of Baudrillard's philosophy, which is, of course, *The Matrix*, a film that not only spawned several blockbusting sequels, but also a significant political legacy. In that film, humans being farmed for energy by machines are placed in a simulation and must break out, famously by choosing between the blue pill and the red pill. Today, on the simulation-field of the internet, *The Matrix* is continuously used as a metaphor for our current political life. It is interpreted by conspiracy theorists as a metaphor for what it means to "wake up" from media lies about, say, vaccines or the shape of the earth. It is used by incels to suggest that men need to wake up to a particular understanding of the sexual marketplace. (Andrew Tate notably said the movie was part of his own radicalisation, and still talks about being trapped in the Matrix). Ironically, given how frequently it is used by right-wing causes, the filmmakers themselves, two trans women, likely saw the parallel to the difficult awakening to one's own gender identity.

But for all its immense cultural capital, there is a way in which *The Matrix* does not even begin to do Baudrillard's underlying point justice.¹ There is, in other words, a fundamental point it misses that *Synecdoche New York* "gets". This point is that for Baudrillard, we are not simply mistaking the false for the real. Rather: we are making the real through our fictions. "The territory no longer precedes the map, nor does it survive it. It is nevertheless the map that precedes the territory—precession of simulacra—that engenders the territory." The nature of the construction is, as I have suggested above, that of a Mobius strip. There is no true outside to our hyperfictional hyperreality. Caden really does become a cleaning lady. He really does pursue romance based on his fictions. We do this too, in all senses of the term romance. We choose our friends and lovers, role models, purchases, Covid decisions, and votes, off mediated realities, and these become non-mediated realities that then feed back into mediated reality. In these ways and others we are forced to consider the problems caused by a looping slippage of signifiers in an increasingly frenetic and indecipherable mediasphere, one endlessly more fraught than it was in 1991. We cannot go back and refix the signifiers, nor should we want to,

¹ The Wachowski sisters loved Baudrillard's work and explicitly based their film off it. They apparently required the whole cast to read his book (!); they invited the man himself to work on further films, an offer he turned down. He eventually broke his silence to explain that he felt they had not captured the idea of a simulation well. This point about the shortcomings of *The Matrix* is of course thus not my own - but the suggestion below that it is this exact simplistic framework that makes the Matrix politically influential, and that on the contrary we cannot simply "wake up" from our reality but must re-work unreality, is my own - flaws and all.

not least since they were generally fixed via empire, a false sense of “the end of history”, forced secularization, religious orthodoxies and so on.

The political challenge we face is therefore much harder than “waking up” and breaking out of a simulation. There is no outside to break into. The simplicity of a red pill and a blue pill is part of what is appealing about *The Matrix*, but also what it gets “wrong”. Instead, we have to create good fictions that can then become real. This, of course, is playing with dynamite. But to pretend the situation is any simpler is to eschew responsibility, at our own peril.

We are forced to reach forward and construct what some art theorists and political theorists term a “metamodern” way of thinking, one that can juggle these unfixed signifiers while nevertheless reaching toward a shared sense of what is good, beautiful and true. Some writers I work and correspond with, my friends and colleagues, have recently attempted to do this via the lens of developmental psychology. They have done so fruitfully but also, in some cases, risked conceptual overreach and its attendant woes. Let me attempt to, at minimum, supplement their work here by suggesting another approach to carving out a sphere for truth in a world that feels even more disorienting than that of the film.

In traditional liberal political theory, most bad outcomes can be defined either as instances of injustice or illegitimacy. These are notably both roughly about fixed signifiers of truth and fairness/goodness. But in the niche world of theory that I was trained in, critical theory, there is another possibility: some unhappy outcomes are not exactly “unjust” nor are they “illegitimate”. As the theorist Neal Harris puts it, consider a world where people have democratically chosen the government, and are granted equal access to international flights and vacations. Nothing is exactly unjust or illegitimate about this, and yet, on a planet on fire, something is still very wrong. Critical theorists have a term for this type of situation: it is an instance of *social pathology*. Even if we cannot point to a single fixed signifier for right or wrong, it seems to me, even if we cannot find grounds to say something is unjust or illegitimate, there are still cases where it is obvious that the current state of affairs is not preferable to alternatives, and indeed is pathological in some significant sense: causing a spiral of harm. Climate change is perhaps our most clear-cut example of this (though there are many others): the simulacra that is currently public life simply does not appear to have the capacity to deliver us the urgent solutions we need to save our own future lives from harm. It seems to me that the last shots of *Synecdoche New York*, where people have either died or possibly left the warehouse, make clear that the attempt to live life through this particular series of Russian-doll-like fictions has proved similarly pathological. But, notably, the film does not take us outside the warehouse at this point. It is not even clear that there really is one. Again, we cannot go back to an old set of hardened signifiers, we cannot take a pill and wake up. Instead, I suggest: we are going to have to try to notice these social-pathological elements of our fiction-reality Mobius strip and rework them; we are going to have to pick our way through the rubble even as we face death (as Caden does in the last moments of the film). We need to take note of what seems likely to doom us, and try new fictions that might generate better realities. We have to try, even if we do not know for certain that - to use Caden’s phrase - something honest will emerge.

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