

Synecdoche, New York - An Investigation of Being

Introduction

Charlie Kaufman's cinematic masterpiece 'Synecdoche, New York' is in many ways an investigation of life and Being through various motifs prevalent through the one hundred and twenty-four minutes of the movie. Kaufman tries to answer the question posed by Martin Heidegger 'what does it mean to exist?'^[1] In his exploration of Being, Kaufman makes use of a very impaired sense of reality to explain anxiety, authenticity, and Being-toward-death.

To understand the way Kaufman depicts these themes, we must start with getting a basic idea of what the plot of 'Synecdoche, New York' revolves around, the spatiotemporal structure of the story, and the motifs and symbols which are prevalent in it. Following that, I will explain a few of the various Heideggerian themes in the movie and how they can be understood through viewings of certain scenes in the film.

Plot^{[2][3]}

The film follows theater director Caden Cotard as he finds his life unwind before himself. Suffering a serious injury to his head in the very beginning of the movie, he's eventually afflicted with several kinds of physical and mental conditions — ones which will eventually lead to his death. As a result of these, he becomes depressed and grows distant from his wife, Adele, and his daughter, Olive, who leave him for a new start in Berlin causing him great dismay.

After the success of his play 'Death of a Salesman,' Caden receives a MacArthur Fellowship. He decides to use this for a grand theater piece in a warehouse just outside of Manhattan. He wishes to create "something big and true", as he explains to his therapist.

Following an awkward fling with Hazel, a woman who works at the box office, he marries Claire, the lead actress in his cast. Subsequent to the inevitable collapse of this relationship, he continually indulges in his relationship with Hazel and hires her as his Assistant.

As time goes by, his body starts shutting down and his condition deteriorates. The insides of the warehouse expand irrationally as he buries himself into his creation. He creates a full-size model of New York within the warehouse and populates it with doppelgängers for every single person in his life, blurring the line between reality and the world of the play.

After being rid of any new ideas on how to go about the play, Caden lets an actress take over as director and he assumes her previous role as Adele's custodian Ellen. He lives his final days in what seems to be a model of Adele's New York apartment. Following an ambiguous time period, an unknown disaster strikes the warehouse; it is left in ruins and seemingly everyone in it is left dead. As Caden walks out of Adele's apartment, he hears the director's voice in an earpiece and prepares for his own death. He waits for the final cue in his earpiece: "Die".

Film Structure and Motifs

The movie is principally divided into two halves — in the first, we deal with the reality, within which all characters reside; in the second, we deal mostly with the world of the play, which is an embodiment of the real world, with the same characters, locations, and events. This creates two structures of 'world-hood' - in-the-real-world and in-the-world-of-the-play.

Spatiotemporal Structure

The spatiotemporal structure of the movie is very impaired. Time passes in the movie in a very uncanny way. For instance, in the opening scene, which in itself is a single continuous stream of events of about one hour, Kaufman uses devices such as radio announcements, news

dates and expiration dates of products to move from October 14th, to October 17th, to November 2nd all the way to March of the next year, with the aim to create a sense tension and eeriness.^[4]

As we progress through the movie, and Caden's delusions grow, this sense of time becomes even more distorted, with years passing by between scenes while it only seems as if a few weeks have gone by. This distortion in the passing of time can be seen best when Caden tries to instill emotions in his cast to get them indulged more in the play and an actor speaks up:

"When are we gonna get an audience in here? It's been 17 years."

The movie in its spatial sense too is jarred. In order to create his theater piece, Caden rents a warehouse in New York, which eventually grows exponentially into an irrationally sized model of the city itself. This contains locations from the first half of the movie, all of which obscures the line between reality and the world of the play.

Doppelgängers

In his play, Caden hires thousands of cast members to portray everyone in his life. As a result, almost all of the characters we encounter exist in two ways - their own self in-the-real-world and their portrayal in-the-world-of-the-play.

This duality of self is most visibly seen with Caden himself. Throughout the first half of the movie, Caden appears to be stalked by an old, withering character. This character turns out to be Sammy Barnathan, who Caden eventually hires in the second half of the movie to play himself. This creates a metaphorical representation of the 'authentic' and 'inauthentic' selves.

Character Notes

The cast of the play is given notes about the portrayal of their characters. These are of great significance, as they reveal the primary emotion that is prevalent through the movie -

anxiety. These notes have cues such as “*nothing matters anymore*”, “*your wife just had a miscarriage*”, “*you keep biting your tongue*”, “*you lost your job today*”, all of which have one common emotional tone, that of a confrontation with an everyday state of existence. Such is the entirety of the movie, as most events which occur are obstacles to a normal, routine life.

Death

The first exposition of the theme of the play reveals that Caden wants to paint a brutal realism of life that is death. He believes that Being can only be made manifest through an understanding of death. This is characterized by how every death in reality — Caden’s parents, Adele, and Sammy — is changed into a scene in the play, in order to understand better what existence is. The play (and the movie) ends with Caden’s own death.

In trying to tell the truth about life, Caden deems it necessary to understand death and how it affects our Being. Whether it is in-the-real-world or in-the-world-of-the-play, the characters have to experience the deaths of all acquaintances in a very factual sense, as the world of the play is merely a manifestation of the real events of the movie.

Concepts of Existentialism Understood through Synecdoche, New York

Role of Anxiety in Understanding Being

For Heidegger, Anxiety has a key role in the investigation of the meaning of Being. Anxiety itself being an emotion that discloses a threat to our existence. In a Heideggerian sense, it is a mode of disposedness which is not an emotion directed towards an entity, but rather a fundamentally disclosive emotion which is responsible for opening reality in a distinctive way.^[5] It is an emotion which brings ourselves before us. Unlike Fear, in Anxiety, one is not challenged by its interaction with other Dasein or an entity, but its state of Being-in-the-world-as-such.^[1]

As Heidegger writes, “[The] state-of-mind which can hold open the utter and constant threat to itself arising from Dasein's ownmost individualized Being, is anxiety. In this state-of-mind, Dasein finds itself face to face with the ‘nothing’ of the possible impossibility of its existence”.[1][5]

The emotion most frequented in the movie is that of anxiety. Coupled with the unease produced by the spatiotemporal system of the movie, the events which occur within it, such as the deaths of a loved one, the loss of a job, the end of a marriage, etc. are those which bring the self and the world to Dasein in a new light by creating a sense of unease and anxiety. This is also the emotion Caden demands of his cast, as is visible from the character notes handed to all of them. Since Caden tries to explain life and Being-in-the-world-as-such, it is ideal for the emotion of anxiety to be the primary one in the play.

Authenticity and Inauthenticity

Existing in a way that leaves us indistinguishable from ‘the Others’ or ‘the They’ (the undifferentiated, indistinct group of people) — doing things as *they* do things, thinking as *they* think — is according to Heidegger what is the Being of Dasein in everyday life. This opens up to Heidegger’s distinction between the authentic and the inauthentic selves.[6]

For Heidegger, ‘authentic’ means one’s own. As a result, an authentic self is a ‘self that is mine’. In being an authentic self, Dasein leads a life such that it is a display of its own potentiality of being based upon whatever is its current state or facticity. On the contrary, the inauthentic self represents what Heidegger calls ‘the fallen self’ or the ‘they-self’. This is the kind of self which has been lost to the ‘they’, in that the life led by this self is one which is governed by the Others.[1][6] Thus, with authenticity, Dasein truly chooses to do something

instead of doing it only because “That is what one does.”^[5] However, with the fall, Dasein flees away from its true self showing a repudiation of their potentiality of being. It shies away from actually choosing to do, but merely acts how it is supposed to.^[1]

Kaufman does a great job in rendering a metaphorical version of this dichotomy of authentic-inauthentic selves by his use of the doppelgängers. In the movie, doppelgängers represent the authentic self of each character — what they truly are when rid of the essence of their they-self. Often, it can be seen that the characters show a grave denial of how their true selves are portrayed, showing that they have fallen and are fleeing in the face of authentic existence as it demonstrates to them the plain and unfiltered truth, as Caden wanted with his play.

This denial of an authentic self is revealed in several scenes in the movie, but most notably when Caden and his second wife Claire are separated. While rehearsing a scene for the play, Caden asks Sammy to portray Caden’s self in the exact. Whilst acting, Sammy says a few things in an improvisation which hurt Claire, causing her to have an argument with Caden that would eventually lead to their separation.

In trying to defend himself, Caden says

“I didn’t say that; he [Sammy’s portrayal of Caden] did,”

to which Claire answers

“But you thought that,”

implying that Caden’s authentic self would rather not have continued his relationship with Claire. This can be seen through his many affairs, mainly with Hazel and a few other characters. Yet he stays with Claire as “that’s what one is supposed to do,” instead of leaving her to pursue his true love of Hazel.

It is also important to note that Claire was one of the only actresses who played herself in the Caden's theater piece. Her authentic Being is revealed as she quits Caden's play to pursue another play which would have been her dream production, letting go of her they-self and choosing what she truly desired.

Death and Being-toward-death

For Heidegger, Dasein's existence as Being-ahead-of-itself is one of its potentiality. However, as Dasein is a finite being, this realm of its possibilities makes its existence incomplete, and it is Death that complete's Dasein's existence.^[5] Therefore, an understanding of Dasein in relation to its death is essential for a complete understanding of its Being. However, since death is the end of all subjective experience, Dasein cannot experience its own death, but only leading up to its own death.^{[1][5]} Heidegger poses a solution to this worry by suggesting that Dasein understands death through experiencing the death of other Daseins.^{[1][5][7]}

Death as an event marks the transition from Being-in-the-world to Being-no-longer-Dasein. This marks an end to the potentiality of being, in the form of a limiting and fundamental possibility of Dasein. Treated in this way, a knowledge of death turns to Being-toward-death.^{[1][5]}

Being-toward-death can be authentic or inauthentic. With an everyday discussion of death, the certainty of one's own death is concealed. The they-self of a person is always in denial of death - when experiencing the death of another, it tries to convince itself that it won't go through the same ordeal. On the other hand, the authentic Being-toward-death is when Dasein re-evaluates life with an acceptance of finitude. In this, it experiences anxiety.^{[1][5]}

In Synecdoche, encounters with Being-toward-death begin with Caden's realization that he's dying, as he speaks to Hazel. *"I, um... I'm sorry. I'm really sick. And I think I'm dying."*

A clear contrast between inauthentic and authentic Being-toward-death can be seen in a dialogue between Caden and Claire. As Caden re-evaluates his life and impending death, he wishes to create a grand play to represent life and certain death. As he explains this to his cast, which includes Claire, he says:

“I’ve been thinking a lot about dying lately.”

To which she says in denial, almost as if she is certain Caden will not die:

“You’re going to be fine, sweetie.”

While Caden clearly has accepted that he will eventually die, from his condition or otherwise, Claire tries to convince herself that one doesn’t have to go through it.

The movie also reveals some ways in which Dasein understands the event of death. The final scene of the movie has a key insight into the features of the transition from Being-in-the-world-as-such to Being-no-longer-Dasein. As Caden walks into the set, now in ruins with dead bodies all around, he hears in his earpiece the final instructions for the play:

“What was once before you, an exciting and mysterious future is now behind you, lived, understood, disappointing.”

This is to say that Death marks the end of Dasein’s potentiality of Being. What previously would have seemed to be a life riddled with possibilities, has now come to a conclusion, in that Dasein’s completion is marked by Death. The director says further in Caden’s ears:

“You have struggled into existence and are now slipping silently out of it. This is everyone’s experience.”

The director in saying these words reveals how Heidegger describes thrownness. We are thrown into Being, and then we are thrown into Being-toward-death. It is also expressed that

these experiences are universal, and everyone has to go through it. Finally, in the last few moments of the movie, we hear:

“Now, you are here. It's 7:43. Now, you are here. It's 7:44. Now, you are... Gone.”

The final cues that mark Caden's death tell us a critical fact about death. Death marks the change of Dasein's state of Being from Being-in-the-world to Being-no-longer-Dasein. Who was once here has now ceased to exist as such — completing the Being of Dasein.

The Conclusion of the Investigation

In its metaphors, motifs, and tropes, Charlie Kaufman's 'Synecdoche, New York' does a phenomenal job in portraying the various facets of human existence. With inspiration from various Heideggerian themes, it turns the investigation of the meaning of Being into a cinematic experience to ease the understanding of concepts that deal with Dasein's existence.

Employing various cinematic and storytelling techniques, Synecdoche gives a clear understanding of the dichotomy of authenticity and inauthenticity, death, and Being-toward-death with anxiety written all over the depiction. It gives insights into all of these themes which are important in answering the question of Being. Fitting to the analysis, just as a human life would, the film ends in completion - Death.

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