Directed by Charlie Kaufman
Written by Charlie Kaufman
Produced by Spike Jonze, Charlie Kaufman, Sidney Kimmel
Cinematography by Frederick Elmes
Music by Jon Brion
Production Design by Mark Friedberg
Art Direction by Adam Stockhausen
Set Decoration by Lydia Marks

Philip Seymour Hoffman...Caden Cotard
Catherine Keener...Adele Lack
Sadie Goldstein...Olive (4 years old)
Tom Noonan...Sammy Barnathan
Michelle Williams...Claire Keen
Samantha Morton...Hazel
Hope Davis...Madeleine Gravis
Jennifer Jason Leigh...Maria
Emily Watson...Tammy
Dianne Wiest...Ellen Bascomb / Millicent Weems


Philip French, in The Observer:

Schenectady in upstate New York is the hometown of Henry James's Daisy Miller and site of Union College, where Robert Redford and Barbra Streisand meet as pre-war undergraduates in The Way We Were. It is also home to troubled playwright Caden Cotard (the always excellent Philip Seymour Hoffman), hero of Synecdoche, New York, the fascinating directorial debut of Charlie Kaufman, author of such philosophical and psychological comedies as Being John Malkovich, Adaptation and Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind.

Caden is a recently popular first name in the States, possibly deriving from the Gaelic for "battle". Cotard's Syndrome, named after a 19th-century French neurologist, is a neuropsychiatric condition in which the patient believes he is dead, does not exist or is putrefying.

One of those grammatical terms we casually worked into scholarship papers as sixth-formers and later forgot, synecdoche is a figure of speech in which the part stands in for the whole or the whole for a part. Should this film prove widely popular (about as likely as The Satanic Verses becoming a set text at a co-educational university in Riyadh), we may be faced with films called "Metonymy, Missouri", "Tmesis, Tennessee" and "Litotes, Louisiana".

Caden Cotard is an intellectual, a secular Jew, a hypochondriac in midlife crisis, much like Woody Allen's Alvy Singer in Annie Hall, the working title of which was 'Anhedonia', a psychological term for the condition of not being able to experience pleasure from normal pleasurable activities. He sees death and decay all around, does not exist or is putrefying. He's getting old; after 17 years, the play is still not ready to come before an audience. By contrast, Caden's wife paints pictures so small you need jeweller's glasses to see them.

Caden's existence and his play become coterminous, the enormous set taking in both meanings of synecdoche. The movie is at various times intriguing, funny, disturbing, eerie and occasionally irritating. Is life a dream as the Spanish playwrights thought? Is everyone the hero of their own drama and an extra in everyone else's? Are we all sad Willy Lomans, doomed to failure? Is the only drama a short journey from birth to death over which we have no control?

The movie explores ideas and conventions that became fashionable in 20th-century drama and fiction. There is Borges's fable about the map commissioned by a king that is the size of the world itself, its fragments now scattered to the four corners. There is, too, Edward Albee's play Tiny Alice, the subject of heated discussion in 1964, in which the set contains a large model of the house in which the drama is enacted. One also recalls David Ely's SF novella Time Out, in which a team of US scholars is called in to reconstruct the British Isles after a nuclear holocaust. More recently, men play God in The Truman Show, while the funnier and slighter Groundhog Day touches on WB Yeats's challenge: "The intellect of man is forced to choose/ Perfection of the life or of the work."

Anyway, this is a movie designed to provoke, entertain and infuriate, that boldly goes into areas where few films from the English-speaking world nowadays dare penetrate. Incidentally, talking of Star Trek, it's been brought to my attention that the new voyage of USS Enterprise ends by changing "no man" to "no one" in "where no man has gone before".

Roger Ebert on Synecdoche, New York:
I think you have to see **Charlie Kaufman's** "Synecdoche, New York" twice. I watched it the first time and knew it was a great film and that I had not mastered it. The second time because I needed to. The third time because I will want to. It will open to confused audiences and live indefinitely. A lot of people these days don't even go to a movie once. There are alternatives. It doesn't have to be the movies, but we must somehow dream. If we don't "go to the movies" in any form, our minds wither and sicken.

This is a film with the richness of great fiction. Like *Suttree*, the Cormac McCarthy novel I'm always mentioning, it's not that you have to return to understand it. It's that you have to return to realize how fine it really is. The surface may daunt you. The depths enfold you. The whole reveals itself, and then you may return to it like a talisman.

**Wow,** is that ever not a "money review." Why will people hurry along to what they expect to be trash, when they're afraid of a film they think may be good? The subject of "Synecdoche, New York" is nothing less than human life and how it works. Using a neurotic theater director from upstate New York, it encompasses every life and how it copes and fails. Think about it a little and, my god, it's about you. **Whoever** you are. Here is how life is supposed to work. We come out of ourselves and unfold into the world. We try to realize our desires. We fold back into ourselves, and then we die. "Synecdoche, New York" follows a life that ages from about 40 to 80 on that scale. Caden Cotard (Philip Seymour Hoffman) is a theater director, with all of the hangups and self-pity, all the grandiosity and sniffs, all the arrogance and fear, typical of his job. In other words, he could be me. He could be you. The job, the name, the race, the gender, the environment, all change. The human remains pretty much the same.

Here is how it happens. We find something we want to do, if we are lucky, or something we need to do, if we are like most people. We use it as a way to obtain food, shelter, clothing, mates, comfort, a first folio of Shakespeare, model airplanes, American Girl dolls, a handful of rice, sex, solitude, a trip to Venice, Nikes, drinking water, plastic surgery, child care, dogs, medicine, education, cars, spiritual solace -- whatever we think we need. To do this, we enact the role we call "me," trying to brand ourselves as a person who can and should obtain these things.

In the process, we place the people in our lives into compartments and define how they should behave to our advantage. Because we cannot force them to follow our desires, we deal with projections of them created in our minds. But they will be contrary and have wills of their own. Eventually new projections of us are dealing with new projections of them.

Sometimes versions of ourselves disagree. We succumb to temptation -- but, oh, father, what else was I gonna do? I feel like hell. I repent. I'll do it again.

Hold that trajectory in mind and let it interact with age, discouragement, greater wisdom and more uncertainty. You will understand what "Synecdoche, New York" is trying to say about the life of Caden Cotard and the lives in his lives. Charlie Kaufman is one of the few truly important writers to make screenplays his medium. David Mamet is another. That is not the same as a great writer (Faulkner, Pinter, Cocteau) who writes screenplays. Kaufman is writing in the upper reaches with Bergman. Now for the first time he directs.

It is obvious that he has only one subject, the mind, and only one plot, how the mind negotiates with reality, fantasy, hallucination, desire and dreams. "Being John Malkovich." "Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind." "Adaptation." "Human Nature." "Confessions of a Dangerous Mind." What else are they about? He is working in plain view. In one film, people go inside the head of John Malkovich. In another, a writer has a twin who does what he cannot do. In another, a game show host is, or thinks he is, an international spy. In "Human Nature," a man whose childhood was shaped by domineering parents trains white mice to sit down at a tiny table and always employ the right silverware. Is behavior learned or enforced? "Synecdoche, New York" is not a film about the theater, although it looks like one. A theater director is an ideal character for representing the role Kaufman thinks we all play. The magnificent sets, which stack independent rooms on top of one another, are the compartments we assign to our life's enterprises. The actors are the people in roles we cast from our point of view. Some of them play doubles assigned to do what there's not world enough and time for. They have a way of acting independently, in violation of instructions. They try to control their own projections. Meanwhile, the source of all this activity grows older and tired, sick and despairing. Is this real or a dream? The world is but a stage, and we are mere actors upon it. It's all a play. The play is real.

This has not been a conventional review. There is no need to name the characters, name the actors, assign adjectives to their acting. Look at who is in this cast. You know what I think of them. This film must not have seemed strange to them. It's
what they do all day, especially waiting around for the director to make up his mind.

What does the title mean? It means it's the title. Get over it.

**ONLY TWO MORE IN THE FALL 2013 BUFFALO FILM SEMINARS XXVII:**

November 19 Wim Wenders *Pina* 2011  
November 26 Baz Luhrmann *The Great Gatsby* 2013

The online PDF files of these handouts have color images

**COMING UP IN THE SPRING 2014 BUFFALO FILM SEMINARS XXVIII:**

January 28 Josef von Sternberg, *Underworld*, 1927, 81 minutes  
February 4 Jean Cocteau, *Orpheus*, 1950, 95 min  
February 11 Kenji Mizoguchi, *The Life of Ohara*, 1952, 136 min  
February 18 Satyajit Ray, *Charulata/The Lonely Wife*, 1964, 119 minutes  
February 25 Metin Erksan, *Dry Summer*, 1964, 90 min  
March 4 Monte Hellman, *Two-Lane Blacktop*, 1971, 103 min  

Spring break March 17-22  
March 25 Agnes Varda, *Vagabond*, 1985, 105 min  
April 1 Gabriell Axel, *Babette’s Feast*, 1987, 104 min  
April 8 Louis Malle, *Vanya on 42nd Street*, 1994, 119 min  
April 22 Tommy Lee Jones, *The Three Burials of Melquaides Estrada*, 2005, 120 min  
April 29 José Padilha, *Elite Squad*, 2007, 115 min  
May 6 John Huston, *The Dead*, 1987 83 min

**CONTACTS:**

...email Diane Christian: engdc@buffalo.edu  
...email Bruce Jackson bjackson@buffalo.edu  
...for the series schedule, annotations, links and updates: http://buffalofilmseminars.com  
...to subscribe to the weekly email informational notes, send an email to addto list@buffalofilmseminars.com  
...for cast and crew info on any film: http://imdb.com/

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