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Liminality and Liminal Aesthetics in the Filmography of Charlie Kaufman

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ABSTRACT: In recent years, an online subculture dedicated to the appreciation and exploration of the aesthetic of empty spaces that evoke eerie and surreal feelings has sprouted on forums such as 4chan and Reddit. Users have taken to calling these “liminal spaces”, defined by existing in a state between being utilities and being ruins. Liminality has been defined in the fields of sociology and anthropology as the quality of being in between two stages of social and/or cultural status. This article aims to explore the filmography of American writer-director Charlie Kaufman through the lens of liminal aesthetics, pointing to instances of this aesthetic of emptiness in his three directorial works, connecting it to each film’s themes and attempting to form a narrative of liminality in the director’s body of work. In the introduction, there is an exposition of the online phenomenon of liminal aesthetics, a short review of literature on liminality and liminal spaces, and a section on liminality in Kaufman’s works. Afterwards,

RESUMO: Nos últimos anos, surgiu em fóruns como o 4chan e o Reddit uma subcultura online dedicada à apreciação e à exploração da estética de espaços vazios que evocam sensações sinistras e surreais. Os utilizadores chamam-nos “espaços liminares”, definidos por existirem num espaço que se inscreve entre o útil e o arruinado. A liminaridade é definida nos domínios da sociologia e da antropologia como a qualidade de estar entre dois estádios de estatuto social e/ou cultural. Este artigo pretende explorar a filmografia do argumentista e realizador americano Charlie Kaufman através da lente da estética liminar, apontando instâncias desta estética do vazio nas três obras que realizou, relacionando-a com os temas de cada filme e tentando formar uma narrativa da liminaridade no corpo de trabalho do realizador. Na introdução, há uma exposição do fenómeno online da estética liminar, uma breve revisão da literatura sobre liminaridade e espaços liminares, e uma secção sobre a liminaridade nas obras de Kaufman. Em



there are analyses of liminality and its aesthetics in his three directorial features: first, *Anomalisa* (2015) and the liminal space between “isolating” and “overwhelming”; second, *I’m Thinking of Ending Things* (2020) and the liminal space between “real” and “imagined”; and, third, *Synecdoche, New York* (2008) and the liminal space between “not yet” and “no longer”; these are ordered from the smallest to the largest liminal space present in the film. Finally, the conclusion will attempt to connect the three works through the thematic matrix of liminality.

KEYWORDS: Liminality, liminal spaces, liminal aesthetics, Charlie Kaufman

seguida, são analisadas a liminaridade e a sua estética nas três longas-metragens que realizou: primeiro, *Anomalisa* (2015) e o espaço liminar entre “isolante” e “avassalador”; segundo, *I’m Thinking of Ending Things* (2020) e o espaço liminar entre “real” e “imaginado”; e, terceiro, *Synecdoche, New York* (2008) e o espaço liminar entre “ainda não” e “já não”; cada um deles é ordenado do menor para o maior espaço liminar presente no filme. Por fim, a conclusão tentará conectar as três obras através da matriz temática da liminaridade.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Liminaridade, espaços liminares, estética liminar, Charlie Kaufman

*A liminal space is the time between the 'what was' and the 'next'.
It is a place of transition, waiting, and not knowing.
Liminal space is where all transformation takes place,
if we learn to wait and let it form us.*¹

1. INTRODUCTION

In the past few years, the collective consciousness has become attracted to a particular aesthetic present in the now iconic scenarios of the COVID-19 pandemic: roads, streets, schools, offices, and shopping centres, all empty, unpopulated; a reality which felt eerily similar to the settings of post-apocalyptic fiction.



Fig. 1 Empty Champs Elysées in 2020. Segretain, P. (2020). Getty Images.

Some have taken to calling these *liminal spaces*. Besides characterising the look and feel of the streets of great modern metropolises devoid of people, the aesthetic of liminal spaces has become associated with obsolete commercial spaces: the American malls of the 1980s were once filled with people, garish colour, neon signs, restaurants and clothing shops, bowling alleys and arcades. Now they stand empty, the home of businesses which refuse to succumb to the unforgiving march of History, stuck in a space *between* what is living and what is dead.

The liminal aesthetic has quickly acquired a cult following among Internet denizens. What started as only a set of mildly interesting posts on online forums such as 4chan and Reddit has turned into an artistic movement that seeks to capture – through modern mediums such as photography and digital art – the strange yet strong sensations one feels when traversing old malls, staying at largely empty hotels or walking below the

colourful plastic slides of an indoor playground that used to be filled with the screeching and laughing of children back in the early 2000s. The look of these places may be characterised by one word: *non-specificity* (Xiao 2021). They are devoid of any defining characteristics that may allow the observer to pinpoint where they are, what time of day they have been captured in, and at times, even what actual function they might have once served. Besides that, they are profoundly – even dreadfully – empty. They inhabit a sort of *architectural uncanny valley*, where the spaces one observes feel strange because they lack the expected context; while one expects them to be hives of activity, liminal spaces present the observer with a “failure of presence” (Heft 2021, 14-15).

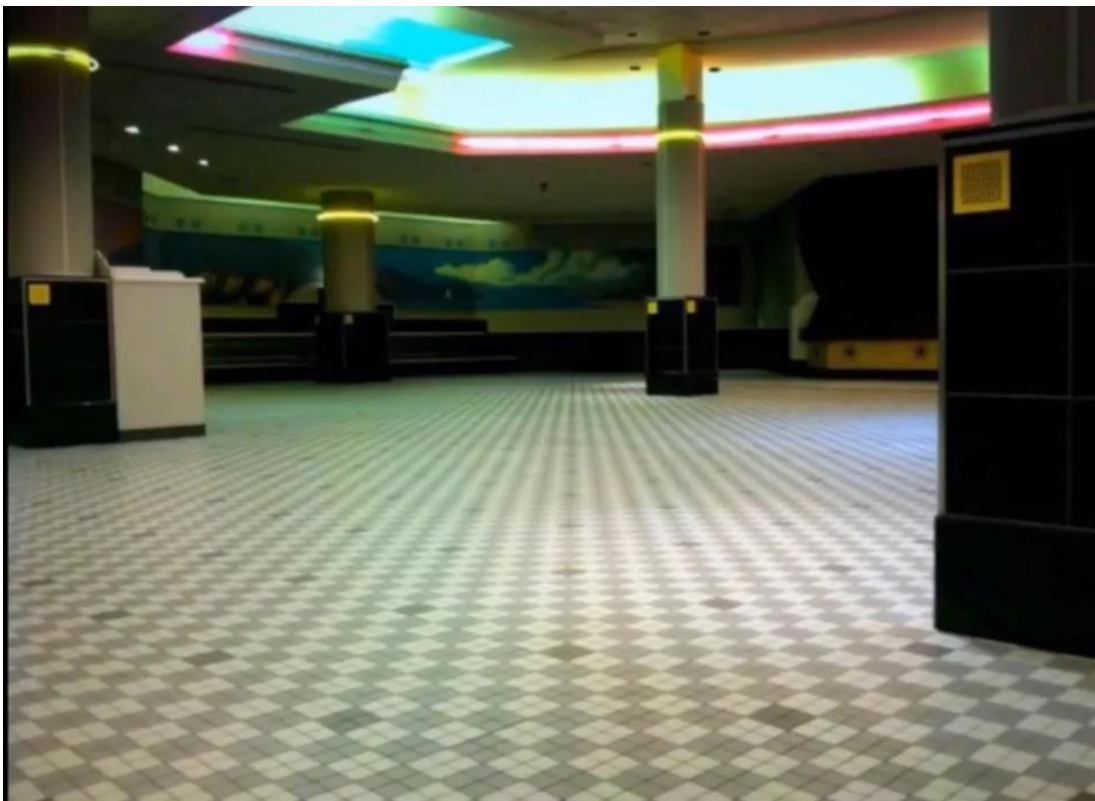


Fig. 2 An empty mall. Retrieved from reddit.com.

Spaces such as these represent a threshold. They are symbols of a changing world, for they can be portrayed as neither having concrete utility nor being ruins. They are, in essence, artefacts of a world in transition (Pitre 2022).

All of these places – malls and indoor playgrounds nearing foreclosure, Times Square and the Champs-Élysées during lockdown – are bound together by their *liminality*.

1.1. Liminality and liminal space

Liminality, as a concept, was first developed by German ethnologist Arnold van Gennep (1873-1957) and later expounded upon by Scottish cultural anthropologist Victor Turner (1920-1983). According to the latter, liminality is a state of ambiguity occurring in rites of social and cultural transformation in human societies, happening between a preceding and subsequent social status or cultural state (Turner 1974, 57).

The liminal space is, therefore, set between two states of being and may be disorienting to those who navigate it. When applied to the concept of *place*, and especially to the field of architecture, liminality usually refers to places of transience, something connected to the concept of *non-place*, which are understood as places where one does not dwell, that do not symbolise nor reinforce the identities of those travelling through them, where an individual is separated from their determinants and only inhabits the role of transient entity (Augé 103); places such as bus depots, train stations, and airports. Non-places such as these are liminal in so far as they are the setting in which liminal activity occurs – *literal* liminal activity, such as travelling from point A to point B. For this article, the liminal space will not be understood as one where liminality occurs by the actions of others; rather, liminal spaces – as characterised by the online subculture dedicated to them – should be understood as liminal entities *themselves*, traversing through change, inhabiting the space between *being* A and *being* B.

1.2. Liminality in the filmography of CHARLIE KAUFMAN

Charlie Kaufman is an American filmmaker and novelist. Born in 1958 to a Jewish family in New York, he began his career as a writer in the 1980s working for humour magazines, later transitioning to writing for TV in the late 1990s and early 2000s. His most notable work, however, has been on the big screen. His collaborations with directors Michel Gondry in *Human Nature* (2001) and *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (2004), and Spike Jonze in *Being John Malkovich* (1999) and *Adaptation* (2002), set the tone for the themes of his future films. His directorial debut, *Synecdoche, New York* (2008) and the two films he has directed since – *Anomalisa* (2015) and *I'm Thinking of Ending Things* (2020) – have cemented the theme of identity crisis as central to Kaufman's work.

The main characters of these three films can all be understood as being liminal entities; they are traversing points of monumental uncertainty in their lives, and the narratives in each work may be understood as explorations of distinct liminal spaces between opposing concepts. The present article aims to explore the *physical*/liminal spaces as liminal entities in these three works, and how said physical spaces reflect the liminal spaces the main characters traverse. The films will not be explored in chronological order; instead, they will be analysed from the one set in the smaller liminal space to the one set in the most sprawling one.

2. *ANOMALISA* – BETWEEN ISOLATING AND OVERWHELMING

Anomalisa is a stop-motion animated film following Michael (David Thewlis), the author of a popular book on proper customer service, as he visits the city of Cincinnati for a convention where he is supposed to give a speech. As he encounters other people during his visit, one comes to understand that he perceives everyone else as having the same face and voice (played by Tom Noonan). Michael eventually meets Lisa (Jennifer Jason Leigh), the only other person with a unique face and voice. The narrative is mainly set at a hotel called The Fregoli (after the Fregoli delusion, a rare mental disorder in which the affected person perceives everyone else as being one single entity).

It becomes readily apparent that Michael feels depressingly lonely. He can form no relationship with anyone in his life: not his wife, his child, his ex-girlfriend, or any of the people he meets throughout the night at the Fregoli. Michael longs for human connection, so he frantically runs after Lisa once he hears her distinct voice through the walls of his hotel room, thinking he may have finally found someone he can bond with.

Further analysis, however, may lead one to conclude that Michael suffers from something on the other end of that spectrum. Besides being lonely, Michael constantly seems to feel overwhelmed by human contact. The first of Michael's conversations is with a man sitting beside him as they land at Cincinnati Airport. The man apologises for grabbing Michael's hand earlier, and Michael quickly becomes tired of the interaction to the point of rudeness. The same happens in his conversations with the taxi driver taking him to the Fregoli, the concierge, the hotel porter, and even his wife and son. Interaction

with most people seems to annoy Michael; he makes no effort to engage with any of these people, which seems to be at odds with the fact that he longs for human connection.

There are several moments in *Anomalisa* where human presence is depicted as overwhelming. The movie opens with a black screen and the sound of dozens of identical voices having distinct conversations as if to disorient and overwhelm the audience intentionally. Besides that, in several instances, Michael seems to be overwhelmed by multitudes of people: during the nightmare sequence, during his speech at the convention, and at the surprise party his wife sets up for him on his return home.

It seems Kaufman aims to explore this metaphorical liminal space between being isolated and being overwhelmed by human interaction that Michael constantly traverses. That being the case, it is fitting that the film is mostly set in a hotel, of all places. Hotels are one of the examples Marc Augé uses to illustrate his concept of non-place. They are spaces where one does not dwell but only traverses; they are built for liminal activity. The Fregoli, however, could be understood as a liminal entity reflecting Michael's liminal state of mind as well.

The audience is first introduced to Michael's room through a dolly shot: the porter opens the door, and the camera moves into the room before Michael can enter it. The spectator sees the room in a shot that almost mirrors hotel catalogues: a made bed, neatly laid magazines, a small table with chairs displayed in a strange, artificial way (instead of facing one another, inviting two people to sit in front of each other and *engage in conversation with each other*, they face outward, as if to present themselves to their patron). The room lacks its expected context; it has no *human presence*.

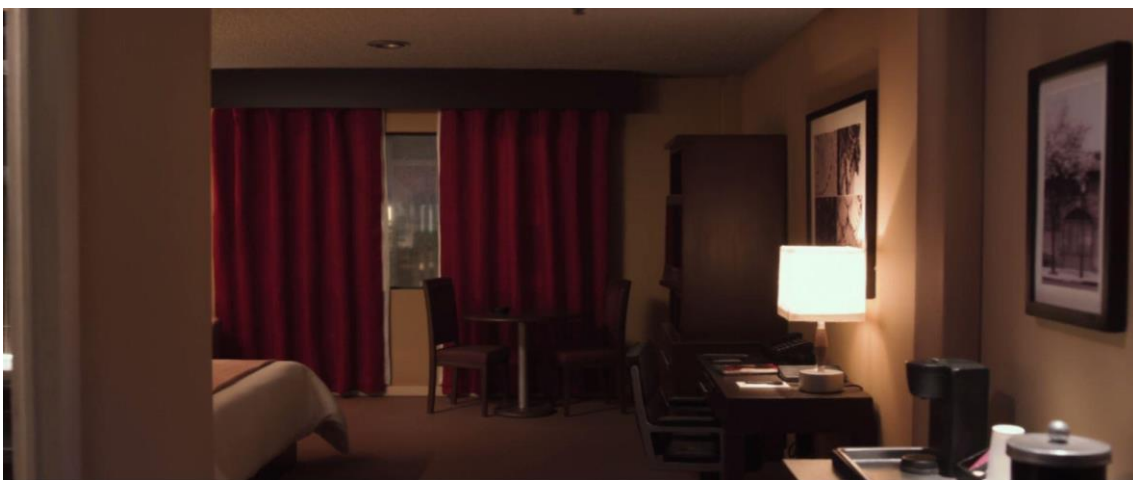


Fig. 3 Michael's room at the Fregoli.

The awkwardly laid-out table and chairs are most important. In the morning, Michael and Lisa sit at the table for breakfast after spending the night together. While eating, Michael notices small things in Lisa that irritate him, and her face and voice eventually transform, becoming identical to everyone else's. The chairs not facing each other foreshadow Michael's inability to see Lisa's uniqueness for a prolonged time and his subsequent failure to maintain a connection with her. He can never *face* anyone for too long; the people that seem unique to him seem so because he idealises them, and once he perceives flaws, the façade crumbles down. It seems Michael's room is the part of the liminal space (the hotel) that best reflects the sense of *isolation* in his liminal state of *being*. In it, he makes several failed attempts to escape his isolation: fruitless conversations with his wife and son, a haphazard attempt at rekindling the flame he once had with his ex-girlfriend Bella, and his eventual disillusionment with Lisa, all happen in this room, under the dim yellow light of a desk lamp and the irritating humming sound of the minibar.

Crossing the doorframe into the hallway does not lead Michael out of the liminal space; instead, it leads him into another dimension of it.

Scrolling through the r/liminalspace subreddit, one will notice empty hotel hallways are a recurring theme in the online subculture. The hallways of the Fregoli reflect many of the classical aspects of liminal spaces. They are devoid of people for the most part, largely characterless in their aesthetic, and they can be perceived to fall into the architectural uncanny valley; they seem longer than they should be, almost endless.



Fig. 4 The hallway on the 10th floor.

The hallway is a place where Michael seems to go through several experiences of being overwhelmed by human interaction. The first occasion is with the hotel porter, in an awkward and prolonged interaction that Michael seems desperate to terminate. Later, going out to get ice cubes for his drink, Michael walks by a couple having an argument, which he seems to want to ignore, but his uncomfortable expression says he cannot. The most poignant of these experiences, however, is during the nightmare sequence. In it, the collective entity, formed by identical people, tells Michael he cannot be with Lisa. He runs through the hotel to find her, eventually bringing her to his room, while darkness swallows the hallway. In the apparent safety of his suite, Michael hears the multitude of people in the hallway, banging at his door and calling his name repeatedly, at which point he wakes up from the dream.

It seems the hotel reflects Michael's liminal reality through its architecture. The hotel is set in a liminal space between being isolating and overwhelming, harbouring multitudes of people who desire to be separated from each other in the same place. While many seek hotel rooms to escape their home life – as appears to be Michael's case – the common spaces within the hotel force these people to engage with others, in a jarring experience for those seeking solitude. Therefore, the hotel dwells in the liminality between reinforcing loneliness and forcing one to engage in undesired interactions, and, by design, it can never escape it.

***3. I'm Thinking of Ending Things* – Between Real and Imagined**

I'm Thinking of Ending Things – based on the 2016 novel of the same name by Iain Reid – follows an unnamed young woman (Jessie Buckley) and her boyfriend, Jake (Jesse Plemons), as they go on a trip to meet his parents (David Thewlis and Toni Collette). The couple's story is interspersed with shots of an elderly high-school janitor (Guy Boyd). A careful analysis leads us to conclude that the janitor is, indeed, Jake. The first moment that indicates this to the audience occurs at the beginning of the film: as the young woman waits for Jake, she looks up at a window, and on the other side of it is the old janitor; the camera cuts back to the young woman, and then again to the other side of the window, where Jake now stands, watching her.

We then come to understand that the scenes involving the young woman and Jake occur in the janitor's mind. A parallel reading of the novel will make this more transparent:

the young woman is not real – she is called by several different names in the film, namely Louisa, Lucy, and Lucia. She was never Jake’s girlfriend. The old janitor remembers her from his past and regrets never having approached her. Therefore, he creates a fantasy of being in a relationship with her. The film chronicles the young woman’s slow realisation that she is, in fact, a figment of the janitor’s imagination.

The journey the imaginary couple embarks on takes place in mental representations of real places. The long drive to the farmhouse lets the audience know what this looks like: the old janitor combines elements from fragmented memories to attempt to reconstruct an authentic setting. One such example is when the young woman looks out the car window and sees a ruined farmhouse with a brand-new swing set out in the front yard. It seems this is the result of a conjunction of two anachronistic memories: the janitor’s last memory of the house is seeing it abandoned, but it might at one point have had a colourful swing set in the yard, which made enough of an impression on the janitor’s mind that he would include it in his mental reconstruction.



Fig. 5 The new swing set by the old house.

The landscape the couple traverses is characterised by its liminal aesthetic: completely devoid of people, populated by the occasional building, grove or road sign, most likely resulting from the imaginator's scattered memories. On the drive back from Jake's parents' farmhouse, the couple stops at an ice cream shop; strangely, it is open in the middle of the night, in the midst of a blizzard, in a field engulfed by night darkness, with nothing in sight, no buildings, no vegetation, neatly fulfilling the (admittedly vague) criteria for a liminal space.



Fig. 6 The ice cream shop.

Jake's childhood home is an imagined reconstruction as well, as are his parents: a collage of different points in time, real moments in the janitor's life, which create a strange replica of what was. As time is spent at the farmhouse, the audience will see Jake's parents ageing and rejuvenating several times, a result of the janitor's recollection of several distinct points in his parents' lives.

Because of this, the architecture of the house feels unclear. Rooms seem to switch places, there are doors which seem to lead into a dark nothingness, and, during one scene in particular, the young woman seems to be locked in a loop, as it appears there is a strangely excessive number of flights of stairs for a house with only two floors. When Jake and the young woman first enter the house, they wait for Jake's parents to come down for quite some time. For a long while, they hear only the disembodied voices of the parents, as the rest of the house seems empty, *lacking presence*.

The one place that seems not to be constructed from an assembly of distinct memories is Jake's old high school, which is precisely where the janitor presently works. It is, however, a clear example of liminality in an aesthetic sense: it inhabits the architectural uncanny valley because it lacks the expected context. While most will think of a high school during the day, filled with young students, Jake's high school is displayed to the audience in the dark of night, completely empty. It is here that the narrative comes to its dramatic conclusion; the young woman encounters the janitor and eventually accepts the reality that she is, in fact, not real.



Fig. 7 Jake's high school.

In *I'm Thinking of Ending Things*, the liminality of the places parallels the liminality of the young woman's identity. All of it is built inside the janitor's – Jake's – mind, the result of an assembly of pieces of what *is* to build something that *is not*, something remembered. Because human minds are faulty and prone to embellishing and awkwardly reconstructing the past, memory could be said to be the liminal space between the *real* and the *imagined*.

There is one noteworthy conversation in the film relating to this concept. While having dinner with Jake's parents, the young woman shows them her landscape paintings – which turned out to be Jake's, since the woman is a reconstruction and is prone to be injected with aspects of his personality. She says she attempts to imbue them with *interiority* without painting people. Jake's father then asks, "How can a picture of a field be sad without a sad person looking sad in the field?". That is, indeed, the question that artists such as photographers and digital artists attempt to respond to when depicting liminal spaces; liminal spaces *evoke feeling through emptiness*.

4. *Synecdoche, New York* – Between Not Yet and No Longer

Synecdoche, New York tells the story of theatre director Caden Cotard (Philip Seymour Hoffman) – named after Cotard's syndrome, a rare mental disorder in which the afflicted person believes they are dead – who, after receiving the MacArthur Fellowship prize, decides to invest the money into a hyperreal production which mimics real life.

Caden lives in a dysfunctional marriage with his wife, Adele (Catherine Keener), an artist herself, with whom he has a daughter, Olive (Sadie Goldstein). He suffers from numerous bizarre health issues; several scenes take place in hospitals, some of which are clear examples of the liminal aesthetic, as (once again) they fall into the uncanny valley for lacking human presence, besides being devoid of any defining characteristics. They evoke a foreboding atmosphere, in the moments when Caden is informed that his life is in jeopardy due to his failing health.



Fig. 8 The hospital in Berlin.

During the first half of the film, Hazel (Samantha Morton), who works at the box office of the theatre Caden is directing a play in – and is the object of his romantic desire – purchases a home that is perpetually burning. She ends up living in this space, which is traversing a liminal experience: the house is not safe nor burnt down but in the in-between stage of being on fire. This may be perceived as reflective of Caden’s attitude towards her: he wishes to become romantically involved with her but awaits her approach instead of approaching her himself. However, when they finally have sex, Caden cannot perform, leaving their time together incomplete. When they meet again years later, Caden is in his second marriage. Although the erotic tension between them still exists, it takes a long time for it to materialise into something concrete. Most of the time they know each other, their relationship feels like a half-said word that lingers on the lips; *between* being and not being. Eventually, they fully embrace it. Caden, however, does not leave the liminal space of his life for long: Hazel soon dies, probably due to smoke inhalation.



Fig. 9 Hazel in her burning house, obfuscated by the smoke.

The clearest example of a liminal space in the film, however, is the absurdly large warehouse in downtown New York that Caden uses as a set for the play he directs with the MacArthur grant. In it, he constructs a recreation of the city and populates it with actors, aiming to recreate real life. As he becomes more obsessed with this production, he starts casting doppelgängers of real people, and doppelgängers of said doppelgängers, eventually building a recreation of the warehouse inside the warehouse where a recreation of the play is taking place, creating a sort of Droste effect (the effect of a picture recursively appearing within itself).

Eventually, by casting actors as themselves – including his wife, Claire (Michelle Williams) – and setting up walls in the initially open apartments so they would feel more real, a liminal chasm between reality and fiction begins to open up. For both characters and the audience, it becomes a difficult task to distinguish between what is set in real life and what is set in Caden’s play. When Claire leaves Caden amid rehearsal, he and Sammy (Tom Noonan) – the actor playing Caden – have trouble discerning whether Claire is truly angry or simply playing the part.



Fig. 10 Sammy walks towards Warehouse 2, located inside Warehouse 1.

Throughout the film, there are references to Caden's own multifaceted liminal identity. Long after separating from Adele, he visits her apartment, where he begins playing the part of Ellen, her housemaid. Despite never actually seeing Adele, Caden gets into the habit of going to her apartment, cleaning, and conversing with her through notes, signing them as Ellen. There are several moments in the film where people around Caden seem to take him for a woman: close to the beginning of the film, while having a seizure and calling 911, the operator calls Caden "ma'am". Once Caden has embraced the role of Ellen, Claire says he smells "like he's menstruating"; and when preparing to have sex with Tammy (Emily Watson) – the actress playing Hazel in the play – Caden says he feels he would have been better living as a woman. This does not necessarily mean Caden is transgender; rather, it means that he inhabits a liminal space relating to his gender identity. He never

commits to presenting as a woman, but he seems to feel more at peace with himself when playing one.

Millicent (Dianne Wiest), the actor playing (the never-seen) Ellen, eventually volunteers to play Caden after Sammy commits suicide. When trying to convince him to let her play the part, she describes Caden as follows:

“Caden Cotard is a man already dead. He lives in a half-world between stasis and antistasis.”

All these liminal spaces, both concrete and abstract, are set in the largest physical liminal space one could imagine. The world of *Synecdoche, New York* is, much like our own, liminal. Because this story takes place over many decades, one can observe, in the background of the narrative, a world in constant mutation. The film begins in a universally familiar setting: a small town (Schenectady, to be precise, in Upstate New York) in the early 21st century. As the narrative progresses, however, so does the setting. One can see the world outside Caden’s warehouse transforming into something like a post-apocalyptic setting (circling back to the earlier reference to COVID-19). Besides the liminal aesthetic of the empty streets of future New York, one can witness violence – the sound of explosions and shooting in the background – and the assembling of some form of dictatorship in the background of the narrative (a great chromed zeppelin is seen floating above the New York skyline with a searchlight, perhaps looking for curfew violators). Caden’s play becomes isolated from the real world, as if a bubble of relative normalcy forms inside the warehouse, if not for the bizarre condition of it being a play mimicking the real world. Eventually, though, reality bleeds into the play most devastatingly: New York is bombed, the warehouse is destroyed along with the actual city, and all the actors lay dead just as the real people they were playing. As Caden walks among ruins and corpses, it becomes apparent that the world has left the liminal space it inhabited.



Fig. 11 Caden walking among the ruins.

It is not easy to discern a single concrete liminal space in *Synecdoche*; there are several of them. Between real and fictional, between normal and abnormal, between male and female, between affection and disdain. It seems that the film functions as the overall thematic thesis of Charlie Kaufman's work, which is why its theme will be addressed in the conclusion of this article.

5. CONCLUSION

Much more than what was written in the last pages could be said about Charlie Kaufman's films and the concept of liminality in fiction. One could say that all stories worth telling are of people walking through liminal spaces, where certainty and safety do not exist. The terror of liminality may be the core of writing fiction. There are also aspects of the previously mentioned films that were not discussed, and the films Charlie Kaufman has written but not directed are also worthy of being analysed through the lenses of liminality and its aesthetics.

It seems, however, that Charlie Kaufman believes that the human experience mainly comprises liminal experiences. Social and emotional bonds, thoughts, and fantasies, all exist in an uncertain middle ground that we are fated to cross for the whole time we are allowed on Earth. *Synecdoche, New York* asserts that life itself is liminal: the space between *not yet* being and *no longer* being. Humans seem to be deeply uncomfortable

with being placed in life's liminal spaces, for those are the places where we are forced to make choices. The only moments in time where one does not have to choose are mentioned above: before one's birth and after one's death, when all choices either do not need to be made or have been made already. In the meantime, one must navigate the disorienting reality of simply existing.

Synecdoche seems to be a story about everything, so it seems fitting that the liminality of the greatest abstract space it depicts – *life* itself – is mirrored by the liminality of the greatest concrete space in which it is set – the *world*.

At the end of the film, as we witness the death of Caden Cotard, the screen does not cut to black (as most films do) or white (as a few others do). Instead, it cuts to grey. Halfway *between* black and white.

END NOTES

¹ From inaliminalspace.org.

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