

Trans-formation, Trans-migration

The philosophy of death and the afterlife intrigues me, especially that of Buddhists. Their view of the afterlife is explained in The Tibetan Book of the Dead, a funerary text. For this work, I have incorporated the stages of death outlined in the Tibetan Book of the Dead, mirrored the journeys of these characters on this philosophy, and used these stages as a basis for story development. I examine what archetypes and conventions exist within the genre of afterlife films, as well as the philosophy or theory behind what is being portrayed.

A Thin Camel is about a man who dies suddenly and discovers that the afterlife is not what he had expected. He is confronted with all of his worldly possessions and a rather unimpressive figure to guide him. He finds that he will be required to carry these things a great distance to what he expects will be Heaven. This tedious task and the long journey allows for thought, furthered by conversations with his guide and other recently deceased he meets along the way who are all at different places on their own particular journeys. It describes the experiences of the soul during the interval between death and rebirth. This in-between state is the “afterlife” but all stages of life are fluid states of “in-betweenness”. It reflects the Buddhist view of not really an afterlife, not a static Paradise, but a between-life. It is a purposeful journey from one consciousness to another.

In-Betweenness: A Buddhist Perspective

In this paper, I will discuss the afterlife as portrayed in the Tibetan Book of the Dead and other relevant Buddhist philosophy. In addition, in order to create a film about the afterlife, one must first explore the visual motifs and archetypes of existing afterlife films. In my film A Thin

Camel, the protagonist is killed suddenly. While he had expected to find a Judeo-Christian heaven upon his death, what he is actually confronted with is a decidedly more Buddhist view of the afterlife. He discovers that all of his worldly possessions are there, representing his attachment to his life on Earth. In addition, he finds a guide, Michael, who helps him on his journey. The people he meets on his way, like the deities which appear to the deceased according to Buddhist philosophy, affect his understanding of the afterlife. Though George does not quite achieve enlightenment by the end, he becomes a guide himself, helping new arrivals on their path.

An idea central to the understanding of a Buddhist afterlife is that of impermanence, often explained using the metaphor “The glass is already broken”. It appears as though the glass is not broken, but sooner or later it will be. In the same way, we are already dead. The body will inevitably fall apart. This metaphor explains a basic tenet of Buddhist philosophy - accepting the natural way of things makes one free.

The goal of life is either to escape the cycle of rebirth, attaining nirvana, or to become a bodhisattva, someone who helps others to attain enlightenment. Thus the afterlife is a journey either to rebirth or to nirvana, a cessation of suffering and liberation from the death and rebirth cycle. The way to eliminate suffering is to understand the true nature of the world. People suffer because they desire things that do not bring lasting happiness. When one holds on to things that, by their nature, do not last, it causes sorrow. Things in life can bring joy, but attachment to them brings sorrow. To recognize their true nature, and thus their impermanence, is to be freed from attachment to them. The essential nature of the universe is change. Everything is constantly changing, always in a transitional state. “You cannot step into the same river twice.” (Ikeda, 35) In Buddhism, this constant change is called the transience of all phenomena. People, objects, the

entire universe repeat a cycle of forming, continuing, declining, and eventually disintegrating – it is the basic law of entropy. Everything which exists is in a constant state of decline, and must inevitably fall apart. What keeps us bound to this cycle is desire, the craving of worldly things.

Buddhism teaches that nothing is permanent. There is no soul, only a combination of components that come together to form a person. Our experiences, which we may identify as our “self”, are impermanent. There is no part of our concept of self which is not constantly in flux.

“To gain freedom from this predicament, we must first develop a healthy sense of self-based on being harmless and compassionate, both to ourselves and to others. Then, through meditation, we enter the present moment by dropping our memories of the past and fantasies about the future. Observing the present, we see that our “self” is simply an internal dialogue of incessant chatter. As this chatter grows still, a point is reached in which “self,” “other,” and “present” are transcended. That is where liberation is found.” (Thera, 82)

Buddha accepted the basic Hindu ideas of reincarnation and karma, and the goal of escaping the birth-death cycle, but departed from Hinduism with the no-soul doctrine. The no-soul, or anatta, doctrine can be hard for some to grasp. If we have no soul, no eternal self, then what is it that reincarnates? This theory is often explained with the candle analogy.

Reincarnation is like lighting one candle with the flame of another. The flame is connected to the first, but it is not the same flame. Josei Toda explains it this way:

“When we wake up in the morning, we resume our activities based on the same mind as the previous day. In the same way, in each new existence we

are destined to live based on the result of the karmic causes created in our previous lives.” (Ikeda, 32)

Humans do not have eternal souls, but instead a mass of habits, memories, desires, and so on. It is a transitory self. What moves on to the next life is not the self or the soul, but the karma that the deceased has accrued throughout all of a person’s past lives. Humans are subjects of moral action and karmic accumulation. Bad karma is created through any actions born of greed, anger, or foolishness, while good karma is created through actions born of good intentions, kindness, and compassion. Thus karma is decided by the intent that guides the action.

Another Buddhist teaching is the idea of non-duality or oneness. Many people think in binary terms – black or white, good or bad, dead or alive – but Buddhism discourages such thought. Aristotelian logic, prevalent in western thought, is based on these binary terms. Buddhism’s logic structure is based on the tetralemma:

A is true

A is not true

A is both true and not true

A is neither true nor not true (“Buddhist Philosophy”, 14)

Body and mind, life and death, these are not polar opposites but parts of a whole. This is explained in Daisaku Ikeda’s book in an analogy using persimmons:

“Persimmons can be sweetened by soaking in lime or being exposed to

sunlight. There are not two persimmons – one sweet and one bitter – just the one. The inherent bitterness of the persimmon has been drawn out, allowing its inherent sweetness to emerge. The intermediary is lime or sunlight. Earthly desires are the bitter persimmon, enlightenment the sweet, and the process of drawing out the sweetness is Buddhist practice. Instead of negating desire, we accept the realities of life as they are, revealing the way to transform them into causes of enlightenment.” (Ikeda, 8)

Things remain distinct, but they are not separate from one another. The waves and the ocean are not separate entities; the waves are a part of the ocean’s ongoing activities. All apparent opposites are actually one. As soon as we are born, we are dead, because our birth and death are just one thing – a continuous cycle. Many Buddhist teachings are explained through analogies, and the idea of nonduality is explained in terms of trees. If there is a branch, there must be a root. They are separate things, yet part of a whole; thus one can not exist without the other. Buddhism teaches understanding of human nature and of reality, eliminating suffering through this understanding of the world’s true nature. Because so much of Buddhist thought focuses on suffering, it is often wrongly associated with nihilism, but Buddhism’s focus is on the elimination of suffering, and not the inevitability of it.

Buddhism makes a distinction between two types of causal relationships. The first of these is called Hetu, and is the root cause or necessitating force. The second is Pratyaya, a causal relationship which is not the root force but is a correlative cause. Ignorance, suffering, and enlightenment are part of a causal relationship. Ignorance causes suffering, and the cessation of

suffering is enlightenment. This relationship is more easily explained using Plato's metaphor of the cave, where he outlines the relationship between the world of shadows and the world of ideas. The people in the cave that can only see shadows are overcome by ignorance. If they could turn to the entrance to see the light and true reality, they could be enlightened.

These fundamental theories – impermanence, nonduality, the no-soul doctrine, and causality – are all part of the philosophy that drives Buddhist afterlife theories. Understanding these theories is what allows a spirit to move on to either rebirth or liberation. The Buddhist afterlife is made up of a series of stages that a spirit must go through following their death. These stages help to guide the spirit to its proper place in the universe, and each stage offers the opportunity to better oneself and move closer to liberation. These stages of death are explained in detail in the Tibetan Book of the Dead.

The Tibetan Book of the Dead is a funerary text, actually called the Bardo Thodol, which translates to “liberation through hearing in the intermediate state”. It is a book for the living as well as the dying, and is meant to be read over the dying in hopes of guiding their spirits, much like the Egyptian Book of the Dead or the Catholic last rites. The Bardo Thodol describes the experiences that the spirit will encounter during the interval between death and rebirth. This interval is called a bardo, and the series of in-between states is their “afterlife”. This stage between lives is separated into three bardos – one of the moment of death, one of the intermediate state featuring visions of various Buddha forms, and one which leads to rebirth. There are also bardos for life, meditation, dream, and several subdivisions of these six bardos. Each bardo is a state of consciousness, and any state of consciousness is really an intermediate state. It is a fluid state of “in-betweenness”. It reflects that the Buddhist view is not really an

afterlife, not a static Paradise, but a between-life. It is a purposeful journey from one consciousness to another.

The four stages of life are subdivided into existence during birth, existence during life, existence during death, and existence during the period between death and rebirth, or the intermediate stage. In Buddhism, each state is a transitional one, and these bardos are very fluid. According to the Bardo Thodol, following death the spirit goes through a series of bardos divided into three stages. After the state of death and before that of rebirth, when a person's consciousness is not connected with the body, a spirit will experience a variety of phenomena. At the end of each bardo, the spirit can enter nirvana, be reborn, or continue on to the next bardo stage. The purpose to this journey is to allow the spirit to become enlightened or secure a favorable rebirth. A lingering attachment to worldly possessions will drag the spirit into another painful reality. The Book of the Dead is read over a dying person in the hopes of guiding them through these stages, and describes the experiences a person can expect from the moment of his death to that of rebirth or enlightenment. The sequence of these experiences degenerates from the clearest experience of reality that one is spiritually capable of to terrifying hallucinations brought on by the person's previous actions. These bardos offer opportunity for liberation for the spiritually advanced, and a place of danger for others as the karmic ally induced visions can cause a spirit to choose a less desirable rebirth.

The worlds, from lowest reality to highest, are Hell, Hungry Spirits, Animals, Anger, Humans, Heaven, Learning, Realization, Bodhisattvas, and Buddhahood. The first four worlds, Hell, Hungry Spirits, Animals, and Anger, are known as the four evil paths. The last four, Learning, Realization, Bodhisattvas, and Buddhahood, are known as the four noble paths.

The desired state, the liberated state, is Buddhahood. This state is characterized by infinite compassion and the wisdom to recognize the ultimate reality. At this point, the spirit can reform their existence, directing all activities toward altruistic goals. Enlightenment is not the creation of a new state, but the recognition of what always was. (Watts, 24) Attaining enlightenment does not try to carve away what can be perceived as bad, because the bad is a necessary part of the good. It does not condemn weakness, but encourages it. For example if one's weakness is impatience, one should strive to become a person who can not wait to take positive action. (Ikeda, 125) Those who achieve Nirvana, which means "to extinguish", are liberated from the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth. The Buddha described Nirvana as incomprehensible, indescribable, inconceivable, and unutterable. It is described as a place where there is nothing but what is seen of the mind, where there is no more attachment to external things – they are extinguished. Without the screens and filters of life, the mind itself can be seen directly, and the spirit can recognize its own true nature. Recognition and liberation are inseparable. Because nirvana is an end to existence, it can be seen as destructive or negative. Yet nirvana is not a negation of being, as this implies a duality – being or not being. Nirvana is the other end of samsara, the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth. Samsara is driven by karma-causality, which ceases after realization and enlightenment.

The next most desirable state is that of the Bodhisattva. This state is also one of compassion and altruism, but these spirits still aspire toward achieving enlightenment. During their time as Bodhisattvas, they help others to achieve this goal as they work toward it.

Next are the states of Realization and Learning. In these states the spirit recognizes the impermanence of all things, and seeks to improve itself. It is aware of the reality of death and pursues self-perfection. The difference between these two states is that those in the state of

Realization have arrived at this understanding on their own, while those in the state of Learning have arrived at them through studying others' ideas, knowledge, and experience.

The first stage of death, the bardo of dying, begins at the moment of death and can last up to four days. During this time, the spirit must realize that he has been separated from and abandoned his body. Awareness, consciousness, is no longer connected to the physical body. The spirit encounters the Clear White Light at the death moment. This light is liberation; if the spirit can recognize it and remain in that state. Every spirit encounters this, but only those who are spiritually developed can go beyond it to a higher level of reality. Most go on to the lesser state of the secondary Clear Light, which is seen immediately after death. If the spirit has still not achieved liberation, it will continue to the second bardo, the bardo of Luminous Mind. In this stage, the spirit will encounter apparitions, visions of various Buddha forms. These visions are personifications of human feelings.

In the first part, the spirit encounters the peaceful deities. As the Buddha form appears, so does a light from one of the six worlds or Lokas. Each Buddha form represents a virtue, and offers the possibility of liberation. These Buddha forms will be seen in a different light depending on what type of life the deceased led. If the spirit's life on earth was well lived, he will embrace this Buddha form and attain liberation. If not, the Buddha form will strike fear and terror in his heart, and the spirit will continue through the second bardo, encountering other such Buddha forms. Thus, after each of these encounters, the spirit can be sent to one of ten worlds. These are not physical locations, but states that are inherent in every person. The spirit must be willing to leave behind its former life in order to progress. Spirits make hell realms out of their anger, worlds out of passion and desire. The spirit then projects its own emotional state, believing it is real.

The first deity or Buddha form that is encountered in the first bardo is the Father-Mother, the supreme deity of the universe. This deity embodies the idea of non-duality, as even genders are not opposites but parts of a whole. The spirit may embrace this deity, or if his life was ignoble and impious, the spirit will be afraid and be driven toward the softer light of heaven. This heaven, like all states in death, is impermanent. There is intense joy in this state, but it is vulnerable to external influences, unlike the eternal happiness achieved by the Buddha. In this state, the spirit cannot transform his life. The spirit must realize the impermanence of all things to search for truth.

Next, the second highest God in the Buddhist pantheon will appear to the spirit and along with him the smoky light from hell. The spirit may respond to this second God, but if the spirit reacts angrily he will be drawn into hell. Like heaven, hell is impermanent as well. This state is one of suffering and despair, where the spirit perceives no freedom and has very little life force. The spirit feels trapped by his circumstances.

Subsequent deities represent both virtues and vices. The spirit's egotism could be his downfall with the next God to appear, in which case he will be drawn back into the human world for rebirth. In this state, the spirit is capable of passing fair judgment, controlling instinct with reason, and acting in harmony with his surroundings. From this state, it is possible for the spirit to strive toward enlightenment.

If miserliness and attachment is the spirit's reaction to the God of Eternal Life, he will be drawn to rebirth in the world of hungry ghosts. These ghosts are described as having huge stomachs, but throats the size of pinholes. This state is governed by desire, and the spirit is never satisfied. The spirit is tormented by relentless craving and a disregard for everything but the fulfillment of desires.

Jealousy will cause rebirth in the world of warrior-demons. This state is dominated by ego and aggressiveness. Those spirits in this state do not speak or act from their heart, but make a false show of emotion. This state is dominated by selfish ego, competitiveness, arrogance, and a need to be superior in all things. When they are ready to use their energy toward bettering themselves, they can strive toward the state of humanity.

At each of these stages where a particular vice can be a spirit's downfall, there is also the opportunity for virtue to draw the spirit to liberation. Following this stage of the bardo, all the deities the spirit has encountered will appear again, along with the lights from all six Lokas. Then the Knowledge-Holding Deities appear to transition the spirit to the next stage of the second bardo where the spirit will encounter wrathful deities. If the spirit can not face these deities, due to his own ignorance, then he is reborn on earth as an animal. Animality is a state governed by instinct without morality. Otherwise, the spirit will meet seven legions of wrathful deities.

The spirit needs to have no fear, and must recognize that these are only the previously encountered Peaceful Deities in disguise. The goal is to visualize each wrathful deity as the deity it really is, and thus to attain the second degree of liberation. If the spirit can recognize that these creatures are his own illusions, he will be liberated. If not, the spirit continues on to the third bardo.

The third bardo is the bardo of rebirth. The spirit once again encounters visions, driven by his karma. First the spirit encounters the Lord of Death, who subjects the spirit to judgment. If the spirit claims to have done no evil, he is shown every good and evil act he has committed in vivid detail. Demons inflict punishments for the evil deeds, and the goal is to recognize the voidness of these visions. If the spirit can recognize that all of this is a hallucination from his

mind, the spirit will attain liberation. If the spirit does not recognize this, he will be drawn toward rebirth.

The lights of the six Lokas appear, and the spirit will be reborn in one of these worlds. The light that the spirit is destined for will shine more brightly than the other five. The spirit is frightened by the previous bardos and will seek out shelter in a cave or hiding place. These caves are actually the entrances to wombs. The goal is to meditate on the Clear Light instead of entering these places and to achieve the third degree of liberation. If the spirit can not do this, the Bardo Thodol instructs her on how to choose the best womb for her reincarnation.

Many spirits spend their existence going back and forth between the worlds of hell, hunger, animality, anger, humanity, and heaven, until they are able to realize their responses are based solely on the external factors of their environment. Hell is ruled by rage, hunger by greed, animals by foolishness, anger by perversity, heaven by joy, and humans by calmness. Every state is inherent in every individual, and individuals move fluidly between states. While an individual embodies one world, the others are still dormant within him, and can be manifested at any moment. The spirit must look for truth to escape this pattern. Otherwise there will neither be understanding nor a purpose for understanding.

In-Betweenness: Representation

As a part of my study, it is necessary to see what archetypes and conventions already exist in films dealing with death and the afterlife. An archetype is a generic, idealized model. It can be a person, object, or concept. It is an example of a type, and something found in all film. Fiction relies on these archetypes and conventions to help audiences connect with characters, time periods, or plots.

Every religion has a particular belief about the afterlife; in fact even atheists have beliefs about what the afterlife entails. These ideas are reflected in any number of art forms – literature, film, painting, and dance. They stem from centuries old myths and stories which become an integral part of each culture. Aside from the belief of what happens to a spirit after death, there are also existing conventions regarding visuals associated with the afterlife, such as the pearly gates, Saint Peter, the river Styx, or angels. Archetypes such as the vision of Heaven with angels resting on clouds and playing harps, or Hell as consumed by fire, persist. These visuals are consistently represented in films about the Judeo-Christian afterlife, as well as in television shows and commercials.

Another familiar archetype in film, literature, and other media is that of the redemptive journey which is often tied in to religion. In my own film, George is after enlightenment, and not redemption, yet the journey reads in a similar way. Throughout the film, George works toward this enlightenment, and his character changes throughout. Transformations such as this often occur within the protagonist's journey. Films such as these often rely on the archetypes of hero and anti-hero, the Christ figure, and the reluctant savior - something found in traditional storytelling (Fitch). The most well known of these journey tales is The Odyssey. Odysseus left his home and family to go to war, but on his journey home was delayed by a variety of trials. This journey and its trials help to shape Odysseus' character, making him stronger than when he left. Yet he has not grown into a strong warrior, but instead a clever murderer. Though Odysseus historically is seen as a hero, in modern though he is a prime example of the anti-hero, and is not considered heroic in the traditional sense. Generally the anti-hero is an outlaw type, who seeks out such conflict (Fitch, 22).

Several times in the *Odyssey*, the poem refers to Odysseus' quest as a desire for rebirth, which can only occur after he has reached his destination. Fitch describes these "redemptive journey" films as adhering to the Road Movie or Mission Movie categories. The Road Movie is often either a story of hopeful enthusiasm or of escapist abandonment. The Mission Movie, which he describes as being a sub-category of the former, has one single imperative goal. It is this category that I feel my own film falls under, although the protagonist spends much of the film trying to discover just what that single goal is. He is working toward enlightenment without even knowing that it is his goal; it is his unconscious goal. George's conscious goal throughout the film is escape, as he thinks that is the only way. The deeper message behind these films is that it is the lessons the character learns throughout their journey that is important, and not obtaining their goal. In the case of my film, it is a causal relationship. The lessons George learns on his journey are the only way he is able to achieve his goal.

There are four main conventions that I have observed within narrative films portraying the western view of the afterlife as heaven: The spirit world as guides or ghosts, the soul being taken before its time, the soul arguing its way into heaven, and the soul being reincarnated.

In popular American films, there are a number of conventions found regarding death and the afterlife. Primarily, the afterlife in film is portrayed as a paradise the character reaches, as in "What Dreams May Come" (1998). Usually the afterlife portrayed in such films is a western view, based on the Judeo-Christian view of the afterlife as heaven, a static paradise. Although this film does touch on the Buddhist idea of reincarnation, it still shows the main character's afterlife as his personally created paradise. The main character, played by Robin Williams, dies almost immediately after the film begins. His wife, wracked with grief, commits suicide, and much of the film focuses on Williams' character fighting for his wife's soul. In this vision of the

afterlife, the dead create their own heaven simply by using their imagination. The film is loosely based on the Orpheus myth. Eurydike, Orpheus' wife, died on the night they were married. He was permitted to pass into Hades and win her back, if he was able to lead her to the land of the living without looking back. Similarly, William's character, Christy, is permitted into Hell to convince his wife that she is dead. Neither man is able to resist looking back, but in the myth, Orpheus loses his wife to death forever. In "What Dreams May Come" Christy's willingness to remain with his wife in Hell is what helps her to realize the truth of her situation. She rejoins him in his heaven, and the two are reincarnated, to meet again on Earth. Everything the two experience – their heaven, hell, redemption, despair – is constructed by them, by their unconscious expectations. Following the Buddhist afterlife model, they inhabit worlds which are already inherent within them. The rules that govern this afterlife operate independently of divine intervention, and are wholly based on the individual.

An earlier film, "The Reincarnation of Peter Proud" (1975), also focused on reincarnation, though with a living main character. Audiences in the west can easily identify with Judeo-Christian religious references in film, but films such as these that focus on eastern philosophy are making these concepts more familiar. Even films which portray a Judeo-Christian afterlife can exercise some poetic license without complaint. Generally, audiences are more familiar with the Bible as portrayed in film and television than with the specifics of the book itself. For this reason, film and television do more to familiarize an audience with another culture than most other media.

A slightly later film, "Audrey Rose" (1977) portrays a father who believes that his recently deceased child, Audrey Rose, has been reincarnated as another little girl, Ivy. Ivy is born only minutes after Audrey Rose dies. The film portrays the father, Elliot, going to India where he

learns about the Buddhist belief in the afterlife and reincarnation. This film, unlike “What Dreams May Come”, explains the idea of reincarnation within the film. By the time “What Dreams May Come” was made, audiences no longer needed this explanation, as they had become familiar with reincarnation being portrayed in film.

In fact, reincarnation is even showing up in children’s films, such as Disney’s “Brother Bear.” The story is based on three brothers living in prehistoric North America. The youngest brother, Kenai intervenes when a bear tries to steal the older brother’s fish. When the older brother Sitka tries to protect Kenai, he is killed by the bear, and his spirit becomes an eagle. Kenai kills the bear, but the spirit of his brother Sitka turns Kenai into a bear. Kenai befriends the cub of the bear he killed, and begins to see the world from a different perspective. When his other brother, Denahi, finds Kenai’s clothes and a nearby bear (actually Kenai), he misinterprets the situation and begins to hunt the bear which he thinks has killed his brother. Kenai has gone from hunting bears to being hunted. The message of the film is that we are all connected to one another, and that we are responsible for our actions. These ideas are prominent in both Buddhism and Native American religions.

Reincarnation has been portrayed on the stage as well as the screen. A Broadway production, “On a Clear Day You Can See Forever” with Barbra Streisand, debuted in 1965, and was later adapted as a screenplay. When Barbra’s character, Daisy, sees a hypnotist to help her quit smoking, she uncovers a past life. They research this life and eventually prove that Daisy has been reincarnated. In a real-life version, Virginia Tighe underwent hypnosis to cure her allergies, and discovered a past life as an Irish woman named Bridey Murphy. Her doctor wrote The Search for Bridey Murphy, which later became a movie as well. The film caused a stir, and

led to the formation of the Association for Past-Life Research and Therapies, which has since become the International Association for Regression Research & Therapies, Inc.

Films like “Heaven Can Wait” (1978), “Chances Are” (1989), and even “Corpse Bride” (2005) show a popular convention of the deceased being taken to the afterlife too soon, usually due to some kind of cosmic clerical error. In “Corpse Bride”, the protagonist, Victor, is arranged to be married to Victoria. After he messes up the wedding rehearsal, he takes off into the woods to practice his wedding vows. Following much practice, he finally recites his vows correctly, and places his bride’s wedding band on a tree branch that looks like a hand. He soon discovers that the tree branch was, in fact, a hand when it grabs Victor. The hand belongs to Emily, who was killed on the day of her wedding and has been waiting for her groom to come for her ever since. She declares Victor her husband, and he faints. When he awakens, he is in the land of the dead. As the film goes on, Victor has to overcome many obstacles to return to the land of the living, a common theme in such stories.

Often these films also mix the usual western view of heaven with the idea of reincarnation. Typically, a person can not simply be sent back to Earth to correct this error, and must instead be reincarnated, as in “Down to Earth” (2001). Lance, the main character, is accidentally killed before his time. He can not simply be returned to his old body, and is instead returned to Earth in the body of a recently deceased rich man. This is a remake of the 1978 movie “Heaven Can Wait.” In the original film, the man is a football player, but again the body he is reincarnated as is that of a very rich man. The spirit must let go of his old body and embrace the new one, which also, however subtly, touches on the Buddhist idea of non-attachment.

The deceased can be portrayed as arguing his way into heaven, as in “Defending Your Life” (1991). In this version of the afterlife, a soul is put on trial upon arriving in heaven for being afraid. If heaven’s court determines the soul has conquered his fears, he will be sent on to the next phase of existence. Otherwise, the soul is reincarnated on earth to be tried again at the end of this life. The main character, Daniel, is told that it could take several lifetimes for him to be ready to move on. This mirrors the pattern of the bardos, where at the end of each stage the spirit can either be liberated or move on to the next bardo. This film deals solely with the idea of fear or foolishness, which is only one of the ten worlds a soul can be sent to following the appearance of a deity. This does, however, show Daniel how important the motive to actions can be, as with determining karma. This film focuses on a soul’s need to be accountable for his actions in life. Though many of the elements in this film are true to Buddhist beliefs, the ending is that of a conventional romantic comedy.

As a spin on this, Henry van Cleve argues to be admitted into hell in “Heaven Can Wait” (1943). Henry tells the story of his unworthy life in an attempt to gain admittance; however, the devil tells him to “try the other place.” Both of these films portray an afterlife where a person’s actions on Earth determine what happens to his soul.

Another common convention is that seen in films like “A Christmas Carol” and “It’s a Wonderful Life” (1946). Both films deal with a living soul, but use aspects of the afterlife to show them the error of their ways. In the first, spirits show Ebenezer what will become of him if he continues living the way he has. In the second, an angel shows George what the world would be like without him. The message of this film is that every life counts, and that the karma they have created during their own lifetimes has necessarily altered the lives of others.

Other films and media play on the idea of the living and the dead coexisting by portraying the afterlife played out on earth, as in “Beetlejuice” (1988), the television series “Dead Like Me”, and the adventure game “Grim Fandango”. The portrayal of the afterlife in “Beetlejuice” is reminiscent of Sartre’s idea of death as a meaningless bureaucracy. The dead sit in a lobby, take numbers, and await meetings with death counselors that only result in further paperwork. Additionally, elements of magic or spiritualism like exorcism, incantations, and séances are prevalent. In “Dead Like Me”, characters are required to work as grim reapers before they are allowed to move on. These characters do not know how many souls they must reap before moving on, or where they are moving on to. In the game “Grim Fandango” those players who have committed crimes in life are forced to work off their time in death, serving a department of the dead. In some cases the dead are still connected to the living as in “All of Me” (1984) and “Heart and Souls” (1993). This plays on a common theme in literature of the dead being turned into ghosts, which haunt the living. In “All of Me” (1984), Roger is haunted by Edwina in a very physical way, as she possesses and controls half of his body. Generally, the spirit makes itself known to the living in less physical, dramatic ways, as in “Ghost” (1990) and other similar films, like “The Others” (2001). In “The Others”, the characters are neither in heaven nor hell, but continue to exist on Earth amongst the living, more or less unnoticed.

If you look at this film list, a common thread is that these films are American films. Thus, it is no surprise that they primarily deal with the western, Judeo-Christian idea of heaven. The archetypes used in film are developed from a society’s myths, legends, and other previous fictional stories. This is not the case in every American film about dying. Some films deal with a more Buddhist idea of the afterlife as a journey, as in “The Five People You Meet in Heaven.” (2004) In this film, the deceased, Eddie, meets the souls of five people whose lives he had

affected and discovers the significance of his own life before finally moving on to Heaven.

Eddie's own version of "enlightenment" is realizing that, much like George in "It's a Wonderful Life", the things he has done and the karma he has created mattered, and deeply affected the lives of others.

Other films, particularly those in the science fiction genre, deal more with the philosophical side of afterlife and theories about death. The "Matrix" (1999-2003) trilogy explored the idea that the notion of being alive is itself false, its characters existing in a manipulated reality. This concept is also the primary plot point of "The Truman Show" (1998), where the main character lives in a completely constructed reality, unbeknownst to him. "The Matrix" was influenced by Mamoru Oshii's "Ghost in the Shell", an anime series and film which reevaluated human identity and uniqueness through the development of artificial intelligence and an omnipresent computer network.

Other popular themes in science fiction works such as time travelers moving from one universe to the next, cloning our bodies so that we will never die, and memories being erased all play with the question of what defines us. Are we our bodies? Our memories? An accumulation of our actions? What is it about us that continues on after we die? These films and others like them work to affirm or rebuke the no-soul doctrine. These films, and others such as "Vanilla Sky" (2001), also deal with the idea of reality. What is real, and how can we know? In "Vanilla Sky", it is unclear whether we are seeing the main character's reality as it is or as he sees it. Other similar movies, such as "Mulholland Drive", "Waking Life", and "Memento" were released in 2001 as well.

Spiritual Cinema, a phrase coined by Stephen Simon, producer of "What Dreams May Come" and "Somewhere in Time", is used to describe films that focus on "the story and the

empowerment and the beauty of being human.” (Hawthorne) Simon contends that there are few movies that make an audience feel better about being human beings. Part of the issue is that major studios expend a great deal of money making and marketing a film, thus want to ensure that their movies have a broad-base. Many producers shy away from movies with spiritual themes, for fear that it will narrow their audience. To combat this, films about spirituality need to bring in a big star to convince the studio that it can bring in the audience they desire.

Certain aspects of Buddhism have reached to other cultures, especially in areas of philosophy. Nietzsche praised Buddhism in The Anti-Christ (1895) wherein he condemned Christianity. Nietzsche found it more realistic than Christianity, as Buddhism’s goals are attainable in life, though self-adjustment and meditation. Both Buddhism and Nietzsche’s philosophy emphasize humans in a godless world, and neither looks to external beings for solutions. Albert Einstein also felt that a personal god is unnecessary in the endeavor toward living a good life. Einstein said, “A man's ethical behavior should be based effectually on sympathy, education, and social ties and needs; no religious basis is necessary. Man would indeed be in a poor way if he had to be restrained by fear of punishment and hope of reward after death.” (“Religion and Science”) Other supporters of Buddhism are Carl Jung, who wrote a commentary for the 1935 reprint of the Tibetan Book of the Dead, Hermann Hesse, who wrote Siddhartha, Jack Kerouac, and Alan Watts. The hippie generation in the 60s and 70s led to a re-discovery of Buddhism in the west.

The recent trend of celebrities becoming Buddhist is not too surprising to monk and Professor Robert Thurman. Thurman was ordained in 1964 by the current Dalai-Lama, and teaches Indo-Tibetan studies at Columbia University. Thurman says that is harder to progress as a monk with the noise of the world, as opposed to a quiet monastery. Since celebrities (including

filmmakers) tend to be “artsy” types, Thurman feels they are more likely to find Buddhism appealing than other traditional Western religions (Argasinski, 42).

Filmmakers reveal much about themselves, their culture, their beliefs, and their personal interests in their work. And many films today are focusing on life’s meaning. In the 1940s, movies were not likely to contain elements of the Buddhist philosophy, but many authors were looking to eastern religions for inspiration. W. Somerset Maugham wrote The Razor’s Edge after a visit to India, and Christopher Isherwood lived at the Vedanta Society in Hollywood. These days, mainstream films often contain elements of spiritual ideas found in Buddhism, the most common being ideas of reincarnation and karma.

There is some debate over whether Buddhism is a religion or a philosophy; in fact many people who follow other religions claim to adhere to the Buddhist philosophy. People have identified with Buddhism as a religion, philosophy, ideology, and way of life. There is no one authority in Buddhism, no equivalent to the Catholic Pope, and Buddhism has been greatly diversified, from Tibet to California. The lines between religion and philosophy can be blurry, as they both try to answer some of the same questions. Basic questions of existence, human nature, good and evil, and the purpose of life are all explored by both religion and philosophy. The difference lies in how the answers to these questions are approached. Philosophy uses reason and critical thinking, whereas religion focuses on faith. Additionally, religion often has rituals to mark important events, and separates the sacred from the profane.

Another aspect which confuses this debate is the difference between how western and eastern cultures approach philosophy. Western philosophy focuses on the idea of being – what was first, what is the cause, what is the absolute? Western philosophy is completely separated from religion. In eastern philosophy, the question is not so much “why?” as “how?” Instead of

striving to arrive at an absolute truth, eastern philosophers ponder the effectiveness of a system, so it is not a question of being, but of knowing. Thought centers around the connections between phenomena, and is rooted in the religious, linking philosophy with mysticism. Western philosophy is decidedly non-religious, whereas eastern philosophy can not be by its very nature. Even Confucianism, which rejects anything supernatural, accounts for heaven and virtue. Thus there can be no Buddhist philosophy without Buddhist religion, and the argument is moot. (“Buddhist Philosophy”, 16)

Much like western films portray an afterlife born of their own religion, myths, and legends, films from other countries reflect their own culture. A Japanese film, “Afterlife” (2003), asks the question, “If you could only choose one memory to live with, for all eternity, what would it be?” In a way, this film does portray the western idea of heaven as paradise, but the paradise chosen is a very personal one. Karma is again a very important component in this film, as the dead can only choose from the memories they have created through their actions on Earth. Thus, if they lived ignoble lives, their only memories to choose from will be ignoble ones. Like the bardos, there is a time limit, and counselors to help the deceased choose this memory. The counselors serve as Bodhisattvas, assisting others in their journeys while they strive toward the same end themselves. The counselors who help the dead are there only because they were unable to choose their own memory to live with. Like Bodhisattvas, these counselors have not achieved their own enlightenment. This film, like “The Five People You Meet in Heaven”, adheres to the popular convention of the spirit world as being made up of guides to assist the spirit in its journey, serving much the same purpose as the deities which appear in the Buddhist afterlife. Each deity, or spirit guide, the dead encounters offers another opportunity to seek the truth and attain enlightenment. The visuals in this film do not adhere to typical western ideas of heaven,

however. The film begins with the dead walking through a door. Behind them is fog and white light, and the audience is unable to see where these people have come from. They check-in, then sit in the lobby waiting for their numbers to be called. The setting is an average building, and not a glorious paradise. In accordance with Buddhist thought, their afterlife is just a continuation of their lives.

In the animated film “Mononoke Hime” (1997), directed by Hayao Miyazaki, the Buddhist idea of between-ness or liminality is portrayed. Ashitaka, a warrior prince, is suspended between the two worlds of nature and humankind. These worlds are represented by female leaders who intend to protect their own world by destroying the other. Ashitaka, being between their worlds, is the only one in a position to stop this, and he acts as mediator and savior. This film also addresses non-duality in that it does not take the common stance of good vs. evil. Instead, both worlds and the females that represent them are presented as sympathetic characters. Each world has its own beauty, and its own savagery. “For Ashitaka, there is neither beast nor human, forest nor town, but one world that must learn to live in harmony in order to avoid destruction” (Kraemer). Ashitaka, in accordance with Buddhist ideals, is committed to peace and compassion, yet can be just as easily read by western audiences as a Christ-like figure. As such, this character allows for cross-cultural understanding and the ability for various audiences to relate to him.

Though there is much variety in the perception of afterlife, most theories involve a continuation of existence. It can be in a spiritual, experiential, or a ghost-like existence beyond this world. It is a belief that something survives when the body dies. Many religions’ views of afterlife revolve around either reward or punishment, and these ideas are also reflected in film and literature. The punishment and reward system can be based on actions or faith. Outside of

religion, there are also philosophical arguments regarding the afterlife. Some argue that because we can not know for sure, the question of whether or not an afterlife exists is meaningless.

Others argue that because we can not know, it is more beneficial to us to believe in some kind of afterlife. If there is no afterlife, and we believed in it and lived our lives accordingly, no harm is done. On the other hand, if there is an afterlife, and we have not lived our lives so as to be looked upon favorably, our souls could be in great peril.

However limitless our wealth or power might seem, we can not avoid our own demise. One must realize that death, along with life, creates a whole. The belief that afterlife is a paradise may not enrich the lives of the living, but instead inspire resignation to a decided fate. We can begin to grasp the meaning to life through honestly facing the reality of death, the reality of non-dualism, and the reality of impermanence. When our worldview expands beyond just our present existence to include the whole universe, we can lead fulfilling lives. As such, there are practical implications to the Buddhist philosophy. When death is seen as a normal phase of existence, it provides us with courage to face it. Believing that behavior creates karma and determines our future existences inspires us to make our lives worthwhile, encouraging us to lead kind, just, compassionate lives. We know that the good fortune, the karma we've accrued, does not diminish with our deaths. This way of thinking allows us to elevate our states of being. While some view Buddhism as merely preparing people for death, it also encourages people to enjoy a fulfilling life. Buddhism affirms and exalts life, partly through accepting death. It teaches us that our problems are not the cause of suffering, but that our lack of wisdom and power to solve them is. I have drawn on Buddhism, but also aspects of the western idea of purgatory in order to write the following script.

FADE IN:

EXT CITY LATE AFTERNOON ESTABLISHING

MONTAGE

A) CAMERA PANS ACROSS CITY SKYLINE

B) TRAFFIC

C) SKYSCRAPERS AS SEEN FROM SIDEWALK

RICK (O.S.)

I'm still only up to 4 miles on the
bike.

MEGAN (O.S.)

Isn't the race 10 miles?

GEORGE (O.S.)

I'm going to own you.

EXT CITY STREET CONTINUING

DOLLY WITH GEORGE and a small group of sharply dressed
business persons - TOM, DICK, and HARRIET - as they walk down
the sidewalk, talking over each other. They have just left
work and look relaxed.

MEGAN

I thought you were a runner.

GEORGE

Yeah, and I'll still kick his ass.

RICK

I still have a month. I'm gonna be
like, the Lance Armstrong of
biking.

MEGAN

Isn't Lance Armstrong the Lance
Armstrong of biking?

DAWN

Your mothers must be so proud.

DOLLY IN FRONT OF THEM as they enter the shot around a corner.

DAWN (CONT'D)

So what's the status on the YMCA thing?

GEORGE

(beat; glances around)
Why are we looking at me here?

RICK

It was your idea.

GEORGE

Okay, yeah, but Sam's in charge of it. Andy's team made playoffs this year, I can't be working Saturdays.

MEGAN

Sam's not here, and this has to be together by next week.

GEORGE

We're going with the gala. Black tie, three hundred a plate.

RICK

What are you serving, gold plated lobster?

GEORGE

It's a fund raiser, idiot.

RICK

Oh, name calling, that's adult.

The men arrive at another corner and stop. Across the street is a parking garage. Camera FOCUSES on Tom.

MEGAN

(looking at George)
You coming?

PULL BACK to include the group of men.

GEORGE

I've gotta get home.

RICK

The old ball and chain, eh?

GEORGE

Working on Andy's curve-ball tonight. And I'm telling Katie you

called her old.

George begins to cross the street. Camera ALTERNATES CLOSE UPS of the men speaking.

DAWN

(calling after him)
I'll give Sam a call tomorrow, see
if he's signed off on the invites
yet.

GEORGE

(turns toward him)
You do that.
(to Dick)
I'll tell the old lady you said
hello.

RICK

Dude, seriously, don't tell her I
called her that.

George smiles, waves, and continues to cross the street.

EXT CU, GEORGE

Walking across the street. We hear a loud THUD.

CUT TO: BLACK.

FADE IN:

EXT STREET CONTINUING

We see George laying in the street, his coworkers and other passersby running toward him. Camera TILTS UP to sky.

FADE TO: WHITE.

FADE IN:

EXT A LARGE FIELD, "LOBBY" EARLY MORNING

George awakens in a large field. As his head clears, he looks around and sees piles of stuff. On a tree stump sits MICHAEL. He is whittling.

MICHAEL

You're up.

George still appears disoriented, but starts to stand up,

survey the scenery, and begins walking toward Michael.

GEORGE

Is this my stuff? This is my stuff.

(to himself; continuing)

I didn't even know I owned this many CDs... lumber? Look at all this...

(picking up a chess piece)

I thought I lost this set.

(to Michael, continuing)

What's... how did this get here? And where's... are you whittling?

MICHAEL

I am.

GEORGE

Who does that?

MICHAEL

Whittling has been practiced for centuries, all around the world. It's very cathartic. And I get to play with a knife, so there's that.

GEORGE

Right... of course. So, uh... what's going on here?

MICHAEL

What's the last thing you remember?

GEORGE

Well... I left work... I was talking to the guys... crossed the street. That's it.

MICHAEL

Someone ran you over. You're dead, George.

GEORGE

Wait... what? That's... Jesus, you can't just spring that sort of thing on somebody. Are you serious?

(sitting)

You've really got to work on your delivery there.

MICHAEL

I don't think there's anything you can say to a person to prepare them. Why stall?

GEORGE

It's just what you do. It's... it's

polite. Have you been doing this awhile? I mean, I can't imagine this is the first time you've had a complaint like this.

MICHAEL

I've been doing this a long time. I can assure you, I've tried several approaches. They all have the same effect.

GEORGE

Well wait now... no, no I can't be dead.

MICHAEL

Why is that?

GEORGE

I'm not done. Yeah, there's no way I'm dead. Geez, that was a hell of a scare. So what is this, some kind of dream? Am I still in the hospital? I'll bet I am.

Michael shrugs at him.

GEORGE (CONT'D)

Alright, we'll do it your way. I'm "dead". Now what?

Michael motions for George to follow him.

CUT TO:

George and Michael walking together. Some time has passed. Michael is eating an apple. The camera follows them.

GEORGE (CONT'D)

This isn't what I'd expected.

MICHAEL

Of...?

George stops walking. Michael stops with him.

GEORGE

Heaven. Oh... is this heaven? Is that where I went?

MICHAEL

You could call it that.

GEORGE

Do you call it that?

Michael smiles and continues walking. George follows. They

walk in silence for awhile. They come to an opening in the trees where there is an obvious trail. It is about the width of a road, but dirt and not paved.

MICHAEL

This may be what you're looking for.

GEORGE

We're hiking?

MICHAEL

This is where all the new arrivals go.

GEORGE

How far is it?

Michael shrugs, and George looks at him, irritated.

GEORGE (CONT'D)

How am I going to get all of my stuff... umm... there?

MICHAEL

Sometimes it takes a few trips. Best get started.

George and Michael start walking back to the clearing with George's things. CAMERA remains stationary as they walk away from it.

EXT "LOBBY" MORNING

George and Michael arrive back at the clearing.

GEORGE

Wait... this isn't all my stuff. Where's my car? Or my house?

MICHAEL

You owned portions of those. If you look, you'll find portions of them here.

George roots through his belongings. He picks up a hubcap.

GEORGE

Not the useful portions.
(dropping the hubcap)
So do you have bags, a wheelbarrow... something?

Michael shakes his head no.

GEORGE (CONT'D)

I thought you were supposed to help
me.

Michael smiles, then returns to his stump and resumes his
whittling, while George surveys the task at hand.

EXT PATH DAY

SERIES OF SHOTS:

A. GEORGE WALKING WITH HIS ARMS FULL OF HIS BELONGINGS.

B. GEORGE SITTING ON TOP OF HIS BELONGINGS, RESTING.

C. GEORGE JUGGLING AND DROPPING HIS BELONGINGS. HE KICKS A
BOX, SIGHS. AFTER A BEAT, HE BEGINS GATHERING HIS THINGS.

D. GEORGE SLEEPING, SURROUNDED BY HIS THINGS.

EXT PATH DAY

George is walking the trail with his things, after what may
have been days, weeks, or months of solitude. He looks weary
and disheveled, and is talking to himself. He is panting
slightly from the effort.

GEORGE

I can't believe I'm spending
eternity running errands.
Pointless... stupid...
boring errands. And talking to
myself, that's healthy. This place
better be...

George looks up to the path and stops.

GEORGE'S POV

The trail opens into another clearing. There is a large tent
ahead of him.

BACK TO SCENE

GEORGE

Yes! Oh, thank God.

George walks with renewed vigor, excited and relieved, toward the tent. He considers it, puzzled, and then finds the opening. He enters.

INT TENT DAY

Inside the tent is a woman, GRACE, sitting at a long table. She has papers stacked everywhere, and a typewriter she is currently working at. The tent is set up like a temporary office. Without looking up, Grace holds up a finger to George, asking him to wait. She finishes typing her sentence and looks up.

GRACE

Sorry about that, there's always a
ton to catch up on here. Welcome!
Have a seat.

George looks around the tent, puzzled. He doesn't move.

GRACE (CONT'D)

Michael said you'd be on your way.

George sits in a chair across from Grace.

GEORGE

Michael... the whittling guy?

GRACE

That's him. I'm Grace, I'll be
checking you in today.

Grace extends her hand, and George shakes it slowly.

GRACE (CONT'D)

Can I get you some coffee? Water?

GEORGE

Coffee. Thanks.

Grace gets up and starts making coffee for the two of them. She takes her time, and says nothing. As George waits, he gets increasingly restless and upset.

GEORGE (CONT'D)

Are you going to tell me anything?
I mean... I feel like I've been as

polite as I can be with the small talk here, and I've been walking for I don't even know how long, and I finally get to it, whatever it is, and it's just you in a tent, and I don't mean to be rude but if this is all there is I think I'm going to lose it. So what's the deal here, enlighten me.

Grace continues to fix the coffee as she speaks.

GRACE

Enlightenment, George, comes from within. That's not something I can do for you.

GEORGE

What is it with you people? Do you think this is funny? I don't know what you're doing here, but if you're all supposed to be some kind of welcoming committee or whatever, you're doing a terrible job of it.

Grace brings the coffee over and sits, shuffling through her paperwork.

GRACE

I can't speak for Michael, but I'm here to check you in. There's some papers to sign, a few waivers since this is your first trip. We'll be taking your things into storage. After this trip, you'll just have to sign in and out, and you can always stay awhile if you like. That's basically it.

GEORGE

Fine. Whatever.

George sifts through his paperwork and begins to calm down. He sips his coffee, and signs his name in several places.

GEORGE (CONT'D)

So I did your silly paperwork, where do I go now?

GRACE

Well, that's up to you.

GEORGE

No. No. Huh uh. I hauled all this stuff up here, and I followed your rules, and I filled out your paperwork, and YOU. YOU are going

to tell me what's going on here right now. Where am I, and why do I have to haul everything here, and where am I going. I'm not about to just wander around here hauling shit until I wake up.

GRACE

Wake up?

GEORGE

Look, I know I'm not dead. I mean... come on. Does this look like heaven to you?

As George is ranting, an old man, RAY, walks into the tent. He stands by the entrance, smirking, and waits for George to finish.

RAY

(to George)

First trip, eh?

George turns to look at him, and then shakes his head and begins to laugh.

GEORGE

Great. Another one. Let the parade of crazies begin. Are you in on this too?

RAY

Nah, I don't work here. Just feels like it, eh Grace?

Grace smiles at him warmly. They obviously know each other.

RAY (CONT'D)

She'll finish your paperwork, why don't you come with me?

(to Grace)

Sign me in there, would ya hon?

Ray winks at Grace, then puts his arm around George. George shakes his head and throws up his arms. He looks defeated. Ray leads him out of the tent.

EXT CLEARING, "TENT CLEARING" DAY

George and Ray walk over to a large tree, talking. They stop beneath it.

RAY

Man, if Gracie had a nickel every time she saw a guy go off like

that, she'd be a rich lady. Not
that it'd do her much good here.
I'm Ray.

(extends his hand to
George)
And I'm leaving.

GEORGE
(shaking his hand)
What?

RAY
This is my last trip.

GEORGE
How do you know?

RAY
I've been up and down this path
1,086 times. Gives a man some time
to think. They all say you'll know
your path when...

GEORGE
Oh don't even say it.

RAY
It's the truth, George. You'll be
here until you understand why
you're here. And then... you'll
know where to go.

GEORGE
You sure you don't work here?

A few beats.

GEORGE (CONT'D)
So I'm really not waking up?

RAY
Wish I could tell you different.
(rising)
I think I'm done here. You coming?

GEORGE
(looking around)
No. I've got a lot to deal with
here. I think I have a lot of trips
left.

RAY
Then you do. Good luck.

Ray walks off into the clearing. A figure in the distance
waves to him. George leans his head back against the tree and
closes his eyes.

EXT "CHECK-OUT" DAY

Ray walks up to the figure, who turns out to be Michael, and shakes his hand.

MICHAEL

Ready?

Ray turns back to look at George.

POV RAY

George continues to rest beneath the tree where Ray left him. He does not look over.

BACK TO SCENE

RAY

Yes sir.

Ray closes his eyes.

FADE TO: WHITE

EXT "TENT CLEARING" DAY

George looks over toward where Ray was standing; the field is now empty. He sighs, rises, and begins walking back to the path.

EXT PATH DAY

George is nearing the end of the path, when he spots another figure in the distance.

GEORGE'S POV

The figure is a woman, ANN. She waves at him, and continues walking up the path. Ann is young, and is not carrying anything.

BACK TO SCENE

George begins walking faster toward her. They reach each other and stop in the path.

GEORGE

Hi, I'm George

ANN

My name's Ann.

They laugh.

GEORGE

George.

ANN

Ann.

They shake hands.

GEORGE

Glad to see someone else out here,
it was getting pretty lonely.

ANN

Tell me about it.

GEORGE

So this isn't your first trip then?

ANN

Oh no, no. It's been... I don't
know. Feels like a million times.

GEORGE

I met a guy, up at the clearing,
says it took him 1,086 trips.

ANN

Ray? How is he?

GEORGE

You've met him?

ANN

Actually, we came here together. He
umm... he hit me. With his truck.
And so, I'm here.

GEORGE

Awfully big of you to be concerned
about a guy that killed you.

ANN

Yeah, well... I've had a lot of
time to think about it. I didn't
feel that way when I got here.

GEORGE

But you're okay with it now? I mean, you're young. You had your whole life ahead of you, and then bam. Gone. No more job, no more watching your kid play ball, and it's all this guy's fault.

ANN

And there's absolutely nothing I can do about any of that.

Several beats.

GEORGE

I'm supposed to just accept that? I can't go home to my wife, and there's nothing I can do about it. I want to kill the guy that did this to me. I'm still waiting to wake up, for this to be over.

ANN

(putting her hand on George's shoulder)
You aren't asleep, George.

The two stand for awhile.

GEORGE

I have to go.

Ann nods, and smiles at George. The two give a little wave to each other, and begin to part ways. Suddenly, George stops.

GEORGE (CONT'D)

(yelling after Ann)
Hey, wait a sec!

Ann turns and takes a few steps toward George.

GEORGE (CONT'D)

You're on your way up, right?

ANN

To Grace, yeah.

GEORGE

Where's all your stuff then?

ANN

Not every burden is physical, George.

GEORGE

That son of a bitch...

EXT "LOBBY" DAY

George is striding angrily from the end of the path into the clearing, where Michael sits whittling.

GEORGE
You...

MICHAEL
Yes?

GEORGE
Why doesn't Ann have to carry anything?

MICHAEL
What?

GEORGE
You know who I'm talking about, why isn't she carrying anything?

MICHAEL
She is. Everyone is.

GEORGE
Stuff, why doesn't she have to carry her stuff? Why are my things the only ones here?

Michael looks at George, puzzled.

GEORGE (CONT'D)
You told me that I had to take all of this stuff up there, why isn't anyone else doing that? Did Ray?

MICHAEL
I never told you that.

George is becoming more agitated, breathing heavily and gesturing wildly.

GEORGE
You... did too! When I got here-

MICHAEL
I said that you needed to go. You asked how you were to get all of your things there.

GEORGE
You made me think I needed them!

MICHAEL

Do you?

GEORGE

How should I know? I thought it was part of the process here.

MICHAEL

It can be.

GEORGE

This is crazy. Look, all I want is a straight answer. Do I need to take this stuff or not?

MICHAEL

That's up to you.

George takes a punch at Michael. Michael sidesteps the blow, and George stumbles. George tries to cover as though it didn't happen.

GEORGE

I'm out of here.

(to himself)

If Ray can leave, so can I.

George strides away, back toward the path.

EXT PATH EARLY EVENING

As George is walking, he spots a sign that says CHARLIE'S. He walks over to it, inspects it, and realizes that the path branches off here into a smaller trail. He looks up the main path, and then down this new one. He can see nothing but more trail in either direction. After a few moments of deliberation, George begins walking toward Charlie's.

EXT DINER EARLY EVENING

The trail George has been traveling opens into a clearing. George looks up and stops.

GEORGE'S POV

In the clearing is what appears to be an old church, with a sign that reads CHARLIE'S DINER.

BACK TO SCENE

George shakes his head, but begins to walk toward the diner, opening the door and walking inside.

INT DINER EARLY EVENING

There are tables, a bar, and stools in front of it. Behind the bar is a man, CHARLIE.

CHARLIE
Hey! Welcome to Charlie's, come on up!

George walks up to the bar, inspecting the place, then takes a seat on one of the stools set up opposite Charlie.

CHARLIE (CONT'D)
What can I get you, sir?

GEORGE
How long has this been here?

Charlie shrugs.

GEORGE (CONT'D)
Where'd you get the stuff to build it?

CHARLIE
Came with me.

GEORGE
Nails?

Charlie shrugs. George throws up his hands and sighs.

GEORGE (CONT'D)
Okay, well what do you have then?

Charlie gestures to the "specials" board. George scans the menu, and laughs a bit to himself. Charlie looks at him expectantly.

GEORGE (CONT'D)
(laughing)
You have Beef Wellington?

CHARLIE
Comes with a side salad.

GEORGE
Back there.

Charlie looks confused. He glances behind him.

CHARLIE

In the kitchen, right.

George stops laughing and stares at Charlie.

GEORGE

You're serious.

Charlie nods and begins writing down the order.

GEORGE (CONT'D)

No, umm, just a hamburger would be fine. Beer, if you have it.

Charlie writes this down, and scurries back into the kitchen. PAN from George to the dining room.

INT DINER LATER, EVENING

George and Charlie are both sitting and eating.

GEORGE

You're not much of a talker, are you?

Charlie shakes his head no, and George laughs. Charlie smiles.

GEORGE (CONT'D)

At least tell me what you're doing here.

CHARLIE

Waiting.

GEORGE

For?

CHARLIE

Let me ask you something. Do you really think you're dead?

GEORGE

What?

CHARLIE

Think about it. Does this look like heaven to you? Or hell if you were... you know.

GEORGE

What did they say to you when you got here?

CHARLIE

Told me I got shot.

GEORGE

They told me someone ran me over.

CHARLIE

Gotta switch it up I suppose. It's all a lot of bull, I think.

GEORGE

Agreed. So whatthe deal here, where the hell are we?

Charlie looks excited. He glances left, then right, and leans in closer to George.

CHARLIE

Coma dream.

Charlie leans back and nods.

CHARLIE (CONT'D)

I'm staying right here and waiting it out. I meet interesting people, Gracie brings me food and drink to serve. Beats the hell out of hiking until I wake up.

GEORGE

I'll be damned.

George and Charlie continue to eat. George looks lost in thought.

GEORGE (CONT'D)

Need a busboy?

Charlie smiles, and the men shake hands.

EXT "LOBBY" DAY

George walks from the path to his piles of belongings, without looking up at Michael. Michael is neatly arranging George's things. He looks up as George approaches.

MICHAEL

You're back.

GEORGE

I need that.

Michael hands him the books he was arranging.

GEORGE (CONT'D)

For Charlie.

MICHAEL

So you've met.

GEORGE

I'm just going to hang out there until this all blows over.

MICHAEL

Have you asked Charlie how long he's been waiting to move on?

GEORGE

Wait, move on where?

MICHAEL

I can't tell you that.

GEORGE

You can, you just won't. I was going to apologize for taking a swing at you earlier, but now I'm starting to feel like doing it again.

MICHAEL

What do you think is holding you here, George?

GEORGE

You! You're holding me here! If I knew where to go, I'd have been long gone already.

MICHAEL

I'm not keeping you here, George. But something is.

George gathers as much of his things as he can, scowling at Michael, and takes off for the path. Michael watches him go, then resumes tidying up George's belongings.

EXT DINER DAY

Charlie and George are both hard at work building some tables outside of the diner.

GEORGE

This place'll be a lot nicer with some outside seating.

George wipes his brow and steps back to inspect his work. Charlie emerges from the kitchen with some beer for the two of them, and they sit at the table they've just built. Charlie stretches out next to George, and they clink their

bottles together as if toasting.

GEORGE (CONT'D)

Hell of a nice place to spend
eternity.

CHARLIE

Thanks. Makes me wish I'd thought
to add on sooner. I've got big
plans for the place now, it's gonna
be a sight.

GEORGE

Well count me in. I've had enough
of these people's bullshit. I'm
just going to hang out with you
until my time's up here.

CHARLIE

I'll make sure Grace brings down
more beer.

GEORGE

If that isn't heaven, I don't know
what is.

INT DINNER LATER, AFTERNOON

George and Charlie are sitting inside at the bar, eating.
FOOTSTEPS can be heard behind them, and George turns to see
Ann walking into the diner. Ann's face registers surprise as
she recognizes George.

ANN

George?

GEORGE

Hey!

ANN

I wasn't expecting to see you
again.

GEORGE

Well I ran into Charlie here and I
figured I'd hang out awhile.

Ann sits down at the bar next to George. She looks worriedly
from George to Charlie.

ANN

Did you tell him your theory?

Charlie nods.

CHARLIE

He's in on it too.

ANN

You're not asleep, George.

GEORGE

What about Charlie, is Charlie asleep?

ANN

This isn't a joke.

GEORGE

Yeah, well, it seems like a joke to me. I'm tired of being jerked around here, and Charlie's theory makes a hell of a lot more sense than anything else I've heard so far.

ANN

Really? Hey, Charlie, tell him what year you died.

GEORGE

I don't see what that has to do with-

ANN

Tell him.

CHARLIE

I told him I got shot. In The War.

GEORGE

Which war?

CHARLIE

What do you mean which war, The War.

GEORGE

Iraq?

CHARLIE

Where the hell is that? I got shot at Ruhr Valley giving the Germans what for.

GEORGE

(to Ann)

Ah, geez, which one was with the Germans?

ANN

World War One, George.

GEORGE

So you died...

CHARLIE

1916. God, I'd like to see how that all panned out.

ANN

I told you, we won.

CHARLIE

Oh yeah.

GEORGE

So you've been here...

ANN

What year did you die, George?

GEORGE

2006. That's 90 years. Charlie... you haven't been in a coma for 90 years.

CHARLIE

What do you mean?

GEORGE

I mean... how old were you when you died.

CHARLIE

35.

GEORGE

So if you were still in a coma, dreaming all this, you'd be... 125 years old.

The three sit in silence.

CHARLIE

Damn.

GEORGE

Damn.

Again, they sit without speaking.

GEORGE (CONT'D)

I need some air.

George stands, and walks out the door. Ann looks toward the door.

EXT DINER DAY

George comes to his newly built table, sits, and buries his face in his hands.

BACK TO SCENE

CHARLIE

So this is really it?

ANN

Yup.

CHARLIE

How long have you been here?

ANN

Well if when George got here it was 2006... it's been 9 years.

CHARLIE

Wow. Seems like just last week you were here the first time.

ANN

Yeah... seems that way to me too.

CHARLIE

Well... I guess it's back to work on the addition.

ANN

What?

As they're speaking, George walks up behind them and rejoins the group.

GEORGE

I'll help.

ANN

Are you serious? I don't know how else to say this, and I'm sorry to be so blunt, but you... neither of you are ever going to wake up.

GEORGE

Like I told Charlie. If this isn't heaven, I don't know what is.

CHARLIE

Hell of a place to spend eternity, right?

The men smile at each other.

ANN

How can you two just... bury your heads in the sand like this? There's more than this, somewhere.

GEORGE

Yeah, well, I'm not playing the game to get there.

ANN

It's not a game, George.

GEORGE

Really? I'm getting jerked around by some guy in a field, I have a receptionist telling me "enlightenment comes from within", and it's not a game? A horrible joke? I feel sorry for you, I do, believing that you'll go somewhere better. I don't know what's out there, but I know what I've got right here.

ANN

And this is better?

GEORGE

Maybe it is. At least I know the rules here.

Ann shakes her head, throws up her hands. She is at a loss for words.

ANN

You know what, fine. If you want to tread water for eternity, fine.

GEORGE

What are you really mad about, Ann? That there's nothing more to this, or that you weren't smart enough to figure it out for yourself?

ANN

Smart? You think you're smart? You're a coward.

Ann turns to Charlie.

ANN (CONT'D)

And you?

Charlie looks down. Ann shakes her head, turns and leaves.

GEORGE
(calling after her)
Hey! Hey you come back here! I'm no
coward!

INT DINER AFTERNOON

George sits down at the bar.

GEORGE
Can you believe her?

Charlie remains silent.

GEORGE (CONT'D)
What?

CHARLIE
What if she's right?

The men sit and drink.

INT DINER EVENING

George is laying on the ground, asleep. As he wakes up, he sees Charlie behind the bar, writing. He watches as Charlie takes the paper and pins it to the front of the bar, then begins to walk toward the door.

GEORGE
Charlie?

Charlie stops walking. Waits a beat.

CHARLIE
I didn't know if I should wake you.

GEORGE
Where are you going?

Charlie sighs, looks at the ground.

GEORGE (CONT'D)
I see.

CHARLIE
If she is right, I gotta know. If not, well... so I wasted a walk, right? I wasn't trying to ditch you, I just thought you'd made up your mind.

George lays back down.

GEORGE

I thought I had too.

Charlie waits for a response.

GEORGE (CONT'D)

It's a long walk. I'll come with you.

EXT PATH EVENING

GEORGE

Did Michael ever tell you to take your stuff?

CHARLIE

Well it was there, I mean I figured...

GEORGE

Yeah but did he ever say you had to take it.

Charlie thinks a minute.

CHARLIE

Damn.

GEORGE

Yeah, damn. Ann didn't have anything when she left, Ray didn't. I think by the end, you don't need it anymore.

CHARLIE

Our past theories haven't been so hot.

GEORGE

Then we waste a walk.

EXT "TENT CLEARING" DAY

The men arrive at the clearing, at the end of the path. Charlie walks off toward a figure in the distance.

GEORGE

Where are you going?

CHARLIE

I'm supposed to. Yours is... somewhere else, I guess. Good luck,

George.

GEORGE

You too.

Charlie leaves, disappearing into the distance.

EXT CLEARING DAY

George looks around, unable to find another figure in the distance.

GEORGE (CONT'D)

Why isn't this working?

MICHAEL

You're not ready.

George turns quickly to find that Michael has appeared behind him. George jumps.

GEORGE

Holy hell, don't do that.

MICHAEL

Have a seat, George.

Michael leads George over to the tree where he sat with Ray. A chess set rests on the grass. The two men sit down across from each other, and Michael moves a piece.

MICHAEL (CONT'D)

It's not working, because you're not ready.

GEORGE

But this is where Ray went.

MICHAEL

Everyone's path is different, George.

George absentmindedly moves a piece.

GEORGE

But Charlie... didn't Charlie go to the same place?

Michael makes his move, and the men continue to play in silence awhile.

GEORGE (CONT'D)

But I left all my stuff.

MICHAEL

That's not all you'll need to leave.

GEORGE

What else do I have left? I've left
my home, my family, my job,
everything I own.

MICHAEL

Have you?

The men sit awhile. George doesn't move his piece.

MICHAEL (CONT'D)

Your move.

GEORGE

I don't want to play chess with
you, this is stupid.

MICHAEL

Chess is a thinking man's game,
George. A path to self-improvement.

GEORGE

No knife, though.

Michael smiles and shrugs. They continue to play in silence
awhile.

GEORGE (CONT'D)

What about Charlie?

MICHAEL

Charlie has nothing to go back to.
His family, his life, it's all gone
now. He knows that.

GEORGE

Yeah but... if I can't go back,
then I guess mine's gone too.

Beat.

MICHAEL

There you go. Ready?

Michael gets up off of the ground.

GEORGE

That's it?

George gets up, and follows him to a clearing. CAMERA remains
steady as the men walk away from it.

MICHAEL

That's it.

A few beats.

GEORGE

You know, I had you in four moves
anyway.

MICHAEL

I know?

GEORGE

You were letting me win?

MICHAEL

No. I had you in three.

EXT "CHECK-OUT CLEARING" DAY

The men arrive at a clearing. Michael stands next to George. Standing in the clearing are Charlie, Ann, and Grace. Michael moves to stand with them.

GEORGE

What do I do now?

MICHAEL

I can't help you anymore.

George looks at the line of people. He walks over to stand in front of Grace.

GRACE

Ready?

GEORGE

As I'll ever be.

George closes his eyes.

FADE TO: WHITE

FADE IN:

EXT "LOBBY" DAY

A woman is laying in the clearing. She begins to wake up and look around, discovering piles of her belongings surround her. She continues looking, and spots George sitting on a stump, attempting to whittle.

GEORGE

You're up.

FADE OUT.

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