# TABLE OF CONTENTS

**Introduction**

*“Carnival of Souls”: Familiar Nightmares* ............................................. 43

*Bardo Blockbusters*: “American Beauty” & “The Sixth Sense” ...................... 85

*“Jacob’s Ladder”: Search for a Guide* .................................................. 102

*“Enter the Void”: Escape Velocity* ..................................................... 49

The Dharma of Lynch: “Mulholland Drive” & “Inland Empire” ....................... 108

*“Vera”: The Underworld* ................................................................. 106

Escape from Hell: “Diamonds of the Night” ........................................... 26

*“Le Quattro Volte”: Elemental Change* ................................................ 7

*“Beetlejuice”: Guide as Huckster* .................................................... 78

*“Defending Your Life”: Purgatory as Shtick* .......................................... 90

*“Ink”: Remembering Who You Were* ................................................ 59

*“The Bothersome Man”: Not Bad As Purgatories Go* ............................ 64

*“The Lovely Bones”: Avenging Angel* ................................................. 55

Following Robin: “Being Human” & “What Dreams May Come” ................... 22

Following Downey: “Chances Are” & “Hearts and Souls” .......................... 46

Death at an Early Age: “Donnie Darko” & “Wristcutters a Love Story” ........... 94

*“Samaritan Girl”: Saint or Sinner* ..................................................... 126

*“The Life Before Her Eyes”: Headline Bardo* ....................................... 75

Dia de Muertos: “Macario” “The Book of Life” & “Coco” .......................... 9

*“Waking Life”: All Our Guides* ....................................................... 68

Japanese Ghost Stories: “Pitfall” & “Kuroneko” ...................................... 29

Crossing the Big Ditch: “Between Two Worlds” ..................................... 34

*“Stairway to Heaven” aka “A Matter of Life and Death”* ......................... 100

*“After Life”: Memories to Go* ......................................................... 83

*“Holy Motors”: Ghost in the Machine* ................................................ 121

*“Samsara”: The World We Live In* ................................................... 93

Bardo Thodol 101: “Heart of a Dog” .................................................. 61

Earning Hell: “The Devil in Miss Jones” ............................................... 67

*“Tibetan Book of the Dead” & Ishu Patel: The Straight Dharma* ............... 20

*“Dead Man”: Manifest Destiny* ....................................................... 17

*“The Saragossa Manuscript”: The Never-ending Story* ............................ 36

*“Angel Heart”: Walk on Gilded Splinters* ............................................ 82

Streaming Bardos: “The Good Place” “Russian Doll” & “Forever” ............... 129
INTRODUCTION

The first movie I ever saw about the afterlife, or an afterlife was Between Two Worlds. It would have been on TV in the late 1950s, on a local Houston channel, either an afternoon matinee or the “late show” after the nightly news. Local stations ran a lot of movies back then, especially of ‘40s and ‘50s vintage. I ate them up.

In Between Two Worlds (1944), a ship has left London during the Blitz, bound for America and safety. But it soon becomes apparent that the small group of people on the luxury ship have indeed perished, and are bound...outward. (I didn’t know for many years that Between Two Worlds was a remake of Outward Bound, a 1930 Leslie Howard film.) As an adolescent searching for the unusual and resonant in art, I was transfixed, right through the heartfelt but not “corny” ending. I’ve always held it dear, in a shrine room reserved for movies of the otherworldly kind.

I’d seen John Garfield before, but as a preteen had yet to grow into the standard beat adoration of the man, his mystique and the tough failings of complex characters. He is the star of Between Two Worlds but, as death would have it, an equal part of the ensemble—a mixed bag of characters being ferried across the Big Ditch on a ghostly ocean liner. On the journey, each must deal with the letting-go of their very selves, to death and its judgment. The viewer sees them as they were in life—physical appearances, personalities, hopes and fears. Viewing as a kid, I saw the characters as people that were recognizable and who WERE NO MORE—the ultimate mystery.

But death had been a plot device in almost every movie I’d ever seen that wasn’t a comedy. Usually a Big Death at the end, of one of the principals —for moral rectitude, it was usually the villain, the force of darkness—while minor characters and extras may have been falling left-and-right all along. So many cinematic deaths, fictitious and historical (a bio-pic like I Want to Live! impressed with the added weight of recreated reality). Sometimes one of the heroic figures died, inspiring a kind of confused sadness that demanded further reflection. I remember being particularly disturbed at fourteen by the death of Ira Hayes, as played by Tony Curtis, in The Outsider.

It seemed that deaths were just a part of the dramatic equation, of surrendering to the movie world—feeling the vicarious loss of a friend or loved one, or, more often, satisfaction at the death of a two-dimensional “bad guy”—and then going about one’s daily life. I began to wonder, vaguely, what happened to this particular character, to their soul or spirit or lifeforce, now that the body had been rendered inoperable? With only a haphazard conventional religious upbringing—(thanks, Dick and Edie, for your rebelliousness)—I arrived at a nebulous belief: There is something inside that animates us, and is probably imperishable.

So what about all those movie deaths? Was that really “the end of Rico” in Little Caesar? And if not, what happened to that vivid villain in his own passage through the afterlife? Fire and brimstone seemed too obvious.

There were films that felt otherworldly, ambiguous or surreal, perhaps the nightmare of a liv-
ing, sleeping person—but not the Big Sleep. Such as *The Wizard of Oz, Vanilla Sky, Time Bandits, Invaders From Mars, The 5000 Fingers of Dr. T,* to name some notable “it was all a dream” films. Those two bardo, dreams and the afterlife, are closely related, and David Lynch is a creator of films that depict them both. He has made two (or three) death-bardo films, while most of his others convey the non-linear nightmares of a specific character who will wake up soon, e.g. *Blue Velvet* If the movie ends with a character’s death, as *Mulholland Drive, Lost Highway,* and *Inland Empire* do, that is a big clue that the preceding two or three hours have been about that Subject’s passage through their particular transition state. As envisioned by Lynch, a wildly original writer-director whose creativity is rooted in Eastern religion and quantum physics, those films have inspired this book as much as any others, exploring in surreal non-linear ways the mystery that we may all face at the end of our current gig.

Some Dharma then, from this layperson:

The word “bardo” comes from Tibetan Buddhist teachings dealing with the changes that we experience, both in this life and “the next.” *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* is the English title of an ancient text, *Bardo Thodol,* which means “Liberation Through Hearing During the Intermediate State.” Composed in the 8th century by Padmasambhava and written down by a student, it was buried in the Gampo hills in central Tibet until discovered by a Tibetan terton, Karma Lingpa, in the 14th century.

The *Bardo Thodol* describes six states of being: three that we experience in this life—waking life, meditation, and dreams—and three that our consciousness traverses from the death of the body until the next rebirth, unless liberation has been attained. These are called the Bardo of Painful Death, followed by Luminosity, where liberation is possible, and finally the Bardo of Becoming, of reincarnation.

The after-death state is said to last 49 days, during which the soul is guided by divine beings, subjected to karma-cleansing radiations, and confronted by wrathful deities that are projections of the ego-mind being disassembled. It is during these 49 days that the “liberation through hearing” is performed by a lama or other high practitioner, who reads a daily text to the departed soul, near the corpse for as long as possible, and then to pictures and objects on a shrine. The goal is to guide the spirit through the “labyrinth,” to the ultimate goal that Buddhists call liberation, the Clear Light or Nirvana, and thus escape forever the wheel of birth, death, and rebirth. A documentary film which deals directly with this teaching and practice, titled *The Tibetan Book of the Dead,* is discussed beginning on page 20.

I have not been practicing Buddhism for many of my 70 years, but in the last 20 have been drawn to the end-life teachings of the Tibetans, as well as Western writers who have explored and translated the *Bardo Thodol,* for the public. Foremost of these is E.J. Gold’s *American Book of the*
Dead (1975)² which had a powerful effect: I recited Gold’s version of the daily readings for my mother and brother after their deaths. I am not a trained reader, and can only hope they were guided by my voice and loving intention, to liberation or at least an auspicious rebirth.

Most cultures have their own conception of an afterlife, from the Norse heroes’ Valhalla to the Lakotas’ Happy Hunting Ground, from Christian visions of Heaven and Hell as varied as Dante, Bosch, Revelations, and Pearly Gates, to a materialist belief that consciousness ceases with brain activity, and the energy of the dead body is transmuted into other forms of life. The films in this book, coming from many cultures and from highly creative minds, have a broad range of conceptualizations, of what the consciousness may experience after leaving the body and how “it” may interact with the world of the living.

My aim is to analyze these visions in Buddhist and other cultural and philosophical contexts. My hope, as a cinephile, is to generate interest in these wildly diverse films, and provoke some consideration of their spiritual, psychological, and metaphysical themes. And I expect and welcome healthy doses of skepticism and downright dismissal, when my interpretation of one of your favorites contradicts your own.

Regarding spoilers, many of these films are “spoiled” by their very presence in a book about the afterlife and whether the central character is “there” or not (e.g. “only dreaming”). My hope is that the book has at least as many teasers—to pique one’s interest in films never seen—and also that going more deeply into plot details generates more interest in seeing a movie for the first time, or enhances a repeat viewing. Bon visionnage!

Jimi Bernath
Englewood Colorado
Spring 2018
Elemental Change:
“Le Quattro Volte”

*Le Quattro Volte* is a poetically meditative, dialogue-free 2010 Italian film written and directed by Michelangelo Frammartino. The title translates as *The Four Times* or *The Four Turns*, referring directly to the philosophy of Pythagoras, who claimed he had lived four lives, and his concept of *metempsychosis* is the structure of the film—showing one physical state and then its transformation into another. Metempsychosis is a philosophical Greek term referring to transmigration of the soul; the “turns” are Human, Animal, Botanical, and Mineral.

This particular transmigratory drama plays out in a remote mountain town in Calabria, the southernmost region of Italy (where Pythagoras established a school circa 530 B.C. and taught for ten years before returning to Greece). Except for one motorized vehicle, *Le Quattro Volte* could be set in ancient times, and Frammartino emphasizes the timelessness with many long shots and takes, interposing close-ups that bring the viewer back to immediacy.

The opening shot shows smoke streaming out of holes in the earth, mysteriously until the end, when the full circle will make the smoke clear, so to speak. Now we join the first *turn* in progress—an elderly goatherd, who drives his flock every morning onto pasturage in the surrounding hills. He has a raspy cough, and has to stop and rest by the trail. Back in the town, we see him bringing milk to the village church, to trade for the dust and ash that a woman custodian sweeps up in the church and saves for him, folded in a magazine page. This he mixes with water and drinks before bed, as a medicine for his illness or a self-administered sacrament for his impending death.

Before this inevitability, we see scenes of the townspeople preparing for an Easter pageant, from the stationary vantage of a corner where the old man lives, across from his barn and goat pen. The herding dog becomes a character in the drama, in both humorous and poignant ways, and the canine actor, Vuk, was awarded a special jury prize at Cannes for his performance. The Easter pageant, complete with cross-bearing Jesus and costumed Roman soldiers, proceeds down the road from town, followed by the townspeople. Following the death of the old man, we see a smaller procession bearing his coffin on the same road.

A long black-out ends abruptly with the birth of a baby goat, a black-and-white kid that we follow from infancy to toddlerhood. At first, he stays in the barn with the other kids, too young to go to pasture, frolicking and asserting their personalities. A game of “king of the cinder block” is funny and endearing in its naturalism. Now these youngsters are old enough to graze, and the new herdsman drives them out to the hills with the rest, but “our” kid gets separated from the flock, and after
piteously bleating and roaming about, settles under a tall fir tree, to be seen no more.

The tree is shown in the cycle of seasons—for a year or for many, the passage of time being relative and inexorable—before we see it shudder and fall, chopped down by the townsmen. Its trunk is stripped except for the crown, and the noble tree—which we know has assimilated the body and essence of the goat—is dragged to the town and erected in the square for a spring festival called in Calabrian “The Feast of Pita,” a propitiatory rite for a good growing season. After the fest, the giant spar is taken down, sawn into pieces and hauled to a nearby charcoal “factory.”

We are shown the laborious process, at once primitive and scientific, of the charcoal-makers. A large mound is constructed, with logs and branches inside, mud coating the outside. Holes are made in the top and sides and the fire is lit within. The wood is thus cooked in a low oxygen environment that burns off volatile compounds such as water, methane, hydrogen, and tar, and leaves char, mostly pure carbon that burns much hotter and cleaner than firewood.

This particular batch of coals is bagged up and taken in a little red truck—which has become, like the herding dog, a familiar character—back to the residents of the town, their source of cooking fuel. The life-sustaining food absorbs the energy of the fuel and the human endeavor—and the smoke rising from their chimneys, to be assimilated by the atmosphere, is the final transmutation of the life force, from carbon-based life forms to air and ether.
In Mexico, Dia de Muertos (Day of the Dead) ceremonies date back at least 2,500 years, when they occupied an entire summer month of the Aztec calendar, and were dedicated to a goddess known as the Lady of the Dead. In the 20th Century this figure became identified with La Calavera Catrina, a skeletal figure in a fancy woman’s hat created by printmaker and political cartoonist José Guadalupe Posada in the 1910’s during Mexico’s long, bloody revolution. Posada’s many etchings of skeletons engaged in human activities are now inseparably linked to the Day of the Dead as celebrated around the world today. His bio is worth inserting at this point:

José Guadalupe Posada (1851–1913) was a Mexican illustrator known for his satirical and politically acute calaveras. Deriving from the Spanish word for ‘skulls’, these calaveras were illustrations featuring skeletons which would, after Posada’s death, become closely associated with the Mexican holiday Día de Muertos, the Day of the Dead. Most of these calaveras were published by the press of Antonio Vanegas Arroyo which produced inexpensive literature for the lower classes, including thousands of satirical broadsides which Posada illustrated. Through this focus on mortality, Vanegas Arroyo and Posada satirized many poignant issues of the day, in particular the details of bourgeois life and the dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz. On January 20th 1913, three years after the start of the Mexican Revolution, José Guadalupe Posada died at his home in obscurity. He was penniless and buried in an unmarked grave. It was only years later in the 1920s that his work became recognized on a national and international level after it was championed by the French ex-patriot artist Jean Charlot who described Posada as "printmaker to the Mexican people."

After Spanish colonization, the native commemorations were subsumed into the Catholic holy days All Hallows Eve (Oct. 31), All Saints Day (Nov. 1), and All Souls Day (Nov. 2), the latter also called "Commemoration of All the Faithful Departed." In the commonality of many pagan and Christian rites, this autumnal festival involves much prayer, candle-lighting, and baking of cakes and other food offerings.

Three films that deal with this ceremonial holiday are worth examining for their depiction of the afterlife. One is a Mexican classic from 1960, nominated for both an Oscar and the Palme d’Or at Cannes. The other two are quite similar: a 2014 Mexican-American animated feature produced by Guillermo del Toro that is a visual and multi-cultural treat for all ages, and a Pixar mega-hit from 2017.
Even in the huts of peons, like the woodcutter Macario and his wife and children, preparations are being made for Dia de Muertos. A portion of their meager meal is set aside on a household shrine to their own dearly departed. Their hillside home is simple and seems full of familial warmth, particularly from the beautiful, caring wife and mother, but Macario is mightily disturbed. His family has always lived on the edge of starvation. He seems on the verge of despair, and gives his portion of the evening meal to the children.

The next morning, the trip to town for the festival passes by a large communal shrine for the dead, piled with sugar skulls and burning candles. Macario eyes it apprehensively, while the wife and children are in a holiday mood, looking forward to the festivities. Macario has a large load of firewood to bring for the baker and the candlestick maker. His wife has clean laundry to deliver to the houses of the wealthy. There are extra gratuities, "dead tips" given on this special day. But even the tradesmen and servants of the town look down on him and his wife (who does not have a character name in the film, unfortunately—beautifully played by Pina Pellicer) as they make their deliveries.

The candle maker’s shop is going full tilt. The shot of the candle maker inside a revolving curtain of tapers—as he gleefully relates to Macario the myriad ways a human being can die—is masterfully done. Outstanding cinematography throughout is by the legendary Gabriel Figueroa. (His filmography lists 235 movies made over 50 years, including Los Olvidados by Bunuel, The Night of the Iguana by Huston, The Fugitive by Ford, and Río Escondido by Emilio Fernández.)

The candle maker sounds a bit demonic as he tells Macario how the seed of our death is planted when we’re born. These words of doom echo in Macario’s ears as he walks to his next delivery. He wonders what seed of death is planted in him—will his heart fail, or will a dead tree fall on him one day, the likely fate of a woodchopper?

The baker has had to stop baking bread and sweets for the townspeople’s shrines and is using his ovens to roast turkeys for a rich man’s party. Seeing the baker basting the roasting birds, Macario is overcome with desire; then later, outside, he watches the parade of servants, each with a roast bird on a platter, taking them through the streets to the unimaginable feast. The injustice consumes him, and that night he has a fever dream of the gluttonous rich at their banquet, stuffing themselves as the poor watch through the gate, all in the form of marionette calaveras. Finally the mob breaks
through and takes their share of the food, while Macario cries in his sleep to save some for him.

In the morning he tells his doting wife that he will never eat again unless he can have a whole turkey to himself, just once. She tells him that she understands, but still pleads with him to take his lunch of beans and tortillas to his job in the forest. He sadly refuses. While she is delivering some laundry to a woman in town, who berates her haughtily for not starching the skirts—she makes the decision to steal one of the turkeys flocked there in the mean bitch’s courtyard. Taking it home, she hides it from the children, cooks it while they are playing with their friends outside, and gives it to Macario as he is leaving the next morning, imploring him to take it and eat it all as he wished, and not to feel guilty.

Her compassionate, justifiable crime sets in motion a Faustian tale, set in the late Colonial period, that deftly encompasses fairy tale, horror, and the political climate that ignited the Mexican War of Independence. And the soul of one angry peon, weighed in the balance.

Macario was based on a story called The Third Guest by the shadowy author B. Traven, who had several identities both in his native Germany and his adopted beloved Mexico, as well as in the international film and literary communities. The story was originally written in English and entitled The Healer, although first published in German in 1950, and the original appeared in The Best American Short Stories of 1954. The New York Times named the English version of The Third Guest the best short story of 1953. A convoluted history indeed, for a fantastic tale which Traven had in fact adapted from a Grimm fairy tale, Godfather Death.

So, guided by the Brothers Grimm, B. Traven, and the renowned Mexican playwright Emilio Carballido—who wrote the screenplay with director Roberto Gavaldon—our hero Macario finds a secluded spot to satisfy his great hunger at last, to finally know satiety in this world. But before he can take a bite, he has three visitors—Satan, God, and Death, all of whom ask him to share his turkey. The Devil is easy to refuse, as Macario sees through his trickery. He refuses God who can have anything at any time, and God blesses him and disappears. But because Death appears as a half-starving peon like himself, Macario shares with him. For his generosity, he is given healing powers by Death in the form of water from a magical spring. He can bring people back from the brink of death with just a drop of the water. But, Death tells him, some lives he will not be allowed to save.

After performing a few miraculous cures, first on his own son who has fallen into a well, he is acclaimed as a healer. This in turn leads to wealth and power, a partnership with the richest man in town, who sets him up with his own “clinic”, a new beautiful home, and fine clothing for his family. But while his new status and his healing powers have made him a hero with the masses, he provokes envy from the town physician and mortician, who accuse him of black arts to the Office of the Holy Inquisition. He is arrested and tried by an ecclesiastical court, who narrow the case down to two possibilities—he is a charlatan, in which case he will only have his tongue cut out, or a heretic, which demands burning.
The Viceroy has a small son who is dying, and Macario is summoned from the court to save him. Death tells him that this child cannot be saved, so Macario flees in terror, only to find himself in the cave of Death, who admonishes him for selling his healing powers for comfort and status. The cave is a dark sea filled with millions of candle flames, souls burning bright, wavering, flickering out. Death shows Macario the Viceroy’s son’s candle as it dies. Then he shows Macario his, flickering and guttering.

The denouement of Macario reveals that what we have been watching was Death’s true gift, a glimpse of Samsara, the world of desire and wealth and impermanence. A powerful lesson to take into the next world. There is also something about the uneaten half of a roasted turkey. Discuss.

"The Book of Life"

The Book of Life takes folk tales and depictions of Day of the Dead ceremonial rites and fashions a dazzling, intricate, state-of-the-art animated film. Created for the children’s market, with plenty of Hollywood embellishment and invention, its visions of the afterworld and the beings that rule it may have little connection with ancient beliefs. But under the serious hands of producer Guillermo del Toro and director Jorge R. Gutiérrez, The Book of Life is a fine entertainment and a substantial take on life, death, family, and karma.

In modern Western culture, Dia de Muertos has increasingly been embraced as a spiritual alternative to the pop-culturalization of Halloween, the trick-or-treat scare-fest for children that has also become, in recent decades, a highly commercialized party culture. The Book of Life tries to meld the child’s fantasia with the deeper sense of mourning and remembering.

The story is written down in the titular Book, which is revealed to a gaggle of urban school kids by an earnest young tour guide, Mary Beth, in a hidden room of the history museum. The children are ignorant of some of their own culture regarding the realm of the dead and the autumnal festivals which seem to gravitate toward ghosts and graveyards. Mary Beth begins to narrate the
In this hybrid mythology, there are two realms of the dead: the uppermost called Land of the Remembered, and below that, the Land of the Forgotten. The Remembered are ruled by La Muerte, a timeless spirit whose beauty represents the universal compassion that keeps her realm a happy place of reward. But only as long as the person is still remembered by someone living, after which they must move to the sadder, lower place.

Traversing the two realms is a benevolent immortal called The Candle Maker, in charge of keeping balance between the Remembered and the Forgotten, as well as creating the candles that represent every living soul (a concept so graphically represented at the end of Macario). This being resides in the Cave of Souls, the link between the two realms. As written and casted, the Candle Maker is given the voice of a contemporary African-American (Ice Cube, sounding a lot like Isaac Hayes as Chef in "South Park"). He corresponds to the Friendly Guides in the first phase of the Tibetan Bardo teaching. And as such, he’d best be heeded!

The three childhood friends have grown up: Manolo Sanchez—a sweet-natured mand who loves his guitar and who is expected to become the latest and greatest in a long line of famous Sanchez bullfighters; Joaquin Mondragon—soldier, hero, and protector of the town against the demonic bandit Chakal; and their lady fair, Maria Posada—who embodies a modern woman’s freedom and courage while still being emotionally torn between her two suitors.

Her compassion and strength are established early on, when as a child she saves a group of pigs from slaughter, incurring the wrath of her father. Later, Manolo, facing his test of manhood in the bull ring, exhibits confident mastery but refuses to kill el toro, incurring the wrath of his father. Manolo’s grandmother, who has some of the film’s funniest lines, sums it up: "Kids today, with their long hair and their no killing stuff."

The realm of the Forgotten Dead is ruled by Xibalba, a sly devil whose name is the Mayan word for the Underworld that translates as “place of fear.” Xibalba bets La Muerte—who was his consort in ancient times, and there is still a spark of romance between them—that Joaquin will win the hand of Maria in marriage. La Muerte takes Manolo’s cause. The bet is rigged, and Manolo is killed trying to save Maria from death by snakebite (a two-headed serpent sent by Xibalba), throwing him and us into the phantasmagoria of the Land of the Remembered. It appears to be a non-stop fiesta, and Manolo meets his dead relatives there. Xibalba has won his bet and now presides over this realm, while La Muerte is exiled below.

With the help of the Candle Maker, Manolo and his family travel to the Land of the Forgotten. When La Muerte understands how Xibalba has cheated and even killed to win their bet, she confronts him and demands that Manolo be returned to life. Xibalba agrees, but Manolo must first face a challenge in the Underworld—a bullfight to end all bullfights, culminating in a showdown with a behemoth demon-bull which he defeats but will not kill. For this, he is granted a return to the living,
just in time to find his town under siege by the behemoth demon-bandito, Chakal. A battle rages, a whirlwind of action and color which culminates in the defeat of evil and the inevitable romantic couple being wed.

Because this happens on November 2nd, the spirits of the dead are allowed to come and aid in the fight against Chakal. They are doubly honored after the battle is won, and the Day of the Dead is over for another year. Xibalba is contrite, El Muerte is forgiving; they’ve rekindled some ancient passion they once shared. Heaven and Hell and Earth are in balance. Cue the insanely catchy theme song and roll credits.

“Coco”

The honest appropriation of Hispanic, especially Mexican, culture by American animation studios has been a natural progression of social awareness aimed at children that goes back to early Disney (Saludos Amigos, The Three Caballeros, Ferdinand). Studio animators have been tasked not just with all-ages entertainment, but a mission to depict the archetypes of humanity, sometimes in the guise of animals, toys, even monsters—and to serve as a moral compass. They have endeavored to bring great works of literature and folklore to a child’s medium, all while pushing the boundaries of animated film to incredible heights. Technological advances, certainly, but in the service of ever more sophisticated stories that make children more intelligent and aware of our inner Goodness, and its power over evil. A “Sunday school” with popcorn, at the Saturday afternoon cartoon show. Those of us who grew up with Walt Disney and Jim Henson and Mr. Rogers understand the power and necessity of this teaching, a secular Catechism, Gita, Torah, Koran, Sutra.

Much has been made of the similarities between The Book of Life (2014) and Pixar’s Coco (2017), but both films stand firmly on their own merits and if anything, complement each other. The makers of Coco did have the advantage of seeing Gutiérrez’s and Del Toro’s film before theirs went into production (although Pixar writer-director Lee Unkrich first pitched the idea for a Day of the Dead film in 2010), and they obviously incorporated some specific elements of plot and design. Plagiarism is an ugly term, and knowing that charges would be leveled, how could they have been so blatant? Unless they simply incanted “We’re Disney and they’re not,” and proceeded with confidence—and four times the budget—knowing their product would be superior, as Pixar films have tended to be, then laugh all the way to the bank and the Oscars.
Regardless, **Coco** is one of Pixar’s great achievements in all respects: visually, musically, dramatically, emotionally, . And it contains more hilarious asides and sight gags than a Marx brothers classic. (Well, maybe not *that* many.) The spiritual realm is depicted in a familiar way: dead souls cross over a bridge, retaining their memories and identities, and dwell in a “place” with all of one’s ancestors who have passed over before. *The Book of Life* was also about family attachments, but it was primarily a romance, a love triangle. **Coco**’s hero is a 12-year-old boy, Miguel Rivera, who is frustrated by his immediate family like a typical adolescent. What he learns from—and teaches—his multi-generational family, living and dead, is the film’s dramatic arc.

Miguel wants to be a musician in a family of shoemakers who hate music and forbid it in the house. The reason: his great-grandmother Coco is the daughter of a musician who long ago left her and her mother to pursue his dreams of stardom. Mama Coco is settling into senility but still interacts warmly with the lovable, energetic, strong-willed Miguel. The rest of the family—living, and later the ones on the other side—are trying to rein him in. His grandma, Abuelita Elena, the active matriarch of the Rivera family, smashes Miguel’s guitar, which he has kept secret while learning to play it and dreaming of his own eventual stardom. This forces him to do something drastic to get another guitar, a sanctified one, on the night of Dia De Muertos. This act triggers his crossing the bridge to the Land of the Dead, on the one night when spirits of the dead are allowed to cross the other way, with only one stipulation—someone living must have their photo on a shrine, or remember them in some way.

A ne’er-do-well sort named Hector (all the Dead are skeletal, Posada-style) is denied access to the Bridge, which is overflowing with excited spirits going to see their families. Living Miguel’s arrival the other way, into the Land of the Dead, causes quite a stir until Hector takes him aside and makes him up to look skeletal. Miguel is confused as to why he is there, knowing he is still alive, but he formulates a plan with the help of the seemingly disreputable hustler Hector. Hector has no living soul that is remembering him this night, and as he tells Miguel, after they watch an old man fade away, eventually the Forgotten Ones disappear:

“*He's been forgotten. When there's no one left in the living world who remembers you...you disappear from this world. We call it ‘The Final Death’.*"

“*W-where did he go?*”

“No one knows.”

“But I've met him. I could remember him...when I go back.”

“No, *it doesn't work like that, chamaco.*”

That is an interesting metaphysical speculation, one that is also depicted vividly in *The Book of Life* with its Land of the Forgotten, a gloomy hell compared with the non-stop *fiesta* world of the Remembered Dead. This centrality of family and memory is inherent in the Mexican holiday, in both its Christian and Mayan roots.
One of the most beautiful elements of *Coco* are the *Alebrijes*, the brightly-colored hybrid creatures born from an artist’s fever dream that were originally rendered in papier-mâché and became the famed wood carvings of Oaxaca. Miguel sees some of them flying around as he’s crossing the bridge. Hector exclaims, and explains:

“Alebrijes!”

“But those are…”

“Real alebrijes. *Spirit creatures. They guide souls on their journey. Watch your step, they make cacitas everywhere.*”

(This joke is an example of the smart yet simple humor that *Coco* brims with, and indicative of the copious Spanish in the script—dialogue, names and terms, even vernacular ones like *cacitas*. All of which helped make *Coco* the highest-grossing film of all time in Mexico, to date.)

The *alebrijes* are everywhere, each family has their totem animal, their spirit guide. The creatures are unique and intricate, like much of the deep detail in the film, the kind that rewards repeated viewing. Miguel’s dog, Dante—a sloppy, silly but fearless stray he befriended that has followed him across the Bridge—gradually transforms into Miguel’s *alebrije*.

Miguel contacts his dead family, many that he only knew as old photos on the annual *ofrenda* (shrine; offering). Their matriarch in the Afterlife is his great-great-grandmother Imelda, the deserted spouse who issued the musical ban that has lasted generations and created Miguel’s earthly crisis. When he explains the sequence of events that led to his crossing over, she says she can send him back to the living with just the touch of a *cempasuchil* (marigold) petal. But she stipulates that he must again forsake music for the rest of his life. So he rebels again, this time against the dead matriarch, and runs away into the City of the Dead, determined to find his famous movie-musical-star patriarch, and get his blessing to be a musician.

Imelda sends her awesome *alebrije* Pepita to find the runaway boy. The suspense builds rapidly, as it must all be done before sunrise marking the end of *Dia De Muertos*, otherwise he will become a skeletal spirit—his transformation has already begun—i.e. a truly dead 12-year-old.

The plot thickens, the spectacle dazzles, the villain is toppled and cosmic wrongs righted. The dramatic payoff is bountiful, emotionally pitch-perfect. If the Oscar-winning theme song represents the movie itself, its plea to “Remember Me” will doubtless be heard a long time, across generations.
Manifest Destiny:  
“Dead Man”

An accountant from Cleveland, significantly named William Blake (Johnny Depp) is riding into the Old West by rail. In formal clothes, like one would wear to a job interview or to be buried in, this solitary soul watches the passing scenery change from plain to mountain, from day to night to day. The faces of the fellow passengers change constantly. Blake dozes, plays solitaire, reads a dime novel. What we call killing time.

The Fireman (Crispin Glover), fresh from stoking the engine, comes into the car, sits across from Blake and begins to spout cryptic sentences that Blake can’t understand. With his soot-covered face but perfect hair and clothing, the Fireman is an apparition, and we begin to suspect that we may be aboard one of those hell-bound trains. This possibility is reinforced by the quotation from Henri Michaux that precedes the opening credits—“It is preferable not to travel with a dead man.” Suddenly, the train grinds to a stop and the rough, menacing characters in the car grab their long rifles and begin slaughtering buffalo from the windows. “Over a million last year alone,” the Fireman tells Blake.

Blake’s destination is Machine, a manufacturing town in the mountains of the Northwest, a hellish place of public blowjobs and casual violence, lorded over by the owner of the metal-works factory, played by Robert Mitchum in one of his last roles. Mitchum was pushing eighty at the time of shooting, and looks both spectral and macho in the character of John Dickinson (which was also the name of one of America’s founding fathers; Jim Jarmusch has much to say, however obliquely, about the American Dream and its concurrent nightmare).

When Blake arrives at the factory to assume the position of accountant for which he has traveled from Cleveland, he is told that he’s two weeks too late. The job has been given to someone else. To the jeers of the clerks and the open contempt of Dickinson, he exits and walks back down into Machine, apprehensive but still maintaining the passive equanimity he has shown so far.

In the threatening atmosphere of an Old West town after dark, he befriends another kind soul, a reformed prostitute named Thel, who repays his kindness by sharing her room and bed. Blake proves to be a healthy virile man, and they are enjoying the sexual afterglow when her former lover bursts in and shoots at Blake. Thel dives in between and takes the bullet in the proverbial heart of gold. Blake kills the man with Thel’s gun, then realizes that the bullet has gone through her body and pierced his chest as well. The second half of the film proceeds from this fatal wound, and how
William Blake is guided through the Bardos by an Indian named Nobody. He manages to fall from the upper story window of Thel’s room, and the scene ends with Blake mounted on a pinto pony and riding out of town.

The dead boyfriend was the son of John Dickinson—and the stolen horse one of the old man’s prized possessions—and he hires three notorious bounty hunters to track Blake down. This trio is a creepy lot—well-versed in murder and mayhem, they function as a kind of nightmare Three Stooges, wraiths that could just as well be drinking blood from skullcups as water from canteens. The Kid, as played by Eugene Byrd, is almost likeable, named Pickett like the famous black rodeo star, but he is a baby-faced killer with a big rep. The middle Stooge, the hyper-loquacious Conway Twill (Michael Wincott) provides a non-stop rap along the trail and by the campfire that’s as funny as it is banal. Cole Wilson (Lance Henriksen) is the deeply depraved brains of the outfit. Twill tells the Kid that Wilson fucked, killed, and ate both his parents. An Old West legend for sure.

Meanwhile, Nobody has materialized and attempts to remove the bullet from Blake’s chest, but it is too deep. Blake seems to recover somewhat, enough to press ahead on the trail. Nobody, one of the most fascinating characters in any Western film, has been Anglo-educated and adores the poet William Blake, whom he takes this Bill Blake to be. In fact, he insists that the mild-mannered accountant from Cleveland is the immortal mystical English poet, even though he had died earlier in the 19th century. Nobody quotes Blake:

“Every Night and every Morn
Some to Misery are Born.

Every Morn and every Night
Some are Born to sweet delight.

Some are Born to sweet delight,
Some are Born to Endless Night.”

This lyric will recur as Bill Blake, in the process of dying and crossing over, accepts his true identity as the mystic poet William Blake. At the same time, he transforms into the desperado whose reward poster is been widely distributed, and becomes an avenging angel for Native Americans. His encounter with another trio of nightmarish campers, played by Iggy Pop, Billy Bob Thornton, and Jared Harris, speaks to the insanity of the ignorant white man and his “manifest destiny” based on murder and greed. After a showdown with two lawmen, and a confrontation with a religious zealot at a trading post, Blake is now a wrathful deity, punishing the wicked.

His guide, Nobody, has delivered him to the Pacific shore, the end point of the European drive to domination. But Blake must go further, across the water, and Nobody has prepared a ceremonial sea canoe, lays William Blake inside, and pushes him off.

So ends the life of Bill Blake, accountant from Cleveland. Or has he been dead from the open-
ing scene, when he appears to awaken on the train, and the entire film his remembering it all—the trip west, his mortal wound, and the wonderful guide named Nobody, real or spectral, who led him safely through a hell-realm to the waiting arms of the sea?

The bardo of painful death seems to be a place where a voyager does not know where it is or how it got there, and many of these film dramas represent the process of remembering death and the events leading up to it. After which follows the struggle to accept the truth and to let go of the individual life and its ego-body, in what is called the “reality phase” of the afterlife, leading to either liberation or the process of rebirth.
Straight Dharma: “Tibetan Book of the Dead”

This 1994 documentary, a co-production of Japan, France, and Canada, effectively portrays in 90 minutes both the actual practice of the Bardo Thodol readings, and also visualizations of the intermediate state through animation by Ishu Patel. The film has probably been most widely seen for its narrator, Leonard Cohen, his long and continued fame helping to spread the dharma that Cohen had studied and practiced several years. He was ordained as a monk at Mt. Baldy Zen Center in Los Angeles in 1996.7

Part 1 of the film, entitled A Way of Life, immerses the viewer in rural Tibetan life in Ladakh, the region of northern India bordering Tibet as well as China and Pakistan. An elder of the Buddhist community has died and his last rites are being administered by a local lama.

“Recognition and liberation are simultaneous,” Leonard Cohen quotes as the holy man begins reading the Bardo Thodol to the corpse. It is the essence of the teaching, that to recognize the light as one’s true being, and everything else as projections of ego-mind, is all that is necessary to be set free from the Wheel of death and rebirth. The middle-aged lama comes every day to read from his unbound, well-worn book. He says that the deceased, Palten, has been a wild pig in a past life and may be a bird in his next, although he may attain a human birth again. A date is determined astrologically for the cremation, which is performed with great ritual. The readings continue for the 49 days, ending with the lama telling the soul formerly known as Palten, “With your head held high, enter the human realm.”

This story is intercut with scenes from a hospice in San Francisco in which a Buddhist volunteer or friend introduces a terminally-ill middle-aged man named Bruce to the concept of the Bar-dos. Interviews with the Dalai Lama and Ram Dass about the afterlife, and the importance of preparing for it, are presented as well.

Part 2 is entitled The Great Liberation and introduces us to another lama and a 14-year-old monk, attending the death of a young business-man due to a sudden illness. There are many family members present and some are weeping audibly. The lama tells them to cease, it is only binding the soul of the departed to the place and the life he has left, to think only of his liberation and be happy.
The bond between the lama and the youthful monk is profound and beautifully filmed, the questions and answers while they are trekking across the mountain terrain of Ladakh reveal the teachings as well as the compassion that must be given. Their faces are wonderful to behold.

While the readings are being done, the animation of Ishu Patel fills the screen, representing a life and its transmutation, in a flowing style that might be called psychedelic. Some of the visions are scenes from Patel’s 1978 short film *Afterlife*, which is a psychic/spiritual journey from light to light, an amazing seven minutes that belongs in this book and bears repeated viewings.

"*Afterlife*" Ishu Patel 1978

*The Tibetan Book of the Dead* is a powerful document of the dharma of the bardos, filmed in the land of its origin and connecting very closely with the people, both living and dead.
Following Robin:

“Being Human” & “What Dreams May Come”

Scottish director Bill Forsyth had a fine run of films in the 1980s including *Gregory’s Girl*, *Local Hero*, and *Housekeeping*. After being wooed by Hollywood for a Burt Reynolds caper flick to cap the ‘80s, with a nice paycheck in lieu of critical success, Forsyth obviously wanted a statement film next, and it took him five years to get *Being Human* to the screen. It is a reincarnation saga that was bound to fail with audiences, even with the changes that Warner Brothers demanded—in length (a full 40 minutes cut) and style (addition of a narrator, Theresa Russell), and a happy ending of sorts. Forsyth disowned the finished product, his most intriguing and heartfelt film for those who believe or ponder the concepts of karma and reincarnation.

Robin Williams is the voyager Hector, in scenes from five lifetimes spanning a cave-dwelling existence in northern Europe to contemporary New York and New Jersey. The film opens with the latest—the modern, embattled and guilty Hector—whose story we only get hints of in the opening segment, because the film also closes upon this life, the one closest to our own.

By the time we have examined each episode in the lives of this particular soul, we see commonalities and can think about his karmic fears and weaknesses, and what he may have learned over the millennia about love and family, about domination and attachment. And how he may have evolved and gathered at least some wisdom.

In the next episode, historically earliest, Hector is the male protector and provider of a beautiful primitive family of four. Their shore is invaded by a party of explorers, who speak Gaelic and are decidedly advanced, taking Hector’s wife with little force, even respectfully, and befriending the children. Hector attacks as the raiders prepare to sail away with his loved ones, and they are almost forced to kill him, but a pile of stones on a hilltop gives them pause. It might be a god protecting this man who is fighting for his family, that might curse them should they do him harm. So instead
of a fatal wound, they give Hector a talisman of their own, placing it around his neck and then sailing away.

Next we find Hector in Imperial Rome, the deferential, mild manner of the caveman even more appropriate now, as he is the trusted slave and companion of a weak nobleman (John Turturro). The master is facing financial ruin, and has been commanded by the powerful lender to kill himself for honor’s sake. He commands Hector to join him in death, has even falsely implicated the slave in his financial dealings. Hector however has a beautiful young lover, an African slave who is in the same household, and he has no desire to die for his rather dim-witted owner. How he manages to live and effect a happy ending for himself is morally ambiguous and dramatically pleasing.

Episode #4 has Hector in the Middle Ages, still subservient, his master this time a returning Scottish crusader (Vincent D’Onofrio) who is charismatic and intelligent, impersonating a monk and preaching, somewhat hypocritically, to their fellow travelers. This character is an earthly guide who is struggling with his own humanity and mission in life. As played by D’Onofrio, the knight/priest is a key figure for the whole film. He is still a sensual sinner but feeling the call of service in his non-ordained monk’s robe and crucifix. There is war in the land, and the monk is called on to give succor to the dying. When Hector comments, the monk replies,

“Nothing wrong with helping someone die in peace.”

“Nothing at all,” Hector replies.

Later, D’Onofrio is going off with the soldiers to a battlefield to administer to the sick and dying there, and he tells Hector,

“Wait for me. I still have the money from Venice. We can be home in a month.”

“You’ve work to do here. You’ll make a good priest yet,” Hector says.

(Humbly) “Do you think so?”

“You’re a strange fellow. I’ve been with you a year and I still don’t know who you are.”

“You never will.”

“Are you a priest?”

“I don’t know.” A soldier interrupts to tell the priest that they are moving out. “I must be,” says the priest to Hector.

Hector is having a dalliance with an attractive woman met along the road, a fellow traveler. He tells the knight/priest that it means nothing, he is going home to his wife and family. But he’s persuaded to go off with the woman, who speaks no English, only Italian. They do speak the language of affection and sex, and she is quite enamored of Hector. A widow with a mountain chalet and beautiful children, she invites Hector to stay in the idyll. But he cannot; he has a family—a rather elusive one, we are coming to realize—in Scotland, and must continue his long journey home.

The fifth lifetime finds Hector a Portuguese nobleman whose expedition has shipwrecked on the coast of Africa. He is now the weak master of an earnest slave, whom he treats in a superior but kind way. They are all in a mutual crisis: the stranded party of noblemen and women, their slaves,
priest and retinue of nuns, and common sailors, are in an ill-equipped battle for survival. Some of the sailors steal what little fresh water remains and make a run for it. They are caught and hanged in an inept slapstick manner. Some of the party’s provisions wash ashore, but the food poisons many. They engage with some African tribesmen, who offer no help.

Hector has broken off with a young lady in the company, and she has found another protector who is noble and brave. Hector is not; he is trapped in self-preservation and his fragile ego’s need for the lady to smile on him one more time, to take away his guilt. At the end, some of the party are going to head overland, leaving the weak and dying behind. A recurring motif of Being Human, about shoes and the lending thereof, closes the episode. An obvious message of walking a mile—or a lifetime—in another person’s.

Finally we come back to the modern-day Hector, who is spending a weekend at a beach house with his two estranged children. He has been a seriously absentee father, and had some dubious business dealings as a Manhattan slumlord, as we saw in the opening segment with his partner (William H. Macy). His anxiety is palpable. He still has the Hector charm with the ladies, as evidenced by an affectionate girlfriend (Lorraine Bracco) who loans him her car for this outing with his kids, and a good-natured ex (Lindsay Crouse), whose current husband and full-time stepdad is loaning Hector their beach house for the weekend.

Slowly and painfully, son, daughter, and father begin to communicate facts and feelings about their lives, “catching up” and reaching out. Hector tries to establish his paternal authority by taking them to a seaside fair, even after they tell him it’s “not their kind of thing.” At the fair, an older man, possibly homeless, sitting alone at a picnic table and visibly not enjoying the “fun fair,” makes eye contact with Hector for a second. It is perhaps a cosmic test, a reminder of his selfishness and the universal human condition. No words are spoken.

Back at the beach house, many words are spoken, and a true family feeling begins to take hold. The film ends with a longed-for hug between father and son, and some silly joking around, while stargazing, about what the universe really is.

By contrast, What Dreams May Come takes itself very seriously, in a Hollywood big-budget way—a spectacular guided tour through an imagined Heaven and Hell. In the late 1990s, when CGI technology was growing by leaps and bounds, it was a pioneering work, and won the Oscar in 1999 for Best Visual Effects.

The soaring—or overblown—Soulmate Romance, with a climactic descent into Hell, has echoes of Dante and Beatrice, as well as the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice. But in the hands of director Vincent Ward and screenwriter Ronald Bass (Rain Man, Joy Luck Club), it is far from classic. (For a brilliant work of sweeping romance, Ward’s Map of the Human Heart is highly recommended.)

However the film was originally conceived, loosely based on Richard Matheson’s 1978 novel of the same name, What Dreams May Come had special-effects eternal-romance blockbuster writ-
ten all over it. It disappointed at the box office, but remains dear to many fans as a confirmation of soul-connections.

Robin Williams plays Dr. Chris Nielsen, a kindly pediatrician who seems to have accumulated much merit in his lifetime, given his love for family and compassion for his young terminally-ill patients. His wife Annie, played with a lot of soul by Annabella Sciorra, is a painter and museum curator. Their two adolescent children are beautiful and mostly well-adjusted. Then the children die in a car crash. At the funeral, we see the young couple devastated, but they obviously have a strong love to stand upon. All this while the opening credits are rolling. (In the novel, the children do not die, one of many divergences with Matheson.)

Four years later, Chris is killed while helping some people in an automobile pile-up. So begins his journey in the afterlife, a complex and confusing jumble of spirits, guides and death-scapes. Chris deserves his dazzlingly beautiful heaven, which includes even his deceased dog. His first spirit guide (an exuberant Cuba Gooding Jr.) tells Chris that he can control this eternal realm, make it whatever he wants.

Then Annie commits suicide and her soul is sent directly to hell, where Chris must travel to rescue her. He finds his two children along the way, although they may be played by different actors with different faces. Hell is depicted as a ship-wreck, with submerged souls, followed by a field of upturned faces that he must trod on to get to, well, the other side. It is as grotesque as intended, and notable for one of the cameo faces, Werner Herzog, who even gets in a line as Dr. Nielsen steps over him. He finds Annie all alone in a degraded version of the house they had so happily shared. She is resigned to being condemned, but he reconnects the soul-bond they had shared since their first meeting—which was portrayed in the opening scene, when they first recognized their soul-kinship.

Thus she is saved, miraculously, along with the kids. They may now live as a family in the brightly-colored heaven—with the dog, even—but they choose rebirth. Possibly to work out some residual karma, but primarily so they can find each other again and re-activate that perfect love between two immortal soul-mates. The swelling romantic finale works its magic for the faithful.

Interestingly, the original score was composed by Ennio Morricone, but it was rejected after some initial screen tests. It would undoubtedly be a different film with the Italian master’s compositions. And a different film if Matheson’s book had been given greater weight. The novel had far more references to Theosophical, New Age, and paranormal beliefs. Matheson says in an introductory note that only the characters are fictional, and that most everything else is based on research (the book includes an extensive bibliography.) Story elements that didn’t make it into the screenplay included astral projection, telepathy, a séance, and the term "Summerland" (a name for a simplified Heaven in theosophy, and for Heaven in some religions, Wicca for instance).
Escape from Hell:
“Diamonds of the Night”

Jan Nemec, a prominent director of the Czechoslovakian New Wave of the 1960s, employed a style he called “dream realism,” a rather vague and convenient term when applied to a film like *Diamonds of the Night*, which goes beyond dream and memory into the bardo-consciousness. This is certainly debatable, given the film’s double ending, but certain elements of the harrowing one-hour film reveal the director’s true intent—a depiction of the mind of one of the Jewish boys in the transitional state, remembering his short life, up to and including his murder by Nazi partisans.

Nemec, upon his graduation from FAMU, the prestigious film-training institute in Prague, developed a book by Arnošt Lustig called *Darkness Casts No Shadow* into his first feature film in 1964. (The novel was surreal autobiographical fiction. Lustig had escaped with another young man from a Nazi death-camp train. He had in fact survived three concentration camps and was on his way to certain death at the fourth, Dachau, in 1945, when he and a friend jumped from the train and ran for their lives. This is the fundamental story of *Diamonds of the Night.*)

The film opens with the two teenaged boys jumping from a train and running up a hill into the woods, the sound of machine gun fire behind them. As they run, they shrug off their identifying coats, which are crudely painted with stripes and the letters “KL” (for konzentrationslager: concentration camp). The handheld-camera shots in high-contrast black-and-white reflect their jagged desperate flight. They run through the woods until the sound of gunfire is no longer heard, and fall in exhaustion. Here we establish one of the boys as the Subject of the film. As he sleeps, we see his hand covered with black ants (symbolic of swarming antagonistic beings—Nazis—or of insects devouring dead meat) and realize that what we are seeing is not necessarily present action or even past action, but a surreal dream with echoes of Bunuel and Cocteau. The boy awakens and shakes the ants from his hand. He will think of these ants later, swarming over his face. And now the film becomes a montage of the Subject’s memories, dreams, desires, and what we take to be his experience of the present desperate situation. As the boys trudge through the forest, the Subject thinks of Prague, in his innocent pre-war youth, and during its occupation, of the ancient architecture, of women either real or imagined and his emerging sexuality which has been cru-
elly nullified. A city streetcar is the scene of several vivid memories.

He has flashbacks to the train from which they’ve escaped. Old men in striped uniforms and the two young ones, sitting against the boxcar walls, bound for Dachau. How he traded his shoes to the other boy for food, and how they planned their escape. This stream of consciousness is intercut with the boys’ progress toward nothing but survival: they approach a village, hide and sleep until dark, then find food. On they trudge. The Subject’s internal voice is heard, saying “I am cold. I can’t get warm.” Then he is seen walking into a brilliant light, perhaps sunrise through the trees—but it is still night. Lying down to sleep, he remembers or imagines a child in a peaceful sunlit scene, and he begins to laugh, either happily or insanely, followed by images of tall trees being felled.

Daylight. They trudge across a rock-covered expanse, the other boy now walking with a stick. A memory of children sledding. Night rain refreshes them, a long sequence involving trees and the forest floor, sounds of water dripping, trickling. The next day, from the edge of the woods they watch an old plowman stop to eat his lunch, then resume his work, the plow smoothly cutting and turning the soil. A young woman who brought the food returns to the farmhouse, and the boys follow. The Subject decides to go in and get some food, and how he and the farm wife confront each other is a fascinating sequence.

The woman calmly watches from the stove as the boy enters the kitchen. He rushes her and kills her with a blow. Now she is calmly watching again, goes to the larder and fetches a loaf of bread, from which she deftly cuts several slices, lays them on the table. The Subject grabs them, then attacks and kills her again. Now she stands and watches impassively as the boy leaves, and we feel compassion in her gaze. Outside, the boys cannot eat the bread because their mouths are too dry.

“She must give me milk,” the Subject says, goes back in for it, and it is given. We finally see her watching them from a window. The Subject’s grappling in the bardo with his murderous impulse, his anger at the very world and overcoming it, are necessary for his soul to move on. As they walk, his friend’s hand now on his shoulder for support, his mind is flooded with images—of train rails, the Prague trolley, empty and then filled with people including Nazi officers. He helps a young mother with a baby buggy off the trolley, watches as the buggy wheel wobbles and falls off. He envisions women young and old, sexual longing, a happy conversation with a particular girl—many doors, keyholes, he rings the bell—will it be answered? Will he be invited in?

Now a host of demons enters the picture, in the form of a German gentleman’s hunting club that has been recruited by the local mayor to hunt down the two escapees. They apply themselves to the job with an inane brio, with laughter and camaraderie, and it’s not long before the boys are spotted and the chase is on. These old men in their fancy hunting clothes, rifles slung, appear both sinister and entirely mindless. The banality of their willingness to bag a couple of Jewish kids for the Fatherland is more than chilling; it is unforgettable. The boys are pursued up a wooded hillside with shouts of “Halt!” and an occasional shot. They come upon a road, try to jump into the back of a a truck but are too weak. They fall and are captured.
At the town hall, awaiting the mayor, the boys are stood against a wall, where the Subject’s KL coat strangely reappears. The old men, eating mechanically and drinking beer, turn festive, singing, reciting, dancing with each other, all with the stupidity of a decidedly inferior race. The mayor arrives and hears the Subject’s plea, who hopes that simply verifying his address in Prague will save him—although the mayor appears to not understand Czech any more than the boy understands German. The head of the “posse” is told to bring the prisoners out at 6:00. The Subject’s memories come faster now—laughing with a girl, ascending on stairs or in elevator, standing before the door, now back to the beginning, jumping from the train. Two rifle shots ring out, and the viewer is presented with the only Objective shot in the film—the boys’ bodies lying in the road. The shot is held for a full ten seconds, proving to us and to the Subject that he is dead, and that all the preceding narrative was his mind coming to that realization.

Now the boys are led out—again—and we hear “Ready, Aim, Fire,” but no shots. The old men laugh and clap, and the boys walk on, back into the forest, deeper and darker, leaving hell behind. Birds begin to sing.
“A documentary fantasy. Penniless miners talk in passing about labor unions. A miner and his young son go to a village in Kyushu where the miner has been told he’ll find work...a murder takes place, a frame-up, and a ghost who wants to know why, meet in a story of realism and the surreal. The child mutely witnesses all. Does the truth count for anything in this world or in the next? Can everything be manipulated?”

A concise IMDb synopsis of Pitfall that well describes the potent mix of politics, class struggle, and the world of the earthbound dead depicted in the 1962 film from director Hiroshi Teshigahara and writer Kobo Abé. It is one of the essentials in a long tradition of Japanese ghost films, which genre is still very much “alive” as evidenced by such popular 21st-century films as Dark Water and the Ju-On series.

Unlike their subsequent collaboration, the classic Woman in the Dunes, Pitfall was not based on an Abé novel, but on a television play titled Rengoku (Purgatory). The concept of Purgatory—a temporary spiritual dimension of suffering and confusion, most often associated with Catholic doctrine—is key to understanding the metaphysics of Pitfall and how the dead souls interact with each other.

When the film opens, we wonder if we are already in the land of the dead, as a young man and small boy fearfully move through a dark landscape, while terrifying sounds of barking and snarling seem to come from nowhere other than the soundtrack. They make it back to daylight and a ramshackle coal mine in the hills. The man is one of two diggers employed by an old prospector, who has dreams of finding a rich lode of ore. The two young men are both army deserters, hiding from authorities, while the child hangs out and silently observes everything, as he will the entire film. The two young men laugh at the old man’s optimism behind his back, and imagine how much better off they’d be if they were in a miners’ union. This wish will be ironic, as the plot soon becomes about class struggle, an indictment of both unionists and the mine owners, to whom lives of workers are disposable.

The man and boy run away to find work at another mine, but find the mine closed and the factory town deserted. A true ghost town, except for one living soul: a woman who runs a candy
store who has stayed behind, waiting for some money she’s owed. The man and boy find the woman in her sweaty little shop, and learn about the town’s demise.

A dapper man on a motorbike has been following the man and boy on the road. Next to the mine-tailing pond just below the candy woman’s open door, he stabs the man to death. The boy watches his father’s murder from afar. The dead man’s spirit immediately rises, sees his lifeless body, and begins to lament and question why. The assassin goes to the candy-store lady and gives her money to say that she saw the murder, and to describe the killer in a certain way, which will implicate the leader of one of the mineworkers’ unions. For her cooperation, she will be brutally raped and murdered.

Police come to investigate the man’s murder and it is revealed that the poor dead miner looks exactly like the leader of a second mineworkers’ union, which is locked in a power struggle for the right to work the New Mine. It becomes apparent that the well-dressed man on the motorbike is a hired assassin for the mine owners, and he will commit one more murder and arrange for the two competing foremen to engage in a mutually fatal knife fight—at which time the hitman says to himself that all has gone according to plan. All four ghosts eventually disappear, leaving only the small boy—who has uttered but a single word in the entire film—as witness. He flees down a deserted road in the final shot.

The film’s focus on the exploitation of coal miners was likely influenced by Teshigahara’s and Abe’s political leanings, and their sympathy with the Tokyo demonstrations in 1960 against Anpo, the Japanese-American Security Treaty, which dated to 1952 and had been amended in 1960. The film was shot in Kyūshū, and incorporates stock footage of mining disasters and starvation that had afflicted the area.

The plot device of using ghosts, particularly of the miner and the woman, who were exploited victims in life and are rendered completely powerless in death, conveys more effectively than any straight political drama Teshigahara’s and Abe’s sense of the futility of the class struggle.

“**Kuroneko (Black Cat)**”

*Kuroneko* is a 1968 film from the prolific writer/director Kaneto Shindo, and may rightly be considered a sequel or extension of his 1964 ghost-story classic *Onibaba*. It deals with two earthbound spirits who are bent on vengeance for the brutal circumstances of their deaths. Although innocents, they become doomed to exact violent retribution for eternity.
The film opens with a crane shot of a group of bedraggled soldiers emerging from a field and entering a house, to find a young and a middle-aged woman, startled by the intrusion. A brutal gang-rape, accompanied by much leering while eating the women’s food, is followed by the burning of their home. They are left unconscious, to burn alive. Later, in the smoldering ruin, their pet black cat comes creeping around the women’s bodies, licking their faces and the blood from their wounds.

This feline energy will be the conduit for a haunting of the surrounding region, the object of which is the seduction and vampirization of every “noble” samurai warrior stationed thereabouts. Our sympathies are very much with the innocent victims-turned-avenging-spirits. They lure the depraved warriors to their home, ply them with saké and then—just as the swaggering men are about to take their carnal pleasure—sink fangs into their necks.

Indeed, the overarching theme of Kuroneko is the pride of the warrior and his feeling of superiority and ownership over women and peasants by virtue—or vice—of having gone to war on their behalf. Rape and pillage have always been claimed as the right of battle-hardened men, the perks of survival. The samurai class has been widely portrayed in film—as heroes, villains, loners and simple strivers. Kuroneko begins by showing their bestiality, and then introduces a hero—one very close to the ghostly women.

At the Rajomon Gate of the city, samurai horsemen are approached by a beautiful woman in distress, who asks to be escorted home through the bamboo forest. Immediately, the style has shifted—from the muted naturalism of the opening rape/murder scene in flat daylight, to black night starkly lit with great artificiality. The contrast is stunning, and Kuroneko is rightly acclaimed for some of the most haunting images ever shot.

One by one, the samurai enter the eerie home, that seems suspended and shrouded in mist, drink the proffered liquor to excess, and are then dispatched by the cat-demons. The second or third of these swaggering victims tells the women “I feel like I’ve met you two before.” The younger woman laughs. “What an amusing thought,“ she titters. The mother tells him that her son is about his age, kidnapped by soldiers three years previously. The young woman is his wife, the older woman’s daughter-in-law. The samurai tells them not to worry about the missing son/husband, that he is probably a wealthy samurai in some other district by now.

“It’s a samurai world,” he brags. “Fighting allows us to eat our fill and have whatever we desire. Even the Emperor will bow to our master Raiko someday.” These are his final words except for some lustful laughter in the bedroom, before the young woman pounces and goes for the jugular.

The fourth of these warrior victims, aware by now that some ghost or monster is killing samurai in this haunted bamboo forest, draws his sword on the woman, suspecting her to be that predator. She proves him right by leaping straight into the air, floating and flipping before alighting on the soldier’s shoulders. His body is found the following morning.

The Mikado tells Raiko, the samurai commander, that he is a disgrace for allowing his men to
be slaughtered like this. Raiko—surrounded by many fawning geisha—in turn exhorts his men to find the beast and slay it. He personally does not believe in ghosts, and states that their enemy is a very real predatory animal. Like a big cat.

The scene shifts to a battleground in the northern part of the country. A young man, torn and tattered, is being pursued through a marsh by a gigantic man wielding a mace. Somehow the young man manages to kill the giant, grab a horse and race homeward. On arriving, he comes before Raiko, matted and bloody, and presents the warlord with the head of the giant, a legendary warrior known as Sunehiko the Bear. Raiko is greatly pleased, and gives the young warrior the name “Gintoki of the Grove.” The geisha all eye him with lascivious smiles. His handsome face and hard body are a dirty mess, but by the next scene he is groomed, garbed in a fine robe, and elevated to a high rank among Raiko’s troop.

He is of course the missing son and husband of the murdered women, and as a samurai, marked as one they must destroy. The remainder of the film deals with the confrontation of the three and the love that exists between them, complicating their sworn vows. In Gintoki’s case, his duty to warlord and emperor. In the women’s case, their obedience to the Lord of Evil for the chance to wreak vengeance on the samurai class that destroyed their simple honest lives, as they tried to survive in the absence of their beloved son and husband.

Now he has returned and found his home a burned-out ruin. An old farmer tells him that no one knows what happened to the women. He cries out in grief for his loved ones. Raiko tells him to slay the beast and he will have any woman he wants, while the geisha girls behind him leer, hoping to be chosen by this most excellent knight. Gintoki accepts this as a suitable reward. Then he is accosted by the ghost of his dead wife, at the Rajomon Gate like all the others. But when the three sit down together in the ghost-house, Gintoki confronts the women, asking if they are indeed his mother and his wife.

The mother, Yone, says:

“I do not know where they may be, but just as you fought day and night to return to them, your mother and wife must have waited day and night. You have returned from war in triumph, but I wonder what has become of them?”

“Who are you?” he demands, drawing his sword and swinging at the ghosts, who jump up and float through the air and disappear. He slices the air until, exhausted, he falls to the floor, and when he raises his head he is lying in the charred ruins of their former home.

Meanwhile, the wife, Shige, weeps for her husband to the mother, then appears to him at the Gate again. He returns with her to the ghost-house, where the ritual is again performed. He knows they are ghosts or demons, but is happy just to look at them as his loved ones. Now the wife takes him to bed and instead of vampirizing him, makes love with him all night. This is accompanied by romantic music on the soundtrack; there is great tenderness and blissful tears. He must leave before
dawn but promises to return, which he does each night, but on the seventh night, his mother tells him that Shige is now gone forever. By refusing to kill Gintoki, she has broken her vow to the Lord of Evil to "drink the blood of every last samurai in the world," including his, and was given seven days to make love and then be cast into hell forever.

Now, warned by the warlord to kill the demon or forfeit his own life, Gintoki is pitted against the spirit of his mother. The mother-ghost, now alone, goes on a killing rampage, leaving samurai bodies all over the countryside. In one scene, peasants strip a warrior’s body where it lies in the woods, emphasizing their disrespect for their so-called protectors.

The mother appears to Gintoki at the Gate and says that she loves him and is prepared to join Shige in hell, if only he will come and read a sacred sutra for her soul. He comes to the house, but sees her cat-demon appearance in a mirror and draws his sword. The ensuing battle ends with a severed human-sized cat arm, which becomes the focus of the rest of the film, the final showdown between two souls who loved each other dearly in life. It is as wild and disturbing an ending as one might expect from a supernatural masterpiece. And as in the previous film, *Pitfall*, the innocent have not only been worldly victims, but it seems that even the afterlife is rigged against them. Unlike the hapless ghosts in *Pitfall*, who are unable to affect the living at all, the cat-spirit women of *Kuroneko* definitely make their presences felt.
“Across the Big Ditch:

“Between Two Worlds”

As stated in the Introduction, this film has been haunting me most of my life. It planted the John Garfield damaged-he-man archetype into my adolescent male psyche, and also gave me a version of the afterlife that was (is?) relatable to American and European audiences. Catholic morality is served up by two lovable dead priests, one of whom, in the second act, serves as the wise and benevolent judge of each soul.

*Between Two Worlds* (1944) features an extraordinary cast portraying ten souls who have been killed in a London air raid as they attempted to get to a ship leaving for America. Actually eight died in the bombed taxicabs; the other two, Henry and Ann, have committed suicide. Along with Garfield, these are the leads—Eleanor Parker in one of her first starring roles, and Paul Henreid, hot from *Casablanca* and *Now, Voyager*. Henry and Ann find themselves on the misty deck of a ship; they quickly remember the suicide by gas and know that they are dead.

The others do not, until Garfield’s character, a cynical American journalist, figures it out and with gleeful derision lets them know. He is particularly thrilled that the rich industrialist, whom he has been dogging journalistically in life, must face his death and loss of worldly power. This arrogant tycoon (George Coulouris) condemns himself by constantly stating “I’m Lingley, of Lingley Limited,” and lording over his fellow passengers. Even after he learns the truth of his demise, he tries to buy and bully his way to preferential treatment.

The only crew member on this ghost ship is the steward, Scrubby, played with earnest solicitude by Edmund Gwenn. As Guide to them all, he strikes all the right notes.

An elderly matron (Isobel Elsom) is also doomed by her life of privilege and sense of superiority, while her husband, a gentle henpecked aristocrat (Gilbert Emery,) who has tolerated his wife’s infidelities and egomania for many years, is sent by the Judge to a sort of heaven with his old school chums. Her fate is a fabulous castle in which to spend eternity in luxury—but completely alone.

A young American Merchant Marine (George Tobias) is going home to Brooklyn and his wife and baby. He has been torpedoed three times in the service, and considers himself charmed, carrying a talisman he calls the “ho-hocus,” until he must confront the reality of the situation. His death seems the most tragic, and it is hard for him to let go, until the Judge tells him he can watch over his wife and the child he has never seen, and that all lives must end—they will be reunited.

Garfield’s traveling companion is a stylish young woman (Hope Emerson) who is as cynical
and wise-cracking as he. An opportunist, she throws herself at Lingley of Lingley Limited, who is interested and invites her to his cabin for “dinner.” This is before they have the karmic rug yanked from under them by the news of their deaths. When she learns their fate, she rebels against it, going to her cabin and refusing to see the Judge when he arrives. But she will experience a conversion of sorts, repenting her sins while remembering the innocence and promise of her childhood. Garfield rails against this surrendering to her fate, urging her to stay defiant, as they both were in life. She gives him a final compassionate kiss before leaving on “the launch” for her ultimate destiny.

The mystery woman of the company, an sweet elder woman named Mrs. Midget (Sara Allgood), has revealed little about her life on earth, stating that she will be content with a little cottage as her eternal reward, and this she is granted. She has a big secret, however, which will provide one of the satisfying twists to the film’s ending.

The other twist involves the two suicide lovers, and the fate of all suicides in the afterlife, according to the cosmic order portrayed here. Like Annie in What Dreams May Come, suicides have a special place in hell, but where that film ordained a grim eternal solitude, Between Two Worlds condemns a suicide to serve forever as steward for new passengers. Thus we learn that Scrubby was a suicide and has served as “ferryman” on numberless crossings. But his is a merciful lot, assisting lost and frightened souls to understand their fates and to ease their fears. He is able to intercede with the Judge for the souls of Henry and Ann, leading to a climax that will be viewed as either a metaphysical cop-out, or as a soaring affirmation of mercy and hope. I have held the second view from childhood, and as an old man I still find it dramatically potent.
Never-Ending Story:
“*The Saragossa Manuscript*”

Famously, it was Jerry Garcia’s favorite film. He championed and helped finance the restoration that he never lived to see. Fortunately for film buffs, the 1965 Polish film directed by Wojciech Has was also admired by Coppola and Scorsese, and they oversaw the creation of the beautiful 3-hour version available today. Needless to say, it’s popular with Deadheads, and the film’s trippy narrative, brilliant cinematography, and Penderecki’s classical/modernist score, keep the stories-within-stories-within-stories rolling along at a lively pace.

As for lively—and deathly—the ultimate question for the subject at hand: is it a bardo film? The story of this Subject, Captain Alphonso Van Worden, is filled with supernatural beings and occurrences, skulls and succubae, with a haunting ending that strongly implies a crossing-over. All of the other nested stories in Alphonso’s manuscript, while often humorous, deal with the nexus of sex, honor, religion and death.

The opening credits are shown with a background of surreal and sexually suggestive drawings, accompanied by the high-spirited music of contemporary Polish composer/conductor Krzysztof Penderecki. Arcane symbols, nude women, a sword impaling a book etc., promise an entertaining phantasmagoria.

Based on an 1815 novel written by Count Jan Potocki\(^{11}\), the film opens during the Napoleonic siege of Zaragoza (Saragossa) Spain in 1809. In the opening shot, a battle is raging—explosions, French soldiers in retreat. There is a bomb blast and one soldier in the mid-ground falls dead. An officer goes up, touches him on the shoulder and he springs back to life and runs away. This easy-to-miss detail is significant: We aren’t really going to know the dead from the living in the entertainment to follow.

The officer then goes into a bombed-out building, where the story begins. He finds a large dusty manuscript and is immediately fascinated by the illustrations—a scientific drawing of a lobster with a picture of two hanged men on the facing page. The next pages show an octopus and, opposite, two attractive women reclining together in an amorous pose.

A Spanish officer enters aggressively with soldiers, but is immediately fascinated by the drawings, and in a blatantly humorous scene, dismisses his men who are about to kill the Frenchman, then sits with him and begins to read the book, written in Spanish, aloud. He declares in amazement that the story is about *his own grandfather*, a Captain Van Worden of the Spanish Walloon Guard,
and the Captain’s bizarre experiences some seventy years before.

The Primary tale begins, that of Captain Alfonse Van Worden (Zbigniew Cybulski) who, with his two servants, is trying to reach Madrid and assume a post there. We first see Alfonse awakening on the ground, face-down, while his servants worry aloud about being in the Sierra Moreno, which are known to be haunted. They fear “devils and demons of the abyss.” (Like several of the films in this book, the opening shot is of the Subject awakening, as from a dream, or in death.)

The Captain takes charge and points out on the map their destination for the night—Venta Quemada, an inn not far away. The mule keeper, Mosquito, runs away with the mules and supplies, the loss of the Captain’s worldly belongings. The captain and remaining servant come across a channel ground, with piles of skulls, and a gallows from which hang two gypsies. The corpses appear to look at him directly. The other servant runs away.

Captain Van Worden arrives on his beautiful steed to the Venta Quemada, which appears to be deserted. (Venta Quemada, this magical locale that the stories return to again and again, translates as Burned Sale. There is a town by that name in southern Spain, and it is in the Sierra Moreno, where Van Worden’s story takes place.) Looking around, he sees a pitcher on a table and drinks. He will drink from many vessels in the course of this “adventure.”

A beautiful African woman appears behind him, breast bared in her black robe, and invites him to dine with “two foreign ladies.” She leads him down an underground passage to a door; inside is a large domed cavern which is beautifully ornamented like a mosque. He sees a table laden with food and drink amidst much splendor, begins to eat, and is approached—again from behind—by two sisters, Emina and Zibelda. They are beautiful and sexily attired. This is one of the recurring themes or motifs of The Saragossa Manuscript: attractive women—joyfully seductive in most cases—appear in most of the stories. Emina and Zibelda tell him that they are Tunisian, but come from Granada.

Closing in around Alfonse, they ask about the locket around his neck, if it might be a token from a lady fair. He tells them it is a gift from his mother and contains a holy relic. At the thought of a Christian talisman, the women recoil. Then one sister leads Alfonse to a canopied bed, smiling and caressing him. She tells the Captain that they have been waiting for him, and that he is the first man they have ever seen, as they were locked in a harem from childhood.

“But nature gave us the inclination to love. We give our love to each other,” says one sister.

“This is beginning to look interesting,” Alfonse says with a knowing smile.

The sisters then tell him that he is family—the Gomelez—from his mother’s side, and that the three of them are the last of their line. That is why he has been chosen to husband them both, to keep the family alive, and they begin kissing him on the mouth. He must accept the Prophet’s law, and will be allowed to visit them in dreams. They give him a skull chalice to seal the deal. He drinks
willingly; they are all three aroused. We see the face of one sister, her eyes alight, as the lovemaking begins behind her.

Alfonse awakens (again), smiling, but soon finds that he is lying on the charnel ground. The hanged men have been cut down and are lying next to him. In horror, he jumps up and runs back into the inn. Down to the underground chamber, but the sumptuous table is now covered with rotting food, rats, and skulls. In fear, he mounts his horse and rides away. He comes upon an old church, and within finds an elder monk, who bids him to come to his hermitage.

“Woe to him who refuses to confess his sins,” the monk tells Alfonse, stressing the Christian doctrine, as if to cleanse him of the Muslim pollution he has just experienced or dreamed. The monk asks if he has spent the night at the Venta Quemada, to which Alfonse says yes, as he drinks from a dark bowl on the monk’s rough table.

A crippled man, Pasheko, enters with a piteous moan. His arms are twisted and he is missing an eye. The monk explains that he is in the process of exorcising the poor man of a demon that inhabits him. There is something both pitiful and humorous in Pasheko and performance of Franciszek Pieczka in the role. The monk tells Pasheko to drive the goats uphill (possible symbolism), and Pasheko exits with another whine, now obviously comedic.

The monk asks Captain Van Worden for his story, and the SECOND STORY begins, that of the Captain’s father, who was also an officer in the Walloon Guard. The father is a bit of an aristocratic buffoon who is a professional duelist, looking for slights that might call for a challenge. In this particular story, he is wounded in a ridiculous duel with another nobleman and is laid in the back of a wagon, badly hurt and near delirious in the blazing sun. He says he will sell his soul for a drop of water. Suddenly, the wagon stops and a woman in black appears coming down a hill, framed by cow skulls and carrying a jug on her shoulder.

She unstops the jug, which resembles a breast with a spout for a teat, and gives him water. He will marry this woman and take her to his ancestral castle in the Ardennes. At the wedding feast, with a torrential storm raging outside, the roof leaks, and the bride and groom take to their conjugal bed in a flooded room. “Nine months later, I was born,” Alfonse tells the monk.

He then begins telling his own story, of being a randy youth sent away from his family to learn the ways of nobility. Returning home, he finds his foolish father getting old and feeble but still dueling. The old man brags that he has fought 130 duels, and either won or survived them all.

The Monk interrupts Alfonse and says he is interested in this story, but calls Pasheko in to tell the Captain his story. In a hilarious bit of slapstick, Pasheko sits down with all his tics and piteous whining, then begins to relate his story in a calm and articulate manner.

Pasheko was a young handsome nobleman whose recently widowed father married a beautiful younger woman Camilla, whose equally beautiful sister, Inezillia, has come along. We sense that
the older man really married both of them and, indeed, when Pasheko professes his love for the sis-
ter and intention to marry her, the father forbids it, and takes both of the women away on a trip to Madrid. Before they leave, Camilla tells Pasheko not to worry, she will arrange for her sister and him to be together as lovers. It is apparent that she herself is in love with the dashing young son.

Left alone, Pasheko broods, contemplates suicide even though he is surrounded by sexy laughing servant girls who appear eager and willing to assuage his melancholy. A message arrives, telling him to meet his father and the two women at the inn called *Venta Quemada*. It says that his passage will be considerably safer since the two bandits, the Zota brothers, have been caught and hung.

At the now familiar *Venta Quemada*, the innkeeper warns Pasheko of ghosts, saying that even he and his wife sleep off the premises. Pasheko’s servant begs for permission to leave the place. Left alone, Pasheko is looking at the pearls and treasure he has brought for Inezillia when Camilla comes up behind him, tells him his lover is waiting, and then leads him down the subterranean chamber. Camilla tells him that Inezillia will refuse him nothing, but that she, Camilla, will always be present. Just like the Tunisian sisters.

Again, we do not see the romantic/sexual interlude, and Pasheko awakens smiling, on the ground littered with skulls below the gallows. Except that now, one of the hanged men has been cut down, whose face is inches from Pasheko’s. He jumps up in horror, does the cringe that we are now familiar with from his “possession,” and runs back into the *Venta Quemada*. His treasure has changed into snakes. Women’s seductive voices come from all around, and the fireplace blazes up. Two bodies, hanging up the chimney, fall out, come to life, chase Pasheko from the place, catch him and gouge one of his eyes out.

“The Power of Satan!” exclaims the monk as Pasheko ends his tale, and he advises Van Worden to spend the night in the chapel to be safe.

“I don’t think I’ve sinned, unless I did it in my dreams,” replies the Captain.

The next morning, the Monk tells the Captain the direction to Madrid, with the blessing or warning “Remember, my son, God has raised his arm.” As our hero rides off on his mighty steed, Pasheko bids him goodbye with a joyful wail.

Alfonse has not ridden far when he is captured by soldiers and clergy of the Holy Inquisition, who knock him senseless with a framed picture of the Holy Virgin. They take him to a torture chamber, lock his head into an iron mask resembling a devil and demand to know his collaborators. “Do you know two African princesses?” they ask.

As they prepare to torture him, the Zoto brothers, along with the two African princesses, burst in and rescue him. A vaudevillian sword battle ensues between the Inquisition soldiers and the combined Saracens and Zoto gang. Later, the Zoto brothers tell Van Worden that they were never hung—it was two shepherds that were executed “to pacify the neighborhood.”
Back at the inn, in the mosque-harem-cave, the girls cut off the devil mask, then take the Captain’s crucifix and replace it with a talisman.

“Adopt our faith, and you would sit on a throne in Tunis,” they cajole.

“Let’s not talk about sunny kingdoms. We’re in the abyss, close to hell,” the Captain states.

A Sheik enters with soldiers, and condemns the Captain as a heathen in the company of Muslim women, for which he will be killed and hung, unless he drinks an elixir from a skull cup. He gladly quaffs, laughs, then again finds himself on the charnel ground below the gallows, with a rope around his own neck. Instead of corpses, he now sees a living person, the Cabalist, standing over him. He helps the Captain up and back into the inn, where they refresh themselves before setting out for the Cabalist’s castle. The Cabalist possesses much arcane knowledge that he wishes to speak with the Captain about on their journey, which may perhaps allay the Captain’s fears.

They haven’t gone far when they encounter Don Pedro Velasquez, who has been set upon by the Inquisition forces, thinking he was the escaped Captain Van Worden. The Cabalist recognizes Don Pedro as knowledgeable and aristocratic, and invites him to his home too. Don Pedro accepts, saying he can have a quiet night to consider all that has happened to him.

“That could drive an inexperienced person insane,” replies the Cabalist as they ride off. This provocative statement, suggesting that the Manuscript may all be the ravings of a madman, a la Caligari, closes out Part One of the Film.

Part Two opens at the castle of the Cabalist and his sister Rebecca, a voluptuous young woman who watches the arrival of her brother with the two strangers. She and the Cabalist whisper together; they are plotting something to do with Van Worden. Meanwhile, the Captain and Don Pedro are bonding in the beautiful home adorned with many arcane objects. Don Pedro is calm and erudite, with an aura of wisdom. Alfonse is disturbed, and wants to leave for Madrid immediately, having been haunted by ghosts and demons in these parts for who-knows how long. Don Pedro tells him to go into the library, the fount of all knowledge, and calm down. The library is full of stuffed animals, including a shark and alligator hanging from the ceiling.

Here the Captain finds The Manuscript, opening it to the illustrations of the octopus and the reclining women, the lobster and the hanged man. These reflect what he has been experiencing. He gets excited and wants to show the book to Don Pedro, who is having wine with the Cabalist, proposing the toast “We’ll all soon come to rest in the Eternal Night!”

The Cabalist scolds Rebecca for leaving the book out where Alfonse could see it. If he had read the ending, he tells her, it would ruin their plan. A confusing thing for the viewer to hear. Are they all agents in a plot against Captain Van Worden, to prevent his soul’s easy passage?

She hides the Manuscript, and when the Captain can’t find it, he blames evil spirits. Rebecca asks him what he has experienced since he’s been in their region, and he says that he was given a potion and taken to the gallows. She looks at his palm and tells him he is possessed with a love for
demons which makes him fear no living man.

With much commotion and high spirits, a caravan of gypsies arrives at the villa. They are led by the charismatic Avadoro, whose tales-within-tales will take up most of Saragasso’s Part Two. At dinner, Avadoro is urged by the warm hospitality and generous cleavage of Rebecca to tell a tale from his own adventurous life. He responds with a convoluted story of noblemen, their love affairs, misunderstandings about voices from beyond the grave, and his own part in these romantic entanglements. A young friend of his, who is laid up with broken bones in Avadoro’s room, begins telling another story that in turn leads to still another. And everywhere these stories go, beautiful young women enliven scenes public and private with playful laughter and erotic tension. A kind of heaven for a young virile man like a captain of the Walloon Guard.

At one point, Avadoro is called away from the dinner table to attend to something, and Captain Van Worden and Don Pedro discuss the stories. The Captain says he is confused, it’s hard to tell between reality and fantasy. Don Pedro elucidates for Alfonso—and for us:

“If I do not comprehend but I can define it, I am getting near poetry, which seems to be nearer to life than we suspect.”

“One story creates another and then another,” smiles Rebecca.

“But what’s the point of it?” the Captain insists.

Don Pedro poses an answer as well as a challenge to the audience:

“We are like blind men lost in the streets of a big city. The streets lead to a goal, but we often return to the same places to get to where we want to be. I can see a few little streets here which, as it is now, are going nowhere. New combinations have to be arranged, then the whole will be clear, because one man cannot invent something that another cannot solve.”

The stories seem to run together, before Alfonse is told that an important task awaits him. Don Pedro tells the Captain that he doesn’t have much time, so he rides away, stopping again at Venta Quemada. Three dark figures welcome him to “Gomelez’s land.” The black servant girl again takes him to the subterranean room, where the two princesses and the Sheik await him. We see that the Sheik and the Monk are the same man, and he admits this to Alfonse, telling him that this has all been a test to see if he was worthy to be the new head of the Gomelez family. The Captain has impregnated both women, and will husband them both. The Sheik gives Alfonse the Manuscript, and a pen so that he may write the rest of his story.

“May Allah send the dew of happiness on your head,” Alfonse is blessed, and given the familiar skull cup to drink from. Now, instead of waking up smiling among skulls and rotting corpses, he sees himself walking into light with the two women. But it is an illusion, and becomes a mirror in which he confronts himself. He hears the women laughing and crying. In fear, he awakens once again at the gallows, both of his servants standing by. Has it all been an elliptical dream, the same
awakening from the opening scene? Perhaps, but he now has the book tucked under his arm.

The three men are confident that they can get out of these haunted mountains before dark, the servants even laughing about it, their former fear dispelled. They make it to an inn, one that appears to be normal, and the Captain begins writing feverishly in the Manuscript. One of his servants tells him that two foreign ladies wish to invite him to dinner.

"Where?" he exclaims, opening a door onto a dream landscape, where the two women are dressed in white and black. There is a mirror suspended and dead animals hanging down in the surreal scene. The women beckon, but Alfonse begins raving and flings the book across the room, where it lands in the place it is found 70 years later by a French officer and his very grandson during the siege of Zaragoza. Van Worden then mounts his steed and goes riding at full gallop toward a mountain ridge, at the crest of which we can see the silhouette of two hanged men.

On the face of it, The Saragossa Manuscript is a ghost story of a brave soldier caught in some haunted mountains and tempted to renounce his Christianity by two Muslim succubae. He is drugged, and after being abused by these sexual demons, cast upon the killing field time and again. Other spirits come to him representing Christ and the need to confess his sins. Then the Holy Inquisition, through its cruel fanaticism, shows him that the crucifix is not the way either. Magic, poetry, and science are all represented by various teachers, as may well appear in the s as we struggle with doctrines and moralities we have learned and questioned in life.

The shocking and cryptic ending of the film would seem to say that the soul of Captain Alfonse Van Worden was subjected to tests of non-attachment, desire, belief and compassion, and at last is shown the light and the way out, but he instead leaves the previous life behind, in the form of a jumbled history—and what life isn’t?—and charges headlong into another round of birth, life, and death.
Familiar Nightmare:  
“Carnival of Souls”

There is little suspense but nearly unbearable oppression in the quickie-cheapie 1962 drive-in horror film *Carnival of Souls*. It might have sunk into obscurity and remained just a haunting memory for the few drive-in denizens who saw it in the delicious darkness of their automobiles at that time (“Hey, did you ever see...?”)  But it was resurrected as a midnight movie in the ’70s and soon elevated to Cult Classic for its haunting music and cinematography, which are symbiotically cheap and inventive—and wholly arresting. Discerning viewers attuned to metaphysical themes also recognized it for its dime-store vision of the afterlife, that of a young woman whom we can deduce in the first fifteen minutes has died.

Three boys in a hot rod challenge three girls in a regular car to a drag race. They speed out of town, side by side, the excitement and sexual tension palpable in both cars. On a river bridge, the girl driver loses control and their car breaks the railing and plunges into the water. Soon police are on the scene, searching the river from boat and bank. After a long period of time, one of the girls, Mary Henry, appears on a sand bar, miraculously alive. Police ask her, “What about the other girls?” “I don’t remember” is all she says.

She is taken into town and soon returns in her own car to the scene, watching the search for her lost friends. She appears impassive. Next we see her in a church, playing the pipe organ, a strange eerie music that echoes the soundtrack we have been hearing. We learn that she has taken a job in Utah as a church organist. Her teacher congratulates her, but says she should put more soul into her playing when she is playing for a congregation. She tells him it’s just a job.

Driving to Utah alone at night, she sees a zombie-like man’s face in the car window and then in front of the car. Swerving off the road, she sees a deserted amusement-park and pavilion on the shore of the Great Salt Lake. On her arrival at the boarding house in which she has reserved an apartment, the kindly landlady tells her there are only her and “Mr. Linden across the hall” as tenants. Alone in her new room, she sees the zombie face (played by the director Herk Harvey) in the night pane reflection, scaring her, until it turns into her own image.

On the first day at her new job, the friendly preacher tells her he wants to have a reception for her, to introduce her to the congregation, but she coldly refuses. Her organ playing is quite satisfac-
tory, and the preacher says that she has the power “to stir the soul.” She asks the minister about the deserted pavilion by the lake, and he says he is driving out that way if she would like to come along. In the daylight, the place seems harmless enough, but Mary is strangely drawn to it, prevented from entering by chains and No Trespassing signs.

That night, Mary is taking a bath when her neighbor knocks on the door. Thinking it’s the landlady, she wraps a towel around her. Mr. Linden tries to enter, but the chain is on the door. When she sees it’s a strange man, she is shocked and tells him to wait while she gets her robe. He ogles her through the crack in the door, and when she finally lets him in, trying to be friendly, he proves to be a young lout, and begins aggressive flirting. Thus begins Mary’s dance of sexual attraction and repulsion, probably the most powerful human attachment, to be resolved in the first stage of the death bardo before liberation can be attained. Sexuality is a common theme not only in these films, but in the underpinnings of all religious and moral teachings.

The next morning, Mary is refreshed and seems happy, as her lecherous neighbor brings her coffee and begins “hitting on her” again. He spikes his own coffee with liquor. Given that all of this are Mary’s thought-forms in death, we might deduce that her relationships with men in life involved alcohol. She treats him with a friendly upbeat attitude while still deflecting his come-ons.

She has the day off work and goes shopping downtown. In a department store, her perception is altered, and she finds that people cannot see or hear her, and now she can hear nothing either. In a panic, she runs out onto the town square, where she suddenly hears birds singing. She drinks from a water fountain, a life-giving act, then she sees the zombie-figure and runs away, right into another man. This serious-looking individual tells her that he is a doctor and if she is disturbed, she might want to come to his office nearby and talk about it. She responds to his kindness and concern, and goes there with him.

“I have no desire for the close company of other people,” she tells him.
“Have you always felt this way?”
“I don’t know,” she answers.

The final thirty minutes of Carnival of Souls has Mary frantically trying to escape the nightmare she is in. At the church organ, her playing has become strange and discordant, and the minister, shocked, fires her with righteous anger. She goes on a date with the dissolute Mr. Linden, but he is finally fed up with her hot-and-cold routine and vents his own anger. Back in her room, the doctor visits, and she tells him that she is leaving town, but her car has a “transmission problem.” In a garage, the car is put up on the rack with her inside. She falls out, and runs down the street to a bus station, where she again has become invisible and deaf. She tries to board a bus at Gate 9—a number traditionally symbolizing the end—but the bus is filled with the living dead, so she runs to a train station, which is locked. Now again she hears birdsong. She goes to the doctor’s office, hysterical,
but he turns into the zombie.

Back to the garage—her car is OK, and she drives to the deserted pavilion on the edge of the Lake, where she sees living corpses rise from the water and walk across the salt flats to the carnival pavilion. Night descends and a formal dance with the dead souls begins. She sees herself now as one of them, dancing with a male ghost, and she now has the full realization of her fate. Still unable to accept it, she screams and runs away toward the water, the living dead following her, smiling as if to assuage her fear. They chase her onto the shore, where she collapses.

The doctor, the minister, and the policeman, who have been searching for her, follow her footprints in the sand until they simply stop. She has vanished. And the final shot reveals what we have suspected all along.

_Carnival of Souls_ bears remarkable similarities to a classic 1960 episode of “The Twilight Zone” entitled _The Hitch-hiker_, in which a woman driving alone cross-country from New York to California, experiences the same frightening visions that Mary Henry has, discovering at the end that she died in a crash along the way. The Rod Serling teleplay was based on a famous radio play written by Lucille Fletcher for Orson Welles in 1941. It is likely that the TV episode from two years earlier had a strong influence on Herk Harvey’s cult classic, just as his film did on George Romero’s _Night of the Living Dead_ and David Lynch’s bardo films.

The belief that a soul may not realize that their body has died until working through memories and often unearthly visions, is an old, probably ancient one, and forms the plot of many of the films discussed here.
Following Downey: “Chances Are” and “Heart and Souls”

These strangely parallel films from 1989 and 1993, both starring Robert Downey Jr., use the afterlife and reincarnation as major plot devices in very earthbound romantic comedies. The later film, *Heart and Souls*, directed by the more-than-competent Ron Underwood, while still a rom-com, is thought-provoking and visually interesting. *Chances Are* is as cute and confectionary as death-and-rebirth-based entertainment can be. It defies much analysis, but to summarize briefly:

*Chances Are* involves a young couple in 1963 celebrating their first anniversary and the joyful news of pregnancy. Unfortunately, Louis (Christopher McDonald) gets his overeager self run over and killed while dashing across a Washington DC street to meet his expectant wife Corinne (Cybill Shepherd) at a café. He finds himself immediately in Heaven, walking on clouds with a crowd of smiling people toward a reception desk. He is frantic to get back to life, to his beautiful wife and unborn child, and after the admittance clerk informs him of current fetuses awaiting souls, he chooses one in Cleveland, the closest he can get to Washington and his dear Corinne. He hurries off, to be shuttled down to the selected womb. The rather silly angels have forgotten to give him his forgetfulness shot, which they have been administering to all the newly-dead arrivals. “What if he remembers?” a guilty angel worries.

Fast-forward twenty-two years, and the reborn Louis has grown up to be Alex (Downey), freshly graduated from Yale. He meets a young woman Miranda (Mary Stuart Masterson) who just happens to be the daughter of Corinne, who after all these years is still pining for her lost Louis. Miranda is of course his daughter too, genetics be damned.

The characters are thus sloppily thrown together. Alex dramatically remembers, when seeing Corinne again, that he is really Louis—and convinces her with a few personal details. Miranda is in love with Alex, but he must now shun her—being, in his Louis-mind, her father. Somehow Alex/Louis gets invited to move in with them, and the pot is stirred. The age difference between the “soul mates” is comical, and much romantic confusion and lustful intentions ensue. Then, due to an accident, Alex is unconscious in hospital when the impish angel appears to give him his long-overdue forgetfulness drug. When he comes to, the lovers pair off age-appropriately, including Corinne with the long-suffering, heart-of-gold third-wheel Philip (Ryan O’Neal).

One provocative plot element in *Chances Are* is the forgetting of past lives, a nearly universal experience of human beings. Beyond being given a celestial hypodermic injection as in this movie, what could be the cause of such cosmic amnesia? Here are some well-known hypotheses:
First, our tendency to forget—can we remember what we were doing at this very moment one year ago, one month or even one week ago? Similarly, to remember our past lives is unlikely, especially as we are locked into our current ego personalities, and emotionally invested in bolstering them.

Second, scientists have found that the chemical oxytocin is associated with both amnesia and pregnancy, so the biological cause of past-life amnesia could be the oxytocin secretion in our mother’s womb when we were gestating. So, that amusing angel with the glowing hypodermic has some scientific as well as dramatic justification.

Third, our psyche has an innate defense mechanism to forget painful incidents. In this life, we get over traumas only by forgetting them with the passage of time. Between our present and past lives lies the trauma of death. Suppose we had died in a car accident and could remember it; we would likely be afraid of cars throughout our lives. To save us from such psychological malfunctioning, nature arranges to erase our past-life memories, even though Buddhists hope to find the dharma in every succeeding life, consciously choosing the proper parents. And the “trauma of death” is what the Bardo Thodol may help us remember and prepare for in the present life. Fear will be lessened, and eventually overcome.

Heart and Souls shuffles the cosmic deck and tells the tale of four dead souls who find themselves, rather than winging heavenward, attached to a newborn baby. For what reason they don’t know for a long period of time—about the time it takes for the baby to grow up and (again) become Robert Downey Jr.

These are good souls, as we have seen in the opening vignettes, each one establishing their personalities as well as their individual unfinished business. Heart and Souls could be titled “Unfinished Business,” but that would have spoiled a bit of suspense in the unfolding of this enjoyable film.

A bus crash in San Francisco in 1959—caused by the driver’s distraction by a couple engaged in sexual foreplay in a car alongside—results in five deaths, including the driver’s. The other four see the driver’s form rising from the crash, before their spirits are whisked suddenly down the street to a car where a young expectant couple is stuck in traffic—from the bus accident—and not going to make it to the delivery room.

The four ghosts are visible to the child Thomas, and they watch him grow from toddler to grade school age, doting on him like parents and giving him advice. He loves them and converses with them, which leads to his being considered mentally ill by the school and his worried parents. So the four decide they will become invisible, which they explain to the child in a heartrending scene. They still follow him, but he grows up and eventually forgets them, or considers them imaginary
friends that he outgrew.

The adult Thomas is a high-powered, self-absorbed corporate attorney with a serious girlfriend (Elisabeth Shue) who can’t get him to commit to a LTR. Now, the dead bus driver shows up in the ghost bus, to pick up the four souls for their next incarnation. Because he was responsible for their deaths, he is fated to driving the celestial shuttle bus for a couple centuries or so. But there has been an administrative error: they were “assigned” to Thomas so that he could be the vehicle for each of their unfinished business. For some reason they didn’t get the memo—a heavenly oversight, like the forgetfulness shot in Chances Are.

So they become visible to him again after all these years, to explain their existential crisis, and the need to use his physical body to fulfill their “one last thing” before leaving behind these lives and personalities forever. The four disparate ghosts—a black mother (Alfre Woodward) who wants to make sure her orphaned children are all right, a punky cat-burglar (Tom Sizemore) who needs to return to their rightful owner a pane of valuable postage stamps, a waitress at the Purple Onion (Kyra Sedgwick) who should’ve said yes to her love’s proposal, but who, like Thomas, could not commit, and an opera singer wannabe (Charles Grodin) whose stage fright torpedoed every audition—have bonded with each other in this Bardo Interruptus, a close family of spirits.

So they inhabit Thomas’s body one by one—to fine comic effect by Downey—while the others cheer them on, and then bid fond farewells when the bus to the rebirth section comes for them. The waitress is the last one to face her unfinished business, but she and Thomas learn that her old lover has been dead for some time. She realizes that Thomas is about to make the same mistake she did before her death, and makes sure that he doesn’t, thus indirectly fulfilling her goal. She catches the bus, leaving Thomas to his own fate, spiritually fortified to marry his love and live happily ever after.

There are many lines and scenes which make Heart and Souls satisfying as a comedy and a drama, including a lively cameo by B.B. King, the theme song “Walk Like a Man,” and hip references sprinkled throughout the script. At one point, the wisecracking burglar calls Thomas “Cosmo,” a reference to Cosmo Topper of the novel, movies, and TV-series about a man who alone can see a dead couple (and their dog).

Metaphysically, the film improvises nicely, incorporating reincarnation and the popular concept of God as a Man Up Above. When the driver tells the souls that he has come to take them on for their next lives, and they tell him to stall his mission until they can complete their final acts, he says “Stall HIM?” while rolling his eyes upward. Heart and Souls, like many of these bardo films, shows only how earthbound spirits interact with the living, rather than a subjective depiction of the soul’s journey within, as E.J. Gold calls it, the multi-dimensional labyrinth.

The next film is a completely subjective immersion, of one unprepared soul’s voyage through the stages of the afterlife, from a filmmaker known for creating existential terror.
Escape Velocity:

“Enter the Void”

Gaspar Noé’s masterwork of 2009 appears to be a visualization of the Bardo Thodol in the mind of a suddenly-deceased young man, and in this it succeeds over its long running time—although the director disavows any such direct correlation, as will be discussed below. Some viewers will doubtless find the movie tedious, as the disembodied spirit relives important moments in his life, some repetitively. There is an oppressive anxiety in following the silent mind as it moves ethereally from place to place, viewing the aftermath of the young man’s death and his negative effect on the people being left behind.

The Washington Post’s review called the film “successful as an attempt to transport moviegoers to a hallucinatory version of the hereafter unlike anything they’ve ever witnessed on film.” But with this caveat: “The problem is that it’s also the most excruciating sit in recent cinematic memory. And no, the fact that it’s intentionally excruciating doesn’t make it less excruciating.”

“Excruciating” an interesting descriptor; the Bardo of Painful Death may be just that.

At the end of the screening of the film’s extended version that I attended, a loud male voice from the back of the theater succinctly expressed a similar view of the film’s excruciation: “Fuuck that!” while my friends and I sat stunned by the experiential impact of Entering the Void. It was a jolt I felt for days, as I contemplated how much Noé had tapped into and visualized the Tibetan teachings.

Before delving into the film proper, the opening credits should be noted, for their startling effect and thematic thrust, even though Noé claimed he made them so rapid-fire because of obligations to keep the film under 140 minutes. The credits begin as a psychedelic assault on the senses, visually and musically jarring but still within our “entertainment zone.” Then there’s a pause, the music changes, and the credits accelerate from something intense but enjoyable into something overwhelming for the unprepared mind, like coming on to acid and fearing that one’s ego is unprepared. Or likewise, being thrown into the Void after death and knowing that one is unprepared. Viewers may come to Enter the Void expecting it to be two-and-a-half hours of trippy visuals—as is its reputation—but the opening credits might be the most mind-blowing. There is no shortage of psychedelic visions to follow, however.
**Enter the Void** is entirely subjective, both before and after the death of the central character, a young American drug dealer named Oscar, living in Tokyo with his sister Linda. She is working as a stripper. Oscar is responsible for her degradation, a karmic fact that weighs heavily in his bardo trip, after he is shot and killed by police in the toilet of a sleazy “shot bar” called The Void.

Leading up to this sudden death, we are shown downtown Tokyo at night, a dazzlingly colorful and at the same time oppressive place. On the terrace of their modest apartment, Oscar and Linda watch a jet airliner climbing through the cloudy night sky. Oscar wonders what Tokyo at night looks like from up there, and Linda says she doesn’t want to know. She’d be scared, she tells her brother—of death, of falling into the void. Inside, Oscar shows Linda a copy of *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* that his friend Alex has lent him. Linda says sarcastically that Alex is trying to turn Oscar into a junkie *and* a Buddhist.

After she leaves to go to her job at the strip club, Oscar settles down to smoke some DMT, the powerful ayahuasca-based drug that compresses an hours-long psychedelic trip into six minutes of hallucination and ego-death. Oscar’s thoughts are audible to the viewer as he prepares to trip, then go silent as the visions begin, from kaleidoscopic mandalas into a journey through his very cells and the energy infusing them. Before the brief trip is over, his phone rings and his consciousness comes back enough to deal with the call. He has to deliver some drugs to his young British friend Victor, so he attempts to get straight, going into the bathroom to splash some water on his face. In the mirror we get our first look at Oscar, through his eyes. So young—just a kid. He lapses back into the DMT visions momentarily before the door bell rings. It is Alex, and together they walk to The Void to deliver the drugs to Victor. While they walk through the garish Tokyo nightscape, Alex tries to answer Oscar’s questions about *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*. This is his CliffsNotes version:

“Basically, when you die, your spirit leaves your body. At first you can see all your life like in a magic mirror. Then you start floating like a ghost and you can see everything happening around you, you can hear everything but you can’t communicate with the world of the living. And then you see these lights, all different lights of all different colors. These lights are the doors that pull you into higher planes of existence. But most people, they actually like this world, so much so that they don’t want to be taken away. The whole thing turns into a bad trip. The only way out is to be reincarnated. Does that make sense?”

“Yeah, I guess so. What’s the bad trip?”

“You go crazy. It’s like what’s left of your mind has to be on top of everything. Then some darker yellow lights appear to you, they represent all these couples making love. And then, the light comes out from their bellies and if you get closer, they give you a vision of a possible future life. And you choose the life that suits you the best, end up in a womb, and then you’re reincarnated. End of story. And basically you do this over and over until you manage to break the circle.”

At the entrance to the Void, Alex waits outside while Oscar delivers the drugs to Victor, a sen-
itive British teenager. But Victor has set Oscar up to be busted, in revenge for Oscar having sex with Victor’s mother. Oscar tries to flush the stash in the locked toilet of the bar, yelling to the police pounding on the door that he has a gun. Wrong thing to say: he is shot through the door, in the chest, and dies in a fetal position on the floor of the filthy urinal.

We hear Oscar’s dying thoughts, hear his heart stop, after which there is a blackout. A grid appears, from which springs a white light, which grows to encompass everything. In the Tibetan book, this is the opportunity for the soul to merge with the light and be liberated, enter Nirvana or Heaven, if one is prepared and is not attached to the world. Oscar is far from ready, and is unable to let go and leave samsara (the world) forever. He will have several other opportunities to enter the light (the void), but will remain connected to the earth by the karma he has accumulated through his human relationships.

The light becomes the ceiling fixture of the toilet stall in which the body of Oscar lies. The spirit rises, viewing its own corpse. This disembodied, silent mind will be our eyes into the cosmos and into Oscar’s memories, as well as events transpiring in the present. Victor hears the gunshot and becomes hysterical, realizing that he has caused not Oscar’s arrest but his death. Outside, he tells Alex what has happened. The police try to grab Alex, knowing he is involved in this drug trafficking, but he runs away. Victor is taken in for questioning.

The floating consciousness moves through walls, over streets, even into people’s minds, as Oscar follows what is happening to his body, as well as to Linda, Alex, Victor, the drug supplier Bruno, the strip-club owner Mario, and other people as they deal with the aftermath of his death. His mind flies to the strip club, called Sex Money Power, where he sees his sister pole-dancing and then in a dressing room having sex with Mario, ignoring a voice mail Alex has left, telling her of her brother’s death. For a moment, Oscar’s mind enters the head of Mario as he’s copulating, in essence making love with his own sister. This connection will play out dramatically and spiritually, to a logical conclusion and new beginning.

Now begins the “magic mirror,” as important scenes from Oscar’s life are remembered. The camera—the subjective eye—sees the back of Oscar’s head in this memory phase, looking over his own shoulder as he sees himself and Linda as children. Their childhood seems nearly idyllic, until a tragic accident takes away their loving parents (Warning: this accident is sudden, loud, extremely disturbing, and is repeated in the film.) Oscar has vowed to take care of his sister after they lose their parents, but they are separated by a rather cold grandmother. We begin to feel that judging Oscar as an amoral drug pusher who has led his sister into a debauched life is not fair, without considering the suffering he has endured in his short life. Compassion is necessary.

As an American expatriate in Tokyo, Oscar made friends with Alex, a French expat, and Victor, a young Britisher who lives with his parents. Alex encourages Oscar to bring his sister to live in Tokyo, while at the same time introducing him to Bruno, a homosexual drug lord, and the seedier side of Tokyo nightlife. Victor’s parents welcome Oscar into their home, and Victor’s mother seduces
him. When the Subject (no longer “Oscar”) remembers making love to this older woman, he simultaneously remembers his mother’s breasts and his own suckling as an infant, something he tells Alex was the best time of his life. The mammary attachment, so powerful in life and even more so in the afterlife, made palpable.

Alex’s Japanese roommate has created a psychedelic model of downtown Tokyo which, under blacklight, is a dazzling representation of samsara and its illusory nature. Taking LSD with Alex, Oscar remembers opening a door and seeing his parents in bed having sex; then sees Alex doing the same with one of the strippers. Before long, Oscar is dealing drugs at the strip club, until the owner Mario catches him and threatens to kill him.

Victor’s mother offers to financially help Oscar bring his sister to Tokyo. Linda arrives, and the siblings have an affectionate—bordering on incestuous—reunion. They ride a roller coaster at night (be prepared), walk through the colorful Tokyo streets, and talk warmly in their apartment as Linda, either innocently or provocatively, sits around half-dressed. Oscar takes her to a night club and gives her Ecstasy. Alex and Mario are both hot for her. She has not been a druggie in her foster-home upbringing—much less a stripper—but she connects with a loose exhibitionism and is soon immersed in that life.

Now the events leading up to Oscar’s death are remembered, until he is again on the ceiling of the urinal, looking down at his dead body. At the morgue, Linda identifies Oscar’s body. Oscar’s consciousness zeroes in on the fatal gunshot wound and enters it momentarily. Now we are in the present, seeing through the Subject’s eye: Alex on the run from police, living in cold alleys; Victor being interrogated by the police, threatened with prison if he doesn’t turn in Alex and Bruno; Victor confronting his mother with her infidelity with Oscar, in front of the father/husband, who becomes enraged; and Linda burning Oscar’s drug stash; then finding out that she is pregnant by Mario. She has an abortion, and Oscar’s spirit recoils at first, then enters the tiny bloody fetus. He must absorb all the pain and suffering in these scenes, having been responsible for much of it. The scene of Victor and his parents screaming at each other in their cramped kitchen becomes hellish, and the Subject enters the gas burner of the stove, drawn to the hell dimension.

The Subject now flies high above the city and enters a plane like the one he and Linda saw from their balcony. Night passengers, a baby crying, a mother nursing. She whispers to her infant, “Oscar.” Linda realizes that Oscar was right about Mario, that she should have been with Alex all along. So Linda and Alex get together, in a cab bound for the Love Hotel (the big trauma re-occurs in this scene; be prepared).

At the Hotel, which is the psychedelic model that Alex’s roommate created, there are sex acts in every room, bright lights at the points of contact. The Subject moves through walls, and enters the mind of one of the males atop his partner. Seeing the face of his sister in pleasure, he floats outside—the whole city has become the model—then back inside to Alex and Linda’s lovemaking. It is tender. Some visions and memories flash as he enters Alex’s mind. Linda tells him (them?) to come
inside her. Consciousness now enters the womb. It sees penetration, ejaculation, fertilization, interspersed with organic visions, leading to birth, and a first suckling with the happy mother, Linda. The umbilical cord is severed, and a newborn child begins to cry.

Has Oscar been reborn as the son of his sister and a mostly good-hearted friend, putting himself in a position to work off, in the course of a lifetime, some karmic debts? It would seem to make perfect metaphysical as well as dramatic sense. The dramaturgy after Oscar has been killed is indeed loosely based on *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, and ends with the Subject's search for the best way to reincarnate.

Yet Gaspar Noé appears to refute this. The writer and director, who opposes all religious beliefs, says that "*The whole movie is a dream of someone who read The Tibetan Book of the Dead, and heard about it before being [killed]. It's not the story of someone who dies, flies and is reincarnated, it's the story of someone who is stoned when he gets shot and who has an intonation of his own dream.*"

Noé describes the ending of the film as Oscar's recollection of "*the most traumatic moment of his life—his own birth.*" The director also leaves open the possibility that Oscar's life starts over again in an endless loop, due to the human brain's perception of time.

I would ask M. Noe, "*Where is this consciousness now, the one that we have been following in the afterlife? Will it be reborn? Why did we see the act of conception? I suspect you of trying to keep your agnosticism pure. You have created, cinematically, a perfect arc of karma and reincarnation, within the context of a very real and complex human drama.*" (This is not the first time a director's explication of a film has differed with my own impression; *Donnie Darko* another case in point. In some instances, this has led to further reflection and new insights. In others, I'll stand by my own analyses, believing that creators don’t always understand their own children as well as some analytical observers may.)

A note about the two versions of the film, 143 minutes compared to the "director’s cut" at 161. Noe made only one cut to meet contractual obligations regarding length: he excised the entire seventh reel, starting about the 100th minute. He said that the reel does not contain any critical information, and given the nature of the narrative, that is true. But there are some elements open to interpretation, and some memorable visual effects as well; the long version is recommended, unless you find the whole thing excruciating.

DELETED REEL:

After a tracking shot to Linda's hair and a rather long dark screen, a scene in the hospital. There are several shots of the surgery (blurred and with fade-outs), then Linda and Alex' housemate are seen in the corridor.

Linda goes back to Mario's car, Alex' roommate is already sitting in the backseat with Oscar's subjective view.
Linda: "That thing is not my brother. He's obviously not like how he was. That thing is fucking disgusting."

Mario: "Shut up! Have you two decided where we going? Have you two decided, where the fuck we going?"

Linda: "There is...there is no way I could put up with him."

A hand from the backseat (Oscar's?) reaches for Linda's shoulder, she screams: "Don't fucking touch me!" Mario reacts instantly and hits the person in the face. Alex' roommate tries to calm them down in Japanese.

Linda is whiny: "Let's get the fuck outta here"

After a black screen we are back in Oscar's memory. He is sleeping in Alex's flat. The roommate shakes him lightly and tells him to wake up. He does, walks through the room, and looks at himself in the mirror.

Next is a scene of the fugitive Alex at night in a lonely alley; he has made a fire. Alex is painting on the wall—in the course of the scene the writing changes from "I want 2 live" to "I want 2 die."

He is talking: "They burnt you, didn't they? They burnt you, didn't they? They torched you! They torched you, c'mon, think about it. Close your eyes and think about it. If you're lucky, you might find your ashes. Go on, you little cunt! Go on! Close your eyes, think about it! Go on!" The camera pans to the fire, a burnt head can be seen. The last scene in the sequence: A chat between Mario and Linda, as she eventually says goodbye to Oscar's remains.

Linda: "I, ah..."

Mario: "What?"

Linda: "I had another dream where my brother resuscitated from the morgue. Isn't it creepy, keeping his remains in that box?"

Mario: "What you gonna do? It's your fucking brother!"

Linda: "Those remains are not my brother."

Mario: "Do what you want."

Linda exits the room and shortly afterwards flushes the remains down the drain, saying "Goodbye." The camera tracks into the drain.
Avenging Angel: “The Lovely Bones”

The Lovely Bones impresses with the kind of visual magic one has come to expect from Peter Jackson, as he and his team create an ever-changing death-state called The In-Between. It is almost heaven, a place for innocent victims to absorb and deal with their sudden deaths—the temporary spiritual home of Susie Salmon, who has been brutally murdered at the age of fourteen, and whose unfinished business consists of bringing her killer to justice, and her first—and last—kiss.

Jackson’s ability to meld otherworldly special effects with human (and creature) emotions is well-known (Lord of the Rings, King Kong), but in adapting Alice Sebold’s bestselling novel he has created a haunting work that directly addresses fundamental spiritual questions. Do the dead communicate with the living, and if so, to what end? What is the meaning of good and evil? Is there an ultimate justice for the suffering of innocents—indeed, for all sentient beings?

It is suburban Pennsylvania in the early 1970s, an era when kids like Susie Salmon felt safe—“before the milk carton kids,” as Susie says in her voice-over narration from The In-Between. We see a happy family at their second home—the mall. Susie tells us that she is being watched by her murderer in this scene at the Food Court, and we are subjected to some misdirection: the rather sad-looking solitary man that we are given to suspect is not him, Susie tells us. That man is a loving father who will also lose a child, to disease, a year after Susie’s death. The actual demonic pain-giver is blending into the crowd of shoppers.

He is a pedophilic serial killer named George Harvey (Stanley Tucci). It is implied by the nature of his victims that he rapes them before murdering them, a terrible fact which was explicit in the novel. So this is a monster in human form, and we will have a large emotional investment in seeing that he is stopped and—punished? Susie is urging us in our hate, as she comes to terms with her sudden separation from the confusing pleasures of life as a 14-year-old middle-class American girl. That much of her life may be superficial, even meaningless, is posed by a satirical, all-too-familiar view of a vapid suburbia. But this consumer-heaven milieu is counteracted powerfully by the emo-
tional bond between Susie and her parents, particularly the father-daughter connection. She can not let go of this natural attachment, but must somehow utilize it to lead her father to the murderer. She admits the fixated hate that keeps her “in-between,” while her guide, an Asian girl who calls herself Holly Golightly, is urging her to let go and move on to “a wide, wide heaven.”

The In-Between is a heavenly space custom-made for the earthbound soul of Susie Salmon—brilliant vistas that change as quickly as a 14-year-old’s attention span. Susie at first does not remember her death, and sees herself escaping from George Harvey’s underground “clubhouse,” which he has built in a winter cornfield. He lures her with the suggestion that he has made it for “the kids,” and that she will be the first to see it and tell her friends about it.

She envisions herself running in terror down a dark lane, as if she has escaped. But she soon realizes the truth, as her spirit enters Mr. Harvey’s house and beholds a bloody scene with the villain soaking in a bathtub with a rag over his head, as though he were dead himself—a truly horrifying scene. Susie still doesn’t fully understand, until she sees on the table her charm bracelet, a symbol of her short life and the meaningful things in it. In particular a little silver house that Mr. Harvey will keep as a fetish to remember the rape and murder and recapture the thrill. That realization causes her image to literally blow away, and—as Mr. Harvey cleans up the gore and burns Susie’s clothing, and police are alerted about a missing child—Susie tells us:

“I was slipping away. Life was leaving me, but I wasn’t afraid.”

Now a series of wondrous visions both celestial and earthly: her light-body jetting through space; a moonlit lake with a gazebo in the center, where her teen-crush Ray sits forlornly; the sun a mandala (sacred geometric design for leading one to the Center—Home) which grows until it fills everything. In the bardo of painful death, this all-encompassing clear light of love is the opportunity for the soul to merge and be liberated forever from the wheel of birth, death, and rebirth. But fear and attachment often prevent this ultimate letting-go, and Susie is not able to merge, but instead sinks into the lake. In the Tibetan teachings, this is the first sensation of the consciousness in the dissolution of the body—Earth sinking into Water. The other four steps in the process,—water sinking into fire, fire sinking into air, and air into light, are not visualized here. But Susie’s sinking, and floating to the bottom of the lake, may be an intentional reference to the Buddhist teaching.

A classmate of Susie’s, Ruth Connors, is a raven-haired artist, a “weirdo” with psychic ability, who saw Susie’s spirit-body as it ran in terror down the lane after her death. She picked up a note that Susie dropped, a love poem from her boy-crush, which Ruth now shows to the incredulous Ray.

“Where did you get this?”

“I found it,” Ruth replies. “I never knew what dead meant. I used to think it meant lost...frozen.”

“It means gone,” Ray replies glumly. “She’s gone.”

“What if she isn’t?” says Ruth, knowingly. “What if she’s still here?”

Susie observes this whole scene with obvious mixed feelings, jealous that Ruth is forming a
bond with Ray, and a deeper understanding that she still has business with the living. The highly nuanced and acclaimed performance by Saoirse Ronan as Susie is epitomized by expressions of complex human emotions in her young, very human, and no longer living face. Holly Golightly tells her that she has to move on, but Susie cannot—and turns back from the heavenly path.

Her dad, Jack (Mark Wahlberg,) has sunk into deep depression, looking at the model ships in bottles that he had constructed with the help of his “first mate” Susie. He begins smashing them, in anger at his loss, creating a magnificent shipwreck scene that Susie observes in the In-Between. He stops before destroying the last one, and uses it to build a shrine to his missing daughter, a single candle placed upon the bottle and set in the window of Susie’s bedroom. This simple act opens a channel of communication between father and daughter, one that feels like faith but that some would call metaphysical. Susie exalts in the connection, telling Holly Golightly that she is “not lost, or frozen, or gone...but alive in my own perfect world,” and the visualization of that elation is a joyful teen fantasy of epic proportions.

Susie’s little brother comes into this room from bed, telling the dad that he saw Susie; she came into his room. Hugging him, Dad says that he saw her too. The boy, Buckley, tell his father “I think she listens.” Communication has been established.

Nearly a year goes by. Jack is still obsessed with the “case,” bombarding the detective (Michael Imperioli) with suspicions and theories, while his wife Abigail (Rachel Weisz) agonizes over her husband's desperate grief. Buckley tells Grandma (Susan Sarandon)—who has come back to stay with them, and offer a bit of boozy, cynical comic relief—that Susie “is here. She's in the In-between.” The middle child, Lindsey, who is growing into a normal teen like Susie was, begins to suspect George Harvey, when the family dog barks at him as they are jogging past his house. He has begun a scrapbook on Lindsey, aware of her suspicion and marking her as his next victim, and has started constructing a new trap.

Jack becomes certain of Harvey’s guilt and goes after him, urged on by Susie’s vengeful spirit. But he pays for his violent impulse with a savage—and ironic—beating. Susie sees it all, and the In-Between begins to crumble, turn dark and foreboding. She realizes, as her father lies in an ICU with a weeping Lindsey at his bedside, that she has to let him go, and vice versa. Entering the place she dreads getting trapped in, George Harvey’s house, she can see the bodies and burial places of all his other victims, spanning many years, all young girls except for the first, who was his landlady. One of the victims is a 14-year-old Asian girl, who we have come to know as Holly Golightly.

The mystery of the whereabouts of the lovely bones, Susie’s remains, is revealed. It is an important element of the plot as suspense mounts. Lindsey now becomes Susie’s agent as she breaks into Harvey’s house looking for evidence and finding it. Knowing he’s been found out, Harvey escapes, disposing of the lovely bones on the way. The drama now builds around our concept of earthly justice and our hope that it will be done, that this heinous villain will be caught and punished.
At the same time, Susie has finally let it go, and concludes her only unfinished business, that longed-for adolescent kiss.

Our own thirst for vengeful justice is subverted, as Mr. Harvey meets his demise as instant karma, a not-so-random accident. In this film’s version of the cosmos—the Christian-based belief that humans have one life to live, after which they will be accorded a place in heaven or cast into eternal torment, based on degrees of love and sin—we believe that Harvey will be meted out his punishment. Reincarnation is neither mentioned or implied. But as richly detailed as Susie’s afterlife has been, a glimpse of Harvey’s descent into hell might have been appropriate for such a morality play. Looking at his dead body, I had an “Is this the end of Rico?” moment, and knew that it was not.

In a Tibetan view, we would have seen him confronting the clear light with an opportunity to merge and find the peace of Nirvana. But given his extremely painful karma, his soul would have run from the light, into rebirth as an animal, perhaps as a trap-door spider, having blown his chance in the human dimension for many lifetimes.

But we are spared a glimpse into a serial killer’s hell, as the film looks heavenward, and concludes with the soul formerly known as Susie Salmon finally liberated, and flying as a bird toward the green tree of ultimate freedom, a view of her family reconciled, and her parting words for us:

“I wish you a long and happy life.”
"Ink"
~Remembering Who We Were

**Ink** is a self-described science fiction film from 2009 that uses a fractured narrative—and innovative visuals that belie a shoestring budget—to tell the story of one soul’s passage through the dreamworld, the afterlife, or a combination of the two. Sorting out the scrambled timeline can be challenging, and may demand multiple viewings (like all cult films worth their salt) to fully appreciate this metaphysical drama.

Writer-director Jamin Winans has created a fantasy world inhabited by three distinct types of metaphysical beings: **Storytellers**, who give sleeping humans happy dreams; their antagonists the **Incubi**, who bring nightmares—and a third class of spirits called **Drifters**, who are neither good nor evil but are mercenaries who would serve the Incubi for profit or for admission into their godlike realm.

The man-creature called Ink is one of these Drifters. And there is a solitary being called a **Pathfinder**, who has been sent to aid the Storytellers in this particular quest. All of these supernatural forces will battle—quite literally—for the soul of one John Sullivan.

In the opening scene, John Sullivan (Christopher Soren Kelly) leaves his office building visibly upset, and while driving away is broadsided by another driver. Looking at his bloody unconscious form through the car window, someone says “Tick tock, this man got rocked.” We may assume that it’s an EMT arriving on the scene, but find out later that the voice belongs to the Pathfinder. Now we see John being awakened from sleep by his beautiful daughter Emma (Quinn Hunchar), and the misty quality of the scene may lead one to assume that John has died in the crash and that his daughter is there to guide him in the bardo. But nothing in **Ink** is simple or predictable, and this sequence, in which Emma wants John to pretend with her—to build a fort against “the monsters”—parallels a climactic scene with Ink and Emma in the Incubi’s world.

John’s life is revealed in boldly filmed scenes, which he may be remembering in the afterlife. The story is tragic and relatable: a young success-driven businessman neglects his wife and daughter, loses wife in auto accident due to his alcohol-impaired driving, drowns his guilt in more alcohol until his in-laws take custody of Emma. This further undermines his sanity, but he throws himself even harder into making and closing deals, until the Big Deal turns sour.

Meanwhile (and I use the term loosely) a creature in a big shaggy coat and hood, called Ink, whose only visible feature is a giant nose, appears at night with the other angels and devils of the dreamtime. He steals the soul of Emma from her bedroom in the grandparents’ house and escapes,
but not before a knock-down-drag-out fight with the Storytellers. Ink is rough and ruthless, and his plan is to enter the Incubi realm and offer the soul of Emma, in return for becoming one of them.

The grandpa/former father-in-law visits John in his office and says that Emma is in a mysterious coma and needs her father. John, angry and embittered because the grandparents have “stolen” his daughter, refuses to go see her. Soon after he has the auto accident—which we now discover is not an accident at all—and is taken to the same hospital where Emma is.

The twists and turns of the plot are best left to the viewer to unravel, as well as the roles of other major characters. But the identity of the being named Ink is suspected early on, and how he became this monster is the crux of the film. This is where the dream-world ends and the bardo begins, and where salvation may be found, with the help of angelic guides—who will even sacrifice themselves to preserve the love of a father and daughter for each other.

The story of the production and distribution of Ink is fascinating in itself and can be read about elsewhere. But the dedication, creativity, and resourcefulness of the young Denver couple Jamin and Kiowa Winans needs to be acknowledged. This was truly a DIY with minimal crew, and the unique look of the finished product—the color-coded worlds, the fascinating Incubi, the kinetic fight sequences—all make Ink highly entertaining and provocative.

It’s not exactly a disclaimer, but as a fellow Denverite, I got an extra boost from the montages and whole scenes shot in various Mile High locations—all in the Winans’ otherworldly style.
Laurie Anderson’s 2015 documentary begins as a tribute to her beloved rat terrier Lolabelle, whose death is conflated with the death of Laurie’s mother. Laurie narrates a hand-drawn dream in which she gives birth to Lolabelle, after she has had the full-grown dog sewn up inside her. Now she relates her mother’s dying words as consciousness began to unravel, about animals that she sees on the ceiling.

“Tell the animals. Tell all the animals,” she beseeches the family gathered at her deathbed.

Anderson’s mellifluous voice, familiar to many fans of her recordings, films, and multimedia stage productions, is both soothing and alarming. Exactly the tone for this meandering meditation, which integrates her observations of changes in post-9/11 America—urban militarization, the exponential growth of surveillance infrastructure, massive data collection—with a practicing Buddhist’s explanation of The Tibetan Book of the Dead—the Bardo Thodol.

Between the current reality of a gigantic NSA facility in the Utah desert and the sublimity of a guided death, with the aim of release and liberation—Laurie weaves family stories, complete with Super 8 movies from her childhood shown through an overlay of rain running down a windowpane. Effectively artful, these words and pictures reflect the “dream” of her personal life, and through this act of self-reflection, she is in the profound process of letting go of her own life, as she has her dog’s, her mother’s, and her husband Lou Reed’s.

Lolabelle’s life and death are poignantly shown, scenes from the terrier’s POV, pavement level in Greenwich Village, in hills and on beaches. Lolabelle goes blind with age, so she takes up playing the piano and gains a cult following, a subset of Anderson’s large avant-garde fan base. Lolabelle even records a Christmas album. When the time comes and her body starts to fail, she is admitted to animal hospital. The vet gives the standard speech about cessation of pain and suffering. One shot to calm her, another to stop her heart. Laurie’s and Lou’s Rinpoche tells them:

“Animals are like people. They approach death, and then they back away. And it’s a process, and you don’t have the right to take that from them.”

So they take her home and over the next few days, help her to die. In return, Lolabelle un-
locks a depth of tenderness they had never felt. At this point in the film, Laurie begins her dharma lecture, explaining the *Bardo Thodol* in lay terms, and creating visualizations of what Lolabelle’s bardo dreams might be.

She says that she will keep a 49-day journal of what is going on in the real world and what is going on in the canine bardo. It’s the spring of 2011: Osama bin Laden is killed, while the Arab Spring is being quashed. In the afterlife, Laurie tells us, there are illusions and projections of the mind, as familiar living things disappear, echo, and repeat. There are exhortations from the guides to “recognize this” and “wake up,” “do not be afraid” and to leave behind aggression and passion until “the monkey-mind dissolves like moonlight in a cloudless sky.”

There is a long, slow shot of her and Lou Reed on a beach, the first image or reference to her late husband, who died in 2013, the year before this film was made. His passing is at the core of the film, and Laurie’s love for both man and dog cannot be separated at this point. As one of their teachers has said, “the purpose of death is the release of love.”

At the end, she returns to her mother’s dying words, and adds her own:

“Tell all the animals.”

“Is it a pilgrimage? Toward what?”

The density of Anderson’s powerful and subtle voice, the music that weaves and surrounds, the flowing tapestry of images, and printed text onscreen—which comes as a shock when it appears—might seem a lot to digest, but the final effect of the 71-minute work is one of simple grace and deep care. This reverberates in the coda of the work, Reed’s inimitable voice singing “Turning Time Around,” a playful/serious song that seems to embrace the Buddhist beliefs the two great artists shared in their later life together:

*She says, What do you call love?*

*well I call it Harry*

*Oh, please I’m being serious*

*what do you call love?*

*Well I don’t call it family and I don’t call it lust*

*and as we all know marriage isn’t a must*

*And I suppose in the end, it’s a matter of trust*

*if I had to, I’d call love time*
She says, What do you call love
can’t you be more specific?
What do you call love
is it more than the heart's hieroglyphic?

Well for me time has no meaning, no future, no past
and when you’re in love, you don’t have to ask
There’s never enough time to hold love in your grasp
Turning time around

Turning time around
that is what love is
Turning time around
yes, that is what love is

My time is your time when you’re in love
and time is what you never have enough of
You can’t see or hold it, it’s exactly like love
Turning time around

© Lou Reed 2000
A well-dressed young man stands on a subway platform, alone except for a man and woman standing nearby, making out. He watches them glumly, as their french-kissing becomes exaggerated, their eyes vacant, sexual zombies engaged in some kind of anti-romantic ritual. The man, Andreas, looks away, but he can’t help glancing at them. Suddenly the train approaches, and he leaps from the platform to his audibly squishy death. Fade to white.

A bus station in a desolate plain. The stationmaster puts a “Welcome” sign up on the building as a bus approaches. Andreas is the only passenger. A luxury sedan is waiting to take him to The City. He sees plowed fields, then city highways, suburbia, a badminton game in progress. He is taken to an apartment complex and shown his modern flat, and then to an office where he is given an accounting job. His boss and co-workers are all very happy. He is told not to work too hard.

Outside his office building, Andreas is given a jolt—a gruesome suicide, a jumper impaled on a high iron fence while clean-up crews attend to the mess. A message from “the gods” perhaps, about his own recent demise, a warning that he’d best go with the flow if he would be redeemed of his sin of self-destruction. (At least he is not encased in a tree and picked at by harpies, like Dante’s suicides.)

At the pleasant after-work bar, in the men’s room, Andreas is conversing with another man about how the alcohol doesn’t really work like it’s supposed to. A man in a toilet stall, unseen, joins the conversation, confirming what Andreas is saying. Nothing satisfies, he says. Not “hot chocolate, pussy, or burgers.” Andreas realizes that he is not alone in his dissatisfaction, and that it is possible to say so.

His apartment is nice and comfy, and he has also acquired a red sports car. But he can’t shake the sense of numbness and ennui, probably the same state of mind as at the time of his death. At work, he is chopping thick sheaves of paper with an industrial cutter and sticks his finger under the blade. The pain and gushing blood are real enough—to his surprise—and he is taken to a hospital where the hand is bandaged. The next day he removes the wrapping and he finds his hand back to normal.

He meets a woman, Ann Britt, who is agreeable to his every suggestion, and they have sex immediately and repeatedly. He helps her redecorate her place, and before long they are co-habitating. She is, like most of their “friends,” obsessed with interior decorating. All of Andreas’s
needs are fulfilled, and yet he is troubled by the vapidity of it all.

Another young woman, Ingeborg, catches Andreas’s eye at the office. She seems as pliable as Ann Britt regarding Andreas’s interest, leading him to assume that he can have her just as easily. So he tells Ann Britt that he is leaving her. She is fine with that but wonders if he can wait until after their dinner party on Saturday. He agrees.

He wines and dines Ingeborg like a suitor, and proposes to her, in a surreal restaurant scene. She tells him that she’s sleeping with a lot of different guys, but she’ll move in with him to have more room, plus a bathtub—she only has a shower now. Andreas then finds himself alone on the train platform, dejected at this turn of events. The zombie french-kissers are there, exactly as in the opening scene. The train approaches. He jumps.

The train squishes him again, then stops and backs over him repeatedly as he screams in pain. Chopped into pieces, he is scattered along the track by the locomotive. After this manic, horrifyingly funny scene, we see his reconstituted body lying on the darkened track near the bright end of a tunnel. He picks himself up, drags his imperishable carcass out to the city street, where a couple picks him up and helps him home. Their kindness is the first real emotion shown toward Andreas—friendly spirit guides.

They take him back to Ann Britt’s, who takes him and his bloody form in as though nothing had happened. She tells him that some friends of theirs want to go go-carting with them on Saturday.

“OK,” he says.

He meets the contrarian man from the toilet stall, from whose apartment beautiful strains of violin music can be heard. This man, Hugo, claims to have been cured of his previous dissatisfaction, but Andreas forces him to reveal a vagina-like fissure in a back wall of his apartment, from which emanates the sweet sad music, and savory smells as well.

Obsessed, Andreas takes to the opening with a jackhammer, disregarding the noise that carries out into the streets. He uncovers a passageway, which in turn leads to an opening into an old-fashioned kitchen, where an old man and woman sit. It appears to be the organic world. He hears the sounds of children playing, melodic jazz, gentle surf, and he manages to grab a handful of something delicious, which he is stuffing into his mouth when he is dragged out by the authorities.

He and Hugo are arrested, although Hugo is soon released. While sitting in the police car, Andreas is approached by a woman from among the many bystanders.

“Most people are happy here,” she tells Andreas. “The majority of people are happy here.” The crowd behind her all nod in agreement.

In the final montage, Andreas is driven back to the bus station in the wilderness. The vaginal hole leading to the organic world is cemented over; Britt Ann has a new handsome mate; Hugo is working as a janitor; Ingeborg smiles at a self-assured lover. There is a happy badminton game, per-
haps the same one, never-ending. The bus arrives at the depot, and again one person, an old wom-
an, gets off and is greeted by the stationmaster. Andreas is roughly shoved into a compartment
above the rear wheel well, which becomes deafening and filled with churning road dust. He is
thrown about in the confined space for who knows how many miles, and then is dropped, or
dumped rather, in a different place. The film ends.

**The Bothersome Man**, a 2006 film from Norway, imagines, through the script of Per H. V.
Schreiner and direction of Jens Lien, a purgatory for suicides—if it is indeed specifically for suicides—
not far removed from the world the self-destructed have left behind, showing both the good and
bad of modern society. As opposed to the solitary suicide-hell inhabited by Annabella Sciorra’s
character in *What Dreams May Come*, this sociable well-ordered world appears temporary, a purga-
tory where the sin of suicide—the rejection of the world—may be purged and in some way forgiven.
Perhaps the souls who adapt and attempt to find a form of happiness here that they never could in
life, may remain in this lukewarm world, without agony or ecstasy, free from messy drama.

Many critics and commentators have called **The Bothersome Man** a dystopian fantasy, over-
looking the fact that Andreas is *dead and in the bardo*. The social system that the character perceives
in this purgatory is a projection based on the world he’s left behind. Calling this film “dystopian” as a
critique of the world in which Andreas finds himself bespeaks a death-denial that is pervasive in our
culture. It may be dystopian in the way it *reflects* the world of the living, our contemporary global
consumer society, as a vacuous civilization where the organic is not always appreciated, but pleasure
pursued endlessly.
Earning Hell:

“The Devil in Miss Jones”

Known as a landmark hardcore film from 1973 that helped usher porn into the mainstream (on an infamous double-feature with Deep Throat,) the interesting view of both purgatory and hell posited by writer-director Gerard Damiano is worth inclusion here. Because lust and desire figure so prominently in many of the films in this book—reflecting both standard morality and the powerful attachment most of us have to sex—The Devil in Miss Jones is important, paradoxically a titillating porno film and also a cautionary tale against unbridled lust.

A young woman commits suicide by slashing her wrists in a bathtub. She finds herself in a bucolic setting, what appears a country manor, in 19th-century dress. She is interviewed by a pleasant young man named Mr. Abaca, who tells or reminds her that she is dead, and that her life was irreproachable—all except for the suicide, which is unforgivable, thus condemning her to hell.

As she died a virgin at the age of twenty-something, Miss Jones feels a bit cheated, having to go to hell without having really sinned. So she asks Mr. Abaca if she may be allowed to go back and devote herself to lust and debauchery, that she might at least deserve eternal damnation. He agrees, and her soul is sent, not to the world she left, but to a purgatory where she is tutored in carnality by The Teacher (Harry Reems). He first tells her that her body is not very sexy to most men’s taste, rather angular instead of curvaceous, which suggests a psychological reason behind her self-destruction. Miss Jones’s repudiation of sex in life, her failure or refusal to connect with potential partners, is offered as motivation, even justification, for a virgin suicide.

The bulk of the film is now given over to the rather perfunctory initiation by the Teacher into the various sex acts, which involve other men and women—demons?—until Miss Jones is “engulfed and consumed” by lust, as she had suggested. If the overarching religious theme is doubted, Miss Jones eroticizes with both Snake and Apple.

She is now recalled by Mr. Abaca and told, despite her pleadings to have another chance at life, that she must go on.

Her hell, in the final ironic scene, is a bare cell that she shares with an obviously insane man. She masturbates and begs him to satisfy her., while he rants in cryptic phrases, ignoring her urgent attempts at seduction.
Richard Linklater’s densely fascinating animated film from 2001 is in many ways a remake of his seminal film *Slacker* from ten years earlier. In the opening scene of *Slacker*, Linklater himself plays a character called Should Have Stayed at Bus Station, who directs this monologue to a cab driver taking him into Austin:

“Man, I just had the weirdest dream - back on the bus there? Did you ever have one of those dreams that are completely real? I mean they’re so vivid... It’s like, there’s always something bizarre going on, though. I have one about every 2 years or something... **Like there’s always someone getting run over, or something really weird...** Anyway, so this dream I just had was just like that, except instead of anything bizarre going on, I mean, there was just nothing going on at all. Man.” (Emphasis mine.)

This character gets out of the cab and then goes around a corner where a woman has just been run over, her groceries laying around her in the street. Surreally, people come upon the scene but seem blasé and detached. Should Have Stayed at Bus Station grabs the unconscious woman’s purse and heads down the street. The movie takes off following another character, then another and another: “Slacker” becomes a series of shifting scenes and talking heads, in the process giving the flavor of the generation known as X and its lifestyle in laid-back Austin in the late 1980s.

In the opening of *Waking Life*, a young man wakes up on a train, also bound for Austin, after a couple of interesting dreams. Unlike the ever-shifting points-of-view in *Slacker*, this Subject, played by Wiley Wiggins, is the central, perhaps the only character—and he is about to “meet his maker.” He gets run over, and spends the rest the film listening to many different people talking, as if seeking an answer for the confusion of life—or death.

Occasionally, in the course of the film, Wiley—I’ll call him by the actor’s name, as Linklater surely based Main Character on his friend Wiggins' true personality—will wake up in bed. But when he tries to get up and rejoin his “waking life,” he starts to float uncontrollably. After grabbing a car door handle to keep from leaving the earth, he rejoins his “dream” and the next talking head.

So—leaving the train station, Wiley gets a ride with a friendly weirdo in nautical garb, driving a car that looks like an open runabout. He climbs in back where another man is already riding—guess who? Richard Linklater of course. Linklater—who also plays the critical last character, Pinball Playing Man—tells the driver to “go up three more streets, take a right, go two more blocks, then drop this guy
Wiley seems aimless and agreeable, and gets out at this seemingly random place. A piece of paper is lying in the street. He picks it up—it reads “Look to your left” and when he does, he is hit by a car. One may assume that this part of the dream is reality, and that he is in the bardo, just now remembering his death, but still wants to believe that he is asleep in a bed somewhere.

Now begins the series of “interviews” with his “guides.” They may all be people that Wiley has known or seen in life, and now, in death, he calls on them to answer his unspoken questions about what his life has meant, what he has learned. By the respectful way they treat Wiley, as an equal and a seeker, they let him—and us—know that he has indeed learned a lot, has been a friendly and curious person who is worth guiding to liberation and ultimate knowledge. Not bad for a slacker dude.

Linklater recruited and cast a wide variety of actors, friends, teachers, colleagues and local characters to represent all these characters.; many are playing themselves. Ethan Hawke and Julie Delphy even appear as Jesse and Celine, the (sole) characters in Linklater’s Before saga, who lie abed philosophizing in their distinctive banter—seeming, like the others, to answer some unspoken question of Wiley’s. Alex Jones, then a famed Austin character and later global provocateur and conspiracist, contributes a political rant to Wiley’s afterlife. Anger and paranoia are also represented by at least one demon—a wrathful red-faced man in a jail cell, ranting at his unseen persecutors, based on the sole character in the Hubert Selby novel The Room. (Linklater’s literary influences are rich and well-documented.)

There are over forty characters who appear to Wiley and offer some guidance or insight for both him and the audience. Here is what I consider a relevant sampling:

Bill Wise as The Boat Car Guy: “Keep things on an even keel...go with the flow...The sea refuses no river.”

Kim Krizan, as herself, talks about human communication: “So much of what we perceive cannot be expressed. It’s unspeakable. And yet, you know, when we communicate with one another, and we feel that we have connected, and we think that we’re understood, I think we have a feeling of almost spiritual communion.”

Eamonn Healy as Shape Shifting Man, talking about the evolution of evolution: “Evolution now becomes an individually centered process, emanating from the needs and the desires of the individual, and not an external process, a passive process... The new evolutionary paradigm will give us the human traits of truth, of loyalty, of justice, of freedom.”

J.C. Shakespeare as Burning Man, his final words before self-immolating: “Hey, you got a match? And they haven’t given us any other options... outside the occasional,
purely symbolic, participatory act of voting. You want the puppet on the right or the puppet on the left? I feel that the time has come to project my own...inadequacies and dissatisfactions...into the socio-political and scientific schemes, let my own lack of a voice be heard.”

Alex Jones, as himself, driving a loudspeaker car, trumpets this bit of non-paranoid, albeit libertarian, idealism: “Start challenging this corporate slave state! The 21st Century is gonna be a new century, not the century of slavery, not the century of lies and issues of no significance, and classism and statism and all the rest of the modes of control! It's gonna be the age of humankind...standing up for something pure and something right! “

Aklilu Gebrewold, a young African man, playing himself:
“The main character is, to this new mind, greater mind. A mind that yet is to be. And when we are obviously entered into that mode, you can see a radical subjectivity—radical attunement to individuality, uniqueness to that which the mind is—opens itself to a vast objectivity. So the story is the story of the cosmos now. The moment is not just a passing, empty nothing yet. And this is the way in which these secret passages happen. Yes, it's empty with such fullness...that the great moment, the great life of the universe...is pulsating in it.”

Steve Fitch as Chimpanzee, a film studies professor (as Wiley relives a film class, sees a montage entitled Noise+Silence that the chimp is running, projected on a classroom screen):
“We the unappeased, the unaccepting, continued looking, filling in the silences with our own wishes, fears and fantasies. Driven forward by the fact that no matter how empty the world seemed, no matter how degraded and used up the world appeared to us, we knew that anything was still possible. And, given the right circumstances, a new world was just as likely as an old one.”

Man Writing a Novel at the Bar and Woman Talking to the Novel Writer:
“What are you writing?”
“A novel.” (The writer seems possessed but not mad.)
“What's the story?”
“There’s no story. It's just...people, gestures, moments, bits of rapture, fleeting emotions. In short, the greatest stories ever told.”
“Are you in the story?”
“I don’t think so. But then I'm kind of reading it and then writing it.”

Wiley awakens from a dream about a bar patron and bartender conversing amiably and then shooting each other dead. He leaves a message on a friend’s phone, then turns on the television and begins channel-surfing. Very strange images and messages flash into his consciousness, some
familiar (like Jim Breuer’s “Joe Pesci” saying “Lunatic macaroni munchkin with my googat,” and shots of the band Nirvana performing)—some surreal, and some typical of the common yet distinct montages of our own individual lives, a waking bardo experience we can relate to.

Spirit guides appear on talk shows. A self-assured man (Kregg A. Foote): “I subscribe to the premise that this flawed perfection is sufficient and complete...in every single, ineffable moment.”

An erudite woman (Mary McBay): “Sorcerers, shamans and other visionaries...who have developed and perfected the art of dream travel, the so-called lucid dream state...where, by consciously controlling your dreams, you’re able to discover things...beyond your capacity to apprehend in your awake state.”

This resonates with Wiley, as he has begun to wonder why he can’t seem to really wake up. Why everything seems so strange, how he floats from place to place to find certain people and listen to them. Increasingly, the guides ease him into the reality that he is no longer Wiley, but just memories and unanswered questions. His next stop is an old church building where he consults a group of people called “oneironauts,” who explore dream worlds, usually associated with lucid dreaming. They school him in a most friendly way:

“I had a friend once who told me that the worst mistake that you could make is to think that you are alive...when really you’re asleep in life’s waiting room. The trick is to combine your waking rational abilities with the infinite possibilities of your dreams.”

Wiley converses freely with these people as opposed to being mostly a silent listener:

“You know, I just woke from a dream. It wasn’t like a typical dream. It seemed more like I’d walked into an alternate universe.”

“So what was going on in your dream?”

“Oh, a lot of people. A lot of talking. Some of it was kind of absurdist, like from a strange movie or something. Mostly, it was just people going off about whatever, really intensely. I woke up wondering, where did all this stuff come from?”

“You can control that.”

This man, played by John Christensen—who died at age 28 before Waking Life was released—tells Wiley that one quirk in lucid dreaming is that you can’t turn lights off and on—that is a way to test if you are dreaming or not. On the way out of the room, Wiley tries the light switch. It doesn’t work: there is no Off—perhaps a clue to the ultimate reality that cannot be hidden. You have to look at it, there is no turning back now. Wiley floats out of the window and across the urban landscape as night falls.

He drifts into a movie theater where he is the only one watching a film about two men talking about film. His eyes glow with the reflected screen, a great animated image. Linklater not only pays homage to his cinematic education but establishes the fundamental connection between life, illusion, and ultimate reality which movies have a unique power to convey, through the marriage of technolo-
“And so what film is actually capturing is, like, God incarnate, creating, you know, like this very moment, God is manifesting as this.”

“So film is like a record of God or the face of God...or of the ever-changing face of God.” Wiley is drawing on his love and study of film to help him see himself—the pure consciousness that has survived body-death—as sacred. He has only to let go of the remaining ego to be free.

He walks in a train yard. A man (David Martinez) jumps from a boxcar and asks him if he is a dreamer. Wiley says yes. His monologue is directed not only to Wiley but to all who would evolve and save our world with dreams and action:

“Nobody teaches it so no one knows it exists. The dreamer is banished to obscurity. I'm trying to change all that, and I hope you are too. By dreaming every day. Dreaming with our hands and dreaming with our minds. Our planet is facing the greatest problems it's ever faced. Ever. So whatever you do, don't be bored. This is absolutely the most exciting time we could have possibly hoped to be alive. And things are just starting.”

An evolved being, who appears as a shape-shifting young man, shows Wiley the way out:

“Now I remember. This happened to me before. This is why I left. You have begun to find your answers. Although it will seem difficult, the rewards will be great. Exercise your human mind as thoroughly as possible, knowing it is only an exercise. Build beautiful artifacts, solve problems, explore the secrets of the physical universe. Savor the input from all the senses. Feel the joy and sorrow, the laughter, the empathy, compassion...and tote the emotional memory in your travel bag. I remember where I came from and how I became a human. Why I hung around. And now my final departure is scheduled. This way out. Escaping velocity. Not just eternity, but infinity.” He changes into a nebulous form before disappearing.

Wiley meets a woman, they converse in a dark space, maybe the subway. He realizes that he is dreaming and attempts to practice lucid dreaming with her. She asks him what he has been dreaming.

“It's weird, too, because it's not like a fixed state. It's more like this whole spectrum of awareness. Like the lucidity wavers. I'm talking about being in a dream. But I'm beginning to think...that it's something that I don't really have any precedent for. It's totally unique. The quality of the environment...and the information that I'm receiving. So much of the information...that these people have been imparting to me... I don't know, it's got this, like, really heavy connotation to it. It's not like I'm having a bad dream. It's a great dream. But...it's so unlike any other dream I've ever had before. It's
like the dream. It's like I'm being prepared for something.”

“Speed” Levitch, talking to Wiley while crossing the Brooklyn Bridge at night, speaks of Lorca, Dostoevsky, Thomas Mann, and this interesting titbit:

“Giacometti was once run down by a car, and he recalled falling into a lucid faint, a sudden exhilaration, as he realized at last something was happening to him.”

He meets a familiar young woman, who comes on to him, and as they kiss, he has another false awakening. He knows this from looking at his unreadable digital clock, and now he is truly shocked that he cannot wake up. He plops on the couch and channel-surfs, and the Wise Woman reappears with a definitive concept:

“Down through the centuries, the notion that life is wrapped in a dream... has been a pervasive theme of philosophers and poets. So doesn't it make sense that death, too, would be wrapped in dream? That, after death, your conscious life would continue... in what might be called, "a dream body"? It would be the same dream body you experience in your everyday dream life. Except that in the post-mortem state, you could never again wake up, never again return to your physical body.”

Quiet Woman at Restaurant (Mona Lee Fultz) with a 'meaning of life':

“It was a time to become conscious, to give form and coherence to the mystery. And I had been a part of that. It was a gift. Life was raging all around me, and every moment was magical. I loved all the people, dealing with all the contradictory impulses. That's what I loved the most...connecting with the people. Looking back, that's all that really mattered.”

The last, critical guide in the film is again played by the director, Richard Linklater, appropriate since he is the creator, who in the opening of the film seemed to send Wiley to his appointed death. Wiley approaches him while he is playing pinball and confronts him with this:

“Hey, man. Weren’t you in the boat car? You know, the guy...the guy with the hat. He gave me a ride in his car or boat thing, and you were in the back seat with me... You guys let me off at this really specific spot...that you gave him directions to let me off at. I get out and ended up getting hit by a car. But then I just woke up because I was dreaming, and later, I found out that I was still dreaming. But I’m still in it now. I can’t get out of it... I keep waking up, but I’m just waking up into another dream. I’m starting to get creeped out too, like I’m talking to dead people. This woman on TV’s telling me about how death is this dream time...that exists outside of life. I mean, I'm starting to think that I'm dead.”

Linklater as Pinball Playing Man, the final guide, goes off on a long spiel about dreaming, false awakenings, Philip K. Dick’s visions, and about a particular nightmare he had that was not a dream but a visit to the land of the dead.
“And then I realize I’m actually in, you know, the land of the dead. And everyone around me was dead...When I finally woke up, I was like, ‘Whoa. That wasn’t a dream. That was a visitation to this real place, the land of the dead. ’

“So what happened? How did you finally get out of the dream? See, that’s my problem. I’m trapped. I keep thinking that I’m waking up, but I’m still in a dream. It seems like it’s going on forever. I can’t get out of it. I wanna wake up for real. How do you really wake up?”

“I don’t know. I’m not very good at that anymore. But, um, if that’s what you’re thinking, I mean, you probably should. If you can wake up, you should...because someday you won’t be able to. So just...but it’s easy. Just...wake up.”

He does, but knows from the unreadable clock-radio that he’s still in the dream. He goes walking around Austin, the sun is shining, nature is beautiful. He comes back to the house, and in the driveway begins to float again. Again he reaches for the car-door handle, but this time consciously lets go. His body—the ethereal body since his physical body died already—begins to float into the blue sky, higher and smaller, until he is gone. A moving depiction of a soul’s liberation.

This reminded me of the ending of The Incredible Shrinking Man, who became so small he merged with the cosmos. It was a spiritualized ending that uplifted an ostensibly routine sci-fi film of the ‘50s into a well-regarded cult classic and provoked some confused pre-teen musings in me. I didn’t know then that both the novel and screenplay were written by Richard Matheson (see What Dreams May Come), one of the many deep thinkers in the visionary genre called science fiction.
Like many of the films in this book, the fact that *The Life Before Her Eyes* is included is a spoiler, so let’s cut to the chase. Someone is dead, and it is a person that thinks she’s alive, until the ending, when the truth finally catches up with her, a la *The Sixth Sense*.

Where Shymalan’s film employs some subtle misdirection, *The Life Before Her Eyes* is liberal with its clues and hints of what happened in that girls’ restroom during a Columbine-esque shooting rampage. That we deduce the truth early on does not detract from appreciating the provocative story, spiritual conjecture, and technical artistry the film provides.

Teenaged Diana (hereafter referred to as TD,) played by Evan Rachel Wood, and Maureen (Eva Amurri) are besties at Hillview High School, although they seem to have little in common besides their playful senses of humor, and living in a less prosperous neighborhood than their classmates. Where TD is rebellious and reckless, with an active sex life and casual drug use, church-going Maureen is earnestly religious, but still typically boy-crazy. Diana dishes about her exploits, titillating her friend and encouraging Maureen to encourage a boy that she has a crush on. Joking around in the girls’ restroom at school, they hear gunfire down the hall, coming nearer, and the nightmare—which seems all too familiar to us now—begins.

The story jumps to the parallel, predominant story of the adult Diana (AD) (Uma Thurman) and her idyllic suburban life with handsome husband and adorable child. The television news is reporting on the upcoming 15th anniversary of “the tragic date” of the school shooting and a ceremony planned for victims and survivors. This triggers Diana’s flashbacks before, during, and after that fateful day. The scene in the restroom, as they are confronted by the disturbed shooter—a boy they both know, who tells them he is going to kill only one of them, and they need to decide which—is repeated and incrementally revealed to the audience, leading to the climactic ending.

We are led to believe that she is haunted not only by the trauma of the event, but by guilt over the death of her friend. She goes about her life, dealing with her young daughter, who is exhibiting the same rebellious nature that she had, and trying to decide whether to attend the commemoration as one of the famous survivors. But we realize, as AD’s memories and her daily life become
increasingly surreal, that she is the murdered one, even though we see Maureen tell the shooter to kill her, while Diana begs to be spared.

There are clues and recurring motifs that Adult Diana is but a projection of dying Teenage Diana—the life she might have had, flashing before her eyes. The Zombies’ 1960s hit song “She’s Not There” is heard on a car radio—not once but twice, in case you didn’t get it the first time. Water is a powerful recurring image: several swimming pool scenes, and the flooded restroom after the killer has shot up the plumbing. Flowers and gardens, lush close-ups of the organic world, strange dream-like juxtapositions. The cinematography is integral to the ultimate depiction of Diana’s bardo experience, and quite often stunning.

The character of Mr. McCleod, the biology teacher, is important on multiple levels, as is the character of AD’s husband Paul—how they met, his infidelity—and the personality of her imaginary child Emma—all figure in the slow reveal, as the projected memories multiply. AD goes to the massacre’s anniversary commemoration and it is there that illusions are completely dissolved and she is forced to remember her death, and the courageous sacrifice that now sets her free.

There is some controversy around the film’s dealing with abortion, as there is bound to be whenever the subject is broached. It is integral to the plot, and is not presented in a pro-anything stance. The fact that it is remembered by a dead soul trying to evaluate the worth and understand the mistakes of a life being left behind, certainly complicates the issue with important spiritual and moral questions. In a sensitive scene, Adult Diana is reading to Emma, the child she never had, a bedtime poem by William Blake, which Emma says is “the only one that helps me”:

“*Nurse’s Song*”

“When the voices of children are heard on the green,
And laughing is heard on the hill,
My heart is at rest within my breast
And everything else is still.

Then come home, my children,
The sun is gone down
And the dews of night arise;
Come, come, leave off play and let us away
Till the morning appears in the skies.”
“No, no, let us play, for it is yet day,
And we cannot go to sleep.
Besides, in the sky, the little birds fly,
And the hills are all covered with sheep.”

“Well, well go and play till the light fades away,
And then go home to bed.”
The little ones leaped and shouted and laughed,
And all the hills...echoéd.
Guide as Huckster: “Beetlejuice”

Tim Burton followed his brilliantly odd feature debut, *Pee-Wee’s Big Adventure*, with this bardo comedy that became so popular and profitable, it propelled Burton into the helm of *Batman* the following year, and an ongoing career as a distinctive auteur in the realm of comedic fantasy.

*Beetlejuice* (an anglicizing of Betelgeuse, the “star” named after the star) is a decidedly slapstick version of the afterlife. There is a macabre bureaucratic waiting room for the newly deceased, haunted-house hijinks complete with cheesy monsters—think Large Marge—and enough one-liners to fuel an Abbott & Costello “horror comedy.”

The casting elevates the film above the rather silly script: Alec Baldwin and Geena Davis as the dead couple, Jeffrey Jones and Catherine O’Hara as the artsy NYC couple who move into the dead couple’s home, 17-year-old Winona Ryder as their goth daughter who can see the ghosts, and Michael Keaton in the title role, a bardo-trapped smarmy TV huckster whose “late-night” commercials set the movie’s tone:

“Betelgeuse, the bio-exorcist! Troubled by the living? Is death a problem and not the solution? Unhappy with eternity? Having difficulty adjusting? Call Betelgeuse.”

Keaton’s indelible performance, oozing with lechery and desperation, was largely improvised and dominates the film—in a mere 17 minutes of screen time. In his rotting polyester suit and Oscar-winning ghoul makeup, he reeks of decay and conveys, hilariously, the panic of the lost soul, the “dying” stand-up comic.

Adam and Barbara Maitland are a sweet-natured childless couple who are enjoying a staycation, remodeling their colonial Connecticut farmhouse. A pesky real estate agent drops by to try again to talk them into selling their spacious home to an interested family from New York City. They gently tell her for the umpteenth time that they are not interested in selling.

Returning from a trip to town together, Barbara swerves to avoid hitting an animal and the car
plunges into the river and sinks. Suddenly, they are back home, and it doesn’t take them long to realize that they have died. They have no reflection in the mirror, and a book has appeared called *Handbook for the Recently Deceased*. It’s a bit of a slog, as Barbara relates:

“This book reads like stereo instructions. Listen: ‘Geographical and Temporal Perimeters: Functional perimeters vary from manifestation to manifestation.’ This is going to take some time.”

Adam had been building a model of the town in the attic, in the cemetery of which we see a miniature Betelgeuse reading the obituaries in a newspaper, or, to him, the business opportunities section. He sees the Maitlands as potential clients for his “bio-exorcism” service, after the house is sold to an obnoxious family from Manhattan. The Deetzes are Charles, a real-estate agent who initially just wants to relax in his new country home, but soon sees the potential for developing the bucolic area into a new bedroom community—Delia, a laughably pretentious sculptor who sets about turning the Maitlands’ beloved farmhouse into an avant-garde nightmare—and their daughter Lydia, a Goth teenager who’s a budding photographer and justifiably alienated from her parents. She can also see and converse with Adam and Barbara, which poses an interesting idea. As Barbara has read to Adam from *Handbook for the Recently Deceased*:

“In the book, rule number two: ‘The living usually won’t see the dead.’”

“Won’t or can’t?” asks Adam.

“It just says ‘Won’t.’”

Thus the two primary mindsets regarding death and the afterlife: denial of the spirit world born of fear, and sensitivity through open-hearted curiosity.

The Maitlands manage to make it out of the house to the bardo waystation, where a variety of gruesome corpses wait interminably for their numbers to be called. The receptionist, a young female suicide, tells them:

“You’ll use up all your help vouchers: D-90s. You spend 125 years on earth in that house, during which you get only three class-one D-90 intercessions with Juno. You probably haven’t read through the manual completely yet. You’ll have to wait if you don’t have an appointment.”

“An appointment with whom?”

“For Juno, your caseworker....Number 54,000,601!”

Juno, played by the venerable Sylvia Sidney, tells the young couple that they will indeed be earthbound in their house for 125 years, putting up with whoever might reside there, unless Adam and Barbara can “haunt” the house and scare them away. This results in some humorous attempts that backfire, because Charles Deetz, when it dawns on him that the ghosts are real, sees an even bigger potential developing the area as a “supernatural resort”. He pitches the idea to a Trumpish
Manhattan real estate mogul (Robert Goulet):

“We've really got something here. We can turn this place into the world's leading supernatural research center. An amusement park. I'll do a presentation. Lydia will bring the ghosts.”

The Maitlands and Lydia invoke Betelgeuse to crank up the scares and repel these invaders. For payment, he demands Lydia, and the morose teenager agrees to marry him and join him in death. His lechery comes charging to the fore, culminating in a bizarre wedding scene. But the creepy “bio-exorcist” is banished back to death’s waiting room, while the Maitlands have decided to co-exist with the Deetzes and to have a hand in Lydia’s upbringing, who is outgrowing her goth-deathwish phase. The next 125 years are looking up.

Burton’s Bardo 2: “Corpse Bride”

Twisted Tim revisited the afterlife again in 2005 with an animated fantasia about a gentle, rather nervous young man betrothed to a very suitable young lady—their names are Victor and Victoria, after all. But going out to the graveyard to rehearse his vows, he accidentally slips the ring onto the bony finger of a dead woman who had been murdered by a deceptive suitor. The spirit world recognizes the trans-bardo union, and Victor is whisked into the underworld to be with his bride. Merriment and mayhem ensue, “enlivened” by several clever songs, rendering Corpse Bride an animated musical comparable to the Disney blockbusters of the day. Some would say better, with Burton’s brilliant musical collaborator Danny Elfman at the fore, and the show tunes have a Sondheim quality. A macabre number performed by a welcoming committee of shades, specters, and skeletons, contains this reassuring chorus:

Die, die, we all pass away
But don't wear a frown
Because it's really okay
You might try and hide
And you might try and pray
But we all end up
The remains of the day.
It’s looking pretty grim for Victor but in the end, the corpse bride sacrifices her claim on the live groom in the cause of true love, and (spoiler) her murderer gets his karmic comeuppance as well.

A bardo-film case could also be made for the Burton-produced *The Nightmare Before Christmas*, set in “Halloween Town” with a wide assortment of hellish creatures—and plenty of G-rated jokes and kid-friendly characters to leaven the underlying fears.

And then there are the *Frankenweenie* films, further evidence of Mr. Burton’s delightful death obsession.
(MAJOR SPOILER) Alan Parker’s *Angel Heart* might not take place in the afterlife, but it features Satan as a principal character, and the protagonist—a tough New York private eye named Harry Angel—is in reality a soul trying to break his pact with Lucifer and avoid the fire and brimstone.

Hired to find a certain “debtor” by the obviously demonic Louis Cyphyre (Lucifer)—played by Robert DeNiro with widow’s peak, claw like nails, and serpentine composure—the private eye (Mickey Rourke) doggedly pursues the missing person. The case will take him from Manhattan to New Orleans, and deeper into the world of voodoo that he first encounters in Harlem. Jazz music and musicians play a large role in the story, as do sex, occultism, amnesia, ritual murder and dismemberment, all served with oppressive dread—a gumbo from hell. The truth is slowly revealed in Angel’s flashbacks, memories, and nightmares. He solves the case, and finds his man.
Memories to Go: “After Life”

A simple premise, which may be comforting or not: in the afterlife, a deceased person is counseled in choosing a single memory from their life, which they will take with them into eternity. All souls find themselves in this waystation—there is no heaven and hell, no karma, no rebirth. One soul, one life, one personal memory to carry forever.

In this 1998 Japanese film from writer-director Hirokazu Kore-eda, we see an overworked staff of young people whose job is to interview the deceased, a disparate group of new arrivals. Memories are evoked, personal details as well as the broader history of the times—especially the Second World War—and the characters’ lives take shape.

An old woman is stuck at age 9 and chooses to remember a childhood song and dance. An unhappy middle-aged man states that to be able to forget everything in his lifetime except one moment would be heaven. A 21-year-old man resents his early death and refuses to choose a memory, so as to “take responsibility for my life.” This young man later asks if he may choose a dream as a memory; he will bond in the course of the week with an old man, which helps him to make a choice. It is revealed that the staff are all such undecided souls. The cosmic rules state that they must become guides, until they can choose their eternal memory.

The film is structured daily, Monday through Sunday. The “clients” have three days to decide on a singular memory. On Thursday, the chosen events are viewed as they occurred in life, on a heavenly video monitor, and discussed by staff and Subjects. On Friday, the memories are re-enacted and filmed, on a sound stage with actors and props, while the Subjects watch the production, and tweak anything that doesn’t ring true. (There is a certain “pride of craft” shown by the actual filmmakers of After Life toward this heavenly film crew, but the re-creation seems superfluous, given the access to actual events in the Akashic-like visual record. Why would they have to carry a dramatized memory for all eternity?)

On Saturday, the films are all screened in the projection room for the subjects, after which they move on to... someplace eternal. But there is a drama yet to play out. One of the male guides, who died in WWII and is eternally young and still uncommitted to choosing a single memory, learns...
that he was part of the old man’s memory. The old man’s wife had loved the young man before the war, had mourned his death, and subsequently never really loved her husband. The young guide now decides that he must move on. He confides the whole story to his female co-worker, who also died young and has remained undecided (and sweetly attractive). They have become close, and the memory that he chooses to take—and her part in that memory—form a beautiful climax to the film.

And on Sunday, another week begins, with new souls emerging from the fog, the dedicated staff ready to receive them.
Bardo Blockbusters:  
“American Beauty”  
&  
“The Sixth Sense”

I am operating under the assumption that a majority of readers have seen both of these popular films from 1999, and that you have pondered, at least momentarily, the view of an afterlife in each of them. For those who have not seen either or both, mild spoiler alerts are in effect.

In the case of Sam Mendes’ American Beauty, in the opening we are told by the narrator that he is dead, and that we are going to witness the last few months of his life. As a plot device, it resembles the opening of Sunset Boulevard, with William Holden’s character’s glib, bitter narration from beyond death, followed by a recounting of all that has led to his particular demise. But now we ask harder questions. Where is this cynical deadpan voice, belonging to the lately-deceased Lester Burnham, coming from? And by what rules is he serving as tour guide for us, to this suburban hell?

From a bardo perspective, he is an earthbound spirit in the “painful death” phase, confronting his attachments and mistakes, as well as his virtuous qualities—nothing less than the meaning of his existence. We may assume that he has just died, and is reliving these last significant months of his life and taking us along so that we, anonymous viewers, might also judge him. We and he are spectators into his former milieu, populated with a grand assortment of blatant stereotypes that we all feel we understand—at least we titular Americans—whether we grew up in suburbia or not.

More than spectators, we are voyeurs. Voyeurism is a primary theme and style of American Beauty, and it brings up a fascinating point. If this soul of Lester Burnham is indeed omniscient and omnipresent, is he actually seeing, for the first time, all these scenes with people in his life at which he was not originally present? He sees his daughter and wife with others, including their lovers, and thus learns more about himself as father and husband. This way he can see all the forces at work in his life and death. It makes sense, cosmically and karmically, this omniscience. In this way, he is able to resolve all his desire, resentment, get in touch with the love he knows is at his core, and attain some kind of release.

Or stay snarky, and haunt this place and these people, especially his soulmate in split-level hell, Carolyn (Annette Bening). Lester certainly had issues—middle-age lust, suburban vapidity, al-
ienated children, and his superiority complex regarding it all—an all-American karma. As neurosis turns psychotic, resulting in the sudden onset of Lester’s departure from life, we are forced to consider the fears and desires that we all face in our modern and postmodern lives.

Not to delve too deeply into the plot and characters of such a popular film (#62 top rated movie on IMDb, won 5 Oscars, with another 103 wins & 98 nominations worldwide), but here are some significant scenes:

The alienated teenage lovers—Jane (Thora Birch) and Ricky (Wes Bentley)—seem to actually contemplate and question the meaning of life, if any, and its natural antithesis, death. Like the Goth daughter in Beetlejuice, they are drawn to death, the dark side, and because they are not programmed like the “adults,” can see a light on the other side. Jane and Ricky see a funeral procession:

“Is that a funeral?”
“Yeah. Have you ever known anybody who died?”
“No. Have you?”
“No. But I did see this homeless woman who froze to death once...just laying there on the sidewalk. She looked really sad. I got that homeless woman on videotape.”

“Why would you film that?”
“Because it was amazing.”
“What’s amazing about it?”
“When you see something like that, it’s like God is looking right at you, just for a second, and if you’re careful, you can look right back.”
“And what do you see?”
“Beauty.”

There is Ricky’s videotape of the white plastic bag floating in a updraft, that might be shopping bag or a trash bag. This in itself is a powerful metaphor for empty consumerism, but he infuses it with a deeper meaning:

“That’s the day I realized that there was this...entire life behind things...and this incredibly benevolent force...that wanted me to know that there was no reason to be afraid...ever. Video’s a poor excuse, I know, but it helps me remember. I need to remember. Sometimes there’s so much...beauty...in the world. I feel like I can’t take it...and my heart...is just going to...cave in.”

If Lester is witness to this sermon from his spiritual vantage, where he was not privy to it in life, it is indeed a lesson to help guide him onward.

The prevalence of sexual attachments depicted and felt in these bardo films may help us address, resolve, or simply laugh at our human sexuality, the source of so much pleasure and confusion. Lester has not been getting any for quite some time from his success-driven, mutually frustrat-
ed wife. So he jerks off, in the shower, in bed, and develops a lustful obsession with his teenage daughter’s cheerleader best friend. This becomes the overriding theme of *American Beauty*, with the ego-need to recapture some youthful glory. "*Middle-age crazy*” has become part of the American lexicon. And Lester was in the throes of it. Until he wasn’t.

His unwholesome fixation comes to a head, in a rather feverish, contrived climax. Lester undergoes some kind of moral transformation after almost seducing the teenager, who suddenly confesses her innocence—a virgin, not the worldly nympho she has bragged about being to Jane. The fever dream of Lester’s impending death builds, involving homoerotic bodybuilding, an hysterical wife with a gun driving home in the rain, and teenage drug entrepreneurs who are going to “escape” into a possible parallel hell in New York City. And a tormented ex-Marine who thinks Lester has been having gay sex with his son Ricky, leading to a fated psychosexual confrontation and painfully awkward dialogue, Colonel Frank Fitts (Chris Cooper) stands outside Lester’s garage in the pouring rain. Lester tells him, a little too kindly, to come out of the rain:

“Jesus, man, you are shaking. We really ought to get you out of these clothes. Yeah.”

“It’s okay. I... am....”

“You just tell me what you need. It’s okay. (Frank kisses Lester) Oh, whoa, whoa, whoa. I’m sorry. Y-You got the wrong idea.”

So, his fate sealed with a kiss, Lester leaves his body, sees what all the other people in his life are doing when the fatal shot is fired, and returns to his peaceful flight over the neighborhood from the film’s opening shot, with this monologue, confirming his attachment to Earth, and the possibility of letting it go:

“I had always heard your entire life flashes...in front of your eyes the second before you die. First of all, that one second...isn’t a second at all. It stretches on forever, like an ocean of time. For me, it was lying on my back at Boy Scout camp, watching falling stars. And yellow leaves from the maple trees that lined our street. Or my grandmother’s hands and the way her skin seemed like paper. And the first time I saw my cousin Tony’s brand-new Firebird. And Janie. And Janie. And...Carolyn.

“I guess I could be pretty pissed off about what happened to me, but it’s hard to stay mad when there’s so much beauty in the world. Sometimes I feel like I’m seeing it all at once and it’s too much. My heart fills up like a balloon that’s about to burst. And then I remember to relax...and stop trying to hold on to it. And then it flows through me like rain, and I can’t feel anything but gratitude...for every single moment...of my stupid little life. You have no idea what I’m talking about, I’m sure. But don’t worry. You will someday.”

A note about the soundtrack: The choice of popular songs to represent action and mood is typical of ‘90s pop films, but one inspired choice reflects the overall theme of *American Beauty* and
gets the adrenaline pumping as well: “The Seeker” by The Who:

*They call me the Seeker*

*I've been searching low and high*

*I won't get to get what I'm after*

*Till the day I die...*

**The Sixth Sense**, also released in 1999, preceded *American Beauty* by a month in late summer. The fact that they were both about the spirit world, and souls grasping for the meaning of their lives, gave them a synergy at the box office and in the culture. Perhaps they imparted a sense of closure as 1999 was coming to an end, when many thought the world might be as well, with the Y2K-bug hysteria.

The ending of *The Sixth Sense* startled a lot of viewers, but had been telegraphed by the opening scenes: the child psychologist Dr. Malcolm Crowe’s apparent murder, followed by the caption “Two Years Later”, implying that he survived the shooting.

Plunging ahead in the story, Dr. Crowe (Bruce Willis) is now involved in a new case, the seriously disturbed eight-year-old Cole Sear (Haley Joel Osment). The extreme edginess of the young character is offset and intensified by the doctor’s professional manner, and by the doctor’s alienation from his wife (Olivia Williams), who was so warm and loving in the opening scene. *Before the shooting*. The viewer may also notice his alienation from everyone else, who appear not to see him at all. Everyone except Cole, who, in a famous climactic scene, reveals his secret ability:

“I see dead people.”

“In your dreams? While you’re awake? Dead people, like, in graves, in coffins?”

“Walking around like regular people. They don't see each other. They only see what they want to see. They don’t know they’re dead.”

We see several examples of these earthbound souls as Cole sees them. All of the ghosts have the pallor of corpses and some show the bodily damage that killed them. Even ones who don’t know they’re dead still exhibit their wounds. The fact that Malcolm does not look dead or show the fatal gunshot is a glaring Shyamalan attempt at misdirection. Malcolm’s wound never appears until he realizes he’s dead, at which time, thanks to Cole’s guidance, he is able to heal his wife’s pain and finally let go of his life after those hypothetical two years.

Regarding a sixth sense, the ability to “see dead people,” it is an ancient form of mediumship called clairvoyance, “clear seeing.” It is the ability to see anything that is not physically present, such as objects, animals or people. This sight occurs in *the mind’s eye*. Some mediums say that this is their normal vision state. Others say that they must train their minds with such practices as medita-
tion in order to achieve this ability, and that assistance from spirit helpers is often necessary. Some clairvoyant mediums can see a spirit as though it has a physical body. They see the bodily form as if it were physically present. Other mediums see the spirit in their mind’s eye, or it appears as a movie or a still picture like a photograph in their mind. Cole Sear would be a highly advanced medium, to see the dead in such vivid embodiment.
Purgatory as Shtick:

“Defending Your Life”

A smugly clever advertising executive is celebrating a job anniversary with his colleagues. He cracks a few deadpan jokes, in the self-deprecating but superior style we have come to identify with Albert Brooks's film characters. Here he stars as Dan Miller, the aforementioned businessman, soon to be deceased. He picks up the new BMW that he is treating himself to in his upward mobility, and then, distracted by a stack of CDs, veers his new car into an oncoming bus.

He awakens in a tram full of dead souls dressed in white robes, bound for Judgment City. Here, after the shock of death has worn off and he reverts to his Jewish comic persona, Dan will literally go on trial, to weigh the merits and fails of his completed life. A defense lawyer and prosecutor have been assigned his case. These cosmic attorneys are both trying to prove, based on review of a certain number of days in his life, whether "Dan Miller" will have to go back to earth, or Go On.

To where is not specified. That souls are reincarnated indicates a possible Nirvana, or better places in the universe. Albert Brooks brings to the screenplay his own religious or cultural beliefs, including the latitude of Judaic beliefs regarding an afterlife. We know from Dan’s defense angel, Bob Diamond—played by the wildly gleeful Rip Torn—that the Great Beyond won’t be back on earth:

“Where am I? Heaven?”

“No, it isn’t heaven.”

“Is it hell?”

“No, it isn’t hell either. Actually, there is no hell. But I hear Los Angeles is getting pretty close. (Imaginary rimshot.) Daniel, let me tell you what’s going on. When you're born into this universe, you’re in it for a long time. You have many different lifetimes. After each one...there’s an examining period, which you’re in now. Every second of every lifetime is recorded...and as each one ends, we sort
of look at it. Look at a few of the days, examine it...and if everyone agrees, you move forward.”

“What do you mean ‘move forward’?”

“Continue onward. The point of the whole thing is to keep getting smarter. To keep growing...to use as much of your brain as possible. I use 48 percent of my brain. How much do you use?”

“I’m sorry?”

Bob Diamond holds up three fingers. “I use 3 percent of my brain?” Dan asks incredulously.

“Don’t worry. Everybody on Earth uses 3 percent of their brain. 3 to 5 percent. That’s why they’re there.”

“3? 3 percent? No one on Earth uses more than that?”

“When you use more than 5 percent, you don’t want to be on Earth... Worse comes to worse, you’ll go back to Earth and try again.”

“You keep going back until you get it right?”

“Not forever. Eventually, they’ll throw you away.”

“Have I been to Earth before?”

“Yeah.”

“How many times?”

“Approaching 20.”

“Is that a lot?”

“I was there six.”

“My God! So I’m the dunce of the Universe.”

“We’ve had people who have been there 100 times. I wouldn’t want them as friends, but we’ve seen them.”

It is the primary tenet of Judgment City that all life on earth is fraught with fear. That’s the big test, and to Move On, you need to have exhibited courage and moral fiber. In most religions, the twin horns of ignorance are fear and desire, but since Defending Your Life also blooms into a romantic comedy, lust and greed don’t come into play, aside from some good-natured sexual jokes. So the prosecutor focuses on what appear Dan’s weak and fearful moments. His motivation is shown to be self-preservation and pain avoidance, which have led to moments of shameful behavior. There is an incident with a bully that has haunted him his whole life, even though Bob Diamond argues that it shows prudence and non-violence, not cowardice. But this is the first law of Earth—survival instinct. So Brooks is broaching some very deep questions about human nature in a broadly humorous way.

Meanwhile, Julia (Meryl Streep), another defendant, meets and is for some reason attracted to the rather whiny Dan. He reciprocates the feeling of what can only be described as a romantic attachment, and Defending Your Life leavens the spirituality with a standard rom-com. Except that this romance is beginning in the afterlife, complicating the future immensely. Will this be a saving
grace for Dan, whose trial is not going well—the prosecutor having a field day with the squirm-inducing evidence of Dan’s rather fearful existence?

“Your Honors, I’d like to present a compilation of general misjudgments......half of them fear-based, half just stupid. I have assembled 164 misjudgments over a 12-year period.”

Julia’s trial, on the other hand, is going quite well—she is shown saving children from a burning building—and it’s soon apparent that she’ll be moving on. But still, she and Dan naturally bond when they have free time together: he cracks jokes and she laughs a lot. It is a relaxing respite from the gravity of Dan’s situation although his anxiety is always evident. He is jealous of Julia’s defense attorney Sam, a handsome black man who uses 54% of his brain.

The places Dan and Julia go in Judgment City form the middle section of the film and provides Brooks with an opportunity to create some memorable “death bits.” A Vegas-style night club featuring a wonderfully morbid comic and an audience of the newly-dead. The Past Lives Pavilion, hosted by a holographic Shirley MacLaine, in which former lives are revealed in a magic mirror. (Julia sees herself as Prince Valiant on horseback, while Dan sees a primitive chieftain running in terror.) A sushi bar filled with laughing wisenheimer Japanese chefs; and an Italian restaurant with another comical waiter and overly generous portions.

It’s no spoiler that Julia is “moving on,” and Dan is “going back,” a fun-while-it-lasted fling in Judgment City. Trams passing in the night. But a wild slapstick ending—reminiscent of Ben and Elaine in The Graduate if they had been, you know, dead—may or may not be satisfying in its anarchy as well as its rom-com resolution. Suffice to say that romance engenders courage, which may be spontaneously rewarded in a judgmental universe.
Saṃsāra is a Sanskrit word that means "wandering" or "world," with the connotation of cyclic, circuitous change. Saṃsāra is sometimes referred to as transmigration, reincarnation, a cycle of aimless drifting, or mundane existence.

Ron Fricke (director/cinematographer) and Mark Magidson (producer) have created a documentary film that aims to document—with images and music—nothing less than human existence on planet Earth, in the here-and-now. Filmed over five years in 25 countries, it succeeds on a conscious and perhaps superconscious level to convey the plight or plane of existence in which we find ourselves. Samsara (2011) follows Fricke and Magidson’s previous similar efforts, Chronos (1985) and Baraka (1992). Fricke was also on camera for the granddaddy of the genre, Koyaanisqatsi (1982).

The film opens with the creation, and closes with the destruction, of a Tibetan Buddhist sand mandala, a sacred artistic act that represents a basic Buddhist tenet, impermanence. The mandala is a symbolic representation of the entire universe, and the reality of the enlightened mind—Nirvana—protected from the ever-changing and impure outer world—Saṃsāra.

The viewer is then propelled, or drawn, flowing like a river, in and out of many scenes horrible, sublime, and mysterious, captured by stunning photography, much of it time-lapse. The viewer’s consciousness is exposed to images that are recognized, evaluated, and responded to with a full range of fleeting thoughts and emotions within the short duration of each scene. Music accompanies all, of equal power to the image. The soundtrack by Michael Stearns, Lisa Gerrard, and Marcello De Francisci is uncanny in its image-melding.

There are perhaps some overt lessons conveyed in Samsara about our mass consumer culture as well as our spiritual traditions that one may not subscribe to. But that is the challenge of Samsara: fill in everything YOU know of life on earth, the love and the fear and the appetites and the wonders—and then think about facing the sweeping-up of your beautiful sand image, at the end.
Death at an Early Age:
“Wristcutters: A Love Story” & “Donnie Darko”

I would have bet that Goran Dukic, the writer/director of Wristcutters: A Love Story had seen Jens Lien’s feature film from Norway, The Bothersome Man and been seriously influenced by it. Except that both films were released in 2006. A strange sort of synchronicity—the Year of the Young-Person’s Suicide-Bardo Film?

Suicide afterlives are envisioned in other films in this book—The Devil in Miss Jones, Mulholland Dr., What Dreams May Come, The Bothersome Man—but Dukic’s treatment of this critical subject is decidedly comedic and romantic, and veers completely wackward before a divine resolution. This was a one-off project for Dukic, a short-film maker from Croatia who got Hollywood and U.K. backing for this otherworldly comedy. He was no doubt aided in the money chase by lining up the young star Patrick Fugit for the lead, as well as some sterling supporting players—Will Arnett, John Hawkes, and Tom Waits.

Zia (Fugit), wakes up, and sets about cleaning his messy apartment. After the application of much elbow-grease, the handsome young man cuts his wrist over the bathroom sink. He looks into the mirror as his life drains away, then falls to the tiles and dies, noticing some dust bunnies in a corner that he had missed.

Now he has a job at Kamikaze Pizza, a pretty good job, and an apartment with an angry Austrian roommate. So it’s not bad, as bardos go. Zia narrates:

“Who could think of a better punishment, really? Everything’s the same here. It’s just a little worse. I’ve thought about suicide again, but I haven’t tried it. I didn’t want to end up in a bigger shit hole than this one.”

This “hole” looks a lot like the Southern California desert, dusty towns populated with scruffy, unsmiling people. We soon learn that these denizens can’t smile, because they are all suicides, and smiling is impossible—one of the natural laws of this place. Zia goes to a young-people’s bar, where two young women engage him in a game of guessing how each bar patrons “offed” themselves (this being the preferred term here). A young Russian man, Eugene, reveals that he was in a punk band and after getting heckled for the absolute last time, drenches himself with beer onstage and is elec-
Zia talks about his wrist-cutting and the reason thereof—his lost love Desiree (a perfect bardo name). There are flashbacks of Desiree and Zia at their in-lovingest, before the breakup, and we feel Zia’s futile longing for her. Eugene takes an interest in Zia and invites him home. In an inspired bit, Eugene’s whole family—mom, dad, brother—are suicides too, and they all live together, just like in the Old Country. Each one goes into his particular means of offing; in fact, we will see glimpses of many characters’ moments of self-destruction. They are poignant, macabre, even laugh-out-loud vignettes.

Zia runs into an old acquaintance from life who has offed and who tells him that Desiree also killed herself. She was not able to accept Zia’s death, even though they had broken up. Zia is thrilled (in his low-key way), and talks Eugene into driving his heap of a car across the bleak landscape to find his love.

"An ex-girlfriend in an ex-life," Eugene scoffs, but agrees to the quest because, as Zia tells him, what else has he got to do? Eugene’s beater has a couple of odd quirks: the headlights refuse to work, and there is a black hole in the passenger’s floorboard that gobbles up anything accidentally dropped.

They soon pick up a hitchhiker, a beautiful young woman named Mikal, called Mike, who is on a quest of her own: to find the People in Charge (PiC). She is a recent arrival and tells Zia and Eugene that she is there by mistake and just wants to go home, she misses everything about her life. We later see that her death was a heroin overdose, not a suicide, so she may have a case.

The three of them bond, camping together in a tent, and their banter is funny. Zia and Mikal discuss the peculiarities of this world, like the inability to smile, and a celestial anomaly:

“I wonder if people who die normally end up with no stars. I really miss the stars.”
“You get used to it.”
“I don’t want to get used to it. I want to go home.”

Eugene, being a horny rock star, tries to seduce Mikal, but she rebuffs him in her smooth sardonic manner. Some chemistry however begins to percolate between her and Zia. They maintain the primacy of their individual quests: she must find the PiC and get back to her young life, while he obsessively seeks his Desiree—even as he warms to the funny and beautiful “Mike.”

(The soundtrack for this bardo road-trip is a cassette of Eugene’s former punk band, which Eugene explains was in his pocket when he offed. The strange Euro-punk songs are performed by the Gogol Bordello, whose lead singer, Eugene Hütz, was a model for the character of Eugene (who
in turn is played with perfect accent by American actor Shea Wigham). The music is ragged, exotic, and funny, wholly appropriate to the surreality of the film.)

Halfway through, the narrative takes a sharp curve. A man lying in the highway at night (the headlamps have been miraculously “cured” by Mikal) is a strange gentle soul named Kneller (Tom Waits), who takes them to a camp that he runs in the high desert. There, small miracles occur, people and objects levitate, individuals change the colors of things. Kneller shrugs it off when Zia inquires about them and wonders why he can’t perform them. Kneller is too focused on getting his dog Freddy back from a rival guru, Messiah King, who has either captured or captivated the dog.

King (Will Arnett) has his own followers, who believe he is going to show them the way out of the Suicide Wasteland by committing his own suicide again, this time being resurrected. Kneller, Mikal and Zia trek across the desert until they find King’s camp. On the way, stopping for the night, Mikal and Zia wander off and find the moonlit ocean, which has been nearby all along. They make love and sleep until morning, when Kneller finds them. Their little beach love-nest turns out to be something less than romantic. And yet the spark has been struck, and we are rooting for them, however their cross-purposes may play out.

The object of Zia’s quest, Desiree, is one of Messiah King’s main disciples, and their reunion is briefly happy. She relates the depression over Zia’s death that led to her own offing, which is depicted in a quick insert that is both zany and horrible. Her fanatical worship of King turns Zia off, and King’s ritual suicide in front of the believers leads to pandemonium, compounded by a raid by the People in Charge. Kneller, we discover, is not a suicide like all the rest, but a celestial being—a PiC. He has seen that Zia loves Mikal, and urges him to tell her. But she has confronted the PiCs, and they have taken her away to investigate her claim. Zia waits alone for her to return, but is picked up instead by Eugene and his new love, Nanuk of the North. They are running away together to her home, catching a strange little railcar and leaving the trusty old car to Zia. Eugene tells Zia about Kneller’s true identity, and that the PiC have heard Mikal’s case, found in her favor, and sent her back to life.

Zia, sits in the car, alone again, pondering his fate.

Kneller makes one final appearance, in an official capacity.

The black-hole in the floorboard comes into play one last time, as a Conduit of The Lost, and the subtitle of the film is fulfilled, with a cosmic smile.

A cult as well as mainstream favorite from 2001, Richard Kelly’s *Donnie Darko* has inspired much speculation, based on the scientific and metaphysical ideas invoked or suggested in the film. A movie that builds its narrative on such works as Stephen Hawking’s *A Brief History of Time*, Graham Greene’s short story “The Destructors,” and a fictitious book, *The Philosophy of Time Travel*, appears to have some deep quasi-scientific questions to pose.
The last-named literary source, written by a character in the film, Roberta Sparrow, aka Grandma Death, is the key to Donnie Darko’s strange convoluted story. In the director’s cut of the film—released with great fanfare in 2005 with an additional 20 minutes running time—pages from Sparrow’s book are superimposed on the screen to explain the theory of parallel worlds and the corruption of time when these worlds intersect. This breach between dimensions involves an Artifact—in this case a jet airliner engine falling to earth—which will lead to the destruction of the world in “28 days, six hours, 42 minutes, and 12 seconds” from the beginning of the film, October 2, 1988.

This momentous information is imparted to teenaged Donnie Darko, who is somehow “chosen” to be the savior of the world—called in Sparrow’s book the Living Receiver, the only one that can prevent total oblivion by his actions within that time frame. Sparrow’s book further explains the other characters, including a man named Frank with a bizarre rabbit’s head mask, and how they relate to Donnie and his quest to reverse the Artifact’s intrusion into our world.

The extensive explanations offered by the visible text of The Philosophy of Time Travel in the Director’s Cut were resented by many original fans of the film, who appreciated the ambiguities of the plot and the conjecture they provoked. But since we wish to understand the writer/director’s full intention, here is the fundamental theory that Kelly’s/Grandma Death’s book propounds:

(\(PU = \) Primary Universe (The Universe we exist in now); \(TU = \) Tangent Universe (The parallel Universe that most of the film is set in); \(PoTT = \) The Philosophy of Time Travel)

The PoTT states that time, the fourth dimension, is usually a stable construct but every now and then it gets corrupted. When this happens, a Tangent Universe is created, which is highly unstable and will only last a few weeks before it collapses in upon itself. There is a danger that when the TU collapses it could cause a black hole capable of destroying the PU as well.

This is what happens in the movie—there is a corruption in time, and at midnight on October 2nd, a TU is created. The next 28 days are now set in this alternate reality. Shortly after the TU starts, Frank wakes Donnie up and lures him out of the house. A few minutes later, a large jet engine falls through the rip in time and lands in Donnie’s bedroom. He is not there; he has been directed by some sort a spirit guide to sleep-walk, and apparently sleep-pedal his bike, to a nearby hilltop. His “mission” to save the world has begun.

All the people connected to the Living Receiver (Donnie) are the Manipulated Living and these people will subconsciously help the Receiver. They will behave in the exact way necessary to push Donnie toward his eventual destiny.
Here’s where it gets complicated. Anyone connected to the Living Receiver who dies in the TU becomes *Manipulated Dead*, time travelers who have knowledge of the impending disaster and help guide the chosen one. Frank is killed in the TU, and therefore becomes one of the Manipulated Dead. He travels back in time and, in his Halloween rabbit mask, helps Donnie with his quest to return the Artifact, initially by waking him up before he gets killed by the jet engine. He is like a reverse ghost who appears before his own death. Gretchen the girlfriend (Jena Malone) is also a Manipulated Dead, leading him on to his destiny, even knowing that she is going to have to die. But she is saved, as the ending confirms.

Nearly every event in the film has a specific purpose designed to aid Donnie to save the Universe. What is the driving force behind the Manipulated behavior, the *Manipulator*? A divine hand saving the world through...a begotten son?

With so much additional information for understanding *Donnie Darko*, the plot becomes clearer, forming a compelling science-fiction work with religious and sociological undertones made for an intellectual youth market. And yet, viewing even the director’s cut, with its plot explications, I see another meaning, the bardo scenario I took away from my original viewing in 2001.

If Richard Kelly was facing his personal fears of death, the unknown afterlife, as he has Donnie do in the sessions with his therapist (Katherine Ross), might he not construct an intricate concept—indeed a whole book, *Philosophy of Time Travel*, that equates one human death with the whole universe slipping into a black hole?

As in many of the films in this book, when an opening shot is someone waking up, and the ending shows that character’s demise, one might suspect that the Subject is awakening in the death state, and all that follows is their personal bardo experience. The beginning is really the ending. So my alternate bardo version:

Donnie does die at the beginning of the movie. He is dead when he wakes up in his bardo on the hilltop. Everything that happens subsequently is the product of his teenage mind working through the life he has so suddenly left, creating strange sci-fi explanations, seeking out the teachers he respected in life, dealing with his anger over certain misguided or downright evil people, perhaps even imagining a girlfriend that he never had. Wishing that his life was more than significant, that he were the Ultimate Hero. The Harvey-esque rabbit is in fact a bardo guide, helping him come to terms with his death and the fear associated with it. The sexual symbolism of the humanoid rabbit (characters also prominent in Lynch’s *Inland Empire* and *Rabbits*) reflects the longing of a young life cut short and the fecundity he missed. Donnie’s teenage libido is a major issue for this premature death and the resolution thereof. At the end, he finally remembers how he died, and is happy to let go.

This interpretation holds water but for the final scene of the film. People awaken after Donnie
has saved the Primary Universe, some obviously remembering what has happened the last 28 days in the Tangent Universe. It is a powerful coda for the Manipulated Living. Particularly the character of Jim Cunningham, the success-and-motivational guru, whose perversion and hypocrisy were exposed by Donnie. We see him awaken from this 28-day dream in tears, obviously repentant and thankful for the chance to mend his ways while there is still time. He has been given a second chance by the Christ-like actions and death of Donnie Darko, who has taken a jet engine for the team.

So OK, Richard Kelly, you win. I fully accept your—and Roberta Sparrow’s—cosmological science fiction. Thanks for letting me squeeze it into my bardo-movie book.
“Stairway to Heaven”

aka

“A Matter of Life and Death”

Michael Powell & Emerich Pressburger’s 1946 romantic fantasia is a visual treat, a hallmark of their films whether filmed in black-and-white or Technicolor, or, in this case, both. During and immediately following World War II, their prodigious output was staunchly patriotic: *Blackout, One of Our Aircraft is Missing, 49th Parallel, The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp, The Volunteer, and finally Stairway to Heaven (US)/ A Matter of Life and Death (UK)*. Although it deals with an Afterlife and the rules that govern there, *Stairway to Heaven* is primarily an affirmation of the supremacy of romantic love, a just reward for a war-weary world, as well as a soapbox for the victory of global democracy.

The film opens with a cosmic journey, a celestial voice guiding us through the stars, homing in on a war-torn planet called Earth, and the impending doom of an RAF pilot, Peter Parker (David Niven) whose plane is going down in flames. Parker’s last radio communication is with an American WAAC named June (Kim Hunter) as he is about to bail out of his burning plane—without a parachute. They bid an intense farewell, the pilot with heroic, almost casual acceptance of his fate, the radio operator in tears—falling in love with each other’s voice in the final moments.

The plot proceeds around a glitch in the dead-soul retrieval process that spares Peter’s life. His “Conductor” couldn’t find him in the pea-soup English fog, and the intrepid pilot awakens in the surf, believing himself to be dead but actually alive on terra firma—albeit missing and unaccounted for in Heaven. Heaven is depicted in glorious black-and-white, an effective contrast to the famous Powell-Pressburger lurid color-saturation in the earthbound scenes. We see many souls arriving to some approximation of pearly gates—mostly soldiers, all of the English or American variety (The bond, and the gulf, between America and England are at the core of *Stairway to Heaven*, belabored in the climactic trial sequence.)

A discrepancy of one, between the confirmed dead and these arrivals, is discovered, and Conductor 71 is re-dispatched to collect the errant soul. However, Peter Parker sees June bicycling on a road toward her quarters, stops her, and their desperate radio love is sealed when they see and recognize each other. Although neither can explain how Peter is alive, they avow their love passionately.

Conductor 71, played with sophisticated charm and humor by Powell-Pressburger favorite Marius Goring, appears to Peter, making time stand still as he explains the situation. Peter claims
that he was perfectly willing to go when his time was up, but now he’s fallen in love, which should be an extenuating circumstance. He refuses to go without a fight. The admin staff in heaven agree that a trial should be held.

June has enlisted the help of the village doctor (Roger Livesey), who also happens to be a world-class neurologist, to help Peter with what they consider his delusions about the celestial Conductor and the impending trial. Peter’s headaches validate the doctor’s diagnosis of brain damage, and surgery is scheduled. It is in sleep and sedation that Peter travels to the black-and-white celestial realm via the stairway of the title—really an escalator, an amazing construction—to confront the authorities and to announce who his defending counsel will be. The Conductor tells him it can be anyone, living or dead. But Peter senses that the Conductor is tricking him to enter Heaven for all eternity, and runs back down the up escalator, and into conscious life.

He chooses the good doctor, staunch and canny, to defend his and June’s love versus death. A major plot twist complicates, or simplifies, the case for the Defense. The grand set piece of the trial is impressive with a gallery of thousands, many types of groups, nationalities, races, military, historical. There is a presiding judge who doesn’t pretend to be God or even a god, and a prosecuting attorney, Abraham Farlan, an American Revolutionary War casualty who particularly loathes the British. Played by a bombastic Raymond Massey, he has a Puritanical severity that seems well-suited to prosecute a case against Love. And the whole of British Culture while he’s at it. It’s almost painful to watch Farlan’s rabid Americanism.

The Escalator to Heaven is employed once again, as the heavenly throng descend to the hospital where Peter is under the knife, while his soul has been “up there.” June’s tears, as she watches and waits, are submitted as powerful evidence, but the clincher comes when she offers to take his place in death. The verdict is unanimous for the defense, Peter is granted X more years of life, to share with June to some ripe old age.
This film from 1990, written by Bruce Joel Rubin and directed by Adrian Lyne, is for me the quintessential bardo film. I saw it at the Cherry Creek Cinema in Denver in the first run, alone. I don’t remember what I had heard or read about the film, but the ending had certainly not been spoiled. I sat there stunned as the lights came up, my mind rewinding the film to grasp its significance.

The shock ending was felt to be a cop-out by many viewers. Perhaps they embraced the demonic elements and wanted it to be a straight horror film, albeit one intensified with dark political themes. A title-card postscript informs the viewer about an experimental drug used on soldiers in Vietnam, which further confused the film’s death-trip trajectory. I certainly did not know that Bruce Joel Rubin’s script came directly from his careful study of the Bardo Thodol. The big reveal at the end reflects the protagonist’s letting go of his life as it is inexorably slipping away. Rubin was also strongly influenced by another classic bardo dramatization:

“I realized that I was writing a feature length version of “The Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge,” a movie about the last moments, or hours, of a dying man wildly imagining his life as it is being taken away from him. I understood the philosophical relevance of my film to The Tibetan Book of the Dead, which details the progress of the soul through the various dreams and illusions it experiences during death. Suddenly the entire film found its spiritual relevance and grew from a horror film into a work of potential power and significance.”

A squad of grunts in ‘Nam come under attack, and at the same time the soldiers begin to have some sort of seizure, retching, acting deranged. Private Jacob Singer (Tim Robbins)—bespectacled, joshed by his fellow soldiers as “Professor”—observes this horrific scene as he returns from the latrine. He sees one of his buddies’ head vibrating rapidly, insanely, from side to side. There is a quick shot of a tropical spider in its web—a metaphor for what E.J. Gold calls “the shocking ambush of the labyrinth.”

Jacob runs away but is caught in the brush and bayoneted in the gut. Like The Sixth Sense, there is now a jump-cut from a mortal wounding to an awakening—in Jacob’s case, waking up on a subway train in New York City, wearing a postal uniform. We are led to believe that he was having a nightmare about his experiences in ‘Nam. Other strange passengers on the train, and Jacob’s fear on the hellish platform (similar to the opening scene of A Bothersome Man) create an atmosphere of
psychological horror.

At this point, it’s a small leap to believe that, rather than having a nightmare about combat terrors, the battlefield wound is reality and the subway is the dream. This is reinforced by continual progressive flashbacks of Jacob being found by corpsmen and medevacked by helicopter—and by the increasing insanity of the New York world around him.

This present reality looks like the world we know—we recognize it and want to accept it. But it is unstable, for Jacob Singer and for us. He is beset by visions of demons, entrapments, a burning fever, and a man with a vibrating head who appears in dark places, instilling great dread. In this de-volving madness, Jacob has one ally who proves to be fiercely protective—the angelic chiropractor Louis (Danny Aiello).

Jacob is married to Jezebel—"Jezzie"—(Elizabeth Peña), a Puerto Rican woman who works in the sorting cubicle next to his at the Manhattan Postal Facility. We soon learn he has a sweet ex-wife and three young sons, one of whom has died. Jezzie is hot-tempered and blooded, and Jacob is full of lust for her, though he otherwise seems mild-mannered and reasonable. His carnal desire is a barrier or obstacle he must resolve, to escape this hell.

A wild Manhattan loft party becomes a strobe-lit scene of demonic sex, witnessed by the horrified Jacob. He wakes in a burning fever that Jezzie treats by immersing him in bathtub of crushed ice. He awakens again, in bed with his first wife, Sarah, telling her of this nightmare that featured "Jezzie from the Post Office." They joke about it and Jacob’s anxiety fades, as they are now interrupted by their sleepy-eyed son Gabe. From the Jezzie-reality we know that Gabe is dead, the lost angelic child that Jacob still mourns. Then Jacob reawakens in the tub, his fever broken, looking up at the worried face of Jezzie. Dreams within dreams.

The disorienting narrative is complicated by the introduction of the other primary theme—the experimentation by the Army on enlisted men with drugs to increase their aggression. This takes us back to the opening scene in which the soldiers go insane as the enemy attacks. Jacob, fearful that he is going mad, contacts the surviving members of his squad, and finds that they are all having nightmares—waking nightmares involving demonic beings. The government seems to be out to silence them; there have been suspicious deaths. They try to retain a lawyer (Jason Alexander) to represent them in an Agent-Orange-type civil suit. He agrees at first, but is scared off by thuggish men in dark suits who are following the veterans.

Jacob is nearly run down by a long black automobile. His back is hurt, he can’t move, and is taken to a hospital, which becomes a charnel house, floors covered with blood, offal and body parts, as the gurney is pushed further into the bowels of hell. In an operating room, Jezzie is the doctor who attempts to plunge a large hypodermic needle into his forehead. She tells him that he is dead, and that there is no escape from this place. Jacob insists that he’s alive, just as the avenging angel
Louis charges into the operating room, wheeling him out and back into the light. In the sanctuary of his treatment room, Louis manipulates Jacob’s spine. Jacob tells Louis that he was indeed in hell.

“You ever read Meister Eckhart?” Louis asks.

“No.”

“How did you get your doctorate without reading Eckhart? Eckhart saw hell, too. You know what he said? He said the only thing that burns in hell is the part of you that won’t let go of your life—your memories, your attachments. They burn them all away. But they’re not punishing you, he said. They’re freeing your soul... Relax...good...

“So the way he sees it...if you’re frightened of dying and you’re holding on...you’ll see devils tearing your life away. But if you’ve made your peace, then the devils are really angels freeing you from the earth. It’s just a matter of how you look at it, that’s all. So don’t worry, ok? Ok? Good. Relax. Relax. Relax...”

This corresponds to Buddhist teachings that, in the bardo of painful death, the consciousness is bombarded with purifying rays that burn away sin/karma, and that the astral body intensely feels the pain of this cleansing. Notions of hell as a realm of fire may come from the universal memory of these burning rays—but they are beneficial in nature, loving, and not an eternal damnation.17

Now another man, Michael, contacts Jacob with a story, a confession really, that he hopes will dispel Jacob’s confusion. In 1968, Michael was busted for making LSD and subsequently recruited by the Army to go to Vietnam and work in a top-secret lab synthesizing mind-altering drugs to increase aggressive tendencies. They develop something called The Ladder, which, when tested on monkeys and Vietcong POWs, proved to be horrifyingly effective.

“Anyway, there was this big offensive coming up, right? Everyone knew it—Time Magazine, Huntley Brinkley—and the brass were scared because they knew we couldn’t win. Morale was down, it was getting ugly in the States. You remember.

“So, a couple days later they decide to use the Ladder...on one test battalion. Yours. Just an infinitesimal dose in the food supply, they said, just to prove its effectiveness in the field. They were sure your unit would have the highest kill ratio in the whole God-damn offensive, and they were right. You did. Except not the way they thought.”

“No one can remember that night,” Jacob says. “I get flashes, but they don’t make sense. What happened? Was there an offensive?”

“Yeah. A couple days later. It was fierce, but you guys never saw it.”

“But there was an attack? It was a fight, right?”

“Yeah, but not with the Cong.”

“With who?”

“You killed each other.”
“What!”
“It was brother against brother. No discrimination. You tore each other to pieces.”

Pause to consider: this whole subplot of experimentation on soldiers may just be in Jacob’s dying mind, as a way to explain and confront his fear. The dying mind may clutch at phantasms, projections from an ego that wants to live, not die a meaningless death, as by friendly fire. But this possibility is more or less negated by the end-title message referred to previously:

“It was reported that the hallucinogenic drug BZ was used in experiments on soldiers during the Vietnam War. The Pentagon denied the story.” (There is factual evidence supporting the accusation.)

Which makes Jacob’s Ladder both: a deep exploration of a mind going through the bardo of painful death—a dharma lesson from a Buddhist screenwriter—and a wholly separate political thriller, of mad science practiced by U.S. military commanders during wartime. But no matter who stabbed Jacob Singer, Vietcong or crazed brother-at-arms, he was definitely killed in Vietnam, or during “war games in Thailand.” He died on a table in a M.A.S.H. and never went home to his wife and children and that real or imagined job at the Post Office, where he might have lusted after a co-worker and fantasized about leaving his wife for her. Jacob’s Ladder takes place entirely in the dying mind, which may be considered an unreliable narrator. And, in fact, the movie viewer could be considered unreliable too, bringing his or her own hopes, fears, and ego projections with them into the darkness of the cinema.

Jake’s Guide
The Underworld: “Vera”

This 2003 film from Mexico depicts the afterlife visions of a solitary prospector who dies in a cave-in while digging for gold. Like the Dia de Muertos movies, Vera combines Christian and native American beliefs and iconography in a fascinating, if often obscure, narrative. Because the images tumble and swirl over the 80-minute course of the film, I will try to relate the phantasmagoria as it unfolds on the screen, with little commentary.

Dawn breaks in a mountain village. The sound of animals and birds soon mingles with that of children playing. Machete-wielding harvesters begin their workday. A day like any other. An old man laden with tools makes his way over the crest of a hill to an opening in the earth, into which he lowers himself with a pulley. It is a cavern or abandoned mine. He begins digging with his pick by lantern light, and appears to find a vein of gold just before the ceiling collapses, burying him. The lantern flickers, then is extinguished.

The screen goes black for several seconds. Then, a candle flame and a murmuring sound, and the man awakens. He sees a blue light and crawls toward it, then begins walking, but in shifting sands, buffeted by a swirling energy like an undersea current. He senses life-forms around him, sees a dead tree, and beside it a cow which begins to decompose. The shifting sands open up and he sinks, looking up in fear as he falls. Someone is singing in Japanese. He is drawn to a farmhouse, where he hears wedding vows being spoken. A snake crawls. The man finds a large gold nugget in his hand.

He has lit a flame under a cooking pot. He chants and prays. There is the bare frame of a house. He enters, again hears wedding vows. Smoke or steam is in the air. He attempts to take a piece of fruit from a bowl; it crumbles to dust. He lies in the bed. Around him there are Christian icons and family portraits, which come alive as he looks. He sees his wife lie down, praying to the Mayan goddess Lady Balam. The man is again jerked around by wind, assailed by loud noises. A point of light reveals itself to be a reflection of his lantern. He appears alive—maybe he was just knocked unconscious?

Relighting the lantern, he begins looking for a way out, entering a large cavern and shouting for help. He strikes the rock with his pick, and water begins to flow from it. He drinks from it and is refreshed. Soon it is gushing. He returns to the pot over the flame, crumbles gold into it, praying to Lady Balam. The man’s prayers to the Four Directions echo, with a background of shifting lights.

A creature rises from the pot, a metallic skeletal figure that disappears. The man urinates into the pot, then cuts his penis with a knife and bleeds into the water, which is a metallic blue that be-
gins to boil like mud. A goddess figurine rises; the man holds it up to the Four Directions and has two simultaneous visions: a priest praying, and a man and woman in sexual union, with cries of passion.

Blue lights in the darkness shimmer over a cocoon-like structure that is marked with a honeycomb pattern. Man points the goddess figure, a high frequency tone pulsates, and the cocoon begins to move. A humanoid figure emerges, and throws something that hits the old man, who holds up the goddess defensively. The being walks away. This is Vera, a Mayan mythological fairy known as an alux or duende.

Man finds a subterranean lake, bathes and swims. Vera watches him, her skin changing color from black to green. Her heart chakra is open, a hole in her chest. The man approaches and looks in; something is moving. Man loses consciousness. He dreams that he is fighting with Vera over a cloth that has “Juan” embroidered on the corner. Vera lies upon the cloth, humming happily, and the man sees his granddaughter Lupita weaving the cloth and embroidering his name—Juan. Juan now awakens, sees Vera lying nearby. He wets the cloth and places it on Vera’s face. Light radiates from the heart opening, binary code rises in the form of a heart, then reenters the chest. Vera appears to die and be reborn. She crawls on hands and knees to Juan, who is sitting and dreaming of being chased by a jaguar.

He awakens, sees Vera, whistles to her playfully. She seems to stop and think. Behind her is a moon in a blue sky. Juan is now back home on the farm. A procession of peasants in the road, singing. He looks into the house and sees his wife lying in a hammock. Vera appears with the sound of a gong reverberating, keeping the time. Juan looks at Vera; his house changes back into the cavern. Vera kisses him on the mouth. An image of Virgin Mary floats toward him then disappears. Vera climbs enormous tree roots toward the surface, and Juan follows, praying to the Virgin.

A skeleton with a wafer heart appears; Juan eats the wafer and the skeleton comes alive and dances with Vera, who is now clothed in rags. She dashes the skeleton against the cavern wall, smashing it. She enters the boiling pot, tries to drag Juan in too. A coin tossed into the air. The shadow of a flying bird. Darkness inside the pot.

Vera and Juan wade in the water of the subterranean lake. Now in a canoe, Vera in front with her heart opening leading the way, and Juan reclining in the stern. From the heart opening, Juan’s granddaughter prays “Grandfather is dead,” and he is now lifeless. Vera’s eyes roll upward. The canoe glides silently into a large cavern.

There are two fruit trees on a hill. Juan lies in the grass while Vera stands up and walks toward the trees slowly. She picks the fruit—one ripe and one green—smells them, and carries them back to Juan. We are now back at the beginning: the sun rises on a Mexican village and life begins anew, minus one old man lost underground.
"Life is very, very confusing, and so films should be allowed to be, too," is a famous quote from the cinematic auteur David Lynch. He might just as easily have added that death will be too, as he has at least a passing knowledge of the Bardo Thodol. Lynch scholar Martha P. Nochimson in her book David Lynch Swerves, posits that beginning with Lost Highway (1997), Lynch’s films “swerved” into a new world, where his deep meditative visions and intuitions meet his fascination with the paradoxes of quantum physics.21

This new level of narrative informs his last four films, which besides Lost Highway include The Straight Story (1999), Mulholland Drive (2001), and Inland Empire (2006). As far as the last two films are concerned, with the explicit deaths of their female protagonists in the last reel, I believe that there is more Bardo Thodol than Niels Bohr in Lynch’s intricate, ethereal final features. Then again, where they overlap—consciousness—is really the crux of the matter. “Threshold” is a quantum concept that Lynch has depicted many ways, and in these two films, that portal is the one between life and afterlife, as opposed to films like Blue Velvet that deal with the threshold between the bardos of dream and waking life.22

The release of Mulholland Dr. in 2001 marked a leap in the evolution of David Lynch’s cinematic art into the realm of the afterlife, its pitfalls, and what the ultimate goal may be. In the course of its 147 minutes, we attempt to track a young woman, Betty Elms ((Naomi Watts) from her hopeful arrival in Hollywood, through the relationships she forms, her visions of stardom and ultimate failure to win fame and love in the Dream Factory. The great dichotomy is between illusion and disillusionment. So-called “disillusionment” in life leads to suicide; real disillusionment in the bardos leads to liberation, if one is prepared for it. Betty is not.

There are rational, sequential clues in the Chandlerian mystery in which Betty becomes enmeshed, before the story takes a Lynchian swerve, and characters begin exchanging identities. Betty becomes a tragic figure named Diane Selwyn, confronting her own death by suicide, and the mystery becomes metaphysical. Which it has been all along.

Raymond Chandler’s influence is keenly felt, particularly that of The Big Sleep, the novel and Howard Hawks’ magnificently confusing 1946 film version (unresolved plot threads and unexplained
characters courtesy of screenwriters William Faulkner and Lee Brackett). The title is of course hard-boiledese for death—the ultimate mystery.\(^{23}\) The fresh-faced Betty serves as a canny and fearless Marlowe for the first half of *Mulholland Dr.*, earnestly trying to help an amnesiac woman find not only her identity, but the source of a great deal of cash they find in her purse. This Dark Woman (Laura Harring) seems Betty’s opposite, has survived a car crash on the winding L.A. road of the title. Her chauffeur was about to murder her when their parked limo was struck by “joyriders.”

With a head wound, she managed to descend to a residential street below, find an apartment open, and crawl in for shelter and to assess her trauma. The place belongs to Betty’s Aunt Ruth, a movie actor who has just left for a location shoot, leaving the comfortable apartment for Betty to stay in while pursuing her big Hollywood break. Betty arrives to find the Dark Woman in the shower and mistakes her for a friend or employee of her aunt’s. The Dark Woman, not knowing her own name, tells Betty that she is “Rita,” from a Rita Hayworth *Gilda* poster hanging in the bedroom. “Rita” also doesn’t have any memory regarding the bundles of cash, and a mystical-looking blue key, in her bag.

It seems an almost straightforward whodunit so far, if not for an inserted scene in a restaurant called Winkie’s.\(^{24}\) A man, Dan, tells his friend about a nightmare that he’s had, twice, about “this particular Winkie’s” and an evil being that lives in the alley behind the diner who is “controlling everything,” and is the source of Dan’s great anxiety. His friend, who is skeptical but willing to help disprove the dream, accompanies the nervous man out to the dumpsters. The nightmare comes true, and Dan swoons unto death.

There is a quick cut to Rita waking up in the strange bed in which she has taken refuge. Has she just dreamed Dan’s story and its fearful conclusion? Lynch will take us back to this so-called Winkie’s—a bardo waystation serving breakfast all day.

A parallel story involves young hotshot director Adam Kesher (Justin Theroux), who is getting interference from studio suits, and the gangsters behind them, in casting the female lead for his pop movie musical, a star-making role apparently. He is instructed by two goombahs that when Camilla Rhodes comes to audition, he is to say “This is the girl.” Identifying “the girl” will prove problematic, when Rita becomes Camilla, and the actress playing Camilla becomes, well, someone else. The goombahs are only messengers for a godlike figure called Mr. Roque, shown in a wheelchair in an empty curtained room.

Adam tells the mobsters to fuck off, and for good measure takes a five-iron to their limo in the parking lot. His defiance of the studio system echoes Lynch’s own. Lynch sinks his teeth into the milieu he has operated within for decades, making the necessary deals while maintaining control over his vision and his projects.\(^{25}\) Adam is helming an anachronistic Frankie-and-Annette style musical for the new millennium, and he wouldn’t seem to have much to defend, artistically, but his self-
righteous anger prevails, and he loses everything in short order—his bank account and his big studio movie.

Unlike Lynch, he caves to the power pretty quickly—he’s obviously a player, with his beautiful house in the Hills and a beautiful wife whom he catches in bed with the pool man. He will lose her too, but in casting “the girl” Camilla Rhodes, he gains both a star and a lover. Camilla first appears on the movie set as a Sandra Dee-type (Melissa George), but soon morphs into the Dark Lady Rita, henceforth known as Camilla. These are the tricks and projections of Diane’s mind, trying to understand her life and recognize her death.

But before these permutations take place, Betty and Rita sit in a booth in Winkie’s trying to pick Rita’s brain for memories. Rita sees the waitress’s name tag—Diane—and it rings a bell. “Diane Selwyn” occurs to her, maybe it’s her own name, or someone who knows who she is. They resolve to search for Diana Selwyn, but in the meantime Betty has landed a big audition, through her aunt’s influence, for a movie called The Sylvia North Story.

It takes place in a claustrophobic room with the director, producer, casting director, and others. Betty plays her scene with the leading man Woody (Chad Everett, another example of the perfect casting of Lynch films), who is full of himself and his sex appeal and wants to play the scene in a clinch with this much younger, inexperienced actress. (His character name is a laugh-aloud Lynch joke, although an extremely pointed one. A primary theme in Mulholland Dr. and Inland Empire is the criminal, soul-deadening exploitation of women in Hollywood, and the descent of most hopefuls into menial jobs and especially into prostitution.26)

Betty transforms as she plays the scene, from the ingenue just in from Deep River, Ontario, to the character of Sylvia North, an abused woman dealing with her “Dad’s best friend” who had raped her without compunction years before, and is coming on to her again. She seethes with sexual energy, seductively arousing the slick scumbag before telling him that he’d better go, before she….kills him. The scene ends and they laugh as the tension is released. The producer raves about Betty’s acting ability, and Betty seems back to her perky self.

But the blending of personalities has begun between Betty and Diane Selwyn. It was Diane who did this audition, and the traumatic scene of sexual abuse and domination reflected her own life—as she views it in the afterlife, from the safe remove of the fictional character Sylvia North. It is a mechanism of a Subject in the bardo to avoid painful truths of the previous life until it becomes unavoidable, when the real death must be seen and confronted. Regarding this dream-audition, we learn later that Diane failed to get the part; it went to Camilla, beginning Diane’s downward spiral.

Another character is introduced, a young pimp named Joe who is looking for the Dark Woman and the money, probably on behalf of the mobsters. We see him asking a Hollywood streetwalk-
er—who looks a lot like the dissipated Diane we see at the end—if she has seen any new girls on the street. Joe visits his “friend” Ed, who has an address book that may lead to the Dark Woman, and Joe kills Ed to get it. This cold-blooded murder leads randomly to two others, escalating into nightmare slapstick, in which viewers are invited to be amused by the blatant evil of Joe’s actions, and thus implicate ourselves in the samsaric cheapness of human life.

Meanwhile, Betty and Rita have found Diane Selwyn’s address. Going there, they learn from the manager that Diane has changed apartments, and they sneak around to the alley to check out Diane’s unit from the rear. (Like the scene with Dan at Winkie’s, alleys are important in Lynch’s metaphoric world, tied to the concepts of The Marketplace and The Palace. He will elaborate these in Inland Empire.) Betty brazenly breaks in through a window. Inside, they find a rotting corpse in bed, face down, on scarlet sheets that were glimpsed in the opening sequence. It is the reality of Diane’s end. Some Vertigo-style music intensifies their horror as they flee, their images blurring together.

Back “home,” Rita cuts her hair and dons a blond wig, fully becoming the starlet Camille Rhodes. She and Betty make love, are in love, are one, in an intensely erotic scene. (Lynch re-creates the famous melding shot of the two women’s faces from Bergman’s Persona—another influence on Mulholland Dr.) Diane has begun to remember the truth of her former life and the desire and jealousy that ended it.

Rita now urgently drags Betty to a theater, the Club Silencio, where Betty will finally see all her illusions exposed. A demonic emcee announces as much—nothing is live, it’s all recorded. A chanteuse takes the stage and lip-synchs her own recorded voice singing Roy Orbison’s “Crying” in Spanish. She falls to the stage as if dead; the song continues.

Lynch loves lip-synch; he used it to great effect in Blue Velvet with another perfectly thematic Orbison song, “In Dreams,” and he will wrap his feature-film career, in the finale of Inland Empire, with a cathartic pantomime of a Nina Simone song. Lip-synching is the perfect metaphor for illusion that conveys real feeling—as well as for the channeled nature of art, if the mind is open and clear to receive these visions and ideas.

Betty/Diane and Rita/Camille are in tears as they watch the show—all prerecorded, like Diane’s life, over and beyond changing. The blue box appears. Club Silencio is itself a blue box. Betty disappears. Camille unlocks the box; it contains a black hole. There has been a quantum leap. For the rest of the film, events are unmoored from linear time, as Diane’s unmoored mind revisits her love affair with Camilla, how it soured as Camilla became a star, and how Camilla rubbed it in, inviting Diane to a dinner party on Mulholland where Adam and Camilla announce their love. Adam says to the assembled guests, “We’re going to be...” He lets the sentence hang, and it stings: they are going to be, while Diane has ceased to be. She is mortified (in the true sense of the word) and plans revenge, meeting Joe (her pimp now?) in Winkie’s, and paying him to kill Camilla.
This brings the movie in a circle to the beginning; the limo driver has been contracted to do
the hit, but in Diane’s dying mind—on the red sheet in the opening sequence—she knows the mortal
sin she has commissioned and “saves” Camilla with the car crash, to spare her own damnation. The
projections of the mind in the bardo to construct fantasies, rationalizations, and denials, until the
truth must be faced and the painful rebirth process begin, are well illustrated in these Lynch films.

The final shot of *Mulholland Dr.* shows the “demon” in the alley behind Winkie’s, and we see
that it is a pitiable, grime-encrusted homeless person, and a woman at that (Bonnie Aarons as Bum)—
perhaps it is Diane in her complete degradation, karma to carry into her next life. And the rest, as
a voice and neon sign proclaim, is *Silencio.*


“Inland Empire”

*Inland Empire* (2006), David Lynch’s first—and last—feature since *Mulholland Dr.* in 2001, is a direct continuation and expansion of that visionary bardo film—a three-hour collage or web that mystifies, terrifies, and entrances. Lynch’s long devotion to transcendental meditation and Maharishi Mahesh’s Vedic Science has led him to an informal study of quantum mechanics and the integral role of consciousness on reality. Some of the quantum theories that may have influenced the disjointed narrative of *Inland Empire*:

- **Non-locality**: Where action at a distance influences local bodies and actions.
- **Many-worlds theory**: For each possible outcome to an action, the world splits into a copy of itself. This is an instantaneous process called *decohesion.* In layman’s terms, the hypothesis states there is a very large—perhaps infinite—number of universes, and everything that could possibly have happened in our past, but did not, has occurred in the past of some other universe or universes.
- **Entanglement theory**: Particles remain connected so that actions performed on one affect the other, even when separated by great distances. The phenomenon so riled Albert Einstein that he called it “spooky action at a distance.”

Applying these ideas to the after-life state is consistent with both ancient spiritual teachings and modern science. The fact that death is where the two may meet in harmony might be the true miracle. In his 2010 book *Biocentrism: How Life and Consciousness are the Keys to Understand the Nature of the Universe*, Dr. Robert Lanza states:

“At death there’s a break in our linear stream of consciousness, and thus a break in the linear connection of times and places...More and more physicists are beginning to accept the ‘many-worlds’ interpretation of quantum physics, which states that there are an infinite number of universes. Everything that can possibly happen occurs in some universe.”

This may provide a key, or at least a leg to stand on, in interpreting *Inland Empire*.

In *Mulholland Dr.*, the Subject was a failed actress, Diane Selwyn, a Hollywood hopeful who
became a pitiful hanger-on. She loses the lover whose star is rising as hers fades, leading here to commit suicide. In *Inland Empire*, a successful actress, Grace—or a character she is playing in a film—becomes a Hollywood prostitute before being murdered on the street by a jealous wife. This climactic death, like Diane’s, loops back to the opening scene, where we are inside the consciousness of the Subject as she awakens in the afterlife. In the course of the film, she will try to understand where she is, to remember the life lately lived, the karma and merit accrued, and to look for the way out. By both films’ endings, these two protagonist women will “see” and thus remember their physical deaths and the events leading up to the fatal moment.

Trying to authoritatively interpret the narrative in a Lynch film is a fool’s errand, although a highly stimulating one practiced by legions of fans and scholars. There are signs and systems at work and play. David Lynch himself claims as much wonderment at his stories as his quizzical audiences. *Inland Empire*, with its quantum leaps, personalities flowing together like quicksilver, and archetypal characters like The Phantom, The Lost Girl, and a judge or confessor with the Kafkaesque name Mr. K.—adds layer upon layer of consciousness to the main story.

The production of a movie within the movie, *On High in Blue Tomorrows*, is being made in the “real world,” i.e. on a set in a studio, with actors, director and crew, and what seems a cheesy soap-opera script. This is the shaky framework that Lynch will soon start dismantling. Into this story and the ostensibly real lives of the principals involved, Lynch weaves several threads, or perhaps tosses them in pell-mell, like a William Burroughs “cut-up” novel:

There is a young woman watching a TV screen in a darkened room, weeping silently: The Lost Girl. One show she watches might be called *Humanoid Rabbit Soap Opera*, filmed before a “live” audience—or is that a cosmic laugh track? As Lynch has always done between feature films, he made several shorts between *Mulholland Dr.* and *Inland Empire*, including a mini-mini-series called *Rabbids*. Nine episodes, running under an hour total, the stage set (or non-locality) representing some sort of cosmic trap or purgatory. He inserts clips from *Rabbids* into *Inland Empire*, lending an air of absurdist comedy a la Beckett, in the guise of a surreal soap-opera satire. Even as comedy, it is deeply unsettling and emotionally challenging.

There is a story set in Poland, shot in the snowy urban nightscapes of Lodz, of a group of prostitutes who parallel a similar “abject sisterhood” in Hollywood. (David Lynch became enamored of Lodz while visiting the Camerimage Festival in 2000, and revisited many times, shooting stills and film, ideas for *Inland Empire* and its Polish parallels percolating, one imagines, in his creative cauldron.) The plot contrivance here is that *On High in Blue Tomorrows* is revealed by its director.
(Jeremy Irons) to be a remake of a Polish film titled “47” which was never finished due to the murder of one or more of the actors. It was/is a “cursed production.” This device allows Lynch to incorporate footage he shot in Lodz and Warsaw and to add a dreadful metaphysical mystery to his behind-the-scenes Hollywood story.

_Inland Empire_ opens with a lot of creepy exposition. A phonograph needle in a record groove and an announcer saying,

“Axxon N., the longest running radio play in history, tonight, continuing in the Baltic region. A gray winter day in an old hotel. The stairway is dark…”

We see a prostitute and her customer ascending stairs. The woman speaks:

“What’s wrong with me? This is the room? I don’t recognize it.”

“Take off your clothes.”

“Sure.”

“You know what whores do?”

“Yes. They fuck. Do you want to fuck me?”

“Take off your clothes. I’ll tell you what I want”

“Fine. I’m afraid. I’m afraid.”

Cut to a movie star, Grace (Laura Dern), in her lavish home, anxiously awaiting news of a starring role she is up for. She will get the part of Susan Blue, in fact _become her_, if she isn’t already. A strange woman (Grace Zabriskie) comes to call, to introduce herself as a new neighbor. Speaking in an eastern European accent, with fascinating intensity, she begins to spout some ominous words:

“A little boy went out to play. When he opened his door…he saw…the world. As he passed through the doorway…he caused a reflection. Evil was born…Evil was born, and followed the boy. An old tale.

“And a variation: A little girl…went out to play. Lost in the marketplace…as if half born. Then, not through the marketplace—you see that, don’t you? But through the alley behind the marketplace. This is the way to the Palace.

“But it isn’t something you remember. Forgetfulness, it happens to us all.”

The Visitor has begun the process of releasing Grace from her golden cage by disrupting Grace’s sense of time and space—much as Lynch attempts to break us out of our golden cages by rattling them. She also states a fundamental theme, that is at the heart of _Mulholland Dr._ as well: the Marketplace—our gross Samsara—as opposed to the Palace—Nirvana—and the way to the Palace is through the Alleyway, through the rejection of materialistic desire. The alley is where the Axxon N. door will appear, the threshold through which Grace/Susan will realize her true self, defeat her
Phantom, and become enlightened.\textsuperscript{34}

On the movie set, Grace and her co-star Devon (Justin Theroux) begin rehearsing, then flirting. Devon is cocky in much the same way as Adam Kesher, the character Theroux played in \textit{Mulholland Dr}. As the actors and their roles—as well as those of their real and \textit{Blue Tomorrows} spouses—start to blend, reality becomes ever more elusive. When Grace succumbs to Devon’s seduction, she begins to really lose her sense of self, telling him repeatedly during intercourse “It’s me, Devon!”\textsuperscript{35} Even the movie sets become real places, as dark and foreboding as the Badalamenti music that infuses them. A red lamp in a cheap apartment bedroom becomes a demonic symbol, or a warning light for Grace’s groping consciousness.

There are Polish gangsters in the service of The Phantom, the evil spirit that in the Visitor’s parable was released by a reflection. The gangsters hold a séance with a medium. Grace—or Susan Blue—is now a streetwalker on the Lodz street with the Polish hookers. They tell her how to burn a hole in a silk scarf and “see” through it. The Lost Girl watches this “movie” on her TV screen.

The slatternly prostitute Grace/Susan climbs a flight of dark stairs and tells a story of rape and revenge to a Judge or Auditor called Mr. K. Her life has been violent and petty, and she speaks of it casually, without remorse or fear. Back in Susan’s movie-set apartment, the Abject Sisterhood reappears, talking about their sexuality and its centrality to their existence, to be attractive and to please men.\textsuperscript{36} A fundamental theme of \textit{Inland Empire} is a profound feminism, David Lynch’s sensitivity and deep respect, his abhorrence of the victimization of women, not only in Hollywood, where Lynch sees it run rampant, but in the world of violence and greed, the Marketplace.

The headlong jumble of the last half of \textit{Inland Empire} has been the subject of much speculation and explication. One or more plausible synopses are here.\textsuperscript{37} Consistent with teachings on reincarnation, souls that we have been connected to in past lives reappear in subsequent lives, and also between lives—be they “soulmates,” “guides,” or bearers of unpaid karmic obligations. Grace’s bardo that appears to be a movie production, \textit{On High in Blue Tomorrows}, leads her to the Hollywood Walk of Fame. But instead of glory, she is a streetwalker, in the company of her “abject sisterhood.” Stabbed in the gut with a screwdriver by the jealous wife of Devon/Billy, she staggers down Vine and falls on the sidewalk, in a group of homeless people. She hears them talking about people and places that have some reflections of her own pitiable life, mundane and yet meaningful. A black woman (angel) says “You dyin’, lady,” then lights a lighter before Susan’s eyes, intoning,

“\textit{It burns bright forever. No more blue tomorrows.”}

Susan dies, and now the camera pans out, the director shouts “Cut and print.” The actors leave the set, including Grace, to the applause of the cast and crew for her amazing performance. She doesn’t speak, significantly for the rest of the movie, heads to her trailer, but sees the AXXON.N door and enters. She has died but is self-aware enough to seek the threshold to freedom. This involves killing her Phantom and setting free her Lost Girl. She sees herself as a grotesque monster,
running through the night, until a blue starburst appears, which grows until it encompasses everything.

She is back in her palatial home, sitting with the Visitor, who has done her job and brought her full circle. Grace is calm and happy. Now the room is full of people, a joyous cast party featuring the Sisterhood, one of whom lip-synchs Nina Simone’s spiritual, “Sinnerman.” This is a final indictment of the powerful men who have abused and exploited the Sisterhood since time immemorial:

Oh sinnerman, where you gonna run to?
Sinnerman, where you gonna run to?
Where you gonna run to?
All along dem day

Well I run to the rock, please hide me
I run to the rock, please hide me
I run to the rock, please hide me, lord
All along dem day

But the rock cried out, I can’t hide you
The rock cried out, I can’t hide you
The rock cried out, I ain’t gonna hide you guy
All along dem day

I said, rock, what’s a matter with you rock?
Don’t you see I need you, rock?
Lord, lord, lord
All along dem day

So I run to the river, it was bleedin’
I run to the sea, it was bleedin’
I run to the sea, it was bleedin’
All along dem day

So I run to the river, it was boilin’
I run to the sea, it was boilin’
I run to the sea, it was boilin’
Along dem day

So I run to the lord, please hide me lord
Don’t you see me prayin’?
Don’t you see me down here prayin’?
But the lord said, go to the devil
The lord said, go to the devil
He said, go to the devil
All along dem day

So I ran to the devil, he was waitin'
I ran to the devil, he was waitin'
Ran to the devil, he was waitin'

All on that day
I cried -
Power!!!!!!!

(Power to da lord)
Bring down
(Power to da lord)
Power!!!
Bardo Experiment:
“Lost Highway”

In the evolution of David Lynch, Lost Highway (1997) represents both an advance and a regression. His Eagle Scout morality is in full play and in full confrontation with his artistic impulse toward uninhibited freedom. This makes for schizophrenic viewing, as Lynch lashes out at the “pornos” and their destructive exploitation of women, while he himself creates hyper-eroticized sex scenes featuring Patricia Arquette, who is both victim and femme fatale, temptress and slave. It is regressive in that Lost Highway echoes the eroticism of Wild at Heart (1990). Its script was co-written by Barry Gifford, whose novel was the basis for Wild at Heart. But its eroticism is more infantile and conflicted than Lulu and Sailor’s steamy road-trip dream of seven years earlier.

Lost Highway is also a progression—spiritually, as Lynch’s first incursion into the bardo realm. It is, in fact, both sleeping-dream and death-dream. The story: Jazz musician Fred (Bill Pullman) has a hot wife Renee (Arquette), who may be sleeping around. Fred is suspicious and edgy. At a party where Renee knows most of the people, including the overly friendly host, Fred is confronted by a demon. It is the Demon of Jealousy (Robert Blake), who tells Fred that he has allowed the demon to enter his home. Before we know it, Fred is in prison, on Death Row, convicted of murdering Renee.

He is having trouble sleeping, so the prison doctor gives him a powerful sedative that appears to knock him out. In this deep sleep, he dreams that he has become a handsome young car mechanic named Pete (Balthazar Getty), who becomes involved with a woman “belonging to” a violent gangster, Mr. Eddy. In the real world—waking life—Pete has replaced Fred in his cell, to the total bewilderment of the prison authorities. “Some spooky shit,” is how one guard explains it. All part of the overall dream.

In this phase of the dream, Pete is an earnest, hardworking kid who falls hard for platinum blonde Alice (also Patricia Arquette) after she easily seduces him. Mr. Eddy (Robert Loggia) is a two-dimensional cartoon gangster, who brutalizes a man for tailgating him and then quotes statistics on tailgating accidents with a moral superiority. He is also the ringleader of the porno-film ring that has sucked Alice into its clutches and claims her as his property. Lynch’s inner Boy Scout moralizes against pornography and gangsterism—he portrays Alice being forced at gunpoint to strip in front of Mr. Eddy, her induction into the skin trade, and degradation.

But we must also remember that this is the dream of a man in a cell on Death Row, waiting for
his date with the electric chair. To deal with his guilt, Fred has remade himself into the innocent Pete, who is forced by the seductress to commit an accidental murder.39

Mr. Eddy is onto Pete and Alice and their clandestine couplings. The Demon of Jealousy reappears to Mr. Eddy, fueling his rage and doing his dirty work. It is kill or be killed. Alice bestows one last fuck on Pete before leaving him forever, saying “You’ll never have me.” Pete wakes up and he is Fred again—and still in the dream. A false awakening. He jumps in his car and starts barreling down the dark Lost Highway, when the switch is thrown and he is electrocuted.

Whether the entire film takes place in the moment of Fred’s death in the electric chair for his jealous-rage crime—that we are in his bardo from the opening shot—or whether the first half of the film, before the prison doctor forces the sleeping pills down Fred’s throat, is objective reality—is my primary question for Lost Highway. What is not in doubt is that Fred’s death closes the film.

David Lynch has met the bardos, and he will run with them, and into them—dimensions he calls Mulholland Drive and the Inland Empire.
The first question when confronting a film like *Holy Motors* is: “What exactly is happening here?” Queries may tend toward the colloquial “WTF?” This should be followed by a close examination of the narrative, however fractured or nonsensical, to attempt to grasp the auteur’s intent. Since artists are often exploring their own complex psyches, including dreams and the question of death states, much of their expression is necessarily metaphorical, symbolic, or downright deranged. To the extent such art taps into our collective unconscious, it may reveal something universal. To create works of psychic exploration, Cecil Day-Lewis’s famous credo applies: “We do not write in order to be understood; we write in order to understand.”

*Holy Motors* tells the story of a man or celestial being named Monsieur Oscar, who cruises around Paris in a white stretch limousine that is a mobile theatrical dressing room. In the course of a single day and night, we watch him become a variety of characters who then enter real settings and situations, and perform some act(ion)—including sexual union, parental guidance, and murder. He is aided in this by the limo driver Céline, who seems more of a superior or equal—a la James Bond’s “M”—than Oscar’s servant. She briefs him on his assignments. It’s implied that he works for some kind of government agency, and that the murders have political motives.

But before we meet M. Oscar, there is a cryptic 5-minute dream prologue that may be the key to understanding who or what this character is.

First, we see a movie audience in the ghostly light of the reflected screen, watching a strange silent film of a naked man performing repetitive, forceful movements. From somewhere, we hear the sound of traffic, horns honking, then loud footsteps, a man’s voice desperately saying “No...no...no” followed by a gunshot. A person (The Dreamer, played by director Leos Carax,) wakes up in bed, a dog sleeping by his side. Perhaps we have been watching his dream, a dream of cinema, the play of light and shadow.

Knowing that this is the director of the film reveals much of what is to follow, whether it is his dreams, a vision of an afterlife, and/or a deeply personal attempt by Carax to work through critical issues in his life, including the suspected suicide of his mate, the Russian actress Yekaterina
Indeed, sequences in *Holy Motors* deal with the earnest attempt of an ordinary dad to parent his innocent daughter, and the suicide of a woman who appears to be the soul mate of M. Oscar.

The Dreamer sits up and lights a cigarette, then moves to a picture window that reveals a nighttime cityscape, or is it? Moving to a wall adorned with the image of bare trees, he runs his hands across it, discovers a round lock and inserts his index finger—which is not flesh, but a mechanical cylinder that unlocks a hidden door. Carax is perhaps acknowledging the magical technology at his fingertips that allows him to capture his visions, his very mind—the medium of motion pictures.

Down a passageway, he and the dog are bombarded with bright flashing lights (a common depiction of the early stages of the death bardo), along with the sounds of seagulls, trains, tugboat horns and wild animals. At the end of the corridor is a doorway which leads to the balcony of the theater showing his dream movie of the naked man. A large creature, a shaggy dog (!) lumbers down the aisle in the dark. Did we hear a man get murdered? A man now lost in a bardo, a dream of life in which he must explore his fractured psyche, to find out who he really is, or was? Was he a hitman, or the victim of one with a desire for revenge? Was he an ordinary family man with an active fantasy life and unresolved parenting issues? Or is *he* a bardo guide, a bodhisattva helping others, through the agency of some higher power, to deal with their own deaths?

The scene now shifts to the main story, and we see a beautiful child looking through a round window into sunlight. We are in the world of M. Oscar, as he leaves his modern millionaire’s home that resembles a ship, saying goodbye to his wife and children and walking down the long drive, lined with luxury cars, to the white limousine and his chauffeur Céline.

She tells him that he has nine “appointments’ that day. He talks on the phone to a gun dealer, then begins to make up for his first “incarnation,” a horrible-looking crone who is dropped off on a city street to beg. We hear her thoughts: “Nobody loves me, nowhere. But I’m alive anyway. I am so old...I’m afraid I’ll never die.” This segment is very short, the crone doesn’t interact with anyone. Perhaps an preliminary exercise in humility and compassion?

M. Oscar is back in the limo, making up for Appointment #2, for which he dons a sensor-covered bodysuit to act in a green-screen video, first doing calisthenics and then, with a lithe woman in a sensored red bodysuit, making love. Their sexual gyrations are “captured” and transformed, technologically, into something fantastic.

Looking at the dossier for Appointment #3, M. Oscar exclaims “Merde!” and then begins making up as a grotesque character named M. Merde, a combination brutish leprechaun and antisocial marauder. He crawls into a manhole and emerges in the Père Lachaise Cemetery, running through it eating flowers from the graves, until he comes upon a high-fashion photo shoot. A pretentious American photographer and a full crew are using the ancient graveyard to pose and shoot a sullen glamour model. The photographer sees M. Merde at the edge of the crowd, is excited by his raw
ugliness, his bestiality, and sends his assistant over to sign him up to participate in the shoot.

"Harry thinks it'd be great to shoot you together. A shot that's kind of strange... A bit 'Beauty and the Beast'. You see? Do you know Diane Arbus for example? A great American photographer. She took photos of dwarves, giants, monsters... photos that are really 'human'."

Merde responds by biting off a couple of the assistant’s fingers, grabs the model after kissing her armpit with his bloody lips, and runs off with her to an underground crypt. He empties her purse and eats the money, pulls out a cigarette, which the model lights for him. Her cool is unshaken, she shows no fear but a kind of detached amusement. She removes her wig; he removes his clothing. Playing the designer, he "dresses" her in a rather provocative way. Finally, they recreate the tableau of Michelangelo’s Pietà, profanely, M. Merde’s erection in full view. The model sings to him the old spiritual lullaby “All the Pretty Little Horses.” It is confoundedly hilarious.

Appointment #4 finds Oscar, made up as a very ordinary middle aged man, taking a little red sedan to pick up his teenaged daughter from a party. As they drive home, she admits that she didn’t really dance with the boys as she first told him. She wanted her dad to think that she was popular, when she had really hidden in the toilet out of shyness. In a bit of questionable parenting, he says she must be punished for not trying to be more popular with boys.

A musical Entr’acte has M. Oscar and a horde of accordion players marching with great brio through a cathedral, playing a rousing tune. It’s tempting to read more of Carax’s irreverence into this intermission but regardless of context, it is an effective breathing space in the perplexing storyline.

The next part M. Oscar plays is that of an assassin, known to workers in an underground warehouse as Alex. He finds his victim, Théo, who has committed some kind of serious transgression, for which he expresses remorse before Alex knifes him in the neck. The hitman then opens a kit he has brought and proceeds to shave and make Théo up to look exactly like him, Alex. But Théo is not quite dead, and knifes Alex in the neck, who falls next to the victim, where they lie as a mirror image. But Alex is not quite dead, and drags himself to his feet, finds his way out of the underground, clutching his neck. Rain is falling and Céline is waiting for him. When she sees he is wounded, she is startled and drags him back to the limo. Once inside, he is unharmed. If it’s all an act, why was Céline upset? Is M. Carax messing’ with us, or is there method to this madness beyond some French absurdist mindfuck?

The answer may be revealed by the man Oscar finds waiting for him in the limo (Michel Piccoli) a superior in whatever organization M. Oscar and Celine are working for. Their conversation is cryptic but reveals that this whole operation is being filmed for someone or some purpose.
“Do you still enjoy your work? I’m asking because some of us think you’ve looked a bit tired recently. Some don’t believe in what they’re watching any more.”

“I miss the cameras. They used to be heavier than us. Then they became smaller than our heads. Now you can’t see them at all. So sometimes I too find it hard to believe in it all.”

“What makes you carry on, Oscar?”

“What made me start—the beauty of the act.”

“Beauty? They say it’s in the eye of the beholder.”

“And if there’s no more beholder?” asks M. Oscar.

We may have lost count of the appointments by now, because the next one is unscheduled. Oscar yells to Céline to stop the car, fumbles in a drawer full of handguns for the right one, jumps out in a downtown Paris intersection, and shoots a gangster sitting in a sidewalk café. The gangster’s bodyguards then fill M. Oscar full of lead, as onlookers scream. Céline rushes over to again usher Oscar back into the limo, where he is again unhurt. Karmic avenger? Or just playing one on TV?

The next role is Mr. Vogan, an old man dying in bed, with a dog sleeping beside him. A young woman, his niece Léa, sits with him in his final moments, wiping his brow. He tells her how much he loves her and the feeling is obviously mutual. They reveal some family drama; he had secretly arranged for her to become wealthy, which has led to a marriage in which she is happy. She goes into the next room and undresses before a full-length mirror, admiring herself, before becoming Léa again and returning to the deathbed. Mr. Vogan dies. She lays her head upon him in grief. They are silent and still for a moment, then they break character and become the actors. They both have another assignment, this one is over. They leave separately.

M. Oscar gets in a nap before his next performance, and is rudely awakened by a collision between his white stretch limo and an identical one. Céline is yelling angrily at the other driver “Ectoplasm on wheels!” (some kind of clue!?) The actor/agent in the back of the other car is an old intimate, Jean (Kylie Minogue). They haven’t seen each other for a long time. Both have 30 minutes until they have to take on another role, so they enter a deserted department store, the stately Samaritaine, which is now filled with rubble and heaps of mannikins—awaiting, Jean tells Oscar, conversion into a 21st century luxury hotel. It is an amazing set.

She tells him that she is portraying “Eva Grace,” a flight attendant who is going to commit suicide with her lover. As they walk through the rubble of the once-grand store, M. Oscar kicking the head of a mannikin across the room like a demon, Jean sings a sad romantic song. Not just because she is Kylie Minogue the pop star, but because it is integral to the film. The chorus sums up the film in a plaintive tone: “Who were we? Who were we? Who we were. Who we were.”

Eva Grace’s lover arrives at the Samaritaine and mounts the broad staircases calling her name,
while M. Oscar hides to avoid him. By the time Oscar reaches the ground floor and exits, Eva Grace and her lover have jumped from the roof and lie together in a bloody heap on the street. M. Oscar wails in true anguish, as though it really is Jean lying dead—or Leos Carax’s young Russian soulmate—and not Eva Grace, a character in a psychodrama. He then dives into the open door of the limo, and sits weeping in his dressing room.

Céline tries to cheer him up. After all, she says, “Who knows if we’ll laugh in the next life?” They do manage a laugh before Céline drops him off at his last assignment, which the dossier has called “Your house, your wife and daughters.” She stops not at the modern mansion she picked him up from in the morning, but a modest row house, where she gives him his pay for the day and his “key for tonight.”

He enters the home, calling softly to his family, and goes upstairs, where we last see him looking out the window with his family. They are not human. But perhaps nobler than homo sapiens. It’s another Carax curve, a laughable headscratcher, leading to the true punchline of the film.

Céline drives to a large garage, where many limos are coming in for the night. She parks it and puts on a green mask. After she and the other drivers have left the garage, the limos begin talking to each other, some in French, some in English, while their taillights flash to show which is speaking. Here is the shaggy dog story foretold, come to a fitting conclusion. When I saw Holy Motors in theater in first run, I felt angry at the flippant ending, and dismissed the whole thing as French absurdist slapstick, somewhere in the Tati-Ionesco spectrum. I get it: the cars are the gods, hence the title, and people but actors doing their bidding, whether they’re aware of it or not.

But it is more than that, the questions more pointed. Life is an act, our lives and expressions composed of lines that may all be channeled from a “creator.” We cannot die; we are performing machines. Our script is tragic & comedic, encompassing human evolution, or the reverse, and we are allowed precious little improvisation, free will. As absurd as it may seem, the best route may be to acknowledge a “creator” and say—as the stretch limos do as they power down for the night—“Amen.”
Saint or Sinner:

“Samaritan Girl”

This 2004 film by the controversial director Kim Ki-duk, enters the bardo in the last scene, when a deranged Seoul police detective murders his teenaged daughter, whom he knows has been prostituting herself. She subsequently awakens into another world that looks like this one. This is not much of a spoiler, as critics and online discussions and analyses do not share this interpretation of the film’s ending, preferring the “only a dream” scenario. But there are some compelling clues for the death state.

In the opening scene, two teen girls are online, making a sexual assignation with a young man. These best friends want to take a trip to Europe, and have decided to finance it by selling Jae-yeong’s body. Yeo-jin is serving as the internet pimp. Jae is happy about the “date” they’ve just made and seems unafraid, while Yeo is nervous, already feeling guilty and not a little jealous. She loves sweet, cute Jae very much. Jae is reminded of a certain prostitute:

“There was a prostitute in India named Vasumitra.”
“Vasumitra? What a pretty name.”
“Words say that any man who slept with her turned into a devoted Buddhist.”
“What the hell did she do to them?”
“She gave ecstatic sex as a prostitute, I guess.”
“What does sex have to do with Buddhists?”
“Maybe it aroused some deep maternal love. You see, men are like babies when they have sex. Yeo-jin, call me Vasumitra from now on.”

There is underlying tension in the film between Buddhist and Christian beliefs. This religious element makes Samaritan Girl a morality tale of some weight and complexity. The sweet-natured Jae establishes herself as a Dharma follower, even as a naive teenager venturing into prostitution. She has a big heart and finds herself truly interested in the young professional “johns,” telling Yeo there is enjoyment in it.

Yeo doesn’t want to know anything about it, except how much money they have accumulated, as though she is the one being “soiled.” In Yeo’s bedroom, there is a prominent picture of Jesus. Her father, Yeong-ki, wakes her in the morning with soothing music, then tells her about a miraculous statue of Christ in France that sprouted branches, without any roots. Later he will tell her of a Marian
apparition in Italy:

“In a country town, three young girls went to go play in the forest. Suddenly, in the sky, Mother Mary appeared in a blinding light. It was so bright, they all fainted. While they were unconscious, they saw a terrible and grim vision of the world’s end.”

This hardened homicide detective who sounds like a Christian missionary will cross the line into insanity when his daughter, traumatized by her friend’s death, begins to turn tricks herself. Not for money or pleasure, but with the men that Jae had “serviced,” to give them their money back to assuage her guilt. But in the process, Yeo becomes Vasumitra, the Buddhist consort that Jae identified with—a Samaritan girl, giving aid and succor without fear. And, in this grief-inspired satori, sudden enlightenment, she feels compassion for the men she once feared and despised.

Yeo started to burn the pile of money, but then realized she must return it. Calling one of the former “clients,” she tells him that she is Jae-Yeong. While she is waiting in the hotel room, she puts on makeup, then looks out the window, the same one from which Jae fell to her death, and sees Jae on the street, smiling and waving up at her. The client, a middle-aged man, arrives and sees Yeo at the window.

“You’re Jae-yeong?”
“Yes, I’m the real Jae-yeong.”
“What are you smiling at? Is there somebody outside?” Yeo is certainly smiling.

Sitting together in bed after sex, the man seems exceptionally pleased. “I’m lucky, I tell you. I’m lucky to have you. I feel like I’m ten years younger. The hell with morals. Isn’t this happiness?”

“Did it feel good as well with Jae-young?”
“It feels exactly the same. The way you two laugh is also the same.”

“Jae-yeong is dead. She jumped off that window and her head cracked open.”

“Really?”

Yeo gives the man money. “What’s this for?”
“I’m supposed to give you money. I’m returning it. I don’t need it anymore.”

Leaving, she thanks him. He then calls his own daughter on the phone, to convey his love; paying it forward.

We see Yeo with other clients, not in the act but before and after. Their interactions are so positive, even healing, that we are tempted to forget that she is a minor engaged in illicit and dangerous behavior. All we want to believe is that she is truly helping these males who need more than sex.

Her father, while on the scene of a homicide—that of a prostitute—happens to see his daughter through a window across the street, in bed with a young man. An attractive rich kid who is angry that Yeo is gently laughing at him, but is soon won over by her affectionate nature. Thus begins the second act of Samaritan Girl, in which the father/cop/missionary begins a crusade to save his daughter and punish her abusers. While we sympathize with his paternal rage, we also have com-
passion for these men who have been touched by the healing energy of the teenaged Samaritan Girl. Yeong-ki begins a descent into violence toward the men, that begins with warnings and humiliation, leads to a forced suicide, and finally the brutal murder of a “john” in a public restroom. This ushers in the third act, which is entitled Sonata, in which father and daughter travel to the countryside to visit the grave of their late wife/mother.

Yeo sleeps as her father drives. They arrive at a bucolic setting and make a strenuous hike to an isolated grave on a hilltop. Yeong makes offerings to his late wife with wine and food, but when he tries to eat, stuffing sushi into his mouth, he gets sick. Yeo comforts him as he retches and weeps. They find a farmhouse and ask the owner if they can spend the night. In a cozy room, at bedtime, Yeong talks about Mother Teresa, how her healing miracles were acknowledged by the Vatican. He also tells Yeo that if something is bothering her, to let it all go, urging her to confess. She does not respond.

The next morning, Yeong stops for cigarettes and sees Yeo idly playing with the steering wheel. He asks her if she would like to drive, and she says no, she is afraid. We see her now in her primary manifestation, a child, too young yet to even drive. In the next scene, the car is in a creek, hubcap-deep in the flowing water. Yeo is sleeping, while Yeong, standing on the bank, makes a call to a fellow detective, saying cryptically “It happened that way,” and giving their location.

Suddenly Yeo wakes. The world has a blue tint, and the soundtrack music is weird. She walks along the road beside the creek, and her father comes up behind her and strangles her. He buries her in a shallow grave, puts earphones on her before covering her with rock and sand, then turns on the CD player. We hear the ethereal music that he woke her at home. Now she wakes up in the car again. Did she just dream that her father murdered her? Why would she dream that?

She sees that her father has painted hundreds of rocks, all the same size, yellow, and lined them up like a driver’s-ed course. He encourages her to drive, leading her on from outside the car, telling her she’s now on her own. While she is having this driving lesson, the police arrive and take Yeong away. (They have somehow arrived in minutes, from Seoul.) When she sees them drive away, she tries to follow, but gets stuck in mud. The soothing music from the CD is still playing, on the soundtrack at least.

I don’t believe that Kim Ki-duk is asking us to suspend disbelief over the ability of the father to paint hundreds of rocks from a quart of yellow paint, and lay out a road course in a matter of minutes. I do believe that Yeong has planned this filicide, driven mad by a combination of paternal rage, Christian righteousness, and the moral certitude of a homicide cop. Yeo-Jin has awakened into her blue bardo, still hearing the song coming through the earbuds. She sees the hopeless path that her father, in his derangement, tried to lay out for her into the afterlife, and has gotten bogged down in confusion.

Hopefully, Jae-yeong and Vasumitra will be along shortly, to guide her.
Streaming Bardos: "The Good Place" "Forever" & "Russian Doll"

The explosive growth of streaming movies and serials in the second decade of the 21st century, on platforms such as Netflix, Hulu, and Amazon Prime, has resulted in many in-house productions that rival or exceed the output of mainstream studios. This currently has the Hollywood establishment in an existential battle; the king of Hollywood himself, Stephen Spielberg, is lobbying to bar Netflix and other original streaming productions from Academy Award consideration. Those studios, they contend, are broadcasting TV movies that should fall under the Emmys’ purview, as they always have. With streaming services, broadcast channels, satellite and cable TV all providing original content now (2019), the definition of “movie” is broader than ever. Perhaps Oscars and Emmys need to become something else entirely, reflecting a 21st Century paradigm of motion pictures.

Length is an obvious criterion for “feature film.” Television has always had the advantage of producing open-ended dramatic or comedic series—not movies per se, but continuous episodic stories lasting years. Mini-series, beginning in the 1970s, reclaimed the notion of a serialized novel that could be considered an epic film, like The Thorn Birds or Centennial (although Centennial pushes the envelope at 25 hours). Streaming studios like Netflix have refined the 3-to-6-hour (and longer) original film comprised of episodes, as well picking up the best of international television fare, a rich trove indeed. These can be viewed as leisurely or quickly as one desires; binge-watching has become epidemic.

The Good Place is a weekly NBC half-hour comedy series that can also currently be binged on Netflix (39 episodes broadcast/streaming at this writing, with a fourth season pending). Not knowing the full dramatic arc, I can’t address the outcome or whole concept, but the framework of a unique afterlife is established early on. With constant character and plot development, punctuated by plenty of laugh lines.

The Good Place is a colorful paradise created by an cosmic “architect,” Michael (Ted Danson), for an exclusive group of dead souls, only the very best of humanity are here, we are told, in a little modern village surrounded by beautiful landscapes. These chosen ones are paired with “soul mates” in housing designed to fit their earthly style. Eleanor (Kristen Bell) awakens, and soon realizes that she is in the Wrong Place. She has been a wholly unlikable and amoral human, evidenced by flash-
backs to her life and her continuing sneaky, selfish behavior in this paradise. Her supposed soul mate is/was a young Senegalese ethics professor named Chidi (William Jackson Harper), who has immediate qualms about Eleanor’s situation and her obvious lack of scruples, on which he appears to be an authority. But he undertakes her plea to teach her some morality, how to be Good to avoid being sent to The Bad Place. Chidi knows what is right and speaks for human ethical ideals—Kant, Aristotle, and Hume are referenced among other philosophers. He appears to be the moral center—at least until his own imperfections begin to show.

The other two primary characters of The Good Place are Tahani (Jameela Jamil) and her “soul-mate” Jason (Manny Jacinto). Jason is also hiding his own failure in life to look out for anyone but himself, and knows, like Eleanor, that a mistake has been made. Tahani is/was beautiful, wealthy, philanthropic, and ebullient and helpful to others in the Good Place. Eleanor immediately hates her and sets out to expose her perfect façade.

It is apparent that Tahani and Jason are just as unsuited as eternal soul-mates as are Chidi and Eleanor, and while Michael blames himself and his design for numerous glitches that keep occurring, the situation starts to feel like “Hell is other people,” Sartre’s No Exit with network-TV gag-writers. Perhaps this is really The Bad Place. Michael—along with the sixth primary character, a perky infallible “virtual assistant” named Janet (the delightful D’Arcy Beth Carden)—deals with a cosmic bureaucracy overseeing and interfering with his Good Place, and anomalies like giant sinkholes created by the presence of the not-Good Eleanor and Jason. The eternal nature of the place is beset with problems and crises, and no one seems to be in charge, although Janet knows everything and cheerfully announces the latest bad news to a harried Michael.

Perhaps all of them are making the Good Place Bad, as their neuroses began to show. No one, not even the composed, upbeat Tahani, is quite sure where they are or where they belong. Flawed on earth, and still in the wrong place, working out their karmic flaws in the same old bodies and personalities. In the third season, all four souls are returned to earth just before their accidental deaths, given the chance to avoid those deaths and to work out their issues. Each is now tied to the other three in life, and Michael and Janet are there (here) in person to help them along in their Second Chances. Which they inevitably begin to blow, trapped back in the fallible mortal world. Perhaps Season Four of The Good Place will keep them on this cosmic roller coaster, or lead them gently to Nirvana, where they can finally shrug off these irksome personalities.

There is nothing startling or even particularly dramatic about Forever, a 2018 Amazon release. The less-than 4-hour running-time of Forever may seem longer, given the primary theme of boredom—ennui in death as it was in life.

A married couple pushing 50 die a year apart and are reunited in an afterlife. The realm in which they find themselves
looks very much like the Southern California suburb they left behind. They are outwardly very happy to be together again, in a painfully bland and solicitous manner. Strangely, they appear to be the only ones reunited with their mates in life. Everyone else is single in the seemingly happy, normal community called Riverside. It is not in another dimension: there are living people there too, carrying on their everyday lives among ghosts. The living are unaware of the dead ones, while the dead can watch the living and even draw some sort of energy from them.

The dead couple (Fred Armisen and Maya Rudolph) immediately begin to recreate the habitual life they had—mundane, empty rituals of meals and hobbies and entertainment, indulged with a forced enthusiasm. The husband is particularly vacant and sappy, and the wife begins to question why they are there together, and whether their lives may have been wasted clinging to each other. This feeling is abetted by her attraction to a single middle-aged dead woman (Catherine Keener) who seems a independent spirit in Riverside, but who had a unhappy life and a boring job.

Together, with the help of a cryptic character The Traveler (Peter Weller) the two women leave the perfect suburban Riverside—and the husband—and walk to Oceanside, where beautiful dead people have a bacchanalian dance party in a mansion overlooking the sea. Maybe the party is endless. They are immediately welcomed and join in the revelry, enjoying the change and each other’s company.

Husband comes to Oceanside seeking Wife. She does not want to go back. He gets upset at this rejection in his cringe-worthy, deadpan manner, with a hint of anger and/or amusement. Armisen’s acting is awful but may be part of the challenge to the audience, to take it at all seriously. Indeed the whole tone of Forever is one of hipster tongue-in-cheek absurdism, of testing the notion of soul-mates in a spiritual state, an afterlife that is highly dubious in the first place.

Husband tries to go back to Riverside without his mate, but is blocked by the Traveler and told he must now stay in Oceanside. “All roads lead to Oceanside” is a repeated line that tries to sound meaningful. Not wanting to have anything to do with the decadent crowd in the mansion who have captivated his wife and her “friend,” he stays on the beach and tries to build a boat, preferring the unknown of the open sea to any of these arranged “paradises.” He asks Wife to help him. She wants to, despite emotional interference from the other woman, all three of them confronting repressed feelings they had had in life.

The boat building goes badly but incorporates some humorous gags. Even though they have proclaimed themselves divorced “forever,” the Couple ultimately acknowledge that they must stay together, and don’t want to return to either of the communities of dead souls they have been shown so far. So they walk into the sea, and across the sea bed to another place. Emerging from the water, they gaze up at a New Place, with looks of awe.

Have they reached the Promised Land? We don’t get to see, which usually would indicate a cliff-hanger, to be continued next year. I would be interested in any metaphysical developments, but not with these two bland, hapless souls.
**Russian Doll**, a Netflix original series, is a well-constructed and -paced 4-hour movie over 8 episodes. It is also brilliant in execution—visually, musically, and especially psychologically. It depicts an afterlife or a transitional stage that is a loop of some kind—a trap and a puzzle which two people—who have died on the same night in New York City—try to understand so they may escape the round of deaths they are experiencing.

In the process, they figure out that their deaths are somehow interdependent, and they are being given the opportunity—from some Power or blind karma—to resolve deep flaws in their lives. Then they are allowed to remain among the living with their healing lessons. As the title makes clear, there are many layers to these characters—indeed to every individual—and they must be explored. Selves within selves. Nested karma.

Nadia Vulvokov (the magnetic Natasha Lyonne, also co-creator and co-writer) is looking into a bathroom mirror while a pop song plays from the party outside. It is her 36th birthday party, thrown by friend Maxine in Max’s large East Village apartment. The song, which will repeat many times—whenever Nadia dies and instantly returns to this moment—is Harry Nilsson singing “Gotta Get Up,” and it’s a perfect earworm—bouncy, upbeat, and yet somehow urgent:

“Gotta get up, gotta get out, gotta get home before the morning comes…” (The device also immediately recalls *Groundhog Day*, and its constant return to the clock-radio playing “I Got You, Babe.” Indeed, *Groundhog Day* is cited as one of *Russian Doll*’s inspirations)

Getting “home”—or at least closer—before the morning comes will be the goal for Nadia and for Alan (Charlie Barnett), her somehow-linked soulmate in this cosmic maze. The tagline for the series says, “Dying is easy, it’s living that’s hard.” In the Buddhist bardo teachings, dying is indeed hard—The Bardo of Painful Death being the first step—and once the body is dead, the mind must let it and all its attachments go, as quickly as possible. A supremely difficult task, but in the dharma of reincarnation, we have many more lives to work out karma, gain merit, and find the equanimity that leads to liberation. Nadia is “allowed” to remain in her life, experience various painful deaths over a night and following day, and earn some knowledge and peace of mind for the way forward.

She exits the bathroom through a strange glowing door that’s either a piece of art or a cosmic portal, and joins the party. Maxine (Greta Lee) greets her, as she will many times, with “Sweet Birthday Baby!” and hands her a joint. Nadia proceeds to party, consuming drugs and alcohol and bantering with friends in her aggressive New York style, cynical and brashly funny. She meets Mike
(Jeremy Bobb), who is trying to impress her with leftist-intellectual political talk, until she starts coming on to him. He is slick and confident, they are equally brash and horny, and are soon out the door heading for her place. They first must stop at her regular bodega in the Tompkins Square neighborhood for “supplies,” including condoms. It is here that she will cross paths with Alan, who is drunk and knocking stuff off the shelves in the back of the store. She takes a brief interest in him but is focused on the matter at hand, getting laid.

Cut to Nadia and Mike in post-coital conversation, mutually smart-ass and not the least tender or romantic. We begin to see that Nadia is seriously defensive in her assertiveness, and unhappy despite her funny quips. We learn that she is a freelance software engineer, that Mike has played some games that she designed, and that she is now done with him and called him an Uber.

Working at her computer, she is out of cigarettes and goes out to buy some. Seeing her missing cat Oatmeal across the street, she crosses, is struck by a cab and killed. Zoom in on her dead vacant eyes, and then her bardo trip begins. She finds herself back at the bathroom mirror in Maxine’s apartment, with full knowledge of what has just happened. Re-entering the party, Maxine again greets her with “Sweet Birthday Baby!” but there are variations in this new/old reality. She finds herself in the same conversation with Mike, but rejects him. Visibly shaken, she asks Maxine if it isn’t weird partying in a building that used to be a Yeshiva school, “because this was once a sacred place.” (Maxine’s reply is precious: “This is New York. Real estate is sacred.”)

So the element of Jewish mysticism is introduced into the plot, which will become ever more complex with symbolism and cultural references. Nadia’s death is forcing her to look at her ongoing sacrilege, abusing her body and shuttering her heart. That Judaism is an important element of her character’s bardo trip reflects Natasha Lyonne’s own Russian-Jewish heritage and upbringing. In fact much of Nadia’s backstory and existential crisis is Natasha’s.

Into her confusion and near-panic comes a bardo guide. Ruth (Elizabeth Ashley) arrives at the party. Ruth is an elder psychiatrist who has known Nadia since childhood, was close friends with Nadia’s deranged mother, and thus understands her better than she does herself.

“I don’t know what I’m doing,” Nadia tells her. Mike walks by. “I was going to go home and fuck this guy, but now I just feel so profoundly empty.” They sit and talk. Nadia says she thinks she has amnesia, that things are repeating, but not everything—which makes her feel that maybe she’s OK. Ruth says that the 36th birthday was always going to be a tough one: Nadia’s mother Lenora died on or before her 36th. This establishes the central conflict for Nadia, holding her back both in life and in death—guilt over the death of her mother, and fear that she is as crazy as Lenora was.

Enter another man in Nadia’s life, ex-boyfriend John (Yul Vasquez), who arrives at the party as Nadia is telling her friend Lizzy (Rebecca Henderson) that she thinks she’s dead. John and Nadia find a quiet corner and Nadia relates her death, which John tries to understand but of course can’t. He is
a good-hearted man who loves Nadia and regrets their break-up. Nadia is agitated about her missing cat Oatmeal, who is semi-feral on the streets but always returns to her place within a day or so, and it’s been three. John offers to help find him; Nadia perks up and they hit the streets. Nadia sees a panhandler by the park entrance and tells John she thinks she knows him. This literally shady character will also be a significant figure in Nadia’s “long dark night of the soul.” Calling himself Horse—the name maybe a symbol for addiction—he is like every character in *Russian Doll*, three-dimensional and memorable.

Nadia sees Oatmeal across the street and starts across, but this time John grabs her and saves her from getting hit as before. She gets angry at John, irrationally, and goes off alone to look for the cat. She finds him, and sits up on the back of a park bench petting him, and cooing that she loves him. Then the cat disappears from her arms. Nadia looks confused, and then loses her balance and falls backward into the river, sinking like a stone. Immediately she is back at the party, looking in the mirror but this time coughing up water.

Nearly hysterical, she has a fight with Maxine and leaves. Mike is on the porch and saves her from falling down the stairs. She sees Horse across the street, then walks on into the night. This is the end of Episode One—a lot of character and plot development in a mere 24 minutes, setting the pace, and the desire to be swept into Nadia’s existential drama. The outro song, “Shallow Tears” by Light Asylum, like all the music in this series, is curated for dramatic and thematic impact.

> “Like a storm, lightning striking black and white  
> You were born out of this darkness and light…”

Nadia now begins dying in rapid succession, in different ways, but each sudden death returns her to the bathroom mirror, ever more frantic and confused. Yet her nature is combative, so anger and fear are mingled. After her fifth or sixth death, she decides to just stay and enjoy the party. It might actually be some kind of eternal reward. She smokes the “Israeli” joint that Maxine offers every time Nadia emerges from the bathroom; then, in a surreal montage, slugs whiskey and wine, snorts cocaine, and tokes on a pipe, smoking cigs all the while. Her self-destructiveness is the counterpoint to her actual destructions. As “I Go to Sleep” by Sia plays, she finally crashes, and wakes up in the morning, alive.

She sees Lizzie lying in a tangle of sleeping bodies on the carpet—a “fuckpile”—and wakes her. They leave the apartment by the fire ladder—Nadia considers this means of egress safer than the stairs, with which she has been having really bad luck. Lizzie is another engaging character, a stereotypical postmodern New York lesbian art denizen, but a funny and wholly likeable individual. Through these recognizable characters and rich visual detail, the writers and designers of *Russian Doll* deftly satirize some of the absurdities of the current cultural milieu.

In her jaunty easygoing manner, Lizzie tells Nadia about her current gig:

> “Today I’m helping an artist make blood jelly to suspend over a 13th Century mock debtors’
prison.” Pretension and meaning are debatable, but it all rings true as part of Nadia’s very real 2019
downtown Manhattan culture—nocturnal, amoral, and highly self-indulgent, in the name of artistic
lifestyle and hard-won freedom.

Having made it to the morning this time, Nadia makes a beeline for Ruth’s home, and their
conversation reveals more about Nadia’s mother. Nadia gives Ruth the “safe words” that mean she
is truly fearing for her sanity, and Ruth calls an ambulance to transport Nadia to Bellevue. But she
never makes it to the hospital. Returning again to her party, she now decides that, as Maxine has
told her, “It’s your party, you can’t leave,” to go with the flow and have fun. She gets loaded again
with a variety of substances, and crashes on the couch.

The next alternative Monday morning, having decided that Bellevue is not the answer, she
goes to the synagogue that formerly owned Maxine’s building, to ask a rabbi about her strange ex-
periences there. Confronted by a secretary, Shifra (a very droll Tami Sagher), Nadia is told she can’t
just waltz in and see the rabbi, so she lies about being married and calls John to come and talk to the
rabbi for her. John is so earnestly in love with her that he cancels an appointment with a real estate
client to do her bidding.

He begins by asking the rabbi questions from the list Nadia made regarding the old Yeshiva
building, but ends up confessing his love for Nadia and his ongoing frustration, even despair. The
rabbi has much sage advice to impart, which applies to both John and Nadia:

“Mysticism teaches that there is wisdom inaccessible to the intellect. You can only reach it
through surrender, being nothing. Embracing the abyss (John’s attachment to Nadia) is the only way
forward.”

Meanwhile, Nadia and Shifrin have a scene in the outer office. By challenging her knowledge,
Nadia tricks Shifrin into reciting some prayers—especially one for protection, “Like if someone could
die,” she says, trying to be casual. “Come sit,” Shifrin tells her, warmly.

“What does it mean?” Nadia asks after Shifrin has recited a beautiful prayer in Hebrew.

“Angels are all around us.”

Nadia and John go to her apartment and have sex, her promised payment for his help with
the rabbi. Afterwards, she tells him coldly that they will never get back together. He tells her what
the rabbi said, that he was using her as a way of avoiding the abyss. But, he adds angrily, “You ARE
the fucking abyss.” Nadia is visibly hurt but cannot defend herself.

After dark, having made it through the whole day without dying, Nadia is again looking
for Oatmeal in the park, carrying a pint of liquor. She runs into Horse and offers him a drink. He is
fascinated by her thick red hair and says he wants to cut it. She notices he has no shoes, and it’s
winter. They were stolen the night before in the shelter, he says, adding that he will never go back
there. “I don’t sleep with thieves,” he proclaims. She commiserates by saying how fucked up America
is, and then tells him that she herself is “the abyss,” which they both find hilarious.

Horse takes Nadia to a secluded place in the park and produces a proper set of hairdressing
tools wrapped in a rag, and soon Nadia’s mop is shortened considerably. He seems to care for her in a tender way. They are both drunk on the whiskey, and snuggle together under a thin blanket, as a cold wind audibly rises. Nadia wakes up at the mirror.

“I froze to death,” she says. “Jesus fucking Christ, that’s dark.” Then notices that her hair is still long, her haircut didn’t travel backward in time. But now she is concerned for Horse, leaves the party and goes to the shelter. Since it is the night before, he doesn’t know her and has not yet had his shoes stolen. She sits on the next bunk and guards them while Horse sleeps, and she does prevent the theft. Her heart is opening; we are seeing her caring side. She dozes off until morning, when she and Horse awaken. He looks at her seriously and says, as he slips on his boots, “I want to cut your hair.”

Later in this Monday morning she is in an office building elevator, and Alan is standing next to her, fingerling a ring box nervously. It bothers Nadia so he puts it in his pocket. The elevator car jerks, everyone begins to panic and lie on the floor of the car. They start to plummet; Nadia and Alan are the only ones standing.

“Hey man,” Nadia says, almost jokingly. “Didn’t you get the news? We’re about to die.”

“It doesn’t matter. I die all the time.” Crash to black.

The next episode begins with Alan, also staring into his bathroom mirror. “Ten,” he says, the elevator plunge being death #10 for him, and brushes his teeth while classical music plays. We soon see that Alan is obsessive-compulsive; in his neat modern apartment, he feeds his fish and listens to affirmations. Pocketing the ring that Nadia saw in the elevator, he goes to girlfriend Beatrice’s home, to propose marriage. But she rejects him, as he knows she will, because he’s already gone through this scene ten times.

He goes home, gets drunk and plays video games, eventually passing out. Like Nadia, he has substance abuse issues that all his affirmations and controlled environment can’t assuage. In the morning, he goes to see his mother, a medical doctor, and tells her he proposed to Beatrice and that she said yes. Then he gets on the ill-fated elevator with Nadia, except we now hear her reply to his comment “I die all the time.”

“Me too,” she says before the crash.

Back at his bathroom mirror, the classical piece plays, marking return #11. “Fuck,” he says, as he swats at a fly that he has killed numerous times before but misses this time. Nadia is also back at her mirror saying “Fuck.” They both now know that they are not alone in this strange purgatory, and set out to find the other. All Nadia has to go on is the logo on the ring box that Alan was fidgeting with in the elevator, and she manages to find him by his “Yep” review of the store.

She tracks him down, and on the sidewalk outside his building, they carry on an impossible conversation. Nadia, in her rapid-fire manner, speculates on what is happening to them, “Do you think we’re dead? Do you think we’re the same person?” She tells him that she is “restarting” on her
birthday, and invites him to her party—the night before.

Alan goes through another painful meeting with Beatrice, but this time she lets slip that she has been sleeping with Mike, her literature professor at CCNY—the same sleazy guy that Nadia had sex with before her first death. A connecting thread. Alan, in his painful insecurity, curses Beatrice, who admits that she was afraid to tell him of her infidelity, for fear that he might “hurt himself.”

After a scene in Mike’s office, during which Alan breaks a mirror—a recurring symbol in Russian Doll—he throws the engagement ring into the river, then dies again, freakishly. “Twelve” he tells himself in the mirror. Checking the ring box, he finds that it is gone, which makes him smile. Perhaps things are changing, leading him to a way out of this insanity.

Nadia comes to Alan’s apartment to “brainstorm” their dilemma. Her sloppiness and his OCD emphasize the yin and yang of their personalities. But they find a connection: Alan has a copy of a game that Nadia developed. He claims it’s an impossible game, doubting that she even played it. To prove him wrong, she does play it, with commentary: “The trick is, you’ve got to find a labyrinth keeper.”

The Bardos are often referred to as a Labyrinth. The fact that Alan and Nadia’s lives, like so many in contemporary culture, revolve around games is significant. In video games, the protagonist/avatar dies many times but always gets to go back to the start for another try. The hard-won lessons add up to progress or evolution, and the ultimate prize—victory or transcendence—may be attained.

Alan says that he remembers all of his dozen or so deaths, but can’t remember the first one. Nadia seizes on this as significant, a possible key to their escape. She takes Alan to Ruth’s office, hoping Ruth can hypnotize him or use EMDR to help him remember his first death. Alan refuses. He can work out his own problems, he tells them, trying to maintain some sort of control over his utter helplessness.

In the subway, the Odd Couple of Death have an almost humorous one together, right after they joke about a mutual allergy. Nadia suspects they have been dying at exactly the same times. Three times they have died in each other’s company, which supports her theory. Now Nadia has a plan—she will go with him everywhere to find the cause of his first death. He resists the idea, saying that while she is restarting at a party among friends, his day was the worst of his life, getting rejected by the woman he loves and finding out she has been unfaithful—not something he wants anyone else to witness. But Nadia persists, and they go off together to Beatrice’s apartment for the traumatic scene. It plays out very differently with Nadia present, even humorously, and Alan is not so dejected this time as they leave together.

His next stop was a bar, to get shit-faced after the break-up. But he no longer feels as depressed with Nadia along, and has a harder time getting drunk as they converse. More of Nadia’s mommy-issues come out as she tells Alan about a small fortune in Krugerrands that her grandparents left for her, which her mother spent. The lone remaining gold coin is on a chain around her
neck, and she wears it in bitterness. Back on track, she tries to get Alan to remember his first death and where he went after this, but he wonders where she was at this time. She knows exactly, and has to say.

“Fucking Mike from the party,” she confesses. Alan’s romantic antagonist rears his smug slick head again. Trying to downplay it, Nadia tells Alan that Mike wasn’t such a great lay—pretty average. In a sense, Alan, Nadia, Beatrice, and Mike have all been fucking each other. This sets Alan off again, angry at another betrayal. Since he’s now drunk, he tells Nadia he can fuck her better than Mike did, and she, being a horny, sad, and liberated woman, says “Let’s have at it.”

The sex scene in Nadia’s pad between these two lost or trapped souls seems gratuitous, but it cannot be. They are too connected and too damaged to let them have a drunken casual fuck just because they are the primary characters. Since they seem like polar opposites, perhaps there is some kundalini exchange or alignment happening in their drunken coitus.

Nadia stands at her mirror, blasely brushing her teeth; Alan is passed out naked on the bed. She sees his probably-expensive sneakers lying on the floor, and steals them to give to the shoeless Horse. In the park, Horse is suspicious but the sneakers win him over, and he takes her someplace where they huff some gas or glue. Horse’s rap is both paranoid and believable.

“I prefer casual acquaintances over closer relations and strangers above everybody else ‘cause humanity’s a fuck.” This echoes many of Nadia’s cynical statements about the general state of the human race. He tells her about his role in creating “the dark web” in the ‘90s; that it was just a scam and the government was also a scam so he dropped out completely. (Except for perhaps a hair-dressing career.)

“How do you know that you’re real?” Nadia asks, getting to her primary concern. “Do you think we need other people to be, like, witnesses?”

“I’m here,” is his confident reply, ironic considering they are both stoned.

In the bodega with Horse, Nadia sees him and Alan in a kind of mirror image, both emotionally damaged and physically impaired by drugs. She remembers seeing Alan here the first night, and back in her apartment, tells him. He has remembered his first death that night, an obvious one—suicide.

Shots of rapidly dying flowers and rotting fruit tell us that this bardo is deteriorating. Nadia and Alan begin to realize that people are disappearing, that perhaps the end of this loop-world is drawing near. They need to understand the rules of the game, and come to the realization that they truly want to help each other in their suffering.

Flashbacks to Nadia and her mother (Chloë Sevigny) in 1991 reveal the neurotic Lenora, and the source of Nadia’s guilt—a belief that she abandoned her mother to her insanity. She had chosen to live with Ruth as Lenore’s mental illness advanced, and soon after, Lenore died (the cause never revealed but suicide implied.) Ruth tells Nadia she’s got it all wrong:
“You wanted to live. It’s the most beautiful thing in the world. Do you still want to? I look at you now, chasing down death at every corner.”

Following a death either by heart attack or choking on a chicken wing, Nadia returns to the party to find the bathroom mirror missing. Maxine says there has never been a mirror. (“It’s a statement on narcissism and waste and the beauty-industrial complex.”) Alan’s mirror has also disappeared. They are afraid that if they don’t stop the loop, the people they care for will disappear forever. Into death, or worse, a negated existence?

Nadia’s wounded child starts materializing. Nadia tries to make amends by retrieving from Ruth’s a book, *Emily of the New Moon*, and finally giving it to John’s daughter Lucy, whom she had rejected. The book has special significance for Nadia. This act seems to be the cathartic one, as Lucy tells Nadia “She’s still inside you,” causing Nadia to disgorge the broken bloody shards of her childhood, and break the spell.

When she and Alan return to their lives this time, things have been restored—the engagement ring, the mirrors, the reveling party crowd, even the fly in Alan’s bathroom, which now has a mate in Nadia’s. Alan’s last visit to Beatrice, clutching the futile ring, is a healing that even encompasses Mike.

They are now in touch with their giving selves and it shows. Alan meets a couple of women—one on the street, one at Nadia’s party—who respond affectionately to his aura. But Alan’s and Nadia’s desperate selves still exist—they have split, and the reborn ones must save the destructive ones before their first death. SPOILER: They succeed. When Nadia saves Alan from self-destruction, he asks,

“You promise if I don’t (kill myself) I’ll be happy?”

“Absolutely not. But I can promise you that you will not be alone.”

The yin and yang souls then merge, and their integrated selves join a kind of ecstatic pagan parade led by Horse through the New York night. On the soundtrack, Arthur Lee begins singing Love’s “Alone Again Or”:

Yeah, I heard a funny thing
Somebody said to me
You know that I could be in love with almost everyone
I think that people are the greatest fun
And I will be alone again tonight, my dear...
"By this merit,  
May all beings gain omniscience,  
And thus defeat neurosis and negative actions,  
Which are the enemies.  
From the turbulent waves of  
Birth, old age, sickness, and death,  
From the ocean of cyclic existence,  
May all beings be liberated."
NOTES


5 Brightly colored Mexican folk art sculptures of fantastical (fantasy/mythical) creatures. The first *alebrijes*, along with use of the term, originated with Pedro Linares. In the 1930s, Linares fell very ill and while he was in bed, unconscious, dreamt of a strange place resembling a forest. There, he saw trees, animals, rocks, clouds that suddenly turned into something strange, some kind of animals, but unknown animals. He saw a donkey with butterfly wings, a rooster with bull horns, a lion with an eagle head, and all of them were shouting one word, "Alebrijes." Upon recovery, he began recreating the creatures he saw in cardboard and papier-mâché and called them *Alebrijes*. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alebrije)

6 Blake, William excerpt from “Auguries of Innocence”


9 “Arnošt Lustig” https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arno%C5%A1t_Lustig

10 “Pitfall” http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0203612

11 Jan Potocki was born in 1761 into the Potocki aristocratic family that owned vast estates across Poland. He was educated in Geneva and Lausanne, served twice in the Polish Army as a captain of engineers, and spent some time on a galley as novice to the Knights of Malta. His colorful life took him across Europe, Asia and North Africa, where he embroiled himself in political intrigues, flirted with secret societies and contributed to the birth of ethnology—he was one of the first to study the precursors of the Slavic peoples from a linguistic and historical standpoint. In 1790 he became
the first person in Poland to fly in a hot air balloon when he made an ascent over Warsaw with the aeronaut Jean-Pierre Blanchard, an exploit that earned him great public acclaim. He spent some time in France, and upon his return to Poland, became a known publicist, publishing newspapers and pamphlets, in which he argued for various reforms. He also established in 1788 in Warsaw a publishing house named *Drukarnia Wolna* (Free Press), as well as the city’s first free reading room. Potocki’s wealth enabled him to travel extensively. He was also one of the first travel writers of the modern era, penning lively accounts of many of his journeys, during which he also undertook extensive historical, linguistic and ethnographic studies. Believing he was becoming a werewolf, Potocki committed suicide by fatally shooting himself with a silver bullet that he had blessed by his village priest, in December 1815, at the age of 54.  


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12 Chaney, Jen, Washington Post, November 12, 2010 (per Rotten Tomatoes)


15 Other forms of mediumship are *Clairaudience* or "clear hearing"; *Clairsentience* or "clear sensing," the ability to have an impression of what a spirit wants to communicate, or to feel sensations instilled by a spirit; *Clairsentiment* or "clear feeling," a condition in which the medium takes on the ailments of a spirit, feeling the same physical problem which the spirit person had before death; *Clairalience* or "clear smelling," the ability to smell a spirit; *Clairgustance* or "clear tasting," the ability to receive taste impressions from a spirit; *Claircognizance* or "clear knowing," the ability to know something without receiving it through normal or psychic senses. Often, a medium will claim to have the feeling that a message or situation is "right" or "wrong." “Mediumship: Psychic Senses”  https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mediumship (Glossary of Key Words Frequently Used in Parapsychology”Archived 2010-11-20 at the Wayback Machine., Parapsychological Association website, Retrieved January 29, 2007)

16 Rubin, Bruce Joel, *Jacob’s Ladder: the Applause Screenplay Series*, Applause Theatre & Cinema Books; Annotated edition April 2000. This in turn reminds me of the ending of Nikos Kazantzakis/Martin Scorsese’s *The Last Temptation of Christ*, in which Jesus, in his dying moments, envisions surviving the crucifixion and the life he might have led.

17 “From out of the heart of the beloved, a sudden brilliant, blinding blue radiation penetrates every fiber of my being, slowly and inexorably and not particularly comfortably burning away those automatic habits of human primate life and attachments to the organic world which have unavoidably accumulated within me through continual contamination with organic life... This harsh, intense radiation which burns and itches so intolerably...dissolves karma—which is to say, frees me from
those results of my continual involvement with biological bodies—the ego will also dissolve, that false sense of detached self-existence generated by the human primate self...Here I will be once again, faced with the same dilemma: to give in to the soft, seductive light of rebirth, or not to give in to panic, to accept the brilliant and dazzling blue dissolving radiation without resistance, to welcome it and bathe myself in it, in the mood of gratitude, as it dissolves away every last shred of habits, attitudes, and occluded human primate vision.”  *Gold, pp 81-83, “Fourth Chamber.”*

18 Also known as Lady Xook, a powerful Queen of the Maya in the 8th Century CE; Balam was the King’s name.  [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lady_Xoc](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lady_Xoc)


21 Nochimson, Martha P.  *David Lynch Swerves* (Univ of Texas Press, 2013): “He sees the Bardo moment, when enlightenment might be the result of the perception of emptiness.  He sees that those who misunderstand emptiness drop into a lower level of existence.”  (p. 112)  Nochimson had many interviews with David Lynch.

22 “I know that Lynch has read  *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, which is in sympathy with Vedic visions of the illusory nature of physical appearances”  Nochimson, pp 16-17

23 Other cinematic influences on  *Mulholland Drive*, regarding the amorality and destructive nature of Hollywood are  *The Bad and the Beautiful, Sunset Boulevard* (also a tale told from the grave,) the nightmarish  *Barton Fink*, and  *In a Lonely Place*.

24 a fictitious name that suggests sleep; also a  *Wizard of Oz* reference, one of Lynch’s favorite films, heavily referenced in  *Wild at Heart*.  ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Winkie_Country](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Winkie_Country))

25 “The portrait that Lynch paints in  *Mulholland Drive* is of a malignant imbalance...The Cowboy, Roque, and the Castigliones are the anti-Lynch in Hollywood.”  Nochimson, p. 120

26 It’s a story that might have been ripped from the pages of Kenneth Anger’s  *Hollywood Babylon* books.  David Lynch’s cinematic style may also owe something to Anger’s seminal underground films of the 1940s, ’50s and ’60s.  (Anger is still making films as of this writing—at currently in his eighth decade!)


28 “Many-worlds Interpretation”  [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Many-worlds_interpretation](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Many-worlds_interpretation)
Dr. Lanza’s credentials as a scientist are stellar: He is a renowned stem cell expert, in 2014 was listed in *Time’s* one hundred most influential people in the world; in 2015 he was chosen as one of *Prospect Magazine’s* “World Thinkers 2015”, and was voted as the third most important scientist alive by *NY Times*.

“David Lynch disclaims full knowledge of why he has used certain images, identifying his reception of their effects with ours.” (Nochimson, p. 120)

“This abject sisterhood links Grace/Susan to another potential world connected with *Blue Tomorrows*, a wintry street in Poland fused with the image of the record in the main title that first alluded to AXXON N.” (Nochimson, p. 136)

“Lynch’s references to Mahareshi Mahesh Yogi…and his teachings about the shallowness of confusing surface appearances with the totality of reality. In *Inland Empire*, Lynch puts that vocabulary explicitly into the Visitor’s mouth as she speaks to Grace in parables about the marketplace and the palace.” (Nochimson, p. 134)

Nochimson, p. 143

“(The sex scene is) a moment completely suffused with the uncertainty principle…a kind of doubling that recalls the phenomenon of superposition noted by quantum physics.” Nochimson, p. 142

“Every step of the way, Grace/Susan continues to meet again and again the abject sisterhood in slightly altered shape, but always the sisterhood to which she has been destined to belong, who become witnesses to her death.” Nochimson, p. 147


“Sinnerman,” a traditional African American spiritual, is one of Nina Simone’s most famous songs. She recorded her definitive 10-minute-plus version on her 1965 album *Pastel Blues*. Simone learned the lyrics of this English song in her childhood when it was used at revival meetings by her mother, a Methodist minister, to help people confess their sins. In the early days of her career, when she was heavily involved in the Greenwich Village scene, Simone often used the long piece to end her live performances. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sinner_Man)

An illustration of the illogic of the dream, or of David Lynch himself: In the house where Pete meets Alice to get the money for their getaway, a porn film starring Alice is playing on a wall-sized screen—a continuous shot of her face, registering pleasure. Face time is usually minimal in such entertainments.
Yekaterina Golubeva (9 October 1966 – 14 August 2011) was a Russian actress, perhaps best known for her role in the 1999 French film, *Pola X*. Golubeva was born in Leningrad...married Šarūnas Bartas, a Lithuanian film director, but they divorced and Golubeva subsequently moved to France, where she lived until her death. *The cause of her death remains unknown*. Golubeva and Bartas had one child, a 15-year-old daughter who lives with her father in Lithuania. Also an adult son by a first husband who lives in Russia, *and a 6-year-old daughter she was raising with Leos Carax in Paris*. (emphases mine) ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yekaterina_Golubeva](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yekaterina_Golubeva))

The Samaritaine building was proposed in 1905 and the building, filling the entire block from rues de la Monnaie, Arbre-Sec, des Petres, and Baillet, was completed in 1910. On 15 June 2005, in order to update the 19th-century building to modern standards of security—or for purposes of restructuring, as the labor unions believe—the department store was closed. In June 2015, a building permit is finalized and in September of the same year construction began. This modern construction of the Samaritaine is designed to feature a hotel, restaurant, brewery, cafes, offices, and housing, and is projected to be complete in 2019.

The mask that the actress Edith Scob dons at the end of *Holy Motors* is the same as the one that she wore as a 22-year-old in Franju’s classic *Eyes Without a Face (1960)*.

“When I first began reading about Buddhist female figures, even before my formal conversion, I was struck by the literary, thematic, and soteriological differences between two incredibly powerful women in Buddhist lore: Mahaprajapati, the Buddha’s stepmother and maternal aunt, and Vasumitra, an enlightened courtesan who serves to guide the devotee Sudhana on a mystic journey in the *Gandavyuha Sutra*. One woman is unfailingly dogged in her fight to have the Buddha, her nephew, recognize her as worthy to be ordained as a monastic. The other is unapologetic in the use of her physical body as a skillful means (*upaya*) to enlightenment.” Lam, Raymond, “Mahaprajapati or Vasumitra? Contrasting Representations of Female Buddhist Authority” www.buddhistdoor.net/features

Definition: (1) a charitable or helpful person (with reference to Luke 10:33); (2) a member of a people inhabiting Samaria in biblical times, or of the modern community in the region of Nablus claiming descent from them, adhering to a form of Judaism accepting only its own ancient version of the Pentateuch as Scripture. *Google Dictionary*

“Karma is one of the most important points of the Buddhist tradition. It means that your world is not dictated by a higher power, cosmic power, external deity, or God. Instead, your functioning in life is constantly a result of your previous actions. People get messages constantly—if they are speeding or if they are slowing, if they are tripping out or not, whatever they are doing. Constant answers come to you, which is karmic expression—cause and effect.” Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, *The Teacup and the Skullcup: Where Zen and Tantra Meet, page 111*

47 en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Emily_of_New_Moon