You Only Live Twice: The Representation of the Afterlife in Film

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YOU ONLY LIVE TWICE: THE REPRESENTATION OF THE AFTERLIFE IN FILM

By

Amanda Joy Shapiro

A THESIS

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YOU ONLY LIVE TWICE: THE REPRESENTATION OF THE AFTERLIFE IN FILM

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The objective of this thesis is to examine and analyze the presentation of spaces, figures, and the processes of judgment in afterlife films. American and foreign titles as well as television series are assessed as afterlife films by two criteria: (1) A character has clinically died yet continues to exist and (2) a living character finds his or herself in an afterlife space. Films with characters that have near-death experiences (NDEs) are included in relation to the above three qualities. After screening nearly one hundred and thirty titles, I have found there is a basic formula structure that has been expanded and transformed into seven other structures, plus those that are combined for a unique narrative. The afterlife corpus is divided into five distinct eras by the quantity of releases that fluctuate in accordance with 20th and early 21st century cultural anxieties and technological advances. A secondary argument proposes why the afterlife story is perfectly suited to the film medium plus why the industry and audiences are incessantly drawn to the afterlife film premise. The ideas from Dutch scholar J.M.L. Peters’ 1961 UNESCO publication *Teaching About the Film* on film’s power to mentally transport audiences into a “second virtual world” and filmmaker Jon Boorstin’s *The Hollywood Eye: What Makes Movies Work* of cinematography styles that anticipate audience reception are used as tools to better understand these goals. A dozen are repeatedly cited for extensive study: *Liliom* (1934 France), *Here Comes Mr. Jordan* (1941) and its
DEDICATION AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I thank my mom, younger sister, and close friends.
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This project process has educated, inspired, and challenged my own philosophy.
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Introduction and Literature Review

The objective of this thesis is to examine and analyze a series of afterlife films, focusing specifically on the presentation of spaces, figures, and processes of judgment. American and foreign titles as well as television series are assessed as afterlife films by two criteria: (1) A character has clinically died yet continues to exist and (2) a living character finds him or herself in an afterlife space. Films with characters that have near-death experiences (NDEs) are included in relation to the above three qualities. After screening nearly one hundred and thirty titles, I have found there is a basic formula structure that has been expanded and transformed into seven other structures, which have additionally led to further combinations. The afterlife corpus is divided into five distinct eras by the quantity of releases that fluctuate in accordance with 20th and early 21st century cultural anxieties and technological advances.

A secondary argument proposes that the afterlife story is perfectly suited to the film medium and that the industry and audiences are incessantly drawn to the afterlife film premise. Two primary sources are used as tools to better understand these goals: the ideas from Dutch scholar J.M.L. Peters’ 1961 UNESCO publication Teaching About the Film on cinema’s power to mentally transport audiences into a “second virtual world” and filmmaker Jon Boorstin’s The Hollywood Eye: What Makes Movies Work on cinematography styles that anticipate audience reception. This thesis devotes extensive study to one dozen films: Liliom (1934 France), Here Comes Mr. Jordan (1941) and its remakes, Heaven Can Wait (1943), Angel on My Shoulder (1946), A Matter of Life and Death (Stairway to Heaven 1947 UK), All Dogs Go to Heaven (1989) and its sequel, Ghost (1990), Defending Your Life (1991), Bill and Ted’s Bogus Journey (1991), Don’t
Tempt Me (2001 Spain), Corpse Bride (2005), and Enter the Void (2010). An inventory of similar films is cited to bolster arguments or provide further samples. The afterlife is both a distant yet familiar world of the mind. The afterlife film perpetuates universal and age-old questions on the significance of life and death in the guise of enticing sights and stories. Each afterlife film may have its own identifiable design and theme but all of them are connected to higher concerns of mortality and second chances.

Since the 1890s, an indefinable number of films have been released that feature the afterlife yet the only film scholarship literature available for facilitating this study focuses on ghosts and angels. Works that examine the representation of Heaven and Hell belong to other disciplines of theology, philosophy, art history, literature studies, and cultural studies. Here, any artwork or religious tenets mentioned are used as reinforcement of the film’s analysis and serve as placeholders in the mind’s eye. Some significant resources that have assisted such background knowledge are Jansons’ History of Art 6th edition, R.C. Finucane’s Appearances of the Dead: A Cultural History of Ghosts, Brian Innes’ Death and the Afterlife, Tom Schouweiler’s Great Mysteries Opposing Viewpoints: Life After Death, Jeffrey Long’s Evidence of the Afterlife: The Science of Near-Death Experiences, and Lisa Miller’s Heaven: Our Enduring Fascination With the Afterlife; plus various texts that explain the theologies and beliefs in Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism. I will strive to illuminate the images of Heaven, Hell, ghosts, and angels as well as with other spaces, forms of return such as resurrection and reincarnation, and the processes of automatic judgment or by divine trial. There is no other work that attempts to accomplish such a feat in film studies
and it is my hope that this thesis inspires the field’s scholars to take this neglected yet extensive subject for further study.

James Robert Parish’s *Ghosts and Angels in Hollywood Films* lists over two hundred theatrical and made-for-television films, in alphabetical order, up to the early 1990s that omit Hell, its agents, and other forms of return. Despite its narrow lens and lack of analysis, every title is accompanied by its production crew credits, a plot summary, and a discussion of the critical reviews from its time of release. It is like a printed list that can be compiled by keywords on the International Movie Database website (IMDB.com) rather than film studies’ scholarship. For this project, my filmography indicates a variety of theatrical feature titles from Hollywood, Western Europe, and Asia as well as a few television series and amateur shorts, but almost none from the silent era or made-for-television examples, primarily due to inaccessibility for viewing. Parish provided an index for others to begin a conversation.

Katherine Fowkes’ *Giving Up the Ghost: Spirits, Ghosts, and Angels in Mainstream Comedy Films* also focuses on the ghost and angel figures and is limited to the Hollywood comedy genre of those released from *Heaven Can Wait* (1978) to *Heart and Souls* (1993). Fowkes approaches these films with academic scrutiny and incorporates gender, race, class, and psychoanalytic perspectives on social issues. However, she neglects afterlife films’ narrative foundations as a whole. This thesis instead applies gender, race, or class analysis to the characters’ appearances and relationships on a singular basis or to the difference between casts and plots of an original and its remake. For example, *Angel on My Shoulder* (1946) comments on delinquency and Chris Rock’s blackness in a remake of *Here Comes Mr. Jordan* (1941). The
character’s psychology or state-of-mind is assessed in the context of the death-event, attempting to complete a mission, or experiencing judgment as with *Jacob’s Ladder* (1990).

An additional rule for analyzing afterlife films is that whatever apparitions or strange supernatural occurrences the main characters see, are not dismissed as psychological materializations. Fowkes attempts an argument that Captain Gregg of *The Ghost and Mrs. Muir* (1947) is a figment of Lucy’s imagination: “The difficulty in deciding whether the ghost is a subject of his own right or an object of Lucy’s fantasy foregrounds the contradictory quality of the ghost as a narrative device.” (149) I say Captain Gregg is real. He is in no way born from Lucy’s mind. He lived, died, and continues to exist separately from Lucy’s existence. His powers are evidence of his spirit’s survival and not her hallucinations. The same can be said for other living characters that see the un-dead.

The most recent published source is Tom Ruffles’ *Ghost Images: Cinema of the Afterlife* that uses the single criterion of, “the continuation of personality after bodily death.” (4) He focuses on the ghost figure, like the above two sources, but not the other forms of return such as resurrection or reincarnation. The criterion would be better stated as the spirit’s disembodied existence after bodily death. Thus, his subtitle *Cinema of the Afterlife* is deceiving because he is not concerned with the entire afterlife body of filmic work, only one (significant) area. I consider continued existence of the body and soul as independent factors. Retaining personality and memory are not requirements for inclusion in this afterlife thesis, but are certainly discussed. Ruffles and I both exclude vampires. Though the living person is turned into a vampire by bodily death and is
resurrected, the personality is transformed by demonic force. It is a far more complicated figure with its own historical trends, doctrine, and volumes of study. Ruffles excludes zombies because they, “usually do not display much personality.” (8) While that may apply to Frankenstein’s and George A. Romero’s creatures, I say that films like Death Becomes Her (1992) and My Boyfriend’s Back (1993) feature characters of resurrected bodies and personalities.

Like Parish, Ruffles cites as many ghost films (English and some non-English languages) as possible and their plot summaries. Like Fowkes, he finds common connections to discuss, especially using an underlying question of the living character’s credible ghost-sightings: “veridical (or) hallucination…genuine haunting (or) fake haunting.” (Ruffles 55) He screened or learned of hundreds of ghost films and appropriated them by thematic content. Unlike Fowkes’ analysis of the ghost social metaphor, he focuses on the ghost narrative. His second chapter is a history of Silent Era ghosts; an even more rarely studied topic. And the third chapter is subdivided to address, “some thirty sections that provide a schema,” (Ruffles 8) with headings that range among the ghost’s mission, appearance, and purpose, such as “Interactions With Matter,” “Ghost Lovers,” “The Ghost in the Machine,” and “The Haunted House.” This thesis applies Ruffles’ research method and outline structure for a more comprehensive thematic discussion of afterlife films.
Methodology

The three chapter headings of Spacess, Figures, and Processes of Judgment are the three entwined qualities that make up an afterlife film story’s images, characters, and plot elements. “Spaces” is a term that refers to the world that fills the screen; the world that the characters exist within and move between; an imagined world created by art production designers from studio set materials or computer generated image technology or exteriors and interiors shot-on-location that stand-in for other-worldly places. These spaces are imbued with religious and/or secular symbols that act as visual shortcuts to a favorable, neutral, or damned assessment on the dead character’s designation. They are eternal or transient destinations. They are pre-existing or personally formed. It also refers to a realm shared by the living and the dead or a living realm marked by death. “Figures” references the multitude of characters that exist within the story, that interact within the spaces and with each other to push the narrative forward. They are concerned with a character’s death event and form of return, explaining the space’s qualities, and facilitating the completion of a mission or of unfinished business. The body’s appearances and wardrobes are important to the story’s tone and characters’ nature. Figures act as identifiers for the audience’s attachment to perceive the story. The “Processes of Judgment” are implicated or direct, partial or ultimate, verdicts on a character’s life that saturate the mise-en-scene. Whether these higher decisions are made behind-the-scenes by the character’s automatic arrival or by trial, the qualities of the spaces and its representatives are keys to understanding the story’s themes of morality, justice, or gratitude for time alive. Judgment provides the story with emotional conclusions. The afterlife narrative is not complete without some form of judgment.
Each chapter heading is divided into sub-sections to better showcase the arguments at hand. **Spaces** features various depictions and ideas of such examples as The Underworld, Heaven, and Hell as well as The In-Between, a Hereafter, and a place for suicides. It explores how they are all situated to the earthly realm. **Figures** covers a dichotomy of characters: those that are from or of the afterlife space and those that have arrived from the earthly realm (dead or living). The former consists of such kinds as supreme beings, guides, and attendants while the latter occurs by various forms of return such as resurrection, the ghost, reincarnation, and body possession. All are assessed on their appearances, functions, and interactions. **Processes of Judgment** considers only three categories: automatic arrival, trial, or the life review. Each mode allows for different cinematography and set design plus variance of the character’s control over a final destination. Judgment is the conclusion of the story’s progression (intrinsic) but also the film as a finished product for the audience to resonate with (external). These three main chapters are able to explore the afterlife body of films in a uniquely comprehensive yet specialized manner not found in any other work.

Interestingly, how a film shows and makes use of spaces, figures, and processes of judgment does not determine a film’s story-structure. The filmmaker’s decision choosing automatic arrival to Heaven or a trial’s verdict to Hell makes no difference in how the story unfolds and resolves. Instead, the various structures provide a roadmap for the character’s journey to an afterlife. Each turn of the plot is a signpost for the character and audience to be shown and moved through. There are a limitless number of possibilities. The most basic formula of the character moving from life to death to an afterlife existence is also the most basic in journey and purpose. There is one life, one
death event, and one eternal space for the one character of body, personality, and memory. There is no return to life or a second chance to mend mistakes and there is only one final judgment based on that one life. Not to be considered boring or stern but the other formulas open up to incorporate various spaces, missions to be completed, various forms of return/continuance, multiple opportunities to be judged and how; plus the various supporting characters to assist the hero. The seven other formulas are described as the following:

1. Main character is alive, main character dies, main dead character goes to the (gates of) an afterlife space but is returned to earth, has a mission, Final Destination decided. Ex. A Guy Named Joe (1943) and Angel on My Shoulder (1946)
2. Main character is alive, main character dies, main dead character stays on earth, has a mission, Final Destination decided. Ex. Ghost (1990)
3. Main character is alive, main alive character meets dead character, main alive character helps dead character complete formula 1 or 2. Ex. The Sixth Sense (1999)
4. Main character is alive, main character dies, main character enters an In-Between space, has a mission but not on earth, completes mission, Final Destination decided. Ex. The Lovely Bones (2009)
5. Main character is alive and stays alive, finds his or her self in an afterlife space, and must escape. Ex. Spirited Away (2001 Japan)
6. Main character alive, due to mistake remains alive instead of death, judgment, Final Destination decided. Ex. A Matter of Life and Death (Stairway to Heaven 1946 UK)
7. Main character is dead, gives life review (for judgment), Final Destination decided. Ex. Heaven Can Wait (1943) and American Beauty (1999)

It is not my intention to match each film to its respective formula. Rather each formula gives a general idea on when the character arrives or departs a space, when they learn of a mission, when they complete a mission, and when they are judged. As in Formula 1’s Angel on My Shoulder, a character that dies goes to Hell but is informed of, and sent back to earth for, a mission. When it is complete, the character is supposed to be accepted into an afterlife space but the space does not have to be shown again, instead only implied.
For Formula 2, as in the case of *Topper* (1937), a separate afterlife space does not even have to be shown once. The figures’ powers of exacting their will—by force of energy or influence—on space and other figures are (remnant) evidence of their otherworldly existence.

For Formula 3, a living main character meets a dead character and must assist the mission to be completed. The dead and living frequently interact and have much to learn from each other. The dead are able to teach the living companion the value of life and not to repeat their unfortunate mistakes. However, sometimes the story confuses the audience as to which are the living and dead characters for a shocking ending. For Formula 4, there is no dichotomy of Heaven versus Hell but a literal In-Between space that the dead must reside within for contemplation and purification. Formulas 5 and 6 deepen the relationship and questions of life and death: a living character caught in the afterlife space, witnessing the dead, and a character that should have died missed its mark and must fight to stay alive. Formula 7 is usually told in flashbacks with assessments from a character’s disembodied voice. Then there are those that follow more than one character through the afterlife, taking different journeys or a completely original spin on those listed above, by mixing and matching what the character must do. Examples of these indeterminate few are *Beetlejuice* (1988) and *White Noise* (2005).

The mission to be completed is the crux of the second act as romantic, dramatic, comedic, etc. The dead character continues to exist for a variety of reasons that can be categorized among: protecting, informing, assisting, redemption, justice for murder, self-growth and learning, moving on and letting go of life, romantic love, and family love. Or for just unfinished business: something they would have done before death and if they
had a second chance. Fleur from *Rouge* (1987 China) comes back to earth to search for her boyfriend. The ghosts of the married couple in *Topper* spend their time enlivening the title character’s dull existence with their comedic antics. Bill and Ted must return to life to save the future and “the babes.” Little Joe Jackson of *Cabin in the Sky* (1943) must prove he is worthy of Heaven by redeeming his debauched ways. Kate from *Over Her Dead Body* (2008) must let her living fiancé find happiness with a second love. And two parents seek to marry their dead son to their servant in *The Maid* (2005 China/Philippines). Defined as comedy, horror, drama, romance, war, sport, or other kind of film, these characters go about their mission with seriousness, lightheartedness, fright for the unknown, a goal to meet, and interaction with their supporting cast with laughs, tears, smiles, and anxiety. The way the dead complete their mission helps determine how they will be judged and assigned to an afterlife space.

The selected titles used for analysis are distinguished among five eras. The first is the Silent Era. Taken from Ruffles’ “Filmography” in *Ghost Images*, there are eighty-three titles between 1896 and 1926. However, the majority of these are considered “trick” films and too short for a developed narrative. Most were simply experimenting with the available technologies of the time; building upon past ghost stories from lantern shows and campfire stories. (George Méliès’ work proves the rule and is the exception.) F.W. Murnau’s *Faust* (1926 Germany) and Mary Pickford’s *Sparrows* (1926) are the only two silent films available for analysis. By the early “talkies” of 1927, films’ feature length, screen aspect ratio, rate of frames per second, cinematography, and editing technologies stabilized and made for a more level field to judge narrative.
Beginning with 1930, the roster of films screened for this study along with those titles found in other published and online sources, which follow any of the above formulas, can be grouped according to the year of their release.

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Decade</th>
<th># of Releases</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1930s</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>1970s</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1940s</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>1980s</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1950s</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1990s</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1960s</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2000s</td>
<td>60</td>
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This is only a rough estimate to stand in for the actual number of afterlife films. But according to this chart there is an obvious pattern between world events and technological advances. The second era clusters titles released in the 1930s and 1940s. While the thirties’ narratives were more about scientific experiments of life and death gone wrong like *Frankenstein* (1931) or Depression-luxury-fantasy themes like *Supernatural* (1933), the forties’ were primarily concerned with World War II and its aftermath. Afterlife films were an alternative landscape for showing Allied soldiers rewarded in Heaven for their duty and sacrifice. With *Beyond Christmas* (1940), *A Guy Named Joe* (1943) and the UK’s *A Matter of Life and Death (Stairway to Heaven* 1946) soldiers are not seen in white robes and haloes but in full uniform: distinguished and commended for a life well lived and returning to the living for love of family and romance. Other titles from that time period, like *Here Comes Mr. Jordan* (1941), *Heaven Can Wait* (1943), *Cabin in the Sky* (1943), *Angel on My Shoulder* (1946), *The Ghost and Mrs. Muir* (1947), and *Sunset Boulevard* (1949), may not have featured depictions of war but were no less trying to answer existential questions. All of the characters made some assessment on their lives in relation to the grand scheme.
The third era, 1950 to 1977, is defined by a steep decline in Hollywood afterlife releases and a rise in foreign titles from Western Europe and Japan. Jean Cocteau’s *Orphée* (1950) Akira Kurosawa’s *Rashomon* (1950), Kenji Mizoguchi’s *Ugetsu* (1953), Ingmar Bergman’s *The Seventh Seal* (1957 Sweden), Nobou Nakagawa’s *Jigoku* (*The Sinners of Hell* 1960), and Jack Clayton’s *The Innocents* (1961 UK), with the American exceptions of Herk Hervey’s *Carnival of Souls* (1962) and George Romero’s *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) were and still are highly regarded for their artistic compositions and serious ruminations on life and death, reality and illusion. The second era’s hope for salvation was exchanged for political paranoia. The Cold War was better expressed in science fiction fantasies of space aliens, mythological creatures, and doomsday possibilities. The afterlife was tinged with horror, or at best a silver lining of redemption. Almost all of them were shot in black and white film stock, adding to the images’ contrasts between life and death, light and dark, past and present, and good and evil. Yet their themes and characters were very ambiguous with questions of credible death events and continued existences. The lack of double exposures or extreme special effects takes away the supernatural-magic in exchange for the organic-supernatural. The dead and the living are symbiotic.

The third era’s twenty-five year lull came to a quick end because of an upsurge in near-death experience research and *Star Wars*’ release in 1977. Drs. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross’ *On Death and Dying* in 1969 and Raymond Moody’s *Life After Life* in 1975 generated mass enthusiasm on television and radio talk shows, magazine articles, literary fiction, and movies. Thousands of testimonies then and since (in Jeffrey Long’s recent book *Evidence of the Afterlife*, 2010) attest to a journey to and from the afterlife with
little variance across cultures and geographies. They challenge religious assumptions and create a more humanist inclusive system with its own perspective on spaces, figures, and judgment. George Lucas’ blockbuster’s extremely high quality special effect technology was no better applied than to the afterlife film. It was a defining moment that has resonated for over thirty years. Since, over eighty theatrical titles and numerous television shows and “supernatural” episodes have been produced worldwide. No longer tricks of light and staging or the body’s limitations by natural laws: by using computer-generated images to present the event of death, the spirit’s disembodiment, the spaces’ otherworldly physicality, and the transport between worlds, the afterlife ironically became less fake and more tangible looking. The creators’ visions and other process of filmmaking resulted in visuals that brought the afterlife closer to speculations of what may be beyond death.

The fourth era began with Warren Beatty’s *Heaven Can Wait* (1978), a remake of *Here Comes Mr. Jordan* (1941). It followed the original very closely but modernized the hero’s sport to the more popular game of football and a streamlined airplane for his transport. It was also one of the first Hollywood afterlife films shot in color that showed Heaven’s background of blue skies and white rolling clouds. *The Amityville Horror* (1979) relied more so on acting and psychological horror, yet it was one of the first to pose the supernatural clashing with American suburbia. Spielberg’s *Poltergeist* (1982) followed up this theme with lofty appearances of the dead. From the 1980s to mid 1990s filmmakers took great opportunities to experiment with emerging special effect technologies for stories that could not have been as easily accomplished fifty years earlier; like *Casper* (1995) based on the 1940s cartoon television series. Rather than a
hand-drawn cartoon, the title character’s transparent-milky apparition passes through walls and flies in the air. His generated and magical afterlife directly interacts with the living actors’ customary restrictions of walking or mechanical apparatuses.

There was an explosion in the quantity of worldwide, especially Hollywood, releases from 1998 on, which signifies the fifth and latest era.

At the end of the century, Americans (and the world) were better connected, wealthier, and more diverse than ever before. Yet it was neither the prosperity nor the technology that made the 1990s remarkable. Americans sensed that they were entering into a new era in world history, radically different from even the recent past…America in the 1990s wielded enormous power but, confronted with new and dangerous opportunities, was as yet unsure what to do with it. (McConnell x)

Shifts in cultural values, political world power, and the Internet’s maturation, with the uncertainty of a new millennium culminated in a spectrum of afterlife films. Like those of the 1940s, they pose existential questions. Like mid-century foreign productions, they imagine what may be beyond death with artistic integrity and intense character psychology. And building upon the fun exercises of new technology, they create strong visual images and worlds to attract audiences. Examples include *What Dreams May Come* (1998), *After Life* (1998 Japan), *The Sixth Sense* (1999), *American Beauty* (1999), and *What Lies Beneath* (2000) plus *Dogma* (1999), *Gladiator* (2000), and *Final Destination* (2000). But since the terrorist attacks in New York City on 9/11 and in Europe, followed by war in the Middle East, there has been an increasing expression of a global anxiety about death. Violent images are constantly viewed and reports on religious afterlife beliefs are discussed on television news and Internet sources. There is an overwhelming bleak and hostile outlook on the present and future. There have been at least three Hollywood afterlife premise features released a year and it doesn’t seem to be slowing down. In 2010 alone *The Lovely Bones, After.Life, the Nightmare on Elm Street*
remake, *Charlie St. Cloud, Enter the Void, Devil,* and *Hereafter,* played in local theaters. It is also manifest in Japanese horror, Chinese, and more European productions. *Ju-On, Kairo,* and their remakes, *The Maid* (2005), *Don’t Tempt Me* (2001 Spain) and *Angel in Krakow* (2002 Poland) have been steadily released in American markets. Television series are also following suit with *Desperate Housewives* (2004-present), *Supernatural* (2005-present), *Pushing Daisies* (2007-2009), and *Drop Dead Diva* (2009-present). The early 2011 release of *Drive Angry* in 3D hints at a near-future shift. If audiences have the opportunity to feel literally part of the afterlife world and story, it is the closest possible simulation for the mind as well as body to experience transport. The next fifteen years will be extremely interesting to see.

This study cannot prove the exact reactions to an afterlife film. The secondary argument is based on anticipated audience reception because of world events and cultural outlook that coincide with the industry’s releases. Advancements in modern Western science and technology have pushed death further down the road of life by increasing longevity rates and creating a smaller interactive world with efficient communications. Death has become an interruption of everyday activity. When someone dies, survivors are left with memories, recordings, and other personal items to be taken care of. It creates a vacuum to fill with grief for a loved one and curiosity or hope that some quality of the departed continues to exist.

Death kills not only the individual, but to some extent, the group as well, because it destroys the harmony of everyday life…rituals are performed to create comfort and console the living, and death is denied by belief in an eternal existence or through allusions to divine forces. Death rituals, then, are beneficial because through participation the living emerge stronger from social uncertainties. (Arriaza 23)
By the 1990s, “Americans turned to religion more often to ‘meet their spiritual needs’ than out of a sense of worship…the ease with which Americans moved from denomination to denomination– looking for comfort, and not theological resonance.”

(McConnell ix) Rather than connecting to a specific strict religious doctrine, Americans/audiences, were searching for connections and meaning to the universe by channel-surfing. Houses and acts of worship were not confined to a traditional church but opened to learning. The movie theater could provide a similar sense of solace and the afterlife film for comforting anxieties and inspiring the imagination. Watching a film allows escapism and emotional catharsis.

Film has the innate ability for any type of story to transport the audience as a whole, or a single spectator, from the stationary theater seat into the world projected on the screen. The body is immobile while the mind follows the visual narrative. However, film stories are more than sight and sound but also an emotional paradigm of relationships between characters that push the plot forward. To quote J.M.L. Peters,

seeing a film can be a ‘virtual’ physical and a ‘virtual’ mental participation in the life of other people in another world. Or, to put it another way, to see a film is to lead a second (virtual) life in a second ‘virtual’ world…However, from this very virtuality it derives its own charm, is appeal, its magic. We cannot ‘touch’ it, but neither can it ‘touch’ us: it happens to us and we go through it but without any risk. (18)

By suspending reality the audience can participate in a simulation of a “virtual world” and return once the end credits role. It is a break from living one life to live another. The strength in the image and/or the relationships creates a passage for the audience to take a trip to another side of life. Although Peters is not specifically relating films to the afterlife, the parallels are evident. The single afterlife film, and the body of afterlife films, takes what film is naturally capable of to show a journey from death through the
afterlife. The audience identifies with the main character’s journey through different stages of continued existence. It is an imitated out-of-body-experience in a virtual second world for the mind to see an afterlife premise while the body is unharmed. It is a trip to the other-side. The afterlife film takes the audience on a journey without clinical death, without danger, without supreme judgment, without being observed, and without finality. The audience is on a journey of pleasure, personal judgment, and voluntary admission and escape, all the while remaining aware and conscious. The afterlife film is someone else’s thought-work for which all the metaphysical qualities have been designed. By taking the camera’s perspective, the spectator is as if locked into a rollercoaster along the plot’s rise and resolution.

Filming the afterlife offers a window to what could be beyond life. By following the characters when alive, pronounced dead, and through their initial afterlife existence, audiences can witness a developed visualization to imagine and place his or herself or a loved one within: like a relative looking down from Heaven. A related notion is that it reinforces a natural defense mechanism. The consciousness does not have to comprehend absolute nothingness by creating the idea of something that exists apart from this realm’s perception. Performing a “ritual” of watching afterlife films could reaffirm the audiences’ hopes by giving them comfort in watching a projection of the afterlife.

Film is capable of mentally transporting the audience by using certain principles of cinematography and editing techniques. Each shapes the ways an audience participates in watching a film. Filmmakers apply their own experiences of watching movies as they decide among an array of styles for a scene’s design. The production team anticipates and
hopes their choices create the desired result. Filmmaker Jon Boorstin describes his ideas in the context of a symbiotic relationship between production and audience.

What I have discovered is that we don’t watch movies one way, we watch them three ways. We derive three distinct pleasures from watching a film, which I call the voyeur’s, the vicarious, and the visceral. Each demands a different set of film techniques, often in contradiction with the others; each has its own sort of content, its own rules of time and space, its own way of judging reality. (9)

He does not consider himself a film theorist but his respected position within the industry and as an avid movie lover puts him amongst both of the average and the learned audiences. His three terms may be at odds with traditional film studies’ usage but here they are tools for understanding how film presents itself to viewers. If death is a journey of transitioning between life and the afterlife, watching an afterlife film is a simulation of that journey. How that journey is simulated varies according to the production principles applied.

The voyeur experience is stripped of its sexual implications, preferring, “the simple joy of seeing the new and the wonderful…a richly imagined special world, full of enticing things.” (12) The film scenes are for pleasing the mind’s eye. What fills the screen holds the audience’s attentions instead of the themes or character conflicts. There are many wondrous afterlife sights and objects within the scene’s space. The audience is invited to the space but is not made part of it. The audience is not invested in the story, only interested in the spectacle. An example is *Bill and Ted’s Bogus Journey* (1991). The vicarious experience is created to pull in the audiences’ emotions. The story and characters’ dynamic is more important to watch than the spaces they act in. It is a “one-way nature of the transaction,” (67): the viewer becomes part of the character but retains judgment on the situation. An example is *A Guy Named Joe* (1943). The visceral experience is pure and enveloping. It is best compared to watching an IMAX or 3D
movie. The camera is in a first person point of view playing the character’s perspective. Or if in a third person point of view, the character is like an ant within the action so the space is bigger than the figure. The character and audience are fused: “the character is a conduit for the viewer’s feelings…experience the moment directly…where sights and sound trigger life-and-death responses.” (110-111) An example is *Enter the Void* (2010). These three experiences are parallel to each afterlife film’s concentration on spaces, figures, and judgment. Many titles are also prone to combining techniques and subjects to maintain the individual spectator’s interest and cater to the mass audiences’ diverse appetites. Some examples of these negotiated narratives are *A Matter of Life and Death, Made in Heaven* (1987), and *Stir of Echoes* (1999).
A Central Example and Starting Point

Although this thesis focuses mostly on theatrically released feature films, an episode from *The Twilight Zone* television series (1959-1964), entitled “A Nice Place to Visit,” (aired on April 15, 1960) best represents all of the above arguments. Rod Serling and his creative team designed an afterlife story that plays with the most basic formula and reverses traditional audience expectations of spaces, figures, and processes of judgment. Rocky Valentine botches a bank robbery, is shot down in an alley by the police, and dies. When Rocky wakes up he is in the afterlife. His guide Pip is dressed in a white suit, has a pleasant manner, and helps Rocky get acclimated. He informs Rocky that every desire will be satisfied and this world was created for his sole benefit. Rocky initially believes he is in Heaven, but doesn’t understand why. Pip takes him to The Hall of Records: an open white space with a grand staircase and file cabinets. His record does not list any good deeds but Rocky leaves confident it is Heaven anyway. The third and final scene is the most critical to this episode for its shocking revelations. After only a month of the women, winning money at the casino, and luxury means, he finds Heaven boring and routine. At his apartment he summons and asks Pip for suggestions on breaking the monotony of his extravagant lifestyle. Rocky’s discouragement increases when Pip assures him everything could be prearranged for him, nothing left to chance, and approved. Rocky decides he doesn’t belong in Heaven but is better fit for and wants to go to “the other place,” referring to Hell. Pip then takes great pleasure in telling Rocky (and the audience), “Whatever gave you the idea you were in Heaven? This is the ‘other place!’” The camera cuts to Rocky’s look of horror and is then matched by Pip’s boisterous laughs.
In less than twenty-five minutes, the story follows Rocky Valentine’s transition from life to death to the afterlife. The story moves from drama to comedy to horror. The character’s and audience’s perception moves from thinking he is within Heaven to knowing he is in Hell, that his angelic guide is possibly a hellish attendant, and thinking he had done something to deserve Heaven but was justifiably sent to Hell. The physicality and functions of the afterlife space, figures, and processes of judgment are those of popular images/ideas of Heaven’s rewards but are revealed as the qualities of a psychological Hell. Surely a place where all wishes are immediately granted and specifically created to Rocky’s taste, Pip’s fitting presence as one of Heaven’s agents, and the Hall of Records’ resemblance to the sets of 1940s Heaven films lead to an obvious first impression. Rocky’s punishment is to eternally exist within a space that offers too much of a good thing and that exacts frustration, confusion, and anger. But what can be rightly inferred is that this episode’s Hell does not exist below earth but next to or inside it. Rocky’s city of Hell consists of the slum he wakes in, uptown luxury homes and attractions: all as if it were the living world, like a replication. It is as vast as necessary to seem real and appealing but the entirety of the space must be infinite enough to fit all other personal Hells: beneath the earth would be illogical. According to Hell’s rules, because Rocky’s commands must always be met, it negates others’ free will and wishes; thus it is presumed whomever else is in Rocky’s Hell were created to populate and service only his needs. Anyone else who is in Hell would have a different space and anonymous denizens. However it is uncertain if Pip and his fellow workers are only guides for Hell or for Heaven as well. Would Heaven’s guides be dressed in the same
white suits? The Hall of Records may be a space for all to convene as neutral of desires, central to judgment, and possibly a headquarters of some-sort.

Rocky was born and died once, lived as a delinquent, and was judged behind the scenes to reside in his own private Hell administered by one of Hell’s agents. Despite its unique approach within this formula, Rocky will never have the opportunity, to return to life and make new choices and/or in a new environment. The images of Rocky’s afterlife space and figures are constructed with traditional qualities but at the end, they are saturated with new meaning. The audience follows with keen recognition and interest, investing in Rocky’s existence and Pip’s placation. Thus, the viewing experience is anything but static. The unique “A Nice Place to Visit” serves as a central example and starting point to discuss the various filmic afterlife qualities expressed in the following chapters.
Chapter One: Spaces

For people who do not believe there is an afterlife, life and existence are purely biological. When the body permanently ceases to function it is as if the lights go out never to be turned back on. There is no soul because the personality is the brain that dies. In some films, the characters die and are resurrected, but make no mention of where they have been. *The Man They Could Not Hang* (1939) and TV’s *Pushing Daisies* (2007) are such examples. For those who believe or imagine the soul leaving the body, en route to an afterlife space, the space may or may not be constructed by a supreme deity but simply is. There is a recognizable shift in the West from the second era’s dichotomy of Heaven and Hell to the latest era’s one Hereafter that admits everyone; despite their actions, morality, theist beliefs, or lack of. Regardless of which space a film designs, there are two general categories all concepts fall under: (1) horizontal levels situated above or below the earth’s surface, also described as layers, and (2) vertical dimensions, situated next to or within that of the living’s reality on or away from earth, like walls. The world’s earliest religions committed all souls to a single afterlife space, whether below, above, inside, or beside that of the living. Over time, many spaces expanded and divided within themselves (like cell division) to separate the elite from laymen, the moral from immoral, and the heroes from the masses. There are places of different physical appearances emphasizing purification of the soul, reward and pleasure, versus punishment and pain.

Films that place Heaven and Hell as part of the earth’s layers use camera angles, dialogue, and scene composition of typical symbols. If composed within the frame or by moving the camera upwards are stars and clouds, then Heaven is in the sky. If pointing the camera down or through the ground to show fiery or cold dark caves, then Hell is
deep beneath the earth. Most of these films use staircases, escalators, elevators, and the ability to fly (bodies and vehicles), to transport souls to such spaces since they only work in an up or down motion. These are particular to Western/Hollywood films. The souls of Faust and Gretchen from Murnau’s Faust fly upwards to Heaven for reward. There are an even greater variety of methods to represent parallel afterlife dimensions. For transporting souls or for interaction, passageways, portals, and vehicles allow lateral movement between spaces. Such examples are mirrors, bodies of water, tunnels, trains and subways, and hotspots. Rather than the spirit’s power to manipulate an area of space, the space is naturally made of pockets for the spirit to use. In most cases, it is as if the character appears out of or disappears into thin air. There are veils or permeable walls between realities. The rippling mirror portals of Cocteau’s Orphée and the various doors of Beetlejuice (1988) are two notable cases. Especially with the latest modern media, portals have since included the cinema screen, television set, computer screen/Internet, radio, telephones, and other electronic or digital technologies. It is as if the dead reside in the invisible energy waves/fields the living use for transmitting information.

The afterlife film spaces are animated, constructed on a studio set, or shot-on-location, with each defining the setting in a distinct way. The first is a virtual world that can be manipulated without considering the laws of physics. While All Dogs Go to Heaven and the South Park (1999) feature are animated spaces of Heaven and Hell, respectively, their styles differ: transparent watercolors and colored paper cutouts. Art and production designers construct sets with the materials of this world made to look like another world. The famous and majestic stage piece of the UK’s A Matter of Life and Death gave the film its American title, Stairway to Heaven. Not stairs but actually an
escalator, it has been copied and parodied in other afterlife films like Bill and Ted’s Bogus Journey. These two types of spaces are composed of elements that physically look familiar yet create new sights and have different meaning. Interior or exterior locations and pre-existing architectural places used for an afterlife space indicate the afterlife is not its own space but a copy of or is sharing reality with the living. Sites can be recognized from this world and thus imbued with double meanings. Most often it is for humor. The student film, On a Cold Day, situates Hell as Miami, Florida. Various locations across Los Angeles were filmed at to comprise the whole of Defending Your Life’s Judgment City to be a replica of the earth with an office campus, venue halls, mini-malls, and hotels.

A dead character may arrive at an afterlife space but does not go beyond the admission gates (as in Formula 1) only to return to the living with a mission to complete before deemed worthy of a final destination. The earthly living space they return to is as if meshed with a special dead-zone. The interactions and methods of transport are unique to the figure’s condition and open the living space to greater capabilities. The living’s natural laws are broken by and manipulated by the dead. Or, (as in Formulas 4 and 7) the dead character may arrive at the In-Between for pending judgment or reflection. It is an informally acknowledged realm with multiple purposes and physical qualities. Visualizations vary for all afterlife spaces; yet they can also be constructed with familiar or recognizable images and terms. The Underworld served as a dark or benign central domain for souls minimally conscious or (fully) unaware of their existence and environment. Heaven has been considered an aesthetically designed place in the clouds; a celestial kingdom and a Garden (of Eden) where nature and human activity harmoniously
coexist as a pleasure dome for the just righteous. Hell has been continuously ascribed a subterranean network of abodes below ground that exact various forms of pain as punishment or purification; ranging from the absence of God’s love-light in a dark hollow assembly or a geography/topography of fire pits and or boiling waters. The In-Between has served as a check-in lobby for new arrivals with teams of greeters, an observatory, or a judicial court for judgment. In the late 20th century there has been a rise in cinematic spaces reflecting NDE testimonies, and psychological manifested afterlife spaces created from the characters’ own mind of knowledge and associations. The following sub-sections are an analysis of how certain spaces entertain traditional or innovative concepts for the audiences’ enticement.

No Afterlife: This Is It

The very few titles that resurrect a character and make no mention of an afterlife space consist of The Man They Could Not Hang (1935) and Frankenstein (1931), both starring Boris Karloff as Dr. Savaard and The Creature, plus Bryan Fuller’s television series Pushing Daisies (2007-2009). Dr. Savaard is found guilty of homicide and sentenced to death by hanging. His faithful assistant uses the doctor’s own invented procedure to revive him. While attempting to take revenge on his persecutors, the doctor accidentally kills his daughter in the chaos. She too is revived but before she can speak, is wheeled off-screen. The Creature is not a single human revived but a collection of body parts from an assortment of dead bodies with the brain from a degenerate criminal. A bolt of lightening, as if from Zeus himself, brings The Creature to life, albeit with diminished understanding. The brain and its personality were not reawakened in its full state but only the most basic functions to move, garble words, fear fire, and imitate others. In Pushing
Daisies, the dead momentarily wake up from death as if no time passed since their demise. None of these characters share information from when they were dead. For these examples there is no (memory of an) afterlife, instead, only the turning back on of a light.

The Mind’s Afterlife: A Dream Your Heart Makes

Nineteenth century perception psychologist, H.H. Price’s hypothesis of the afterlife was that,

>a dream is something that ‘everybody experiences and knows is real…because the dream state involves the mind not the body…Heaven is not a physical place but an image world existing in the minds of the dead…’ An image world would have a space all its own. There would be feel images as well as visual, hearing and smell…This would be a world that was whatever the person imagining it wanted to be…limitless. (Schouweiler 60-61)

This visceral afterlife is comparable to what a film is capable of. The dead dreamer can manipulate the “image world” for pleasing all desires or suffering self-assessed punishments. The “limitless” possibilities come from whatever the mind remembers or invents. Creativity and reflection is key to its proliferation. There are a selection of titles that posit a space not created by an unseen force, deity, or governing bodies, but a space created by the individual character’s mind: one that seems to last indefinitely and so real that even though it is virtual, all of the physical senses are enraptured. If the afterlife space is pure imagination and suspends or elongates temporal perception, just before death, it could be like Heaven (as from the ending scene in Gladiator (2000)), Hell, or both. Lucid afterlife dreams are controlled by the dying mind and produce the sum of awareness: the happiest and worst memories, the people, places, and things loved and hated, are taken with us and visualized in their literal and or symbolic form. It is an afterlife concept for the contemporary age: not based upon theology, sociology, or even science but by and for each person, in a moment. For the following films, audiences are
shown worlds that combine all three experiences: the voyeuristic urban fantasy, the vicarious romantic or family entanglements, and the visceral dreams.

The Spanish *Open Your Eyes* (1997) and its Hollywood remake, *Vanilla Sky* (2001) are so similar in image and dialogue that one can almost refer to them interchangeably; except for the latter’s saturation of American popular iconography. They both feature a man that commits suicide to be later resurrected by scientists of the future. For 150 years Caesar and David are frozen and unconscious until suddenly, seamlessly, their lives begin again: a life of continuous personal choices linked to a woman they knew for two evenings but fell in love with. Rather than an immediate resuscitation to live in 2145 A.D., a team of Life Extension employees monitors and produces every thought, regardless of its nature, to keep Caesar and David in their own lifetimes. Whether called Artificial Perception or a Lucid Dream, the purpose is to live forever within one’s own head. The spaces are virtual manifestations of the clients’ consciousness and subconscious thoughts that appear and feel as close to reality as possible. But Caesar and David are still depressed from a near fatal car accident that deformed their facial appearance, loosing self-esteem, and perhaps regretting suicide. Their paranoia and guilt interrupts Paradise and it becomes a nightmare. When it’s too much, they are saved by Tech Support and choose to leave the dream state for the reality of 2145. By imagining their bodies falling and hitting the ground, the jolt would wake them from a deep slumber. It is the strongest method of letting go: the “formality” of a second death. To live in the future would be like a third chance at life: to make new connections and die naturally in (presumed) old age.
Hollywood remakes give bigger or better details to their central characters and set designs than what the original films offer. David’s wealth and power are obviously more than Caesar’s: an upper-East side Manhattan apartment of the finest luxury, music history artifacts, and expensive Impressionist paintings instead of a Madrid loft with modern furniture. The same can be said for the moment when their dreams take over reality. The original shows no difference in environment from Caesar’s life before and after he wakes up in an alley to Sofia’s voice. There is no blue tinting or any indication of an oddity. His dream space is just like reality. When the narrative becomes severely distorted by image composition (and not editing) of Caesar’s mistaking Sofia for Nuria, the revelation of when reality merged with fantasy is more shocking. However, *Vanilla Sky* has many signs that something is off. When David wakes to Sofia’s voice and looks up at her, the sky is an impressionistic mix of blue, pink, and yellow like the painting in his apartment Sofia admired. The couple’s instant happy life plays out in a montage of images with David’s cut-to-the-chase voiceover narration. Plus the L.E. commercial not only plays continuously on the television in the background but also is discussed between the characters. David’s space was constructed from all the images he wanted but did not have or could not attain. It has a dazed and soft appearance because it was not from his reality. His dream was a dream.

Once Caesar and David are made aware of a choice to either start the dream over with a new splice of a tabula-rasa space, or wakeup in the new real world, the latter is quickly decided. How many lives could these men experience if they keep returning to the same manifestation of regret and guilt? Even though the memories of the first dream and life alive would be erased, their psyches could not be controlled and the nightmarish
factors could return. By resurrecting the mind instead of the body, they could live the same life an infinite number of times for as long as the company monitoring them exists. To live a full life, completely aware, in reality, would be like coming out of Plato’s allegorical cave. Instead of feeling rewards and punishments in a private space of their own creation, alternating between Heaven and Hell, David and Caesar would reemerge as the living.

The tagline for *Jacob’s Ladder* (1990) is incredibly deceiving, in fact, the antithesis of the film: “The most frightening thing about Jacob Singer’s nightmare is that he isn’t dreaming.” Because it is a hallucination! Jacob is presumed to survive the attack in Vietnam and years were to have passed after his return. When he wakes on the subway, the attack seems to be merely the dream of a memory. From the moment he is shot in Vietnam’s jungle to when the doctors declared him dead in the medical tent, all of the images and story was in Jacob’s mind and could not have lasted more than a few hours. His relationship with Jezzie, his job with her in the post office, the dismal New York City landscape and its otherworldly denizens, the dream within a dream of his wife Sarah, and the visual distortions of paranoia are the amalgamation of the mind. His imagined continued life is a defense mechanism to deny his-own death. But he could not hold up the illusion and is forced to accept the truth of its arrival. Jacob is repeatedly told of his death by other characters. The subconscious nightmarish content transforms to images of relief: Louis the (angelic) chiropractor helps him escape from a hospital ward and a former chemist reveals a cure for the government’s conspiracy of an experimental drug. As Louis calmly says, “you’re holding on you’ll see devils…but if you made your peace then the devils are really angels freeing you from the earth.” Jacob sees devils
taking him from life that turns into the calm realization of his inevitable death. In addition is the recurring memory of his young dead son. It is Gabe’s personification that allows Jacob to safely let go. Jacob’s family home is the spatial passage, but holding Gabe’s hand and walking up the illuminated staircase leads them up to Heaven.

Dreams and hallucinations create worlds that do not rely on logic and continuity. They jump cut and rewind. *Open Your Eyes/Vanilla Sky* and *Jacob’s Ladder* not only reference what the characters know of their cultures but also are screenplays based upon the writers’ own nightmares. Thus these story structures and images reflect such a strong lucid dream state. They both visualize the infinite space of fear. *Jacob’s Ladder* is the echo of a scream that bounces from one end to the other of his hallucinatory virtuality while fighting death until the end and willfully disappears. For *Open Your Eyes* and its remake, time loses all significance. The chronology is not a linear succession but a recycling of one moment. Caesar and David do not cross the line of sanity because their perception is highly temporal. 150 years passes unbeknownst to their consciousnesses plus the time they spend within their artificial perception after the mind’s resurrection is unspecified. Without a foundation of understanding time in their dream state, fear takes over and turns their Heavens into Hells. Their strongest emotions of love and guilt are fighting for control in a space undetermined by time. These two characters’ only way out is to voluntarily leave and wakeup in reality, while Jacob’s only escape is to go with it. All of their experiences could not be described as the gates of an afterlife space but a suspended animation between life and death that leads to one final destination or another.
The Greek Underworld, also known as Hades in respect to its governing god, and its formal appellation Tartarus, is described as a, “colorless, ill-defined region where the ‘souls’ or ‘shades’ led a feeble passive existence,” (Janson 96) in, “an immense cavern or cavity below ground.” (Brandon 77) Many plays, literary works, and other cultural artifacts reveal the belief in The Underworld as a single repository for all souls upon bodily death. The most popular narrative, an antecedent of Formula 2, features a living hero entering the realm of the dead to see what fate the afterlife holds. Such examples are *Gilgamesh, Enkidu, and The Underworld*, Homer’s *The Odyssey*, *Orpheus and Eurydice*, and Hercules in Euripides’ *Alcestis*, with later examples of Virgil’s *Aenid* and Dante’s *Comedy*. That these heroes could enter The Underworld while still alive is justified by the unique geography of the region. “There is no doubt that in both Greece and Rome there were places thought to lead to Hades…mysterious geological quirks of fissures, caves, and grottos,” (Finucane 12) which may have perpetuated the region’s emphasis on such a concept for an afterlife space. Figures were not required to transform or have special powers to move between spaces. They could simply walk into anyone of the land’s “quirks” and go deep enough to find The Underworld and its denizens.

While stories of Heaven and Hell are regularly featured in afterlife films, The Underworld of the ancients is rarely shown. The closest depiction to the above descriptions is in Disney’s animated *Hercules* (1997). Though an extremely different plot from the series of tasks in its source mythic literature, the film shows a significant portion of The Underworld. After Hades leaves baby Hercules’ birthday party on Mt. Olympus (a Heavenly space of clouds, classical architecture, golden gates, and harps), the third
person omniscient camera follows him home. The sequencing of frames and their image composition simultaneously act as an introductory tour for the viewer but a routine trip for the god. His journey takes him all the way down a steep path of winding stairs, is ferried across the dark blue River Styx that flows between banks of gray-black cave walls, and is filled with grappling and moaning spirits. He passes by the beastly red-eyed three-headed Cerberus guarding iron claw gates (as if Hell), and gets off the boat to his dim and circular shaped gray office that has a war map of Greece in the center. A scene later, Hades takes an elevator (deeper into the earth) to a grand hall of bones where he practices alchemy. The comedic dialogue and characterizations of his assistants add to the visuals’ tone. Hercules combines traditional with modern-day imagery for humorous relief from a dismal and harrowing space.

The Underworld is presented as expected according to basic synonyms of darkness, disorientation, and dreariness. The visuals of this type of space satisfy common notions of what today’s audiences believe the ancients may have believed it looked like. The Underworld is a space of reunion for souls after death, but unaware they are amongst each other. They will continue to exist as diminished versions of their living selves in a space that does not differentiate them by deed, creed, or birthright. Hades has no concern for his kingdom’s subjects. Hercules shows an afterlife space where every living human will arrive. The Underworld is a belief in one life and one afterlife. Upon death all that makes up one life fades. As a mid-1990s release, this film poses a return to simpler times and unity. In the ‘end’ all are relegated to the same fate.

Though Corpse Bride (2005) is, “not specific to mythology, (and) not clear about rules,” (DVD extras) it presents an Underworld subterranean space that is not only a
gathering of acquaintances but livelier than the world of the living. The Victorian world “above” is dressed in daguerreotype paints while the world below is as colorful as Magic Scratch Paper. Tim Burton’s vision that, “death is mankind’s reward,” (Ringgren 176) is for all arrivals to be relieved of social obligations and mores; for a bohemian existence of music and drinking; an extension of what was available while alive but better; not a diminished existence or loss of memories but embracing death-life to the fullest. The dead do not (usually) try to or want to leave their eternal energetic space because there is, “more fun going on down below.” (Zachanek) Death allows Life. This film reverses traditional expectations of living and dead spaces to give audiences beautifully dull and vibrant dichotomies.

If *Corpse Bride* is analyzed from Victor’s perspective, he is like a descendent of the living heroes from Formula 2. After his first attempt to escape The Underworld fails, he recognizes the positive aspects of staying. But to do so, he must die in the land of the living. All of the residents accompany Victor and his dead accidental wife Emily for a wedding above, though how they all arrive is not explicit. *Corpse Bride* is a world created by claymation and stop-motion production artists. Actors’ voices are lent to the nearly life-size model characters. With meticulous care, the dead materials are brought to life. With space and figures taking equal importance, it is fair to conclude that this film plays both to the voyeur and vicarious viewers. There is plenty for the eyes to behold and human emotion to identify with. Tim Burton’s *Beetlejuice, Sleepy Hollow (1999)*, and his other works can be categorized in the same manner.

The dismal space of *Hercules* is refashioned for *Corpse Bride*’s celebratory candor. As two of the few Underworld spatial afterlife films, the eight years between
their releases signifies the sense that fears can be conquered. Not only was it the turn of a new century but a new millennium. The world waited and prepared for an ultimate power failure that never came. The world had an NDE and recovered, if only for a little while. *Hercules* can be seen as the-before and *Corpse Bride* as the-after. The Underworld is a space that literally brings people together for contemplating community’s unity in the face of great change.

**Traditional Visions of Heaven**

In *Sparrows* (1926), when a baby dies in Molly’s motherly arms, Heaven and Jesus come down to take the baby’s soul. Whether a dream or a vision, the light passes through the barn’s attic wall to become an illuminated verdant pasture of grazing animals. As a Garden of Eden, and resembling the *Allegory of Earth* by Jan Brueghal the Elder (Janson 559), this is the most Biblical depiction. In *Green Pastures* (1936), angels enjoy a cookout in the Heavenly meadows atop clouds and praising Da Lawd. Though a place of tranquility and nature in perfect condition, the garden is perhaps too bucolic for urban audiences. The only other Heavenly space with the same level of religious representation is a celestial City of God. A kingdom, “with its streets of gold, its walls of jasper, its gates of pearl, and the river of life” (Patterson 213), especially from medieval imagination and art, is best and lone depicted in *Constantine* (2005). A hospital wall opens to a space of golden light, a palace in the clouds, and birds soaring in the sky. Although also only lasting a few moments on screen, it is a glimpse of awe that its main character is kept from entering, and it disappears. Instead of coming down, a pocket opens to reveal another reality. The image is within the hospital, as if pasted on like a collage.
*Carousel* (1956) shows Heaven in the sky but with an unsophisticated visual. The scene opens in a studio-constructed set of monochromatic azure sky and crystal stars hanging on strings from the ceiling. Each man sits on a ladder polishing the star above him. Billy is told of a rumor that “there’s trouble down on earth with (his) kinfolk,” and is suggested to that he, “go down there and help...(has) a right to go down there for one day.” He climbs off his ladder, throws a star into the backdrop, which becomes a shooting star to be seen on earth, and goes to the administrator for permission. The star-keeper’s office has glass walls, a chair, desk, and he is dressed like an accountant. Billy’s narrated flashback of the events leading to his death tells of mistakes that are apparently not enough to land him in Hell, if it exists in the movie, but a lower level of Heaven to do penance (for an undetermined time). *Carousel*’s Heaven set references its Broadway musical stage play by its simply painted walls and minimal props. The French film *Liliom* (1934) that *Carousel* is based upon, features an afterlife space like the later idea of Central Booking: a space for assessment and judgment that replicates the strong bureaucratic elements of earth, combined with traditional symbols. *Liliom*’s is constructed with room for an office, administrator and secretary desks, large doors to other spaces, and a movie projector for the life review process of judgment. When both Billy and Liliom return to help their daughters they give them a crystal star: a piece of Heaven. Not only are Earth’s recording devices and office spatial qualities brought up to Heaven, but also Heaven is thus brought down to earth.

A Perfect Heaven…For Dogs

Rocky Valentine initially believes he is in Heaven until Pip reveals the truth at the very end of the program. Every wish he desired when alive is granted in his afterlife but
eventually he grows tired and annoyed with perfection. He needs the opportunity for action and surprises, instead of predictability and placation. When finally told he is in his own private Hell, the look on his devastated face is not realizing he will be in an eternity of pleasure but of pain disguised as and turned into pleasure. Hell is too much of a good thing. And Heaven can become like Hell. *All Dogs Go to Heaven* (1989) and its sequel share many philosophical questions of perfection with *The Twilight Zone’s “A Nice Place to Visit.”* However while the episode shows a Hell of ideals as an alternative to Heaven, the animated feature is a perfect Heaven and the only afterlife space for the canine kind. The latter’s story incorporates many of the popular images and figures of other afterlife Heaven films but lacks any requirements for admittance. “All dogs go to Heaven unlike people...(because) naturally good, loyal, and kind.” Oddly enough, as probably the most beautiful Heavenly space on film, it was specifically designed (and animated) for dogs, not humans. Despite how the space appears and promotes a resort-like atmosphere, the film’s main character, Charlie, is disappointed/unimpressed, and escapes at every opportunity. For (Rocky and) Charlie, perfection is overrated and “gets old fast.” Dog Heaven is not one size fits all.

During the studio system era MGM was a haven for the most elaborate film set designs such as *The Wizard of Oz* and *Gone With the Wind* (both 1939) plus musicals of the forties and fifties like *Singin’ in the Rain* (1952). Their signature ebullient cinematographic aesthetic was applied to *All Dogs 1* and *2* (1996)’s animation: a Heaven of watercolor majesty. As Charlie dies, he is carried up to Heaven in a swirling vortex of pink bubbles and electric neon lights. Dropped just past the golden gates, he takes the carpeted pathway (of moons and stars) along the clouds, listening to the dog choir music,
when he meets Heaven’s administrator Annabelle. As his guide, she proclaims the rules of the space, its “73 degree climate,” and takes him through the check-in process of signing documents. Charlie is given the traditional white robe, gold wings, and gold halo. From the beginning of his orientation, not even letting some time pass to get acclimated, he rejects Heaven’s tranquility.

Bleach white and fluffy clouds float in the pastel, wispy blue, pink, yellow, and violet evening sky, and a saturated yellow full moon looms against the midnight blue universe. Roger Ebert’s words of praise read, “(a) voluptuous use of color…invigorating bath for the eyes.” The theatrical screen visuals must have been the epitome of Peters’ “virtual” experience in a second world. There has yet to be a live action equivalent without the help of digital effects. (The painterly Heaven of What Dreams May Come (1998) was significantly accomplished by CGI.) All Dogs 2’s Heaven is one of serenity, protection, beauty, light, and wish fulfillment. On the outskirts of a crystal city, the pathway leads through a fragmented meadow made of clouds. The ray of light or vertical vortex method of transport and the frame’s perspective of looking down when a puppy and Gabriel’s horn fall past an airplane landing in San Francisco, show that Heaven is situated high above the earth’s ground. Additionally, at the end, dogs are trapped in the air between Heaven and an island prison (a figurative Hell) with all three levels in the frame: clouds and the sky at the top, the horizon in the center, and the water and jetties at the bottom.

Although derived from art that differentiated between mortals and angels with golden disks over the latter’s heads and wings on their backs, such images of halos, white robes, and wings were purposely drawn here for extreme kitsch. In the film’s opening
title the halo falls from the top of the ‘H’ to stand in for the preceding ‘O’, foretelling the space’s flaws and Charlie’s disobedience. Charlie’s disgust is made more funny when he discards his new accessories. His story rests on the single factor that upon entrance to Heaven he retains his memories and personality. He lived a life on the edge and courted danger. Not only was he unprepared to die but was highly angered by it. He wasn’t ready for an afterlife and disapproves of the only space available. He could not go to the other place. He is a dog and all dogs go to Heaven, no matter how they lived; even his murderer Carface. But what might have seemed like the right kind of Heaven for dogs when created, it is not Charlie’s ideal. “Paradise…might be boring if you know exactly what to expect from life for the rest of eternity, even if it was pleasant.” (Schouweiler 65)

When aware of one’s own spiritual immortality and unsatisfied by the only environment available, any afterlife space presents the greatest philosophical objection to eternity.

In the first film, Charlie is in Heaven for only a couple of scenes before returning to earth until the last scene when taken up by a beam of light. The sequel opens with and stays in Heaven for a significant amount of more time with repeated appearances throughout the rest of the story. Charlie and Carface are already longtime residents by the time Itchy meets his fate and arrives at the golden gates. Despite Charlie and Itchy’s close friendship, their needs and personalities while alive were quite opposite, thus experience Heaven differently. Charlie is excited to get back to earth (for a second time) to retrieve the horn while Itchy resents leaving so soon to act the sidekick again. The boredom of perfection Charlie detests satisfies Itchy’s wellbeing: to be relieved of fleas (they go to the other place). By the end, Charlie is granted a second life on earth but when he dies
again, Heaven will still be as it is and his collective time on earth will eventually pale to an eternity.

CGI Heaven

Stephen Holden’s *New York Times* review states that *What Dreams May Come*’s “lavish cinematic landscapes…celestial special effects…(are like a) dream reality.” The vibrant and tactile Heaven, nonlinear narrative, family reunions, and hero’s journey are able to transport the audience physically, mentally, and emotionally. For a few moments the camera stands in for Chris’ disembodied spirit and fuses with the audience’s perspective, as Chris wanders around his house invisible to Annie and his wake’s guests. It is less than five minutes and is only used once more from a soaring bird’s perspective in Heaven. And though the remainder is in third person omniscient, the scenes move between memories of Chris’ life and present afterlife. The narrative is anything but static.

The audience’s eyes behold dense yet transient images. Chris’ Heaven is based on Annie’s painting of their dream house. What existed in her mind and was brought to actuality in her art was recycled for his new Home and is literally constructed in paints. The flower meadow has a brush-stroke texture and the lake ripples like a waterbed. This space’s unique impressionist appearance is made possible by the (time’s) latest computer graphic technology and using Velvia: a special film stock usually reserved for still photographs. The landscape shots of sky, ground, and bodies of water allude to a world of its own qualities in a separate dimension. However, Chris’ Heaven is one amongst many others. “Here is big enough for everyone to have their own private universe.” His daughter Marie’s Heaven is a replica of a diorama she had in her bedroom from when alive. Chris meets his tracker at a library. Wherever “here” is, it is not above or below the
earth. Because he and Annie are still connected by their thoughts, the afterlife is still tethered to the living.

Elevator to Heaven

_Heaven Sent’s_ (1998) images and dialogue references traditional views of Heaven’s place in the sky but also as if hidden behind a veil of invisibility (not to be confused with parallel dimensions) with its own ground and surroundings. After a brief live-action scene to set-up reckless teenager Eddie’s near-death experience and his need for an attitude adjustment, the camera moves upwards. In claymation and stop-motion are the blue sky, white clouds spelling out the film’s title, and Howard the angel on a telephone informed of his assignment. The Howard clay model jumps into a cloud and the scene changes back to show in live-action his presumed first person perspective parachuting towards a hospital on earth. However, Howard must escort/transport Eddie’s spirit to Heaven by elevator and has to press a specific combination of buttons to turn its function from the hospital’s space to the other world. After rising so high, the floor counter sign reads Paradise; the doors open and the white light blinds them. The camera moves outside the elevator and shows the space not as sky and clouds like earlier but a completely white space. A man stands holding a flower but is disappointed that the new arrival is not his wife Edie. Wherever the flower came from, it must be beyond the vicinity of this lobby, or gate. Because of the filing department’s mistake, Eddie’s spirit is taken instead of Edie. They must be exchanged, and as compensation Eddie is given three more days to live. When Edie steps out from the elevator and sees her husband with the flower, she transforms to her younger self and they walk off screen. This Heavenly space exists above earth but is its own world, invisible to the living. This eternal afterlife
does not explicitly offer anything exciting or enticing. Similar greeting spaces are shown from *Here Comes Mr. Jordan* through *Over Her Dead Body* (2008): rolling fog to cover the floor and distant painted backgrounds that seem to reach to infinity, or a completely white room.

**Traditional Visions of Hell/ Elevator to Hell**

*Angel on My Shoulder* (1946) represents a very traditional concept of Hell. It is picture perfect fire, caves, and sweltering heat. After Eddie Kagle is released from his umpteenth incarceration and shot by his friend, Eddie’s body appears to be falling down a black void and lands on a rocky cliff beside a fire pit. The camera follows him from the mountain terrain to the Devil’s office chamber. There is a map of the world with flashing lights, a temperature gage, and an intercom to call upon his servants or Board of Trustees. There is only enough light to see but it comes from the stage set lights. After causing a racket, Eddie’s punishment is to shovel coal in the 55th Circle of Hell boiler room. All of the workers are threatened with an ultimate punishment of being tossed into a bottomless pit. When the Devil, known as Nick, offers Eddie the opportunity to “go up” to New York City, they must step into the furnace to be lifted to the earth’s surface by a platform elevator. The scene cuts to an external shot of a bakery’s opening basement shaft. Unbeknownst to the storeowner and invisible to the living, Eddie and Nick continue on their way. The Devil came up from the ground to bring Eddie back to earth. As how the trumpet fell from *All Dogs 2* and landed in San Francisco from the clouds above, these characters arrived on a Manhattan street from a cellar door below.

“*Angel on My Shoulder* is notable as one of the few films…to even mention Hell or the Devil (in the 1940s)...Hell is a fascinatingly torrid place, all shot in exaggerated shadow lighting that suggests an intriguing collaboration between eschatological fantasy and film noir...” (Sheib)
That this title should be compared to film noir is surprising given the latter is based in psychological expressionism. The story does not take place in the character’s mind, focus on a detective’s mystery, or have a femme fatale, but combines the gangster and political hero genres with a trust-worthy wifely figure. Instead it could be said that film noirs take their lighting cues from earthly and psychological Hells that the characters struggle with on a daily basis.

The film uses a sociological theme to ruminate on class inequalities. Nick’s sinister mission for Eddie to ruin Judge Parker fails because Eddie is confronted by his own mistakes and immorality with the righteousness of his doppelganger. If he had been a beneficiary of the environment and opportunities the Judge is trying to implement for the city’s children, he would not have lived a life deserving of Hell. He could have been more than a gangster crook and had a “good woman” like Barbara. Though Eddie learns a lesson, he must return to Hell without the hope of transferring to Heaven. Judgment was passed once and the superior authority will not grant a pardon. For Angel on My Shoulder, the soul is sentenced to eternal damnation no matter if characters stand corrected and realize their mistakes. No angel swoops in to take him up, like in Murnau’s Faust (1926). Eddie’s time back on earth was a break from his singular final destination. For Eddie and Nick to return to Hell, they take the same bakery elevator shaft as before but the film ends when the doors close: Hell is not seen for a second time. The set was only used once. As well designed as Hell is, it is not the foundation. Instead, the plot is carried on by strong characters and acting performances. The supernatural is downplayed for real political and social concerns. As accomplished as the effects are, Hell as a space does not make the film a voyeuristic pleasure but is rather vicarious.
*Heaven Can Wait* (1943) is a similar example of the seemingly voyeuristic but actually a vicarious experience. The main body of the story is a chronological sequence of memories, attempting to prove Henry is worthy of admission to Hell, with the opening and closing scenes both taking place in The Devil’s office. This afterlife space is shown twice, but is rather like two halves of a whole. There is nothing visually original of the office’s set-up except that it serves as a unique gate to Hell. Unlike Hades or Nick’s dark cavernous headquarters, His Excellency receives arrivals and conducts work in a luxury office suite like the CEO of a Fortune 500 business. There is plenty of light, wall-to-wall bookshelves seven tiers high, a waxed gray marble floor, terracotta columns, and a large round desk at the center. The butler acts as an accessory to His image but also as a gatekeeper by announcing arrivals and guarding the door. When Henry is about to begin his flashback narrative, Edna barges past the butler to argue her case; that she does not belong in Hell. His Excellency is so annoyed by her manner he pushes a red button that opens a floor tile beneath her for which she falls through into an unseen space of red light and smoke. This is just enough to conjure a deeper Hell where the damned go for an eternity. The types of punishment and what else may be down there do not need to be shown because it does not matter to the story.

The Lubitsch humor plays on this fantastical situation, and though there are references to Hell and its figures, the scene moves on to meaningful matters. After Edna’s disposal Henry tells the tale of the women in his life. The audience is not meant to feel transported between interesting worlds and sights, but follow the characters’ interactions and identify with a relationship’s development. Henry’s marriage to Martha is the story’s main concern. The culmination of his love for her is shown in a very short yet
emotionally charged scene. Henry has a library full of books but he randomly pulls out the one that brought the couple together: *How to Make Your Husband Happy*. He is momentarily silent and overcome in sorrow.

Henry’s death and transport to Hell is off-screen. Upon the scene’s return to His Excellency’s office, the latter determines Henry has not satisfied the criteria, ushers him to an elevator, and tells the attendant to take Henry, “up.” His Excellency assumes that the “lobby of the other place above” will accommodate him and that his beloved grandfather and wife will welcome his arrival. It is mildly unclear if the afterlife spaces of Heaven and Hell are a set of levels in its own dimension or actually sandwich earth. But that an elevator is the set’s choice method of transport, like in others, connects them like stories of an office building. If Hell is balanced by Heaven, then the images we have of His Excellency’s office and the domain below would be the reverse of how Heaven may look: like a palatial white lobby.

“You Ever Wonder Why Hell Looks So Much Like Miami?” - From *On A Cold Day*

If the afterlife does exist, a piece of it has never been brought back to us, thus however we imagine the afterlife it comes from our reality. Whether the afterlife film space is animated, constructed on a studio set, or shot on location, its physicality is derived from the available materials here and now. Even an original visual is the amalgamation of elements the mind is already familiar with. The representation of an afterlife space, no matter how different, new, or original, is an arrangement of recycled images. For those afterlife scenes shot on-location, the real place becomes a replication in an afterlife space. The empty afterlife is filled with earth copies.
On a Cold Day, a short film directed by undergraduate Derek Stuckert from the 2010 student Canes Fest at the University of Miami, uses the above quoted reflexive line of dialogue to comment on its own image and production. With limited access to special effects the project was forced to stay local, cheap, and creative. The opening scene on the beach introduces the main characters and is where new arrivals wash ashore. Knowing they had died and recognizing Miami’s skyline, they scream out in self-pity for their disappointing eternal existence. Miami stands in for and is Hell. An establishing shot of a real downtown office building for Hell’s headquarters reinforces this association. The camera moves inside to show demon-like characters. Though it could not be helped to show the earth’s expansive landscapes of ocean and sky within the shots, they emphasize Hell as a separate dimension possibly alongside the living world. Each external shot of this film, as with others that differentiate the living from the dead when both occupy the same space, the latter shots are usually tinted blue. For such a short film with five scenes, the camera moves between three different spaces: the beach, a coffee shop called Perkatory with Adam as a counter barista, and The Devil’s office. Again, humor is used to emphasize the space and its figures.

A Place for Suicides

A perversion of free will is the choice to take one’s own life, before natural death, but then to suffer extreme punishments in Hell. When the title character of Constantine remembers his attempted suicide/NDE to Hell, the space looks like a garbage dump on nuclear fire. The film What Dreams May Come also takes a traditional point of view. But the suicide characters in Wristcutters: A Love Story (2005) and The Others (2001) go to
spaces with different rules and purposes: where torment is kept to a minimum and/ or is more psychological than physical.

*What Dreams May Come* kills the family dog, the couple’s teenage children, and Chris all in the first act. Annie is left alone, relapses into clinical depression, and commits suicide. Chris’ guide Albert informs him, “You’ll never see her. She’s a suicide. Suicides go somewhere else…No one has ever seen a suicide brought back.” Chris leaves his Heaven to rescue Annie. Her world is a materialization of her distressed psyche: a charcoal colored, dim, and dusty replica of their family home. She is trapped in her tomb-like chamber unaware of her death with thoughts too murky to clarify. Chris’ attempts to help Annie make sense of where she is and who he is initially fail. But just when the space starts to envelop his perception, taking away his memory, Annie comes out of her illusion and recognizes him. Chris’ illuminating presence and self-sacrifice to stay in Annie’s dark Hell saves them both from eternal gloom. Annie was supposed to suffer indefinitely for taking her life, like any other suicide Albert knows of. That love is her salvation means that love is everyone’s salvation but is rarely attained. The suicides’ space of harsh self-punishment that can last forever transforms to one capable of ending if the spell of denial or anger is broken.

*The Others* was written and directed by Alejandro Amenábar; the same filmmaker responsible for *Open Your Eyes*. Though both titles feature main characters that kill themselves, their afterlife spaces are entirely different. Caesar’s was a simulation that he voluntarily leaves while all those dead in *The Others* are trapped in a world that can mesh with the living. If this were a more traditional conception, Grace would have gone to Hell for killing herself and her children. Ann and Nicholas would have gone to Heaven to
meet their father: a soldier who died in World War II. Instead, the father believes he is still fighting in the far away trenches, Ann and Nicholas stay with their mother, and three housekeepers who died of tuberculosis fifty years before delicately assist the family’s acclimation. All of these characters died differently yet are in the same space: a suicide, murder victims, a war hero, and those by illness. Mrs. Mills says, “Sometimes the world of the living gets mixed up with the world of the dead.” But it seems that this is the rule and not an occasional occurrence. There may not be a hierarchal differentiation of afterlife spaces based on morality and other factors. The separate dimension that shares its existence with the living seems the only repository for the dead. There is no sign of a superior authority or a judging process.

How M. Night Shyamalan’s *The Sixth Sense* shocked audiences in 1999 was repeated with *The Others* in 2001. In both films the dead and living are confused for each other and the fact of who is living or dead is revealed at the end. The difference between the two is that *The Sixth Sense* is based on rules of the ghost in the living’s space and *The Others* is based on the rules of the ghostly space with the living. It is a matter of perceiving the environment and not the self. Grace believed God gave her and the children a second chance at life to be a better mother but when she learns the truth, she is anxious of her space’s irreligious physicality and purpose: “I don’t even know if there is a Limbo.” But the children find peace in their situation. Their entire lives were spent in the darkness because of an allergy to sunlight and when the curtain is literally taken away, they are unharmed. The estate was shrouded in gray skies and fog that fast becomes clear spring days as the living “intruders” leave. Somewhat similar to *Corpse Bride*, death is their release from life.
Instead of drama and horror, *Wristcutters: A Love Story* meets suicide with humor, romance, and a road trip. The DVD menu art is a road sign with slit wrists and directional signs: “Jumpers” go one-way and “Drowners” another. “For Zia it’s a lot like the life he quit but a little worse. This netherworld which looks like a corner of the American southwest…no one is able to smile and stars are invisible.” (Scott) Zia works at Kamikaze Pizza and leads a stale afterlife. His best friend Eugene is one of four family members that committed suicide at different times, so they are able to resume a functional domesticity. When Zia learns that his ex-girlfriend Desiree recently killed herself too, because of a cult leader, the guys hit the open road to find her. While traveling they meet hitchhiker Mikal, who claims to be there by mistake from a drug overdose and wants to explain her case to the space’s leaders. Zia and Mikal form a friendship based on their mutual attraction. Though suicides are in their own world and forbidden rewards, the potential for happiness is still possible.

Road movies have plenty of landscape shots with the characters’ vehicle moving from one edge of the frame to the other across a variety of natural sights and cities. Instead, this space is a continuous wasteland save for a few rest stops. When the camera looks to the sky, arrivals can be seen dropping in by parachute. At the end of the second of three acts they find an ocean, and can finally admire natural beauty. Though this space is highly unpopulated, the winding parkways, desert, ocean, and sky make for a very worldly geography. As explained with *On a Cold Day*, shooing on location places the afterlife within the earth because of its shared physicality. The ending however, is a cheap shot. Zia wakes up in the hospital to see his parents outside the room talking with a doctor, and Mikal is wheeled next to him. Did the space’s agents allow Zia and Mikal to
return to life or was this space a holding room until they regain consciousness? These NDE cases challenge the authenticity and coherence of what the film attempts to present. Were all the other suicides in Wriscutters having an NDE or were some actually dead? Is there a specific neutral place for suicides? The spaces of The Others and Wriscutters may be presenting interesting concepts but the stories are based in their characters’ relationships. Their respective cameras do not leave the English estate or the dismal road. Their topsy-turvy plots keep the audience’s attention instead.

Red (Hell), White (Heaven), and Blue (the In-Between)

Bill and Ted’s Bogus Journey is heavily based upon both traditional religious and popular visuals. It comments on many preceding influential films and has inspired those released since. After Bill and Ted die, their spirit bodies stand in a blue tinted dimension inside the living’s space: similar to the Chilean ancient Chinchorro and Asian peoples’ beliefs. Bill and Ted can interact with the living like a one-way mirror: as when their girlfriends pass through their invisible selves without pause or effect. To inform the police of their deaths, the guys jump into two detectives’ bodies. At an séance, Missy sends Bill and Ted to Hell through a pitch-black wind tunnel. After some extended minutes of falling and pretending to be scared, they land on top of a rock in a big fiery cave, chained to a contraption that the Devil has control of. A giant robotic beast has them on a conveyor belt that leads to a hall of doors. Behind each door is a scene of extreme horror derived from each of their worst memories. With a surreal set design and the personifications of an authoritarian boot camp officer, an Easter bunny, and ugly grandmother, each room is their “own personal Hell.” Unlike Rocky, who wakes up in a single bestowed personal Hell, The Devil demands Bill and Ted to “choose (their)
eternity.” Instead, they escape to an In-Between space where the Grim Reaper resides and challenges him to let them return to earth alive. Bill and Ted defeat Death, they go to the gates of Heaven, steal the clothes of “worthy and enlightened” innocent arrivals, and sneak in to see God. The Heavenly space is not in the sky, per se, but another surreal space of white, gray, and lilac majesty with Classical architecture. God sends them via a pink bubble to where the denizen souls reside: a nightclub like from *Monty Python’s Meaning of Life* (1983 UK) and later used in *Down to Earth* (2001). Albert Einstein, Marilyn Monroe, bridesmaids, and hardhat workers plus others are all in attendance and enjoying the party. Bill and Ted, fall from above and return to their bodies, with the Reaper and the appointed helpers.

In the film’s final scene at the Battle of the Bands, when they say they have, “been all around the afterlife,” it is a simplification of all they have experienced and explored. However, the afterlife is rather “all around” them: within, below, and above. No other film has put it all together in an order of events that make sense and reflecting every aspect that the afterlife corpus can offer. The movie’s religious, occult, popular, psychoanalytic, artistic and chromatic references to Heaven, Hell, the other side, and the In-Between all exist as a collective and individually designed space. Shot on location in the desert when Bill and Ted are thrown off a cliff, their fall to Hell done by special effects, and other spaces constructed on a studio soundstage, *Bill and Ted’s Bogus Journey* made the most of all that is available to create a recognizable yet visionary afterlife geography. The film is a combination of the voyeur and visceral experiences: Bill and Ted are so simple minded they are like dummies standing in for the audience as they move from one space to the next, from life to the afterlife and back.
Earth is The In-Between

*Don’t Tempt Me*’s (2001 Spain) afterlife spaces seem to exist in a reality of its own: expansive, stretches in all directions, a separate dimension, but still connected to the earthly realm by Madrid’s subway. Here, Heaven is mid 20th century Paris, complete with an Eiffel Tower, and shot in black and white. The Operations Manager, Marina D’Angelo, walks the empty streets to meet with a group of other administrators for a luncheon, followed by a meeting with agent and singer Lola, requesting her to work on earth to procure Manny’s soul. When Lola’s song is over, the O.M. snaps her fingers and the audience disappears. Is this a replica of Paris for all of Heaven, part of Heaven, or just Lola’s personal design? Later scenes of Heaven’s characters are mostly shot up-close so the space is pushed to the frame’s border and becomes indistinct, but the film’s dialogue reveals Paris is one among many replicated cities; Lola was planning a tour. The same is for Hell’s spatial position. Central Booking is for new arrivals in boiler room jail cells.

Jack Davenport, the Operations Manager, travels in a limo down a country road. His employees work in an office building. And his appointed agent for Manny’s case, Carmen, is relieved of her 22nd Circle cafeteria waitress duties. The initial force behind the plot is that while Heaven’s streets are empty hundreds arrive in Hell, and Manny’s soul will prove if Heaven should shut down or remain open.

God and the Devil are absent and so the power struggle between good and evil is left to each space’s administrators. However, Jack’s position is in jeopardy. So that he stays in charge and so Heaven can continue to exist, Carmen and Lola must work together to get Manny into Heaven. But in the midst of the mission, their moonlighting jobs at a superstore envelop their concerns. The issues they become involved with are no
longer about the afterlife but life. They try to procure fair labor practices for fellow employees. “(This) European film instinctively settles into the social realism that has long been the continent’s strongest tradition.” (Kehr) The problems of the living and the afterlife are mixed together so that both could be resolved. Despite their existences in separate planes, they still share qualities of the same real space. When Manny sacrifices himself to save his family, the scene moves to a third, neutral, afterlife space where Heaven and Hell’s representatives meet to pass judgment. Instead of a grand celestial courthouse, everyone is gathered in a circular lobby that is tinted pale green: a transitional color. It looks like a city municipality that needs a renovation. None of Don’t Tempt Me’s spaces look divine, baroque, or have biblical imagery. They are based in reality and more so shot on location. However, there is a gender bias towards Heaven and Hell. The former features female agents in powerful offices and Paris gives Heaven an air of womanly sophistication. Jack’s boyish charm, the sexual harassment Carmen faces in the cafeteria from brutish men, and that she used to be a male gangster gives Hell a masculine nature.

While Lola and Carmen’s relationship moves from adversaries to allies, the spaces they represent take greater attention. The story ruminates that humans are more likely to go to Hell so Heaven needs to defend itself and secure more residents. The scenes frequently cut between earth and the afterlife. Communication and transport between these various spaces are also frequently shown. Heaven, Hell, and the courthouse waiting room lack adornment, thus commenting on audience’s expectations of opulence and extremes. The reverse is instead accomplished: the spaces call attention to
themselves because they fail traditional visuals. These new images give the mind’s eye more to see, think about, and react to.

The In-Between

The In-Between is a neutral space for souls to work out and resolve issues from when alive, wait for a judgment on their final destination, or a way station to segregate each of the arriving dead on to the next steps of the afterlife procedure. In these films, it is not a religious space like Purgatory, Limbo, or the Great Plain of resurrection. Here, the look and purpose of the In-Between in more secular; particularly bureaucratic and psychological. It is somewhere between life on earth and acceptance into Heaven. It is devoted to exploring the characters’ journey of self-reflection, letting go, and accepting death. Peter Jackson’s adaptation of Alice Sebold’s *The Lovely Bones* is the best example of recent releases. Central Booking is a lobby for space agents to greet and check-in new arrivals, make sure the roster is met, and lead them to another mode of transport for traveling to the next space and or a final destination. The best examples are *Here Comes Mr. Jordan* and *A Matter of Life and Death* from the forties. The Waiting Room is a holding chamber for new arrivals to learn of a mission assignment or their final destination, like from *Beetlejuice. After Life* (1998 Japan) combines these three kinds for a very interesting departure from the country’s typical ghost cinema. The Courtroom is a setting for the dead character’s life to be examined and judged for a final destination. This last example is kin to *Don’t Tempt Me*’s allusion to a trial, and will be better illustrated in the *Judgment* chapter. The In-Between space and the story’s plot is an intermediate state of existence. It is saturated in potential.
Lisa Miller discusses Susie’s existence, from Alice Sebold’s *The Lovely Bones*, as a personalized Heaven... sees the whole earth from a distance, as if in an airplane...In the end Susie is finally able to ‘move on’ to another sphere where she will be able to let go of her earthly concerns...it’s inclusive; it allows you to have what you want and what you desire. (216-217)

Her reading of the book’s spaces is wrong. Sebold’s character may use the phrase “my Heaven” but only in comparison to the phrase “wide wide Heaven” where, “my father’s father, my favorite of them all, would lift me up and dance with me. I would feel only joy and have no memory, no cornfield and no grave.” (Sebold 136) The “my Heaven” of satisfying immediate desires is the In-Between where she can read magazines for homework, care for a dozen puppies, paint the world with her imagination, and watch over her living loved ones. The “wide wide Heaven” is for those souls who cease, “asking why you were killed...stop investigating the vacuum left by your loss, stop wondering what everyone left on Earth is feeling... (where) you can be free. Simply put, you have to give up on Earth.” (Sebold 136) For the first half of the book Susie focuses on following her loved ones and is concerned with every moment of their lives and her loss. But over many years, both parties heal and gain closure. Susie watches them less and refocuses her energy on coming to accept her afterlife existence. When Susie finally leaves “her” space for the “wide,” she describes,

*it is beautiful here, that I am, and you will one day be, forever safe... it includes all my simplest desires but also the most humble and grand. The word my grandfather uses is comfort... take you somewhere you could never have imagined in your small-Heaven dreams. (Sebold 369-370)*

This is Heaven. She can still fulfill her desires but instead of whims, they are needs. She no longer wrestles with how her life ended but appreciates where she is and how she will continue on. She has earned admittance to a permanent Home. From here Susie can still spy on the living but the ache and struggles are left behind. The In-Between helped ease
her transition from the teenage voice of a new arrival to a mature resident. Susie
overcomes her anger by watching her family grow, and she heals by understanding she is
physically separate from them. The In-Between allows her to compensate her life’s loss
by dreaming up a space of familiarity and freedom. When ready, she didn’t need the In-
Between anymore, and could create a “wide” space of peace.

Peter Jackson’s adaptation left much of the book’s violent scenes and many
important characters out of the script. The timeline was significantly rushed. Its only
saving grace was its understanding of the spaces she exists within. Jackson and his
writing partner saw the distinction Sebold wanted to get across and what Miller missed.
The movie’s Susie says, “I was in the blue horizon between Heaven and earth.” Her
“perfect world” was a teenage girl’s fantasy. Jackson’s special effects for the In-Between
are the latest works of afterlife film Art since What Dreams May Come. As Susie’s soul
leaves earth and enters the Universe, her form is a body of light sparks flying past
meadows and valleys between hills, through a turquoise blue sky, and landing on the
beach of a sapphire blue lake with a white gazebo at the center. The sun is a flower, the
screen goes white, then shows her spirit body running through a field of gold that turns to
a marsh, and sinks beneath water. A scene later she wakes up in the gazebo amongst a
forest. Susie asks her new guide Holly if it is Heaven but she replies, “not there yet.” Her
grand vistas of nature fill the frame with gorgeous colors and symbolic compositions.
They swiftly transform to match her ephemeral emotions. Yet, somehow the world of the
living reaches her afterlife perception. When her father destroys all of the glass bottle
ships they made together over the years, their giant twins crash against a landscape of
ocean cliffs and break into millions of pieces. The icy blue and other pastel colored
computer-generated images, and superficial lighting, are some of the most beautiful visuals of the latest era.

As if to compensate for not filming Susie’s murder in detail, the film uses strong imagery of its aftermath and her state-of-mind. Susie’s feelings manifest within her space: Harvey’s house is attached to a lighthouse tower that looms on the edge of her world yet she must walk through it and come out on the other side to enter the “wide Heaven.” She is only able to do this when closer to accepting her situation. Here she is introduced to the others Harvey killed. She takes the final step to move on when her family has reunited. At the film’s end, we do not see her enter the “wide Heaven” of Sebold’s vision or even Jackson’s. Her voice merely wishes everyone goodbye. It is difficult to determine which experience the director hoped the audience would have. Her effortless migration through the spaces and potent panoramas are intensely designed, leaning to the visceral. Though Jackson did try, much of the book’s emotional impact was lost in the adaptation; an attempted but failed vicarious experience.

While most In-Between spaces are constructed for either psychological healing or bureaucratic administration, After Life incorporates both. While most afterlife films show either a collective or individually designed space, After Life incorporates both. While most afterlife film spaces are constructed on a studio set or are shot on-location, After Life incorporates both. This title is distinguishable from almost all others because it single-handedly merges literal and figurative ruminations on film, memory, and the afterlife. The recently deceased arrive at a compound estate of park grounds, a dormitory, offices, a film studio, and a screening room. They check in with a secretary’s roster and sit in a waiting room until called into an office. Counselors explain that the dead are to, “select
one memory most meaningful or precious…our staff will do their best to recreate it on film… As soon as you’ve relived your memory you will move on taking only that memory with you.” The counselors’ assist with sorting through their memories and make sure they choose one. A group of filmmakers take the counselors’ notes and match them to an inventory of materials for recreating the memories. All those who watch their own memory-film are gone from their seats when the lights are turned on.

This compound is just one of many branches set up to handle incoming groups each week. It is a system that allows reflection and promotes self-assessment. The facility first appears to be in a separate dimension: as a space specifically created in an isolated environment for their single task. But when Shiori, one of the counselors, leaves the compound with a camera and wanders unnoticed by cricket players, a crowded mall, and traffic, the afterlife compound instead shares space with the living world. Her migration from one to the next and back is not seen but for those films with similar spatial positions, she must have used a pocket to move through. Like the world of the living, the compound experiences seasons (this story takes place during a snowy winter) and day turning to night. And as one of the other counselors reveal, time passes at the same rate in the In-Between, as it does for the living (except aging). They are halfway between where they lived on earth and a deeper internal dimension. *After Life* does not ruminate on the space beyond. They do not hint if it is Heavenly, Hellish, or neutral. The memory may be their own afterlife space to exist within or simply a composite of feelings and images they take to their final destination. Once the dead vanish, they and where they go is no longer the compound workers’ concern. Any of the dead who do not, cannot, or will not
choose a memory by the end of the week must stay in the In-Between and train for counselor duty.

While this all indicates a governing body, there is no intimation of a supreme authority. The best clue is the compound’s emblem: two interlocking rings similar to the Chanel logo of CCs. It at least represents the service as a unified organization with a continuous purpose. This film recycles images in four steps: (1) the sights of materials of the living world are taken into the mind’s inner world and become memories, (2) the dead keep their memories so one can ultimately be selected (VHS recordings are used as helpful reminders), (3) the memory is recreated as close as possible using the various props the afterlife film studio has at its disposal, and (4) somehow the dead enter their projected film-memories. However, *After Life* only shows the small sets and their filming but not the memory film screenings.

Disembodied Voice

Japan’s *Rashomon* (1950) and *Ugetsu* (1953) as well as Hollywood’s *Sunset Boulevard* (1949), *American Beauty* (1999), *Blind Date* (2009), and the television series, *Desperate Housewives* (2004– present) feature an idea similar to the flashback review of *Carousel* except they do not show the afterlife space. Instead the dead, from wherever they are, narrate either the events leading to their deaths or the continued lives of those they left behind. The purpose of the former type of voice-over may be a method of life review for (self) judgment and or understanding the meaning of life while the latter is the dead watching over the living. Camera angles and dialogue allude to a space usually above in Heaven or from behind a one-way mirror in a separate dimension. Regardless of the method, it is only known as somewhere outside the film’s frame. The dead observe
and comment simultaneously on their loved ones and the audience. The voice-over narration itself is taken from literature to give the reader/audience a clear idea of what the main character is thinking. It is a straight line of acknowledged communication from the narrator’s state of mind to the audience, hidden from the other characters, “in autobiographical or reminscental,” form. (Fleishman 24) These films directly ruminate on the living’s lives after the narrator’s death.

*Rashomon* is a slight exception because the husband’s spirit takes over a body to testify on his own death at the trial of his murder. His mediated narration is just one of multiple questionable observations on the truth. (Because the characters face the camera, the judges are presumed to be opposite the characters and sitting where the audience is: audience members are the judges.) He tells a story rather than a revelation. Yet that the husband’s voice stifles the mediator’s, he is still speaking from somewhere. *Rashomon* and the other above examples are of disembodied voices. The afterlife is evident but the space is created by its narrator’s aural presence and visual absence. The dead voice comes from somewhere from someone who was once alive. It is an intersection of life with death, the cinema screen with the audience, and the past with the present. However, it also has the strange effect of making the living’s reality an afterlife space. Because the audience is informed of the narrator’s death from the beginning, every scene is permeated with the knowledge of death. The scene might as well be tinted blue. The end is not coming but has already come. But the narrator’s tenses are not strictly retrospective. There may be a switch to present observations directed to the audience: bringing them into greater contact with the story and the dead. *Ugetsu*’s Genjuro cares for his wife’s
grave and asks, “Why did you have to die?” The voice of Miyagi replies to him but he cannot hear her. Only the audience can.

I did not die. I am at your side. Your delusion has come to an end. You are again your true self in the place where you belong. Your work is waiting. (As the camera moves to show the pottery) What a beautiful shape...How I long to see it when it’s baked!...became the man I hoped for but alas I am no longer among the living. I suppose such is the way of this world.

Though she is speaking to Genjuro as a dead wife to her living husband, and unaware there is an audience, only the audience can hear her. The camera moves to show what she is commenting on: her husband working outside and then the pottery drying inside. From a first person perspective, it as if she floats from one area to another, while the audience sees through her eyes. Miyagi says she is at his “side”: a literal rather than metaphorical statement of her whereabouts. Here, the dead share the space with the living. The phrase, “I am,” conveys her continued existence and retention of personality.

The Western afterlife film traditionally places afterlife spaces as layers in relation to earth by moving the camera upwards or downwards. Sunset Boulevard opens from a high angle that comes down as Joe’s voice comments on how the police drag his body out of the pool: as if “hovering somewhere ‘over’ it.” (Fleishman 90) Similar to Miyagi, Joe speaks in the present tense indicating that he understands his death was just moments before and can see what happens just afterwards as it occurs. The second act is a long visual flashback of how his life ended with his short aural past-tense comments. Joe’s living body performs the actions as they play out but with his dead voice-overs. It is like a DVD film with director’s commentary for the audience. The story’s third act returns to the scene of the crime in the present at Norma Desmond’s mansion. “The murder and its discovery take place shortly before the time they are narrated, but the narrator now looks down at them from the detached perspective of the dead.” (Fleishman 96) Like how the
afterlife space bookends the long flashback in *Heaven Can Wait* (1943), *Sunset Boulevard* begins and returns to the police’s handling of Joe’s body. However, his narrative takes three different tones from sarcastic humor to reminiscence, to assessment. While *Heaven Can Wait* is a circular formula, the latter is an arc. Joe transforms his outlook from beginning to end. Similar to *The Lovely Bones*, his disembodied narrative is kin to the In-Between space for reflection and purification. The film’s last scene is not of Joe’s body but of Norma’s continued delusion for a second chance at fame. What transpires after his death is the true reason for his “hovering” close by: to see her reaction and a hinted glimpse of her future. Again, like Miyagi, the camera moves through space and comments on the living, from the first person perspective. The audience is Joe’s spirit.

Fifty years later, *American Beauty* was released. The visuals are strikingly similar. The film begins with a camera coming down from the sky to a suburban neighborhood as Lester’s dead voice introduces the audience to his life. The film is a flashback of the events leading to his death, fragmented by repeats of the downward camera that rise back up as the film concludes. Lester’s formal address to the audience includes a strong understanding of his life and why it ended so suddenly. He, like Joe, Miyagi, and Susie, accepts his physical death with great appreciation for the time he did have, love for the family he left behind, and yet dissociated from the present. Wherever he is narrating from and for how ever long he has been dead, he is far from disappointed or bored. His life review is rather a summary of his transition: waking up from a dead routine to find personal satisfaction and killed soon after. Lester describes the moments of his violent death with peaceful retrospection.
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… I guess I could be pretty pissed off about what happened to me…but it’s so hard to stay mad when there’s so much beauty in the world… feel 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.

His paired memories are in first person point of view and sepia tinted that play like a series of film clips. This address is a summation soliloquy addressed specifically to the audience. The time away gave him the opportunity to evaluate and assess his life within the grand scheme. His experience hints at the clarity the dead can achieve and what lies beyond for those alive. That “someday” comes for everyone. The disembodied narrative of a dead character is different than any other voice-over because the voice comes from a space and time beyond the audience’s immediate comprehension. “The voice-over characters, they were once fully alive in the story, as we see, but now have become a persistent echo of the past, as we hear…” (Fleishman 80 and 90) The character’s living body may have been in the scene, thus the voice is matched with the physical actor playing the role, but the story is lost in time. The voice can give clues but the past, present, and possible future are confused.

The Underworld Revisited/Revised

A filmic afterlife space that visualizes the pattern from near-death experiences requires Heavenly beauty and tranquility, rewards and learning, a life review for self-judgment, retaining memories and personality, guides and family reunions, lateral modes of transportation, and above all, a singular separate dimension of reality for everyone to arrive at. In NDE testimonies across the culturally diverse world, such a domain is repeatedly described, with only slight variance. When the soul has left the body it travels to and through a space to be met by a guide for understanding their life’s purpose. The
soul is either given a tour of the space or remains at the gates. Either on their own accord or by force, the soul returns to the body when revived. The person wakes up with strong memories of their journey, greater understanding of themselves and the world, and the courage to lead more fulfilling lives. Pre-birth and reincarnation hypnosis testimonies have similar qualities but with greater information about the space because the death and rebirth cycles were completed. This singular space promotes understanding the soul’s journey, levels of accomplishment, the possibilities of second chances, and reunions with the living or in the afterlife. Psychological punishment and rebirth is self-determined for learning lessons. This conceptual space for which all humans, in a sense return to, is The Underworld of contemporary times that, should be renamed Human Headquarters. Western and Eastern cultures of the past and present have come full circle to at last meet upon fair ground. Space, figures, and judgment are all combined to cook an ideal universal afterlife. A full image of Human Headquarters has yet to be written into one film. So far its qualities are spread out among many, but best in Made in Heaven (1987), The Five People You Meet in Heaven (2004), and Hereafter (2010).

In 1946, a few days after watching Hitchcock’s Notorious at the local movie theater, Mike dies a hero by saving a group of children from drowning. The black and white scene reopens in color and he is standing naked in a room with a checkerboard tile floor, adorned walls, and windows to an azure background. Michael is greeted by his dead Aunt Lisa and realizes he must be dead too. “Welcome to Heaven.” She leads him out of the room, as if it were a lobby, and into the blue space. Lisa’s Parisian apartment is filled with paintings she did herself: a “rewards for being untalented on Earth.” Mike is able to move within Heaven by thought-travel. There are homes for families and schools
for learning. While Mike wanders the colorful halls, he can see the music room, a science lab of telescopes and lessons on the rainforest, and a computer class. His guide and romantic interest Annie studies toys in preparation to run her future earth father’s business. Other scenes in Heaven take place in parks, his replicated childhood home, and a marriage home he builds for himself and Annie. This Heaven is connected to earth but where? The blue sky from his arrival is a cliché Heaven above, but they transport themselves by telepathy. By the time they both reincarnate, it is the 1960s.

In *The Five People You Meet in Heaven*, there is one avenue the dead follow to their final destination. After death, the person arrives in their first guide’s personally designed Heaven, to learn a lesson or information they did not otherwise know. It is repeated four more times. After the fifth guide’s Heaven, the dead person moves into his or her own designed Heaven to wait for a visitor. It shows how everyone is connected for better or worse and promotes the painful process of reliving memories for purification. Five people are just a sampling of all those we interact with and effect. Eddie, like Mike, dies saving a group of amusement park visitors from a broken ride and a young girl in danger of its fall. Each guide presents Eddie with a morsel of truth that opens him to new understanding, forgiveness, and healing psychological scars. His afterlife journey is segmented among his memories and the living world without him.

Eddie’s memories from childhood in The Depression, his war traumas, and married life, to the early 21st century play in juxtaposition with his visits to five Heavens (the amusement park’s early 1900s construction, a war zone in the Philippines, a distant acquaintance’s secluded diner-car to keep souls safe, his wife’s Heaven of marriage ceremonies, and a young Filipino girl’s tranquil riverbed). Eddie’s questions of his war
injury and a haunting nightmare from a P.O.W. camp are answered and his enigmatic authoritarian father’s noble death is revealed, changing his perception. Eddie was bitter with regret for never leaving the seaside park to start somewhere new and for abandoning his dream as an engineer. But because of his mechanics job, he always made sure the rides were safe and lives were saved everyday. Instead of a Supreme Being’s space with a bureaucracy, Heaven is a separate dimension that expands with each new arrival’s own design, governed by its residents: like a co-operative. Eddie’s journey is one of discovery and self-judgment that allows him to come to terms with a place he could not escape from and to appreciate that it gave him a Home. There is no mention of reincarnation, thus it is not a cycle of learning but paying it forward. Each guide bequeaths to an arrival, and the arrival becomes a guide. *Five People* is a made-for-television movie adapted by the same writer of the same titled novel. Mitch Albom created a literary and filmic set of spaces, figures, and judgment of purification, rewards, and comfort where families, friends, and strangers come together.

*Hereafter* is the latest release to hint at a central domain regardless of morality. The space itself is not shown in full but the characters verbally and emotionally describe its qualities. A.O. Scott wrote in his *New York Times* review that the film would, “haunt the skeptical, mystify the credulous, and fascinate everyone in between…rich deep shadows and heavy saturated colors…beauty of existence.” When Parisian journalist Marie LeLay has an NDE she sees a world of illuminated faces standing in rows of a gray-blue space. This parking lot of residents is shown again when medium George Lonegan tries to connect with a client’s dead wife. She lost her battle with cancer but encourages her husband to start a new relationship: all supposing that this was a kind
woman. But in the same space George finds his girlfriend’s father, a man who wanted to apologize for (sexually) abusing her: a sign that he had committed a terrible act worthy of Hell but instead somehow learned the error of his ways and seeks forgiveness. London teenager Jason dies in a car accident. His twin brother Marcus searches for answers to understand where Jason may have gone that takes him on a tour at Youtube.com of Muslim and Catholic theologies and visits various mediums around the city: two fake psychic readings, a false body possession, and an ancient tradition of mirror reflection experiments. When George connects with Jason, Jason says he “could be all things at one time,” the “weightlessness is cool,” and assures Marcus they will always have each other. The dead are still able to interact with the living world, as how Jason is able to save Marcus’s life by using energy to knock off his hat before getting on a doomed subway. Despite George’s expertise and inside knowledge, he cannot say where the hereafter is. He is only allowed to sense the parking lot.

But Marie’s experience and talking to a character based upon Kübler-Ross, convinces her that something is out there. “The afterlife remains throughout the film a vague conjectural place, a zone of speculation…cinematic technology provides an available shorthand to its presence.” (Scott) For Hereafter, death is part of life, a conflict that humans struggle with to understand in public and private, a space that accepts victims and perpetrators, where only the representation of a body is necessary at the gates for recognized communication, and that may or may not be governed by a Supreme being. The idea behind Human Headquarters does not debunk or insult religious theologies, but makes room for one more idea. Like almost all afterlife films there is still plenty left to the imagination.
A Technological Underworld

Japanese horror films, and their Hollywood remakes, pose the afterlife as a singular space within the invisible energy fields used for transmitting messages. A gray dismal dimension like the ancient Underworld but instead of gray subterranean caverns, it is the gray steel of technology hardware. If the soul is energy, it will go to where energy gathers. In such films as Kairo (2001), its Hollywood remake and sequels Pulse (2006-2008), and White Noise (2005), the dead connect and come through to the living world via the Internet, telephones, and screens as physical or vocal shadows of their former selves. There is no indication of punishment except the laborious attempt of crossing back over to life. For White Noise, there is no vision of space other than the television static and for Pulse, the dead exist in a void reaching out in sorrow. At this time, I am unable to properly analyze this space in greater detail but it is nonetheless a current trend and deserves better assessment.

The Spirited Amusement Park

A majority of afterlife titles across the eras feature a metaphorical motif: the amusement park. The Ferris wheel, carousel, rollercoaster, trapeze artists, circus shows, other rides and games promote an adrenaline rush and competition for rewards in a relatively safe environment. Like films, the amusement park and fair grounds can be fun and scary that brings smiles and tears. The rides are built to elicit intense feelings, automated movement, speed, and entertain the eyes with colorful machines. The spectator is enticed to get on and feel the excitement for his or her self. There are rules for admittance (height and age) and waiting on the line is a voluntary participation, but once locked into the ride by a safety belt he or she is trapped and must go through the
experience until the ride ends. The rides’ motion follows its geometrical shape: circular and cyclical, or a series of climaxes and plateaus like aligned triangles. Or, the ride Eddie rescues the girl from in *Five People* is shaped like a cross with a horizontal cabin moving up and down along a vertical bar, as if a transient Cross. Permanent parks and traveling fairs are all designated a specific space with a bordering wall and a ticket booth, like a gate to the afterlife. It is filled with concession stands and their attendants. The latter group keeps the lines in order, the rides safe, and people gratified. The entire amusement park experience is a combination that offers voyeuristic, vicarious, and visceral visuals and reactions.

franchise (2003-2011) are based on their theme parks’ popular attractions. The made-for-television movie adaptation of Stephen King’s *Riding the Bullet* (2004) is based on the main character’s regret of not riding a popular rollercoaster. *Zombieland* (2009) concludes at an abandoned Los Angeles amusement park. *Blind Date*’s (2009) struggling married couple share a date in a bumper car ride. And at *Enter the Void*’s (2010) mid-plot, Oscar and Linda go on a rollercoaster ride in Tokyo. All of these examples reposition the familiar amusement park space as a source of contention between the characters and death.
Chapter Two: Figures

This chapter focuses on the scene’s internal system of communication. Personalities and memories, the condition of the body and mind, style of dress, gestures and expressions, and relationships are analyzed to showcase how characters can be identified with and followed through the film’s story. I negotiate between interpretations from the director’s and the audience’s anticipated point of view. The viewing experience is applied to the spatial representatives, main characters, mediators, and other cast members in the context of their form of return: resurrection, reincarnation, the ghost, and body possession. Cinematography, editing, and set design, also require consideration for reinforcing arguments. The characters’ dramatic personalities and actions envelope the viewers and take attention away from the spatial composition.

Scenes shot from a character’s first person perspective allow the (individual and general) audience to have a visceral sensation. In the few moments of What Dreams May Come, Stir of Echoes (1999), an out-of-body experience in Bliss (1985 Australia), and the entire Enter the Void (2010), what the character sees is appropriated by the viewer and interpreted with double the strength of a third person perspective. The scene is not mediated by watching the main character but by the viewer as the character. The camera witnesses and records the action as it happens: the character’s eye and the “I” of the audience are fused. The voyeurism of transient spaces is exchanged for the transient bodily existence. The soul’s journey from a third person perspective is best shown by the ghost and body possessions because the technological effects need to create a believable image of the soul’s physical transfer. The so-called dead body plays in front of and for the camera.
The dead characters’ continued existence hinges on their transference from life to death to the afterlife. Whether as an introduction or flashback, the majority feature scenes of the dead character when alive and the reason for his or her death. Whether the cause is natural or untimely, the event may or may not be shown but the occurrence is made known via cinematography and editing or dialogue. For a living character that enters an afterlife space and interacts with its representatives, there is no death event but a passage between realms of the living and the dead: as with *Spirited Away* (2001 Japan). While the dead may intrude on the living (usually as ghosts), the living intrudes on the dead in solid and biologically functioning bodies. Instead of powers, they gain knowledge and self-acceptance. Their final destination is continuing life with a new outlook. The same could be said for those characters that have near-death experiences.

Psychologist Carl Roger’s idea of the self-concept is “the collection of beliefs about one’s own nature, unique qualities, and typical behavior…a mental picture of (the self),” (Weiten 341) that can be applied to the afterlife character’s appearance and personality. The condition of the body as perfect or scarred is an independent factor for each film but is closely tied to religious ideas of resurrection. The dead character may retain the injuries of the body from when alive and or its event of death. One that shows no sign of deformity or decay serves three purposes: (1) superficiality of the body’s attractiveness, (2) abandon its association of death to bolster its continued lively existence, and (3) if a body stands in for the soul’s energy, or what is believed to be a shapeless form, is given perfect form. If the body is a mechanism for performing the continued personality of a dead character, then the perfect body reflects the personality fully intact. In films, bodies are needed especially when live-actors are needed. The
actor’s body portrays the character’s living and dead bodies. They are not supposed to function biologically yet retain skin color, voice, and ambulatory functions.

The living struggle to believe in a loved one’s return because they know of and witnessed the body’s death, the doctor’s call on time-of-death, and its interment. The following two quotes exemplify such a surprise to the continued existences of the dead characters Madeline and Johnny, respectively, via resurrection:

I tell you kids, it’s an odd thing here...you’ve shattered two vertebrae...The bone protrusion through the skin is not a good sign, your body temperature is below 80, and your heart stopped beating. Death Becomes Her (1992)
Your mother, and I, the ambulance driver and the coroner, and the embalmer, were all pretty much convinced that you were dead. My Boyfriend’s Back (1993)

How does the spectator accept the character’s death and afterlife existence? In animated films the artist has control over the body’s functions. It can stop working for any length of time and be drawn with signs of decay. An animated body could move without needing to breathe: breath itself is under the artist’s discrimination. However for live-action, death is a fraud. The actor was living 100% of the time while portraying a character that was alive, dead, and continued to exist. The character’s death is the actor’s fake death. “In classical dramaturgy, death must occur off stage.” (Goodwin 7) A shot of the body’s immobility followed by a blank (black or white) screen is the afterlife film’s cliché editing technique; just as how the camera angles up and down to refer to Heaven or Hell. Quickly cutting away from the actor’s body reduces the actor’s need to hold his breath or stay still for too long so as not to show signs of necessary inhalation and closed-eye twitches. A prolonged close-up or medium shot can give away the added truth of the actor’s life and betray the character’s death.

Reincarnated, resurrected, and possessed bodies are essentially live-action films that use special effects for intermediate states, but are full bodied. Interactions that
promote the dead character’s invisibility allows the actor’s body to stay solid, not requiring incessant special effects for transparency and moving between walls. Holographic appearances can be achieved by tricks of light and mirrors, though is more realistic by, ironically, computer-generated images. The technology used in *Poltergeist* (1982) had significantly advanced by the time of *High Spirits* (1988), *Ghost* (1990), and *Casper* (1995). However, films of the last ten years prefer the solid body and invisibility tactics used in the 1940s to save the effect costs for spatial composition.

Retaining memory and personality is key to the dead characters’ unfinished business. The people they need to contact and the information to relay can only be carried out if still aware of their recently ended lifetime. When alive, the characters’ unique personalities are clearly expressed to captivate the audience and are later used as the keys to identifying the character, in whatever form of their return: “personal identity and consciousness...(are) supreme confirmation of individuality.” (Goodwin 16) Memory and personality are especially necessary in comedies and dramas because of a strong reliance on a recognized sense of humor or relationship correlation. To prove post-mortem existence to family, friends, and love interests, behaviors and secrets need to be disclosed. Without such personal information there is no essential reason for their receiver to believe the possibility of life after death, their return, or to take on a facilitating role in the mission. Horror films oscillate between the absence and presence of memory and awareness: the dead are only shadows of their living selves.

Remembering the characters’ death event is shown either soon after arrival in an afterlife space or left for a shocking conclusion, as with *The Sixth Sense* (1999). In both cases the dead character will grab themselves to test the sensation of existing bodies and
try to “wakeup” from a dream. Because they don’t feel dead, they are not convinced until secondary evidence proves otherwise. Rarely do characters automatically acknowledge their death and move on to what’s next without taking some moments for an emotional reaction to grieve the loss of life. They feel disoriented, surprised, or sad. For those who saw death coming, the afterlife is a quick and smooth transition. Here Comes Mr. Jordan (1941)’s Joe Pendleton’s soul was wrongly taken from his body before death and “fought all the way up,” in contrast to Heaven Can Wait’s (1943) Henry van Cleve who dies an old man in his home from a fever and visits His Excellency in good spirits.

Clothing styles help define the characters’ time of death, sense of fashion, social class, and condition of the body. The Heavenly Kid (1985) opens in the late 1960s with Bobby in an Elvis leather jacket and girlfriend Emily in a poodle skirt. When Bobby returns to the living some sixteen years later, Bobby’s guide Rafferty warns him there are “some changes since your day,” to which he replies, “no shit!”: teenagers wearing edgier and skin-tight styles as well as the type of music and cars they drive. High Sprits’ Mary and Martin Plunkett’s sixteenth century wedding attire are in significant contrast to late twentieth century casual wardrobes. Tattered clothing is evidence of the body’s decay or from a violent death. Corpse Bride’s Emily’s wedding dress loosely hangs on her skeletal body.

Clothing can also indicate a spatial representative’s status. Executive and professional positions wear suits while low-level administrations wear uniforms. Similar to earthly power structures, the afterlife agents are a hierarchal bureaucracy. Each figure has different responsibilities in assisting the main character accomplish the mission. Their appearances and roles play off of various company job titles and dress codes. Low-level
workers are at the spaces’ gates to welcome new arrivals or handle any communication errands. High status workers rarely concern themselves with such tasks and are rather direct contacts with the Supreme Beings.

Space Agents: God and the Devil

God is rarely present in afterlife films. Actors personify God in religious Creation stories or as proof of existence for skeptical living characters like *Green Pastures* (1936) and *Bruce Almighty* (2003), respectively. For all others God is mentioned and then dismissed. Albert from *What Dreams May Come* answers Chris’ question of God’s whereabouts by saying, “He’s up there, somewhere. Shining down that he loves us, wondering why we can’t hear him,” and then continues drinking coffee. Marina from *Don’t Tempt Me* handles the situation similarly. Save for a disembodied voice (presumed) in *Beyond Christmas* (1940) or the camera’s first person perspective in *Bill and Ted*, God may exist but whether an ever-present invisibility or relinquishing control, this Supreme Being is not a physically shown afterlife character.

The Devil is a versatile role cast as a man, woman, animal, and beast, by human actors or in animated and constructed form. He, She, or It presides over an afterlife space of punishment, pain, or purification and roams the earthly space to collect souls. The robotic beast of *Bill and Ted* and the animated brute of *South Park*, or the human-like devil from *Little Nicky* (2000) and *On a Cold Day* are traditional images of the Devil with red skin, horns, hooves, and sometimes wings. However, a popular 20th century image of a devil in contemporary wardrobes can better blend into society. Murnau’s silent *Faust* (1926) shows Emil Jannings made-up in the traditional physicality as Mephisto while wagering with an Archangel, then transforms his appearance into a beggar and an
aristocrat to entice the scientist; at its end he returns to the beast-like costume. Later devil figures keep to one guise. The male actors in The Damn Yankees (1957), The Imaginerium of Dr. Pernasus (2009), Heaven Can Wait (1943), Bedazzled (1967 UK), Oh God, You Devil (1984), The Devil’s Advocate (1997), Meet Joe Black (1998), Constantine (2005), Hood of Horror (2006), and 1408 (2007), and the television series Reaper (2007-2009), wear professional or casual suits while the women of The Ninth Gate (1999), Bedazzled (2000), Killer Pad (2008), and Devil (2010) wear an assortment of clothing. While the male devils look like white-collar professionals in company positions of power as an adjective, the women dress for power as a verb: blending into a crowd or capturing sexual attention for objectification. While most titles feature a Devil that is evil incarnate of one-dimensional ruthless intentions, there are some that pose a misunderstood character worthy of sympathy.

The relationship between God and a main character is spontaneous and distant when compared to the developing bonds between The Devil and his or her subject. Recruiting and satisfying an initial contract creates a space for mutual, necessary, and often communication. The rapport of Mephisto and Faust is carried through the characters of the above listed titles as father-son, teacher-student, or buddies. There are opportunities for masculine connection and persuasion. Their subjects are not just honed for evil but used for information and social networking. Angel on My Shoulder’s Nick and Eddie’s dynamic works differently. Eddie is too independent and the situation never works out as well as Nick plans. Nick’s frustration grows as Eddie slowly finds God. By its conclusion the two come to an understanding on an eternal business affiliation. They have a love-hate rapport reminiscent of Casablanca’s (1942) infamous ending. When a
woman plays the Devil with a male subject, the relationship shifts to a sexual femme fatale nature. The *Bedazzled* remake’s Elizabeth Hurley first appears on screen in a red dress and repeatedly wears male fantasy costumes. Though not an afterlife film it shows that The Devil is still a masculine designed character.

While God is mentioned or implied, The Devil is in full visible form. They reign over their domains and contest for more residents. In religion these Supreme Beings balance the ideas of reward and punishment, right and wrong, with desire to exact their powers over intended arrivals. But in film they signify imminent death, safety and danger, acceptance and rejection. The dead character’s final destination to the land of God or The Devil is a direct expression of an overall assessment on his or her life. These Supreme Beings are two of Western culture’s most powerful figures and are routinely referred to as the highest officers. God is like a company’s figurehead; a presence that permeates and runs the space without actually being there. *The Adjustment Bureau* (2011) calls God “the Chairman.” *Heaven Can Wait*’s Henry bows and greets Hell’s master as His Excellency. He is dressed in a formal suit and looks like the average CEO but his hairline’s widow peak, mustache, and thick goat-T give a more sinister appearance. This image was similarly applied to Al Pacino in *The Devil’s Advocate* (1997) as a Manhattan lawyer. The Devil’s inclusion permits the audience’s intrigue to harmlessly observe evil and primary instincts. Mephisto gave Faust youth, sexual experiences, and wealth. But in the end Faust rejects his gifts to be with his young lover and goes up to Heaven. If films are an escape into another world, than The Devil permits temporary indulgence and inhibition.
Space Agents: Angels and Demons

In afterlife films, angels and demons act as the top guardians of Heaven and Hell, respectively. Instead of casting God or the Devil, their agents take on the top responsibilities. Here, they are the Supreme Beings’ pre-existing task forces: armies and advocates. Throughout art history, Angels have been described and visualized as different, with gold disk headpieces to signify divinity and with white robes and wings. Demons are typically deformed or skeletal. But in film, both are also dressed in contemporary human wardrobes of professional suits or informal wear. *Cabin in the Sky*’s (1943) The General and Lucifer Jr. wear marching band uniforms of white and black to signify their respective domains and high status. *The Twilight Zone*’s many angelic and demonic characters wear suits and announce themselves as such without flashy or cliché accessories. *Constantine*’s Gabriel is first seen wearing a professional suit but later wears a skintight white outfit with outstretched white wings. *Dogma* (1999) and *Legion*’s (2010) angels are warriors in armor. Japan’s *Jigoku* (1960) and China’s *The Dead and the Deadly* (1982) feature demons of short round stature with alien-like features. Demons are flying carcasses in *South Park* and Anubis’ armies are two-legged rabid dogs in *The Mummy Returns* (2001). Whether played by human actors or computer graphic animations, angels and demons carry out their bosses’ demands. They do not cater to the spaces’ residents.

Clarence from *It’s a Wonderful Life* (1946) or Poland’s *Angel in Krakow* (2002) and its sequel *Angel in Love* (2005) feature recently deceased and newly made angels that follow a plot structure more like the main dead character’s purpose than as a Supreme Being’s right hand commander. They have a mission to complete by assisting or learning
more about the living. Cary Grant in *The Bishop’s Wife* (1947) or Denzel Washington in its remake, *Angels in the Outfield* (1994), John Travolta in *Michael* (1997), or Cuba Gooding Jr. in *The Family Man* (2000), a remake of *It’s A Wonderful Life*, are such examples. Howard from *Heaven Sent* may be an angel but is of a lower class and better fits in with the upcoming section on guides and other underlings. Rocky’s guide Pip would be Howard’s evil-twin. Angels and demons act as ancillary proof of the Beings’ existence yet are also less likely cast in afterlife films.

**Space Agents: The Grim Reaper**

If God and the Devil are company chairmen while angels and demons are their executives, then the grim reaper is like an independent consultant: an entity separate from both extreme domains and rulers. The grim reaper is only responsible for collecting the souls of the dead and bringing them to their next destination whether it is an In-Between or eternal space. Ancient Greek mythology’s Charon is a ferryman that brings souls across the River Styx to The Underworld. As depicted on a terracotta vase displayed in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in Manhattan, the plaque reads, “Charon wears the clothing typical of a Greek workman. The exomis, a tunic that is fastened on one shoulder and leaves both arms free and bare, and a cap with a narrow rim.” (Object 21.88.17) Here, Charon is definitely a male-human form with a masculine body and facial beard in the typical garb of that period. By the Middle Ages, the job was still the same but with a different appearance: the personification of Death as a skeleton in black robes with a scythe. Still given a male body, he is painted on many church murals to reinforce patrons’ fears of universal demise. The filmic grim reaper is also clothed in either traditional or contemporary clothing.
Jean Cocteau’s *Orphée* (1950 France) is a re-vision of the ancient myth *Orpheus and Eurydice*. A unique alteration was exchanging the male grim reaper of Death for the female grim reaper called The Princess. She wears black and white dresses, is driven in a black car by several guards, and walks amongst society closely following her next intended soul. To know Death is coming, to see Death, the intended would do all they could to prolong the inevitable. As she says of herself, “if I appeared to the living the way they portray me they would recognize me and that wouldn’t make our task easy.” She glides between spaces like a ghost though requires a pair of gloves to enter the rippling image of mirror portals. Here, The Princess is one of many grim reapers employed by a higher authority. She has a human form but is from another world and dresses in outfits influenced by medieval depictions and modern fashion. That The Underworld was filmed in World War II bombed remnant structures lends the print an exceedingly visceral tone that, while seems constructed, is an actual location. A parallel implication is made between space and figure when The Princess’ façade is revealed to Orpheus and her true identity, as a grim reaper, is even more desirable to him. Her secret reciprocated love for Orpheus and why she killed Eurydice instead is demeaned: “You have no right to love in any world…You’re in love with Orpheus and you don’t know how to handle it.” An abuse and misuse of her power, The Underworld’s tribunal of judges condemns her and an assistant to an unseen punishment. As she is Death in love and as he is in love with Death, two of the strongest mysteries are sacrificed in the end to be evermore separate.

Ingmar Bergman’s *The Seventh Seal* is one of the most serious depictions of the grim reaper, and also one of the most parodied in later productions. The auteur’s deeply philosophical work carries on as an episodic game of chess between the grim reaper and a
knight playing for the latter’s allowance to continue living. They discuss many of life’s questions but the knight is severely disappointed there is no truth of God’s existence. With bleach white skin, a black robe, and a scythe, he is the ultimate look of Death to ironically appear neutral. His features do not elicit horror but numbness; his voice is not dark and deep but calm and direct; the scythe is not used to harass but is a tool. His character does not need to reinforce the already innate representation of Death as an omen of possible nothingness. Film Atheist writes, “He’s not particularly frightening nor is he kind…Death has no reason, and no master. He simply is.” He knows whom to collect and when but the audience is unaware of how Death knows. The afterlife is a mystery to all, even to its ferryman: a figure of the In-Between. Unlike The Princess, this grim reaper is only visible to the knight and a medium. After all of the intended souls of the traveling group have been taken, the medium sees their joyous spiritual bodies holding hands and following Death somewhere away from the living world.

Nearly thirty years later, Monty Python’s The Meaning of Life (1983) showed several comedic segments of life from birth to death and the afterlife. In the latter third of the film, a skeletal black robed vision of Death with a dark and deep voice comes to a rural English home to take the soon dead souls of two married couples. Despite his obvious appearance the couples are more bothered by his improper guest manners than the reason for his intrusion. Death repeatedly tries to explain himself, “I have come for you, to take you away, that is my purpose,” but they humorously fail to understand. When they do die and their transparent bodies follow him outside, they insist on taking their cars’ spirits up the vortex. At Heaven’s hotel lobby, Death absconds as the two couples check in to Heaven’s lobby. Though there is no explicit sign Death cannot pass
through Heaven’s gate, it is certainly not his place. He must return to collect more souls. His sarcastic tone reveals that the job is never-ending and the living rarely appreciates his work.

The grim reaper characters from *The Seventh Seal* and *Monty Python’s*, with an additional dose of slacker humor, heavily influenced Death’s character in *Bill and Ted’s Bogus Journey*. Collecting Bill and Ted’s souls is thwarted when they tie his laces and lift his white brief underwear over his head to get away. Later, when the boys escape from Hell they arrive at his mason stone castle, but instead of playing chess they play board games of Battleship, Clue, and Twister. Because Death looses, he must escort them to Heaven to seek God’s help for returning to life. To enter Heaven, Death wears a Little Bo Peep disguise and follows Bill and Ted to God’s throne. Rather than leading with a plethora of riddles or as a horrid scarecrow, here Death is a third wheel. He is burned out and finds pleasure in accompanying these simple dudes, despite some endured embarrassments. His sarcastic humor is both spoken and gestured intelligently when he says to a smoker, “See you real soon,” or at a hardware store shopping for scythes, or shouts out to the audience, “You might be a king or a little street sweeper, but sooner or later you dance with the reaper!” This last quote simultaneously conjures the sense of universal imminent death, the unity of all souls in The Underworld, and the grim reaper’s Dance of Death on church murals.

The Showtime series’ cast of *Dead Like Me* (2003-2005) best personifies the 21st century version of the grim reaper. Its main character, George Lass dies but instead of going on to an afterlife space, she is made a grim reaper, and must stay amongst the living until her collection quota is met. Somehow she is given a new appearance to hide
her true identity and is just one of innumerable reapers across the globe. To understand her new trade she learns from her supervisor and fellow workers. They are all former living humans in contemporary clothing with paying jobs to blend into society. The opening credits sequence combines the black robed and scythe image with contemporary work force humor: chatting at a water cooler, riding the bus, and making copies. George is the updated Princess reaper. While Orphée was a more composed visual experience, Dead Like Me also has some interesting camera moves but mainly focuses on accepting death and afterlife relationships. A new family of reapers assuages loosing the family she left behind. As Heather Havrilesky states in a Salon.com review, “Dead Like Me treads on interesting terrain between creepy suspense and poignant character driven scenes, wobbling between darkness and light, melancholy and optimism.” It is a black comedy story of a grim reaper’s education that balances the personifications of both serious drama and deadpan humor.

Space Agents: Low-Level Management

Those dead characters that leave the earthly realm for an afterlife space require assistance in understanding where they are. The workplace motif in afterlife films is no more pronounced than when applied to the low-level administration of the spaces’ representatives. They are subdivided into four groups but can take on multiple duties at once. (1) Record-keepers have a roster of names and other information on new arrivals to make sure that the natural order is maintained or to later help in the judgment process. In All Dogs Go to Heaven 2 (1996), a dog stands by the golden gate with a list and checks each name off as they pass, almost leaves before Itchy arrives, and then corrects himself as Itchy lands in Charlie’s arms: “Oh yeah, he’s right here on the list.” (2) The
Welcoming Committee is one or more persons (space agents or loved ones) that first greet new arrivals with a short introduction to the afterlife via conversation or reading material. Aunt Lisa is Michael’s in *Made in Heaven* and when a bell rings all of the Underworld residents come to the bar to meet Mayhew in *Corpse Bride*.

(3) Gatekeepers stand at the entrance of an afterlife space to admit or reject a new arrival. The giant three-headed Cerberus keeps the dead in The Underworld and the living out in *Hercules*. And Isabella Rossellini’s character Lisle gives Madeline and Helen the potion to drink for entering the secret society, in *Death Becomes Her* (1992).

Record-keepers, the Welcoming Committee, and Gatekeepers interact with the dead characters but work for their respective afterlife spaces. Most of their responsibilities are favored towards keeping the process running smoothly and rarely care for the masses. The above film examples are unique for keeping each job separate. Those that are combined strengthen its workforce image and tend to put women in charge.

Whether man or woman, they are clothed in uniforms according to the dress code of each position and maintain professional manners. The Ally soldiers of *A Matter of Life and Death* gather in a lobby to be checked-in by a record-keeper, are welcomed to Heaven, and handed a set of angel wings by the female front desk coordinator. The two couples from *Meaning of Life* arrive at a hotel lobby and go through the same procedure. Dressed in white flight attendant skirt suits, three stand at the entrance of God’s columned temple handing out “Welcome to Heaven” pamphlets, in *Bill and Ted. Chance Are*’s (1989) attendants wear white suits and black neckties, carrying illuminated glass shaped commandment tablets that supposedly hold a database of all arrivals and reincarnation information. The idea anticipates today’s technology of the Apple iPad. One of the
attendants tries to calm Louie down with a placating voice yet wants to dismiss him:

“Well, you just got here, you haven’t been processed, you’ll get back it just takes a little while, wait at the end of the line…we understand that here we really do!”

All of these examples can be traced to one of the earliest afterlife workplace sequences. In *Liliom*, as he lays dead, two pale men in black suits appear in front of his body telling his transparent soul to rise and follow. They fly up and away from earth through the sky and leave him at a celestial police station. A space that resembles an earlier event from his time alive, bureaucratic processing is replicated at this way station: a presiding angelic officer sounds off Liliom’s first and last name, status and age, a stenographer sits nearby to record the transcript, and a demon walks in with an “error on a registration form” that needs to be stamped and approved. Liliom receives his sentence and is shown the door to Purgatory by another attendant.

Guides are the fourth kind and the strongest criteria to defining an afterlife film. They are well versed in their space’s rules and regulations to facilitate the new arrivals’ acclimation, inform them of a mission to be completed, and may act as a mediator between the characters and the space’s higher authorities. Guides are customer service: working for the space but focused on the main character’s behalf. As longtime residents, they too once experienced the same situation, thus can better understand what their charge needs to accomplish and how. Most guides are men who dress in suits or casual wear. There are no traditional monikers like any of the above figures. Guides are known by their placement within the story and how they are characterized. Though The Princess’ assistant Heurtebrise may be two weeks new to the afterlife, he understands its system like a veteran. He tells Orpheus of the way into the other world, gives him The Princess’
gloves to enter the mirror, leads him across No Man’s Land to see Eurydice and The Princess, and takes them back to the Living. Orpheus and Heurtebrise leave at 6pm as the mailman approaches the house and the clock still reads 6pm as the mailman drops a letter into the box when the three of them return. His two weeks could equal decades.

Guides of the fourth afterlife film era are defined by a sly humor. Though Defending Your Life’s Bob Diamond, played by Rip Torn, is a well-known example, Heavenly Kid’s (1985) Rafferty, played by television comedian Richard Mulligan, is quintessential. He speeds into the scene on a vintage motorcycle just as new arrival Bobby attempts to ride “Uptown’s” escalator. Rafferty performs all of the guide’s above-mentioned responsibilities as well as providing transport between the two worlds, gives Bobby advice how to be a father figure to Lenny, has a roster of names and their final destinations, tries to get Bobby a different mission (or at least he says so), and informs Bobby of his acceptance into Uptown. Rafferty is a richly constructed guide.

Characters that go to Hell do not usually have guides. Those like ruthless businessman George from Beyond Christmas (1940), Eddie from Angel on My Shoulder, Bill and Ted, Annie from What Dreams May Come, and John Constantine go to Hell alone. Part of their punishment is the confusion of what happened, where they are, and figuring it out for themselves. And as in every aspect, “A Nice Place to Visit,” reverses traditional expectations. When Rocky first wakes up Pip introduces himself: “My job is to know everything about you. I am your guide…see to it you get what you want.” Rocky relies on Pip for navigating his new world and making the most of it. Because it is uncommon for a guide to betray his charge, Rocky’s revelation is all the more punishing and Pip is automatically re-envisioned as an agent of Hell. His outward appearance, as a
nice angelic figure who graciously assists Rocky, transforms to a conniving wolf in sheep’s clothing just by a change in voice and maniacal laugh in the episode’s last shot.

Community of Souls

No matter where the main dead character goes after death, whether inside a space of his or her creation or pre-existing, that character is not alone. The community of souls, or rather, the anonymous dead, are extra bodies to fill the afterlife space that the dead main character arrives in. The main dead character is only one case that is universally experienced by the surrounding crowds. They are assumed to have unfinished business and desires to be fulfilled as well. The Underworld is a space for all those who died. In Hercules, they are a swirling mass of transparent green shades. In Jigoku, they are divided into dozens of groups, undergoing different forms of torture for their sins. In the Japanese Kairo (2001) and its Hollywood remake Pulse (2006) they are gray tone holographic copies of their former selves, reaching for a second chance at life. A Matter of Life and Death is not only known for its majestic staircase but also the crater-shaped amphitheater that fits all of Heaven’s residents. The rows of benches stretch back to infinity but show only a handful that represent armies from across the world since the American Revolution. There are no ancient peoples in their midst. Released the same year, Angel on My Shoulder’s Eddie lands in Hell and meets the wandering dazed dead. A former chemist, hanged for killing his wife and her lover, tells him, “You’re dead. We’re all dead.” These words are the reason for the community of souls: visual proof of the character’s afterlife.

The diverse outfits of the anonymous dead coincide with time of death. Soldiers wear their army uniforms in A Guy Named Joe (1943). Zombies in Night of the Living
Dead (1968) wear tattered clothing. Poltergeist’s (1982) ghosts wear what they were buried in. Titanic’s (1997) final scene shows all of the tragic ship’s voyagers in their best attire. And Ghost Town (2008) shows a World War II nurse’s uniform of white skirt suit and cap in contrast to today’s nurses wearing colorful scrubs. Yet collectively worn clothing is able to coincide with the space’s features. Petunia and Little Joe walk up the staircase to Heaven wearing white hospital gowns in Cabin in the Sky (1943). All arrivals in Judgment City wear similar neutral pieces resembling turbans, called “tupas,” in Defending Your Life (1991). The Mummy Returns (2001) features an Underworld shot with an infinite number of naked bodies burned red.

Chances Are and Down to Earth (2001) are exemplary for their many racially diverse looking extras, standing in line as if part of the background while the main dead characters move amongst them. Louie is the only person creating chaos by shouting out for his wife and refuses to assemble with the others. Chris Rock’s Lance Barton arrives in a heavenly space and sees rows of people getting anxious to pass the red velvet rope and enter a night club: “We’ve been waiting for an eternity here!” Inside are dancers dressed in costumes from every time period enjoying food and drink. There are photographs of the already dead, like Elvis. Though one voice may speak out, the communities of souls are usually silent faces or one large group of white noise.

Living Communicators

Mediators are living characters that have the ability to move and converse between the dead and living. They conjure, help deliver messages of information, prove return, and put the dead to rest. If the dead remain in the earthly plane, without first going to a separate space, the mediator takes on the role of a guide. It is one of the most popular
and vital figures in afterlife films, especially in Formulas 2, 3, and 4. Most mediators are women, children, and or those severely ill. One of the earliest accounts of medium-ship is from the Old Testament. “King Saul sought out a woman (the witch of En-Dor) who could contact the spirit of the deceased prophet Samuel on his behalf,” (Raphael 50) to learn the outcome of the next day’s battle. Because necromancy was a condemned practice in that time, King’s Saul’s disturbance of Samuel was soon punished with his and his sons’ deaths. In film, conjuring is still treated with negative consequences. The archeologist characters of both *The Mummy* (1932) and its remake in 1999 resurrect the powerful Imhotep and must return his soul to The Underworld. However, two other film mediums that act on behalf of the wandering dead are presented as positive figures. Problems are alleviated, put to rest, and the dead are sent on their way to a final destination. In *Ghost* (1990), the fake medium Oda Mae abruptly transforms from dormant to active. She is capable of helping Sam solve his murder, protect Molly, and lets Sam use her body to give Molly one final embrace. Nine years later, the most popular afterlife film ever released that features a medium is *The Sixth Sense* starring Haley Joel Osment as Cole Sear and Bruce Willis as Dr. Malcom Crowe. As bookends to the 1990s American afterlife films, with critical acclaim and blockbuster profits, these medium heroes competed with *The Mummy* (1999), and even *Hocus Pocus* (1993), for final say.

But after 9/11, the vote swings in the medium’s favor. There has not been a profound negative image since 2001. In *Haunting in Connecticut* (2009), cancer patient Matt Campbell is able to sense the young conduit that tragically died eighty years before. Seemingly a connection that does more harm to Matt’s ailing health than good, the story’s conclusion shows the spirit as a victim not predator. By allowing the spirit to
possess Matt’s body, he can cleanse the house of its evil forces. But the mediators benefit as well by learning lessons from the dead on how to live life without regrets. *Heart and Souls* (1993) Thomas, played by Robert Downey Jr., resolves his abandonment and commitment issues as the “corporeal being” for four dead ghosts that complete unfinished business. As John Edward says in his book, *After Life: Answers from The Other Side* published in 2003, “no matter where we are in the world, the human experience of love and loss is universal.” (69) Mediums provide services of hope by connecting the living to deceased loved ones and vice versa. Information reveals hidden truths, clears misunderstandings, a chance for last words and feelings, foreshadows harm, and prevents future mistakes.

Enter the Void

Boorstin says that *Lady in the Lake* (1947) is one of the few films “shot entirely from the point of view of the main character.” (115) It has been done in other films but kept to a minimum of key scenes or action shots. He continues to assess that this visceral film is a failure because “it doesn’t put us in the hero’s head, it puts us in his shoes, and unless something pretty spectacular is going on that is not a very thrilling place to be.” (115) According to Dennis Lim’s *New York Times* article, *Lady in the Lake* and an acid trip inspired director Gaspar Noé to make a first person visual narrative from a disembodied spirit’s perspective. *Enter the Void* (2010) is the first and only afterlife film that achieves a strong visceral simulation of death and understanding of loss and relationships. The neon strobe light show, set with Daft Punk’s intense electronic dance music, is entwined with the character’s living and disembodied journey through Tokyo’s fringe landscape and a separate dimension for expunging memories.
The camera’s field of vision is what Oscar sees. The audience sees from Oscar’s point of view. The camera is Oscar’s body and the audience’s eyes. While Oscar is alive, the camera wobbles. While he walks minute black shutters indicate his blinking. When reaching for his phone, his arms stretch out at the bottom of the screen. While tripping on DMT, the light and dust swirls cover his field of vision. The actor playing the living Oscar is seen when he goes to look himself in the mirror. He stares at himself. The audience stares at him looking back at them. The actor’s voiceover is separate from the audience’s. While Oscar is alive, the audience is in his shoes but not his head. His thoughts are not the audience’s.

When Oscar dies the camera steadily lifts up and sees the dead body curled on the floor. The camera is Oscar’s disembodied spirit and the audience. There is no voiceover that separates his from the audience’s thoughts and reactions. Oscar’s identity, the camera, and the audience become a single being and perspective. The audience sees, thinks, and moves as one: freed of limits in space and time. The being swoops over Tokyo’s roofs, through walls, hovers, and enters others’ bodies and also is sucked into Oscar’s dead body’s bullet hole showing another dimension. A selection of Oscar’s most significant memories play out as if projected on a screen, fragmented amongst kaleidoscope visions of neon lights dancing to electric rhythms. The heart wrenching and spectacular images that unfold from the space itself take over the audience. Observations and reactions are the audience’s own and not mediated by Oscar’s voiceover. Without a body the camera is the consciousness and can explore whatever and wherever desired. A thought plays out faster than a dream: like *Vanilla Sky*’s Life Extension monitors on hyper-speed.
The first act’s conversation between Oscar and Jesse describes the afterlife experience from *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*. Though extremely obvious, it acts as a warning or preparation for the extreme visuals the audience can expect in the coming two acts. The audience still has the option to get out of the theater or stay in their seats. But once Oscar dies in the bathroom stall, the rollercoaster climbs the vertical track. As his spirit is suspended near the ceiling, the ride is paused at the top just about to drop into exhilaration. And then, the ride takes off! The camera goes every which way through space unlimited by natural laws of motion or gravity, like what is possible in animation. For the memory of his parents’ death, the camera is in the backseat (where Oscar was sitting) as an eighteen-wheeler truck crashes straight into the family car. A dizzy and fast-paced light show of the soul’s break from one life to find another is a whirled journey. At the end, the spirit enters Linda’s uterus to be reborn as her son, Oscar. The director took afterlife films to another level.

Reincarnation

Reincarnation allows the (disembodied) soul to inhabit a series of bodies, each from birth to death. With Drs. Raymond Moody’s and Ian Stevenson’s ground-breaking work in the 1970s, popular Western culture has taken stronger notice of an ancient Eastern afterlife concept. There have been numerous past-life and pre-birth scientific research studies but Hollywood filmmakers have reshaped findings and testimonies to highlight soul mates, family reunions, and unfinished business premises. Reincarnation is a ploy for a romantic comedy in Hollywood’s *Chances Are* (1989) as opposed to the foundation for entertaining a social debate on modern times in India’s *Kār̥z* (1980).
Louie is happily married to his pregnant wife Corinne and just covered a corruption scandal that could skyrocket his journalism career. While crossing the street a car hits Louie and he dies. He arrives at an intermediate space where all of the newly dead go for reincarnation assignments and is frantic to get back to his life. Omar, an attendant, explains, “You’re between bodies right now, you’re a soul, a spirit…only way to get back is to be reborn.” He chooses to be a boy in Cleveland and runs toward the light. Since protocol was rushed, Omar did not give Louie the fizzy gold liquid inoculation that erases the soul’s memory of its previous life. Reincarnation is not explained in the universe’s grand scheme or a way to resolve issues and move forward. It is a catalyst for unwinding a confused identity and for the living to let go of the dead.

Twenty-three years later, Louie is serendipitously reunited with his family and friends but as Alex, a Yale graduate; played by Robert Downey Jr. He lived without any knowledge of Louie’s life or afterlife but wants to follow a similar career path as a journalist. At a family dinner Alex has flashbacks of Louie’s memories of Corinne and Philip and knows the items in each desk draw. Louie floods Alex’s consciousness and he realizes, “I am Louie Jeffries. I was Louie Jeffries.” He is so overwhelmed that he passes out. It is one thing to accept death’s imminence but another to accept you’ve died and been reborn. He knows there is an afterlife, what it consists of, and is transformed by it. When he wakes up, Alex is gone and Louie works to resume his relationships with Corinne and Philip and get acquainted with his daughter Miranda. However, his mission is complicated by his physical appearance and secret identity. He relays private information to Corinne to prove his return and eventually she believes him: but does not attempt to tell the others. All the years she lived without Louie’s physical presence,
Corinne faithfully and unhealthily mourned her husband’s memory and spirit by keeping photos close, the house as he left it, and gives him nightly snacks. Louie’s return as Alex allows her to be with her beloved husband who looks like a new man. She would not have to let go but could move onto a new life with “them.” However, once Louie remembers the scandal he discovered and brings it to the public, justice is served, Louie’s secondary mission is complete, and falls down a flight of marble stairs. Recuperating at the hospital, Omar arrives to finally give him the inoculation: all of Alex’s memories and experiences as Louie are erased, but not his soul. Louie is still inside of Alex but will not resurface. Thus the rightful couples are united: Corinne and Philip, Alex and Miranda.

Memories from a past life are stronger than the typical flashback. Instead of memories from a single character, they belong to an entirely different body and that life. Realizing you are (at least) two people in one reinforces the psychological struggle between consciousnesses. The past of one life is confused with that of another: the foreign inside the familiar. But the memories on screen are beneficial for the audience. They see pieces of another life juxtaposed with the present. The actors’ appearances and the characters’ personalities compare identifiers of space and time. The image may be tinted or in fuzzy focus to be easily differentiated.

“The (montage of) images, drawn from the narrative that has just unfolded, effectively bind the viewer’s memory with the character’s summing up his or her life at the moment of death…uniting the film’s imagery into a single figuration of identity.” (Russell 7)

The intruding character’s memories compete for the host’s attention. The dormant other is revealed and requires action for a mission to be completed. The histories of the characters become one to create a third person: a stronger version equipped with knowledge of the past to act in the present. In Karz Monty remembers his past life as Ravi Verma and avenges his death by bringing his murderer and conspirators to justice.
India has the highest amount of reincarnation testimonies. It is deep-rooted in their religion and culture. *Karz* combines genres of action, the thriller, the musical, and romance like no other national cinema. The visuals and relationships are over-the-top expressions for the audience to have an all-around enjoyable experience. The landscapes, costumes, dialogue, and songs all push the narrative and characters forward into a variety of situations and emotions. The introductory scenes show Ravi’s last days as a newlywed. After winning his court case to keep the family property and en route home to his beloved mother and sister, his conspirator wife Kamini kills him just before passing the estate’s Kali temple. Upon Ravi’s death, a voiceover narrates:

The (Hindu gods) came to this world so many times. They took so many births. They came in so many forms. It says that if a man’s wish remains incomplete before his death or if he misses somebody his wish surely gets fulfilled in the next birth. Our friend Mr. Ravi Verma’s… took rebirth for his mother at some other place, in some other form, with the name…Monty.

The opening narration states the argument for reincarnation and the necessity to accomplish a mission. Ravi’s journey is not in an intermediate space but in a new life.

Monty does not know he was once Ravi until he hears a guitar chord from the song that played on the radio during Ravi’s murder. Shots of the “Just Married” sign, his family estate, and the Kali temple come to his consciousness and, similar to Alex, Monty faints on his concert stage. Doctors try to specify where or how Monty would know of such images and while one suggests it may be evidence of his past life, the others guffaw: “reincarnation and rebirth in these modern times?” Science and religion contends with memory and identity. It is difficult to negotiate rationale with the supernatural but *Karz* favors the latter. Science attempts to take away life’s inexplicable wonders. Monty goes on a vacation to the countryside but unintentionally to the same place from his visions: Ravi’s hometown. There he discovers his visions were real and the truth behind them. To
avenge his former life’s untimely death, Monty tricks Kamini into falling in love with him, haunts her by playing the radio song, with photos, and with recorded messages. His final step is choreographing a stage-play of Ravi’s life for an audience of his namesake’s school’s administration, students, Kamini, and family. Monty grew up an orphan. Ravi’s doting mother and sister are the family Monty needs to feel whole. When his mission is complete and in need of a better life, Monty denies his own past to let Ravi’s take complete control. He could finally have a real family and they could resume a relationship with their beloved and missed Ravi. Monty dies and Ravi lives again. It is a win-win. Ravi’s goals for justice and reunion are met. Reincarnation restores balance in all of their lives. Identity crises ensue but are resolved.

There is a major difference between What Dreams May Come’s book and film endings. The former tells how after Chris rescues Ann; she is reborn as a young Indian girl who will “contract an illness which will cause severe sleep deprivation. Ann had taken her life with sleeping pills. To balance the scales, she’d acquire a condition which would not permit her to sleep normally.” (Matheson 265) Reincarnation is to “balance the scales.” It is not the act of rebirth but its purpose and effect on the soul. Committing suicide must be purified by a natural though painful death. The original film’s ending is very similar but the final cut takes a different approach. Reincarnation is a choice Chris and Annie decide together; not for redemption or unfinished business but to find each other, fall in love again, and “make different choices.” It is a self-satisfying happier conclusion that looses all significant meaning.

One last reason for reincarnation is purification. Enter the Void’s Oscar died with deep emotional and psychological scars from his sad childhood and chaotic teenage
years. Memories of losing his parents and separating from his younger sister are reviewed for healing, resolution, and forgetting. This film shows the whole process but unlike other titles, does not rush through the intermediate state. To be reborn requires self-evaluation so the new life can build upon a strong foundation of past experiences to learn new. The first person perspective is made all the more intense during the baby’s birth. As Linda’s newborn son, Oscar could thus keep his promise of never leaving her. Their strong attachment will last another lifetime. The baby’s parents’ genetics create a new body for Oscar’s soul. Whether or not the soul’s journey is shown, reincarnation is an afterlife of one body and a dual mind working together.

Resurrection

In afterlife films, resurrection is the reanimation of the body, the body and the personality, as well as the revivification of the body and soul. The former two types of figures are usually called zombies and the un-dead, respectively. For the latter, I would like to suggest an additional term: the “returned.” It refers to a character that has died, is revived, and continues to live as did before death until a presumed second natural death. Their biologically functioning bodies are back to their pre-death-event condition with personalities and memories intact. The portrayal and reasons for resurrection in film differ greatly from religious belief. Instead of a singular ultimate event for passing judgment, a single or a select number of bodies are reanimated amid living people: whether because of science’s interference, like in Frankenstein, or mystic power and other undetermined factors in the examples below.

The resurrected body is usually in the same condition as when it died, with or without its injuries or signs of decomposition, or magically returned to its lively condition.
without flaws. Compared to the ghost or body possession figure, filming the event or process of resurrection requires few if any special effects. The body simply appears to wake up as if it had been asleep, with slight ambulation. As seen in George A. Romero’s *Night of the Living Dead* and Michael Jackson’s *Thriller* (1985) music video, the definitive zombie body looks to have been given an energy boost, wandering with cannibalistic hunger, and dragging along its injured limbs. The body is still clinically dead, is susceptible to further damage, and the personality is either gone or inactive. They are wearing the clothing they were buried in or what they died in. Romero’s zombies are single bodies that inexplicably rise from the dead and go on a rampage, begetting more dead that rise.

The same could be said for vampires, commonly called the un-dead. But the un-dead also refers to those characters from movies like *The Mummy* (1932) and (1999), *The Crow* (1994), and *Death Becomes Her* (1992). Their bodies are reanimated and their personalities and memories are intact because of Egyptian mysticism. The un-dead lead unnatural or supernatural existences. They are not alive but could pass as the living. Once archeologists disturb Imhotep’s body, an ancient curse is lifted and he absconds from the site. Boris Karloff’s mummy has somehow regenerated enough to look like an old wrinkled Arab man while the remake’s special effects shows how Arnold Vosloo’s mummy violently regenerates and returns to his pre-death appearance (as seen in flashbacks). Imhotep continues the mission that got him killed thousands of years before; to resurrect his girlfriend Anck-Su-Namun. It is as if he had been asleep only a moment and realizes the passage of time from his living guide. In the original, Anck-Su-Namun’s soul rejects her resurrection and wishes to be exorcised from the living body. She does
not wish to live again. Imhotep is killed by an Anubis statue (guardian of the dead) and turns back to a mummified skeleton. In the remake, her soul is brought back to her skeleton body and fights for her continued existence. It is not enough for Imhotep to live again but he must bring back his lover. Life is not worth continuing without her. He is morally tied to completing his mission and nothing can stop him. When Anck-Su-Namun is returned to the dead, Imhotep soon follows.

The Crow shows resurrection as a means of taking retribution for brutal and untimely deaths. Four thugs rape and murder Shelley for standing up against the neighborhood kingpin and push Eric out a window as collateral damage. A year later a coffin comes out of the ground and Eric climbs out. A black crow, the symbol of the soul carrying ba-bird, follows and protects Eric’s existence. His body is not decomposed, walks unsteadily, and feels the last moments and memories of their lives, juxtaposed with flashbacks. This physical and mental remembrance of purification prepares him for the avenging acts he will commit. He is strong, agile, and to kill each thug, he suppresses his consciousness. Meanwhile Eric protects young friend Sara’s wellbeing. He is not a diminished version of his living self but perhaps a simplified version. When the mission is complete Shelley’s apparition visits him. They return to their graves and the ground is solid again. A similar story was constructed in Drive Angry (2011): a father attempts to save his baby granddaughter from a sacrificial killing and is brought back to Hell by “the Accountant.” For Drive Angry, The Mummy and The Crow, second chances at life, desired or not, are settled by restoring natural order and putting the dead back to death.

Instead of temporary resurrection, Death Becomes Her shows death as part of the lifecycle with its absence. At different times, unbeknownst to each other, friends/enemies
Helen and Madeline drink an elixir that restores the body’s youth and makes them immortal. The box is etched with the Egyptian ankh, “the symbol of life,” (Child, 18) and as its master guardian Lisle warns, “take care of you and your body…be together a long time.” Though Madeline tumbles down a flight of marble stairs and Helen is shot with a bazooka, their bodies explicitly showing severe injuries, each woman gets up and continues on. They will “live forever,” without a heartbeat or respiration, but with full memories and personalities. They will not move on to an afterlife, let alone experience a second death. Their bodies can only appear like the living with cosmetic maintenance. Thus, to make sure that Ernest can eternally preserve them, they bring him to Lisle.

Rocky and Charlie’s frustrations with a boring immortality are bolstered by Ernest’s refusal to take the drink: “What am I gonna do? What if I get bored?...I’ll have to watch everyone around me die. This is not a dream, this is a nightmare!” Many years later at his funeral, the eulogy states that immortality is not of the self but in the hearts and memories of loved ones and descendants. Leaving the back pews are the decrepit Helen and Madeline, who stumble down the church stairs and break into a dozen pieces, their heads still living. The un-dead Helen and Madeline are like souls trapped in their own bodies. Their aging bodies betrayed their spirits, and after trying to recover the loss of youth and beauty, their selfish spirits betrayed their perfect bodies. Here, resurrection is a wish fulfilled that turns sour.

For zombies and the un-dead, the characters experience second chances, not second lives. A second life is the unified revivification of the entire person, as if they only suffered an NDE. It does not matter how much time has passed nor are they enhanced with special powers. Their final death is not because of curses or expiration
dates. The “returned” come back from death to live again, as themselves. *Buffy the
Vampire Slayer*’s season five-finale episode was written as the series’ finale. Just in case
of its cancellation, the show required a fitting ending but a strong lead-in to a sixth season
premier. In the May 2001 episode’s final moments, Buffy sacrifices herself to save the
world from an opening Hell dimension. With her blood the veil’s pocket closes and her
body falls to the ground. When the show was moved to the UPN network for September
2001, taking its cues from movie sequels like *The Mummy Returns* (2001), the series and
its cast were resurrected. Buffy’s friends use an Osiris urn and Egyptian dark magic to
conjure her spirit so she can live again. It is also one of the only scenes on an afterlife
television program to show the special effects of a soul returning to its body. The camera
moves beneath the ground into Buffy’s casket where her decomposing skeleton wears a
black dress. An orange mist floats over and into the upper body, regenerating her organs
and tissues. The eyes roll forward and form pupils. After taking her first breath, a scared
and disoriented Buffy pulls at the silk lining and breaks through the casket cover. Her
hand pops up from the dirt and she crawls out. From an empty cemetery plot she walks
wobbly and bleary eyed, sensitive to light and sound. In film or television, no other
resurrection is as dramatized.

Buffy was expected to immediately pick up where she left off. Her friends
assumed she was in Hell but did not consider that all of heroic deeds would be rewarded
in Heaven. Thus, she must acclimate to her second life and mourn the loss of her afterlife.

Wherever I was, I was happy, at peace, knew everyone I cared about was alright.
Time didn’t mean anything. Nothing had form (but) I was still me…I was warm,
I was loved, I was finished: complete. I don’t understand theology or dimensions
but I think I was in Heaven, and now I’m not. I was torn out of there by my
friends. Everything here is hard and bright and violent: this is Hell. Just getting
through the next moment, knowing what I’ve lost. They can never know.
Her friends assumed and were right that her memory, personality, and body would return to its pre-death condition, along with her natural demon-fighting abilities. However, their good intentions backfired. Protecting her friends from the truth and reinforcing their dependency, Buffy emotionally sacrifices herself by letting them believe they helped her. However, this also gave way to a more mature storyline. Until the sixth season, she was able to rely upon her mother and watcher for guidance but with both figures gone, the show and her resurrection are a metaphor for her final transition into adulthood.

The most unique resurrected character is Johnny from *My Boyfriend’s Back* (1993). He looks like a zombie, behaves like the un-dead, and lives a third life as the “returned.” Its promotional tagline reads, “A comedy that proves true love never dies.”

To keep his prom date with longtime crush Missy, the night of his funeral Johnny crawls out of his grave, and goes home, acting as if he did not die. His continued existence instigates community criticism rather than shock: “You think you can hangout with us decent living folks like you’re still alive?” He looks significantly paler and gradually looses body parts but his memories and personality do not falter. With nothing to lose he is unhindered by threats of social humiliation and no longer fears what others may think of him. His body may be rotting but his self-concept is stronger than ever, tirelessly seeking and winning over Missy’s affection. After a second death, the court’s judge declares his first death a mistake. Time rewinds and Johnny is resurrected to correct the incident. Thinking he is going to die again, he tells Missy his feelings. When she says he is not hurt, he asks her to prom. They are shown dancing as a happy living couple and Johnny’s all-knowing voiceover confirms he would “change nothing.” His multiple
existences taught him to be a better person. Facing death only reinforces his will to live unafraid.

The Ghost

The ghost is the most popular figure of return. Defined by *Webster’s Dictionary* as the “disembodied spirit of a dead person,” (273) it should also say: only when in the living realm, not in a separate afterlife space. A ghost is not a ghost in Heaven, but only when among the living. Other than this rule, there are no treatment standards for its physical appearance or its story. The ghost can take a variety of shapes or a human-like form, manipulate itself or its environment, may or may not remember its former lifetime, and can interact with the living or need a mediator. It may wear the clothes the body died in, can change outfits by will, or hide under clothing. R.C. Finucane writes in *Appearances of the Dead: A Cultural History of Ghosts*, that since ancient times, testimonies to ghost sightings cite nearly a dozen common purposes or missions to complete; most of which have been built into ghost movies. Some examples include: requesting proper burials and funerals, justice, forewarning, seeking forgiveness, trickery, promises, comfort the grieving, and love. This section focuses on the ghost as a catalyst for self-acceptance and striving for the highest romantic love.

The cartoon series, *Casper the Friendly Ghost*, has been a popular icon since its brief television airing in 1945. The hand-drawn ghost with a milky white transparent child size body, round baldhead and large eyes, has a wispy tail instead of feet, and three fingers instead of five. He can fly and pass through walls. He is visible to all of the living. Though he acts with the best intentions of helping those in need, and craving acceptance, many of the adults reject his physically different presence by shrieking, “Ah a ghost!”
and running away. The children are not as easily scared and take to him quickly. Casper is a kind gentle spirit seeking friendship. The cartoon taught such moral lessons and he has lived on in the hearts and memories of its audience since. Fifty years later the beloved character made its feature debut in *Casper* (1995). Coming off the heels of *Who Framed Roger Rabbit* (1988) and *Cool World* (1992), *Casper* was reworked as a live-action/animation hybrid: bringing “toon logic to the physical world.” (DVD extras) The title character was digitally included during post-production.

1994 through 1996 was a pivotal moment in children’s film formats. Pure hand-drawn animation was competing for attention with hybrids and with pure CGI. *The Lion King*’s (1994) critical and financial success proved the 20th century art was far from obsolete but *Casper* and Peter Jackson’s *The Frighteners* (1996), along with *Toy Story* (1995) were showing new possibilities for the coming 21st century. *Casper* stands out because it simultaneously conjures the past with its long history and proposes a future of special effect advances in storytelling: quoting Brian Lowry’s *Variety* review, “nostalgic recognition for the adults…(and a) fun-house ride.” Though the original Casper was repeatedly labeled an outcast from the living, he was drawn in the same one-dimensional form as his bullies. Instead, a digital image with unlimited potential to manipulate (in comparison with actors) and with utmost appearance differences from the living, the new-and-improved Casper had more visual impact and personal hurdles to overcome. And like *Ghost Busters* (1984), by blending comedy, drama, and horror, it cannot be pegged as one type of story.

Rather than combine the episodic situations, the film was an amalgamation of the series’ themes of friendship, acceptance, and compassion, but also put the afterlife at the
center of the characters’ main concerns. No longer a wandering ghost, Casper was a young boy who died in the early 1900s from playing too long in the snow, didn’t go into the light, and later became an adopted nephew to three ghost “uncles.” Instead of random interactions with the living, he built relationships with the grieving widower Dr. Harvey and his daughter Kat, who moved into the haunted estate and found stability among the charismatic ghosts. Kat’s secondary story of finding her own place in a new town and school parallels Casper’s. The action culminates with Dr. Harvey’s wife, in her solid body pre-death form, permitting him to stop looking for her ghost and let go. She died without unfinished business and went to her, or the, final destination. Amelia is the ghost of the next world while Casper and his uncles are in an In-Between state’s physicality.

*Casper* also stands out as a rare example of a ghost visible to all of the living. In a vast majority of titles, a single medium is only capable of sensing ghosts. *The Sixth Sense* (1999) and *Stir of Echoes* (1999) both feature young boys, small for their age and vulnerable to bullies, with the natural ability to see the dead among the living. The former title is more popular (box-office sales and an Oscar nomination) but the latter is just as important to the afterlife body of films. As children are considered innocent and removed from conversations about death and the afterlife, these films put children at the center of its crosshairs. When Cole Sear admits to Malcom Crowe his special gift, “I see dead people,” he is lying in a hospital bed, tucked under the blanket, and scared. Yet it also seems the first time he ever said it out loud; a cathartic moment to release a secret kept his entire life. As the audience is well aware, Cole sees the dead in their full-bodied form with the scars and injuries from the death-event. A young boy with half his skull blown off from a gun accident and a family hanging by their necks in the school hallway are
difficult to witness. They are able to touch and hurt him but also want him to help them. With Malcom’s encouragement, Cole finally accepts a request. A young girl, Cara, appears to him with a videotape (somehow able to take it with her) to show at the wake of how her mother poisoned her. The tape justifies her death and protects the younger sister from similar abuse. Cole’s mature handling of this delicate endeavor shows how he has overcome his fear, accepts his “sixth sense,” and will act in the future. His self-esteem increases with each challenge, especially when he tells his mother the truth. Cole may or may not have known that Malcom was dead but upon his own realization, he too understands he has completed a mission of unfinished business, and can move on: “I think I can go now. Just needed to do a couple of things. I needed to help someone. I think I did.”

In *Stir of Echoes*, Jake is comfortable with his gift but later rejects it. The film opens with Jake taking a bath, looking into the camera/audience, and asking questions. With his dad Tom sitting in the bedroom and the rest of the bathroom behind Jake, the camera swings around to show he was addressing the wall. In the next shot, Jake asks the camera, “Does it hurt to be dead?” All along he has been talking to a ghost his family and the audience cannot see. The camera was really the ghost’s character and throughout the story, and after a very visual hypnosis session, the ghost’s perspective is with Tom. He experiences her injuries in a nightmare, sees her again on the couch after turning on the television, intuits a connection between her and a babysitter, and asks around the neighborhood who she might be: her name is Samantha. After almost a year since her death and communicating with Jake and Tom, she looses her patience and shows what her abilities are. Samantha takes drastic action by appearing in the television screen while
Jake switches channels between *Night of the Living Dead* and *The Mummy*, turns his mother’s bath ice cold with a just a touch, and pulls Tom into her blue tinted world: their house in the midst of renovations before their residence. Once Tom has found her body buried in the basement wall, the flashback shows how she died, and the camera/Tom/the audience is Samantha’s perspective at the moment of death: her injuries, losing consciousness, and as the living world becomes a pinhole in a black screen it moves backwards into her mind. With a proper burial, Samantha is relieved and disappears. *Stir of Echoes* brings a culturally ancient purpose for a ghost’s existence to a turn of the millennium medium. And yet, its very last shot shows Jake’s retrograde fear: as the ghostly disembodied voices whisper to him from afar, he covers his ears and disengages. His limits are tested and he shies away from what he once accepted in himself.

Ruffles’ two sections “Ghost Lovers” and “Ghost Lovers Who Return to Break the Bond” (89-94) discuss the ghost figures’ continued existence for the sole purpose of romantic love but he does not give it a name, see a formula, or attribute it to other figures of return. Without reading these sections first, thus from only screenings, I found that certain afterlife movies feature a unique figure: the “Corpse Bride.” Death and Love go hand in hand but Death breaks the bonds that Marriage constructs. The corpse bride features an engaged or newlywed couple separated by one of the partner’s death. An untimely death ceases the progression of an anticipated and intended stage in a woman’s life at the moment she had the most to look forward to. Ruffles unknowingly cites two of the best examples. *Smilin’ Through* (1922 and 1932) is about a woman murdered just before her marriage ceremony that is finally fulfilled when the groom passes away an old man, with a specter carriage for transport to Heaven. And the “sex reversed” version,
Maytime (1937) is about a groom “murdered, leaving his beloved to mourn for the rest of her life.” (90) Or as tough as may be, the ghost returns to assure the grieving it is okay to move on, like in Miracle in the Rain (1956). The corpse bride can show that love can last and overcome death, but also that life can bring new love and joys. These older films are still very similar in theme to its contemporary comparatives such as Over Her Dead Body (2008) and Ghost (1990). But instead of double exposure, CGI does the trick.

In the former film, Kate dies on her wedding day, to Henry, when she is crushed by an angel ice sculpture. She returns to earth unaware of her mission but invisibly stays by Henry’s side. He has been grieving for so long but begins to move on when he meets Ashley, a medium who can see Kate. As a ghost, she is able to change her clothes and voice, levitate, and disappear all to scare Ashley away. One visual that differentiates Kate as a ghost, is that when the living pass through her, her body momentarily poufs into a cloud-like shape and then returns to normal. Though the film was marketed as a comedic supernatural catfight, the story concludes with Kate accepting Ashley as Henry’s second chance at love and marriage. When Kate lets go, she leaves the living and returns to the afterlife space. Ghost’s main character, Sam Wheat, dies at a marital junction as well. He and Molly just moved into their first apartment together and when Molly proposes to Sam he dies before he can give an answer. After his body dies, his spirit continues to watch over Molly but then must justifiably save her from Carl, with Oda Mae’s help. To accomplish his mission, he finds he is able to pass through walls like a transparent “napkin dipped in coffee,” (DVD extras) and he can manipulate objects with energy. Although Molly’s living future is uncertain, she can rest assured that Sam is in Heaven
and will wait for her arrival. *Ghost* is considered the most romantic “idyllic ghost story since *The Ghost and Mrs. Muir* (1947).” (Parish 106)

*The Ghost and Mrs. Muir* is a unique take on the corpse bride because the couple’s relationship begins after Captain Greg is already dead. Set in the early 1900s, widowed Lucy resolves to move away from her controlling in-laws to live in a haunted cottage by the sea. At first she thinks it, “ridiculous…to believe apparitions and all medieval nonsense,” but his tricks annoy rather than scare her, and chides his cowardice. They agree to terms of cohabitation, like a marriage contract between strangers: including he is not to show himself to her daughter or leave the bedroom, but is later found to have broken both rules. They are equally intelligent and strong willed as evidenced by their daily banter. When Lucy says, “Life is too short to be barking,” the Captain retorts, “Your life maybe short, I have unlimited time at my disposal.” He is able to will his bodily materialization or disembodied voice, though is not shown passing through walls or levitating. As they work on writing his memoir, their relationship grows to a love of mutual respect. Though they have a falling-out, she keeps dear memories of him, as “if was a dream.” When she dies of old age, her younger self’s spirit stands up and is embraced by the Captain. Though they were separated by time and space in the living realm, love kept them spiritually close to reunite for an afterlife marriage.

A 21st century corpse bride, based more on the ancient tale of Orpheus and Eurydice, is *White Noise* (2005). Just after learning that she was pregnant, newlywed Anna mysteriously goes missing and is later found dead. Her husband, Jon is severely distressed from his loss and finds it difficult to cope. A mediator/guide brings Jon a message from Anna and introduces him to EVP (Electronic Voice Phenomena) research.
Like Orpheus, Jon descends into obsession with hearing and seeing Anna’s messages on his static video recordings but also becomes a mediator by helping others. However, like the three-headed dog Cerberus guards The Underworld, three human shaped shadows guard the technological dimension and harm all those who interfere. In the end, Jon dies but joins Anna, and he too is able to voice a message to his surviving son and ex-wife.


*Beetlejuice’s* Barbara and Adam are shown as a team before their deaths and after. They work together to understand their new existence, travel to different afterlife spaces together, and attempt to reclaim their home from living intruders. Their marriage continues and strengthens. The film’s original structure and design are Tim Burton’s twist on the afterlife space(s) of waiting rooms and an Underworld of lost souls, a published instruction manual for new ghosts with its own jargon and regulations, and the body’s shape-shifting powers. *High Spirits* is more of a supernatural swingers concept. The living Jack and Shannon berate each other while the dead Martin and Mary literally kill each other. Jack inadvertently intervenes in the nightly replay of Mary and Martin’s wedding night murder, and shortly thereafter Jack and Mary fall in love: as does Sharon.
with Martin. Their ghostly forms can pass through walls (and living bodies for a sexual experience), are transparent and full bodied, wear the clothing they died in, are extremely pale with dark eye-circles, and retain the memories of their living and afterlives. Jack returns Mary to life with a kiss and promise of commitment, while Sharon dies and becomes a ghost to join Martin. Despite hundreds of years between them, the proper happy couples are eternally united.

Body Possession

The unification of reincarnation, resurrection, and the ghost is that of body possession. A dead person’s spirit completes a mission by moving into and taking over someone else’s living body. The soul is able to resume life without rebirth or crawling out from the grave. A ghost uses a mediator to assist and pass on verbatim messages while a spirit uses a possessed body to do the mission his or her self. The host’s body is still vulnerable to any injuries and could cause a “second death.” The host’s body is also subject to cases of mistaken/misused identity. Though the guest should act like the host and proceed undetected, but doesn’t, the host appears out of character. Usually, at some point, the guest reveals his or her true identity to someone trustworthy for help in said mission. Due to the spirit’s natural power to possess a body, the spirit does not require the host’s permission but may do so as a courtesy. Or vice versa, the host gives permission to help the spirit’s mission. The filmmakers use body possession as a simple scheme of “bait and switch.” The host body remains functional while its soul is under control and inactive, like Supernatural (1933) and Angel on My Shoulder (1946), or completely absent, like Here Comes Mr. Jordan (1941). These earlier titles show the possession lasting for a majority of the story, book-ended or interspersed with the spirit’s
appearance. For the more contemporary titles, it doesn’t last longer than a few minutes and is just enough time to complete a mission: the special effects show the guest move into the host and get out.

A body possession film heavily relies upon its lead actor to portray both the host and the guest. Special effects can show the guest moving into the host but the audience must be convinced that they merged into one person. The host is usually a central character and thus has to be set up as a particular personality so when possessed, the guest’s personality and gestures take over, differing from the host’s. The actor must work closely and pay strict attention to the actors playing the guest so the “transference” appears without fault. A higher degree of acting must be achieved to maintain suspended disbelief. However, as a result of the host actor acting as the guest, the voices, diction, and gestures, are an extreme representation of the guest character and its actor. The audience must see the difference in the host to know that the host body and guest personality are fused. *Heart and Souls* (1993) is a unique example because of the multiple characters that take over one shared “corporeal being.” It is also the best feature film that shows how the afterlife figures and a mediator develop strong relationships and learn from each other. One other positive reason for body possession stories is how a character sees from a different perspective to better understand the self: best exemplified by the television series *Drop Dead Diva* (2009-present) about skinny blonde Deb, a wannabe-model/actress, that returns from the In-Between, in the overweight body of Jane Bingum, a high-power lawyer. Lead actress Brooke Elliot plays Jane before getting shot and then as Deb’s personality inside Jane’s body. The difference between these two
women’s personalities is most effectively shown by Jane’s new way to smile, walk, habits, and spoken vocabulary.

*Drop Dead Diva’s* is somewhat of a 21st century descendant of *Supernatural*: a guest personality changing onlookers’ opinions of the host’s appearance and behavior. During a scientist’s experiment, the criminal Ruth Rogen’s spirit is set free from her dead body, and possesses the respectable heiress Roma Courtney. With rudimentary double-exposure, the audience sees Ruth take over Roma and thus they would know that all the mischief Roma causes is really Ruth’s fault. However, the actress playing Roma had to play as Ruth, as the other characters see Roma. The film shows a good woman behaving badly (attempted murder and overt sexuality) but the problematic issues are resolved when the spirit is exorcised from Roma’s body: a morality loophole for the strict censors of its time. In horror films, body possession is also used as a metaphor for the fight between good and evil, instinct and consideration, loosing control, or change. Such titles as *The Innocents* (1961), *The Amityville Horror* (1979 and 2005), *Child’s Play* (1988), *What Lies Beneath* (2000), and *Aatma* (*The Ghost* 2005 Hindi) are known for their disturbing portrayals of possessed children for sexual encounters, brutal homicides, and revenge. Regardless of the Production Code, body possession is a method for exploring the darker side of humanity by putting someone bad inside someone good and watching what happens. The mood creates a catharsis of all the pent up secrets and desires. Though the conclusion releases the spirit from the host, the host is psychologically transformed (on some level) by the experience.

*Haunting in Connecticut* (2009) features Matt who is sick with cancer, living in a house that was once a mortuary, and is possessed nightly by the spirit of Jonah; a male
1920s medium. While it initially seems that Jonah is a dangerous presence to Matt and his family, Jonah’s attempts of communication finally show the truth: he suffered a horrible death by the home’s director. Matt willfully allows Jonah to possess his body and destroy the evil curse. However, their deal and the transference are not shown to the audience. Instead, Matt approaches the house and tells his family not to interrupt or save him. It initially seems that Jonah may have told Matt what to do and he acts accordingly but Matt then says, “I’m already dead,” revealing the possession. It only takes this one line to change the audience’s perception of whom they are watching. Matt’s living body becomes a guise that Jonah is wearing to complete his mission and Matt’s self becomes inactive while Jonah has control. The result is an eerie contemplation similar to a metaphorical or invisible double exposure of transference. The audience sees the physical Matt but the mind’s eye “sees” Jonah.

Though it represented reincarnation, *Chances Are* required Robert Downey Jr. to play both Alex and Alex possessed by Louie. The actor’s experience prepared him for his role as Thomas in *Heart and Souls*. Instead of possessed by one spirit, four take their turn. The film begins by showing each of the four soon-to-be-dead characters in the last hour of their lives in 1960s San Francisco. Milo, Harrison, Penny, and Julia are passengers that die in a bus crash. Throughout Thomas’ childhood they are tethered to him and the five of them have created strong bonds of friendship. But when the relationship intrudes on the living, they say good-bye to Thomas and disappear. In a quick transition thirty years to the present, Thomas is an adult “Yuppie scum,” (Klady) with a corporate job in bankruptcy and commitment-phobic with girlfriend Anne. When the four spirits are told of their mission, they have to revive their relationship with
Thomas by reappearing and convince him to help. Reluctant at first, Julia and Milo test out using Thomas’ body, by unexpectedly “jumping in” for a few moments, during a board meeting. CGI merges Julia into Thomas but Downey Jr. must act like Julia would in his body. As Julia puts her fingers into his upper back Thomas winces at the strange feeling. When she steps inside him, s/he shakes his body to appreciate the “real” feeling. Thomas’ voice gets higher and walks effeminately, flirting with the males. It is hilarious comedy reminiscent of *Some Like It Hot* (1959). When she leaves him, his body is frozen until Thomas regains composure. As he sits in his chair, he has unknowingly sat in Milo’s lap, allowing him to take over, and makes the body jump right back up, talking in his slick manner, and flirting with a businesswoman. Throughout the film, Downey Jr. takes on and plays with these four distinct personalities, plus Thomas the adult and Thomas the child. He still needs to show the emotional vulnerability from when he was the sweet boy in the story’s set up to win over the audience’s sympathy. After watching his “special friends” resolve their own lives and find closure, he finds the strength to let his guard down for Anne, and promise indefinite devotion.

Invisibility and what perspective the audience is privy to can change from film to film. It depends on special effects but also on the character and genre. *Heart and Souls* is very much a descendant of the early body possession films, especially *Here Comes Mr. Jordan*. In the sixty years since its release, it has been remade three times all bringing something different to the original idea in terms of vocation, gender, and race. Joe Pendleton is a boxer up for the championship when his plane crashes and since he soul was taken before the body died he is allowed to exist within another body that is supposed to die on schedule. In order to help out a young woman exonerate her father, he
steps into the body of a rich middle-aged white man. When that body is no longer available, he takes over a rival boxer’s body (of K.O. Murdock), wins the championship, forgets his life as Joe Pendleton, and re-meets the love interest. In its Technicolor remake, *Heaven Can Wait*’s (1978) Joe Pendleton is a football player following the same predicament. Both films share the same perspective: the audiences only see the actors Robert Montgomery and Warren Beatty (respectively) playing Joe Pendleton, the possessed Bruce Farnsworth, and the second possessed man-- while the supporting cast sees each possessed body as it’s supposed to look and calls them by name.

The made-for-television movie *Ice Angel* (2000) and the feature *Down to Earth* (2001) follow the same structure but put a special spin on the main character. In *Ice Angel* Matthew Clark is an ice hockey player who dies just before his team can compete at the championship game and returns to the living as Sarah Bryan; a female figure skater. He must adjust to a second life as a woman. The audience never sees Matthew’s male body again and it is the actress Nicholle Tom who must act as a man in a woman’s body. Upon winning the gold prize at the Olympics, Matthew forgets his life as Matthew to continue on only as Sarah with her memories and personality. For *Down to Earth* Chris Rock plays Lance Barton, an unsuccessful black comedian that takes over the body of rich old white man Charles Wellington. Though the audience sees Lance as Wellington, and the supporting cast sees Wellington acting “different,” there are a number of shots that cut to show the latter. For example, while Lance is driving, the passengers of another car see (him as) an old white man enjoying and singing to a hardcore rap song and then it switches back to see Lance in his place.
Chapter Three: Processes of Judgment


Judgment is the most important factor to the afterlife film. The process and the verdict, whether shown or alluded to, make the story complete. The process is accomplished in three ways: automatic arrival, the trial, and the life review. They occur at any point in the story or are the story. But the verdict is always at the end: what is referred to as “Final Destination decided.” When the character’s mission is complete, the character makes its last transition: whether to a different space, a form of existence, or a change of perspective. A film’s conclusion must resolve the issues the character is challenged with and handled successfully. Judgment is the authoritarian voice that declares the character’s value of deserving rewards, punishments, or an alternative.

A common (Christian) Western cultural visual of judgment is God examining each life and assigning them to Heaven or Hell. An all-knowing authority conducts judgment, there are no second chances, and there is only one of two places to spend an eternity. However, judgment does not always require a Supreme Being’s involvement or an eternity in just two spaces. An appointed judge or a tribunal that has knowledge of the character’s life history decides the verdict, or the dead characters enter their own eternal space. The characters can return to life as existing before death to compensate for a mistake, or by reincarnation. Judgment in religious belief provides guidelines for followers to abide by. Though morality can play a role, judgment in film is a variation of guidelines to end the story.
The main importance of the afterlife film is for the main character to realize his or her significance within the universe. Judgment to a space of rewards or punishments declares that character has satisfied or failed the grand scheme. An eternal residence prevents the character a second chance. A space of neutrality does not deny significance but rather that character’s life has filled its purpose among the living and is no longer needed: death is a sincere form of gratitude for existing. Each film has a different plan and a different code. The ultimate authority behind the story is the filmmaker. The intrinsic qualities represent the external existences of how real people and situations could be judged in a supposed afterlife. The filmmaker is the higher authority designing the characters, conducting the story’s progression, and determining a last verdict. The audience is given a cast of characters played by actors and a story to observe and criticize. The audience may or may not resonate with the film. But the story’s ending must provide a sense of closure: the character deserves its last transition and or leaves room to imagine what could be next.

The “Final destination decided” is not a final judgment or a final ending but a suspension in the entire story. Though The Mummy (1999) closes with Imhotep returning to The Underworld, All Dogs Go to Heaven’s Charlie returns to Heaven, the videotape in Ringu (1998) is destroyed, and South Park’s Kenny goes to Heaven, there is potential for the story to continue: Imhotep is resurrected by the reincarnated Anck-Su-Namun in The Mummy Returns (2001), Charlie must retrieve Gabriel’s horn and returns to the living, Ring-O (2000) is a prequel, and Kenny continues to live with his friends in the South Park cartoon series. The story also continues on through remakes. A story’s characters
and situations are resurrected but largely rewritten and the production uses new technologies. Like with any other type of film there is no “The End” but an ending.

After the characters die and or when the missions are complete, they transition to a different form of existence. Judgment is explicit via a trial or tribulation to show the process and the character’s worth. Or a judgment is made at some point before the character’s death and the character immediately goes to an afterlife space. On its own or mixed into the proceedings of the other two methods is a show-and-tell of the character’s life via playback. As early as 1934 filmed episodes, like candid camera, were used in afterlife films as evidence in judgment. Liliom arrives at an afterlife office for judgment conducted by an angelic officer. He dims the lights, turns on a projector, and plays the scene of a violent argument between Liliom and his wife. From the visuals alone, it appears as it did earlier in the story. But when the audio recording of his actual thoughts is played in coordination, the visuals take on a completely different meaning. Liliom’s true intentions are revealed. The officer judges Liliom on the truth: the audience was deceived and then set right. While automatic arrival may signify omniscience, omnipresence, and omnipotence not in need of explaining itself, the trial reveals such attributes to reinforce its purpose: proof, morality, fear, and acceptance. The life review reinforces learning how actions have consequences for all in the grand scheme. Except for the zombie figure, all dead characters move through each transition with a high level of cognizance: understanding they still exist, understanding they are somewhere, and a recollection of memories. As S.G.F. Brandon writes in Judgment of the Dead, “judgment would have no meaning unless the person being judged was intelligently aware of what was at issue.” (2) To be sent to Heaven or Hell, stand before a Supreme Being, or watch
memory reruns requires preservation of the self-concept. The character must appreciate the verdict handed to them or be able to make their own.

The afterlife film continues to be written, produced, and exhibited for two reasons: (1) because they are the most visual medium to explore the possibilities beyond death and (2) characters’ lives are not just observed and judged by audiences but are observed and judged by a higher/pure power. The afterlife film is just one more medium telling stories and teaching lessons about life. Judgment in an afterlife film proves that it, “is only natural for us to be curious to know what our life will consist of as a whole, what it will amount to.” (Kolenda 21) If audiences identify with the characters and experience their journey, judgment is a verdict for the character and a suggestion for the audience. In all religions there is some form of judgment. Afterlife films express all forms of judgment. “As Socrates reminded us, ‘the unexamined life is not worth living.’” (Kolenda 25) The following sections discuss the films with the most specific and unique methods used to show the three processes of judgment.

Automatic Arrival

Automatic arrival is the immediate transport to and appearance at (the gates of) an afterlife space. Whether a behind-the-scenes/between-the-frames judgment, or by predetermination, after death the main dead character goes to an afterlife space of reward or punishment for a life well or poorly lived. Michael stands naked in Made in Heaven’s lobby, Charlie is taken up to Heaven, Rocky Valentine wakes up in Hell, and Eddie Kagle drops into Hell. These characters do not witness any deliberations on their behalf as to which space they deserve an eternity’s residence. Nor are there attendants directing
them where to go. The characters have no control over where they go. It happens to them involuntarily. They are brought to the space like drifting with the tide.

For most films that use automatic arrival, scenes of the moment of death and trip to the other side are exchanged for a blank black or white screen. When Michael cannot save himself from the sinking car, the camera is shooting the scene from land. The car goes under the water; the scene turns from white to black, and reopens with him standing in the checkerboard lobby, initially unaware of his death and uncertain of his surroundings. He was alive on earth and then dead in Heaven. The blank screen transition hides Michael’s journey between existences. When Rocky is shot dead by the police, his body falls to the ground, and the scene turns black. After a moment the scene reopens with Rocky still on the ground as before, but Pip wakes him and they are in Hell. Other *Twilight Zone* on-DVD episodes have a similar pattern: the introduction followed by a black screen and then reopening to the story. This was actually the transition from the story to the sponsors’ commercials for its television airing. Though reevaluated with its original intention, this editing technique strongly differentiates between the living and afterlife worlds. During production, the actor who played Rocky simply had to stay on the ground for an extended time and rise at Pip’s request. The alley set that Rocky died in did not change around the actor. The alley set is the same alley set of Rocky’s Hell: thus one set for both spaces and one set with two inferences. But for Rocky to move between the living world and Hell, did the space change around him, or was his spirit-body brought to the space? The black screen hides Rocky’s journey between existences and stands in for the time of his unconscious state. If the story continued without the
commercial interruption, would the black screen still have been used or could there have been another method?

In both Made in Heaven and “A Nice Place to Visit,” each character is introduced alive. Michael is portrayed as a good son and dies committing an act of bravery and self-sacrifice. While Rocky is stealing jewelry from a safe, Rod Serling’s voiceover narrates that Rocky leads a life of crime and self-entitlement to others’ riches. The foundation for many afterlife film characters’ introductory personalities is the dichotomy of good and evil as respective to Heaven and Hell. Their last good or bad deeds may not be the ultimate reason for their arrival in Heaven or Hell but shows the audience a fragment of who these characters are and why they would deserve to go to Heaven or Hell. The blank transition screens from scenes alive to those in Heaven or in Hell relieve the filmmakers from including a trial judgment scene that requires a distinct set and more actors. A strong introduction of good or bad behaving characters, followed by a blank screen, saves money and cuts-to-the chase. Since the good character would obviously go to Heaven and the bad character would obviously go to Hell, the audience would not need to see the judgment scene and hear the verdict: the story goes directly to the characters’ arrival.

A compromise shows how the dead character is transported to Heaven or Hell immediately after death. When and how the verdict was decided is still unknown but the audience is brought closer to the action. The result of the verdict and the final destination is made more visually accessible when special effects are put into the scene instead of an omission. Sam Wheat in Ghost is twice offered a ray of light to Heaven and Eddie Kagle falls down through a black void to land in Hell.
Automatic arrival is also the immediate transport to and appearance at the singular existing afterlife space: The Underworld, the Hereafter, or Central Booking. A one-way street sign directs all the dead to the only afterlife space or a conveyor belt carries the dead along to the next phase of existence. There is no judgment whatsoever prior to arrival. There are no rewards or punishments. It does not matter if the character was introduced as good or bad because everyone experiences an innate afterlife space of neutrality. The filmmaker can use either a blank transition screen or show the method of transport but both are empty of Heaven and Hell or good and bad connotations. It can, however, refer to a space below, above, or next to the living world.

In Hercules, the Fates cut a life-string and a distant woman’s scream echoes. One shouts “incoming,” and the woman’s emaciated transparent green spirit-body flies in from an office ceiling hole to join the swirling mass of dead souls: a sign above reads, “Over 5,000,000,001 Served.” All mortals who ever lived unite deep beneath the earth’s surface. The anonymous woman and Meg (who betrayed her deal with Hades/The Devil) both go to this place for a diminished existence. Hercules’ spirit is readily admitted to Mt. Olympus because of his demigod heritage. In the more contemporary Hereafter space, there is self-assessment. The Five People You Meet in Heaven’s Eddie immediately arrives in his first guide’s Heaven and successfully moves on through the next four, until he finally reaches his own Heaven: a space that was designed and ready before his arrival, whether before his death or just after his fifth guide. Albom imagines that everyone goes to Heaven to learn the purpose of his or her life. In Chances Are, Louie and everyone else must wait in line to be processed, get an inoculation, choose a
reincarnation assignment, and be reborn. It is a cycle from one phase and space to the next without judgment from a higher power or self-assessment.

The Trial

If films do want to show the judgment process, the most religiously traditional and visually familiar is a trial. Not only are audiences aware of the Biblical Final Judgment but also of the earthly legal system. Whether it is God on the resurrection plain or otherworldly lawyers, a judge, and a jury determining who goes to Heaven or Hell, the trial and verdict is an ultimate means for determining an eternal afterlife existence: purification, rewards, and or punishment. After death the character arrives in an afterlife courtroom setting for his her or her life to be argued between space representatives, and a verdict bestowed upon. There must be a choice between at least two afterlife spaces. Meeting certain criteria determines the next destination. There is also no need to show the main dead character as an extremely good, bad, or complex personality because the trial (retroactively) decides. The audience can have their opinions and guess the character’s final destination but the story does not rely upon audience expectations. Instead the story shows and defines for the audience, through the trial’s proceedings and verdict, what is worthy of Heaven and Hell.

In Spain’s *Don’t Tempt Me* (2001), the courtroom and Manny’s trial are not shown but the courthouse, spatial representatives, and the anonymous dead fill the screen; entitled “Law Courts Heaven/Hell.” The “/” symbol refers to the courts as a space between Heaven and Hell, a space for Heaven and Hell’s agents to gather, and for the anonymous dead to wait in line for their trial. Along the wall of a staircase, the dead wear the clothes they died in and appear in the condition of their bodies’ death. The lobby is
filled with men and women in red robes and white wigs or business suits: presumably differentiating them as judges and lawyers. Marina and Jack abscond to the empty bathroom to discuss Manny’s trial and guess the soon-to-be made verdict. The judge was a woman. Manny has a history of a short-temper, abuse, and an accidental road-rage killing. But because Manny died to save his wife and cousin, Marina’s side asked the judge to apply the “Thermopylae Clause,” of total sacrifice. A person’s life is argued in full and according to afterlife case law. An appointed judge, not God or other Supreme Being, makes the verdict. A text message received by Jack and Carmen’s cell phones affirms Manny got into Heaven.

To quote myself from above, the courthouse “looks like a city municipality that needs a renovation.” Numerous paintings depict the space of judgment as opulent or majestic. Aside from the red robes and white wigs, Don’t Tempt Me’s is minimal. Two films that do show what audiences would expect from a celestial trial are not founded on whether the character should go to Heaven or Hell but if they should be dead or stay alive: A Matter of Life and Death (Stairway to Heaven 1947) and My Boyfriend’s Back (1993). While Peter Carter did not die as supposed to and Johnny was not supposed to die but did, the loves they find (June and Missy) in their second lives gives them the will to keep living. The trials determine what happens next.

As Peter’s (an Englishman) plane goes down he says goodbye to the world, is heard by and speaks to June (an American), and he wishes her well. The plane crashes but Peter safely escapes and wakes up on the beach, initially believing he arrived in Heaven. When he sees June, he knows for sure he is alive. As Roger Ebert writes, “Heaven has made an error, and an emissary, Heavenly Conductor 71, is sent to fetch him
back. Peter refuses to go and a Heavenly tribunal is convened to settle the case.” An anti-British American Revolution veteran leads the prosecution. Though Peter has all of Heaven to choose as his defense attorney, he picks a recently deceased doctor friend. The first jury is argued as made-up of supposed British dissidents and is exchanged for others. The female presiding judge is Heaven’s manager, but does not take an active role.

Because there has not been a “mistake in 1000 years” a trial is a rare occasion. All of Heaven’s residents are invited to observe in an arena of inestimable size, in the shape of a crater. It is a white space with gray in the infinite distance. Armies of the past and present, Pilgrims, nurses, Muslims, and others (but no ancient peoples), gather in the bleachers, all dressed in their distinguishing uniforms. The film’s stance as a post-war film is evidenced here by no German, Italian, or Japanese soldiers in the amphitheater’s audience and in the opening scene of only Allied soldiers (English, French, and American) arriving at Heaven’s lobby.

The trial does not argue if Peter is worthy of a second chance to live because he led a good life or if the grand scheme of events can alter to fit Peter and June’s relationship. The prosecution’s argument is that if Peter is returned to life, he and June will not sustain a happy marriage because of their opposing nationalities. Dr. Reeves counters that they were “born thousands of miles apart but (were) made for each other.” This trial is more like Parliament’s proceedings than a divine court. Dr. Reeves’ statement, “This is a court of justice, not law,” fails his own argument and the story’s. The trial was “convened to settle the case,” because of an attendant’s mistake but carries on in political banter and testaments to love. Other films with similar set-ups solve the problem without requiring all of Heaven’s involvement. _Here Comes Mr. Jordan_’s Joe
Pendleton is returned to earth in another body. *Heaven Sent*’s Eddie is returned to learn the error of his ways. And *My Boyfriend’s Back*’s Johnny returns for a third life.

When Johnny’s stint as the un-dead zombie wanes from lack of energy, he dies while dancing with Missy at the prom. The scene transitions to a Heaven-looking courtroom of a checkerboard tiled floor, white pews filled by the waiting anonymous dead, Classical alabaster columns, and blue-sky background. It seems the room stretches to infinity and is floating in space, like Michael’s lobby did in *Made in Heaven*. A judge dressed in an 18th century robe, sitting behind the podium, calls Johnny forward.

…supposed to be here four days ago…When you die you are supposed to come directly here, where we pass judgment, and send you to Heaven or Hell…Here is the situation, there’s been a little mistake (he opens a large white book)…You weren’t actually supposed to die in the convenient store (he reads out how the situation was supposed to play out)…supposed to (slip on coffee) but didn’t. It doesn’t happen very often but somewhere someone screwed up and the result is a sad tragic mistake…Whenever we make a mistake we try to rectify it by giving the person a second chance on life, a chance to prove their worth, but that accounts for the existence of the occasional zombie. What they do when back from the dead determines what we do with them in the afterlife…I’m sorry, you must be on your way…to where you belong!

The appointed judge makes clear that the courtroom is neither Heaven nor Hell but where a verdict is made for procession to Heaven or Hell. Johnny is not responsible for his death, his un-dead existence, or his cannibalism. Because of a glitch in the other world’s system, he is justly compensated to return to a normal existence. He slams down his gavel three times as Johnny walks towards the back and into a mist that transports him to the convenient store before the robber shoots. Upon his next natural death, he will return to the In-Between courtroom.

Johnny was not on trial and there was no argument between prosecution and defense. Johnny did not have to state why he should go to Heaven or return to the living. His ultimate return to life instead of an afterlife space is not a unique ending and even
harks back to *Cabin in the Sky* (1943). Little Joe Jackson, a compulsive gambler, rests on his deathbed with a fatal gunshot wound. His spirit rises to witness Lucifer Jr. and three assistants’ appearance to escort him down. Before they can leave, Heaven’s General and his assistants appear on behalf of Petunia’s prayers to “investigate” the matter. Heaven and Hell agree to a challenge for Little Joe’s soul: he is allowed to live another six months until a second death, without the memory of his afterlife, to be tempted by both sides, so a final destination can be decided. Little Joe begins a second life on the good path but Lucifer Jr. sends him a “one way (lottery) ticket to the boiler room.” Little Joe wakes up from his NDE: a dream within a nightmare. The trial is important, as a setting or event, because it is part of determining a life’s value. Judgment to Heaven or Hell is a reflection on how each person appreciates or abuses life and free will. It says more about the person than the afterlife system. Johnny and Little Joe’s trials were the space and time of their “second chance on life,” set up for them. They acted to the best of their abilities and were judged accordingly.

The Life Review

So a fair verdict is made in all cases of judgment, the characters’ lives are reviewed in part or its entirety. Assignment to Heaven, Hell, or back to life is not supposed to be a lottery system but based upon reason. For the single afterlife space that does not require justified admittance, judgment serves a different purpose. Instead of a life review that determines a verdict to a space of reward or punishment, the life review is shown after arrival and reverberates through the story’s end. Instead of a Supreme Being or appointed judge to pass a verdict, the dead character makes his or her own
denouement. Steps four through ten of twelve NDE commonalities that Jeffrey Long’s *Evidence of the Afterlife* discusses are readily applied to the life review afterlife film:

4. Passing through a tunnel, 5. Encountering a mystical or brilliant light, 6. Encountering other beings, either mystical or deceased relatives or friends, 7. A sense of alteration of time or space, 8. Life review, 9. Encountering unworldly (heavenly) realms, and 10. Encountering or learning special knowledge.

If this is the introduction to the afterlife, it sets up the opening scenes of such inspired films. What happens next builds on these visuals. The character takes a journey of self-discovery and each step brings advanced understanding of his or her life’s purpose. The individual life is purified of distress and regret for healing and appreciation. The individual life reconnects with the universe. Judgment is a cooperative classroom that strengthens each student’s self-concept and bonds him or her to each other through experience. Mitch Albom’s *The Five People You Meet in Heaven* transposes the audience into a unique concept of the afterlife by connecting personal memory and experience to collective memory and experience.

Each guide is connected to Eddie by close or distant associations, but all had significant roles in his greatest life events. His transport between the Heavens is hidden behind transitions with memory scenes and scenes of life carrying on after his death. As the five guides take Eddie through his life, he and the audience watch them play out in third-person perspective. The audience does not see Eddie’s memories from inside his head but as the representation of what he remembers. Actors play Eddie at different ages and the sets’ designs reflect passing decades. The memory sequences are their own space that he can wander through or leave alone. They are also their own short films placed between the scenes he is with his guides: not in chronological order. Eddie’s childhood and adulthood are as if conjured when he remembers them or reminded of them. This
method of storytelling is more complex than simple flashbacks to provide information. They show puzzle pieces that create the big picture of who Eddie is: the particularities of his life and in relation to other people.

Just before Eddie can save the young girl from the broken ride, the screen is filled with water; a bright light shines through, and just beneath the surface Eddie’s hands reach for a young girl’s. He wakes up in his first guide’s Heaven unable to speak but the pain in his leg is gone and he can run around the old Ruby Pier amusement park. The Blue Man, a freak-show entertainer who Eddie briefly knew as a child, formally introduces himself and explains their connection. While driving, he swerves to save Eddie from a collision, has a heart attack from the shock, and dies. His second guide is Eddie’s squad captain. After months as a P.O.W. and finally free from his possessors, Eddie takes revenge on the labor camp with a blowtorch. To break his fixation and get to safety, the Captain shoots Eddie in the leg, and dies from a land mine soon after. Eddie returned home unaware of the Captain’s sacrifice, convinced an enemy soldier shot his leg. Eddie fell into depression and ceaselessly grieved for virility. The Captain’s reasoning and intention for his action, “took your leg to save your life,” was unrealized for decades but forgiven in the afterlife. His third guide, Ruby, is who the park was built and named for. She reveals to Eddie the truth that his harsh father died saving a friend from drowning but caught pneumonia: not a drunken stupor. With this knowledge Eddie sees his father differently. The only saving grace Eddie lived for was his wife Marguerite; his fourth guide. She reminds him of their happy times together (which play out as a montage of home-movie footage) and that there is no need for regret. His last guide Tala is the young Filipino girl that he unfortunately killed in a fit of delirium and suffered nightmares.
about. She not only validated his worst fear of extreme guilt from the war but also ironically brought him safely to the afterlife: it was her hands in the water. Throughout his journey Eddie asks if he saved the young girl from the falling ride and Tala assures Eddie that he pushed her out of the way.

These are all strong complex characters with their own histories. Not only is Eddie shown to have had a full life, but also his guides went through the same process of remembrance and understanding. They all learn their purpose. Eddie was bitter, disappointed in life, and believed irrelevant to the universe. By working his whole life at Ruby Pier, he squandered his potential. Yet he trudged through waiting for something to come his way and lift him up. What he did not consider until the afterlife is that by sticking to his principles, taking care of his family, and doing the best job he could as a mechanic contributed to the intricate web of human interactions. The tedious routine of tightening bolts and oiling hinges kept generations of the public safe. For more than half of his life he was haunted by nightmares of the vague memory he accidentally caused an innocent’s death. Tala has already forgiven him: he served his karmic sentence by protecting strangers’ children. He gave back for the life he took and paid forward to make amends. But to personally right his wrong, she has him wash the burn wounds off her skin in the river: a metaphor for cleansing the spirit.

Each lesson illuminates a piece of Eddie’s dark life but his fifth guide finally gives him the answers to defeat his pessimism from broken dreams. Eddie is relieved and released. He goes to his own Heaven in peace: the Ruby Pier he knew from the 1960s and shared with Marguerite, filled with the representations of all those he saved from potentially dangerous rides. The film comes full circle but he is not the same Eddie.
Knowing the truth, re-experiencing his toughest and darkest moments, he judges himself. None of his guides shame or blame him. He can only move on to the next guide when he accepts the lesson they had to teach him. Ruby Pier may have caused him grief while alive but it is the only place he knew. It gave him sorrow and love, like life does, but also gave him a home.

The five guides, the revealed secrets, the reunions and meetings, and the process of remembrance, all provide answers to the reasons for each person’s life. The good and the bad make people who they are and test their resilience. The self-assessment process works without a Supreme Being and without rewards or punishments because the latter is not as personal. The varied qualities of life cannot be neatly classified. Black and white distinctions between good and bad behaviors are exchanged for a range of gray tones. Pain, joy, and all other emotions are equally relevant to how a person thinks, feels, and acts. The self-concept is enlightened. Albom designed *Five People* by permitting everyone to enter Heaven, putting each person on a road to understanding his or her own life through the perspective of others, and giving each person the Heaven of their choice to exist within. Harmony is in place of fear and community is in place of segregation. Self-assessment provides a balance unachieved any other way.

Detours to Heaven

*Beyond Christmas* (1940) features an alternative route to Heaven. Three old rich businessmen die in a plane crash but their spirits remain with the living as ghosts to observe their young friends’ blossoming courtship. Whether or not this state of existence is considered unfinished business, an unseen trial may have simultaneously taken place to determine their assigned afterlife space to Heaven or Hell. This is only conjecture. What
Parish erroneously writes, “the three souls are placed on Heavenly trial,” (29): a very visual statement that is not in the film as a trial is seen in *A Matter of Life and Death* or a wager in *Cabin in the Sky*. There is only an allusion to a process of judgment when they are summoned to their respective afterlife spaces. At three separate times a vision appears. Hell’s storm clouds and lightening come for George Melton as a Supreme Being’s disembodied voice criticizes him for, “years of being an embittered soul who thought only of work.” (Parish 29) George walks into the dark and disappears. Allan Chadwick hears a familiar bugle call and sees his dead son David in full soldier uniform (presumed from World War I) come to take him to Heaven, intimating its splendor: “Every man gets his dream…Mother’s waiting.” By the time Michael is offered rays of light to Heaven his young friend Jimmy is in danger of death, and refuses to leave: a mission to complete. The same disembodied voice tells Michael, “they call only once…linger in the shadows of Earth for all time,” and disappears without Michael. But Heaven is offered once more because of his mother’s bothersome insistence Michael be admitted. Jimmy recovers and as Michael steps into the light for transport, George is accepted to Heaven as well. “I’ve come a long way out of the darkness…I thought of you and Chad, your loyalty, friendship, and then the bitterness began melting out my heart and I saw a light and I followed it.” For George, Hell is not eternal damnation but a detour to Heaven. Like walking aimlessly through a forest at night until daybreak and a path is illuminated. The three ghosts’ verdicts and transport are compromises between automatic arrival and a trial. The life review was visually applied to Chadwick’s summons and verbally to George’s denouement. The filmmakers set a precedent for combining various processes of judgment.
Japanese Judgment

Buddhist and Shinto cultures teach that life moves in a cyclic motion of incarnations and the soul is in constant struggle following good and evil paths. Buddhism accepts that evil can tempt a good man and that crimes must be penalized. Judgment is a process of self-assessment administered by a Supreme Being who determines a verdict of punishment. When the sentence has been satisfied the soul moves on. *Jigoku* (1960) explicitly shows Shiro’s journey from life to death, judgment and verdict, through Hell and arrival at Heaven. After Shiro’s death he arrives on a white beach of green mist and milky water. His acquaintance and escort Tamura appears next to him with a space agent’s knowledge of where they are: “This is the path to Hell, the border between life and death, the River Sanzu.” Shiro is then turned upside down and brought before a red creature with a spear in his neck:

I am Emma-O King of Hell. I am lord of the eight Hells of fire and eight Hells of ice. I sit in judgment of all who slither into the Underworld and pass sentence on their sins. Shiro, recall now your multitude of crimes…all revealing mirror…(replay of earlier scenes)…You are sentenced to the torments of the eight Hells…

To “recall” his sins to the “all revealing mirror” is a command of self-judgment via the life review, but wrongfully excludes his good deeds for a fair verdict. As Brandon states, “The judge holds up before you the shining mirror of karma, wherein all your deeds are reflected. The stay of the dead in either a Heaven or a Hell however prolonged is not eternal.” (176) The mirror is an honest medium for the unadulterated retelling of a life story. It is an emotionally painful and spiritually purifying process to admit and watch the worst moments.

Though one is rarely judged to all Hells, Shiro may have been sentenced but is not subjected to their tortures. The DVD extras’ “Building the Inferno” interviews the
filmmakers: “the protagonist went through all kinds of Hells because we wanted to illustrate that they existed.” Shiro is a Dante figure traversing the Hells in search of his unborn daughter who is floating along the Sanzu, or also Limbo. Shiro meets with the people he knew in life suffering in the various Hells. There is a long line of people walking in step because in life they wandered aimlessly. A man who stole a comrade’s last sip of water must crawl to puddles that disappear before he can reach it. A blue horned demon yells, “You were a negligent doctor…slave to money, you will be sawed to pieces,” and “As a policeman you were supposed to protect law abiding citizens (but)…false evidence,” and his cuffed hands are chopped off. Other sinners’ bodies are flayed or teeth smashed out. Those guilty of adultery, lust, and lechery must swim in the Lake of Blood. Hell’s punishments fit the crimes committed. When Shiro passes the last test to save his daughter from a Wheel of Fortune, he is accepted to the sunlit skies of Heaven, guarded by his sister and by his lover, via an invisible stairway. This is in sharp contrast to the dark and neon lit Hells. All of the torments witnessed appear harsh but serve to purify the soul. No one is eternally damned or rewarded. After Shiro’s time in Heaven is complete he will reincarnate.

As Chuck Stephens writes in the Criterion Collection’s essay on Jigoku, the film quickly attained the status of cult classic in its home country- even as it would remain for decades thereafter a wildly rumored about but rarely screened phenomenon in international cine-extremist circles…Born from some unholy union of Goethe’s Faust and Genshin’s O joyoshu, a 10th century Buddhist treatise on the various torments of the lower realms.

Cinephile audiences appreciate its blending of East and West icons and visual concepts of the afterlife. The trial is not prosecution versus defense and guilty versus innocent. The trial benefits the person and the community: each person confronts their life and a higher authority determines how best to make up for any transgressions. Instead of one Hell and
one Heaven of segregation, a Supreme Being can choose which Hell and which Heaven is deserved. *Enter the Void* (2010) shares themes of losing innocence through tragedy, a friendly guide to the dark side of humanity, using stark colors, and showing intense and gruesome images as well as the cyclical phases of life. The life review reveals when and how the person abandoned the straight and narrow into a world of chaos. Emma-O is an authority and makes the assignments but the process is supposed to result in self-inflicted guilt, retribution, and acceptance.

In *After Life* (1998), all those recently deceased automatically arrive at the nearest In-Between compound to decide an everlasting memory. It is the first step towards a deeper afterlife realm. The self-concept and memory is none more appreciated than in this film. All of the characters retain their memory in the same condition as from their death. The counselors are available for information, guidance, and administration but not for judgment: they cannot decide for their charge. The dead arrive with a lifetime of memories but leave with just one. That one memory should ideally represent their individual selves and should satisfy an eternity of awareness. Wherever or whatever the qualities are of the next realm, the memory is its own space, has its own cast of characters, and is filled with emotion; like a film clip. Whether poignant, mellow, stirring, or even painful, the memory they choose is an indirect judgment upon their own lives. If karma were applied, the memory might reflect how he or she wants self-inflicted punishment or self-justified reward: they want to feel guilty or regretful for a mistake or uplifted as compensation for leading a difficult or disappointing life.

One woman distorts a few details of a situation for a more favorable outcome that could have made for happier consequences. She changes her history to create a new
memory she could accept and move on with. The teenage girl that chose a trip to Disneyland was persuaded by Shiori to select another. In the year she had been a counselor thirty people chose Disneyland and although such a place is beloved by visitors, it fails to define a person. Her charge comes back with a quiet moment resting on her mother’s lap. The majority of the memories turned into short films are simple and private. An old man remembers when he was young sitting on the tram to school and feeling the summer’s end light and breeze. An old woman remembers the red dress her big brother gave her. Another woman wants to sit under cherry blossom trees.

Those who do not choose a memory in their appointed time must stay in the In-Between and work as a counselor. A father does not want to leave until his daughter’s Adult Day ceremony when she is twenty and too old to see him on Day of the Dead. One teenage boy actively refuses against principle. Takashi died in World War II and has been a counselor for fifty years. His latest charge has difficulty making a selection because there is nothing from his sleepy life worthwhile taking along. Takashi gives him a stack of VHS tapes to watch the movies of his life. They are in third-person perspective and warns they, “won’t match your memories exactly so please just use them for reference, watch them as a way of bringing back the past.” When checking in, Takashi sees that the man’s wife by arranged marriage was Taskashi’s girlfriend before the war. Takashi finds out that the memory she chose was not of her husband but of him, silently sitting in the park before drafted to fight. The husband chooses a similar scene: as an older couple sitting in the park talking about the movie they just saw, before she died. Takashi is finally inspired to recreate and move on with the same memory his love chose. They may not be together in the deeper realm but they will share the same emotions and space that
memory elicits. This love triangle has come full circle. According to Cirlot’s *A Dictionary of Symbols*, the triangle within a circle is, “the spiritual within totality.” (117)

All of the memories are turned into short films that are screened in a movie theater. Whether they enter the screen or disappear into it, the film is not the actual memory but a representation. Truth and fiction merge into a new perspective. Do they take the actual memory or its filmed representation into the deeper realm? Most afterlife films make jokes on the idea the dead cannot take it with them. The “it” is something from the living world such as a gadget, memento, clothing, or other object. For *After Life* the “it” is the 3D panoramic sensory experience of a memory and its associative qualities that the dead can take with them: the look and feel of something or someone important.

Morality is not a factor in this afterlife concept or an indicator of the person. “So everyone ends up here?...You mean whether you were good or bad or whatever? All that stuff about going to Hell if you’re bad? Not true? Everyone’s here?” This character was shocked to learn his behavior while alive has no bearing on the afterlife space he arrives at and will continue on to. The only judgment worth any weight is the one they make for themselves. Not selecting a memory is self-imposed judgment. Disregarding the task for personal or philosophical reasons is founded on doubt of what is next and not letting go of the known. And in that last moment sitting in the theater, can they regret their choices? It would be too late to stop and change their minds. Those who do not decide in that week immediately following death might have it right because they do not have to rush or fear that choice. Judgment can wait until the feeling is certain. Takashi’s choice took a second lifetime to make.
Conclusion and Capstone Analysis

Howard Suber writes in *The Power of Film*:

Acts- Some people might find it astonishing how many memorable popular films end in violence and death, but the history of drama is filled with them. (15)

Death- Death has been the ultimate conflict and the ultimate resolution of stories…most memorable popular films involve death or the threat of death. The struggle with death, however, is not concerned primarily or perhaps even principally with the preservation of the body; it is concerned even more with the death of the soul, of the self, of the consciousness. (109)

Fantasy- In a fantasy, the attitude is: ‘Wouldn’t it be nice if…?’…During the late twentieth and the early years of the twenty-first century there have been several years in which nearly all of the top-grossing films coming out of the U.S. film industry were fantasies of one sort or another. (157)

Journeys- Many memorable films—like memorable stories throughout history—involve a journey. While they often involve physical movement (the art form, after all, is called motion pictures), even more important is the movement in psychological or spiritual terms. (228)

Justice- We don’t go to films just to see the world; we go to see a just world…Movies are one of the few places in modern life where things constantly work out the way we want them to work out…the punishment must fit the crime…To be memorable, a film does not have to have a happy ending. It does, however, require a just one. (229-230)

Suspension of Disbelief-…a term that has become a fundamental concept in our understanding of the relationship between the audience and the screen…act as if we were experiencing something real. That is why our palms sweat, our breath is bated, and adrenaline flows…everything that happens in a popular movie is centripetal, that is, draws us into its center. (363)

As this thesis shows, there are a great number of films that proclaim, “Death is only the beginning.” (*The Mummy* (1999)) The afterlife film suggests that life does not have to end at death but is merely part of the whole journey. Here, death is in the first act and not in the third. It is not an “ultimate resolution” but a gateway to possibility. To be engrossed in a film is to suspend reality. Awareness of the surrounding environment is so diminished that when the film ends it is like reentering the body. The audience experiences the journey with the characters they identify with and is transformed by the experiences as if they were the audience’s own. No other art is capable of sustaining such a feeling. The most powerful plot point in a film is the main character’s death or an
intimate partner’s. It represents every human’s deepest fear of loss and thus the audience will empathize. The afterlife concept satisfies an innate hope for divine justice of punishment in Hell and to reunite with the dearly departed in Heaven. An additional advantage the film has over any other medium that explores death and the afterlife is that the imagination invents or amends different spaces, figures, and processes of judgment while the film’s magical technologies brings them to life.

Albert Brooks’ *Defending Your Life*: Spaces, Figures, and a Process of Judgment

The opening chapter of this thesis was a broad analysis of *The Twilight Zone*’s “A Nice Place to Visit,” to orient the reader with the terminology and what was to be drawn out from the films in sequential chapters. This final chapter is an in-depth analysis of *Defending Your Life* (1991) to apply all of the above terms and bring the discussions together for the one title that suggests nearly every quality associated with the afterlife film corpus. Every scene of the film is saturated with awareness of its space, figures, process of judgment, and their combinations. Every scene founds the next and the ending is reminiscent of the beginning.

*Defending Your Life* (1991) is an original afterlife film. Its presentation of spaces, figures, and process of judgment are familiar yet new. It has comedy, romance, and drama. It follows Formula 4: Main character is alive, main character dies, main character enters an In-Between space, has a mission but not on earth, completes mission, Final Destination decided. There are strong influences from religion, secular culture, popular culture, and psychology. “Brooks said he knew *Defending Your Life* would succeed only if he established every detail of Judgment City: what everything looked like and how things worked.” (Miller 174) Every detail of the afterlife world is a creative derivative.
As director and screenwriter, he took on the two most important production roles: he is the master of this universe.

Aside from its epicurean fantasy, the unique judgment process is supported by short screenings of specific points from life. Peters’ and Boorstin’s ideas are none more realized than in *Defending Your Life*. The main character is transported back to the moment the episode occurred: it jogs the memory and prompts associated emotions. The audience is welcomed into a third world otherwise impossibly shown, facilitating greater understanding with the main character. The look of the clips’ events seem so real that it could be like the spontaneous actions in life.

The trailer’s voiceover narrates:

> From the beginning of motion picture history, Hollywood has tried to show you what the afterlife is really like. Finally, the first true story of what happens after you die… If you see one movie before you die, see *Defending Your Life*.

Albert Brooks entices audiences to see not just something new but also something real: claiming that all of Hollywood’s prior efforts to show the afterlife were false or incomplete. *Defending Your Life* can simultaneously suspend disbelief because it seems so possible and not require suspending disbelief because it is so possible. Unlike other afterlife movies of the late 1980s through mid-1990s, *Defending Your Life* is not injected with or constructed by advanced special effect technology. The sets are studio built or filmed on location. There are no transparent or invisible spirits that float in the air. There are no unexplained appearances and vanishing acts. There are no living characters to prove continued existence to. The trailer hints at a film that was executed with such ease, yet a new detail is revealed with each screening. The plot, characters, cinematography, editing, music, sets, costumes, and all the other qualities, “creates a universe of constant amusement.” (Howe) *Defending Your Life* has a timeless quality fit for all audiences.
On his fortieth birthday, while distracted from looking at the road, Daniel Miller crashes his new BMW convertible into an oncoming bus. Instead of a blank transition screen upon impact that hides his transport to the afterlife space, it immediately cuts to opening steel doors. A lethargic Daniel is pushed in a wheelchair by orderlies through a terminal hallway with other anonymous dead arrivals. However much time passed after his death and however he came to this space is unknown. It is a bold edit that pays homage to Goddard’s jump cut. Also unknown is how Daniel’s suit, and everyone else’s clothes, were exchanged for something like a hospital gown.

While the tram drives along a country road, a guide welcomes the passengers.

You’ve just had quite a little journey so for now just enjoy the ride, and considering the transformation you’ve just been through you really won’t have much of a choice. Now if we’ve done our work correctly you should all be from the Western half of the United States…You’re all going to be here for the next five days and we want you to enjoy yourselves. Even though this isn’t earth, our surroundings should seem pleasing and very familiar to you. Exactly why you are here and what you’ll be doing will be explained later. No need to worry about that now.

She is a representative of the space whose job is to delicately orient the arrivals’ diminished attentions. Effectively, her speech gives the audience clues for orientation.

The “journey” and “transformation” are vague about transport and where the space is in relation to earth: not above or below, but not a separate dimension or a distant planet. All those in Daniel’s tram are designated to Judgment City from one geographical region. It begs to question if this is the only Judgment City or if there are others: is there another space for those from China or Africa and those who speak Spanish or Japanese?

Additionally, do Judgment Cities replicate a general region in each passing time period? Medieval Europeans would not have felt comfortable in present day Kansas City. During her speech, Daniel looks around to see the numerous billboards advertising various
activities available: a nightclub, a steak house, a bowling alley, and “three championship
golf courses.” In the distance are high-rise buildings against a bright blue sky. The
billboards and skyline are so inviting and pleasantly designed: an aesthetically controlled
replication.

The tram stops at The Continental, a hotel that looks like a Best Western or other
mid-range chain. The manager and attendants in brown suits greet Daniel and a dozen
others in the lobby. He assures the group they, “are already checked in,” and each are
escorted to their room. There is a bed, night tables, a table, chairs, a rotary telephone, a
television set, and a bathroom with a shower. In the closet are white tupas: “They are like
kaftans, they’re comfortable and fit everyone.” The white tupas convey resemblance and
harmony despite that each person wearing them led a different life and shall be judged
accordingly. Clothing has the power to express individuality and non-verbally
communicate someone’s personality to others. Without identifiers, there are no first
impressions. Uniforms can express conformity but also community. The tupas serve as a
distinction between the community of souls and Judgment City residents as well as
among the residents according to their jobs.

In the morning, defense attorney Bob Diamond telephones Daniel to tell him
where he is and why: “Well, in a nutshell, you’re here to defend you’re life and I’m going
to help you.” Bob is not only Daniel’s guide to the afterlife space but the audience’s as
well. The next piece of information is probably the most unique aspect to any other
afterlife film and later conflicts with Daniel’s sense of comfort. Judgment City has, “the
best food you’ve ever had (and) you can eat all you want!...It won’t affect you physically,
and you won’t gain weight. So pig out!...Eat everything!” In life, health and food are
major issues that abhor excessive indulgence, overeating, and gaining weight. In *Defending Your Life*, death permits consuming any food desired and any amount. The main themes of this film are made explicit when Daniel switches between three television channels: (1) a soap opera’s romantic conflict and reincarnation, (2) a game show that praises the contestant who faces his fear, and (3) an all-you-can-eat buffet, “Our chefs will cook it but they won’t look.” Aside from defending his life, he will have to experience the most basic human conflicts of love versus fear, the past versus the future, restraint versus pleasure, and inhibition versus confidence.

At the hotel restaurant, the waitress proclaims to Daniel, “Everything we have is sensational.” He orders an omelet and she serves him a full plate within ten seconds, “this was made just for you…Eat all you want!” The waitress does not anticipate Daniel’s order, but how such a portion is put together so fast is an unknown secret. As Daniel leaves the hotel for the tram, an automated voice gives passenger instructions: “Never exit the tram while it’s in motion because of the electronic field set up around the moving vehicle, it is very dangerous.” The tram arrives at Defenders Circle, an office campus of three large buildings that reflect the blue sky. The Judgment City tram emblem is clearly visible for the first time. Within a circle are two diagonal S-shapes with arrows on each end. It looks like two snakes biting each other’s tails or a curved ⊙ within a ⊙ so that like the wheel, ⊙, it represents, “The union of the upper and lower worlds…the circle of life spreading outwards from the Origin and falling upon the surface…signify destiny…life with death,” (Cirlot 65-68) and “the rim of the wheel is divided into sectors illustrating phases in the passage of time…spiritual progress and regression…escape from the illusory world…towards the center.” (Cirlot 352) Like *After Life’s* company
symbol, it expresses continuity. The emblem, Daniel’s 40th birthday, the BMW 🚗 logo, the wheel chairs, the rotary phone, all represent the Wheel of Life; foreshadowing Bob’s disclosure of reincarnation. When Daniel exits the tram, Bob’s assistant greets him and the baton of guiding information is now her responsibility. “Looks familiar doesn’t it. That’s how it was designed…If there is anything we can do to make it more like earth, we have suggestion boxes…we’d like to hear from you.” Every Judgment City attendant emphasizes the “we,” but is there others or Supreme Beings that “design” the space? And are the suggestions how the space is redesigned over time? On the waiting room table is a Judgment City photography book. IMDB.com’s trivia page for *Defending Your Life* states it is really an “aerial view of Denver Colorado.” Denver’s skyline stands in for Judgment City like Miami was Hell in *On A Cold Day* or Japan’s suburb for *After Life*’s compound.

Bob Diamond and Daniel finally meet in his office. Bob reveals the truth of the afterlife spaces, the human lifecycle, its purpose, and the trial at hand.

No it isn’t Heaven…No it isn’t Hell either. Actually, there is no Hell…When you are born into this universe you’re in it for a long, long time. You have many different lifetimes. And after each lifetime there is an examining period which you’re in now. You see, every second of every lifetime is always recorded, and as each one ends we sort of look at a few of the days and examine it. And then if everybody agrees, you move forward…The point of this whole thing is to keep getting smarter, to keep growing, to use as much of your brain as possible…There are many more exciting destinations for smarter people…Your life has been pretty much devoted to dealing with fear…I’m just like you. I was on earth for a long time. But I advanced, I moved forward, I got over my fear, and I got smarter. (As he continues, the camera moves closer in on Daniel.) Fear is like a giant fog that sits on your brain and blocks everything, real feelings, true happiness, real joy: they can’t get through that fog. But if you lift it, then buddy, you’re in for the ride of your life.

Judgment City is an In-Between space for a trial. There may or may be a Heaven but there is no Hell. Breezed over was Bob’s comment on the life-recordings. The process of the trial will include watching short films of Daniel’s life. He will experience a
life review of key events chosen for him. Daniel is “on trial for being afraid.” It is not a
verdict between innocent versus guilty or Heaven versus Hell, but is whether he has
overcome his fear and is ready to advance or not and should return to earth in another
incarnation. Fear is what prevents living life to the fullest and what declares a person
worthy or not of advancement: not morality. Fear must be overcome by will. It is the
soul’s responsibility to break free and ascend. He has just finished his nearly twentieth
life on earth. Each person’s body is in the perfect shape as it was when died (no injuries
or vulnerabilities) and the physical appearance of his latest life. This allows the audience
to recognize Daniel before and after death and removes the need for special effects. Yet
in this state of return, Daniel does not remember previous visits to Judgment City. All of
it is new to him and thus to the audience. Most importantly, Judgment City is a place that
decides a soul’s next phase. Because a soul could return to earth, Judgment City serves as
a secondary Heaven: an intermediate space of rewards for all to enjoy and to ease the
anxiety of an unfavorable verdict. Those who will not move onward still benefit from the
experience, albeit without memory of the experience.

Bob continues to explain the trial process. Lena Foster is the case’s prosecutor,
both sides will be looking at nine days, “or episodes,” from Daniel’s life. His questions
sound like curiosities but is nervous if his case is “normal”: fearing he is abnormal, will
be judged unfit to move on, and sent back to earth. At lunch Bob goes over the
demographics, “We have about 400,000 residents here. We service about half of the
United States’ dead…Children don’t have to defend themselves. When a child is taken,
they automatically move forward…(teenagers are) too much trouble, they go elsewhere.”
This proves that *Defending Your Life*’s Judgment City is only one of many, as
hypothesized earlier. There must be others to service the other half of the United States plus the rest of the world. And for audiences concerned about children (perhaps parents who have lost them), it is reassuring they are not put through such an ordeal. But where do the teenagers go if not Judgment City?

At the comedy club, while the performer is bombing all of his death jokes (referring to people in the past tense like, “Where were you from?”) Julia and Daniel notice each other from across the room. Impressed by Daniel’s humorous retort to the performer, Julia leaves her table and joins Daniel. She is the first to make an introduction. They share a nice evening, talk about who they were, how they died, and connect over their acclimation to Judgment City. Julia misses her children but feels “okay about it,” because “they made it that way.” The “they” is the same “we.” Those who design the space give the arrivals a feeling of contentment so as not to grieve for the loss of their lives (unlike so many other afterlife characters). Concerning the food, Julia immediately expresses joy: “isn’t that the best!” When he walks her back to her hotel, The Majestic, there is a luxurious lobby of red velvet carpeting, grand fountains, cavernous ceilings, piano music, and an announcement for “champagne and caviar.” If the tupas were supposed to unify the community of souls, the different hotels just as easily segregate them. Julia is being rewarded for her life and Daniel is not. They are on separate paths: she will advance and he will reincarnate.

At Judgment Center the trial is conducted in a small dark room. Lena has her desk and chair, Bob has his facing opposite hers, there is a swivel chair in the center, a long desk for two judges in the foreground, and a rectangular screen in the background. The judges in traditional black robes give further details to Daniel about the proceedings:
Even though this feels like a trial, it really isn’t. It’s just a process that helps us decide...What you are going to see in the screen Mr. Miller will look and feel so real to you, you might feel a little uneasy at first...after a while I think it will become pleasurable to you. They tell me it feels something like 3D.

Audiences, and Daniel, would not be swayed to think that the process was other than a trial. Though the judges’ warning to him about what will be shown sounds like it is a film, they never say so. The screenings about to transpire are thus the representation of what the audience considers a movie screening but is different for those in the story. In a sense, it is the sort of introduction that may have been spoken to the Lumière brothers’ and Edison’s earliest audiences.

Lena’s objective is not to condemn Daniel as an immoral person but prove he is “still held back by the fears that have plagued him lifetime after lifetime.” She requests a specific day in Daniel’s life: the lights dim, his chair turns towards the screen, and there is a playground in full view that zooms in on twelve-year old Daniel. As a spectator, he is surprised to see how “realistic” it looks and feels. After screening the clip, both sides argue interpretations on what Daniel was thinking and feeling at that time. Was it restraint? Was it fear of a fight? Lena claims this moment “haunted” him years later and regrets not taking action. Unlike Liliom’s scene of cinematic judgment, Daniel’s thoughts are not recorded along with the visuals. It is all up for debate because there is no evidence of his thoughts. Bob presents another “isolated incident” to prove the opposite behavior.

In a classroom, the camera moves past the front row of children to show Daniel and his friend. While the clips in After Life show the camera in a stationary position far from the action, Albert Brooks’ camera makes itself part of the scene: actively moving through the action. The shots cut back and forth between Daniel’s perspective looking up at the teacher and the teacher looking down at Daniel. It is not an omniscient point of view.
After the trial, Daniel wanders Judgment City. There is a Judgment Inn, a resident clothing store of work suits, and a Japanese restaurant where he gets dinner. The chefs tease him for looking at nine days, but sitting next to Daniel is Frank, who is looking at 15 days: a man who will most certainly reincarnate. On the second day of his trial, Lena offers a clip that features Daniel role-playing with his wife: he practices for the following day’s interview by negotiating for a certain salary he feels worthy of. He is confident with her but at the interview Daniel immediately accepts the employer’s substantially lower offer. Lena then presents, “a compilation of general misjudgments: half of them fear based, half of them just stupid…164 misjudgments over a 12 year period.” The collage of images plays out like a Mr. Magoo cartoon.

Julia and Daniel take a trip over to the Hall of Records’ Past Lives Pavilion to see their previous incarnations. They stand on line with other anonymous dead waiting for admittance. She guesses she might “have been a heavyset man at one time.” Julia is not embarrassed to jest about her personality or possible former appearance. She embraces her peculiarities. A hologram of Shirley MacLaine introduces the program’s digital archive and is one of the few special effects. “An image of your former self will soon appear…You will be limited to five past lives only.” A hand imprint brings up the proper set of past life identity movies. Because fingerprints are unique to each person, and part of the physical self, how does the computer read and recognize each hand?

Ronald Madison and Corey Schmidt’s Talking Pictures analyze Defending Your Life as an example of Abraham Maslow’s theory of self-actualization. (239) Psychology: Themes and Variations explains: “human motives are organized into a hierarchy of needs…physiological or security needs, are the most basic…activates needs at the next
level…innate drive towards personal growth…fill one’s potential.” (Weiten 342) Daniel sees himself as an African tribesman running from a predator, or “Dinner”: representing the first stage, “Physiolocigal—hunger, thirst, etc.” Daniel’s experiences of his latest life represent only the second stage, “Safety and Security—long term survival and stability.” Julia is Prince Valiant encouraging his troops. This historical figure represents the mid-level, “Esteem—achievement and gaining recognition,” (Weiten 343, Fig. 11.9) while her current self is higher on the scale. There is an obvious difference between their levels of self-actualization. It should be Daniel’s goal to emulate her self-esteem, her confidence, and her fearless unashamed attitude. “According to Maslow, self-actualizing persons are people with exceptionally healthy personalities…marked by continued personal growth…fresh appreciation for the world around them.” (Weiten 343) Julia is the quintessential embodiment of such adjectives, as repeatedly implied in her enjoyment of buffet eating, her appreciation for Daniel’s sense of humor, and instant friendships with all those she meets. This is in contrast to Daniel’s repeatedly self-deprecating and pessimistic perspective, a follower’s behavior, and anxieties about normality. He is not comfortable with the trial procedure because he fears how others judge him.

At the mini-golf amusement, Julia admits how she died: by accidentally falling into a pool. She is embarrassed but laughs it off. That she remembers feeling “pissed” while dying, questions if the dead remember and feel the exact moment of death. At The Majestic they share their first kiss. A quip about bed candies separates them: she gets chocolates and he gets breath mints. The next trial day, Lena requests an episode of his stage fright before giving a speech at a convention. Daniel sits in front of a vanity mirror with lights, and there is a packed house. He stands on stage in the spotlight speechless,
interrupted by the announcement of a gas leak. He “never went back and accomplished it, he never got up in front of people again…If he had accomplished that moment I believe that the rest of his life would have gone in a much better direction.” In reaction, Bob requests a clip of Daniel on a snowmobile. The camera is positioned on the hood facing Daniel for a visceral experience. Daniel cringes at the scene. Later, when he walks into Julia’s screening, she is rescuing her children and the family pet from a house fire. Daniel realizes that her trial is mere formality because she is prime for ascension.

At a beautiful Italian restaurant the host offers plenty of food: three pounds of pasta and loads of fresh shrimp. She mentions her hotel has a Jacuzzi. While Julia digs into the fettuccini Alfredo, Daniel is immediately nervous seeing Lena nearby. He is embarrassed for the appearance of his plate: “I’m eating thirty shrimp, I’m a pig.” Julia tries to assure Daniel it’s okay to relax, “everyone eats like that here.” But it makes no difference. He wants to leave and Julia won’t let him. She is smiling and enjoying her meal while Daniel wants her to “bite” and finish. The host brings him nine pies and he feels further embarrassed. In The Majestic’s lobby they joke about finally finding love at a “pit-stop.” She invites him to her room but he rejects the offer: he doesn’t “want to be judged anymore.” His life is on trial and though he wants her more than anything, the fantasy and loosing her after the verdict would be too much to bear. Lena uses this scene to summarily prove that Daniel is still plagued by fear, even in the afterlife, and he is not ready to move on. Until this point Bob and Daniel were able to deflect Lena’s hard questions, but to re-experience the regret and shame of letting Julia go, can no longer be denied. By his own admission of self-imposed judgment, administered by the space
representatives, Daniel “was afraid.” The judges agree and Bob puts Daniel on a tram for reincarnation.

“You’re not going to remember any of this so don’t worry…just take the opportunities when they come.” The station announcer directs the anonymous dead going for reincarnation to “the trams on your left,” while those “moving onward…board the trams on your right.” This is the ultimate segregation of the community. They all arrive together, wear the tupas, eat, and go through the judgment process, but the verdict determines their different fates. Daniel is buckled into his tram seat and the doors close but Julia calls out to him and he can’t resist the urge to go to her. The trams leave the station and there is only a short time before they’ll forever be separated. He breaks free from the tram, the alarm goes off, he falls onto the “electric field” warned of earlier, and runs across the tracks. He jumps onto her tram and holds on with everything he’s got, declaring his love for her. Daniel conquers his fear to be at her side. Meanwhile, she tries to break free as well but can’t. He is portrayed as the hero. Then suddenly the camera pulls back to show the event on a screen with Bob and Lena watching. It is not a projection of a past event but a live feed. The judges revise their verdict and via intercom or loudspeaker, requests the doors open. Daniel and Julia embrace and the trams enter their designated tunnel. “The End?” (Ruffles 206)
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