Cinema and the Art of Dying

by

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This Thesis is the combination of a film and exegesis.

Link to film: <https://vimeo.com/265220208> Password: DARK
A Special thanks to my family for supporting me throughout the last two years of this project, and the film crew that suffered with me during the making of this film.

This project is dedicated to James ‘Paddy’ Green, Iris Coles, Des Burns, Tyler Coles, and all the other family members that are not with us today. You are never forgotten, and you are always in our hearts.
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Introduction and Methodology

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Introduction

I want to make a film about death. Over the past two or three years I have been to a handful of funerals that have all left me feeling empty and anxious. This was the first time that I had been confronted with death so many times in a row. It had become something that I was now aware of, and I began to be drawn to films that examined this topic. They served in helping the anxiety disappear, and I came to the realisation that addressing death in film would be a valid way of understanding more about mortality and the sources of my anxieties. In any way that you look at it, death is pertinent to drama. Whether this is a metaphorical death of some kind, or a literal one, life and the idea of losing it is used consistently throughout cinema in order to keep an audience compelled and interested in the stakes of the narrative. You see it in action and horror films all the time, the countless henchmen being gunned down in *Die Hard* (1998), the ‘teenagers’ running away from Jason in *Friday the 13th* (1980), or Freddy in *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (1985). Even in more contemporary and serious films such as *I Saw the Devil* (2010), the threat of death is used metaphorically, and is always introduced to compel and to advance the plot of a narrative. However, the deaths in these types of cinema never feel real enough. Of course, they may look real, but they never feel real.

When an unnamed henchman gets gunned down, the audience doesn’t care, because the audience doesn’t get to know that person, they don’t see their family dealing with the tragic loss of life. The threat of death is used for the advancement of the plot, teasing the audience into the idea of death, but never really hitting them head on with its consequences. This stops the deaths...
from feeling genuine, and as Dr Michele Aaron states in her book, *Death and the Moving Image*, “the banality of physical, or undignified, decline, the dull ache of mourning, are rarely seen,” (Aaron 2014, pp. 1). I started thinking about the films that I have seen that differ from this description. Lars Von Trier’s *Melancholia*, was an easy first companion. Von Trier’s narrative about an approaching death was the first film that really made it clear to me that it was possible to have a positive exploration of the act of dying. I had never really thought about death in this way before, but then I started to connect the dots within other films that I had already seen. Gus Van Sant’s *Paranoid Park* (2008) began to stick out vividly in my mind, along with Werner Herzog’s documentary, *Into the Abyss* (2011). Even Rainer Werner Fassbinder’s *The Merchant of Four Seasons* (1971) and Harmony Korine’s *Gummo* (1997) started striking a new existential chord within my being, despite not being entirely about the act of dying. A pattern began to emerge within these films, and it was becoming obvious that they were doing something different with their representations of death, and by doing so were inadvertently helping address the fears and concerns suffered by this author.

Treated as a whole, death in films is not usually about the death itself, and it is only the films that take death beyond the metaphorical which have helped my anxiety about death in the past. So, then the question becomes about understanding the difference between cinema in which death is used as a device and cinema in which it is not, and where this distinction becomes blurred. In understanding this difference, the more significant challenge then becomes how to make a film that addresses the anxieties and concerns of mortality. To fully understand how these films were doing this, I had to try and take the pattern that I saw and analyse it in another way. In a story sense, it became intriguing to consider the arcs of these films as what Christopher Booker describers as a *Rebirth* plot type. Put simply, a *rebirth* narrative refers to a protagonist that is usually disillusioned about the world around them, after having fallen “under the shadow of a dark power,” (Booker 2004, pp. 204). This dark power can be metaphorical, or literal, depending on the story type. Charting the five main structural points of a *Rebirth* narrative, the protagonist begins trapped and “frozen in their isolated, imprisoned state,” (Booker 2004, pp. 204) before the journey they undergo eventually leads them to achieving some form of redemption or liberation.
In addition to considering this use of Booker’s *rebirth* as a potential foundation to this pattern, I am going to utilise three distinct works from Clive Seale, Michele Aaron, and Caitlin Doughty. These three writings all deal with death from a sociological and philosophical viewpoint, and will be used to offer insights and explanations of how three key films that exist outside of the mainstream, go beyond the metaphorical in telling their stories about mortality in effective and engaging ways through film form. The three films that will help inform this project are Bela Tarr’s *The Turin Horse*, Gaspar Noe’s *Enter the Void* and Gus Van Sant’s *Paranoid Park*. This analysis will interrogate the parameters of three key sociological aspects of death discussed by the above authors, to try and determine whether it is appropriate to try and understand these films as *rebirth* stories in the greater context of representing mortality. These three works stand as contemporary examples of making stories about death. By examining these stories under the concepts of *falling from culture*, *loss of control*, and *death acceptance*, it is my hope that these theories can provide the types of insight and reflection on death that I am searching for through the identification of a story and art work that represents a healthier way of discussing dying by way of the relationship between *rebirth* and death theory.

This project falls under the category of practice led research, which is a discipline of research that engages students to create an artefact, something tangible and created, as the main research output. What this project aims to do is to discuss and analyse some of the films that fall into this paradigm of study by exploring how death is portrayed in three particular films, while asking myself if it is possible to gain some sort of control over these fears of dying. How can I reject what Michele Aaron calls the mainstreams tendency to make dying “not an embrace of the end but of new beginnings,” (Aaron 2014, pp. 114) and strive towards a more meaningful and genuine representation of death and what it can mean to me, and others? The outcome of this research project will be a narrative short film that will be built from my specialty as a practitioner in the field of filmmaking. The narrative film that I am going to make will address the above theories put forth by these authors, and will attempt to fit within the canon alongside the three films analysed.
Chapter Two

Cinema and the Art of Dying

The Turin Horse and Being Outside of Culture

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To Die Culturally

Clive Seale in his book, *Constructing Death*, argues that death plays a key role in shaping our social life. For him, the basic motivation for societal interactions and relationships lies within the problem of death and the fear of dying. Seale meticulously investigates the idea that “social and cultural life involves turning away from the inevitability of death, which is contained in the fact of our embodiment, and towards life,” (Seale 1998, pp. 1). What Seale means by this is that an individual’s fear of death can be both contained and forgotten if social bonds within the physical world are maintained. From this viewpoint, dying becomes a threat to these social bonds and so harms “our security and our ability to see life as meaningful,” (Weiss 1999, pp. 477). The method Seale uses in this work is seen through a culmination of several case studies completed amongst dying individuals and their loved ones. By utilising these case studies, Seale is able to compare the social aspect of dying for differing individuals with the security of self-identity that is provided by human social bonds.

The fear of death is universal, it is something that we are all scared of, but something that is completely unavoidable. Dying is also a completely personal experience, and not a social one. That is, it’s experience can’t be shared with anyone else. In this way, Seale explains death as “an act of social burial,” (Seale 1998, pp. 170). When you die, you no longer have the ability to contribute and interact with society as you once could. This idea of a
social loss from *Constructing Death* becomes Seale’s answer to why individuals may fear the idea in a cultural context. In the third and last section of the book, Seale goes into detail discussing the consequences of losing our social and cultural bonds and how this is applicable to larger concerns of death denying and the fear of death. Amongst this, Seale introduces his idea of falling from culture, a concept that occurs when an individual realises their own place in the physical world upon becoming aware of their own death.

Bela Tarr’s 2011 film *The Turin Horse*, recalls the Nietzsche’s story of the whipping of a horse by its owner in the town of Turin. The opening narration of the film tells us about Nietzsche’s experience after this incident, before ending with the line, “of the horse, we know nothing.” The film then cuts to a continuous shot of the horse being led through a bleak and dusty landscape, whipped by its owner. The rest of the film then positions itself from the point of view of the owner after the incident in Turin, and details the daily life of the farmer and his grown daughter. Soon, the horse refuses to work, and the two are slowly unable to fend for themselves against the harsh landscape of the farmland as a monumental windstorm approaches. Slowly unable to run his farm and provide for both himself and his daughter, they both begin to realise that they, like the horse, are slowly doomed to starve. Tarr’s film is easily seen as a clear representation of what Seale discusses in his book. Through a quick analysis, it can be determined that the two characters that inhabit Tarr’s filmic world have been cut off from culture, trapped in a liminal space outside of the world around them. What then, does this mean in terms of death and mortality? Is it possible to connect the dots, and find a deeper relationship between Tarr’s film, and what Seale claims in his theory of fearing death?

**The Turin Horse as a Fall From Culture**

Studying Seale’s theory of falling from culture provides a productive way of considering how Tarr’s film is strictly about not only death, but a cultural death. In Chapter Seven of *Constructing Death*, Seale claims, “we die culturally before we die physiologically” (Seale 1998, pp. 45). This is what he calls the inevitable fall from culture, and how this is at the centre of why we fear the idea of dying. Seale further expands on this by stating that death is the
representation of “the withdrawal of the self to a final fall from culture,” (Seale 1998, pp. 165). This is reference to how death threatens the idea of the self, and how selfhood is tied up with the social bonds that are held within the physical world. This brings us back to how Seale talks about how individuals interact with those they hold societal bonds with, and how these bonds are taken away once an individual becomes either aware of their death, or physically begin to show symptoms of terminal illness to others around them. The individual’s fall from culture is tied with how these bonds with loved ones decline and begin to disappear as an individual faces death. Once the threat of death is introduced, it is no longer plausible to hold onto these physical relationships. In order to understand what he is saying within this idea, an example from one of Seale’s case studies can be used to explain further.

In Seale’s analysis of a handful of terminally ill patients, he comes to the conclusion that the problem with modernist medical dying is that “patients are cut off from social connections,” (Hauser 2000, pp. 47). The control of the self is also stripped away, bringing about the realisation of a social death that cannot be avoided. Seale uses these case studies to point out particular examples of patients who had actively resisted experiencing this prolonged social death, as their reliance on medical, or nursing home staff, had increased due to their illness. In one example that Seale discusses, a particular patient had been passionate about preparing and cooking food for her family and friends. She had been doing this for most of her life, and cooking was a way of bringing her friends and family together inside of a social setting. Later in life she fell terminally ill, and this illness only worsened, diminishing normal bodily function to the point where she needed full time care. Once she lost the ability to both feed herself and others, she could no longer function in the way she could normally, and so Seale begins to discuss how this patient made the decision to fast to death, in an attempt to take control over her own manner and timing of death. Seale claims that this is one way of “preserving a meaningful social existence until death,” (Seale 1998, pp. 172). The ability for an individual to feed himself or herself is a normal and expected bodily function that this patient had tragically lost. In this case, her choice to starve herself to death was acting to commence her own fall from culture, in a direct reaction to this loss of self. Cooking and eating was her
main bond to the social world, and the consequence of this loss was isolation from her loved ones and from her culture.

If we apply this thought to Tarr’s narrative, it is easy to see that the two characters in the film can represent this loss of self. A big part of why this is so, is due to the environment that surrounds the two characters and how this landscape is represented. Looking at the rest of Tarr’s work, this theme of environment always seems to be particularly important in the way in which he chooses to tell his stories. Always characterised by “some combination of desolation and poverty,” (Kovacs 2013, pp. 72) like many filmmakers, Tarr always seems to include the landscape of his films as integral aspects of his narrative. Unlike others though, instead of representing a landscape as a reflection of character description or place, for example; the empty desert in the beginning of Wim Wenders’ ‘Paris, Texas,’ the land in Tarr’s filmography tend to act more as an antagonistic force to the protagonists, entrapping them in a foreboding liminal space. In this film, the two are stranded on an isolated farm, surrounded by nothing but a never ending dry and harsh landscape.

Even the household that they occupy seems to reflect the outside, consisting of only “a table, two beds, some heavy wooden chests,” (Lawrenson 2011, pp. 66) and an outside well for collecting water, that soon runs dry by the end of the film. Although there are a couple of unwanted visitors throughout the six day timeline of the film, they always seem alone and abandoned in their surroundings, and the increasing windstorm around them is the reminder of their vulnerability amongst the vastness of the land. They are stranded on a dying farm, separated and isolated from the rest of the outside world. The simple metaphor that can be applied here is that this separation stands as a representation of their isolation from culture. There are only two times that we see the two characters interact with anyone else from outside of the farm. Once is with a group of travelling gypsies that steal water from their well, and the other with a drunkard far neighbour who visits to borrow alcohol. Other than this, they don’t interact with anyone from the nearest town. Even if they wanted to, they are trapped by the windstorm that becomes increasingly more violent as the two become more hopeless. In this way, they exist in a
liminal space outside of a culture in which they are unable to return to or revisit. It is unescapable.

Being his last film, *The Turin Horse* is the ultimate goodbye from a director known to push, and challenge his audience. According to Tarr himself, he is able to tell a story that is purely “about the inescapable fact of death,” (Rosenbaum 2011, pp. 48). He creates a world that entraps his audience in facing the realities of death informed by a loss of culture. Despite this, he manages to create a narrative in which none of the characters actually die. Shot entirely in black and white, and consisting of only thirty or so long continuous takes, the feeling of death is heavily implied but never shown. Instead, a heavy dose of foreboding existential dread lingers within each frame as he strips away any societal connection that an audience can associate with. The discussion then becomes how Tarr’s film form, in terms of his mise en scene and lengthy takes, help to communicate these themes of death through the framework of Seale’s idea about *falling from culture*. The answer to this lies within the simplicity of a few aspects of his filmmaking. The first of which is his overall visual language through camera work and cinematography. This particular aspect of mise en scene will begin my discussion.
Tarr’s Visual and Narrative Style

To understand the way in which Bela Tarr creates the world of *The Turin Horse*, it is important to think about the overall style of a Tarr film. In the view of Ranciere, a style, in its simplest form, “is not the embellishment of discourse, but a manner of seeing things,” (Ranciere 2013, pp. 26). Applying this in the context of visual art, it can be said that there should be more of a focus on what we see within the frame over what is being said. The thing that a filmmaker sees in front of his camera is also what the spectator will see, but there is a choice here. For a filmmaker, there is a choice “between two ways of seeing, the relative, which instrumentalises the visible in the service of the succession of actions, and the absolute, which gives the visible the time to produce a specific effect,” (Ranciere 2013, pp. 26). The first shot of Tarr’s *Damnation* is an example of the latter here, and how Tarr positions his viewers within his films. By holding long establishing shots, and cutting away very little throughout his films, the cinema of Bela Tarr becomes largely perspective. In comparing the works of Bela Tarr against more Hollywood centric filmmakers such as Hitchcock, it is clear that he is not concerned with setting up a place with establishing shots where actions take place. If we were to take the opening sequence of Hitchcock’s *Psycho*, and compare it, the differences in approach become very apparent. The first few shots of *Psycho* very carefully set up a sense of place before introducing us to its characters. There is even text that pops up on screen letting us know the name of the large city that we are seeing. In contrast, Tarr’s characters always appear in the film first, as people who are trapped in unforgiving landscapes that are revealed slowly in their intensity, and his films become a “matter of seeing what they see, for the action is ultimately only the effect of what they perceive and feel,” (Ranciere 2013, pp. 27).

*The Turin Horse* is a film that cares so little about conventional storytelling, “apart from conveying the characters and their daily existence,” (Rosenbaum 2011, pp. 48) and this is entirely the point. What Tarr does is instead of driving the plot action by personalising the conflict, he chooses to externalise it between the landscape and the two living within it. There is a scene in which, amid the increasing harshness of the windstorm, they attempt to escape the farm with the horse, but turn around and return back to the small
farmhouse. They are defeated by the storm outside, and are driven back into the darkness of the house. For Rosenbaum, Tarr’s approach of externalising conflict creates an entirely different kind of narrative; one that he suggests makes sense if we “redefine storytelling as what the camera does whenever it moves,” (Rosenbaum 2011, pp. 50). Amongst its bleak representation of existence and the meaninglessness of death, the camera and mise en scene act in framing the conflict as externalised. Tarr, in this sense, despite the idea that no real big moments of action occur throughout the film, uses his techniques in mise en scene and the long take to communicate his narrative in a way that disregards regular action between opposing characters. His particular style sets out to “communicate the severe monotony of peasant life,” (Lawrenson 2011, pp. 66) and the inevitability of an approaching death.

**Darkness and Shadows: The Lighting Style of A Difficult Survival**

A simple lighting technique that Tarr uses in this film is high contrast low-key lighting, which creates a visual dichotomy between brightness and darkness throughout the narrative. This technique can be simply explained as the use of “strong black and white contrasts and deep-focus staging,” (Kovacs 2013, pp. 72) resembling that of a film noir visual style. The inside of the house is full of shadows, while the brightness of the outside landscape blasts through the windows. There is a gas-powered lantern that the two use to light their dim and dark farmhouse at night that consistently keeps burning out after showing glimmers of light in the darkness. During one occasion when the lamp flickers out, the daughter asks the question, “what is this darkness, papa?” (Rosenbaum 2011, pp. 48) which goes unanswered in the immensely
suffocating silence. This is one of the very few lines of dialogue spoken in the film, especially by the daughter, and seems to speak directly to, and highlight, this technical use of light as a motif within the film.

This expressionist lighting approach renders the interior as bleak as the outside landscape. The darkness of the interior and the brightness of the exterior is always a constant reminder of the harsh terrain and its dominance, maintaining the consistency of the idea that the world outside is hostile. Throughout the film the outside is usually completely white, and the characters when outside are completely pushed to black, silhouetted against the sense that there is nothing beyond the rural farm. This works in creating a sense of emptiness and isolation, showing the pair as completely separated from any remnant of outside life. The way Tarr chooses to light and expose the exterior of the house creates a visual separation. Just like a high contrast technique builds a separation between bright and dark, in the same way, it works in building a visual wall around the two that suggests that anything beyond the farm is impossible to reach; they exist outside of culture, in a sort of nowhere space, detached and despondent from anyone else. Tarr’s sophistication in this allows him to use light and the absence of light in order to further build a representation of the intangible idea of both life and death. This brightness of the external world can then be viewed in a more analytical context, as if it were to act in representing the idea of survival, as seen through the films central action of the characters performing daily tasks on the farm in order to sustain themselves.
The most notable example of this is the many repeated actions throughout of both characters leaving the house to collect water from the outside well, to only return into the bleak interior of the house once obtained. This idea leads one to believe that brightness in Tarr’s film stands for the idea of living, no matter how bleak and difficult their type of living may be. This contrasts heavily within the interior of the small farmhouse, where the characters are left in darkness, where they usually sit in the pools of bright light that enter through the windows, as seen in Image B and Image F, as if longing for life to enter their own lives, or merely staring out at the windstorm in recognition of its dominance. In the same way the light outside represents a way to live, the darkness inside the house can represent the opposite. As the storm gets stronger, the characters are forced to stay inside longer, unable to collect water, tend to their land, or go outside at all. The horse refuses to work or eat, and the two can no longer perform the daily tasks that they must do in order to survive. This forces them to become more and more confined to the darkness of the house. Eventually, as the gas-powered lantern slowly fails to stay lit throughout the film, they give up. The darkness inside the farmhouse seems to grow steadily, slowly engulfing the two as they approach their deaths.

Trapped by the storm outside, they are left in almost complete darkness. In the last few scenes of the film there is just enough light to see both characters as if they were grey shadows barely existing. This is truly where “the viewer can experience the incredible sophistication of Tarr’s lighting technique,” (Kovacs 2013, pp. 90). The last two shots of the film cement this.
idea along with the fate of the two characters, illuminating a strong connection between theory and film form. The daughter, like the horse, refuses to eat, despite her pleading father, choosing to starve herself to death instead of survive. This is a brief reminder of Seale’s case study, signalling the daughter’s acceptance of death, and her attempt to control her loss of self, as they are unable to operate the farm as they usually would. She feels no more need to live once everything around them seems hopeless and lost in the dull ache of nothingness. The gas powered lantern slowly burns out, as the house fades into complete blackness, signalling an end to the film, and perhaps an end to the two lives as they are finally engulfed in the darkness. It is no coincidence here that Tarr intentionally chooses to fade to black during the last shot of the film. The absence of light represents an absence of life, and so it can be surmised that “lighting becomes a central effect,” (Kovacs 2013, pp. 90) in representing the inevitable idea of death and dying. Tarr is able to implement a very simple lighting technique of harsh contrasts, and of lights presence and absence, in order to mimic the bleak environment and the death that it brings to the two characters.

A Moment in Time: Tarr’s Camera, and how it is Capturing the Farm

The most striking feature about Tarr’s film is the fact that it is only made up of thirty or so shots. While Tarr is known for his use of lengthy takes, there seems to be a certain evolution of this in The Turin Horse. The average shot length is four minutes, “almost eight times longer on average,” (Kovacs 2013, pp. 91) when compared to his first feature film. From the opening shot, it is clear what Tarr’s stylistic intention is in telling this story, and so it is the length of his shots that also becomes integral to how the story is being told. It becomes a big aspect of how the sense of place is being set up, becoming an important aspect of how Tarr communicates “an atmosphere or a feeling in his films,” (Kovacs 2013, pp. 92). Throughout his work, there has been a consistent increase in shot lengths, and whether this has been intentional or not, when considering The Turin Horse this stylistic choice enables Tarr to communicate his feelings on death and mortality in an often difficult visual capacity.
Tarr’s long take style is not necessarily only concerned with holding on moments for an extended period of time, but seems to relate back to his distinct way of telling a story through atmosphere and laboured situations. Song Hwee Lim of the University of Hawai’i describes Tarr’s work as fitting into a filmic movement known in film studies as *cinematic slowness*. This is the idea that refers to filmmakers who prefer to represent time as an actuality to be felt, rather than to be cut through rapidly. To reference Tarr’s cinematographer, Fred Kelemen, about their own approach, they “believe in time and not in speed, atmosphere and situations rather than stories,” (Lim 2014, pp. 20). This idea of slowness can be aptly applied to understanding how the camera operates within the world of *The Turin Horse*. At first glance Tarr’s camera becomes a “literal form of temporal realism, which collapses real time,” (Lee 2013, pp. 21) so the viewer experiences exactly what the characters do, and how they exist within the landscape. Following his characters in every movement that they make, and action that they carry out in real time, ensures that there is a level of reality to the situation, and that each moment of crushing isolation is felt. The long take style helps to communicate the burden of their isolated lives, and of the farm, as something that the audience should feel anxious about. Witnessing it without any breath in between becomes important. It is essential to feel the gravity of this type of living if you are to understand its downfall.

*The Turin Horse,*
*2011, Bela Tarr*

Watching a man slowly walk to the kitchen and boil a potato in one drawn out shot without cutting produces an entirely different effect compared to watching the man boil the potato with purposeful ellipses. What Tarr is doing is building a space where the viewer is forced to watch an action unfold in
real time while also having the ability to watch every single detail presented within the space of the scene. If the film were to cut from a wide shot of the man walking into the kitchen into a close up shot of the potato being placed in the boiling water, there is an inference that what is happening to the potato is of great importance. Instead, Tarr leaves you in the wide shot, the camera always following, but never cutting. The effect is never noticing if there is an importance to what is happening, leaving you with the underlying engrossment of the importance of the space that is being inhabited over the little details. Tarr wants you to feel the weight of the space, and to be surrounded by it much like the characters are, he wants you to see it as they see it, and experience life as monotonously as they do. Within the film the camera is “mostly following the characters’ trajectories, many times turning around them,” (Kovacs 2013, pp. 90). This brings the discussion back to how Tarr and his cinematographer are further using the landscape of the film and integrating it into their film form.

The camera is an extension of the bare and empty landscape, acting as a miniature representation of life within a space that doesn’t seem to support growth or vitality. Much like the endless outside land does, it always surrounds them. Wide shots quickly change to close following shots, closing in tighter on them when they become unable to leave the house. This shot design pushes elements of anxiety and sadness into every scene. The camera sits as a force within the film that represents time both realistically, and with a high expressivity, becoming “simple remarks about the immediate environment,” (Kovacs 2013, pp. 89) and how they are stranded outside of culture, and riddled with hopelessness. The camera’s mobile movement, and lengthy choreographed shots, brings the environment into the film to become the key aspect of how Tarr sends his characters towards death. This places the viewer directly within the landscape, watching two people suffer, and builds upon Tarr’s unrelenting use of a mise en scene full of dread and sorrow.

Tarr’s compositions further help to communicate two people who are trapped by the outside while being entirely separated from it. The characters are left stranded in a nowhere space; the film is filled with emptiness, and a lack
of social construct. From a sociological viewpoint, this feeds into Seale’s analysis of modern death culture, and cements the philosophical notion of being trapped in a liminal space stripped of control over the societal and cultural self. Seale’s discussion of the cultural experience of death also matches the first stage of Booker’s plot type. This fall from culture begins our characters’ fall under the shadow of a quite literal dark power, “frozen in their isolated, imprisoned state,” (Booker 2004, pp. 204) and so kick starts their rebirth trajectory through the different stages of the plot. Although, the ending of the film is a darker and less celebratory version of rebirth, where the characters find themselves in the third and then eventual fourth stage, engulfed “in the state of living death,” (Booker 2004, pp. 204) where the only option left is starvation. The next stage, then, is submission.

*The Turin Horse, 2011, Bela Tarr*
Chapter Three

*Cinema and the Art of Dying*

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**Gaspar Noé’s Enter the Void and A Loss of Control**

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THE ART OF DYING
Gaspar Noé’s Enter the Void and A Loss of Control

An Attitude of Control

*The Turin Horse* tells of the perils of existing outside of culture, but underneath it also introduces another significant aspect of the sociology of death, the *loss of control*. A brief example of attempting to regain this control was considered when discussing the daughter’s refusal to eat, but this can also lead into a detailed analysis of death and its lack of control. Let’s consider Philippe Aries’ 1975 work, *Western Attitudes Toward Death* to use as a brief illustration into further examination of this idea. Aries points out that up until the eighteenth century, death was a significant function of public living in Western countries, and one that was widely accepted. That is to say that, while death was still a sad and tragic occurrence, the processes of dealing with it were largely more open and embracing. Over the years that proceeded, with increasing industrialisation and growing secularisation, the culture changed, and death went “from being familiar to becoming forbidden,” (Aaron 2014, pp. 1). Previous to the eighteenth century, individuals died at home surrounded by a stream of witnesses, occasionally their body remaining open for viewings for weeks at a time, compared to a modern Western culture that segregates death inside the confines of hospitals and morgues. What was once a very public ritual slowly shifted and became a private occurrence that took place behind closed doors and mourning family members.
The taboo around death is ever growing, directly affecting and fuelling how death is represented in Western cinema. In a modernist cultural understanding of death, Michele Aaron claims in *Death and the Moving image*, that “death is everywhere and nowhere in contemporary Western culture,” (Aaron 2014, pp. 1). It is her conceit that it is becoming increasingly difficult to confront the uncanny idea of dying and the oncoming nothingness that it causes. Throughout the first chapter of the work, entitled *Everywhere and Nowhere*, Aaron details the impact of this nothingness, and begins her argument on the significant effect that this culture, and the fear of death have on the way individuals conduct themselves. The reality of death is continually being hidden away from culture, and so the capacity to understand it is effectively being disintegrated. Aaron argues that this has created a stigmatised secrecy around death as “cemeteries move further away from the city, approach obsolescence as well as capacity, and hospitals hold dying at bay and far from the public eye,” (Aaron 2014, pp. 1). Thoughts of dying and of dead bodies have regressed so far from the public eye that it has inevitably become distanced, but as Aaron will argue, this doesn’t stop the control that it can still have over our lives. She argues that the basis of “the human condition is characterised by a fear of death which funds our actions but evades our consciousness,” (Aaron 2014, pp. 1). She uses this to begin her discussion on how this fear changes the way in which we watch and experience mainstream films, specifically focusing on how difficult images are understood on screen.

In her book, Aaron argues that within cinema devices are present which act, however unintentionally, in distancing the idea of death from our own sense of being. These *distancing devices* are often used in the form of graphic violence or simple melodrama, that “are about our fear not only of death,” (Aaron 2014, pp. 4) but also provide the spectacle of death that can allow the viewer to feel comfortable about their own in tact mortality. The theory is that watching others die on screen, or simply watching others threatened with death, is able to make us feel comfortable that we are not in their shoes. Visual representations of corpses may litter the frames of mainstream Western films, while violence and the vulnerability of life propel most of their fictions, but the real pain and smell of death is ignored to the point where it is
essentially nowhere in sight. While violence and corpses play a significant part in most narratives and how they unfold on the screen, “the banality of physical, or undignified, decline, the dull ache of mourning, are rarely seen,” (Aaron 2014, pp. 1). There is a level of control that is provided through the presence these devices and how they are used. From the safety of the cinema, or our homes, our own mortality is validated by experiencing the threat of death without any of the real world consequences, it is merely a form of catharsis. In considering contemporary cinema and its dealings with death in this way, that for the most part serve only in “distancing death from the self,” (Aaron 2014, pp. 4) Gaspar Noe’s psychedelic narrative in *Enter the Void* can be seen as an opposing force to this system, providing instead a representation of death rather than the thrill of the idea itself within a Western film being told through Eastern philosophies.

*A Narrative Intimately Tied With Death*

*Enter the Void* is a film that is intimately concerned with focusing its entire narrative around a character after experiencing death. While many other films use death, and the threat of death as a plot device to move the story forward, what makes this work notable is how Noe captures the experience of death and the lack of control it carries. Gaspar Noe lets the viewer sit with Oscar as “the spectral transmigration [of death] consumes most of the film,” (Norris 2010, pp. 26). The film opens up to introduce the viewer to Oscar and Linda, two Americans living in Tokyo. Close to the beginning of the film, Oscar is lured into a grungy bar named *The Void*, where he is cornered by the police and shot and killed while trying to dispose of a pouch.
of drugs. While lying on the bathroom floor of the bar, Oscar leaves his own body, and the rest of the narrative’s conflict details Oscar’s loss of control of his life and sister as he begins floating over Tokyo watching over her. As Oscar floats above the city skyline, so does the camera, poised within the perspective of the dead, projecting the film beyond Tarr’s dark meditation of the “anticipation of death [and] towards its experience,” (Aaron 2014, pp. 99).

Noe’s film effectively sets out to do exactly what Michele Aaron suggests within Death and the Moving Image. She argues a dramatic return to representing human vulnerability within cinema, and one that sees a more progressive and “hopeful future of Hollywood’s dealings with death,” (Aaron 2014, pp. 11). Noe’s film, while not existing within the Hollywood canon, can be viewed as an answer to this profound plea of vulnerability. This is not to say that these films never play with human vulnerability. What it does mean is that usually in most films, once a character is dead, the representation of this vulnerability has ended. The threat is over and the rest of the characters move on and deal with other things. Sometimes this can be grief, but the scope of what it means to die and to be dying is only ever briefly touched upon. Watching someone die and still being with other characters that inhabit that same world allows a disconnect with what we see on screen. The dying we see happening does not become our own experience, it is merely prosthetic and superficial. The vulnerability in these cases then becomes a representation of threat and catharsis, instead of detailing real life bodily limitations. Noe’s narrative, however, only concerns itself with the idea of death and specifically what happens after a character has died. He takes human vulnerability and strips all prosthetics away, and we have to succumb to being a part of an unwanted death. Oscar’s arc is losing control over his own life, both by dying, and by being separated from his sister. He moves through frustration over his death, to eventual death acceptance. It details a complete loss of control, and by utilising a few simple and very effective filmic techniques, Noe is able to coerce the viewer into experiencing their own movement from frustration to death acceptance just as Oscar does, by challenging them to be a part of someone else’s experience.
Capturing the Void: The Role of Perspective

The entire film is shot using point of view (POV) camera work, placing the film within the stylistic expression of a first person viewpoint akin to 1947’s Lady in the Lake. The entire time, even during his journey after death, the viewer is looking through the eyes of Oscar. This technique is what Chris Norris calls “the simplest formal device that has the most colossal, if not existential, impact,” (Norris 2010, pp. 27). Cinema is about evoking certain responses according to certain situations or characters witnessed within the frame, but there is a very particular psychological effect that the POV style can hold over the viewer. The role of POV shots have been theorised to be a device that can “align the viewer to a character by providing access to character subjectivity,” (Choi 2005, pp. 17). From the opening shot of the film we are with Oscar, seeing the city and his situation through his eyes, but Jinhee Choi argues that despite such a simple technique, this definition of its effectiveness and purpose is too simple. Instead Choi continues to claim that although this first person device works in encouraging “the viewer to imagine the character’s experience from the inside,” (Choi 2005, pp. 17) it is also working on a much more existential level, placing the viewer inside the characters shoes, making the experience feel like their own.

Going Beyond the Three Points of Audience Engagement

The use of POV by Noe manages to create an engaging sense of intimacy within the film despite the high concept gimmick used to frame his story. Murray Smith of Johns Hopkins University theorised there to be three ways
in which cinema works in engaging its viewer. In her paper, *Leaving it up to the Imagination*, Jinhee Choi explains these three as *recognition, alignment*, and *allegiance*. *Recognition* refers to “the viewer’s construction of a character as a unified person from the cues available,” (Choi 2005, pp. 18) on screen. The first time we see Oscar is when he looks into the mirror at himself. Besides this, the only other time we witness the face of the protagonist is when he lies dead on the bathroom floor. Other than this we do not know much about his character until the film transitions into Oscar’s memories about his sister and his parents. The visual style of the film is constructed to feel like one long conscious take that acts in separating us from Oscar as much as possible. It keeps us from getting to know him too much, and is meant to feel like the viewer is watching from inside their own consciousness. There are mimicked blinks throughout to remind the viewer that they are looking through eyes, a stream of thoughts from Oscar that narrate the beginning of the film, like him asking himself after being shot ‘I’m dying, am I dead?’ and scenes where Oscar floats through walls and buildings in order to keep an eye on his sister. Although cut together to mimic one long take, it is meant to feel much more fluid and intimately human, luring us into Oscar’s eyes and thoughts, to the point where they begin to mimic our own.

The second way is *Alignment*, which refers to how the world of the film, and its specifics, is represented. Once again, the viewer is only witnessing the world through the eyes of Oscar, so it becomes much less about objectivity than subjectivity. Noe’s floating POV camera and constantly moving frame leaves a space open for the viewer that exists in between narrative and their own ontological self. The technique within this narrative works in “simulating the character’s situation oneself and projecting one’s own emotional outputs to the character,” (Choi 2005, pp. 19). This brings in the third point, *Allegiance*. Although a very personal journey for Oscar, Noe is able to engage the viewer emotionally with the character by framing the film through this style. Every emotion that Oscar feels, we also experience, and by seeing through his eyes, we in a sense become an essential participant in the film.
A Cinema of Complete Immersion

There is an argument for the role of spectatorship in cinema when it comes to viewing death on screen. Aaron argues that no matter the kind of death witnessed within the frame, it is always impersonal, questioning “the unshareability of dying, of its place as a profoundly personal experience that cannot be communicated,” (Aaron 2005, pp. 155). The argument is that the viewer of a film can never relate to death as they have never experienced it for themselves. We can also apply Seale’s writings to further this, considering to what length he discusses dying as a personal and individualistic experience ultimately ending in a loss of all social self. This works for most films, where the emphasis on dying is more focused on the theatrics of death, and not its experience, but Noe’s film does something different. The viewer inhabits a space of death in the world of the film through Noe’s camera. If Aaron argues that most films distort death and “in doing so, it confirms the values, salves the conscious and the death fear of the spectator,” (Aaron 2005, pp. 157) then Noe’s film offers an alternate experience in death by providing the actual experience, through the use of these techniques.

Choi argues that the use of POV is thought to only render “the perpetual states of a character effectively, but not the emotional states,” (Choi 2005, pp. 19) in comparison to something like the Kuleshov Effect, where two images cut together can tell us something about what a character is feeling; a simple way to think of it is with the equation \(A+B=C\). For example, if there is a cut from an image of someone smiling, to an image of an apple, we can assume that the character is hungry. A more sinister assumption can be made if we see the same image of someone smiling that then cuts to an image of a violent crime scene. In its most basic function, the Kuleshov Effect works in telling an audience something significant about the character or situation; by giving us two shots \((A+B)\), we can easily assume the meaning or information trying to be communicated \((C)\), but this doesn’t happen in Noe’s film at all. A single POV shot in a regular film would allude to something significant within the narrative, but in Enter the Void, everything is significant and nothing is at the same time. Everything is seen as we see in real life. Doing this is exactly what allows Enter the Void to be able to operate on the emotional and intimate level that it does. The Allegiance point and the POV camera all work together to
become an application for an emotional form of immersion. Referencing the dizzying dolly-zoom shots from Hitchcock’s *Vertigo*, Choi notes the effectiveness of how a POV shot can work in enabling the viewer to “retrieve, by association, his or her actual memory,” (Choi 2005m pp. 22) bringing a fictional situation on screen up to an emotional level. In the case of *Vertigo*, this dolly-zoom technique operates with the idea that upon witnessing the effect of the shot, an individual will relate their own experience of dizziness to that of Jimmy Stewart’s. This is the same way in which Noé is engaging his audience with the idea of dying. By using this POV style, this causes the audience of the film to be placed in a situation of dying instead of watching it from a distance.

The last step of what allows the film to become a completely immersive experience can be further explained through a closer look at Noé’s use of the long take, and how it differs from others that utilise this technique. The long take can have a very specific effect on the viewer, and for a lot of films this technique has been used to introduce a form of temporal realism into the narrative, in that “the long take’s time is the event’s time,” (Henderson 1971, pp. 6). Noé abandons this, and instead of using it for temporal realism, seems to use it to introduce an otherworldly effect into the film. This allows him to seamlessly transition between past and present, and time and space, through a camera that is constantly moving and roaming. As well as placing you inside the character of Oscar, Noé also frames the film inside the idea of making the camera feel as human as possible. Montage isn’t really important in *Enter the Void*, and neither are reaction shots. Noé’s use of the long take is “always in combination in some form of editing,” (Henderson 1971, pp. 6) and the camera is constantly moving, each shot always ending in a movement into black in the form of walls, or flashing lights. Instead of seeing these aspects of the film as clear reminders that the viewer is watching a film, Noé is able to engage the audience in a way that allows the film to represent a form of embodiment within the viewer.

Aaron discusses this idea at length, coming to the determination that mainstream cinema can be thought of as a medium that has increasingly become less interested in the idea of human embodiment, where “dying, like
pain, is displaced from corporeal to psychological suffering, from experience

to inference, and from physical event to dramatic scene,” (Aaron 2005, pp.

100). The scene in which Oscar is shot is definitely dramatic, and in some

ways unexpected, but it is what Noe chooses to do after this scene. Oscar’s

vision becomes blurry, and so does the camera. After the camera pulls out of

his body, Oscar leaves as well, and the viewer, along with Oscar, begin to float

up towards the bright light on the ceiling. This is the transitional point of the

film, where it is clear to the viewer that they are no longer occupying a body

that is alive, but rather one that is dead. Noe goes to great lengths in order to

begin “expressing something beyond the self,” (Aaron 2005, pp. 102),
bringing the viewer into a space that creates an entirely new cinematic
language when dealing with death. Not a lot of films can be considered to be

about death, but Noe’s film is certainly one that is about the embodiment of

what it may be like. Noe chooses to stay with Oscar’s death long after he has

been shot, forcing the viewer to become part of an experience that places
death at the centre of Enter the Void. His use of these techniques strips away
any chance of death denial, through Oscar’s presence becoming that of the
spectator.

The Colours of Control, Love, and Death

These techniques above allow Noe to frame his narrative in a way that

intimately immerses the viewer in what is happening on screen, but he is also
able to introduce a simple narrative through-line that contributes to the sense
of association within the film. The driving force of the conflict revolves
around Oscar’s relationship with his sister, and the loving bond that they
share. During an intense flashback sequence, as he drifts through different
parts of his consciousness and memories, the two make a pact with each
other after the horrific death of their parents. This pact details their plan to
never leave each other, despite the circumstances, and even after death Oscar
tries not to break this promise. The pact acts as driving force for Oscar, and
stands as his main reasoning to regain control after death, symbolising his
social connection to the living world through his relationship with his sister.
This frames Oscar’s rebirth plot and sets up the spiritual, and very literal
journey of reincarnation that he must learn to accept as his social connection
begins to slip away.
Noe has always been interested in psychologically intrusive techniques within his films, whether that is the purposely nauseating score of *Irreversible*, or the un-simulated death of an animal in *Carne*, and “while death and sensory overload,” (Norris 2010, pp. 27) have always been of primary concern, he always finds the simplest techniques the most effective. In terms of narrative set up and execution, Noe has always favoured the simple route of storytelling, laying out his beats with an almost procedural prowess. The logic of his cause and effect timelines are always built on simplicity, with the intent being not on complex stories, but on how he can implement visually nauseating new ways of telling them. In *Enter the Void*, he is able to combine these simple filmic techniques into the story of a brother trying to regain control of the connection to his sister, allowing space for a series of events built “on humanity and how much of it film can represent,” (Norris 2010, pp. 30). In the case of Oscar, this humanity deals with the ideas of death and *rebirth*. Noe leads the viewer into a space of otherworldly wonderment through the use of a colourful visual language, where the experience of death and *rebirth* is at the forefront of the narrative and not in the background.

There is a couple of strong motifs that frame Oscar’s *rebirth* and act in foreshadowing the journey that he experiences, each of which involve Noe’s intensive and metaphorical use of colour. Throughout the film “none of the actors emote as much as Noe’s camera,” (Norris 2010, pp. 30) but he is able to expand on this by also building the language of his world around the colour that surrounds Oscar’s experience of death. This idea of colour is
introduced in two different ways during the beginning of the film, through foreshadowing what is about to happen to him. One of the opening scenes sees Oscar fall back onto his couch while smoking DMT from a small pipe. Oscar’s trip begins with sounds of children’s voices, before moving into a world of different colours floating on top of the ceiling in front of his gaze. His consciousness then drifts out of his own body, and Oscar looks back down at himself. It is no coincidence that the drug that Oscar uses is DMT, “the same chemical that the body secretes at the moment of death,” (Norris 2010, pp. 27). This is the viewer’s first indication of what is about to happen to Oscar later in the film when lying on the bathroom floor after dying.

This trip near the beginning of the film isn’t the first point at which the viewer is introduced to the thematic use of psychedelic colour. Everything that the viewer sees through Oscar seems to echo the experience of an oncoming DMT trip. The first shot is Oscar staring out a plane flying above the neon lights of the Tokyo city, (yet another clue as to what Oscar will be doing later in the film). His sister steps out onto the balcony with him, and the viewer’s gaze moves across to her as she is illuminated by the different neon lights of the city, (see image a above). Their small apartment is constantly being illuminated by the same strobing neon lights and even after Oscar finishes smoking DMT, it is “the synthetic strobe light of a ringing cell-phone,” (Norris 2010, pp. 27) that brings him completely out of his trip. Noe surrounds the viewer’s gaze with an ever present, and always changing source of practical neon lights that creates a thematic connection into the story that
intimately revolves around the effects of DMT, and its role in the body once death has occurred.

As much as Noe’s film echoes the colours of a DMT trip, there is one more thematic aspect of the film that foreshadows what is happening to Oscar after his death. Almost directly after Oscar finishes his short drug trip at the beginning of the film, his friend, Alex, accompanies him on his short walk through the streets of Tokyo. While leaving Oscar’s apartment Alex starts a conversation about a book that he lent to Oscar, Bardo Thodol, also known as The Tibetan Book of the Dead, a religious text that details the Buddhist interpretation of death and reincarnation. While walking he exclaims that after you die ‘you see these lights, all these different lights, of all different colours.’ This challenges pre conceived notions of Western ideologies and sets up the thematic intention of the film in dealing with alternative beliefs in death. The comparison between both the DMT and The Tibetan Book of the Dead creates a direct connection between Oscar’s drug trip and Buddhist teachings. Noe’s intention is to represent a specific type of death, by using an Eastern belief system opposed to other Western religions. With this in mind, Oscar’s journey through the city can be compared with what the book refers to as Bardos, which is the Tibetan word for intermediate state, or, transitional state.

There are three main bardos to consider when dealing with the Tibetan interpretation of death. The three are the Chikhai Bardo, the Chonyid Bardo and the Sidpa Bardo, or “the bardo of death itself, which brings a scintillating light of true reality, the bardo of experience, which transfigures the reality with the divine,” (Norris 2010, pp. 28) and finally, the bardo of reincarnation. As soon as Oscar has been shot and begins to leave his body, Noe is preparing the viewer “to enter Bardo number One,” (Norris 2010, pp. 28) in which Oscar begins to float over his body. In this scene, the physical manifestation of this Bardo acts as the bathroom light, which lures Noe’s camera towards the ceiling through its flickering and strobing effect. As Alex explains again, once dead, the book states that your soul will go on a journey, in which these strong sources of lights are ‘doors that pull you to other plains of existence.’ Most of the film deals with bardo number two, which transfixes itself into Act Two of the narrative, forcing Oscar to become his connection with the world and his sister.
Throughout Act Two of *Enter the Void*, Oscar encounters a series of strong strobing light sources while floating through buildings of the city, whether that is in the form of lamps, the flame from an oven stove, or street lights, “as the increasingly distorting bardos grow more primal and the memories more brutal,” (Norris 2010, pp. 28). These light sources act as transitional points within the film that pull Oscar deeper into his reincarnation and further from his sister. While he can’t help but be lured in by these states, he tries desperately at various stages to fight off his fate and to reach his sister again mirroring his battle against the *dark power* and it’s increasing shadow. His vision becomes increasingly more blurry, and nonsensical as the threat of the *dark power* reaches full force. The last section of the film sees Oscar enter the final *bardo* of *rebirth* and reincarnation, where he accepts his death. According to this final step, he is eventually reincarnated as a new born child completing the cycle of placing the viewer in an alternative Eastern perception of what it might be like to experience the act of dying.

In order to frame Oscar’s *rebirth* story on screen in *Enter the Void*, the colours from the drug mix with the colours of the Tokyo nightlife and Noe’s floating camera, placing a firm grip on how Oscar moves throughout the city. This brings the story from the third stage of the *rebirth* plot type and into the fifth and final, that of *redemption*. The *dark power* of death looms over the character’s head, the force throwing him from one stage of death to another. Oscar has no choice but to accept his fate, and gives in to the *dark power*. In acceptance, his redemption comes through reincarnation. The final shots of the film see him quite literally reborn, either involuntarily or not. Just like the
audience hands over control to Noe once inside the cinema, so to does the character he burdens so heavily with death. He has lost all control and so have we.
Chapter Four

Cinema and the Art of Dying

Paranoid Park and Death Acceptance

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Paranoid Park and Death Acceptance

The Fear of the Human Body

In Caitlin Doughty’s *Smoke Gets in Your Eyes*, she discusses at length our individual disgust and revulsion at the sight of a dead body. Doughty argues that the practices of the modern funeral industry inadvertently assist in fuelling the unshakeable fear of the corpse. The practice of the deceased being embalmed, starving off the inevitable decaying process, and then buried in a reinforced casket and placed far below the ground is described by Doughty as essentially harmful to the self, and “demonstrates our clear terror of decomposition,” (Doughty 2015, pp. 159). The more culture is hidden from any indication of death, the more comfort and reassurance there is to starve off any thought of the inevitable act of dying. This leads Doughty to consider her own experiences working as a mortician, where she claims that being around dead bodies on a daily basis slowly unravelled her own fears of death. The work provided a platform for which she became comfortable around corpses, driving her “compulsion to do more, to change how the public understood death and the death industry,” (Doughty 2015, pp. 171). This leads to her advocation of a new culture that experiences a larger, and more natural, exposure to decomposition.

The argument for a complete reform of the death industry aims at changing attitudes towards the sight of decomposition. Doughty’s aim is to undo any negative thought processes triggered by death, claiming that
“the reminder of our fallibility is beneficial, and there is much to be gained by bringing back responsible exposure to decomposition,” (Doughty 2015, pp. 164). Her argument is that if exposure to all the natural signs of death and decay are more prevalent in the way that we farewell the deceased, this will help in creating a healthier relationship with death. If the practice of embalming corpses is forgotten, along with the quick and cheaper alternative of cremation, and the deceased were instead laid directly into the dirt, left to decompose naturally, then Doughty foresees a culture that no longer suffers from severe death denial. Doughty claims, “there is nothing like consistent exposure to dead bodies to remove the trepidation attached to dead bodies,” (Doughty 2015, pp. 165) and her point here infers a reasonable argument for how a rebirth story can be resolved inside the realisation of death.

**The Rebirth of A Disillusioned Teen**

An enigmatic figure in the American Independent scene, the films of Gus Van Sant inherently explore the worlds of disenchanted and alienated youth. Van Sant’s characters are usually outsiders, or at least feel as though they don’t belong, and seem to exist only amongst circumstances that usually push them towards painful breaking points and realisations. In his 2007 film, *Paranoid Park*, made in between the instalments to his titled *True Death Trilogy*, Van Sant takes his exploration of alienated and lost youth, and places it in a story about the realisation of mortality and the maturity that comes alongside its discovery. Unfolding like the jagged memories of youth and wonderment, the film follows Alex, a teenage skateboarder disenchanted with his middle-class surroundings. One night he finds himself jumping onto a freight train with a stranger, where he accidentally kills a security guard that spots them by knocking him into the path of another oncoming train. Alex throws his skateboard away and tries to forget the situation, but a detective soon questions him and all of his skateboarding friends about the incident, forcing Alex to face aspects about the world he has been previously naive towards. While a more formulaic character arc would have Alex finally admit to the incident by the end of the film, Van Sant does the opposite. Van Sant’s approach to character arc is that the incident in question becomes internal, and it is through reflection that Alex is able to achieve growth. This internal
growth plays into the metaphorical aspect of the plot, and so the external consequences become insignificant. This sets up a unique approach to the language inside of the film.

**The Poetry and Magic of Reality**

Gus Van Sant, whether making a studio film or working on an independent project, experiments with the language of reality, and how cinematic imagery can work in revealing character. Coming from a background in painting, his style and personal approach to filmmaking demonstrates a significant interest in the evocative power of the frame. For Emanuel Levy, this becomes a significant tool in how Van Sant frames his narratives, relying instead on “the ability of visual images and evocative silences to tell stories poignantly, without reliance on language or dialogue,” (Levy 2015, pp. 200). To use Elephant and Last Days as two examples, both which include main characters that hardly utter a word, Van Sant is a filmmaker that is more interested in the ability of imagery to tell an audience about the world, or about a situation. Van Sant is someone who understands the value of non verbal language, and how other techniques can be used in order to tell the stories of those who feel lost and are trying to understand the world as it unfolds around them. Jamake Highwater explores a little about how dialogue is treated in Van Sant’s work, and notes that he recognises that language limits certain scopes of communication, and that although language allows us to express ourselves, “it also predetermines what we are able to express,” (Highwater 1999, pp. 61). This paired with his expressive use of framing and sound, creates worlds that play out more like a reflection of life, and not a falsified version of it, and it’s intricacies. The same can be said for how Alex experiences the situation around him, and how Van Sant frames it within the poetic and rhythmic world of skateboarding teens and runaways.

**The Importance of Imagery**

Dialogue is usually of second importance in Van Sant’s films due to its visual limitations, and the same occurs in the world of Paranoid Park and how the world is communicated to Alex. In the film, the importance of imagery and other sounds, such as music and location sounds seem to consistently drown out any dialogue that could drive the narrative forward. In discussing this style Highwater claims, “a great deal of human interaction is just such a
stifling of visionary expression,” (Highwater 1999, pp. 61). This is exactly how Alex experiences the world, and how he communicates with other people. Alex rarely talks, and while we hear other characters talk, it is never really about the story or arc that Alex is undergoing. The only form of dialogue that it presents that does drive the narrative forward is through Alex’s narration that is provided by him while writing down a letter about the situation as a personal diary entry. This vocal sound bridges the rhythmic and jagged editing that is present within the film, allowing the narrative to unfold like a series of memories. Alex’s narration is paired with moments in the film where Van Sant also juxtaposes this bridging technique by pausing on a shot, something that he often experiments with, yielding “powerful moments that deliberately disrupt the flow of his narratives, preventing them from being too smooth or too easy to digest,” (Levy 2015, pp. 201). This is a technique that is used to highlight certain beat moments in the film, but it is also used sparingly throughout to replicate Alex’s gaze within the world. It is almost like he is watching what is happening to him, and while reflecting on the situation, is getting caught up in the all the little moments of the skate park

The skating sequences of the film are often slowed-down, scored by beautifully somber music and the sounds of birdcalls. Jumping between 35mm and 8mm film, the juxtaposition between each sequence plays out like Alex is contemplating what he believes to be beautiful in his life. This paired with the hallucinatory jump cuts; Van Sant creates a world within the memories of the narrator that

*Paranoid Park, 2007, Gus Van Sant*

THE ART OF DYING

*Image A*
consistency feeds “the interconnected, spongy world of the Web, where chronology and context matter less than coolness,” (Ratner 2008, pp. 27). In doing this, a dreamlike enchantment is added into the narrative, one that acknowledges that words and dialogue are not as powerful in acting as cues to understand the world than actually witnessing it can be. This subverts reality into a dream like quality where words are not as important to the plot as what is being seen. Ehrenstein will argue that Van Sant does this to “shock the viewer out of audiovisual complacency,” (Ehrenstein 2008, pp. 71). This creates a space where every frame of Van Sant’s film plays out through the eyes of Alex, and so his experience captures what we see and how we inherently feel about what is unfolding on screen. Ratner will use this to argue that it is almost like Alex is watching a movie himself. Throughout the film, he even feels that he is not talented enough to skate the park, intimidated by its reputation and the other skaters, so he instead sits back and observes others, completely enthralled by the entire scene. He wants to be a part of this culture, but doesn’t feel worthy enough.

**Pausing On a Moment of Death, and A Realisation of Mortality**

Van Sant makes this point of observation an integral part of Alex’s narrative, and it even frames the way the beat moment occurs in which he witnesses the death of the security guard. As opposed to the novel it is based on, Van Sant makes the decision to also slow down at the moment of death, giving Alex the “time simultaneously to recognise his own vulnerability and unexpected power,” (Ratner 2008, pp. 27). In doing this, the moment of death is highlighted, and Alex is left in a situation where he is...
able to witness the power and vulnerability of mortality. This happens at the structural midpoint of the film, when a detective is questioning Alex and his friends over the death of the guard. The frame holds on both Alex’s gaze, and that of the detectives, before we see what unfolded that night at the train yard through the memories of our narrator. Pausing on these shots, both on Alex and the detective, allows a powerful beat moment to be established, and although the narration of Alex allows us certain information, he never tells himself what happened with words. Instead, the events of that night with the security guard is only established by imagery, and highlighted by a break in narrative. He is unable to communicate to himself with words what he has done, and so Van Sant chooses to show it instead, understanding that imagery is more suited to expressing what is unknown to Alex as he struggles “under the weight of knowledge for which tendon has no categories,” (Ratner 2008, pp. 26). In an argument for death, for Alex, the act of witnessing and experiencing imagery is at the centre of understanding how to grow up and deal with mortality.

The first time in the film that the death is shown on screen, is also the first time that Alex acknowledges the death. For this to happen, the detective investigating the incident shows Alex and his friends a picture of the dead body in class, in hopes that any of them hold any information. Up until this point in the film, Alex remains numb and uncommunicative with the accidental death, and other than a slight moment of panic when seeing a news story about the incident appear on television, he “remains absently present, passivity his greatest defence,” (Ratner 2008, pp. 29). It is only after
having a picture handed to him of the gruesome body, that the film pauses, and the incident is shown in full on screen, along with Alex’s narration finally acknowledging what happened. While his friends react with shock to the picture in a more comic sense, laughing and gasping, as if they are watching a viral video, Alex excuses himself from the class and ends up in a bathroom stall, being sick. It is the first time in the narrative that Alex is confronted by mortality and the mangled body of the security guard. Van Sant uses the idea of the photograph to highlight the power of the image, even framing the entire narrative around a culmination of carefully thought out and abstract visual cues, and more specifically in Alex’s world, the power of the image of the dead body.

**The Redwoods and Death Acceptance**

The chapter in Doughty’s book entitled *The Redwoods* acts as the final realisation of Doughty’s own understanding of death. In her argument, never has there been a culture “that has broken so completely with traditional methods of body disposition and beliefs surrounding mortality,” (Doughty 2015, pp. 214). She contributes the fear of death to its definition as the loss of meaning, and claims that dying should instead be associated with providing meaning. She herself suffered from the fear of death, but overcame it by exposing herself to its reality within her work and her research. Doughty’s argument is that it is only by confronting the fear of death, that others can achieve the same. Taking the initial step to recognise mortality means taking the initial step towards self-discovery. This explanation is broad and arguably tangential, but throughout her work in a crematorium and her subsequent research, Doughty isn’t afraid to exclaim that by facing her fear, she was able to take control of her own mortality. Doughty argues for a change in death culture, shrouding off any negativity associated with corpses, and provides a work that aims at “getting to the hard work of facing the inevitable,” (Doughty 2015, pp. 217).

This theory of Doughty’s can be applied to thinking about Alex’s reaction to the picture of the dead body. It is not until he witnesses the overly graphic, and exaggerated gore of a corpse that he begins to
undergo his own journey of *rebirth* and acceptance. In this way, Alex’s journey is not unlike Doughty’s real life experience. There is only one significant difference, and that is the idea of guilt and responsibility, something that the film doesn’t really care about addressing in any sort of conventional or straightforward way. Guilt and responsibility seem to act more as a metaphoric propeller into a journey towards his acceptance and self growth. Structurally, the act of causing the death acts as a narrative push into plot point one. Though, in remembering Van Sant’s unique approach in representing growth, plot point one moves Alex into contemplation and not trouble with the world of the law, and this is why his journey is so significant. The story operates in this world of acceptance, focussing in on self growth and not the moral consequences involved. More importantly, Van Sant is able to focus more on the inner meaning for the character and focuses the arc around this, and not on the external effects caused.

His reaction upon seeing this image is the most emotion that Alex shows throughout the narrative. After this, his numbness and his ability to dissemble now holds a different context within the rest of the film. This highlights once more, the importance of imagery to our capacity to understand the world and how it shapes our experiences. Van Sant uses his visual ambiguity and ethereal soundscape to communicate this, creating tension between what Alex does, and how his mental state is reflected within the narrative. An example of this is in the post death scene in Jared’s car, Alex’s equally uncommunicative and quiet friend, “whose head, as he questions Alex about
his new skateboard, appears huge,” (Ratner 2008, pp. 29). Increasingly abstract and void of structure, Van Sant uses this to play up the sense of alienation around Alex. He is faced with the visualisation of death, and so is forced to confront it alone. After facing mortality, he must come to terms with its meaning while outside of his culture.

**Causing a Death, and Experiencing a Return to Life and Culture**

Throughout the rest of the film, Alex must learn to deal with what he has witnessed, and what he has done. There is a focus on showing the beauty in Alex’s life, sometimes through the dream like skating montages, and although he is for the most part numb, the disturbing focus on the meaning of causing a death is always present. Van Sant creates a strikingly beautiful film, but Ratner claims that “its beauty is all about numbing, about shutting out what doesn’t jibe with the smooth ride American life is meant to be,” (Ratner 2008, pp. 31). In this way, Van Sant’s film is as much about rejecting death as it is about accepting it, and not necessarily the responsibility of its causation. Alex is aware throughout the film that life is bigger than he is, and so is forced to question the meaning of one death compared to the many others that occur on a daily basis, and whether or not he is right is doing so, he never really owns up to the responsibility of what he has done. Instead, he uses the experience to grow and to learn about the world, the skate park becoming “a cure for his experimental deprivation,” (Ratner 2008, pp. 30). It doesn’t matter if Alex takes responsibility for his actions or not. This is not the point that Van Sant is trying to make, and it certainly isn’t what the film is about.

Van Sant looks past the facts and realities of the world in order to “compound events one upon another, creating a new reality, a revelation, that is somehow more than the sum of its realistic parts,” (Highwater 1999, pp. 63). The film is about how Alex’s actions change him, and how they shape and mature his views on death and mortality. It is about how an external experience and exposure to the realities of the world can also bring upon a realisation of its beauty. The film ends with Alex still with his same friends, skateboarding and hanging out, but with a new sense of belonging to what he felt so separate from earlier in the film. One could make the argument that he has matured beyond his peers, but with this maturity he is also able to feel like he belongs to them, and that he is now able to consider himself a part of a
certain culture that he didn't quite understand before. He throws the letter he had written about the incident into a bonfire by the sea, accepting his place back within culture, not letting this metaphorical death defeat him. In the case of Alex, he uses the death to return to life, this time with more understanding and maturity than he had previously held. The film charts a journey towards acceptance, both within death, and within the living. He begins the story as a disillusioned protagonist, burdened by the shadow of the dark power of death, and finishes his journey liberated. Not unlike Doughty, he is able to achieve a new beginning within culture and how to understand his place within its confines. This brings the story of Alex to the final stage of rebirth. Alex is able to gain redemption by accepting death.
Chapter Five

Cinema and the Art of Dying

Script Development and Conclusion: ‘Dark Circle’

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A New Kind of Story

The more I studied and wrote about these films, the more I started to recognise that the three discussions proposed a clear beginning, middle, and end of a rebirth plot. If we were to take Booker’s analysis of the rebirth plot type, and define it literally with the idea of on-screen death, a sociological viewpoint of telling stories about dying can be applied as a character that first falls under the shadow of the dark power of falling from culture, then struggles to overcome this due to a loss of control. Eventually, the character achieves rebirth through death acceptance and obtains redemption. More clearly, it began to bring about the validation of telling stories about death, rather than just writing about a search for this validation. In each of these films, an intimate link can be drawn between death and the rebirth it can provide for those that experience the grief around its experience. It is within these stories, and how they are told, that one can confront the lonesome feeling of non-existence. Out of this, the argument becomes one for life through the recognition of dying. A character can work through a death on screen, to provide for themselves a new appreciation and understanding of life. A protagonist can find liberation. The next step then, is to put it to the test. I had to figure out how to tell a story dealing with these concepts, that implemented this specific philosophical beginning, middle, and end.
In my mind, there was only one place to start when utilising what I had learnt from Booker and these films, and that was to revisit Doughty. Through Doughty’s thoughts on exposure, her writings further plant the seeds for a narrative that wishes to be focussed on death and *rebirth*.

A Story Revolving Around the Stench of A Body

Considering *Paranoid Park*, and what Doughty has to say about the benefits of witnessing a visual death, it was obvious that the story of my own film had to revolve solely around the sight, smell, and feeling, of a deceased human body. The idea going into developing the script was to make this body, it’s physical appearance, it’s smell, transcend narrative and create weight throughout the film, acting as a catalyst and the *dark power* into an exploration of a *rebirth* story with death as the main means to personal growth. This proved to be a lot more difficult, both practically and narratively, to pull off than was originally thought. First of all, the concept had to be that the reality and sight of the death would hopefully feed into the isolation trying to be built into the narrative, resulting in these characters being placed within “a culture of death denial,” (Doughty 2015, pp. 165). The script ended up being largely minimalistic in story, but the idea uses the foundation of the *rebirth* plot type, and would purposely
rely heavily on tone and atmosphere. The synopsis of my script is as follows: ‘Two teenagers find the body of their friend in an abandoned house, and wander the streets of their run down neighbourhood trying to figure out what to do or who to tell.’ Set up within this story is two main characters, Amanda and Joel, who both have different ties to their dead friend, and who each act differently in the face of mortality and death.

The exposure to the dead is what causes the central conflict of the narrative, as they attempt to navigate what to do with the body of their friend. Amanda attempts to work through the sight of a dead body by leaving the liminality of the world she is in, and by implication acknowledges death. Joel’s reaction is the complete opposite. He is the representation of death denial in the film, and instead tries to hide himself further in this liminal world, choosing to go to a party and get lost in hedonism rather than facing up to what has happened and dealing with the loss like Amanda tries to. Taking cues from Aaron’s work, my film will attempt to combat the argument of mainstream cinema’s displacement of death. The representation of death will not be one of denial, but will be one where the “commitment is to the individual’s experience,” (Aaron 2014, pp. 160). Specifically, the experience of grief, and the level of acceptance that can be gained through a recognition of this loss. This will be done in the way that death is visually apparent in the film, and how Amanda is confronted by its reality.

‘Dark Circle’

Amanda feeling alone in Alex’s house.

Matt Burns, 2017.
In considering the works of both Doughty and Aaron, I wanted Amanda to be challenged with an opportunity to accept her own mortality in a situation where she is able to face the reality of decomposition and decay, similar to Alex is *Paranoid Park*. At first, she will react to the dead body the way she has been taught to, in repulsion and fear. In initially acting this way, the work will consider Doughty’s argument that “a culture that denies death is a barrier to achieving a good death,” (Doughty 2015, pp. 232). However, by being placed in a situation where she has no choice but to confront the unconscious fear of mortality, she will be forced to deal with the real stench and sight of death, while feeling the real pain of grief. Amanda will be confronted with the reality of death, just like Aaron wants audiences to be. Amanda’s arc in the film will attempt to build on what Alex does in Van Sant’s film. While Alex avoids any real responsibility, Amanda’s struggle is in trying to be responsible while recognising the fault in Joel’s behaviour about the situation. I have tried to represent a feeling in the film that borders on acceptance, but ultimately ends up being about self reflection. She is actively searching to construct meaning out of a situation that may have none, while questioning the role of a spectator to their surroundings, and searching for her own sense of growth. Specifically, I have tried to tell this story using this same pattern; the relationship between death and *rebirth*. In this story, the death is the representation of the *dark power* and her recognition of this is an integral part of the character’s own *rebirth* and acceptance.

‘Dark Circle’

*Joel at Party*

*Matt Burns, 2017.*
While confronting the reality of death, and the real numbing pain of mourning is the main purpose of my own film, this feeds back into Seale’s claim that the fear of death is aligned with the fear of a fall from culture. Seale’s analysis of how individuals react to death within a social context will create the central arc for Amanda, and how she reacts towards the situation of finding the dead body of her friend in the beginning of the work. The character of Amanda is built on the idea of these fears. She will be afraid and concerned of dying, and will use her own cultural friendships to inevitably try and protect herself from this threat in order create her own meaningful version of death. Amanda’s character will be attempting to take control of her own death, in a more metaphorical sense. In framing the script in this way, Seale’s analysis will be considered, and compared to the situation of Amanda and her friends attempts to reaffirm their own lives, while being separated from the culture of the society around them. This social context is an important aspect that will be introduced into the story of the work.

A Cultural Aspect

The most intriguing aspect of the film became the idea about implementing this separation from society and culture, and what role this plays in experiencing a death. A challenging part of the script writing process then became how to visually represent this separation, or fall from culture. The idea was to show it through having signs of life around, but never seeing anyone else on screen but the few characters of the same age that sometimes fill the background at significant locations (the skate park and the party). The two teenagers are growing up in a seemingly run down and dishevelled neighbourhood where they have to attempt to take care of themselves. No adults or parents are ever seen in the film, except for one. The scene in which Amanda and Joel go to their dead friends house, Alex, in order to tell her mother that she had died, highlights this. When they get there, no one is home, and even after waiting well into the night for the mother to turn up, it doesn’t seem that she ever will. The sounds of cars driving by in the distance and down the main roads can be heard throughout the film, but no car ever stops. This was a very intentional decision to separate Amanda and Joel and make them seem isolated after experiencing the death in the film. Amanda and Joel are thus placed in a
culture and society that feels very empty and separated from the rest of the world.

The exception to this is having Alex’s mother eventually show up in a later scene, providing an opportunity for a real world connection to the death. After Amanda leaves the house and Joel decides to stay behind to keep drinking and smoking, Alex’s mother stumbles through the doorway. She is the only adult figure that you see in the film, and she acts just as immaturesly as Amanda and Joel. This was initially placed in the film as a simple, and dramatic way, of showing how Joel cannot face the idea of death, and chooses to instead reject it, locking himself in Alex’s room and choosing to escape the situation. While this works, I also think it provides a greater conceptual idea. The mother stands for a representation of death, she holds no authoritative power over our two characters, but what she does do is provide a physical representation of a connection to the dead body that both characters try to confront, and that Joel inevitably chooses to avoid.

The only other people that you do see are either the young skaters, or young partygoers that presumably fit into the sub culture that Amanda and Joel once occupied but now seem detached from. None of these young teens notice them in any of the scenes they are presently in the background for; they are just doing their own thing in their own groups.
In this way, they are experiencing a fall from culture. Amanda and Joel are only spectators in watching what they are now separated and isolated from. They are stuck in a liminal space. This is why Amanda is watching the skaters at the end, trying to come to terms with the death and trying to find a way back into life and out of liminality, while Joel choosing to go to the party can be a representation for him accepting this fall from culture, similar to Ohlsdorfer’s daughter in The Turin Horse choosing to starve herself to death, only he chooses alcohol and excessiveness. Both are forms of acceptance, but only one is redemptive. Having this culture so far removed from the main part of the film was integral to telling this story. The culture they identify with is distanced, and in the background of the film, and it is up to them to try and navigate this distance, for this is the quintessential question of the film.

**Challenges in Creating A Good On Screen Death**

There were many technical and conceptual choices that were made over the course of the making of this film. A lot of these choices changed over time, and were replaced with new choices. But, this change is what is so essential to the creative process. The intention was never to strictly create a story that fell into the recesses of perfect structure and textbook storytelling. Yes, this is an important factor to my growth as a filmmaker, but the film’s aim was always to feel more like a tone poem, or a fever dream, a series of moving images that felt like you were entering these teenagers lives without context, experiencing something with them, and then leaving them more contemplative rather than satisfied that everything had been carefully wrapped up. The choices the two characters make, or fail to make, are not meant to make sense, and this is exactly what the film is about. They are not supposed to be understood. After all, what they are dealing with isn’t easy to understand, or to face, and that is the thesis of the film, and of my experience doing the research. Amanda doesn’t completely overcome her fears of dying, I will admit that it will never be that easy, but rather the film is meant to provide the room for growth. As I see it though, what she does have at the end of the film is understanding, and the ability to comprehend her fears for what they are, and this leads her on a path to redemption and death acceptance. There is a level of ambiguity and angst inside the story that is meant to make it feel loose and
brooding. There are no clear answers here, there is only raw feelings. The film is the feeling of nothing, and the fear of that nothingness.

I believe that there is a certain success to the film feeling tonally solid in this way, like it has a strong feeling and atmosphere to it, but there is something that will constantly eat away at me, and something that I will take into each and every film I try to make from now on. Looking at my own film, I feel that it ultimately fails at what it sets out to do. It straddles a fine line, and falls to its own death. But, I have come to learn that this is okay. Experience is growth, and just like Amanda grows in the film, I feel like my abilities and knowledge as a filmmaker have as well. The experience taught me more than I ever expected, and forced me to face two things that at the start of this course were still terrifying to me; mortality, and trying to make a good film. What I should have done is focus more on grief. I should have tried to focus more on the characters relationships before the grief set in, rather than focus on the loose ambiguous feeling felt after the death. Perhaps if I had done this the film would be better, and it is fair to say that conceptually it all got away from me a little during the making, but I still feel that what was made is worthwhile. It allows a certain space of contemplation to take place, and makes these theories on death a lot clearer for me to think over, and to process. At the very least, it stands as an interesting experiment in implementing a character arc that utilises the three sociological concepts discussed. Making a story around a character that experiences falling from culture, a loss of control, and eventual death acceptance framed around death as the representation of a dark power is ultimately an effective implantation of the rebirth plot type.

What is left to contemplate?

Aaron says it best in the closing few chapters of Death and the Moving Image. In the sixth chapter of the book, entitled Watching Others Die: Spectatorship, Vulnerability and the Ethics of Being Moved, Aaron sets out to seek a new alternative to representing death, one that goes against the mainstream in disavowing, and displacing dying. In seeking this alternative Aaron explores “how film conveys the experience of dying to allow it to be shared in,” (Aaron 2014, pp. 156). She is questioning the validity of the
mainstream in distinguishing the representation of a real death, and not one that has been manufactured to be heavily censored and disavowing of vulnerability. Aaron discusses the implications of films that “rather than turn away from death, rather than deny, deform or degrade its realities, turn towards dying, real dying, and dwell there,” (Aaron 2014, pp. 157). Aaron puts out a call for hope in the future of mainstream cinema, a challenge that contextualises mainstream cultures attitude towards death, and calls for a more realistic representation of what death is really about, and the real consequences that it causes.

I personally have to agree with both Aaron, and Doughty. There needs to be a call to action within the mainstream to treat the reality of death with more respect, and more perspective. This project started with me wanting to make a film about death. It was never certain where this would lead me, but I was able to find three authors, and three films that question our notions on mortality, and force us to face something that is inevitable. In her discussion about creating meaning in the form of relationships or achievements, Doughty states that “we can not possibly live without a relationship to our mortality,” (Doughty 2015, pp. 215). We have to face up to it, acknowledge it, accept it for something that is part of our reality. I am going to end this conclusion somewhat romantically. All it comes down to is facing our fears about the world. This research was quite daunting at the beginning, death is not easy to look at, but the more I dared to challenge my own thinking, the less I felt alone and isolated inside of my feelings. We are not alone in our fear of death. In our culture it’s a persistent source of existential dread, but if we start challenging acts of death denial, we may come to recognise how an acknowledgement of our futility can greatly impact the way we live our lives.

In crafting this story, I started with an idea about the possibilities of the rebirth plot type, and attempted a dissection of what may be a new way of interpreting what this plot type can achieve. In doing so, I have noticed the vital aspect about this link between rebirth and death that I had not previously seen. This pattern that I have recognised fits. The formula of the plot type reflects itself in all the films analysed. In each their is disillusionment, the shadow of a dark power, and varying forms of liberation.
and acceptance, whether in actual death, in the Buddhist interpretation of reincarnation, or in understanding and contemplation. In using death though, the argument becomes one against the use of basic formula, and a new, simpler realisation becomes apparent. The answer here is not that this is a new way of telling a story about death, but that the use of death itself, can act as a means to obtain a personal form of growth, and that the most natural way for stories to achieve this is through the prism of a rebirth plot.

To leave you with contemplation, I want to quote Socrates, who said in a speech once, “to fear death is no other than to think oneself wise when one is not, to think one knows what one does not know. No one knows whether death may not be the greatest of all blessings for a man, yet men fear it as if they knew that it is the greatest of evils,” (Cooper 2000 pp. 51). Socrates is right. If we fear death so much as to hide from it, then it is impossible to really know how we will feel when the curtin of fear is lifted, and how much better this realisation may impact us while amongst the living. Let us take what Socrates says to heart. Let’s try and find joy and growth in the feeling of innate emptiness. Personally, I have found this growth within myself, and I am going to try answer these authors calls by continuing to make engaging stories about death and denial by embracing the rebirth plot type.
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