FADE TO BLACK:
PICTURING MORTALITY IN CONTEMPORARY POPULAR FILM

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BY
CURTIS MALOLEY

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ABSTRACT

This thesis attempts to understand representations of death in contemporary popular film within a framework that posits mortality as a category of particular social and political importance for the way we understand both individual subjectivity and social responsibility in the postmodern cultural moment. It addresses concerns over the social organizing categories of time and space, and performs a sustained consideration of predominant themes related to the popular representation of death, such as contingency, existential meaning, and temporal finitude. Death consciousness and social consciousness are shown to be not just intertwined, but also vitally dependent on one another, and the analyses undertaken are ultimately aimed at making these intersections explicit in order to think through their potential implications for challenging consumer capitalist hegemony and envisioning the possibility of progressive social change through the lens of our mortality.
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PREFACE

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Toward a Progressive Aesthetic of Death in Contemporary Popular Film
The structure and content of what follows is somewhat unconventional for a Master's thesis. In the spirit of an Interdisciplinary Master's program in Popular Culture, I have drawn selectively from numerous methodological and theoretical frameworks in addressing the themes of death and mortality in the contemporary moment of multinational consumer capitalism. I attempt to synthesize a wide range of scholarly perspectives regarding the way we think about and experience the idea of death and the way it is pictured in popular film, including those from such disciplines as film and cultural studies, critical theory and sociology, new historicism, phenomenology, and existential philosophy.

If there is one specific logic or underlying methodology that can be said to unite the eclectic assembly of disciplinary approaches employed in this thesis, then it rests in its focus on certain recurring themes, patterns, and socio-political issues that are identified as vital to an understanding of death and mortality onscreen, and which serve as structural markers for linking the analyses of all four chapters. Concerns over the social organizing categories of time and space in the postmodern moment, for example, along with a sustained consideration of themes such as contingency and existential meaning extend through the discussions of death and mortality in each chapter. Further, at the heart of this project is the over-arching goal of attempting to understand popular representations of death within a framework that posits our mortality as a category of paramount social and political importance. Death consciousness and social consciousness are shown to be not just intertwined, but also dependent on one another,
and the analyses undertaken in the following chapters are ultimately aimed at making these intersections explicit in order to think through their potential implications for challenging consumer capitalist hegemony and envisioning the possibility of progressive social change through the lens of our mortality.

In addressing the representation of the more commonplace depictions of violent death, terminal disease, and immortality, Chapter One establishes the pervasive denial of death at the heart of contemporary popular film and Western culture more widely, and situates this denial within a larger set of consumer capitalist power relations. Particular emphasis is placed on the themes of contingency and anxiety, and on the ideological role of the cinematic apparatus itself in framing the meaning of death, both in its construction of temporality and in the consequent spectatorial subjectivity produced by the widespread proliferation of moving images in the twentieth century.

Having established some of the key theoretical concerns for approaching popular representations of mortality, Chapters Two and Three offer detailed analyses of two new contemporary popular film cycles that emerge in the 1990s and that uniquely engage the themes of contingency, existential meaning, and temporal finitude in the narrative context of death. Chapter Two examines the recent use of chance and coincidence as a narrative organizing principle in a wide range of popular films that I term "synchronicity" narratives. The modern existential experience of contingency, characterized by anxiety, nausea, and meaninglessness, is re-fashioned into a worldview that understands chance and coincidence as personally meaningful, and as mysterious cosmic evidence of fate or destiny. In this context, both philosophic and cinematic imaginings of contingency are
considered as part of a larger analysis of how notions of temporal experience have shifted from a diachronic to a synchronic structure of meaning in the postmodern moment. Chapter Three extends such analyses to a second cycle of popular narrative films that Murray Pomerance has termed "elevator films." These narratives frame death within the context of co-existing, multiple, or alternate realities (once again, a synchronic rather diachronic logic of temporality) in which the idea of "nothingness" and the fact of corporeal mortality are negated altogether. Both film cycles are consequently discussed in context with postmodern theorizations of the "spatialization of time" as elucidated by thinkers such as Fredric Jameson and David Harvey, and both are shown to embody the logic of the consumer capitalist power relations from which they have emerged.

In Chapter Four, I attempt to conclude the thesis in a way that opens up, rather than closes off the analyses undertaken in the first three chapters. Having located and deconstructed the various themes and narrative imaginings of death and mortality noted above, the concluding chapter of this thesis attempts to envision a more progressive aesthetics of popular film based on the representation of death onscreen. Drawing on some of the perspectives examined in Chapter One, this final chapter argues for seeing the theme of death itself as embodying an explicit political challenge to dominant consumer capitalist hegemony. It begins the process of thinking through how popular film might contribute toward progressive social ends in its representation of existential death and the meanings surrounding mortality. After offering a brief survey of some of the key historical debates concerning what constitutes a "progressive" film, I engage numerous theoretical frames in trying to imagine precisely what a progressive aesthetic of
mortality might look like, and end the thesis by returning to themes of contingency, existential meaning, and temporal finitude in context with a close reading of a Canadian film that inflects popular generic conventions in order to offer what I argue is a progressively subversive vision of death.

In sum, the concerns of this thesis are far-reaching and assembled out of a wide array of interdisciplinary perspectives related to the study of popular culture, and they are guided at each stage by the will to understand the meaning of existential death and mortality as crucial social and political categories that carry great weight for the way we understand both individual subjectivity and social solidarity in the postmodern cultural moment.
CHAPTER ONE
Cinema Spectatorship and the Idea of Death in Postmodernity

When he asked me what view I took of death, how I imagined it, I said that the pictures would stop. Evidently I saw as pictures what Americans refer to as Experience.

Saul Bellow, *Ravelstein*

**Violence and Death in the Popular Imagination**

Armageddon (1998), and The Day After Tomorrow (2004): these are the violent images that have come to dominate death’s representation in Hollywood film.

The preponderance of violent death in the popular cinematic imagination is no doubt attributable to a wide array of factors, of which at least two come immediately to mind: first, the rather overwhelming fact that the twentieth century was one of the bloodiest in the history of humanity with an estimated 231 million people dying in wars and conflicts; and second, the subtler but perhaps more essential point that there is a certain violence about death, about the idea of having one’s existence cease, irrevocably, in an unpredictable instance not of one’s choosing. Indeed, Georges Bataille writes that death is “the most violent thing for all of us … [it] jerks us out of a tenacious obsession with the lastingness of our discontinuous being. We blench at the thought that the separate individuality within us must be snuffed out.” And yet, while there is plenty of “snuffing out” being depicted in contemporary popular film, and while this snuffing out has been given a wealth of critical consideration in a number of recent anthologies on violence, including Stephen Prince’s Screening Violence, Christopher Sharrett’s Mythologies of Violence in Postmodern Media and Steven Jay Schneider’s New Hollywood Violence, little consideration is given, either in film or in film criticism, to the social and political meanings and implications of that “separate individuality” which is being snuffed out through violent action, let alone the existential angst which once accompanied the thought and possible meaninglessness of non-being. Thus, while death is so frequently the consequence of violence in so many of our contemporary films, rarely is violence employed as a representational means of addressing the fact or meaning of
death: it is the violent-action-causing-death rather than the death-caused-by-violent-action, which assumes the brunt of our imaginative and critical gazes.

One important exception can be found in the scholarly work of Vivian Sobchack, whose essays on the treatment of death in both documentary and popular film are deserving of significant consideration in unpacking the contemporary meaning of mortality onscreen. In a piece written near the end of the revisionist period of American filmmaking in 1974, Sobchack situates the increasingly stylized and graphically violent deaths in the films of that period, such as those of Sam Peckinpah and Arthur Penn, within the political unrest and senseless violence pervading the American cultural experience of “the sixties,”^3 and in context with films of the pre-1960 classical Hollywood era. In the classical era, Sobchack argues that representations of violence occurred quickly and with little or no voyeuristic appeal: “Death was acknowledged in these films, but not inspected...it was dramatic and meaningful. Those who died did so for a reason.”^4 With their emphasis on genre categories, character-driven plots, linear narrative structures, clear causal links between narrative events, and the use of continuity editing, classical narrative films serve to construct the world as non-contingent and morally clear, situating death within prescribed structures of meaning and understanding.^5

“Our relationship with violence and death,” concludes Sobchack, “was the same relationship we had with them in life. They happened to someone else and were mildly titillating, mildly disturbing.”^6

Even when death itself is the predominant theme of a classical Hollywood narrative, as in *Here Comes Mr. Jordan* (1941) or *Heaven Can Wait* (1943), it is
generally conceived of as a personification of the mortal world we already inhabit, rather than as the dark void of nothingness that so troubled the existentialists. Ernst Lubitsch’s *Heaven Can Wait* is a particularly charming example. It opens with an elderly Henry Van Cleve (Don Ameche) just moments after he has “passed over the great divide,” descending slowly down an enormous staircase into the Devil’s den for what turns out to be a very sensible and congenial meeting with His Excellency (Laird Cregar). The grandiose room is highlighted by big red columns and an endless series of large hardcover tomes that sit on bookshelves which extend from floor to ceiling. By the end of their discussion, which occurs at the end of the film, Van Cleve learns that his fate is not doomed, but rather destined for “the main building” upstairs, and he is escorted by a cheerful bellhop waiting for him in the elevator. This vision of the after-life is, as Mrs. Edna Craig (Florence Bates) observes in the opening scene, one in which she can “still walk, and on the same two legs.”

It was this kind of presumed detachment from death that Ernest Becker, writing as he was dying of cancer in 1973, evidenced as man’s refusal to address his own mortality. In his Pulitzer Prize-winning book *The Denial of Death*, Becker revisions Freudian psychoanalytic theory in order to assert that “Consciousness of death is the primary repression, not sexuality... *this* is the repression on which culture is built, a repression unique to the self-conscious animal” (emphasis in the original). Richard C. Solomon situates Becker’s social-psychological thesis within the realm of existentialism, which had a significant influence on American youth and the counterculture of the late sixties. Becker’s thesis presumed the cultural denial of death as a consequent result of the ways
in which "Americans had so busied and buried [themselves] in the everyday world that [they] had denied the basic facts of life"—a point which echoed the sentiments of several thinkers associated with existentialism, notably Soren Kierkegaard, who wrote at length of man's abstracted relation to the idea of death, and Martin Heidegger, who put forth the argument that the only way to live an authentic existence was to embrace and face up to the reality of one's own death, to "make it one's own." Most notably, it was during the "golden age" of classical Hollywood in the 1930s and '40s that Jean-Paul Sartre, the most infamous and popular proponent of existential thought for Americans in the sixties, formulated what would become "the fundamental experience of Nausea and the cornerstone of Sartrean existentialism." Sartre observed that his theory of contingency was, in fact, born out of his movie-going experience in the classical period: out of the phenomenological "contrast between the cinema, where there was no contingency, and the exit into the street, where on the contrary there was nothing but contingency." The classical narrative films that Sartre had grown up watching were governed by a narrative necessity and causality that linked all of their elements together meaningfully, whereas the world outside the cinema revealed, for Sartre, nothing but a startling lack or absence of necessity. As Sartre's protagonist Roquentin states upon encountering a chestnut tree and the brute fact of its existence in Nausea:

The essential thing is contingency. I mean that one cannot define existence as necessity. To exist is simply to be there... I believe there are people who have understood this. Only they tried to overcome this contingency by inventing a necessary, causal being. ... Every existing thing is born without reason, prolongs itself out of weakness and dies by chance.
Woody Allen would play up the nauseated angst associated with a meaningless and contingent universe to great comic effect in so many of his films of the seventies and eighties, including *Annie Hall* (1977), which pays direct homage to Becker's *Denial of Death*, and *Hannah and Her Sisters* (1986), in which the Allen character spends the whole movie searching for existential meaning as he faces the prospect of his own death. Sobchack's thesis that the cultural experience of the late 60s and early 70s changed both representational uses of violence and phenomenological experiences of death also has its precedent in the kind of angst articulated by the contingency of Sartrean existentialism.

Both contingency and mortality would find their way onto the cultural and cinematic mindscreens of Americans in new forms in the sixties, as death seemed to temporarily "come of age" in the American imagination. In the intellectual world, it was this cultural moment that would inspire not one, but two exposés of the undertaking industry—Ruth Mulvey Harmer's *The High Cost of Dying* and Jessica Mitford's *The American Way of Death*, both in 1963—as well as Geoffrey Gorer's *Death, Grief, and Mourning* in 1965, Elisabeth Kübler-Ross's *On Death and Dying* in 1969, and both Becker's *The Denial of Death* and Philippe Aries' reputable lectures and subsequent book, *Western Attitudes toward DEATH: From the Middle Ages to the Present* in the early seventies. Meanwhile, in the public domain, gruesome images of the Vietnam war flooded the popular media; race riots erupted in the streets; student demonstrators clashed with the police and National Guard on college campuses; John F. Kennedy, Robert Kennedy, and Martin Luther King were assassinated; and suddenly, as Sobchack remembers, "Death by violence became a possibility for all of us because it lacked sense
and meaning much of the time; there was no drama and catharsis. The blood in our lives had nothing of art or distance about it and we all felt personally threatened. Each one of us could die, each one of us could bleed...we all had pink and vulnerable guts.”

Blood was not only all over the streets, but also all over commercial movie screens. Beginning with the release of Bonnie and Clyde in 1967 and most notably in films such as Sam Peckinpah’s two infamous bloodbaths, The Wild Bunch (1969) and Straw Dogs (1971), violent death became inspected in its most meticulous and gory details. As Stephen Prince observes of Arthur Penn’s Bonnie and Clyde, “The editing [in the film] juxtaposes differential rates of slow motion to extend the outlaws’ death agonies and to capture, as Penn put it, the balletic and the spastic qualities of their violent deaths.” Peckinpah would go much further in the slaughter sequences that began and ended The Wild Bunch, causing critics such as Jean Pierre Coursodon to accuse him of an “exhilaration in depicting violence,” and to read The Wild Bunch as “an orgiastic celebration of death, given and received, as the ultimate experience.” In contrast, however, Sobchack envisions the graphically violent depictions of death in these films as providing a great “kindness” to the American public of the time, as in Bonnie and Clyde, which she saw as the first major film to allow the spectator

The luxury of inspecting what frightened us—the senseless, the unexpected, the bloody. And most important, it kindly stylized death for us; it created nobility from senselessness, it choreographed a dance out of blood and death, it gave meaning and import to our mortal twitches... The once abrupt drop into nonbeing has become a balletic free fall.
While Sobchack admits to having received “no pleasure at all out of watching Straw Dogs,” she reminisces that it nonetheless “seemed to be a matter of life and death—mine—that I watch it.” Her desire was to know, close-up, “the material fragility of bodies.”\(^{19}\) In place of the narrative causality of classical films, then, the violent movies of the revisionist period offered a meaningful ballet of contingent death and violence, providing, for Sobchack, a sense of cinematic enlightenment through a rational, slow-motion inspection and cataloguing of violent death, an attempt at visual learning akin to the kind of intellectual knowledge sought after by thinkers as far back as Socrates, who first defined philosophy as “preparation for death.”\(^{20}\) Ultimately, however, any illusions of knowledge or security provided by these representations of violent death were only momentary, for as soon as one left the theatre and re-entered the mortal world, it became evident that nothing really ontologically useful could be obtained from even the most detailed and graphic depictions of violence and death.\(^{21}\) Thus, what is perhaps most significant about these representations is not only their depiction of an overt consciousness of death that seemed to penetrate the cultural era now known as “the sixties,” both onscreen with the mortal self-consciousness of so many films of the decade, and in the many popular culture books about death noted above (several of which became bestsellers), but also the desire of filmmakers, critics, and viewers alike to explore and understand, both personally and politically, the violent death that pervaded their cultural experience.

In sharp contrast to the violent representations of the contemporary postmodern period, the self-conscious stylization of death in the films of Peckinpah and Penn offered
an overtly political meaning in their rendering of death onscreen, a progressive social and cinematic response to the absurd violence of their cultural circumstance. Christopher Sharrett, for example, characterizes Peckinpah’s use of violence in *The Wild Bunch* as “deeply involved with profound humanist and antiauthoritarian concerns,” noting both a radical progressiveness “and great compassion for the human condition and the characters he created,”⁹² which is missing entirely from the popular representations of violence today. With the cultural transition from modernity to postmodernity, which most critics seem to agree was cemented in the decades following the sixties, the existential *angst* associated with modern protagonists such as those depicted in Sartre’s *Nausea* or Edvard Munch’s well-known painting “The Scream” have quickly become obsolete and even clichéd.⁹³ So too the progressive filmic voices of directors like Peckinpah staged our mortal conundrums as very much tied up with the social crises and civilizing forces of the American culture in which they were produced.⁹⁴ Instead, the emergence of what Baudrillard has termed the hyperreal culture of the simulacrum would erase any sense of contingent or mortal anxiety that may have been present for viewers in the sixties, replacing it instead with what Jameson has characterized as a cultural depthlessness and generalized “waning of affect.”⁹⁵ In place of the self-consciously politicized images of violence present in Peckinpah, contemporary depictions of violent death seem to reflect what Sharrett characterizes as a reactionary “civilization that despises history and any reasonable understanding of material reality and human needs.”⁹⁶
Even Vivian Sobchack, upon re-visiting her 1970s “memoir of death in the movies” in 1999, would observe, in tune with voices like Christopher Sharrett, a startling difference between the violent representations of death in the 60s and 70s compared with those of the 1990s. In an afterword appropriately entitled “The Postmorbid Condition,” Sobchack observes that most contemporary American films (and we could now certainly add to her discussion the medium of video games) “have more interest in the presence of violence than its meanings,” noting that, “there is no transcendence of ‘senseless’ violence: it just is, [and] those films that describe violent bodily destruction evoke no tears in the face of mortality and evidence no concern for the fragility of flesh.” Barry Grant has elsewhere echoed these sentiments, arguing that contemporary postmodern texts “tend to depict violence as insignificant fact rather than consequential act,” citing, for instance, the scene in *Pulp Fiction* where Marvin’s brains are accidentally blown all over the backseat of the car with a kind of nonchalance that inspires laughter rather than shock. An exemplary illustration of Jameson’s postmodern “waning of affect” to be sure, such a scene also highlights the insufficiency of contemporary violent representations in provoking both the self-conscious awareness of mortality that resonated so nauseatingly for Sobchack, and the progressive social criticism identified by Sharrett in the films of Peckinpah. “What has been called the ‘postmodern condition’,” concludes Sobchack, “might be more accurately thought of as the ‘postmortem condition.’ There is a kind of meta-sensibility at work here: life, death, and the movies are a ‘joke’ or an ‘illusion’ and everyone’s in on it.”
Death, Disease and the Logic of Consumer Capitalism

A second, even more striking, example of this "postmortem condition" is present in a group of popular movies which, on the surface, seem most explicitly to address the contemporary reality of our mortal condition: namely, those that deal with the representation of terminal illness. Our cultural moment is preoccupied not with civil unrest and violence in the streets, but with epidemics like HIV/AIDS, Mad Cow, SARS, Avion Flu and, of course, Cancer. It is in films about terminal disease that the issues, implications, and meanings of death seem to be given their most overt or "direct" representation in the contemporary period. Here we may consider a long and diverse list of films, including *My Life* (1993), *Philadelphia* (1993), *Outbreak* (1995), *One True Thing* (1998), *Magnolia* (1998), *Stepmom* (1998), *Man on the Moon* (1999), *Life as a House* (2001), *Sweet November* (2001), *My Life Without Me* (2003), *Barbarian Invasions* (2003), *Big Fish* (2003), and *Finding Neverland* (2004), to name only a handful of relevant examples that resonate with significant implications for the postmodern or "postmortem" relation to death.

In order to understand the meanings implicit in the treatment of mortality in these films, it is useful to note first the mythologies and discourses that construct our experience and understanding of disease in contemporary culture. Susan Sontag's study of disease in *Illness as Metaphor* offers a valuable starting point as she provides a thorough meditation on our culture's relationship with terminal illness, in particular with Cancer, which tends to dominate popular representations of dying. She notes the ways in which disease is constructed both as an Other and as a scourge, metaphorically viewed as
“the barbarian within”\textsuperscript{30}—a point that resonates strikingly with the metaphoric structure of Denis Arcand’s Les Invasions Barbares [The Barbarian Invasions] (2003), a film that explores the post-9/11 historical moment in context with the story of a man dying of cancer. Much like violent death, terminal disease is commonly understood as an unnatural means of encountering death: we are victims of cancer, we are under attack by a force that seeks to end our lives prematurely. Furthermore, disease is often conceived, in much popular medical literature, as self-inflicted, as a punishment for deviant behaviour: “Widely believed psychological theories of disease assign to the luckless ill the ultimate responsibility both for falling ill and getting well,”\textsuperscript{31} writes Sontag. Emotions like grief and anxiety, as well as manic depression, self-hate, a lack of emotional expressiveness and so on, are all blamed for causing cancer.\textsuperscript{32} Note here, also, the emphasis on how being unhappy causes a predisposition for disease in the popular imagination—a point which is particularly significant when one considers that in 1996 some 21 million North Americans were taking Prozac and other related antidepressants.\textsuperscript{33} Consider, too, the billion dollar “self-help” industry that has blossomed in the West, selling everything from herbal supplements like St. John’s Wort to an endless number of happiness programs and books such as Simon Reynolds’s Become Happy in Eight Minutes.\textsuperscript{34} Indeed, every kind of product from whitening toothpaste to face cream to orange juice is advertised under the pretense of contributing to happiness and well-being. Because happiness is pathologized as not only natural but also easily obtainable, Kingwell notes that “when we find we are not happy...we begin to think that there is something wrong with us...[and] hence the extensive therapeutic apparatus of happiness.”\textsuperscript{35} Furthermore, as Sontag’s
study reveals, the association of happiness and unhappiness with notions of terminal disease has a direct link to the ideological rationale of consumerism:

Advanced capitalism requires expansion, speculation, the creation of new needs (the problem of satisfaction and dissatification); buying on credit; mobility—an economy that depends on the irrational indulgence of desire. Cancer is described in images that sum up the negative behaviour of twentieth century homo economicus: abnormal growth, repression of energy, that is, refusal to consume or spend. 

Examples of Sontag’s theses abound in popular film. In Bruce Joel Rubin’s My Life, it is insinuated that Bob Jones’ (Michael Keaton) cancer is the product of a deep-seated anger that has poisoned him since his childhood, as well as the emotional distance with which he has approached his life. George Monroe (Kevin Kline) in Life as a House is dying of cancer too, and in his case we learn that he hasn’t had a single moment of happiness in ten years, and he has let his lifelong dream of building a house fall by the wayside, along with his family relationships. The link between terminal disease and unhappiness is similarly exploited in the name of consumer capitalism in Carl Franklin’s One True Thing, but from a slightly different angle. In this case, a dying Kate Gulden (Merryl Streep) tearfully pleads with her headstrong daughter Ellen (Renee Zellweger) to stop being judgmental and expect less from the world: “It’s so much easier to be happy my love, it’s so much easier to choose to love the things that you have—and you have so much—instead of always yearning for what you’re missing, or what it is you imagine you’re missing. It’s so much more peaceful.” Initially, Kate’s plea to surrender the desire for what’s missing in life might sound like an argument against the hedonistic
ethos of consumerism, but when considered in context with the fact that the dying Kate has lived a cultured, upper-class existence in a white American suburb and has spent her life waiting hand and foot on her distinguished professor husband and his colleagues while overseeing the local women's group, one gets the whiff of a rather frank articulation of conservative American morality. A dying woman's last stand is used as an opportunity to emphasize the importance of being happy with one's lot in life—it isn't healthy (trust this poor sick woman!) to worry about how unjust life is. The overt sentimentality of the scene completely blurs the fact that Kate's dying soliloquy has been prompted by Ellen's vocalized anger at the patriarchal oppression she experiences at the hands of her boss who speaks down to her and threatens to give her job to a "more capable" male employee, and by her father, who expects that she will step in to take care of him and entertain his guests now that her mother has fallen ill. Terminal illness and death are here exploited in the name of a hegemony that critics like Henry Giroux have seen as emblematic of the apathy produced by multi-national consumer capitalism.

"Secure in its dystopian vision that there are no alternatives," writes Giroux, "neoliberalism obviates issues of contingency, struggle, and social agency by celebrating the inevitability of economic laws in which the ethical ideal of intervening in the world gives way to the idea that 'we have no choice but to adapt our hopes and our abilities to the new global market.'" The mythologies of disease that Sontag sees as socially repressive are thus not only highly visible in contemporary popular films that address terminal illness, but issues of mortality can also be understood in this context as implicitly tied to the ideological politics of consumer capitalism.
Disease, Immortality, and the Separation of Life and Death

Related, but even more crucial to the repressive function of popular representations of terminal disease, is the tendency toward resolving questions or anxieties over mortality through overt appeals to the idea of immortality. In *Life as a House*, the presumed moral is that we live on forever in what we leave behind, as George Monroe (Kevin Kline) concludes the film in voice-over *after* his death, commenting on how he is enthusiastic about spending eternity as a house (which he built with his son as he was dying) facing the sea. In *Finding Neverland* it is the imagined space of Neverland itself that becomes the metaphor for eternal life, and in the 2001 remake of *Sweet November* Sara Deever (Charlize Theron) attempts to achieve immortality by literally attempting to deny her death. She refuses to let her boyfriend (Keanu Reeves) watch her cancer progress as it reaches its more dire stages, leaving him instead in the middle of the street, because, as she explains: “If I know I’m remembered as strong and beautiful I can face anything. You’re my immortality.” These kinds of narrative appeals to the idea of immortality certainly pervade our cultural history: most notably in religious imaginings of the after-life, but also dating back to Greek epics such as *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, which, as Michel Foucault reminds us, were “intended to perpetuate the immortality of the hero: if he was willing to die young, it was so that his life, consecrated and magnified by death, might pass into immortality; the narrative then redeemed this accepted death.”

The idea that narrative in itself could be a means of achieving immortality plays into contemporary movie narratives of death as well, perhaps most notably in Tim Burton’s
Big Fish, which explicitly appeals to the eternal life achieved through storytelling. As evidenced by Foucauldian and Baudrillardian studies of power, however, these kinds of imaginative appeals to the idea of immortality carry significant political implications and can also be understood as a product of the repressive machinery of power in modern and postmodern societies.

In the final chapter of The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1, entitled “Right of Death and Power over Life,” Michel Foucault argues that both mechanisms of power and attitudes toward death underwent a significant parallel change from the classical age to the modern period in the West. Classical political theoreticians like Thomas Hobbes, for instance, viewed power as dependent on the threat of violent death, on the power of the sword and the threat of bodily punishment, of which Hobbes believed man was primordially afraid. Under such circumstances, capital punishment loomed as the state’s greatest weapon over its subjects, and suicide, in its ability to usurp the threat of death as disciplinary punishment, its most deviant crime. In contrast, Foucault argues that power in the modern period has shifted away from the threat of death and toward the management of life: “Now it is over life, throughout its unfolding, that power establishes its dominion,” writes Foucault, and consequently death is now “power’s limit, the moment that escapes it; death becomes the most secret aspect of existence, the most ‘private.’” To summarize briefly Foucault’s argument: in the classical age death was ever-present in daily life, not only in the violent threat of sovereign authority, but also in the form of epidemics and famines over which humans had little control. But economic and agricultural developments evolving throughout the eighteenth century, along with the
emergence of “different fields of knowledge concerned with life in general” (namely, disciplines of the body such as the military, schools, and medicine) and regulations of the population (for example, demography and resource management), gave humans “a relative control over life [that] averted some of the imminent risks of death,” so that by the nineteenth century “methods of power and knowledge assumed responsibility for the life processes and undertook to control and modify them.”

State institutions exercised power and control through the “distribution of the living in the domain of value and utility,” qualifying, measuring, appraising, categorizing and organizing life into social hierarchies and by means of ideological indoctrination. Consider, for instance, the modern application of bureaucracy, which Max Weber has characterized as “a power instrument of the first order” in its ability to produce “rationally ordered ‘societal action’.”

The historical result of these processes is what Foucault terms a “normalizing society,” the “outcome of a technology of power centered on life.”

As a consequence of the shift in power noted by Foucault, the idea of death becomes naturally separated from the idea of life, as death is understood as a threat to the operations of power that seek to protect and foster life. In contrast to the classical period, suicide now becomes a topic for sociological investigation while capital punishment evolves into a contentious topic for human rights debate. It is also in this context that political doctrines, incomprehensible to the classical juridicial system, such as a “right to happiness,” begin to take form as a normalizing function of power. For Foucault, then, silence about death is less about any kind of denial or anxiety concerning it than it is about the need for power to separate the threat of death from life, to construct the idea of
life as a “plenitude of the possible” with no end in sight. As Alfred G. Killilea has observed of the contemporary American relationship to the idea of death, “Inevitably, with so much of our national history reinforcing a belief in progress, death became for us not a natural and necessary part of life but an embarrassment, a rebuke to our faith in the future.”

Jean Baudrillard draws similar conclusions about the relationship between death and power in *Symbolic Exchange and Death*. Baudrillard directly addresses the concept of immortality and illustrates how the “denial of both death and the dead,” what he sees as “the prohibition of death” in modern society, is a “primary source of social control”:

> It is not the repression of unconscious pulsions, libido, or whatever other energy that is fundamental ... it is the repression of death, the *social* repression of death in the sense that this is what facilitates the shift towards the repressive socialization of life ... The archetype of this operation is the separation between a group and its dead, or between each of us today and our own deaths.

For Baudrillard, the social separation of life and death constitutes the base of all power; it is the primary separation upon which he sees all other social separations as being based. This includes, for instance, the separation between subjects and their bodies, which Foucault has also chronicled in his many studies of sexuality, deviance, and so on; and between workers and their labour, of which Karl Marx’s writings on alienation and the “the abstractions of political economy” are particularly relevant. Political economy, like the idea of immortality, is premised on an abstraction of linear time that, as Baudrillard explains, binds time to “the process of political-economic accumulation.” Time becomes a value; and “value, in particular time as value, is accumulated in the
phantasm of death deferred, pending the term of a linear infinity of time; in the business world, of course, “time is money,” while in the mortal world we are ultimately all “living on borrowed time.”

Consequently, there can never really exist the phenomenon of “natural” death, neither on the Hollywood screen nor in society at large. Representations of characters dying of “natural causes” are virtually non-existent in popular film. An exception that proves the rule is Alexander Payne’s About Schmidt (2002), in which Helen Schmidt (June Squibb) dies of an apparent heart failure while engaging in the mundane activity of house cleaning. As the plot of the film unfolds, however, it becomes possible to infer that perhaps Helen’s heart failure was not so “natural” after all, but rather the consequence of an unhappy marriage and a (literally) “broken heart.” That it is reasonable to rationalize Helen’s death in such a manner is significant, since under the auspices of knowledge and power all forms of death can be viewed as unnatural, premature, and preventable. As Simon, Haney, and Buenteo observe, “the closer we come to explanations for many of the causes of death, the more trivial or accidental its causes appear; the refinement of diagnosis make almost all deaths unnatural, except at the aggregate level of social attributes.” The concept of “natural death,” then, is a social categorization which implies an inevitably and acceptability that pertains to the satisfaction of a certain biological capital in terms of time and manner of death. Presumably, the only acceptable death is one of “natural causes,” in old age, rather than “prematurely” by means of violence, disease, accident, or chance. Of course, this conception of a “natural” death certainly begs the question: with advances in the “life
 sciences" and technologies of cloning etc., at what age, by what means, and under what circumstances can we really accept a "natural" death? It is, as Baudrillard notes, this passing of life into life-capital that "gives rise to biomedical science and the technology of prolonging life," and subsequently, it is these instruments of power that facilitate a continued blurring of the lines between life and death. The final outcome is a conception of immortality as a general equivalent that becomes, like happiness, a principle right for all. It is in this cultural climate that a "right to abortion" or a "right to die" present themselves as the greatest threat to power, to the jurisdiction over life and abolition of death that underlies the hegemonic power of late consumer capitalism.

The 20th Century Technologization of Death

Philippe Ariès, the great historian of death practices in the West, argues that it was specifically the technologization of death in the twentieth century that occasioned the most substantial shifts in contemporary attitudes toward death. Ariès cites two practices in particular: first, the practice of embalming that evolved in the United States as part of an emerging funeral industry; and second, the "displacement of the site of death" from the home to the hospital. The practice of embalming was a means of transforming death, putting make-up on it, giving death an appearance of life. "In order to sell death it had to be made friendly," observes Ariès, and it was through practices like embalming that death could ultimately become "an object of commerce and profit." The funeral industry succeeded in abstracting the idea of death to the extent that funeral establishments could, as Jessica Mitford observes, sell us coffins made of "solid
copper... which offers superb value to the client seeking long-lasting protection," or coffins with features like "inner-spring mattresses" and Elgin's "revolutionary 'Perfect-Posture' bed." At the same time, with the shift towards the hospitalization of death that took place between 1930 and 1950, the ideas and practices surrounding death would incur a further separation from the meaning of life. In the transfer from home to hospital, death became a technological phenomenon outside the control of both the dying and his or her loved ones; it ceased to be a ritual ceremony: "Death has been dissected, cut to bits by a series of little steps," writes Ariès, "which finally makes it impossible to know which step was the real death, the one in which consciousness was lost, or the one in which breathing stopped."

In his documentary entitled *Near Death* (1989), Frederick Wiseman provides visual support for Ariès' thesis, taking spectators on an epic exploration of "the labyrinth issues raised by the rapidly advancing technology of life support." He continuously juxtaposes images of technological intervention with images of dying patients and conversations between doctors about the ethics of how such technologies get employed. As Barry Grant has observed, "the very first comment in the film by a doctor concerns instructions to change a patient's respiratory 'settings' so that 'it doesn't look like he's breathing so hard' because it is 'disconcerting' to the family." From the outset and throughout the duration of the film, Wiseman continuously frames his images of dying patients in context with the machines that mediate their deaths; again and again we are witness to the abstraction of both life and death that occurs through the hospitalization of the dying and the numerous technologies that mediate the meaning and experience of
death. But, while both Wiseman’s film and Ariès’ study of death offer compelling analyses of the effect of twentieth-century technological developments on the attitudes and practices related to death, neither Wiseman nor Ariès pays heed to the extraordinary influence of the cinematic apparatus, experiencing its “golden age” in Hollywood during precisely the same time period as the rise of the funeral industry and hospitalization in the U.S., in constructing contemporary notions and understandings of death over the last century. As a documentary filmmaker working in the tradition of “observational cinema,” Wiseman’s film—no matter how self-consciously it might be assembled—is ultimately constructed under the pretense of the camera’s ability to faithfully capture the unfolding reality he seeks to investigate. Thus, the question of whether the apparatus of cinema itself, similar to medical technologies such as the computer, ventilator, IV machine, and so on, is a technology that alters our experience of mortality, is one that *Near Death* necessarily omits. However, given that Wiseman’s cinematic apparatus is, like the medical technologies he films, also explicitly implicated in the process of mediating our understanding of death, it would seem appropriate to consider whether the predominance—that is, complete saturation—of moving images in the development of twentieth-century Western culture has had its own effect in abstracting notions of death and mortality. As Mary Anne Doane emphasizes in *The Emergence of Cinematic Time*, the cinematic apparatus, in its representation of time and movement, is necessarily imbued with “epistemological underpinnings” which “have a knowledge effect,” and must be addressed if one is to understand “the conditions of the possibility of knowledge within a given historical period.”61
Anne Friedberg has, in fact, argued convincingly for the need to understand the “postmodern condition” and its inherent subjectivity as not only reflected in cinematic representation but as “a product of the instrumentalized acceleration of [the] spatial and temporal fluidities implicit (from the start) in cinema spectatorship.” She emphasizes that attention must be paid to “the cumulative psychic effects” that film-going has had on our “sense of the passage of time outside of the diegetic world of the film.” Such an argument seems particularly insightful, since it is precisely the “relentless melt of time” that has always served as the greatest reminder of our mortality. Thus, an understanding of death in the “post-mortem” moment must be understood not only as represented in film, but as produced cinematically, since the medium of the moving image itself serves to discursively construct both our understanding of the world and the very “idea of death” in contemporary culture (always already no more than an imagined experience for which we have no “real” frame). With that in mind, then, it is necessary to examine our imagined relation with death not only through narrative, but also through a consideration of the ontological subjectivity produced by the cinematic apparatus itself.

Cinema Spectatorship and Death

Writing in the nineteen seventies on photography, Susan Sontag characterized “All photographs as Memento Mori”: “To take a photograph is to participate in another person’s (or thing’s) mortality, vulnerability, mutability,” writes Sontag. “Precisely by slicing out this moment and freezing it, all photographs testify to time’s relentless melt.” In Camera Lucida, Roland Barthes draws similar conclusions to Sontag,
ultimately concluding that, as Martin Jay explains, "photography's madness punctures routinized, culturally coded perception and forces the viewer to confront the undialectical, unrecuperable, unintelligible annihilation waiting us all." The phenomenological difference between the experience of viewing a still photographic image and a moving cinematic image, however, is one that invokes a significantly different spectatorial response. Unlike the photographic image, which captures just one moment, frozen in time—a "flat death" that "violently resists revitalization of any kind"—the moving image is one of perpetual motion, and is therefore not as susceptible to the kind of morbid reflection inspired in Barthes before a photograph. Instead, as Metz has argued, films provide the effect of a living, thriving presence: like movement in real life, movement in the cinema is similarly conveyed to us by the eyes, thus effecting a similar sensation of reality: "The strict distinction between object and copy dissolves on the threshold of motion," writes Metz; "Because movement is never material but is always visual, to reproduce its appearance is to duplicate its reality." Or, put differently, the moving image gains its vitality precisely in its simulation of movement through time, its inherent emphasis on presence, rather than the contingent past embodied in a photographic instance of time. Add to this the narrative worlds into which the spectator of fiction film becomes immersed, and it becomes clear that the nature of film viewing affects an entirely different mortal awareness in the viewer, especially in those films that explicitly address issues surrounding death. Thus, as Doane further elaborates, "The representation of time in cinema (its 'recording') is also simultaneously the
production of temporalities for the spectator, a structuring of the spectator’s time,\(^69\) which consequently has crucial implications for one’s conception of being and mortality.

Sigmund Freud, who “was haunted by death anxiety all his life and admitted that not a day went by that he did not think of it,”\(^70\) maintained, like many of the existentialists noted above, that man possessed an abstracted and detached relationship to the idea of his mortality. In his “Reflections on War and Death” he writes that,

> Our own death is indeed unimaginable, and whenever we make the attempt to imagine it we can perceive that we really survive as spectators (my emphasis)… at bottom no one believes in his own death, or to put the same thing in another way, in the unconscious every one of us is convinced of his immortality.\(^71\)

That Freud uses the word *spectator* to describe this relationship is particularly noteworthy, because to be a spectator implies a sense of being outside of an experience, a rational witness at a safe distance, rather than an engaged participant at the heart of a life event. This, of course, is also the experience of film viewing, no matter how engaged or sutured a spectator might become, and thus it is for this reason that Sobchack sought, however ineffectively, to attempt to *know* violent death through violent representation.

The film image constructs the “idea of death” rationally and meaningfully, providing the spectator an imagined objectivity in looking at death, a separation of death from the experience of life that serves cognitively to distance oneself from the reality of one’s own death. In this sense, the spectatorial experience is very much an experience of transcendence, an experience of being everywhere at once, of being privileged to a perception of reality that is not confined to a limited position in time and space, as is our
normal corporeal experience of the body. Rather, to borrow Walter Benjamin’s oft-quoted phrase, cinema allows us to “calmly and adventurously go travelling.” Films offer us the privilege of multiple angles, slow-motion, close-ups and a kind of God’s-eye view of the world: “a form of flattery so pervasive,” writes Thomas de Zengotita, “so fundamental to the very nature of representation, that it gets taken for granted.” In The Imaginary Signifier, Christian Metz emphasizes how “the spectator identifies with himself, with himself as an act of pure perception... as a kind of transcendental subject, which comes before every there is,” while in Films and Feelings, Raymond Durgnat ties the experience of spectatorship directly to the concept of immortality:

Cuts and dissolves melt space and time. We live dangerously in safety. We are the immortal Gods watching the screen characters live their anguished lifetime-in-90-minutes lives. Our immunity sets us free to participate ‘in the round’. Art doesn’t really make the artist immortal, but it makes the audience feel immortal.

As a spectator, the world revolves around you; indeed, the world has been designed under the pretense of seducing you: “It is all about you.”

To imagine the thought of non-being under these circumstances seems almost incomprehensible. Furthermore, following Durgnat, the transcendent gaze of spectatorship is thus explicitly tied to a subjective sense of immortality, an experience of not being confined by the relentless march of time towards death. Sitting in a stationary position in a theatre, one does not only invest in narratives that take place over the course of days, weeks, months and years, or in alternate historical time periods altogether, but also the narrative construction of many postmodern films bounces relentlessly back and
forth in time, obeying no rules of linear temporality whatsoever. Past, present and future converge in an *eternal present* on-screen, and as Anne Friedberg observes,

It is this subjective *timelessness* that provides an implicit parallel between the ‘postmodern condition’ and cinematic and televisual spectatorship. But this subjective timelessness is not just a factor of diegetic temporality, it is a condition of the mobilized virtual gaze of spectatorship itself.\(^7^7\)

That the gaze of cinema produces a *subjective timelessness* is no doubt a significant point in understanding contemporary representations of mortality, especially when considered in context with the “psychological or subjective *durée* of viewing many films over time.”\(^7^8\) For, if postmodern subjectivity is not confined by a sense of the “relentless passage of time,” it follows that the cinematic—as well as televisual and now digital—modes of cultural production and reception that produced this relation, and that continue to dominate the mediated experience of global capitalism, can consequently be understood as a significant factor in changing contemporary attitudes toward death, both on-screen in contemporary cinematic representation and in postmodern culture more generally.

Writing in 1967 some three decades before Friedberg, it was Guy Debord who first articulated the link between the abstraction of time and what he termed “the society of the spectacle”: “a social relationship between people that is mediated by images.”\(^7^9\) Debord characterized the spectacle as being “the reigning social organization of a paralysed history, of a paralysed memory, of an abandonment of any history founded in historical time,” and linked the “false consciousness of time” produced by the spectacle
directly to a “social absence of death.” Like Friedberg’s characterization of the “mobilized virtual gaze of spectatorship” inherent in cinematic subjectivity, Debord understood the spectacle as effecting an “estranged present,” and thus concluded that “the consciousness of the spectator can have no sense of an individual life moving toward self-realization, or toward death.” The estranged present of the spectacle consequently results in what Fredric Jameson characterizes as a schizophrenic fragmentation or decentering of the postmodern subject, thus marking “the end of the autonomous bourgeois monad or ego or individual,” both in its self-consciousness and its anxiety; and consequently, as Kellner explains, also in the “depth, substantiality, and coherency that was the ideal and sometimes achievement of the modern self.” Similar to the experience of the habitual film spectator who eagerly substitutes his lived experience for the multiple simulated experiences constructed on-screen, the experience of the postmodern subject is one of perpetual change and play: “Identity is constituted through role playing and image construction; it is a game, grounded in play, in which one is able to present oneself in a variety of roles, images and activities, relatively unconcerned about shifts, transformations, and dramatic changes.” The roles one assumes no longer hold the same weight in defining the identity of the self—it is an increasingly common occurrence in late capitalist society, for instance, that people will work many different jobs over the duration of their working life rather than investing themselves in one lifelong career. The self is increasingly abstracted and pluralized, in a state of perpetual flux, and therefore no longer anxious over any one particular master identity. Change is the dominant experience of postmodern subjectivity. Consequently, whereas for the modern
subject, “dying... was viewed as a crisis of identity and the roles that anchor identity,” Simon, Haney, and Buenteo observe that “the abstract self of the postmodern world, tempered by the persistent experience of change, may be more able to experience a loss of roles without a corresponding loss of identity.” In other words, the crisis of identity once inspired by the spectre of death no longer carries the same attendant anxieties; and one of the principle causes of this shift in subjective orientation may well be the habitual experience of spectatorship occasioned by the proliferation of moving images in the twentieth century.

Cinematic Subjectivity and the Apparatus as Immortality in My Life

The connection between postmodern subjectivity and the cinematic apparatus manifests itself tellingly in Bruce Joel Rubin’s My Life, as Rubin self-consciously incorporates a video camera into his representation of a man facing death. Over the course of the narrative, the camera serves to mediate the experience of dying for the film’s main protagonist, Bob (Michael Keaton), and plays a predominant role in the visual construction of the film. Bob and his wife Gail (Nicole Kidman) are months away from the birth of their first child, but Bob has terminal cancer and may not live long enough to see his son born. Knowing that his chances of recovery are slim, Bob decides to put together a home video so that his son will know who is father is and what he was like. In the visual construction of the film, Rubin intercuts images from the perspective of “Bob’s camera” into the diegetic unfolding of the narrative so that we are privileged to several different diegetic perspectives: hand-held shots are used to signify Bob’s
perspective from behind the viewfinder (we see what Bob sees as he makes his film); we also share the perspective of Bob’s unborn son, as Rubin often puts us in the perspective of staring back at Bob as he addresses the camera; and finally we occupy the conventional or neutral God’s-eye-view perspective that observes Bob, his camera, and the other characters in the narrative.

At the outset of the film Bob is in fierce denial of the reality of dying; he expects that his numerous cancer treatments will overcome the grave odds his doctor’s have given him. When he finally gets the bad news that nothing can be done, Bob explodes with anger and resentment and subsequently experiences an existential meltdown at the possibility of non-being. Awakening from a fitful nightmare sequence in which he is being chased naked through a forest by a rabid animal trying to kill him, Bob leaps from his bed in horror and cries to his wife: “I don’t want to die, don’t let me die, Gail. I wanna live. I wanna live.” The plot of the film then turns on Bob’s journey toward accepting his fate and making peace with death; he learns to forgive and accept his family who he has previously disowned, learns to love and appreciate his wife, and comes to face the fears that have plagued him since childhood. Of particular interest in the film’s depiction of these personal transformations is the construction of Bob’s camera as a principle protagonist in helping him overcome his fear of death.

Until Bob becomes too sick to wield his camera near the end of the film, he is portrayed as increasingly infatuated with its gaze. In scene after scene, Rubin cuts between images of Bob wielding his camera and the immediate perspective from his viewfinder. As Bob documents the final months of his life, his brother’s wedding and his
visit to the home and past he has left thousands of miles behind, Bob's perspective shifts from being the object of death to occupying the immortal subjectivity of his camera's gaze: he documents the world around him, the things that are meaningful to him, and experiences the omnipotent distance of the camera's eye - which Rubin continually intercuts into the film in close-ups of Bob's lens. His family repeatedly admonishes him to "come out from behind the camera," but Bob is too preoccupied capturing, constructing, and memorializing himself in the imagined eye of a future spectator, namely his soon-to-be-born son whose vision we share. Like the tourist who obsessively snaps photos of his vacation so that it can be consumed by his friends, family, and acquaintances upon his return, Bob turns his life into a commodity that will have exchange-value long after he is dead. As Jameson explains, "the anxiety that must arise when human beings, confronting the non-human, wonder what they are doing there and what the point or purpose of such a confrontation might be in the first place...is thus comfortably replaced by the act of taking possession of it and converting it into a form of personal property."86 In Bob's case, he affirms his presence through his camera's movements, and by virtue of his will which animates the camera's framing of people and things that are meaningful to him.

At other instances in the film, Bob is not only the omnipotent cinematic eye, but also the subject of vision. He relentlessly documents himself teaching his son how to play basketball, cook pasta, shave, jump a car, walk into a room, and so on. He manufactures his presence for his son through representation, in a fashion reminiscent of the Egyptian practices of mummification which, as André Bazin reminds us, was created as a substitute for the corporeal body at the time of death. Because death signifies the
“victory of time,” representation was used to “defend against the passage of time”: “to
preserve artificially, his bodily appearance is to snatch it from the flow of time, to stow it
away neatly, so to speak, in the hold of life.”87 At key instances in the film, Bob views
himself on video, witnessing himself as he speaks to his son from the beyond, from the
other side of the screen; he sees himself vibrantly animated and very much alive, and can
presumably conceive of himself as an imagined presence in his son’s eyes, as an active (if
virtual) participant in his son’s life. For Barry Grant, this abstraction of the self by way
of representation, this projecting of the self into the world through home movies, is
“graphic proof of our postmodern fragmentation”: “watching ourselves in home videos—
seeing our images out there, on the television set, itself a palpable thing occupying
space—confirms our presence, our being in the world.”88 Unlike the mummy or even the
still photograph, the moving image serves to project not only the image of the self, but
also the subject’s simulated presence:

While photography could fix a moment, the cinema made
archivable duration itself. In that sense, it was perceived
as a prophylactic against death, ensuring the ability to
“see one’s loved ones” gesture and smile long after their
deaths. What was registered on film was life itself in all
its multiplicity, diversity, and contingency.89

Bob’s being-in-the-film is thus capable of virtual action, of articulating desires, hopes,
and advice to his son. His filmed actions (no longer his own after they have been filmed,
but rather beyond his corporeal and mortal self) will take on a life of their own even after
he is gone: his vital “signs,” his movements and words, will endure.

In the final scene of the film, after Bob’s death, his son Brian watches him on the
television set as Bob reads Dr Seuss’s “Green Eggs and Ham.” Brian points to the screen
and says “Da-da,” and his mother replies: “That’s right. Da-da.” It is a moment played for sentimental affect, but its implications are nonetheless a little unsettling in suggesting a triumph of the spectacle in which “all that once was directly lived has become mere representation”—or, to borrow from Baudrillard’s discourse, certainly an instance of the triumph of the simulacrum. Bob comes to terms with dying—and ultimately achieves a sense of immortality—by means of filmic (video) self-mediation, by giving himself over to the logic of simulation, to the reified logic of the spectacle which, as noted above, is always implicated in the abstraction and separation of life and death. Like the practice of embalming, the filmic apparatus succeeds at preserving/producing the vital appearance of life. In the diegetic logic of My Life, Bob consequently remains/becomes a (simulated) presence with future possibilities (he will educate his son and still serve as “Da-da”) even after his death.
Chapter 1 - End Notes


6 Sobchack 112.


10 Solomon 163.


14 Sartre 133.

15 Sobchack 113.


18 Sobchack 114.
19 Sobchack 115.


21 Sobchack 117


23 For a thorough and humorous consideration of the many ways that Edvard Munch’s painting “The Scream” has been appropriated and commodified as postmodern kitsch, see Mark Kingwell, *Better Living: In Pursuit of Happiness From Plato to Prozac* (Toronto: Penguin Canada, 1998): 165-71.

24 Christopher Sharrett sees Peckinpah as one of “the last social critics produced by Hollywood,” “Peckinpah the Radical” 79.


27 Sobchack 120.


29 Sobchack 124.


31 Sontag 57.

32 Sontag 53.


34 Kingwell 16-17.

35 Kingwell 125.

36 Sontag 63.


41 Foucault, *History*. 142.

42 Foucault, *History*. 139-141.


44 Foucault, *History*. 144.


48 Baudrillard 130.

49 Baudrillard 130.

50 Baudrillard 146.


53 Baudrillard 162.

54 Baudrillard 128.


56 Ariès 99.


58 Ariès 88.


60 Grant, “Frederick.”


63 Friedberg 125, 130.


67 Jay 456.


69 Doane 24.

70 Becker 102.


76 Zengotita 41-42

77 Friedberg 177

78 Friedberg 125


80 Debord, 114-15 (Prop. 158-161).

81 Debord 115 (Prop. 160).
12 Jameson 15.


14 Kellner 247.

15 Simon, Haney, and Buenteo 422.


17 Bazin 9.

18 Grant, “American Psycho/sis” 32.

19 Doane 22.

20 Debord 12 (Prop. 1).
CHAPTER TWO
Leaving “Nothing” to Chance: From Contingency to Synchronicity in Popular Film

In the end, each life is no more than the sum of contingent facts, a chronicle of chance intersections, of flukes, of random events that divulge nothing but their own lack of purpose.

Paul Auster, “The Locked Room”

In each of our lives occur mysterious coincidences – sudden synchronistic events that, once interpreted, lead us into our true destiny.

James Redfield, The Celestine Prophecy

It is particularly revealing that Edvard Munch’s painting “The Scream” (1893) has been appropriated in the postmodern moment as an instrument of kitsch, as a playful commodity to be consumed ironically in the form of sound-effect pillows and inflatable dolls. Once a “canonical expression of the great modernist thematics of alienation, anomie, solitude, social fragmentation, and isolation,”1 “The Scream” was the quintessential image of modern man’s anxiety in the face of contingency and meaninglessness. Yet, even the painting’s theft from Oslo’s Nasjonalgalleriet in 2004 could muster little more than passing expressions of detached despondency from most commentators: “Sad for Norway, good publicity for art,” was the reaction from Norwegian newspaper Bergens Tidende.2 Indeed, as Jameson and others have argued, “concepts such as anxiety and alienation (and the experiences to which they correspond, as in The Scream) are no longer appropriate in the world of the Postmodern,”3 and thus Munch’s painting tends to resonate in the present age with little more than the reified value of its own fame. In the contemporary period, the experience of anxiety or angst is associated with the moody expressions of raging teenage hormones or it is mocked
altogether as a cultural joke: “The archetypal vision of anguish,” as Mark Kingwell observes, has been thoroughly kitschified into a “banal vision of happiness” (in one novelty appropriation, for instance, the kitschy yellow pop culture “happy face” is grafted directly over the anguished expression of the screamer; in another, the painting’s image appears in an advertisement with the tag line “Don’t worry, be happy”).

That one might feel anguish in the face of death and the idea of one’s own mortality is also a thought that gets lost in the postmodern maelstrom of consumer bliss. Never mind that thinkers such as Becker, Freud, Kierkegaard, Schopenhauer, Sartre, and Heidegger, among others, have understood anxiety in the face of death as being a central factor in the development of the ego, of social structures, and of religious belief systems; anxiety over death just does not make good common sense to the postmodern mind. As one character plainly observes in Woody Allen’s *Hannah and Her Sisters* (1986): “Why should I be afraid? ... Who thinks of such nonsense? Now I’m alive. When I’m dead I’ll be dead ... Who knows what will be? I’ll either be unconscious or I won’t. If not, I’ll deal with it then. I’m not going to worry now about what’s going to be when I’m unconscious.” This sentiment is expressed in contrast to the overt anxieties of so many of Allen’s many screen personae, such as Mickey, the panicky hypochondriac in *Hannah*, who wanders despairingly around New York City pondering the meaninglessness of existence and who leaps from his bed in the middle of the night stuttering with terror at the possibility of nothingness, of not existing. Indeed, it is precisely these kinds of anxieties that are at the heart of Allen’s charm. But, while he certainly plays up such fears for the sake of comedy, they also constitute a significant theme in his work that
tends to get overlooked because his anxiety frequently ends up being read aslovably neurotic rather than taken seriously and understood as thematically important to the larger meaning of his films. Sam Girogus offers a particularly egregious example of such an oversight, as he understands the character of Mickey as providing little more than “comic relief and narrative energy” to the more central narrative between Hannah and her sisters Holly and Lee. He characterizes Mickey’s scenes as “comedic counterparts,” and dismisses Mickey’s angst and hypochondria as “silliness” that reveals “the absurdity of his existential quest.” That Allen might be consciously linking the themes of love and death in the film, as he has done in many of his earlier films like Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Sex (1972), Love and Death (1975), Annie Hall (1977), and Interiors (1978), and as Ernest Becker—an Allen favourite—does explicitly in The Denial of Death, escapes Girogus’s analysis completely. Good old fashioned anxiety-over-being just does not register as a theme to be taken seriously anymore.

Take, as another representative example, Stardust Memories (1980) which, as Allen himself has stated, was meant to dramatize “man’s relationship to his mortality” and ended up becoming one of his most “stringently criticized films in the United States,” as many reviewers ultimately read its narrative as expressing hostility toward his audience. Or consider Girogus’s analysis of Zelig (1983), another film that explicitly mediates concerns over anxiety and alienation, which goes as far as to state that if it were not for “the film’s technical originality and ultimate aesthetic triumph,” Zelig would be reduced “to a truism or oversimplification about contemporary alienation and angst.”

Ironically, Allen’s one admitted reservation about Zelig was precisely that the technical
achievement of the film obscured the deeper themes he was trying to elucidate. What is striking is that despite Girgus’ serious treatment of Allen as an intelligent and important filmmaker, nowhere in his study do issues of anxiety and mortality constitute a significant philosophical point of analysis. In fact, at the outset of his book, Girgus warns that “taking Woody Allen’s somber side seriously should be considered an occupational hazard.” Strange that in examining the work of a filmmaker one reveres, one would omit or dismiss the very ideas, authors, and interests that that filmmaker has overtly signified, both publicly in interviews and biographies and throughout his work, as being of central importance to his artistic expression and vision: “existential subjects to me are still the only subjects worth dealing with,” said Allen in an interview about Crimes and Misdemeanors (1987), “That’s why I’d consider the Russian novelists [Dostoevsky, Tolstoy] as greater than other novelists.” Perhaps, then, the misrecognition of themes of death and mortality in Allen’s films is itself symptomatic of the general trend toward denying death in popular culture. But, rather than dwell on the particulars of Allen’s films and their critical response, it is enough here simply to emphasize the significance of Girgus’ omission, to highlight the trivializing of concepts such as existential anxiety, dread, and alienation, both in popular and critical discourses of the postmodern moment; and to ask the question: with what have anxieties over existence, death, and contingency been replaced in contemporary culture? If the concept of contingency is no longer the source of mortal anxieties, what role does it now play, or what form does it now take in contemporary postmodern imaginings of death?
Existential angst and the problem of contingency – A Philosophical Interlude

The concept of anxiety (anguish or angst) has its modern roots in the thought of the Christian existentialist Sören Kierkegaard. Anxiety, or what Kierkegaard calls “dread,” originates in the myth of the Fall, in which God prohibits Adam from eating from the tree of knowledge. Kierkegaard explains how in Adam’s innocence (ignorance), he has no conception of good or evil, nor does he understand the word of judgment that follows the word of prohibition—“Thou shalt surely die”—since Adam has no conception of death and what it means to die. At most, reasons Kierkegaard, Adam is able only to perceive “a notion of the terrible” in the intonation of God’s command. Consequently, anxiety manifests itself in two distinct but related forms: first, “the prohibition alarms Adam [induces a state of dread] because the prohibition awakens in him the possibility of freedom” (it is our freedom to act in the face of the unknown that gives birth to the experience of dread); and second, once Adam has exercised his freedom, he suffers the “fall into self-consciousness, [and] the emergence from comfortable ignorance in nature” (he learns of his individuality, his uniqueness, his face and name, and also the mortal reality of his creatureliness). Man is faced with the finite reality of his self within time, and with the dread of the unknown possibility that is signified by his death: anguish is therefore a consequence of man’s consciousness of death and the knowledge of his mortal finitude that resulted from his separation from the infinite.

Unlike the experience of fear, which is always of some-thing, anxiety has no object. Like the dread experienced by Adam in the myth of the fall, anguish is of no-
thing, of an unknown factor which haunts both the consequences of one's choices and the awareness of one's finite being. Because, as Vivian Sobchack has observed, death is the "sign that ends all signs," it is beyond representation, beyond thought, beyond time, and therefore beyond knowing; death is a no-thing to which man is necessarily always in anguish. Thus, as Kierkegaard observes in *Fear and Trembling*, the true Christian cannot know God in any philosophical sense, nor through the superficial actions of going to church and prayer, since God represents the infinite unknown, which man, bound to his temporal finitude, can never conceive. Rather, the true Christian must perform an act of "infinite resignation" in the face of his anguish—he must resign himself to the absurd (to the incomprehensible infinite)—with no certainty or security whatsoever that his leap of faith is warranted or will be rewarded. It is a subjective leap that one makes alone, in "fear and trembling" of the uncertainty that constitutes one's freedom. For Kierkegaard, anguish is a "school" that acts as the eternal spring to authentic faith.

The relationship between anxiety and authenticity is one that is also manifested in the thought of one of Kierkegaard's most infamous intellectual heirs, Martin Heidegger. An atheist, Heidegger conceives of anxiety not as a consequence of man's separation from God, but as a consequence of the "nothingness" that he sees as the very ground of being. Like Kierkegaard, Heidegger understands anxiety as being the apprehension of something indeterminate: that is, of nothing: "Anxiety reveals the nothing." "In anxiety," explains Krell, "I realize that I have been 'thrown' into the world and that my life and death—my Being as such—is an issue I must face." Life seems to rise from no-where and falls back into nowhere; *to be* is to exist within time, *between* the poles of
birth and death, and thus the underlying ground of our being-here—that which exists before and after "us"—is nothingness. Consequently, for Heidegger, in order to live an authentic existence one must acknowledge death not as some future occurrence that will end life, but as our "ownmost possibility" within life, the fundamental existential structure of our Being-in-the-world.22 "In other words," as Graham Parkes explains, "death is not something we have to wait for: it already 'stands into' (hereinsteckt) our present existence, and is 'always already included [einbezogen]' in our being here now."23 Death is always possible rather than the end of possibility; life and death are simultaneous parts of Being. Thus, to be is to be what Heidegger consequently calls a "being-toward-death," and it is in the embrace of the underlying fact of nothingness that Heidegger believes one comes to live an authentic existence. In encountering one's own being-toward-death, the world is overturned and one is liberated both "from superficial and self-deceptive conceptions of life,"24 and from the "power over death" (discussed in Chapter One as the separation of life and death) that is born out of a technological attitude toward life. In doing so, one is inclined to take responsibility for one's life and exhibit care for one's world, rather than seeing the world as an instrument for one's being.25 For Heidegger, then, anxiety is the inclination to authentic being-in-the-world.

Following in the existential tradition of both Kierkegaard and Heidegger, Jean-Paul Sartre introduced the concept of contingency into the discussion of being and nothingness. For Sartre, it was the experience of contingency that lay at the heart of anxiety, or what he would so infamously describe as "nausea." As noted in Chapter One, it is the realization that there is no necessity or causality in the world, and therefore no
grand design to existence or to one's life—the self and world just *is*—that constitutes the experience of nausea. The meaninglessness of a contingent universe where "every existing thing is born without reason, prolongs itself out of weakness and dies by chance." is the root of anxiety, because it means that "man is condemned to be free," and is thus "responsible for everything he does," which includes creating meaning for himself in the world. In this sense, Sartre's position appears quite similar to Kierkegaard's, but as a staunch atheist Sartre did not view man's radical freedom as a springboard to faith. In his discussion of anxiety, Sartre also emphasizes the concept of nothingness, but unlike either Kierkegaard or Heidegger, he sees it only as proof of our radical freedom and nothing more. He argues against Heidegger's attempt to recover death as the defining feature of life, as the final possibility to which man must project himself if he is to live an authentic existence and take responsibility for his life. Death, for Sartre, is a "*contingent fact*...it comes to us from outside and it transforms us into the outside." Sartre understands death as something we can in no way apprehend or make sense of, and therefore it cannot be understood as a possibility from which we derive meaning in our lives: "It is absurd that we are born, it is absurd that we die." Rather, as Alfred Stern explains, "The perpetual interference of chance with the individual's projects shows that death is not our free possibility but the negation of all our possibilities." For Sartre, "meaning can only come from subjectivity," and since no subjectivity can conceive of death, death can never be a possibility from which we can confer meaning: rather, "It can only remove all meaning from life." In a contingent world where *nothingness* binds one's being and stands between one's self and all of one's
actions, our freedom is total; we are completely responsible for establishing both our own values and our own meaning in life. Anguish is the manifestation of this total freedom.32

All three of Kierkegaard, Heidegger, and Sartre’s existential renderings of anxiety emphasize the responsibility of individuals to freely choose a mode of being in authentic relation to ‘the nothing’ that constitutes the anxiety of being. In the thought of Kierkegaard and Heidegger, however, one is offered a possibility for managing the terror of death in the form of either authentic faith or authentic being-toward-death, both of which offer a meaningful program for confronting the abyss. Sartre’s emphasis on the problem of contingency, on the other hand, offers no such mental refuge. And consequently, as Sartre illustrates in his short story “The Wall,” one must face the abyss and its attendant terrors and incomprehensibility alone. As a result, the experience of Sartre’s three protagonists sentenced to death in “The Wall” is, to say the least, an unsettling one. In the night before their scheduled execution, they shake with terror, piss their pants, and grasp in vain at the incomprehensibility of non-being: “I tell myself there will be nothing afterwards,” states Tom, “But I don’t understand what it means.”33 Pablo Ibbieta, the narrator of the story, comes to the realization that all of his convictions in life, all of his passions and activities, were based on an illusion that his imminent death has erased: “I took everything seriously as if I were immortal...I spent my time counterfeiting eternity... but [now] death [has] disenchanted everything.”34 Ultimately, Pablo’s life is spared due to an extraordinary stroke of chance, while his two companions are executed, but Sartre seems to imply that having come to his wall, Pablo will have lost his lust for life: the illusion of immortality is, for Sartre, at the heart of our will-to-life – a
conclusion akin to that of Nietzsche, who found it peculiar that men did not reflect on their mortal fate, but also saw man’s denial of death as the foundation of creative and passionate impulses. Nevertheless, the emphasis at the end of “The Wall” is on the fact of contingency that governs one’s proximity to the wall, the consequent meaninglessness inherent to our individual experience, and the responsibility of the individual to create oneself authentically within this reality.

**Contingency, meaninglessness, and the cinema**

Similar to Jean-Paul Sartre, Mary Anne Doane has emphasized how “Death and the contingent have something in common insofar as both are often situated as that which is unassimilable to meaning,” and notes, for example, how religion has consequently attempted to domesticate death by returning it to the realm of the knowable: “Religion responds to the fear of meaninglessness contaminating death.” In *The Emergence of Cinematic Time: Modernity, Contingency, the Archive*, Doane traces the ways in which the cinema has similarly been implicated in attempts to structure contingency. She examines the technological development of cinema in context with changing cultural perceptions and attitudes toward time that took effect at the turn of the Twentieth century, in particular the modern industrial developments that served to rationalize time and turn it into an abstract value. She argues that time came to be felt, “as a weight, as a source of anxiety, and as an acutely pressing problem of representation,” while modernity became “characterized by the impulse to wear time [i.e. the pocket watch]... the obsession with efficiency, strict management of time, and the elimination of waste.” Such rationalization, as Doane explains, necessitates a “reduction or denial of contingency”: In
Taylorism, for instance, "each of the labourer’s movements must be meaningful; ideally, there is no loss or excess in the system. The body’s movements are efficient and purposeful, and time becomes the measure of that efficiency."\(^{40}\)

Under such circumstances, and in the face of the abstraction of "time as value," Doane observes how chance and contingency become the sites of both pleasure and anxiety, particularly as they are manifested in emerging cinematic representations.\(^{41}\) In the early cinemas of both Méliès and the Lumière brothers, for instance, Doane observes parallel projects of celebrating temporal contingency and unexpected chance events, in spite of their differing approaches to cinematic representation (the expressionist fantasies of Méliès as opposed to the documentary realism of Lumière). "Both make contingency central to their representational practice in a medium in which the experience of temporality is crucial," writes Doane.\(^{42}\) Pleasure is produced by the filmic spectacle’s access to the present, its ability to reproduce movement and capture a spontaneous, contingent moment as it unfolds in time; but, as Doane further notes, "the present instant also and simultaneously poses a threat, that of meaninglessness, pure and uncontrollable contingency."\(^{43}\) Thus, early cinema embodied a paradox: on the one hand, the filming of a contingent event served to rationalize it, thereby reducing its contingency; on the other hand, the style and emphasis of what Gunning has termed the "cinema of attractions"—that is, the exhibitionist, as opposed to narrative, cinema that was predominant before 1906—emphasized the contingent through "the direct stimulation of shock or surprise," thereby always embodying the threat of meaninglessness.\(^{44}\)
In contrast to the contingent emphasis of early cinema, however, the predominance of narrative cinema by the 1930s would serve to erase the threat of contingency and meaninglessness. In classical narrative cinema, "The temporal contingency celebrated by Méliès and Lumière is tamed through its incorporation into a rigidly codified system of producing a temporality that can fully absorb the spectator."\(^{45}\) As noted in Chapter One, classical films are character-driven and coherently structured around a linear, causally motivated narrative, and organized as Annette Kuhn explains, "according to the rules of continuity editing... [which] effaces the moment of transition between shots, with the result that spectators are caught up in the film to such an extent that disbelief is suspended, and they are swept along with the story, unaware of the artifice of the means of representation."\(^{46}\)

Drawing on Pasolini's "Observations of the Long Take," Doane reflects on the significant epistemological shift occasioned by editing practices such as those of continuity editing. In the Lumière films' for instance, the "long take" was used as a means of inscribing "real time": one long observational take opened up the possibility for random events to occur, like the surprise of the unexpected wave in *A Boat Leaving the Harbor [Barque sortant du port]* (1897).\(^{47}\) For Pasolini, the long take presents reality as it happens because it mirrors the singular point of view of our everyday experience of the world. It is always in the present tense, and thus always imbued with the contingency and meaninglessness of our lived reality.\(^{48}\) In contrast, classical cinema made use of editing techniques that strategically positioned spectators in relation to unfolding action
through the use of cuts. It is the use of "the cut" that Pasolini sees as responsible for stabilizing the contingency of the moving image:

For Pasolini, what makes a filmic discourse past tense is not its repeatability but something interior to the discourse itself—the cut that coordinates two separate presences and reconfigures them as a historic, that is, meaningful, present... The lure of contingency, the fascination of a present moment in which anything can happen is safely deployed [in narrative cinema]. The present—as the mark of contingency in time—is made tolerable, readable, archivable, and, not least, pleasurable.

This rationalization of contingency through the conventions of the classical cinema is therefore akin to the rationalization and abstraction of time brought about by the forces of industrialization in modernity: in both cases, the threat of meaninglessness is mitigated.

In addressing the theme of death and its attendant anxieties in *Shadows and Fog* (1992), Woody Allen engages the paradoxical quality of film as that which "comprises simultaneously the rationalization of time and an homage to contingency." He self-consciously dramatizes existential concerns about contingency, meaning and mortality in context with the spectatorial experience of narrative cinema. Based on Allen's one-act play called "Death," *Shadows and Fog* is filmed in black and white and set in a early noir atmosphere that explicitly parodies Fritz Lang's *M* (1931), as well as other German expressionist classics such as F. W. Murnau's *Nosferatu* (1922), with its over-indulgence in a foggy, urban landscape of shadows and darkness, and its plot which revolves around an angry mob's hunt for a looming serial killer dubbed "the strangler". Kleinmann (Allen) is summoned from his bed by the civilian mob to take part in "the plan" to catch the killer, but he has no idea exactly what his role in "the plan" actually is. Wandering
alone through the dark, foggy streets, his footsteps audible, his shadow lurking ominously behind him, Kleinmann comments on how dark, empty, and desolate the city is at night, later reflecting to Irmy (Mia Farrow) how odd it is when everyone is asleep: “It’s like a different place completely...There’s no civilization...It’s so free.” Playing directly off the kinds of existential ideas inherent in the philosophy of Heidegger and Sartre, Allen uses the night as a metaphor for the menacing “nature” that underlies our creaturely experience, and to illustrate the underlying freedom that is lost in “all the civilization that protects you and enables you to lie to yourself about life.” Unlike the other characters in the film, Kleinmann cannot figure out where he fits into “the plan” that consumes the others; his experience is one of meaninglessness and is therefore wrought with anxiety over what lurks in the shadows, rather than imbued with the purpose of capturing and destroying its unthinkable evils. The metaphoric scheme of the film is straightforwardly existential in this manner, and in one particularly reflective scene, played seriously rather than for comedy, Kleinmann makes direct reference to Sartre as he reflects on how the transitoriness of life, its perpetual motion forward in time, makes him “nauseous.”

Much of Allen’s tone is parodic, but his filming technique illustrates the seriousness with which he considers the existential themes in *Shadows and Fog*. While his comedy is situational and often lies in his dialogue and jittery acting technique, his film direction continuously addresses the anxiety underlying the metaphoric scheme of the film. Most significantly, Allen makes almost exclusive use of long takes in depicting the narrative action in each scene. His camera style is observational and perpetually in motion as it seems to “follow” the action, and editing is used, for the most part, only as a
means of transitioning between scenes. He consequently maintains a sense of contingent anxiety in his direction that emphasizes the persistent threat of danger that ultimately lurks in everyone's shadow.

The only exception to this style comes in the climax of the film when "the Strangler" (Death) has his sights set on Kleinmann. In the ensuing chase, Kleinman ducks into the tent of Armstead the Magician and, using a magic mirror, together they improvise an illusion so grand, so "death-defying," that "Death" himself is foiled and finally driven away. In this scene, Allen reverts back to classical editing techniques, employing match cuts and standard reaction shots to emphasize the drama of the illusion. In other words, a distinct transition is made from the contingency-laden long takes that predominate much of the film to a conventional Hollywood chase sequence and traditional narrative climax at the end. Ultimately, Kleinmann accepts Armstead's offer to become his apprentice because he realizes that nothing could be more gratifying than to give people the gift of illusions: "they need them like they need the air," concludes Armstead at film's end. Magic, here, stands in for the illusionism of the cinema, as Allen seems to conclude that the immortal illusion of cinema—its capacity for offering us alternate temporalities and for narrativizing and securing the problematic of chance—is the greatest antidote to our mortal anxieties over meaninglessness and contingency. At the same time, however, Allen's self-conscious use of the long take engages the cinema's capacity for making unstable the narrative ground upon which that security is premised, leaving open the potential affect of contingent possibility that is always already present in the cinema's ability to capture motion and represent time.
Synchronicity, or, How Contingency Became Meaningful

The decade of the 1990s marked a significant shift in attitudes toward chance and contingency in popular film, beginning most notably with Robert Altman’s epic collage of 22 intersecting lives in *Short Cuts* (1993). Renowned for his multi-layered ensemble films such as *M.A.S.H.* (1970), *Nashville* (1975), and *The Player* (1992), Altman frequently turns chance and contingency into a driving force behind the narrative trajectory of his films. Stylistically, Altman, like Allen, makes extensive use of long takes and lateral camera movement rather than cuts to simulate the real contingent experience of time and space, and his directorial style is improvisational, allowing for actors to “riff on a script’s themes,” and making intentional use of overlapping dialogue to punctuate the contingent atmosphere of the film.

*Short Cuts* is Altman’s most overt engagement with the idea of contingency, as chance operates as the principle narrative motivating device for linking together the lives of a series of characters too self-absorbed to see the significant effects that their actions have on others. A darkly comedic, scathing portrait of contemporary American society, Altman assembles a collage which evidences a culture perpetually in bad faith with itself, a culture in which people do not take responsibility for their actions. A party of three fishermen discover the dead body of a naked women floating in their favourite fishing hole, for instance, but choose to tie her to the shore and report it at the end of the weekend so as not to inconvenience their fishing trip. In another narrative thread, a cheating husband and absent father (Tim Robbins) loses his temper with the barking of the family dog, and lets it loose in a distant neighbourhood, telling his distraught wife
(Madeleine Stowe) and kids that it ran away. When the guilt of having hurt his family finally sets in, he returns to pick up the abandoned dog, stealing him away from another group of distraught children who have since adopted the dog.

At the structural centre of the film is the story of a boy named Casey (Zane Cassidy), who is in a coma in the hospital after being accidentally hit by a car driven by Doreen (Lily Tomlin)—another central character in the film—just days before his eighth birthday. When Casey's mother (Andie McDowell) doesn't return to pick up the birthday cake she has ordered, the over-worked baker (Lyle Lovitt) calls to find out why, only to have Casey's exasperated father Howard (Bruce Davison), home from the hospital for a shower, tell him to "fuck off." In turn, the baker snaps, gets drunk, and leaves menacing messages on their answering machine in which he quotes from the children's story "Casey at the Bat"—"There is no joy in Mudville, Mighty Casey has struck out"—to the horrified ears of Casey's distraught mother. Then, out of the blue, Casey's grandfather (Jack Lemmon) shows up, having not seen his son Howard in 30 years and having never met Casey or his mother, and delivers what Howard appears to read as an astonishingly deluded monologue that describes how he cheated on Howard's mother with her sister, how he had been seduced, how this had all happened, coincidentally, on the same day as Howard had been hospitalized because of a car accident when he was a boy, and how afterward Howard's mother had forced him to leave her. He describes it all as a big misunderstanding, justifying himself as a victim of various circumstances that he felt the need to clear up with Howard after he'd been reminded of the whole thing with Casey's accident. This sort of disaffected self-absorption pervades the chance encounters and
interrelationships in the film, as characters hurt each other both mindlessly and vengefully.

Beyond literal actions, words, and repercussions, Altman (in keeping with the tone of the Raymond Carver short stories upon which the film is based) offers nothing in the way of characters' inner lives, "leaving the audience to construct the full nature of the story from what is left unsaid," and ultimately as Leonard Quart observes, leaving one feeling "dissatisfied, [and] looking for a subtext that defies deciphering." Consequently, as one might imagine, the theme of death in the film receives an appropriately contingent and meaningless representation. Casey, for example, eventually dies as a result of inexplicable complications that confound the doctors who were sure he would be fine, while another neighbouring patient, a victim of a violent and apparently unmotivated shooting, survives three desperate surgeries and the bleakest of diagnoses. And while the dead body that surfaces in the fishing scene is a young naked female, Altman offers no clues or explanation in the narrative to satisfy the spectatorial curiosity of what happened to her (a murder? A suicide?), denying the spectator a meaning for her death. For Altman, as for Sartre, death is thus represented as a contingent fact that is pervasive and yet as inexplicable as all the other contingent moments that constitute the interwoven collage that make up the narrative of Short Cuts.

Altman's emphasis on contingency and chance, his refusal to provide an easy meaning for anything that transpires in the film, prompted strong negative reactions from reviewers like Stuart Klawans, who sums up the moral of Short Cuts as "Life is stupid, brutal, and meaningless—a proposition that does not become more attractive for being
stretched to a length of three hours"\textsuperscript{55}, or Rita Kempley, whose scathing \textit{Washington Post} review boils it down to "life stinks and there's not a damn thing we can do about it."\textsuperscript{56} But as Quart points out, "Altman is a director whose work has always been suffused with a longing for community," and thus it serves to consider the existentially bleak picture rendered in \textit{Short Cuts} as an attempt to combat the disaffection he so clearly views at the heart of contemporary American society. After all, as Sartre himself argues in \textit{Existentialism and Humanism}, the anguish which is born out of contingency and which constitutes the realization of one's total freedom in the world, is an anguish that must acknowledge one's responsibility toward others. In choosing one's own actions, Sartre argues that ultimately, "I am creating a certain image of man as I would have him to be. In fashioning myself I fashion man," because in acting authentically, "one ought always to ask oneself what would happen if everyone did as one is doing."\textsuperscript{57} In this context, one can read \textit{Short Cuts} as an overt attempt by Altman to re-engage the threat of contingency as a means of critique, as a means of undermining the inauthenticity that pervades contemporary American experience. Contingency and chance become the organizing logic of a narrative system that resists the predigested meaning of conventional narrative codes, and reinscribes the anxiety that existentialists like Sartre saw as the root of a responsible relation to the world and to others.

The interweaving narrative logic that Altman employs in \textit{Short Cuts} was not a momentary aberration; rather, its structure seemed to resonate with other filmmakers in the nineties as well, and over the course of the decade and through the turn of the millennium, a wide array of films explored the possibilities of contingency and chance,
only to a much different, far less existential effect. A new concept gained popularity in the postmodern imagination, a concept invented in the 1950s but largely dismissed until the 1990s: that of “synchronicity.” A concept formulated by the Swiss psychoanalyst Carl Jung, it was meant to describe what he referred to as the “meaningful coincidence of two or more events, where something other than the probability of chance is involved.”

Unlike causal events, which operate as part of a diachronic structure of time, from one moment to another in a continuous line moving forward in time from beginning to end, meaningful coincidences operate within an acausal synchronic structure, across time at a singular instant. I travel to London to present a paper on synchronicity, for example, only to discover that the person sitting next to me on the bus is a publisher interested in publishing a book on synchronistic phenomena. Our meeting is not causally linked, but the staggering coincidence and meaningful relation of our chance encounter, for Jung, implies a kind of fated relation between our individual experiences, a relation in which contingency and teleology merge.

In the modern cultural moment in which Jung formulated the theory of synchronicity, his ideas were met with a great deal of criticism, but in the contemporary postmodern era the concept has gained a great deal of popular appeal, particularly within the culture of the United States. Take, for instance, the widespread popularity of American spiritual gurus like Deepak Chopra (a PBS favourite who was selected in 1999 by *Time* magazine as one of the top 100 Icons and Heroes of the Century), whose book entitled *How to Know God* advances the idea that synchronicity represents a physical manifestation of “messages from the unmanifest,” a conscious awareness of which leads
to “an intimacy with God”; or consider the immense popularity of James Redfield’s best-selling book of 1993, The Celestine Prophecy, whose PR material advertises synchronistic phenomena as a new “spiritual common sense” which, “once interpreted, [will] lead us into our true destiny.”\(^{60}\)

Coincident with these kinds of pop-spiritual conceptions of synchronicity in American culture is the now commonplace appearance of synchronistic logic as an organizing principle in a wide array of contemporary popular films. Examples include Slacker (1991), Pulp Fiction (1994), Sliding Doors, Run Lola Run, and Your Friends and Neighbours (all 1998), American Beauty and Magnolia (1999), Serendipity and Donnie Darko (2001), Signs (2002) and, most recently, both David O. Russell’s comically reflexive meditation on the meaning of meaningful coincidences, I Heart Huckabees (2004) and Canadian screenwriter Paul Haggis’s directorial debut, Crash (2005). Jeffrey Sconce observes that while,

> Classical Hollywood narration...most frequently sought to avoid excessive coincidence, deeming it an easy and ultimately unrealistic plot device that viewers would find suspect... Paradoxically, in recent cinema, unrealistic coincidences have morphed into the new realism of synchronicity, an overarching belief in the fundamentally random and yet strangely meaningful structure of reality (even if that ‘meaning’ is total absurdity).\(^{61}\)

David Desser has similarly observed that a new genre of films has evolved, what he terms “global noir” or “neo-noir,” that are often characterized by “multiple storylines, skewed chronologies, [and] chance encounters [that] seem to underscore the presence of fate or destiny.”\(^{62}\) It is the latter emphasis on fate that appears to be most crucial to the
synchronistic re-imagining of contingency. Rather than constituting a source of angst or Sartrean nausea, contingency comes to be understood as meaningful in these films.

Paul Thomas Anderson’s Magnolia (1999) offers a particularly relevant case study of the filmic emergence of synchronicity, especially in contrast to Altman’s Short Cuts. In fact, upon the release of the former, many critics made direct comparisons between the two movies. Several critics noted their similar interlinking story structure and climactic scenes, while David Sterritt remarked that Magnolia almost seemed “like a remake of Robert Altman’s epic.” In the same spirit of Short Cuts, Magnolia interweaves the experiences of a large ensemble cast of characters, portraying a disillusioned, urban Los Angeles landscape populated by alienated and miserable characters and building to an unexpected climactic scene that rocks the worlds of its characters (an earthquake in Short Cuts, a rain of frogs in Magnolia). Although these surface similarities are more than evident, the differences between the two films, in particular their treatment of coincidence, chance and contingency, could hardly be more glaring.

Magnolia opens with a sequence that immediately draws attention to the curiously meaningful nature of coincidence and chance events by dramatizing three astonishing real-life coincidences, related on-screen by a voice-of-God narrator who draws attention to the inexplicable nature of three particular stories. First, a doctor is robbed and murdered in his home-town of Greenberry Hill, London, by three vagrants identified as Joseph Green, Stanley Berry, and Daniel Hill [nb: Green-Berry-Hill] (narrator: “I would like to think this is only a matter of chance”); Second, a blackjack dealer is accidentally
lifted out of the water while scuba-diving (he dies of a heart-attack) by a bush plane piloted by none other than a gambler who had experienced a run of bad luck the evening before and assaulted that very blackjack dealer. And consequently, as the narrator explains, "the weight of the guilt and the measure of coincidence so large," the pilot ends his own life by suicide (narrator: "And I am trying to think this is only a matter of chance"). In the final story, seventeen year-old Sydney Barringer, having lost patience with his parents' incessant arguing and violent behaviour, decides to commit suicide. He jumps from the ninth floor rooftop of his parents' apartment building while they engage in a heated argument three stories below. Sidney's mother Fay is threatening his father with a shotgun that accidentally goes off just as Sydney is passing the window, and blows a hole in Syndey's stomach. As the narrator relates the story,

He is killed instantly but continues to fall, only to find, three stories below, a safety net installed three days prior for a set of window washers that would have broken his fall and saved his life if not for the hole in his stomach. So Fay Barringer was charged with the murder of her son and Sydney Barringer noted as an accomplice in his own death. And it is in the humble opinion of this narrator that this is not just "something that happened." This cannot be "one of those things."...This was not just a matter of chance...These strange things happen all of the time.

Anderson's narrator repeatedly emphasizes the contingent nature of death in these three chance episodes that kick off the thematic trajectory of the film, but concludes that there is apparently more to chance and coincidence than meets the eye. Throughout the duration of the film, the characters' lives intersect and weave together, as in Short Cuts, but unlike Altman's film, their coincident intersections gain an apparently meaningful
coherency that eventually alludes to some kind of organizing moral order. Relationships between characters are slowly revealed, and coincidence and chance encounters serve to bridge the isolated gaps that separate the film’s alienated protagonists from one another.

While Altman’s *Short Cuts* underscores the contingent nature of its characters’ interrelations, offering nothing in the way of inner lives to explain the circumstances surrounding their often incoherent and evidently irresponsible actions, Anderson’s film delves deeply into its characters tortured psyches, gradually revealing the skeletons in their closets, and thus providing a cumulative interweaving meaning for their behaviour. Anderson lingers on characters in long confessional scenes, such as when Earl Partridge (Jason Robards) unburdens his guilty conscience to his young male nurse (Philip Seymour Hoffman) about the abhorrent way he treated his loving wife, cheating on her regularly and ultimately leaving her alone to face her death with their young son (Tom Cruise). Confession becomes a theme in itself in the film, as Anderson’s characters must all unburden themselves of their sins to another. In *Magnolia*, characters suffer not because of chance occurrences and contingent experiences beyond their control, but because they have done wrong. While Altman depicts characters who won’t take responsibility for their actions, he refrains from imposing a moral judgement on whether their actions were ultimately right or wrong. Anderson, on the other hand, clearly dramatizes the difference between the two, and sums up the moral tone of the film with the Christian question of forgiveness: “What can we forgive?,” asks Officer Jim Kurring (John C. Reilly) in a monologue near the end of the film, “Tough part of the job. Tough part of walking down the street.” With its explicit emphasis on questions of morality,
forgiveness, and love, Anderson’s portrait of American life is of one that has spun heedlessly out of control and needs saving—evident in his soundtrack use of songs by Aimee Man such as “Save Me” which closes the film, and “Wise up,” which is used in an operatic sequence at the centre of the film, in which Anderson cuts back and forth between his ensemble cast of characters as they sing along to the lyrics of the song: “It’s not going to stop, ‘till you wise up.”

Furthermore, P. T. Anderson draws on conventional attitudes and beliefs about disease (see Chapter One) in dramatizing death as a punishment for wrong-doing in Magnolia. Cancer strikes the two most morally reprehensible characters in the film: Earl, who has behaved scandalously toward his family, and Jimmy Gator (Philip Baker Hall) who, it is insinuated, sexually abused his daughter when she was a child. Unlike the contingent death dramatized by Altman, Anderson associates death with a spiritual cancer born out of unforgivably sins that have manifested themselves physically in his characters. Cancer is a sign of deep-seated personal corruption in Magnolia, reflecting popular beliefs that go as far back as the Iliad and the Odyssey, and persist in the moralizing of disease born out of Christianity, and through the nineteenth century when the link between disease and punishment became associated with an individual’s will and character. Earl’s young wife Linda (Julianne Moore), on the other hand, manages to survive a drug overdose and a violent ambulance crash on the way to the hospital, apparently redeemed for her initially greedy intentions and self-confessed adulterous behaviour after realizing that she really truly and deeply loves her rich, elderly husband. Overt allusions to religion and Christianity in Magnolia, such as the “rain of frogs” and
the regular prayer practice of Officer Kurring provide scenes like this with a subtext of Christian morality that pervades the mood of the film and its thematic use of death and disease.

Coincidence and chance operate not only as a narrative organizing device, but as the spiritual language or logic that reveals truths which have been buried beneath the surface experience of the film’s characters; in other words, the experience of ‘synchronicity’ offers signs, both for the spectator and for protagonists within the diegesis, that speak to the possibility of redemption underlying the cancerous moral alienation that Anderson depicts as having corrupted the possibility of love for his characters. “I really do have love to give,” cries whiz-kid Donnie Smith (William H. Macy) at the end of the film, “I just don’t know where to put it.”

Contemporary proponents of synchronicity insist that we must always be on the lookout for meaningful coincidences, that we must remain open and receptive to signs from the “unmanifest” that will reveal the meaning and purpose of our lives. Similarly, the fragmented structures of many synchronicity films like Magnolia require that we observe with rapt attentiveness the potential meanings of their interlocking stories, their subtly ironic use of cinematic codes and conventions, and even the hidden signs that pervade their set design, like the words “look closer” that appear throughout American Beauty. In Magnolia, the importance of signs is a kind of hidden conceit of the film, with repeated references to Masonic symbolism as well as the numbers 8 and 2 which, by Paul Thomas Anderson’s estimates, appear close to 100 times, as a reference to the ‘plague of frogs’ in Exodus 8:2 which punctuates the climactic scene of the film. While Magnolia,
like many of the films noted above, retains an over-arching sense of ambiguity in terms of precisely what synchronicity really means, it nevertheless assembles signs that point toward a symbolically meaningful something, depicting a quasi-religious, rather than anxious, idea of contingency that animates the drama on-screen, and in which the only certainty is that however lost or alienated one might feel, however meaningless and hopeless things might look, there is a greater meaning underlying both the filmic universe on-screen and the everyday universe outside. There is definitely something rather than nothing, and it is our task to uncover the destiny that awaits us within that synchronistic structure.

This point is affirmed by Anderson’s directorial style, which is, to say the least, heavy-handed and relentlessly allusionistic. While long static shots are utilized to heighten the intensity of various confessionals in the film, the predominant shooting and editing techniques emphasize a chaotic undertow into which the film’s characters are dragged down. Rather than maintain a sense of subjective perspective through the use of long takes or lateral camera movement, Anderson makes use of fast-paced camera movement, long sweeping crane shots, quick cutting, extensive use of extreme close-ups, and suggestive zooms meant to cue spectators to specific clues to be read as significant, like a quick zoom into a painting with the words “but it did happen” during the rain of frogs. The pretense of Anderson’s style is that meaning is here to be read, meaningful signs beg to be interpreted; there is a relentless, almost paranoid sense of meaningful symbolism that spectators must assemble if they are to understand what is at stake in both the film and their own personal lives. The phrase “we may be through with the past, but
the past isn’t through with us,” for instance, is repeated by several characters as well as by the narrator at crucial moments in the film. What does it all mean? The answer is ambiguous at best, and one can note a hint of irony in Anderson’s brash, self-indulgent, even smug directorial style, but there is no question that the presence of synchronicity as a narrative framing device is meant to insinuate, as Sconce observes, that life is most definitely meaningful, even if that ‘meaning’ seems absurd on the surface.

A spectatorial engagement with the idea of death is naturally obscured and abstracted by the relentless need to assemble meaning out of the synchronous clues that synchronicity films like *Magnolia* present as significant. Like Edgar Allen Poe’s tales of ratiocination which, as many literary historians have noted, were invented by their author as a means of taming, through reason, the contingent and chaotic forces of the world that haunted him—a type of story which proclaims, in Hegel’s words, that “Pure reason, incapable of any limitation, is the deity itself.” —postmodern tales of synchronicity and meaningful coincidence similarly engage with a rationalized taming of contingency.

Much like the detective story and numerous contemporary serial killer films, synchronicity narratives engage “the extent to which the world we live in is orderly or chaotic, the signs around us are motivated or unmotivated, the language we use centered or decentered.” In the case of synchronicity, however, the puzzle is not a social one, but a personal one: the postmodern world is socially decentered but privately coherent, clues are individual to each of us, and signs are waiting to be interpreted uniquely by each individual so that we may all understand the purpose and significance of our own worlds. Thus, when it comes to confronting the idea of one’s own death, the personal
rationalization of contingent phenomena as meaningful seems to put an entirely different spin on the idea of mortality.

In contrast to the infamous angst of modern protagonist’s like Tolstoy’s Ivan Ilyich, who screams in horror for three days when the prospect of his imminent death finally becomes a reality for him, or Sartre’s protagonists in “The Wall” who literally piss their pants at the inconceivable thought of nothingness that awaits them upon their execution, or Bergman’s tortured Knight, Antonious Block, in The Seventh Seal (1957), who feels that life and death are a senseless terror without God, contemporary postmodern films offer us protagonists like Donnie (Jake Gyllenhaal) in Donnie Darko, whose anxieties over the meaninglessness of existence and the prospects of dying alone, which he expresses at the beginning of the film, are ultimately quelled by his awakened experience of synchronicity. By film’s end, he willingly embraces his own death in a fit of laughter and a monologue that expresses hope for all that there is “to look forward to.” Miss Huckabees (Naomi Watts), too, comes to realize through synchronicity “that there is no nothing, even when you die.” Synchronicity is therefore understood as confirmation that something profound and mysterious is at work in the universe outside of the temporal bonds of our everyday experience—a point which has led some observers, like Robert H. Hopcke, to conclude, in yet another best-selling book of the 90s entitled There Are No Accidents: Synchronicity and the Stories of Our Lives, that “at times, the synchronistic meaning of a coincidence seems almost capable of repairing and making whole what death has torn asunder.”
The logic of this shift away from the idea of contingency as a source of anxiety and toward the secure profundity of meaningful coincidence signals a significant shift in subjectivity. Postmodern subjectivity, as Fredric Jameson has argued, is governed by categories of space rather than time ("we now inhabit the synchronic rather than the diachronic") and thus the logic of synchronicity in popular film can certainly be read as an extension of what Jameson characterizes as "the waning of the great high modernist thematics of time and temporality, the elegiac mysteries of durée and memory." It is precisely this shift, as noted in Chapter One, that characterizes a subjective relation to the world that posits oneself at the centre of the universe, a decentered subject in a space which is mysteriously but coherently organized around one’s being.

In order for a coincidence to be deemed meaningful, after all, it must be inscribed as meaningful by the participant for whom meaning has been identified. If, indeed, a publisher interested in publishing a book on synchronicity sat next to me on the bus, it would be difficult not to feel as though the universe had conspired in my favour, as though the coincidence was indeed a meaningful sign that it was my fate to be published. But what if this publisher thought my approach to the topic was too sophomoric or perhaps too convoluted? Would that mean it was not my fate to be published, that it was not my fate to be a writer or an academic? What if he had the flu and I was a hypochondriac afraid of getting sick? How would our interaction go then, and what would it have to say about my fate as a writer? It quickly becomes apparent how the principle of synchronicity can appear menacingly paranoid, since at some level it implies, much like the experience of film spectatorship, that not only do I exist, but I exist at the
centre of things and everything is a potential sign of synchronistic meaning for me. In one of his short stories, Vladimir Nabokov comically refers to this sort of over-investment in meaning as “Referential mania,” a mental condition in which “the patient imagines that everything happening around him is a veiled reference to his personality and existence.” Others might simply relate the experience of synchronicity with paranoia: only the underlying question, as one of the characters in Kathryn Bigelow’s Strange Days (1995) repeatedly observes in articulating the contemporary subjective experience of the world, “is not whether you’re paranoid, it’s whether you’re paranoid enough.”

Rather than constituting a new “spiritual common sense,” as James Redfield’s popular novel implies, the idea of synchronicity seems rather to constitute a new form of postmodern hegemony within the spatial logic of late capitalism. As expressed by its popular proponents like Redfield, Chopra and Hopcke, among others, as well as its prevalence as an organizing principle in many popular films, especially those dealing with death, synchronicity is an articulation of a consumer capitalist ethos which attempts to make meaningful and desirable everything that is available for consumption. Good consumers are always relentlessly focused on the present—consider the “buy now, pay later” importance of credit to the economic health of late capitalism—and thus death must necessarily be banished in order to make meaningful the sheer abundance of stuff that promises us gratification and pleasure. In consumer capitalism, anxiety (the evil twin of pleasure) has been re-configured: contingency has been re-cast as mysterious
evidence of the inherent meaning of all one’s experiences rather than the source of
anxiety over meaninglessness and non-being.

Unlike the existential premise inherent in Heidegger that one must confront the
always already present possibility of one’s own death in creating an authentic mode of
being that dwells in care for the world; or in Sartre, who, as noted above, sees anxiety and
contingency as the source of an authentic being in the world, one which emphasizes a
necessarily responsible relation with others, the idea of synchronicity passively implies
that meaning is already in the world and one need only be attuned to the meaningful signs
and coincidences that will reveal one’s own unique destiny. Any social sense of
responsibility is completely foreign to such a logic. Thus, while existential philosophers
construct contingency and its related anxieties as a reality against which we must
imaginatively forge a more ethical and responsible world, the logic of synchronicity
effaces anxiety altogether, turning contingency into a meaningful commodity to be
consumed and presuming that we should passively discover its inherent meanings. In so
doing, the emphasis on meaningful coincidence, on fateful eventfulness, on the
synchronistic meanings of one’s fate, thus ultimately serves to obscure our one
undeniable fate: the fact of our imminent death.

While existential concerns regarding mortality may at times seem morbidly
solipsistic, and certainly very bourgeois, it may therefore be useful to regard such
anxieties as explicitly linked to notions of both social and subjective affectivity. The link
between death anxiety, social responsibility, and the imagining of mortality may be one
that holds promise for theorizing the hegemonic hold of consumer capitalism – a point
that will be further mined with regard to issues of time and synchronous temporality in the following chapter.
Chapter 2 – End Notes:


3 Jameson, Postmodernism, 14.


8 Girgus 91.


10 Girgus 25.

11 Björkman 211.


14 Kierkegaard 40-41.


16 Vivian Sobchak, “Inscribing Ethical Space: Ten Propositions On Death, Representation, and Documentary,” Quarterly Review of Film Studies, 9:1 (Fall ’84): 286.


18 Becker 87-92.


21 David Farrell Krell, “Introduction to ‘What is Metaphysics?’” Martin Heidegger: Basic Writings, 93.

22 Kraus 99.


24 Parkes 94.


29 Sartre, Being and Nothingness, 699.


31 Sartre, Being and Nothingness, 689.

32 Sartre, Being and Nothingness, 72.


34 Sartre, “The Wall,” 11


37 Doane 254n10.

38 Doane 4.

39 Doane 5.

40 Doane 10.

41 Doane 11.
42 Doane 136.
43 Doane 106.


45 Doane 138.


47 Doane 137.
48 Doane 104-5.
49 Doane 105.
50 Doane 107.
51 Doane 32.

52 Björkman 242.


64 Kafka, for instance, believed that his tuberculosis was "a sign of [his] general bankruptcy": See, Susan Sontag, Illness as Metaphor and AIDS and its Metaphors, 44.


70 Jameson, Postmodernism, 16.

CHAPTER THREE
TransCending eXistenZ: Consumerism as Amortality in the “Elevator Film”

If you can’t believe you’re going to heaven in your own body and on a first-name basis with all the members of your family, then what’s the point of dying?

(qtd. in Joan Didion, *The White Album*)

The logic of synchronous temporality that is present in postmodern synchronicity narrative films, with their capacity for shifting the framework of contingency from being a source of angst to being a kind of mystical evidence of fate or destiny, finds an even more overt, or perhaps total manifestation in a series of contemporary films which Murray Pomerance has termed “elevator cinema.” Pomerance draws attention to a group of narrative films that engage the idea of multiple, co-present, co-extensive or “alternate worlds”—that is, simultaneous worlds that co-exist synchronously in time, “just outside the boundaries of our quotidian perception,” as an infinite field of “possible worlds” or “parallel universes” that we are ostensibly capable of shifting between, presuming we can locate the right vehicle for facilitating our worldly transitions.¹ Such parallel universes are, as Pomerance explains, seemingly “built up in strata [...] simultaneously present in themselves yet absent from one another,” and thus since “smooth ascent to and descent from discernable levels is so central a feature” of these films, Pomerance employs the descriptive label of “elevator cinema” to convey the logic of their central narrative organizing principle.² The “elevator film” is, then, like the synchronicity film, one that operates under the logic of a synchronous rather than diachronic structure of time, demanding of the spectator a suspension of disbelief grounded entirely, as Pomerance observes, in the here and now: “Everything being conveniently here—both the ‘real’
world and its many alternatives"—everything is also now, and so time, too, is foregone in the name of present experience in its manifold variations."


Of particular consequence for this study is that so many of these films deal explicitly with the idea of death as a central theme. In both *Fearless* and *Flatliners* death is not the end, it is not nothing, it is by no means an abyss, nor is it the sweet hereafter; rather, death is here and now, a boundary whose thin veneer we can traverse by means of medical know-how or traumatized perceptual attunement; it is a place we are not only destined to go, but a place from which we can often choose to return. In Vincent Ward's *What Dreams May Come*, a film that is framed by a much more conventionally religious vision of mortality, Chris (Robin Williams) migrates from the mortal world to the heavens when he dies, and then literally travels to hell and back again to rescue the fallen soul of his wife Annie (Annabella Sciorra) so they can be re-united for eternity. No sooner has Chris accomplished this improbable goal, however, than he proposes in the
climactic scene of the film that they "go back" down to earth because of what fun it will be, as soul-mates, to find each other all over again and fall in love again. "Life" for these characters is a kind of alternate game world, a cosmic travel destination for a playful romantic romp, and birth and death are nothing more than convenient transitional tools between these worlds, between being and Being. Other films like The Thirteenth Floor and eXistenZ take this game-like association between life and death to its logical extreme, imagining alternate worlds through the rubric of virtuality, or virtual reality—a technological state of being that transcends the mortal context of the body and dislocates the temporal linearity of being so that death is but a momentary transitional tool into another, presumably more 'real' level of being, an eternal process of personal regeneration. And in others like Frequency and The Lake House, these alternate worlds consequently provide the pretext for a mortality that is entirely transcendable provided one can find a partner in an alternate parallel world that can help change one's mortal destiny in the present one.

In elucidating his argument, Pomerance situates elevator narratives within a tradition that develops out of numerous generic formulations including westerns, science fiction films, musicals, road movies, and even 60s drug films, but distinguishes one prominent characteristic that appears to define the "other" worlds of the elevator film from each of these others: namely, the unspectacular, commonplace, and sometimes even banal imagining of the "alternate worlds." Unlike the numerous genres listed above, elevator films tend not to offer the pretext of escape or transcendence to a better, more fantastic, more utopian alternative world—eXistenZ is an especially pertinent example in
this regard—but rather, in elevator cinema, “the precise appeal of the inner world is
ostensibly that it is exactly as real and believable as the outer one, not more believable.”
And thus, for Pomerance, the secret of such narratives is that one’s investment in them
has nothing at all to do with a desire to “arrive somewhere else,” but rather simply “to
stop being here”—a significant difference that leads him to the defining question of his
argument:

If I’m willing to leave my current social position to go to
another that is not characteristically augmented, not more
musical, not more sensual, not more tropical, not
perfumed with the airs of transcendence as is Shangri-La,
but simply different while being equally real, indeed even
cheaply real, then my present social position must be
seriously problematic. In what inheres the appeal of films
that offer us an imaginary possibility of leaving this social
life for something coexisting yet banal?

In attempting to come to terms with both this question and the series of films to which it
pertains, Pomerance emphasizes that the answer lies “not in having insight into our own
motives as viewers, but in trying to understand who might have a motive in convincing us
such a mobility made sense”? He emphasizes, in particular, the lack of discernable
social class relations in the “alternate” worlds of elevator films and performs a Marxian
analysis that argues convincingly for the ways in which eXistenZ and other elevator films
like it—in both their pretense to an unstructured and ontologically decentered social
world, and in their affirmation of mobility for the sake of mobility, and not for any
specific purpose or goal—serve ultimately to “affirm a triumphant anthem of global
consumerist frenzy.” That Pomerance sees this popularized notion of a decentered
contemporary social experience as a production of global marketing strategies rather than
as a kind of tangible “postmodern condition” is a significant point to which I will return below; but it is enough to begin by highlighting his methodological emphasis on the interests of those who produce rather than consume such narratives in attempting to theorize their sudden emergence in contemporary popular cinema. The aim of this chapter is to engage dialectically with Pomerance’s argument in a consideration of the ways in which viewers’ desires, both conscious and unconscious, might be bound up with the ideological interests he identifies. The theme of death—present so overtly in so many elevator films—may have something significant to do with our motives for consuming such narratives, and it might also say something important about both the hegemonic hold of late capital, and the interests involved in convincing us that such synchronous worlds made sense. Building on the arguments made about synchronous temporality in the previous chapter, the link between mortality, postmodern temporality, and late capitalist ideology will here be theorized in relation to the elevator film and its popularity in contemporary postmodern cinema and the contemporary political landscape.

**Postmoderism, Or, The Cultural Logic of the Elevator Film**

Many characteristics have been assigned to “postmodernity” or to the “postmodern condition,” but arguments about the cultural experience of space and time, both in cultural production, socio-economic organization and philosophical speculation, seem to be of paramount concern across all theoretical and political camps, from the poststructuralists through the critical theorists and neo-Marxists—Lyotard, Foucault,
Baudrillard, Deleuze and Guattari, Huysen, Bauman, Habermas, Lefebvre, Kellner, Jameson, Harvey—and so on. Even David Harvey’s *The Condition of Postmodernity*—the project perhaps most closely akin to the analytic tradition of historical materialism—emphasizes the necessity of recognizing “that the dimensions of space and time matter, and that there are real geographies of social action, real as well as metaphorical territories and spaces of power that become vital as organizing forces in the geopolitics of capitalism.” So, while Harvey is quick to criticize even fellow Marxist critics like Fredric Jameson for occasional irresponsibility in allowing themselves to be carried away by “the hyper-rhetoric” of postmodern theory, he nonetheless argues, with the likes of Lyotard, Foucault, Baudrillard and Jameson, though certainly with a different point of emphasis, that what we have been experiencing over the last three decades “is an intense phase of *time-space compression* (my emphasis) that has had a disorienting and disruptive impact upon political-economic practices, the balance of class power, as well as upon cultural and social life.”

Of the many contributing social and economic factors that have resulted in this phase of time-space compression identified by Harvey, key ones include: first, the evolution of technologies of electronic control in production coupled with organizational shifts away from Fordist production and toward “vertical dis-integration – sub-contracting, outsourcing, etc.”, which together have resulted in a general speed-up of production turnover times; second, a “parallel acceleration in [modes of] exchange and consumption,” most notably as a result of advances in communication and information systems (electronic banking, computerized trading, etc.); and third, an increasing shift
“away from the consumption of goods and into the consumption of services – not only personal, business, educational, and health services, but also into entertainments, spectacles, happenings, and distractions” (concerts, health clubs, etc.). These more ephemeral services offered capitalists the benefit of an increasing number of markets that were not subject to the same accumulation and turnover limits as physical goods, and Harvey emphasizes how together all of these trends have ultimately served, over time, to “accentuate volatility and ephemerality of fashions, products, production techniques, labour processes, ideas and ideologies, values and established practices.” The cumulative effect of these shifts, he argues, has been “to emphasize the values and virtues of instantaneity and of disposability,” not only of goods and services, “but also being able to throw away values, lifestyles, stable relationships, and attachments to things, buildings, places, people, and received ways of doing and being.”

For postmodern theorists like Jameson, this shift in cultural experience is marked in particular by a “weakening of historicity, both in our relationship to public history and in the new forms of our private temporality”—namely, argues Jameson, in a schizophrenic experience of “pure and unrelated presents in time.” This point is similarly echoed by the sociologist Zygmunt Bauman, who observes, following Lyotard, that ours “is a space-time of the perpetual present and ubiquitous ‘here’. The waning of tough reality goes together with the decomposition of history into a flow of episodes.” Consequently, Jameson reasons that “it is at least empirically arguable that our daily life, our psychic experience, our cultural languages, are today dominated by categories of space rather than by categories of time.” In other words, we are, in very practical ways,
actually quite similar to Ted Pikul (Jude Law) in eXistenZ who has the simultaneous experience of lying on a bed in a ski chalet while also navigating the inner game world of “eXistenZ” (later we learn that he is also simultaneously occupying a third space, playing an outer-frame game called “TransCendenZ” while sitting comfortably in a church-like setting). We literally engage many different ‘presents’ in time, for instance, as we surf online in absorbing virtual communities, conversations, and interactive spaces at the same time as we are occupying the normal everyday social space of corporeal reality. One need no longer be concerned about whether there will be enough time to draft an important letter, get to the post office to mail it, call Mom for her birthday, and make a flight to Tokyo on time. Rather, global communication technologies permit that we can navigate all four actions simultaneously: drafting an e-mail on our blackberry and sending it off via wireless internet while talking to Mom from a cell-phone in the back of a taxi cab headed for the airport. In other words, the experience of accepting, or perhaps even enjoying, the kinds of conceits implicit in elevator narratives is not necessarily completely alien from an empirical, everyday experience of the postmodern social world.

A striking similarity exists between Zygmunt Bauman’s examination of postmodern cultural practices surrounding death and Pomerance’s meditation on the kinds of conceits implicit in elevator cinema, only Bauman uses the metaphor of a bridge rather than an elevator in order to articulate the ontological conundrum of existing in a world in which historical time ceases to be the dominant marker of subjective orientation. Note, for instance, the parallel between Pomerance’s description of elevator worlds
summarized above and Bauman’s examination of how the terror of death is socially exorcised in contemporary culture:

One strategy that seems to be increasingly favoured by the world we live in, by the increasingly *postmodern* world — makes the whole of life into a game of bridge-crossing: all bridges seem by and large alike, all are — comfortably — part of one’s daily itinerary, so that no bridge seems to loom ominously as the ‘ultimate’ one (most importantly, none seems to be the bridge ‘of no return’)…Nothing seems to vanish forever, ‘for good’ — so that it cannot reappear again… No loss is irretrievable.\(^{17}\)

For Bauman, the idea of death is no longer negotiated using the language of annihilation or negation, nothingness or non-being—in other words, a temporal framework—but rather within a discourse of disappearance and reappearance: death as a transitional state, or as a state of suspension within an alternate space outside of the space in which one is currently positioned—and thus, within a spatially oriented ontological framework. Once again, his description of this transitional state is strikingly reminiscent of Pomerance’s articulation of elevator worlds:

The other world (that where death is reduced to the status of ‘mere’ suspension, temporary disappearance) is a *coexistence* of beings. It is a world in which space makes an impression of not being scarce. Or, rather, space has many levels, its living floors and its cellars, open stages and hidden limbos. To make room at one level, beings may, and do, just move to another.\(^{18}\)

While Bauman’s analysis may be somewhat abstract in its articulation, or perhaps just more of the “hyper-rhetoric” that Harvey identifies in so much postmodern theory, it is not such a stretch to link his ideas to an empirical, lived social experience of individuals
in late capitalist society, perhaps nowhere more obviously than in the engagement with contemporary mass media and communication technologies.

Bombarded by a constant flow of images and information, our attention is constantly in motion; indeed, no one thing assumes more than a few seconds or minutes on our collective mindscreens, and few experiences are worthy of lasting memory. Even monumental international disasters, like the 2004 Tsunami that killed over 150,000 people in Indonesia or Hurricane Katrina that devastated the U.S. Gulf Coast in 2005, seem to occupy incredibly intense, heavily mediated, but relatively short periods of public attention and concern. Just six months after watching the horrific images of devastated landscape, institutionalized racism, and governmental incompetence in the aftermath of Katrina, it is almost possible to forget that the event happened altogether, or at the very least to experience it as a faint or distant memory. Where did the many outraged voices of residents, citizens, and public officials disappear to so quickly? In Bauman’s interpretation, “Public vision is permanently overcrowded,” and thus, “those selected ‘public events’ and celebrities who make it to the centre seem to appear from nowhere; soon they will return whence they came – they will fade into non-existence.”19

Events are increasingly fleeting and seemingly disconnected from any linear historical framework in which human action is connected to past or even future occurrences.

Consequently, Bauman further understands postmodernity as having progressed beyond the mere deconstruction of mortality, as observed in the more conventional Hollywood portrayals of death, and ultimately into the deconstruction of immortality as well. Whereas immortality was once reserved, both in modern and pre-modern Western
cultures, to those privileged few capable of "making history," of having a recorded influence on specific landmark historical events, Bauman observes how in contemporary culture an unparalleled "democratization of history-making (of access to historicity)" has occurred in step with proliferation of mass media, enabling everyone to feel access to individual immortality as, "immortality is deconstructed into fame and immortality-earning virtue into the quantity of tied public attention." The plenitude of 'reality television' shows of all categories, stripes and interests, for example, affirms that we can, and likely will, all have our immortal moment in the spotlight; we are each of us, from the beginning, equally entitled to lasting immortality. Thus, Bauman argues that "Madison Avenue has taken the place of the Papel See. Advertisers, publicity-promoting and image-grooming companies, critics, gallery owners, publishers, programmers of TV companies and editors of the press are the most prominent of the new professions whose function (and importance, and esteem) consists in the brokerage of immortality."

Fame and immortality are, under these circumstances, easily accessible but extremely volatile. One appears on Survivor today, only to be banished from the island tomorrow—but, of course, not without the promise of potential reappearances on late night talk shows a few nights later or a Playboy spread years down the road. Just as fashion and other trends circulate ceaselessly and repetitiously in the postmodern global economy, disappearing and reappearing—what is obsolete today is tomorrow's rage, before once again slipping briefly into obsolescence so that it can reappear, one fine day, to flower again, ad infinitum—so too the economy of death becomes prey to the logic of perpetual transience: "everything becomes immortal, and nothing is:"
Unlike death, disappearance is not final, not ‘forever’; there is no certainty of its permanence ... In the world in which disappearing has replaced dying, immortality dissolves in the melancholy of presence, in the monotony of endless repetition.\(^\text{24}\)

The idea of death in the postmodern moment as Bauman understands it is, in other words, ultimately a mirror reflection of what Harvey describes as the logic of consumer capitalist production, a logic that trumpets the virtues of ephemerality and transience.\(^\text{25}\)

And thus, it is no longer just the social _separation_ of life and death, which Foucault and Baudrillard (see Chapter One) locate as an important base of power in their early writings, constituting a principle source of social control in postmodernity; it is no longer just the abstraction of linear time or the prohibition of death that constitutes our relationship with the idea of mortality, but rather a complete obsolescence of “linear memory—that is to say, the historical view” altogether.\(^\text{26}\)

With both mortality and immortality now deconstructed into a kind of eternal present, it is perhaps therefore more accurate to characterize the postmodern relationship with death not necessarily as a democratizing of immortality, as Bauman articulates it, but as a different category altogether: as a state of deathlessness, or _amortality_. “There is absolutely no general conviction that death is something to be faced,” writes John Ralston Saul of our contemporary predicament: “Life is devoted to working, preparing, saving, driving ourselves towards something undefined. The process of our movement through the system gives us the sense of being somehow here forever.”\(^\text{27}\) Whereas the concept of immortality is most frequently associated with a quest for eternity, a spiritual
existence after the death of the body, the term “amortality” is perhaps more accurate at articulating the postmodern rejection of death as neither a physical nor spiritual concern.

Of the five key aspects of contemporary social life that Simon, Haney, and Buenteo see as emblematic of postmodernity, the predominant one is a widespread “normalization of change,” which “beyond repetition or cycles, has come to be a regular and expected part of the lives of many individuals, families, and institutions...[so] that [change] is no longer experienced as threateningly unexpected and its absence is viewed with foreboding.” Historically, they observe how “the inexorable transformations of individual existence, particularly those involving age and mortality, were given meaning by the seeming constancy of the surrounding social landscape,” which was viewed as indelible. In the postmodern moment, however, they conclude that “mobility of various kinds becomes a near constant,” and it is the access to a “continuously unfolding frontier of possible experiences,” regardless of what such experiences may be, that becomes the nexus of meaning and subjectivity. From the homes we inhabit and the neighbourhoods and cities we live in to the possessions we accumulate, the technologies we employ, and the jobs we work, Simon, Haney and Buenteo argue that the constancy of change is the dominant factor that differentiates us from the successive generations that have come before. “Change at the individual level tends to occur within shorter spans of time and, as a result,” they argue that we have experienced “an undercutting of the ability to share a ‘taken for granted’ sense of shared worlds.” In the postmodern moment, perpetual change and mobility is life and vice versa. Unending movement through the system and
the normalization of change—these are the postmodern antidotes to the age old problem of linear time, memory, and mortality.

Similarly, elevator cinema is also about mobility, about movement across parallel worlds, for its own sake—not, as noted above, for any discernible social purpose. In films like *eXistenZ* the grass is absolutely not greener on the other side. In fact, it is strikingly similar to the grass here, so much so that one of the central conceits of the film is that we are no longer able to discern which grass is the “real” grass to begin with, or, for that matter, where “here” actually is. And it is hardly a coincidence—but also *not* an example of synchronicity—that so many elevator films seem preoccupied with the theme of death and dying, since in many ways these films reflect the inherent correlation between our postmodern belief in mobility and transience, and our contemporary effacement of death as a problematic social and philosophic experience that requires our attention.

Rather than being understood as a temporal cessation of being, death in the elevator film is represented, literally, as a kind of spatial shift into a parallel coexistent universe, conveyed subtly on screen, as Pomerance, observes, through techniques like “a gentle, silent, simple little crosscut.” In the closing scene of *eXistenZ*, for instance, a final transitory crosscut reveals that the world of “*eXistenZ*” has all along been a “game-within-a-game,” a game within a more “real” outer frame game called “transCendenZ.” We quickly learn that the two main game-playing protagonists of “*eXistenZ*,” Ted (Jude Law) and Allegra (Jennifer Jason Leigh), are actually, “in reality,” terrorists who have been sent to assassinate the game designers of “transCendenZ” for its seamless distortion of reality. Having completed their mission and killed the game designers, proclaiming
“death to transCendenZ,” both assassins descend murderously on one last ill-fated game-player who concludes the film by asking the obligatory question demanded by the very logic of elevator cinema’s infinite set of synchronic narrative worlds: “Hey, tell me the truth, are we still in the game?”

In what could certainly be read as an homage to the final shot of Edwin S. Porter’s *The Great Train Robbery* (1903), Cronenberg cuts to a final two-shot of Ted and Allegra pointing their guns directly at the camera so that we are put in the subjective position of the game player for whom death has potentially become all too real. Only unlike early film audiences a century ago who reportedly reacted with shock and fear when bandit chief George Barnes raised his gun and pulled the trigger, the spectatorial experience of film-going today obviously allows for no such anxiety. Having become accustomed to the experience of visual mediation as our dominant representational mode of engaging the world, and having become habituated to the omnipotent spectatorial experience of engaging in other worlds without consequence to our “real” embodied selves, the viewer is precisely like this gamer whose perspective we briefly assume, and can’t help but stare back at these absurd would-be executioners with a gaze unwilling or perhaps unable to conceive of death as a real and present possibility. To be a spectator, as discussed in Chapter One, is to occupy a transcendental subjectivity, and thus the answer is very clear: we must still be in the game!

In this regard, one might read the frequently prevalent theme of death in elevator cinema as emblematic of the postmodern failure to address the problem of death within a temporal framework; instead, these films articulate a spatial ethic of disappearance and
reappearance that betrays the linear hold of time, of memory, and the inevitable finality of death. In more practical terms, one may observe this sort of amoral subjectivity in much contemporary discourse surrounding death and dying, most notably perhaps in the vocabulary surrounding old age as a new stage of youth, or as a “golden age.” “Not only, it seems, should we not prepare our minds for termination,” observes Saul of our discourse of aging, “we should, as the moment approaches, create a whole new set of illusions in order to avoid the relevant thoughts.” If our spectatorial desires are indeed bound up in elevator films, if these films do in some way accord with our desires, if there is indeed viewing pleasure to be had in the experience of moving from here to “here,” from one banal social world to another equally banal, but coexisting world, it may well be that such movement is an articulation and realization of our desired amortality, our will to deathlessness, to a world where death is not real. After all, if this is just a game, then our hapless gamer has found his out. Upon “dying” he will move seamlessly into another frame, to play another day. If, however, this is not a game, then the finality of his being within time, the consequent anxieties of finite life, and the age-old problem of mortality will suddenly become a shocking reality for him.

Umberto Eco has diagnosed this contemporary denial of death as the consequence of an “inflationary tendency” that has resulted from our loss of faith in both religion and the ideological systems like communism that promised to replace them. He quotes G.K. Chesterton’s assertion that “when a man ceases to believe in God, he doesn’t believe in nothing, he believes in anything,” arguing that we have, in the contemporary moment, reverted to the occult in order to reconcile ourselves with death: “The so called occult
sciences do not ever reveal any genuine secret: they only promise that there is something secret that explains and justifies everything. The great advantage of this is that it allows each person to fill up the empty secret 'container' with his or her own fears and hopes.34 Eco's observation is certainly consistent with the appeal of synchronicity as a topic for both popular films and pop-spiritual gurus, but it also finds a parallel in the sudden emergence of elevator narratives in representing an amortal relationship with death.

David Harvey, too, remarks at how the ephemeral and fragmented world that has resulted from a socio-economic system ever-more geared toward accelerating turnover times and transient fashions, products, ideologies and values must ultimately produce new systems of meaning to fit these prevailing modes of production: "the greater the ephemerality," he argues, "the more pressing the need to discover or manufacture some kind of eternal truth that might lie therein."35

The multi-billion dollar self-help and pop-spirituality movements discussed in the previous chapter can be understood as just such a rationalization, as they are awash with "philosophies" and pseudo-scientific belief systems that make use of the very spatial discourses identified above by theorists like Jameson, Bauman, and Harvey in negotiating contemporary fears about death. In bestselling books like Eckhart Tolle's *The Power of Now* (1999) and numerous Deepak Chopra efforts such as *Escaping the Prison of the Intellect: A journey from here to here* (1992) and *Everyday Immortality* (1999), notions of history, memory, and time are, as in elevator films, dispensed with altogether in favour of a spatial logic completely focused on the here and now.36 Both "gurus" offer a pastiche of eastern philosophic tradition blended with contemporary
quantum theory and Western consumer capitalist ideology, producing a uniquely
Americanized hybrid system of belief. For Chopra, memory is a “prison” founded on the
“superstition of materialism,” which we must learn to escape if we are to “soar gracefully
into the unknown.”37 In his system, time is a product of rationalist attempts to quantify
space, while space itself is “the transformational vortex, the corridor, the window of
Spirit”38:

I am now noticing the spaces between written words, spaces between objects, spaces between thoughts, spaces
between sounds, spaces between musical notes, spaces inside a cup, around it, and outside it. I am noticing
spaces, spaces everywhere. They are all the same spaces, and they are always there. Before the thoughts came, after
they left, the space is. Before the music was born and after it dies—the space is. Before the words were uttered
and after the speech was silent—the space is. Before and after death—the space is.

The space always is, and in this space I am.

Before birth I am.

After death I am.

I always am.39

More recently, Chopra has released his first book focused entirely on the idea of
mortality, Life After Death: The Burden of Proof (2005), in which he writes: "Whatever it
is that occurs at death, I believe it deserves to be called a miracle. The miracle, ironically,
is that we don't die."40

This Chopraesque miracle of amortality mirrors the logic of elevator cinema
almost exactly and finds a practically literal transcription, for instance, in Vincent Ward’s
What Dreams May Come. When Chris (Robin Williams) shifts from the space of life to that of death, he encounters his old mentor Albert Lewis (Cuba Gooding Jr.) who helps him with the transition to heaven. Every person, we learn, has their own private universe in “Heaven” that accords to their dreams and desires, and characters can shift between each other’s universes seemingly at will. But before Chris can experience these heavenly spheres he is first subjected to a metaphysical lecture from Albert that is ripe with Chopraesque allusions. Albert must first teach Chris that physical reality is an illusion, that his body, his leg or his arm, his heart or his brain, is not and never was him: “Only thought is real, physical is the illusion. Ironic, huh?” In short, the film provides a Chopraesque crash course on “the superstition of materialism,” with Albert as Chopra’s guru-like stand-in. Death is not death; it is merely the removal of the illusion of time and temporal bonds, the ticket to eternal worldly migration—in short, a miracle.

In Pomerance’s discussion of elevator cinema, he argues that the logic implied by such films is actually an articulation of the contemporary needs of the multinational corporate world, which seeks to “create a consumer/viewer who does not see himself as hampered by a lack of social capital”:

The belief in “inner” democracy, then—that on the game board we are all competitive in the same way—can lead to vast consumption, vast attempts at success (for each of which a fee is paid in one way or another). Whether or not a classless world is one we would wish to imagine, it is certainly one global marketers would like us to imagine. Seeing ourselves in more traditional, class-bound, terms, we would shop less: if we were rich, we would see ourselves as satisfied, or simply acquire without the intermediary of desire. If we were destitute we would think ourselves hopelessly out of the picture. After we have “played” the game called “eXistenZ,” however, we...
feel empowered no matter who we are. Indeed, we feel detached from any capacity to learn whether or not we are already empowered.\footnote{41}

In negating social class relations and emphasizing an existence focused entirely in the here and now, elevator films are most definitely an explicit articulation of consumer capitalist ideology. That these same films also, simultaneously, serve to negate the temporal bonds that orient the subjective experience of mortality, hints at the possibility that the reality of mortal existence, of death and finitude, might be extraordinarily problematic for those who wish to market a classless society organized around conspicuous consumption. To be sure, if we saw ourselves in all the finitude of our mortality, if death was a culturally acknowledged, openly significant part of our existential experience, we would also shop less. In the postmodern global economy, consumption is the supreme form of mobility and the miracle of amortality its most persuasive justification. "Modern man is drinking and drugging himself out of awareness," argues Ernest Becker, "or he spends his time shopping, which is the same thing."\footnote{42} In the postmodern moment, to consume is to exist: this is the moral dogma that pervades the synchronous narrative logic of both the synchronicity and elevator narratives.

In other words, while it is true that elevator cinema should be read as an articulation of the ideological interests of global marketers in the system of late capitalism, it is useful also in understanding the hegemonic hold of these ideologies, to acknowledge that the desire(s) these marketers are best able to exploit in selling us this logic are intimately tied up with our contemporary desire for what is here being called
amortality. Or, put differently, one might argue that our willingness, or even eagerness, to engage the pretense of coexisting, parallel social worlds, may have a great deal to do with the ontologically amortal subjectivity they engender in us: consumerism, then, as postmodern religious experience.
Chapter 3 – End Notes


2 Pomerance 2.

3 Pomerance 7.

4 Pomerance 11.

5 Pomerance 12.

6 Pomerance 12.

7 Pomerance 12.

8 Pomerance 13.


10 Harvey 351, 284.

11 Harvey 284-85.

12 Harvey 285.

13 Harvey 286.


16 Jameson 16.

17 Bauman 174.

18 Bauman 175.

19 Bauman 189.

20 Bauman 171.

21 Bauman 172.

22 Bauman 172.

23 Bauman 174.

24 Bauman 175.
25 Harvey 286.


27 Saul 375-76.


29 Simon, Haney and Buenteo 413.

30 Simon, Haney and Buenteo 414.

31 Simon, Haney and Buenteo 413.

32 Pomerance 5.

33 Saul 376.


35 Harvey 292.

36 According to his website, Deepak Chopra has published 49 books that have sold over 20 million copies worldwide. 29 Jan. 2007 <http://www.chopra.com/124025.html>


38 Chopra 75


41 Pomerance 13.

CHAPTER FOUR
Toward a Progressive Aesthetic of Death in Contemporary Popular Film

Nothing confirms our identity with other mortals and our mutual dependence as powerfully as death does.

Alfred G. Killelea, *The Politics of Being Mortal*

In a consideration of the various arguments and lines of thought developed in the previous three chapters, one particular point requires explicit clarification before we can move on to consider how a more progressive or subversive film aesthetic of mortality might be imagined. While it is true that one of the principle features of postmodern film cycles like those of synchronicity and elevator films is that they construct an idea of our contemporary social experience that is increasingly detached from a linear framework of temporality, from a sense of history, memory and finitude; and while it is also true that this idea is echoed by theorists of postmodernity in their critiques of many aspects of contemporary social experience, it would be a mistake to get too caught up in generalizing such theorizations in any essential ontological sense. It may appear that history and memory are “waning” or no longer predominant as social organizing categories in the postmodern moment, but it is imperative (even if it seems obvious) to emphasize the nature of these prescriptions as dealing precisely with appearances rather than with “reality.” Categories of time and space have not in themselves changed, but rather only in the way we think of and experience them. Consequently, the analyses undergone to this point here have been concerned primarily with the phenomenological question of our experience of time and space, and the consequent effects of that
experience on the way that we understand both our social world and the idea of our mortality.

The preceding chapters examine the many ways in which our imaginings of death in the postmodern moment are bound up with an experience of time and space that has been significantly affected by an increasingly spectatorial subjectivity, an experience of the world that has changed with the rapid proliferation of the moving image and other mass media in the twentieth century. Walter Benjamin understood that "the manner in which human sense perception is organized, the medium in which it is accomplished," carries great consequences for "humanity's entire mode of existence," and we have seen how the experience of cinema spectatorship has constituted something of a primary social framework for what we would call postmodern subjectivity. We have examined how the logic of late capitalist consumer society relies in so many ways on this particular subjectivity and its consequent effects on not only our experience of time and space, but also on existential concepts such as contingency, anxiety, authenticity and responsibility. Further, we have also seen how the logic of consumer capitalism itself has evolved into the opiate to cure our mortal woes.

The hegemonic hold of capitalism is, as Benjamin himself foresaw almost ninety years ago, in many ways the same as that of religion, as "capitalism serves essentially to allay the same anxieties, torments, and disturbances to which the so-called religions offered answers." Max Weber drew similar conclusions in The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism, showing the degree to which Western capitalist values and practices are bound up with a protestant morality that gave meaning to the major social changes
brought on by the Industrial Revolution in the West. He argues, for instance, that the moral valuation of both time and hard work in capitalist society has its root in 17th century ascetic Protestantism, which first constructed the notion of labour as a "calling" imbued with moral significance. Profit itself became a moral virtue attached to the will of God: "For if that God, whose hand the Puritan sees in all the occurrences of life, shows one of His elect a chance of profit, he must do it with a purpose. Hence the faithful Christian must follow the call by taking advantage of the opportunity."\(^3\) O'Brien and Szeman place particular emphasis on the shift in social values that coincided with the growth of materialism at the beginning of the twentieth century, representing "not so much an abandonment of religion as a shift in its orientation, away from guilt and self-denial toward values of self-enhancement and emancipation."\(^4\) In this regard, the amoral logic of the postmodern elevator film can be viewed as the purest narrative imagining of the capitalist economic system turned into a metaphysical order; consumerist ideology has become the nexus of existential meaning and moral action instead of any conventionally religious notion of God.

In his Introduction to Volume I of Karl Marx's *Capital*, Ernest Mandel characterizes today's Western world as even more reflective of the book's model of 'pure' capital than the world which Marx himself was writing about.\(^5\) Marx's diagnosis of the capitalist system viewed "the constant expansion of the capitalist market as absolutely necessary for the survival of the capitalist mode of production."\(^6\) The system requires constant, ever-expanding growth, both in the mass production of commodities and in the corresponding markets in which they are sold. Consequently, however,
consumerist ideology remains vulnerable to those ideas and ethical considerations that call into question the hegemonic valuation of perpetual growth and expansion.

Alfred G. Killelea argues that death offers an implicit antidote to the individualist ideology and acquisitive logic of contemporary consumer capitalist society. He observes how, at an essential level, both capitalist hegemony and economy are entirely at odds with "the value of recognizing and accepting the finiteness of human existence." If postmodern consumer society is the purest model of unencumbered capitalism, then certainly cycles such as those of the synchronicity and elevator films can be viewed as its corresponding narrative manifestation. Both are visions completely at odds with any sense of limits. As Killelea argues, "In order to support acquisitiveness without regard to need, competitive societies must avoid at all costs the critical senses of proportion and of limits that the confrontation with human mortality provokes." And, if we consider how the logic of ever-expanding capitalist modes of production has become prevalent in the kinds of pseudo-scientific, pop-spiritual philosophies that espouse rampant consumerism as a form of postmodern religious experience, then it stands to reason that certain representations of death and mortality might carry the possibility of a significant political challenge to the ideological forces that wish to have us believe in principles such as inner democracy and classless social worlds, as discussed in Chapter three.

Amos Vogel, for instance, views the representation of death as an important cinematic taboo available to subversive filmmakers. In particular, he argues that representations of corpses violate a critical cultural and cinematic taboo in the West, "subverting the illusion of eternity and order on which our existence is built, and all the
reassurances of power, wealth, and ideology with which we attempt to hold nothingness at bay."^9 Certainly anyone who has seen the long, lingering images of Tom Joslin’s corpse moments after his death from HIV/AIDS in *Silverlake Life: The View From Here* (1993)—skeletal, gaping, eyes wide open—can understand the degree to which the representation of a corpse disrupts any commonplace illusions about our corporeal existence, ultimately perhaps lending credence to Vogel’s view that such representations challenge the spectator “to accept one’s physicality and to reject any metaphysical concept of the human body.”^10 The corpse is a literal rebuke to our imagined power over death; it is a symbol of “real” death that rests outside all meaning prescribed by the global capitalist marketplace.

The image of the corpse violates the hegemonic denial of death that treats our mortality as an enemy or scourge, a barbarian force that doctors and scientists have been charged to protect us against. As we saw in Chapter One, the medicalization and technologization of death has turned the value of life into “life-capital,” the good life into the long life. Indeed, notions of the “good life” in the West seem no longer to require much in the way of self-reflection or self-examination at all; consumer hegemony has joyfully simplified all such anxieties for us. Consequently, the image of the corpse is more than just an affront to the logic of this system; it is a powerful indexical violation of contemporary notions of death and mortality in the popular imagination.

In *The Spirit of Terrorism*, Jean Baudrillard elucidates the ways in which terrorism similarly violates the logic of both global capital and its accepted meanings of death. The terrorists, he argues, “have succeeded in turning their own deaths into an
absolute weapon against a system that operates on the basis of the exclusion of death, a system whose ideal is an ideal of zero deaths.” How does one fight an enemy who is “as eager to die as the Americans are to live!”? The meaning of terrorism is entirely at odds with the Western valuation of life; it is the ultimate rebuke to notions of life-capital. Whereas Baudrillard argues that the system survives ultimately “by constantly drawing those attacking it into fighting on the ground of reality, which is always its own,” the terrorists have succeeded at using death to undermine the basic logic of the system: life as a symbolic sacrifice rather than as an institution to be preserved, protected, and prolonged. What good is accomplished by dropping a bomb on an enemy whose military tactic it is to blow themselves up pre-emptively? Death, both in this case and in that of the exposed “real” of the corpse, is too real, too inexplicable, too far outside the order of symbolic exchange belonging to global capitalist hegemony.

Obviously these kinds of radical confrontations with “real” death are not the sort available to popular cinema. The corpse as a representational device may be a sign available to avant-garde cinema or non-mainstream documentaries, such as those hailed by Vogel—Stan Brakhage’s The Act of Seeing With One’s Own Eyes (1971), Georges Franju’s The Blood of the Beasts (1949), Alain Resnais’s Night and Fog (1955)—but not to the Hollywood screen. No fictive corpse, however authentic it may appear, can capture the “ferocious reality” of death; the sign of the corpse is denuded of its ferocity when “safely contained by narrative, in iconic and symbolic structures… which softens their threat.” Similarly, while Hollywood has released a plenitude of films since 9/11 that deal with the crisis of terrorism, including The Sum of All Fears (2002), Munich
(2005), *Syriana* (2005), *World Trade Center* (2006), *United 93* (2006), and *The Kingdom* (2007), none of these films addresses the meaning of death in the logic of terrorist warfare. Each of them makes attempts to re-appropriate the terrorist act within the generic narrative meanings of dominant capitalist hegemony. In *The Sum of All Fears* terrorism is framed as the strategy of evil, greedy Others; in *Munich*, it is understood as a senselessly tragic act of vengeance; in *Syriana*, it is the consequence of religious fundamentalists who have brainwashed poor, vulnerable Muslim boys; and, in films like *World Trade Center* and *United 93*, it is represented profoundly, but completely from the point of view of American victimization. The deeper meanings associated with a fully conscious, politically charged, and purely symbolic sacrifice of life, necessarily go unconsidered. In other recent films, such as *Fight Club* (1999) and *V for Vendetta* (2005), terrorist strategy is employed in a manner that appears to be a direct challenge to the system of late capitalist power relations, but ultimately ends up justifying the evil of corporate capitalism as a "lesser evil" compared to the complete apocalyptic collapse that these films posit as the only possible alternative. For Robin Wood, it is precisely this "failure to suggest that there might be a positive alternative in the form of organized political process" that accounts for the despairing cynicism that seems to accompany most contemporary progressive or oppositional filmic imaginings.¹⁵

What, then, might a progressive aesthetic of mortality look like in popular cinema? How might popular representations of death and mortality work to challenge the logic of late consumer capitalism in a means accessible to popular film audiences? There must certainly be other conceivable cinematic strategies for challenging the radical
individualization and self-absorption that is characteristic of both postmodern subjectivity and consumer capitalist hegemony. I want to conclude by addressing precisely such possibilities. However, it is first necessary to take one last theoretical detour in order to discern some of the key historical debates relating to what defines a "progressive" film. After a brief survey of these debates, this chapter will advance a preliminary sketch for beginning to imagine a progressive aesthetic of death in contemporary popular film, and culminate in a close critical reading of Don McKellar's *Last Night* (1999) as an example of a film that offers a progressively subversive vision of existential death and mortality.

**What is a "Progressive" Film? A Brief Survey of Key Historical Debates**

Defining precisely what might constitute a progressive, subversive, or oppositional film aesthetic is no simple task. Marxist debates about what constitutes subversive cinema have been far-reaching and often diametrically opposed. Take, for instance, the critical debate between Theodor Adorno and Walter Benjamin, friends and scholars both affiliated with the Frankfurt School, in their respective positions on the emancipatory potential of film. In a letter to Benjamin (March 18, 1936), Adorno describes their respective positions as "torn halves of an integral freedom, to which however they do not add up." In contrast to the traditional auratic artwork which encourages passive,
isolated reception, Benjamin argued that the workings of the camera forced the viewer into a position of active and critical reception. Rapidly changing images (edited together through techniques such as Eisensteinian montage) produce a “shock effect” that interrupts spectatorial processes of association; and this for Benjamin, should consequently result in a “heightened presence of mind” in the spectator.\(^{19}\) Moreover, with its ability to penetrate reality in previously unseen ways (techniques such as close-ups and slow motion expand space and extend movement, thus “revealing entirely new structural formations of the subject”\(^{20}\)), and in the necessarily collective production and reception made necessary by its technical process, Benjamin concluded that mechanically reproduced art held an inherently emancipatory force for the masses. While fascism had rendered politics aesthetic in order to control the masses, communism could now respond by politicizing art.\(^{21}\)

Theodor Adorno, on the other hand, while in agreement with Benjamin about the significance of the declining aura, disagreed with the notion that cinematic reproduction held an emancipatory potential. In the eyes of Adorno, Benjamin’s theorizations were ultimately guilty of fetishizing the techniques he espoused without taking into account how such techniques were being manipulated and employed by those whose economic means controlled them.\(^{22}\) The culture industry’s chief concern is not emancipation, but indoctrination. Furthermore, in his letter to Benjamin regarding the “Work of Art” essay, Adorno emphasized the point that the actual class consciousness of actual working class spectators is not as inclined towards revolutionary demands as Benjamin would like to believe.\(^{23}\)
As for the effects of film viewing on the consciousness of the spectator, Adorno argued that rather than producing a heightened critical awareness as was Benjamin's contention, the flickering images on the cinematic screen actually serve to render the spectator more passive as "sustained thought is out of the question if [one] is not to miss the relentless rush of facts."^24 In his letter to Benjamin, Adorno writes that what impressed him most upon his visit to a movie studio "was how little montage and all the advanced techniques that you emphasize are actually used; rather, reality is everywhere constricted with an infantile mimetism and then 'photographed'."^25 Rather than employing a "shock effect," Adorno saw most film production as controlled by commercial enterprises that consciously seek to control the masses in much the same way as fascism. "The mechanisms that Adorno sees operating in the cinema," explains Miriam Hansen, "especially its techniques of illusionism, enhance the false identification of the particular with the universal which characterizes all products of the culture industry."^26 Additionally, the employment of revolutionary cinematic techniques can be manipulated by all established powers, be they fascist, communist or capitalist.^27 Ultimately, for Adorno, the emancipatory potential of any art form can be found only in the formal development of artistic technique, as in autonomous works of art like those of Kafka and Schönberg.^28 "For Adorno," writes Martin Jay, "an art that exposed the palliatives of mass culture for what they were, more accurately expressed the pain of modern existence and was thus ultimately on the side of genuine pleasure."^29 Thus, at the end of his essay "On the Fetish Character," Adorno praises the atonal music of Schönberg as a truly authentic autonomous work of art that "gives form to that anxiety,
that terror, that insight into the catastrophic situation which others merely evade by regressing ... [and whose] work is nothing but a single dialogue with the powers which destroy individuality."\(^{30}\)

Herein is the final point of "antinomy" that Richard Wolin identifies between the two great scholars. While Benjamin's project optimistically attempts to develop a politics of art that could reach and unite the masses through mechanical reproduction, Adorno responds by underscoring the manipulative use to which such techniques are generally put, and cites the only potential emancipatory force as the authentic autonomous work of art that struggles, by virtue of its consciously antagonistic form, against the commodified languages of the culture industry. Wolin articulates the antinomy as follows:

Benjamin's willingness to sacrifice the principle of aesthetic autonomy for the sake of mechanically reproduced, generalizable art—an art suited to the ends of political communication—runs the risk of prematurely surrendering art to the domain of utilitarian interests. And...these interests can be equally progressive or reactionary. On the other hand, Adorno's steadfast defense of deauraticized autonomous art relinquishes all potential for communication on other than the most privatized, esoteric basis—to the point where such art is accessible (as, for example, in the case of Schönberg) only to the 'expert'.\(^{31}\)

Thus, we are presented with a stalemate. How does one reconcile these two positions? How does one locate a middle ground between these two dialectically opposed conceptions of the emancipatory potentials of technological reproduction and autonomous art? Adorno himself, in his March 18, 1936 letter to Benjamin,
acknowledges that both positions “bear the stigmata of capitalism, both contain elements of change (but never, of course, the middle-term between Schönberg and the American film),” and thus, as noted above, “both remain torn halves of an integral freedom, to which however they do not add up.”

Near the end of his life Adorno would revise his steadfast position somewhat and move a step closer to accepting the redemptive potential of mechanical reproduction, in particular film. In 1966 he published “Transparencies on Film,” a paper inspired by his association with radical filmmakers of the New German Cinema, in particular Alexander Kluge. While he remained as pessimistic as ever about the culture industries in general, Adorno’s association with Kluge led him to revise his earlier feelings about film. In “Transparencies,” Adorno even concedes the emancipatory potential inherent to cinema; however, he states that in order to achieve such an end, “the liberated film would have to wrest its a priori collectivity from the mechanisms of unconscious and irrational influence and enlist this collectivity in the service of emancipatory intentions.”

Consequently, Adorno stressed the importance of undermining the objective illusion of the camera by imbuing the film with a critical subjectivity. He returned again to the technique of montage, which Benjamin originally extolled as a method for creating a shock-effect and thus a heightened presence of mind and critical perspective in the spectator, but he asserted that

Pure montage, without the addition of intentionality in its elements, does not derive intention merely from the principle itself. It seems illusory to claim that through the renunciation of psychology, meaning will emerge from the reproduced material itself.
Adorno likens the practice of montage, which, as Hansen explains, “negates the affirmative appeal of the image and interrupts the chains of associative automatism,” to the flow of writing under the eyes, where discreet signs are fixed in groupings which must be actively grasped by the reader. In order for film to become a medium of cognition, then, it must strive for a self-conscious construction: “Only then would film cease to be a script, which imposes a literal reading on the spectator,” writes Hansen, “and become écriture—which requires a critical deciphering.” Thus, Adorno believed that the only way to reach the masses with emancipatory intentions was to self-consciously imbue the techniques being employed, in this case montage, with a critical consciousness that called ideology into question.

In sum, we are left with a critical position that makes an initial movement towards, though not nearly reaching, the middle ground between Schönberg and the American film. Adorno at least now provides an aesthetic conception of film that could achieve the redemptive goals outlined by Benjamin. However, the distance between mass culture and high culture remains firmly entrenched in Adorno’s writing. The possibility of a redemptive popular film, rather than modernist ‘art’ film, never becomes a possibility for Adorno. He ends his “Transparencies” essay by reaffirming that “the culture industry is not the art of the consumer but rather the projection of the will of those in control over their victims.”

While not quite serving as a middle-ground between the avant-garde and the popular, the films of French New Wave director Jean-Luc Godard stand out as exemplary of what Adorno and Benjamin might have agreed upon as an emancipatory use of film
technique. Adorno is said to have been quite impressed by Godard's radical aesthetic and use of montage in films such as A Bout de soufflé (Breathless, 1960). Indeed, Godard's refinement of an increasingly Brechtian film aesthetic, beginning with Un Femme Mariée (1964) and stretching through Tout va Bien (1972), would have been particularly suited to the intellectual dictates of both Adorno and Benjamin. The latter was an enthusiastic advocate of Brecht's "epic theatre," which employed numerous dramatic strategies in order to achieve progressive political ends, such as having actors directly address the audience in order to make spectators self-conscious of their ideological relation to the drama on stage. In the Brechtian framework, empathy is anathema to critical reflection, and thus, as Leslie explains, "by divesting theatre of illusory pretence, by knocking down the invisible 'fourth wall', the customary empathetic relation of the observer to the artwork is prevented." That the epic theatre produced astonishment rather than empathy was consequently a key factor in Benjamin's admiration of Brecht, as he felt that "instead of identifying with the protagonist, the audience should learn to feel astonished at the circumstances under which he functions." If the Godardian oeuvre serves as a model for helping to define what constitutes a "progressive" film aesthetic, then it attains that status precisely in its formalist capacity for denaturalizing both the invisible nature of the cinematic apparatus in narrative cinema and the passive, bourgeois spectatorial experience it engenders.

Godard's films demand an active and participatory audience; they are often demanding both in terms of trying to make coherent sense of their content and in trying the patience of the viewer. In Week-end (1967), Godard uses one continuous tracking
shot (that lasts for more than ten screen minutes) to force his audience to sit through a cacophony of mind-numbing car horn noises, as a car with the two main protagonists inches its way through an endless and bloody car pile-up on a country road, presumably in order to illustrate how our selfish bourgeois desire to be swept along in an illusionistic narrative is capable of trumping, or even erasing any genuine concern we might have for the victims on screen, no matter how great their number. In other films, such as *Une Femme est une Femme (A Woman is a Woman, 1961)*, Godard makes spectators self-conscious about their spectatorial experience by constantly drawing attention to the cinematic apparatus itself. The soundtrack (street noises, diegetic and non-diegetic music) is often jumbled and cuts in and out at annoying or awkward moments in order to highlight the use of sound in the film; and, the editing of many scenes draws attention to both their own construction and the wider manipulation of time in narrative film, such as when Angela (Anna Karina) flips an egg up into the air before going upstairs to speak with a neighbour and returning back downstairs minutes later to catch the egg. Further, the entire structure of the film can be read as a self-conscious deconstruction of the musical genre and its associated Hollywood discourses. These kinds of formal Brechtian techniques are illustrative of the kind of active participation that is required by Godard’s films, which clash purposefully with the instant gratification supplied by conventional Hollywood films. As James Monaco observes, Godard’s films “form questions; they don’t draw conclusions... [they] are not finely crafted, finished, esthetic objects meant for relaxed consumption; they are sinuous, struggling, quirky, unfinished, tense and demanding essays. They are meant for active, not passive viewers.” For
Susan Sontag, “Godard’s films are about ideas, in the best, purest, most sophisticated sense in which a work of art can be ‘about’ ideas,” and thus they can also be seen, to be sure, as satisfying Adorno’s conceptions of écriture and emancipatory film technique. They also, however, bear the consequent burden of their aesthetic brilliance; that is, they are quite often unapproachable and even unintelligible for the average popular film audience. In short, Godard’s films are politically progressive, but not popular.

In 1969, Cahiers du Cinéma editors Jean-Luc Comolli and Jean Narboni published “Cinema/Ideology/Criticism,” in which they outlined a system of Althusserian ideological criticism geared specifically toward helping change the prevailing ideological foundations of popular film criticism. In concert with the formal techniques espoused by Adorno and realized by Godard, they argue for a progressive film aesthetic that undermines and exposes “the cinema’s so-called ‘depiction of reality’” in order to “disrupt or possibly even sever the connection between the cinema and its ideological function,” only they examine the possibility for such disruption within popular film texts as well as avant garde ones. Comolli and Narboni provide a typology of seven potential categories for assessing the “textual politics” of a film, ranging from the most hegemonic in their representation of ideological norms (category [a]) to the most progressive in their challenge to the ideology they appear to represent (category [e]). According to Comolli and Narboni, “[e] films” are those which are integrated in the Hollywood system but present dominant ideological beliefs in order to critique them from within:

An internal criticism is taking place which cracks the film apart at the seams. If one reads the film obliquely,
looking for symptoms; if one looks beyond its apparent formal coherence, one can see that it is riddled with cracks: it is splitting under an internal tension which is simply not there in an ideologically innocuous film. The ideology thus becomes subordinate to the text. It no longer has an independent existence: it is *presented* by the film.49

One can certainly understand Sirkian melodramas such as *Written in the Wind* (1956) in this context. Sirk often uses *mise-en-scene*, performance, colour, sound, and numerous overt symbolic motifs to undermine the moral ideology that is present in the dialogue and narrative of his films, and in *Written on the Wind*, for example, he provides what can be read as a scathing critique of patriarchal power.

Upon revisiting Comolli and Narboni’s typology almost two decades later, Barbara Klinger examines the ways in which the “Cinema/Ideology/Criticism” framework has influenced popular film and genre criticism since the late 1960s and early 70s. She examines the characteristics that have come to define and describe the progressive film in terms of world view, theme, narrative form, visual style, character, and “anticlassical difference.” In short, she observes that progressive films usually attain their critical status based on the degree to which they provide “rupture” with classical forms. Progressive films are those that attempt to break with the illusionistic realism of Hollywood; that undermine the hegemonic value systems of dominant cinema (ie. the family, the couple, the law); that refuse the easy moral separation of “good” and “evil” and refuse easy closure; that use visual style excessively, or in order to expose dominant ideology; that employ excessive sexual stereotypes in order to deconstruct dominant gender roles; and, most predominantly in Klinger’s view, that employ textual signifiers
which reveal their “difference” from dominant cinema in ways that clearly establish a
deconstructive or subversive possibility. She observes, however, that in spite of what
seems like a diverse range of critical considerations for identifying a progressive film,
this framework has a tendency to be reductive in its consequences, in that it “invites an
assessment of textual politics based on a rather rigid sense of both what ‘makes’ and
‘breaks’ the system,” what is “progressive” and what is “reactionary,” and it “underplays
any sense of systemic context for these works that might qualify the progressive
assertion.”

Nonetheless, some of our most insightful contemporary ideological critics still
employ a critical framework that draws heavily from this theoretical paradigm. In
focusing on narrative considerations in contemporary film, Christopher Sharrett
maintains that,

Perhaps the greatest, even obsessive locus of subversion
on the part of all cinemas—Hollywood, foreign, avant
garde—is the debunking of bourgeois life embodied in the
community, the family, the heterosexual couple, and the
larger political-economic system they represent. Films
with this concern present the couple, and the family not as
the social bedrock that dominant civilization has
portrayed, but as the conditioning structures that regulate
desire, delimit sexual roles (especially for the female),
encourage competition and deceit among individuals, and
in short form the basis of the capitalist state. Sharrett critiques many of the same contemporary films discussed in earlier chapters of
this study—American Beauty, Donnie Darko, Fight Club, Magnolia—in order to show
the conservative “false criticism” and nihilism that is at the heart of what appears, on the
surface, to be some of the more “progressive” popular films today. In contrast, he
employs a Lukascian framework to argue, in particular, for Luchino Visconti as a filmmaker who offers authentic consolation for progressives. In Sharrett’s view, Visconti succeeds in films such as *The Leopard (Il Gattopardo [1963])* and *The Damned (La Caduta degli dei [1969])*, at dramatizing how contemporary social disintegration is “owing to the social engine of the family and the construction of the bourgeois subject therein.” The *Leopard* dramatizes how the ruling class preserves privilege through cooptation and pre-emption, while *The Damned* stages scenes of overt sexual taboo (i.e. pedophilia) in order to illustrate the hypocrisy of patriarchy and, as Sharrett explains, the capitalist “transmutation of every sexual impulse into predation... the drive for power, and finally the death wish.” But while Visconti’s films are certainly progressive in their unabashedly Marxist confrontation with the oppressive forces of bourgeois civilization, they cannot be mistaken for film narratives that embody a popular appeal. Nor can they realistically be viewed, with their overtly anti-capitalist stances, as films that any contemporary Hollywood studio might be willing to bankroll today. In many ways, Visconti is to narrative content what Godard is to film form: both brilliant, both progressive, but neither is able to bridge the perceived gap between the progressive and the popular.

In his landmark study *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan...and Beyond*, Robin Wood argues for a repoliticized film criticism committed to the struggle for liberation in “conflicts centered on class/wealth, gender, race, sexual orientation...the winning of which (that is, the victory of socialism and feminism) will be the only possible guarantee of our survival.” Precisely what this conflict might look like in practical terms,
however, is the antinomial point we have yet to be able to bridge. In a chapter entitled “Hollywood Today: Is an Oppositional Cinema Possible?” Wood begins by asking what he considers to be “The immediate—and obvious—question: Was it ever?” Wood’s answer to this question is basically “no,” since most of what we now understand as progressive, oppositional, or subversive cinema was not seen as such in its own cultural moment, but rather years after it was made (Wood’s few exceptions to this rule include Raging Bull [1980], Heaven’s Gate [1980], and the “Living Dead trilogy” [1968, 1978, 1985]). Part of the answer rests in the conditions of production in Hollywood, part of it is due to the development of genre and its conventions over time, and part of the answer, for Wood, is that “radicalism isn’t popular… [it] doesn’t sell.” And while his latter point may well be substantiated by examples like Godard and Visconti, perhaps the greatest barrier to the possibility of a truly oppositional cinema in the contemporary moment is that our textual politics are based, as Klinger notes above, on too rigid an idea of what ‘makes’ and ‘breaks’ the system, of what constitutes “radicalism,” in the postmodern cultural moment.

The Brechtian strategies employed by Godard, for instance, suppose that an empathetic audience can not also be a critical audience (as do the majority of other critics we have examined, beginning with Adorno and Benjamin), but this may be a notion worth reconsidering, especially with regard to establishing a progressive politics of film that is capable of having a real liberating impact on its audience. In his “Notes on Spectator Emotion and Ideological Film Criticism,” Carl Plantinga offers an essential intervention in this regard, as he asserts that while it is certainly advisable that we be
suspicious about how emotions are manipulated by dominant cinema, we must not outright condemn them as an enemy of reason. Rather, Plantinga points out that even Brecht acknowledged a more subtle aim for the practitioner of epic theatre; namely, to encourage the spectator not to completely abandon his/her emotional response, but to "adopt a critical approach to his emotions, just as [he] does to his ideas." In adopting a cognitivist perspective in assessing this goal, Plantinga suggests that ideological critics should consider the ways in which a film's rhetorical project constructs spectator emotion, since some spectatorial emotions may be congruent with "self-examination and critical judgment about social and political factors." Indeed, our allegiance with, compassion for, or even reproval of given characters within any popular narrative film depends to a large degree on our moral assessment of their situation. Thus, as Plantinga observes, "Spectator emotions have a powerful rhetorical force because they involve thinking, belief, and evaluation. In fact, one cannot have spectator emotions without the kinds of evaluations that relate narratives to our ideological concerns." Emotion can play an integral role in moving the spectator toward reconsidering preconceived notions or ideas they may steadfastly hold; and thus, it is certainly conceivable that empathy, compassion, and identification can take a critical form.

It seems necessary that theorizations of what constitutes a progressive film in the contemporary moment must therefore reconsider strategies that meet bourgeois spectators on their own terms, within the illusionistic confines of popular film form and its realist tendencies toward concealment and transparency, which Marxist critics and filmmakers have long disparaged as a product of ideology. If, as critics, we seek to evaluate
progressive films as part of a larger emancipatory politics of film, then we cannot ignore the fact that the films we generally esteem tend not to speak to those outside of the already initiated. We need to expand our critical discourse in order to envision other means by which popular film narrative can be politicized in accordance with the progressive vision of Benjamin. As Murray Pomerance observes:

A philosophy of film must approach feeling and experience, not just plot ... much is denied by seeing film... only as ideological... film is brainwashing, to be sure, and yet brainwashing is also experience ... We are also engaged with a vision of the world that, as André Bazin once put it, “accords with our desire.” The debunking approach, useful as it may be, blinds us to that desire, thus turning us away from something that is elemental, fascinating and worth study.  

While it is far beyond the scope of this study to theorize a comprehensive ideological program for accomplishing a “progressive” aesthetics of popular film, or, for that matter, to even begin to do justice to all of the many critics, scholars and theorists who have contributed to this highly controversial debate, our present study nonetheless seems to hint at some potentially potent territory for future consideration.

Death, Narrative, and Solidarity – Toward the “Progressive” Popular film

Richard Rorty offers a useful starting point for thinking about this relationship between, feeling, experience, and politics, as he seeks to redeem the potency of narrative as a means for building human solidarity and understanding; he views the novel, the movie, and the TV program as “principal vehicles of moral change.” For Rorty, utopian
futures can be achieved “not by inquiry, but by imagination, the imaginative ability to see strange people as fellow sufferers”:

> Solidarity is not discovered by reflection but created. It is created by increasing our sensitivity to the particular details of the pain and humiliation of other, unfamiliar sorts of people. Such increased sensitivity makes it more difficult to marginalize people different from ourselves by thinking, “They do not feel it as we would,” or “There must always be suffering, so why not let them suffer.”

One category of narrative that Rorty seizes upon are those that make evident the effects of particular social practices and institutions on others, especially those we have come to take for granted and that have the most deleterious effects on capitalist society’s most oppressed groups. The traditional Marxist concerns of race, class, gender and sexual orientation would pertain most significantly to this group.

Rorty’s argument about the ways in which popular narrative can operate as an imaginative vehicle for social change, by means quite other than those of the Marxist critics elucidated above, is perhaps nowhere better illustrated than in the example of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852). As President Abraham Lincoln was making public the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863, eleven years after the first publication of Stowe’s abolitionist novel about the injustice and inhumanity of slavery in the United States, he greeted the author of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* as “the little lady who made this big [civil] war.” And while it would be a gross use of hyperbole to insinuate now that Stowe was, in reality, responsible for the American Civil War or for the eventual abolition of slavery in the United States, there is little historical question as to the fact that her popular novel had a significant impact on shaping or crystallizing the
views of a great many Americans. Indeed, it sold 3,000 copies on the first day it was released, and a U.S. record 300,000 copies by the end of the year (20 editions). In writing the novel, Stowe’s goals were: first, “To soften and moderate the bitterness of feeling in extreme abolitionists”; second, “To convert to abolitionist views many whom this same bitterness had repelled”; third, “To inspire the free coloured people with self-respect, hope and confidence”; and fourth, “To inspire universally through the country a kindlier feeling toward the negro race.”

From the perspective of our contemporary moment, Stowe’s aims smack of a condescending racism, and on the whole her book can be viewed as portraying all kinds of oppressive racist stereotypes about blacks, but seen in the light of its historical moment, Stowe’s literary mission was certainly a humanistic and moral one geared self-consciously towards progressive social change, and her method—the sentimental novel—was one that engaged rather than rejected the subjectivity of the audience she sought to influence with regard to the cruel realities of slavery. A minister’s daughter and a minister’s wife, Stowe was a deeply religious woman who understood well the sensibility of evangelicals, whether they were like-minded or not on the issue of slavery, and she consequently employed narrative themes and symbols straight from the Bible in order to reveal slavery as incompatible with Christianity. “By wrapping her anti-slavery message in evangelical garb,” explains Karcher, “Stowe succeeded in reaching ‘a much larger class of readers, who are not in the habit of taking in much humanity, unless stirred up with a portion of theology; like brimstone and molasses’. In 1852, Stowe’s narrative intervention in the form of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* was a progressive tool in the ideological
fight against slavery, even if it revealed nothing about the larger economic system upon which slavery was built, and even if it can now, in the light of 155 years of history, be seen as perpetuating racist values and beliefs. Its progressiveness stemmed from its imaginative capacity for using the dominant popular discourse of her time to communicate the moral necessity for social change.

Building solidarity amongst different groups of individuals through popular narrative is but one potentially effective means of beginning to theorize the possibility of a “progressive” vision of popular film in the postmodern moment, especially if taken in association with the safeguard of an ideological criticism that examines “the kind of emotional response a film offers and the way spectator emotions function in the film’s rhetorical project.” Take, for instance, the example of Paul Haggis’s *Crash* (2005). An ensemble synchronicity narrative that addresses the issue of racism in contemporary American culture, *Crash* was hailed by some of the nation’s most well known film reviewers, such as Roger Ebert (*Chicago Sun Times*) and David Denby (*The New Yorker*), as an affecting, honest, and critical examination of racial conflict in America. The overwhelming public response to Haggis’ film was that its examination of race was “progressively” controversial, and it was richly rewarded at the Academy Awards with 6 nominations and the prize for “Best Picture” of the year. This was apparently the kind of film that held the capacity to change the way its viewers understood the issue of race. Our most perceptive scholarly critics, however, while acknowledging moments in the film in which a progressive examination of race had begun to emerge, correctly concluded that *Crash* is in actuality a deeply reactionary film that not only blur...
completely ignores the institutional and historical role of racism in the United States in favour of a psychological reduction of racist bigotry to an individual prejudice based on fearful ignorance.\footnote{72}

In their piercing analysis of \textit{Crash}, Susan Sarels Giroux and Henry A. Giroux demonstrate numerous moments in which potential insights into the "racist imagination" are completely undercut when racist ideology is reduced to individual prejudice. In a key scene early in the film, for instance, two black characters find themselves in an affluent white neighbourhood and watch as Jean (Sandra Bullock), the wife of LA District Attorney John Cabot (Brendan Fraser), eyes them with fear. Offended by her racist presumption, one of the young men (Chris "Ludacris" Bridges) observes that if anyone should be afraid at that moment, it's the "two black faces surrounded by a sea of over-caffeinated white people patrolled by the trigger-happy LAPD." But as Giroux and Giroux observe, "An encounter that at first seems to underscore the indignity and injustice of the racist gaze is dramatically cancelled out when the white woman's fear proves legitimate," and the two young black men pull out guns and proceed to car-jack Jean and her husband.\footnote{73} Racist stereotypes are seen to be both rational and true in the scene. Examples such as these abound in the film, as Paul Haggis seems to go to great pains "to humanize stark racists."\footnote{74} In the climactic scene of the film, the very staunchest racist, Officer John Ryan (Matt Dillon), undergoes his own personal transformation while risking his life to rescue Christine Thayer (Thandie Newton), a black woman he sexually assaults in front of her husband during a routine traffic stop earlier in the film, from an overturned car only seconds before it explodes. "Having staged a profound
disidentification between the audience and Ryan,” write Giroux and Giroux, “Haggis has now repositioned us to admire the officer’s bravery and selflessness.”^75 As the camera lingers on Ryan’s face at the end of the scene, it is presumed that he has somehow transcended his racist venom and has been redeemed for what was earlier portrayed as an unforgivably racist transgression of uniformed power.

_Crash_ is certainly an emotionally moving film that deals with one of the critically important social issues of our time, but unfortunately, as Susan Searls Giroux and Henry Giroux show us, the movement is largely colonic. Unlike Stowe’s novel, Haggis’s film provides no progressive vision of race in the context of its cultural moment; rather, it only affirms and justifies the neoliberal view that racist attitudes are an unfortunate but natural, and even forgivable part of the human condition that can only be overcome through individual conversions such as that of Officer John Ryan.^76 Watching a film like _Crash_ gives us no insight whatsoever, for instance, into the abhorrent response of the U.S. government to poor black victims in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans.

When Rorty writes of building solidarity through narrative, he is attempting to think pragmatically about how art can contribute to progressive social change, in particular how art can change the way we think of and perceive the values and beliefs of the world around us, thus allowing us to “see the [cruel] effects of social practices and institutions on others.” He also identifies a second category of narratives—to which _Crash_ pertains—which “help us to see the effects of our private idiosyncrasies on others … [and] which exhibit the blindness of a certain kind of person to the pain of another
kind of person." Both forms, he argues, can be progressive tools toward social change and the notion of human solidarity. But while it could certainly be argued that Crash succeeds in this latter regard (it is quite likely that its successes in this respect are what elicited the praise of so many cultural commentators), its failings with regard to the first form are so glaring that they completely undercut and undermine any gains it may have achieved with regard to the second. It is these kinds of nuances that we need to be sensitive to as critics of potentially “progressive” popular films. What the failures of Crash do reveal, however, is that had the film been written and directed by a filmmaker sensitive to the systemic institutional history of racism in the United States—that is, with a different rhetorical emphasis—then the potential for a progressive popular film might not have been so far off.

With regard to our contemporary period, the analysis begun at the outset of this chapter and throughout the three previous ones, hints, in particular, at the subversive potential of representing the existential themes of death and mortality in a postmodern cultural moment in which consumerist ideology has effected their virtual disappearance as a serious subject for consideration and reflection. If we follow the thought of scholars such as Alfred G. Killelea, then the way we both think about and represent death carries great moral consequence for the way we understand ourselves and prioritize our actions in the world. Killelea argues that in a pluralistic society, “confronting our mortality [has] a great force as a catalyst to finding shared values”: Social consciousness and death consciousness are not just tangentially related but are significantly dependent on each other. To face death honestly is to perceive not only one’s vulnerability but one’s identity and equality
with others and one's need for connection in the broader human community.\(^79\)

In other words, the way we think about and imagine death, especially the reality of our own death, contributes significantly toward our notions of solidarity and our ability, in Rorty's words, "to extend our sense of ‘we’ to people whom we have previously thought of as ‘they’."\(^80\) Corliss Lamont echoes these thoughts, as he argues that "the universality of death reminds us of the essential brotherhood of man that lies beneath all the bitter dissensions and conflicts registered in history and contemporary affairs."\(^81\) Even Friedrich Nietzsche, the infamous "immoralist" and staunch individualist, acknowledges how strange it is that death, "this sole certainty and common element makes so little impression on people, and that nothing is further from their minds than the feeling that they form a brotherhood of death."\(^82\) For Emmanuel Levinas, the solitude we may encounter in facing the fact of our own death opens us up rather than closes us off to the Other, it "renders possible an appeal to the Other, to his friendship and medication"\(^83\); and likewise, in a beautiful and pointed call to solidarity, Zygmunt Bauman observes that,

Unless 'I am for', I am not. The human being is a being with meaning. And being for others is the only meaning present in the human condition ‘naturally,’ from the start, ‘matter of factly’, with the degree of obviousness that borders on invisibility. It is only this kind of ‘being for others’ which stands between me and the absurd emptiness of contingent existence."\(^84\)

We have seen in previous chapters how late capitalist civilization effaces the existential categories of time, contingency and responsibility, offering us instead the consumerist medication of acquisition, competition, and narcissistic self-fulfillment;
further, we have seen how this subjectivity is affirmed by the transcendent, mobile, and amortally present-focused gaze of spectatorship in the postmodern moment. In our survey of thinkers beginning with Becker, Sontag, Friedberg, Baudrillard and Foucault and stretching through to Doane, Jameson, Harvey and Bauman, it is evident that the social denial of death in the postmodern moment is inextricably tied up with the ideological forces of capitalist hegemony; and consequently, that the notion of existential death contains an implicit challenge to the logics and discourses of capitalist power relations. "Capitalism creates visions of pursuing unlimited wealth and expanding power over nature and other people," writes Killelea, "It is a theory and vision incompatible with a sense of limits, a sense of priorities, and, most significantly, a sense of mortality." Therefore, if a progressive film aesthetic of mortality is indeed possible, then perhaps its realization depends upon our ability to envision both a narrative and spectatorial address that reflexively engages the idea of death in order to undermine the individual self-interest and social inequality that constitute the basis of capitalist society.

**Progressive Visions of Death: Don McKellar’s Last Night and the Canadian Context**

With the current predominance of Hollywood film on movie screens across the globe, a situation has arisen in which any viable popular international cinema must in some way address the dominant language of American genre films. As Barry Keith Grant has observed, “Filmmakers from around the world have responded to the domination of American film by adopting Hollywood genres and ‘indigenising’ or reworking them according to their own cultural sensibility.” In so doing, international filmmakers have
become very creative at articulating distinct cultural sensibilities by working with both the constraints and possibilities of genre codes, often producing works that explicitly challenge the American hegemony implicit in genres such as the Western and the melodrama.

In this regard, the situation of Canadian cinema provides a compelling context for exploring the potentially subversive use of narrative form to achieve progressive ends, particularly with regard to the representation of mortality and death on-screen. Indeed, in her pioneering study of dominant thematic concerns in Canadian literature, Margaret Atwood observes that the theme of death pervades the Canadian imagination, as “Canadian authors seem to spend a disproportionate amount of time making sure that their heroes die or fail... Death and failure toll out of proportion.” This is certainly true also of Canada’s national cinema, as death is a prominent theme in a wide array of narrative films, perhaps most famously in Claude Jutra’s Mon Oncle Antoine [My Uncle Antoine/Silent Night] (1971)—voted by many critics as the greatest Canadian film—and continuing into the contemporary moment with what Jim Leach categorizes as “Canadian Smart Films” such as Lynne Stopkevich’s Kissed (1996) and Louis Bélanger’s Post Mortem (1999), both of which use irony to critique bourgeois life in their depiction of disaffected characters who commit taboo acts of necrophilia in order to “feel something.” The theme of death is also prevalent in a substantial number of more widely distributed commercial successes, such as Mort Ransen’s Margaret’s Museum (1995), David Cronenberg’s Crash (1996) and eXistenZ (1999), Atom Egoyan’s The Sweet Hereafter (1997), Denys Arcand’s Les Invasions Barbares (The Barbarian
Invasions, 2003), and Don McKellar’s Last Night (1999), which we will examine in greater detail in this chapter.

Atwood traces Canada’s cultural obsession with death and failure to its colonial past and the consequent “colonial mentality” that has resulted from a history of economic domination by Britain and, in more recent decades, both economic and cultural domination by the United States. As a result, she argues that Canadians identify with a position of victimization, with a negative sense of doom and gloom. The experience of French Canadians only magnifies the issue, since their experience is one not only of colonization by outside nations, but also by English Canada, against whom they have fought steadfastly to preserve their own unique Québecois cultural identity (Québec was finally granted Parliamentary status as a distinct “nation” within Canada in 2006). Consequently, if any one leitmotif best summarizes the collective Canadian experience for Atwood, it is that which serves as the title of her book, “Survival”: survival against the harsh Canadian climate and the country’s vast and largely inhospitable geographical terrain (the majority of the Canadian population lives near a U.S. border); survival of the fragile “imagined community” that holds together the different ethnic, linguistic and diasporic communities that constitute the country’s diverse cultural landscape; and, most important for our purposes, survival against Canada’s brashly self-confident, aggressive, and economically dominant neighbour to the south.

Canada’s shared border with the United States has resulted in an ironic paradox with regard to Canadian cultural production. On the one hand, Canadian culture has been dominated by American popular culture since the late nineteenth century; for the most
part, American popular culture is Canadian popular culture. Nowhere is this more evident than when one enters a Blockbuster rental store in Canada and finds Canadian films in the foreign film section. One study in the mid-1980s even concluded that "Canadian children spend more time watching American television than they will spend in a Canadian school," and consequently a great many cultural commentators in Canada have supported Atwood's colonization theory, the more radical of which have concluded that the Canadian imagination has been colonized by the ideological values and beliefs of its neighbours to the south. And yet, on the other hand, while Canadians feast on American popular culture and are largely estranged from or disapproving of their own television and film production, the cornerstone of contemporary patriotic discourse surrounding Canada's national identity is its perceived difference from the United States. Canadian identity is predominantly defined not by what it is, but what it is not: what it means to be "Canadian" rests on the qualifier that whatever it is "we" are, and it is often admittedly hard to know for sure, we are decidedly not American. Thus, the imagined Canadian community is at once both formed by and against the popular culture of the United States, producing a potentially potent schizophrenic relation that has historically placed our cultural artists and filmmakers in a unique position from which to dissent against the dominating influence of American popular culture and its generic and ideological discourses through the very act of employing and inflecting them. The theme of death has served as an especially prevalent form of difference in this regard.

Mary Jane Miller defines the process of inflection as "the grafting of new ideas, dramatic conventions, and technical advances on to old conventions," particularly those
of the predominant American genres popularized by Hollywood. The relationship between these generic forms and the American ideology they espouse consequently make them ideal fodder for Canadian filmmakers to explore the influence of the United States on Canadian values, beliefs and ideas about nationhood. Jim Leach refers, in particular, to David Cronenberg’s popular horror films and Denys Arcand’s use of the crime film as instances in which Canadian filmmakers attempt to address the ideological implications of American genre conventions by “contesting them at the level of ‘the cinematic language itself’.”

One film that addresses the theme of death by inflecting a familiar American genre is Don McKellar’s *Last Night*, a Canadian “disaster film,” which, as Leach observes, “asserts the Canadian difference through the implied contrast between its representation of the end of the world and the spectacular special effects and heroic efforts to avert disaster in Hollywood blockbusters such as *Armageddon* (1998) and *Deep Impact* (1998).” Unlike its American counterparts, *Last Night* offers neither cause nor resolution for the impending worldly disaster; and consequently, it lacks entirely the heroic action of a Harry Stamper (Bruce Willis) in *Armageddon*—the best oil driller in the world—who flies into space and sacrifices his life in order to drill a hole in an asteroid and detonate a nuclear bomb that will save the earth, not to mention the budding romantic love between his daughter and co-worker, from impending peril. There is one caped crusader of sorts in the film, but her cape is made from garbage bags and her heroic act consists of running crazed through the streets, counting down the remaining time until the end. Indeed, McKellar’s vision of the end of the world is dense with irony and
parodies a plethora of stereotypical Canadian attitudes, as his characters largely greet the fact of their impending doom with passive acceptance and civility, save the relatively benign hooligans who are out tipping streetcars in downtown Toronto in order to “blow off some steam.”

In contrast to the conventionally heroic archetypal characters of popular American films, Last Night offers a distinctly Canadian cast of characters whose heroism is depicted as radically inadequate. Indeed, McKellar’s characters often reflect what Robert Fothergill defines as the quintessential Canadian character types: the coward, the bully, and the clown. In Fothergill’s view, each figure stems from Canada’s imagined sense of “lack” in relation to its big brother to the south. McKellar himself plays “the coward” in Last Night, a sensitive and appealing, but ultimately impotent character named Patrick, who desires to face the end of the world on his own terms. He wants little to do with his bourgeois family and the values and expectations they embody; rather, much like an alienated existentialist, he’d prefer to be alone when the end comes. But, as chance would have it, he arrives home to his apartment only to discover a woman named Sandra (Sandra Oh) on his doorstep, whose car has been tipped over by hooligans and who is now stranded downtown, unable to make her way home to meet her husband. Gallantly, Patrick offers to help her find a car, but lacking in heroics of any sort he’s unable to hotwire the one they find together so that Sandra can get home. Eventually, he convinces his comically sex-crazed friend Craig (Callum Keith Renney) to donate one of his three antique cars to the cause, but Sandra ultimately ends up back at Patrick’s apartment after this second car gets stuck in an impassable traffic jam.
Last Night is made up of an ensemble cast of characters whose experiences McKellar inter-cuts throughout the film, but it is this relationship between Patrick and Sandra that is at the film’s core and motivates its larger thematic aims. While searching with Sandra for the first car, Patrick rationalizes his desire to face the end alone, echoing existential notions of the self as he explains his view that “even when you’re with someone else, you’re still by yourself and I don’t think that’s pathetic, I don’t think that’s sad.” Sandra’s response, however, is that nonetheless, “there is something to be said for human companionship,” and Last Night culminates in a remarkably affecting scene that addresses this relationship between existential angst and human companionship from the perspective of death.

When Sandra finally gives up the hope that she will make it home, she asks Patrick to participate with her in a joint suicide as she had planned with her husband Duncan (David Cronenberg), by shooting each other at the moment the world is about to end. “I’m not going to let this world take my life,” she insists, “I’m not going to just pass away.” Sandra is not prepared to accept the contingency of her existence or her death and associates taking her own life with a heroic act of defiance. At first, Patrick is understandably reluctant to acquiesce—“I mean, I hardly know you!”—but after opening up to Sandra and sharing his grief at having lost his partner Karen to illness a few months earlier, he reluctantly ends up on the roof of his apartment with her, each of them holding guns to each other’s temples as they sit face-to-face in front of one another in the climactic scene of the film.
In stark contrast to the irony McKellar uses to portray the bourgeois world of
social relations throughout the film, the final scene of Last Night is played with a startling
emotional impact that moves beyond conventional Hollywood sentimentality. It begins
with a close up of Patrick’s record player, now spinning Pete Seeger’s rendition of the
Spanish folk song “Guantanamera,” which Patrick identifies as a childhood favourite that
he later learned had “socialist implications.” With Patrick and Sandra sitting across from
each other, guns pointed to each other’s heads, and Guantanamera playing in the
background, McKellar tracks his camera in a circular, counter-clockwise motion around
his two main protagonists as crowds in the street begin the doomed countdown. Cutting
back and forth from the vertiginous experience of Sandra and Patrick to the shared
experiences being engaged by the other characters in the film—having sex together,
praying together, partying together, and enjoying music together—McKellar creates a
vision of human solidarity that is premised on an authentic and unremitting sense of the
Heideggerian notion of being-toward-death. We have no idea exactly what it is that is
actually going to happen at midnight, and thus these characters are quite literally faced
with the angst of confronting the no-thing. In angst rather than fear, in acceptance rather
than false heroism, and in a face-to-face relation with one another’s helplessness and
mortality, Sandra and Patrick ultimately choose to accept the contingency of their
situation by lowering their guns at the instant before time finally runs out, and
confronting their end in an embrace that profoundly affirms their shared vulnerability and
humanity.
McKellar’s vision in this scene is by no means a sentimental affirmation of the power of romantic love, as is frequently the case in the film’s Hollywood counterparts; rather, it is a vision that elicits spectatorial empathy for a notion of “love” that encompasses, above all else, a shared sense of responsibility for the Other. It is a representation that corresponds entirely with the perspectives of Killelea, Levinas and Bauman noted above. In confronting each other at the moment of death, McKellar’s protagonists—complete strangers to one another just a few hours earlier—embrace a sense of what Levinas summarizes as:

responsibility for the death of the other person, even if the ultimate meaning of that responsibility for the death of the other person is responsibility before the inexorable, and at the last moment, the obligation not to leave the other alone in the face of death. Even if, facing death—where the very uprightness of the face that asks for me finally reveals fully both its defenceless exposure and its very facing—even if, at the last moment, the not-leaving-the-other-alone consists, in that confrontation and that powerless facing, only in answering “Here I am” to the request that calls on me. Which is, no doubt, the secret of sociality and, in its extremes of gratuitousness and futility, love of my neighbour, love without concupiscence.¹⁰³

In contrast to the standard Hollywood “disaster film,” the closure provided by Last Night is final closure: Death is the only destiny the film makes manifest. Viewed from this perspective, which is grounded firmly in the reality of temporal finitude, from the vantage point of the very last picture show, McKellar’s film posits being-for-others as the only authentic form of meaning available to his characters in the present. What the film achieves through its inflection of the disaster genre is therefore a vision of human solidarity that is defined not by the shared desire to evade and escape from death, but
rather by the desire to meaningfully confront the fact of one’s own death in a responsible fraternity with the Other. *Last Night* is a film about individual bourgeois experience and anxiety, but its implications open up, rather than close off, the movement toward the kinds of progressive social attitudes and values that constitute the basis of progressive social change.

Inflection is used not only to articulate a Canadian difference, as Leach observes, but also in this case to offer a different vision of existential death and its related meanings, a vision that necessarily undermines the hegemonic denial of death in popular cinema and Western bourgeois culture more widely. In the revealing light of one’s last night, the capitalist inclination toward “the ballooning of one’s ego by manic acquisition is,” as Killelea remarks, “pricked by candor about death.” The social world imagined in McKellar’s *Last Night* evolves, in the face of death as final closure, toward a vision of individual responsibility that undermines and subtly inflects the divisive logic of capitalist hegemony. In contrast to the aimless, fearful looters in the street, the protagonists of *Last Night* discover existential meaning by opening themselves up, rather than pitting themselves against their fellow sufferers. Thus, while it is true that apart from its ironic and often parodic tone *Last Night* seems to offer no overt social critique of the capitalist society it depicts, the confrontation with and resolution of its characters’ angst in the face of death nonetheless serves to implicitly, rather than explicitly, call into question the bourgeois values and attitudes of its narrative world.
Concluding Remarks

Don McKellar’s *Last Night* makes visible the progressive filmic possibilities occasioned by the representation of existential death and mortality in popular film. It offers a useful starting point for beginning to imagine specific means by which popular cinematic codes and conventions can be subtly inflected in the service of questioning the hegemonic values of consumer capitalist civilization. Notions of what constitutes a “progressive” contemporary popular film might therefore be expanded to include those movies whose rhetorical strategies engage and inflect dominant ideological discourses in the service of drawing spectatorial empathy toward the call of social responsibility.

The synthesis of ideas, theories and philosophies undertaken in the four chapters of this thesis attempts to make clear the importance of our mortal imaginings to the larger social and political ideologies of our cultural circumstance. My contention is that representations of death in popular film and popular culture more widely, carry significant consequences for the way we understand ourselves as subjects in the postmodern moment, and for our capacity to imagine a more progressive political challenge to the dominant ideological hegemony of multinational consumer capitalism: Death as a vital thematic means to progressive social ends.
Chapter 4 – End Notes


8 Killelea 24.


10 Vogel 263.


12 Baudrillard 17.

13 Amos Vogel, “Grim Death” Film Comment 16, No. 2 (March-April, 1980): 78.


22 Wolin 193.
27 Wolin 184.
29 Jay 121.
31 Wolin 197.
32 Adorno, “Letters” 123.
33 Hansen 194-98.
35 Adorno, “Transparencies” 203.
36 Hansen 194-96.
37 Hansen 197.
38 Jay 127.
39 Adorno, “Transparencies” 205.
42 Leslie 50.
I am grateful to Prof. Scott Henderson, Brock University, Department of Communications, Popular Culture, and Film, and his lectures in FILM 1F94 (Fall 2006) for illuminating Godard for me in this context.

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Comolli and Narboni 5.

Comolli and Narboni 7.


Klinger 89, 87.


Sharrett 147.

Sharrett 149.

Wood 3.

Wood 333.

Wood 7.


Bertolt Brecht, qtd. in Plantinga 374.

Plantinga 375.

Plantinga 390.


Rorty 141-43.


Harriet Beecher Stowe, qtd. in Stowe 169.


Douglas 11.

Plantinga 375.


Giroux and Giroux 241-42.

Giroux and Giroux 245.

Giroux and Giroux 246.

Giroux and Giroux 247.

Giroux and Giroux 241.

Rorty 141

Killelea 11.

Killelea 30.

Rorty 192.

Corliss Lamont, qtd. in Killelea 13.


Killelea 83.


89 Jim Leach, Film in Canada (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 2006): 143.

90 Atwood 45.


92 Atwood 41.


95 Rutherford 279.

96 O’Brien and Szeman 209.


98 Miller 104.

99 Leach 50-1.

100 Leach 57.


104 Killelea 9.