

Death at the Movies: Hollywood's Guide to the Hereafter

Fantasies of Death and Beyond

Anything existing beyond the physical fact of death can be imagined and described only in the relative terms of human thought and language. "Afterlife" movies reveal such projections as the product of the film maker's (and viewer's) ideas, memories, reflections, dreams, and fantasies. The depiction of that curious in-between space between death and what is unknown, designated in the new Quest Books release, *Death at the Movies* as "transit," has been referred to by Tibetan Buddhists for over two thousand years as the "bardo", a state of the soul between death and rebirth. Movie bardos can range from sentimentally charming and delightful to chillingly frightening and grim. Good Hollywood entertainment! Enjoy them. Learn from them. Distinguish them from the real bardo. At times, they are the same.

For over a hundred years, Hollywood has both shaped and reflected our culture's deepest desires, fears and beliefs. That the popular medium of motion pictures, from the beginning, embodied and projected to the public commonly held beliefs, hopes and anxieties about death, the afterlife, and what lies between was brilliantly illustrated in the primarily unconscious projections of those beliefs via a body of fantasy films during the 1930s and early 40s, beginning with the film *Outward Bound* (1930). The film set a precedent for realistic depiction of the afterlife, devoid of fleecy clouds and heavenly choirs, suggesting rather that the condition of being dead looks and feels pretty much like our everyday lives and that the immediate problem is how to awaken to our true circumstances before we make our situation even worse.

Throughout the thirties and early forties these themes were duplicated, often with light hearted wit and charm. As a collective, they include *Beyond Tomorrow* (1940), *Here Comes Mr. Jordan* (1941), *A Guy Named Joe* (1943), *Between Two Worlds* (1944), *Blithe Spirit* (1945), *The Horn Blows at Midnight* (1945), *Angel on My Shoulder* (1946), *A Matter of Life and Death* (released in the United States as *Stairway to Heaven*, 1946), and America's most beloved Christmas movie, Frank Capra's *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946), all released or in production during the war years. When the war ended the country returned to a specious normalcy and film blanc lay dormant as its audience's mood turned to a nation's dark underbelly and unacknowledged trauma, reflected in motion pictures by film noir, a genre that explicitly denied all possibilities of transcendence to portray a world of violence, cynicism, and death.

In 1978, Peter L. Valenti singled out for exposition those earlier fantasy films dealing with the unique themes of death and transition and, playing off the broad popularity of the film-noir genre of the latter 1940s and '50s, called his selection "film blanc," suggesting as a specific genre fantasy scenarios embodying the following characteristics: 1. a mortal's death or lapse into dream; 2. subsequent acquaintance with a kindly representative of the world beyond, most commonly known as heaven; 3. a budding love affair; 4. ultimate transcendence of mortality to escape the spiritual world and return to the mortal world. It was suggested that these popular afterlife fantasy dramas produced during the World-War-II years provided, consciously intended or not, comfort to those at home grieving for loved ones lost to the ravages of war. Valenti titled his article *The Film Blanc: Suggestions for a Variety of Fantasy, 1940-45*.*

His article acknowledges Siegfried Kracauer's *Theory of Film* for its theoretical treatment of fantasy, noting that the American fantasy film grew in popularity during the 1930s, peaked during the early 1940s, and declined in the late 1940s. He points out that different sorts of fantasy combined with angels, pacts with devils, mysterious reincarnations, and beckoning spirits, and that during this general period American film seems to have been entranced by the idea of negotiating between heaven and earth, moving from the mortal plane to the spiritual. He published his article just two years before the release of *Resurrection* (1980), a film that reflected the spiritual/consciousness/ growth/drug movements of America's 1960s and '70s, opening the screen to a body of film-blanc type movies now informed by popular eastern concepts of death and what follows. In a way the film blanc genre had never really run its course, but rather gone underground, its themes encoded into any number of popular ghost and fantasy films of the postwar period—films such as *The Ghost and Mrs. Muir*, *Portrait of Jenny*, or *Heaven Only Knows*.

Two years after Valenti's article, and as part of a major cultural shift, the film *Resurrection* (1980) resuscitated the spirit of film blanc, now informed by somewhat more conscious projections of beliefs about death and the hereafter generated by our culture's assimilation of eastern spirituality-----generally Tibetan Buddhism, particularly *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, and quite specifically, the *bardo*, that curious gap in the time-space continuum designated in the book, *Death at the Movies*, as *transit*, the act of passing over, transitioning from one state of being to another.

The ironically, but appropriately titled, *Resurrection*, led to any number of fascinating films constructed around the subject of death and the transition to whatever lies beyond (actual or psychological), any one of which appear on television on a regular basis. Highlighting only major releases we would, in addition to the above mentioned *Resurrection*, add the following to our list of favorite *transit* movies: *Poltergeist* (1982), *Beetlejuice* (1988), *Field of Dreams* (1989), *Ghost* (1990), *Jacob's Ladder* (1990), *Truly, Madly, Deeply* (1991), *Defending Your Life* (1991), *Groundhog Day* (1993), *Heart and Souls* (1993), *Interview with the Vampire* (1994), *Sixth Sense* (1999), *Purgatory* (1999) and *Birth* (2004). You, perhaps, have your own favorites. We find these films, “beyond” conveying ideas rooted in the deepest perennial wisdom of the planet’s various cultures, and “beyond” being sometimes funny, sometimes poignant and often uplifting, to be simultaneously informative, enlightening and just plain entertaining.

End

*Peter L. Valenti, “The Film Blanc: Suggestions for a Variety of Fantasy, 1940-45,” *Journal of Popular Film* 4, (1978): 294-303.

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October 15, 2013