

Vertigo's Death Dream: Background



The one clear boundary in human life is that which is drawn to separate life from death. It is a one-way filter, allowing no returns, although there are occasionally cases of clinical death which, some claim, offers a glimpse into the other side of things. The space immediately on the other side the boundary has been variously configured. The main commonality is that the immediate zone just following the moment of death is highly geometricized. Some of the favorite models

include tunnels with lights at the end, staircases, spiraling caverns, mountains, or gardens with fountains. What happens after this is unclear, but there is no culture that has not spent a lot of time promoting one model or another, whether it's the labyrinthine encounter of twists and turns, the dark forests where the soul is set on an endurance trial, or a series of presentations in large lecture halls. I, personally, would know I had been sent to Hell if, in the hours following death, I was treated to a power point presentation.

Just as no culture has failed to provide a clear picture of what they imagine to happen on the other side of the line, only a few religions think that there's nothing. The real question, whether it's nothing or something, is "how long will it last?" Forever is not a duration. It is a condition that applies to time or non-time. Those who imagine that the soul will survive and be conscious in some way do not adequately address the impact of learning, once one is dead, that the next steps will last forever. Slavoj Žižek has suggested that we would have the same reactions as we do, when living, to the death of someone close — the famous "five steps of mourning." First, denial (How can I have died? Isn't there some mistake?). Second, anger (Who let me die? Shouldn't there have been some miracle treatment at the last minute?). Third, bargaining (Can't there be some mistake? Maybe if I quickly try to get back in touch ...). Fourth, depression (Looks like God hung up on me!). Fifth, acceptance (Better get on with it ... where do I go?).

Knowing that there's no turning back does not alleviate — in the imagination at least — the soul of the dead from reckoning. In fact, the interval after literal death is famous for the themes of discovery, judgment, and punishment. Lacan formally specified that there were "two deaths," one literal, a second Symbolic, required by the survivors to imagine what's happened to the deceased, i. e. that they will be judged and rewarded or punished. This is always in relation to the Symbolic, Lacan argued, for what dies at this second death is the subject that is defined by the Symbolic's networks of relationships, established and maintained by culture, in customs, language, and institutions. One could say that the Symbolic subject does not belong to itself, and even in death others configure what happens to it. The living thus require the dead to be judged and settled at this second death, mainly so they can cease to mourn and get on with their business.

What we imagine to happen on the other side of the line separating life from death thus has as many options as we imagine should happen to living subjects, but these are condensed and shaped into formal symmetrical designs. In death, we recognize explicitly what was only vague and tentative in life. No more messing around! Death is required to do one main thing: make corrections. What was missing in life should be supplied (often this is a punishment or reward). What was a mistake in life may have the option of being re-run and done correctly after death.

I would borrow some terminology to talk about correction, and the prefix “ortho-” seems the most appropriate. There is something “orthographic” about the shape of things imagined to exist after death, and something specifically “ortho-*psychic*” about the results. Psyche here reverts to its ancient meaning — the soul — but it shouldn’t lose the fine-tuning given it by psychoanalysis, famously by Freud and Lacan. Yes, there are many others, but only Freud and Lacan, I would argue, gave equal attention to the dead and the living, knowing that a great part of life is conditioned by the fact of death, the limits it imposes and the challenges it erects for the living conscious mind, who imagines — must imagine — that what happens after death is both nothing and everything for the Symbolic aspect of our subjectivity. You can be an atheist and a Lacanian, but in this case you are always a “highly religious atheist,” i. e. someone who says they don’t believe but that belief in this case is of no matter. What others believe, plus what is present to the living in a traumatic and Real way, is highly important. What exists or doesn’t exist is irrelevant; what’s important is we think might exist, even when we prove to ourselves it doesn’t; or, I should say, that the things we know don’t exist exert even more force. Because Freud taught us the value of negation and Lacan taught us about denial, we have to see psyche as particularly relevant to subjectivity, and see how the psyche is particularly keen on being correct — orthopsychism.

The Death Dream

The dream of dying, of being dead, and correcting things or being punished for mistakes or sins, would happen with or without cultural instruction. All humans dream at one time or another of being dead — conversing with departed friends and family, going through death experiences, or simply being put in situations that seem to foreshadow what happens after death. But, if we have to give a history of the death dream, we might be justified in picking Plato’s famous “Myth of Er,” the story cited in *The Republic* that must have been popular in Plato’s time.

Er was a soldier who, after battle, was thought to be dead. Stacked up on a pile of corpses waiting to be torched, Er nonetheless revived. This happened, reputedly, after twelve days. Er was nonetheless counted as a dead man who had experienced what all souls experience after death but had slipped away unnoticed and not forced to drink the waters of forgetfulness. His detailed account provided Plato with all the juicy details he needed to demonstrate the *orthos*, the corrective function, of heaven and hell. Although Er experienced what was a recycling process — reincarnation — the idea of a next life was that the old life could be compensated for its errors and lacks.

In miniature, anyone can dream about death and imagine the offer of a second chance. And, when this possibility is extended to literature, authors and their audiences are given a special category, because portraying a subject who dreams and then describing the dream’s contents do not require much suspension of disbelief. We readily accept that people dream and can dream about anything, including especially things that are impossible or improbable in ordinary life. The death dream has another advantage, however. It allows the author or storyteller the chance to have a character present a commentary on waking life. This is the main function of the famous ancient Roman novel, Apuleius’s *Golden Ass*, where instead of a dream the point-of-view character takes the wrong magic potent, and instead of being able to fly becomes a donkey. The critique of the life of a fool is much easier when the fool is suddenly the ass he seemed to be, but now literally. Then, he *orthopsychically* sees his own former folly and is punished for it by enduring the mistreatment accorded to the animal that represents his own worst nature.

But, the real advantage for anyone telling a story is that the audience can be given the option to read events as either (1) a story of a living person or (2) the story of a dead person who dreams that he/she is living. In option one, the writer is obliged to justify characters' motives and actions, but in option two the point of view is entirely from the special position of someone who has done the wrong thing and feels he/she must personally correct it, to meet a deadline that corresponds to the end of the story. Option two exists as long as there is a minimum, an event where it is possible to say that the point-of-view character has died and, in the last moments of life, had a dream that, no matter how short the literal duration of these final moments, seems to fill an expanse of time and space. From an artistic point of view, it is better that the audience is not forced to accept that the point-of-view character had died and is dreaming of being alive, able to correct what went wrong about life up to that point. The death dream is more powerful, and more productive, if it remains only a possibility and not a narrative mandate. Readers alert to the possibility of a death dream must be content with seeing their thesis fail, of reading just the "straight story" without moving into the POV of a dead character. The rule of the death dream in literature is that the two options must be held open, and the real author should not "tip his hand" to favor one option over another.

My favorite death dreams are, in fact, ones that have gone unrecognized by the majority of readers and critics. There are still a few viewers of David Lynch's *Mulholland Drive* who miss the point of the opening fragmentary scenes and thus miss the narrative mandate, that Diane Selwyn's suicide is the basis for her getting the audience to follow the story of a corrected and cleaned up version of herself, embodied by Betty Elms. Here, if we fail to recognize the use of the death dream device, we simply can't enjoy the film's baroque ensemble of doubled names, doubled characters, and even doubled scenes. But, this heavy-handed preference for option two, although entertaining in its own way, is not as complex as works of art where the audience is never confident thinking whether or not the main character has lived through something "actually" or has just dreamed it.

My favorite example in this regard is in James Joyce's *Ulysses*, were in the last moments of Stephen Dedalus's and Bloom's raucous night ramble. This is the thesis of David Bertolini, who teaches architecture and is the dean of his school in Fargo, North Dakota. But, we do not have to go too far to see how the death dream works even when no one has known it is present.

Bloom has forgotten his latchkey and must climb into his apartment by going up on the roof. As he attempts to straddle the parapet wall, he trips and falls. The novel does not say whether or not he gets back up. It could be that the fall was fatal, and that what happens from this point on is a death dream. This would satisfy many feminist critics who complain that Molly's famous monolog is "masculine" rather than "feminine" — i. e. that Joyce failed to capture the way women fantasize. The death dream option rather responds to while at the same time it rebukes these critics. If Bloom is dreaming Molly's soliloquy, then *of course* it is a male fantasy. It is the last thing Bloom thinks as he is dying, his last attempt to "set straight" his failed marriage, his inability to see Molly in a fully positive way.

Vertigo's Death Dream



The fake Madeleine Elster, played by Judy, pretends to be fascinated by the portrait of the real Mrs. Elster's ancestor, Carlotta Valdez. The jewel she wears is "real" but it is a fake in the context of being used as proof of her authenticity. When Scottie discovers it when he comes to know Judy, the shopgirl, he realizes the entire scheme in its totality. The jewel embodies its own principle of being a "false clue."

No one to my knowledge has made a similar observation about any Hitchcock film, but *Vertigo* seems to offer some temptations to create an exception.¹ It opens with a rooftop chase scene. Scottie, a police detective, chases an armed suspect along with a uniformed colleague. They must master several daunting rooftop obstacles, and when the suspect jumps across from one roof to another, the uniformed officer makes it but Scottie slips and saves himself at the last minute by hanging on to the rain gutter. The officer turns around to come to Scottie's aid, but then he himself slips and falls to his death in the alley below. Scottie feels guilty about this sacrifice and, throughout the film, battles a fear of heights. His vertigo,

however, turns out to be the very reason he is tricked into a scheme. A wealthy industrialist, an old school chum, hires Scottie to follow his "crazy wife," who believes she is possessed by the soul of a dead ancestress, Carlotta Valdez. But, this is a ruse to put Scottie in the position of being the ideal witness to the actual murder of the industrialist's real wife. Scottie is actually following an actress who plays the part of a crazy wife, who leads him to a convent bell tower, who knows that his vertigo will prevent him from reaching the top and discovering the switch, where the actress steps aside and the real wife, her neck broken, is tossed off the tower.

The story as told "straight" makes perfect sense, and it is even possible to assimilate Scottie's nervous breakdown and recurring fear of heights as normal. However, if we allow the possibility that Scottie himself had fallen in that opening scene, the same events and breakdown and recurring fear of heights not only makes the same sense but is cast in such a way that the story's symmetry becomes even more

¹ Actually, quite a few Hitchcock films are excellent candidates for an alternative death-dream reading. In *Rear Window*, the POV character is recovering — or is he? — from a near-fatal race-track accident. The camera rarely leaves his room, tying us to his subjective obsession with a neighbor whose actions seem to play out his own fears of being tied down to marriage. In *Rebecca*, after a ghostly trip to a ruined mansion, we see the owner of that mansion standing on top of a cliff, seemingly ready to commit suicide. The unnamed (?) heroine stops him just in time — or does she? The fantasy continues with the only two characters of this scene attempting to correct the failed marriage. Death-dream conjectures could include *Lifeboat*, where all survivors packed on the small boat have just faced death. Did they survive actually, or are they dreaming of "the next step"? And, in *North by Northwest*, Roger O. Thornhill, whose middle initial "stands for nothing," miraculously survives a KGB assassination attempt. *Notorious* begins its story with Ingrid Bergman's drunken car-chase scene, which could have easily landed her and Cary Grant in the morgue. *Psycho's* actual victim, played by Janet Leigh, offers her eye as a portal to what could be a fantasy initiated by the clue that the motel owner Anthony Perkins' interest in taxidermy could extend to his over-bearing mother, the ultimate revenge for his effeminacy.

important. This is particularly evident in the use of doubles. There are two wives, the actress and the one we never see before the tower scene. When Scottie accidentally encounters the actress after “her” death, he confronts the paradox of seeing the dead woman in the living one, not knowing that he is seeing the same woman, no longer playing the murdered wife.

Of course without the symmetries of twos and the different time-lines they demand, Scottie’s story would not be as engaging. We could attribute the patterns to Hitchcock’s writers’ cleverness, their ability to engage us at multiple levels. However, the thesis of the death dream offers some new possibilities. These cluster around Scottie’s need to correct his life, to be known for who he is. In the opening scenes we are given varied accounts of what to call him. Isn’t he John Ferguson? Why do people call him Scottie? Why does he still chum around with Madge, who was for a short time his fiancée? Where does he get the money to live in downtown San Francisco, albeit a San Francisco of the 1950s. Is this real? Or, is it a dream?

If we imagine that the audience makes “bets” on the possible alternatives afforded by any story, there are two kinds. The first is a “short odds” bet, a 50/50 equality between being right and wrong. This is the bet on the “straight story,” forgetting all the nonsense about the story happening inside the falling Scottie’s head in the moments before he dies. The “long odds” go to the death dream thesis, despite the ease with which any brush with danger can justify a character’s initiation of an internal narrative.

The long odds and short odds correspond to Bentham/Geertz’s definition of surface play *versus* deep play. Bentham had defined deep play as something not undertaken by any rational human being because of the likelihood of losing. Geertz had seen that it is precisely this unlikelihood that binds societies together in the assumption of near-certain defeat. This is the situation in *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* where the two outlaws are chased by Pinkerton officers to the edge of a cliff overhanging a raging river. Sundance offers the information that he can’t swim, and Butch counters with a line that always gets audience laughs: “Hell, the fall’s probably going to kill you anyway!” And, then they both jump. This deep play moment seals the friendship, but it also commits the audience to an unshakable bond of sympathy with the outlaws.

Because the death dream is technically simple but difficult for audiences to accept, it is always a long-odds bet. But, because it connects with deep play, it simultaneously aligns itself with other deep play issues: Is life itself not like a story? When we hear a story are we not actually being told that we ourselves are fictional? Or, if the story can last thousands of years, is it not the greater reality? Where does the story exist? —In the imagination of the author? —In the mind of the audience? Is there one interpretation that trumps all others?

My colleague Anahita Shadkam will play the long-odds game by showing you how a thesis about *Vertigo*’s death dream might work. Her analysis deals with the overlaps and reversals of events and timelines. She may not convince you that our conjecture about *Vertigo* is correct, but she will show how it is plausible, and that’s all the deep game needs.