

HELLO, FROM THE OTHER SIDE!

A Walk Through the Trends of Postmortem Depictions

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In the Beginning

'What happens after we die?' is the question that has continued to perplex humanity since the dawn of time and is the question that every sentient human aware of their own mortality has at some point been confronted with and remained to a degree perplexed by until their own inevitable death, when the answer [should] finally arrive. An ineffable answer to a question that all humanity wants answered, but no-one yet has reported back from the other side.

What if the afterlife is just a giant sound-proof, premium quality ballistic glass box where all of the dead are gathered and are trying to shout an answer back but the futility of those attempts are painfully obvious? Perhaps it's a matter of segregation and exclusivity; all of the dead by default join a secret club whose secrets are inaccessible to the living? Or what if it's just a place with really, really bad cellphone reception?

Whatever the answers, which I'm not necessarily looking forward to figuring out but undoubtably will one day, it seems that in all of the 5000 years of recorded human history certain metaphors and symbols have continued to arise and establish themselves repeatedly and thus have inevitably influenced subsequent pondering of afterlife 'problematics'.

Discussions on the afterlife have many a time been a subject of late-night afterparty conversations and a lucrative source of inspiration for many works of narrative fiction, namely literature, film and television, the domain of works I will be focusing on.

Through researching and getting acquainted with the depictions of afterlife in both past and contemporary culture I have noticed and traced the similarities occurring in the narratives, metaphors and symbols used, and the following text is conceived as a sort of walk-through of the trends and conventions concerning the representation of postmortem existence and dwelling.

As the nature of the subject is so fundamental, and the possible answers, teachings and works of art devoted to the subject countless, I have done my best to be as inclusive of as many such views and works possible in the assigned format, and I apologise in advance for all those artworks, cultural views, etc, that I was either unable to include or might have overlooked.

The Otherworldly Down Under

“Where do [bad] folks go when they die?”¹

Lake of Fire, Meat Puppets

When considering and pondering the possibility of life after death and what shape and form such existence might be comprised of the idea that almost instantaneously springs to mind is an otherworldly realm, a place where spirits of the dead continue to exist or live eternally.²

It is a shared notion across various mythologies, and has as such been reconstructed in historical Indo-European religion in comparative mythology.

Related religious, mythological and metaphysical concepts such as ‘realms of supernatural beings’ and ‘realms of the dead’ have been found in many cultures all over the world.³

These cultures have shaped their respective views on the afterlife based on their customs and their religious and ethical convictions, and they have constructed their postmortem realms to reflect those traditions, and populated them with deities and creatures best fit to represent certain aspects they deemed important to meet in the thereafter.

Yet similarities are traceable. To begin with, many of the cultures locate their otherworldly realms under the ground, ‘the underworld’ thus becoming the term of association with such locales. For the ancient Egyptians, the first culture to conceive afterlife as a continuation in another, spiritual world, that place was named Amentit, the Beautiful West, the ‘land of the dead’ ruled by Osiris, who sat enthroned in chthonic halls.⁴

The name Beautiful West is derived from the geographical position of the setting sun, the western bank of Nile – where the entrance to the nether/underworld⁵ was considered to be located.

Osiris, often thought of as Egypt’s best loved god, is a deity playing the role of both peace-loving vegetation and fertility god, as well as that of the ruler, lord and judge of the underworld, god of death, life and resurrection.

After death, the souls embark on a journey through Duat, another name for Amentit, where they have to face judgement of their virtuousness/ wickedness by Anubis, a canine-faced divinity, in the presence of Osiris. The souls are equipped with *the Book of the Dead*, in

¹ Meat Puppets, *Meat Puppets II*, SST Records, SST 019, 1984, Vinyl

² The distinction between verbs ‘to exist’ and ‘to live’ is made here to emphasise that different mythologies and religions have had different views on whether the soul would continue to exist in its full form and retain the personality of the person it once belonged to or would be but a mere shade of a person it once was.

³ Littleton, C. Scott and Cavendish, Marshall, 2005, *Gods, Goddesses and Mythology*, Volume 11, p. 1286-1287

⁴ Casey, John, 2009, *After Lives: A Guide to Heaven, Hell & Purgatory*, p. 23-28

⁵ While predominantly located underground, with the evolution of beliefs of ancient Egyptians, the Osirian underworld merged with the solar realm of god Ra, the result of which is that, paradoxically, the underworld is simultaneously located both under ground and in the sky, as cited in Casey’s *After Lives*, p. 38.

fact a loose collection of sacred texts consisting of a number of magic spells and other data whose purpose is to assist the dead souls on their journey through the underworld. Before the rite of judgement they are to recite from *the Book* the list of forty-two crimes they could be guilty of and plead innocent of all of them. After reciting the denials the dead persons heart is weighed against a feather, the symbol of *ma'at* - the concept of truth, justice and righteousness. While the heart is being weighed the dead utters a prayer from *the Book of the Dead* that his heart will not outweigh the feather and thus condemn/ doom him for wickedness.⁶



'Weighing of the Heart', from the Ancient Egyptian Book of the Dead, spell 125, p. 14

Any hearts heavier than the feather will be rejected and thrown to Ammit, a female demon composited of body parts of a lion, hippopotamus and crocodile, to feast upon. Such outcome on the scale of Anubis, signified the 'second death', one the biggest fears of the ancient Egyptians concerning the afterlife. Casey writes:

One of the chief fears about the afterlife was that for the wicked there would be a second death. This was not the nothingness that moderns may fear — but the dread that they would be hacked and torn to pieces and thrown into a fiery lake.⁷

A number of other vile perils that could befall the wicked ones are mentioned, and although they indeed do appear frightening enough to chill blood in one's veins it is important to note that for Egyptians, the souls of the wicked do not suffer eternal punishment but rather cease to exist after the horror of their second death.⁸ Another view of how they envisi-

⁶ Ibid., 29

⁷ Ibid., 35

⁸ Ibid., 42

oned punishment, is that of the 'reversed natural order' in which the wicked are bound to 'walk upside down against the flat disk of the earth' – that is, in the inverse of their digestive system, thus forcing them to drink their own urine and feast on their excrement. Such conceptions of punishment enforces the Egyptian belief that 'the next life is not purely a nostalgic recall of the delights of the present one' but 'is a perfection of the life in this world' and its 'natural order'.⁹ For the souls of those whose hearts weighed lighter than the feather of Ma'at permission was granted to proceed to the Egyptian vision of paradise, the Fields of Aaru, located in the East; boundless reed fields like those of the earthly Nile delta, where the virtuous spirits would enjoy eternal life in its full form with all the joys and pleasures they remembered enjoying in their earthly lives.

Unlike the Egyptians, the ancient Greeks believed that the continuation of life after death is a bleak and insubstantial one. Their otherworldly realm bore the name Hades, namesake to its ruler, god of the Underworld¹⁰, and was 'inhabited by beings that have only a lamentable half-existence, which is quickened only if they are given warm blood to drink'¹¹. And while their vision of the afterlife was in fact much more grim, lowly and impotent, compared to the fullness and potency of the earthly life, the Greeks too located their post-mortem realm down under. Once a person would die, their *psyche* would separate from their bodies and attain the form of an *eidolon*, a phantom image, like that of an 'image reflected in a mirror which can be seen but cannot be grasped'¹². Souls of eidolonian form are 'hardly more than dream images'¹³ and bear only a slight resemblance to the people they once were among the living. They are not really conscious but are able to regain sentience by drinking blood offered during the summoning rite of *nekuia*.¹⁴

In such barely substantial form the souls are lead to the Underworld by Hermes¹⁵, god of border crossings. At the entrance gate to the Underworld the souls are welcomed by Cerberus, a frightening three-headed 'hell-hound' whose duty was to guard the entrance to the Underworld by preventing the souls of the dead to leave and humans who were still alive to enter.¹⁶ Along with Cerberus, many other creatures are said to roam and reside around the entrance gate like the Erinyes, female chthonic deities of vengeance; Eris, the goddess of strife and discord; Centaurs, half-men half-horse shaped creatures; the Gorgons, horrifying sisters with snakes instead of hair and a literally petrifying gaze; the Lernean

⁹ Ibid., 34

¹⁰ Some sources cite the name 'Hades' to be both the name of the otherworldly postmortem realm and its chief divinity, while others refer to the ancient Greek underworld simply as the 'Underworld'. In the remainder of this text the term 'Underworld', with capital 'U' will be used to refer specifically to the ancient Greek concept of the underworld, and is distinguished from all the other underworlds mentioned.

¹¹ Casey, *After Lives*, p.19

¹² Milton, John, 1952, *Poems, Lycidas* as cited in Casey's *After Lives*, p. 69

¹³ Casey, *After Lives*, p. 71

¹⁴ Ibid., 68 referring to Homer's *Odyssey* 11, 36-41

¹⁵ D'Aulaire, Ingri and Edgar Parin, 1962, *D'Aulaires' Book of Greek Myths*, p. 56, 102

¹⁶ Ibid.



José Benlliure, 1919, *La barca de Caronte/ The boat of Charon*, Valencia, Museo de Bellas Artes

Hydra, multi-headed serpentine water monster; Chimera, a fire breathing hybrid of a lion, goat and snake and the Harpies, monsters with female faces and bird-shaped bodies who carry those guilty of evil deeds and extradite them to the Erinyes.¹⁷ Past the gates of the Underworld, waits Charon, the Ferryman who carries the newcomer souls on a boat over the Acheron, one of the five major rivers flowing through the Underworld.¹⁸ Charon expected payment for his service in a form of a coin that was placed in the mouth of the deceased before burial. Those who could not pay for transport were left unburied after death and roamed restlessly until a proper burial was performed.¹⁹ The Greek Underworld is on multiple occasion described as an abysmal and loathsome place where Hades, king of the dead, sits on a black marble throne with Persephone, his beautiful yet woeful wife²⁰:

When the earth shakes during the battle of gods, Hades leaps from his throne and roars with terror lest the Earth break open and his realm be exposed to the light, ghastly, moldering and an abomination to the gods — as when a stone is overturned revealing putrefaction and teeming larvae.²¹

¹⁷ Room, Adrian, 2003, *Who's Who in Classical Mythology*, p. 147

¹⁸ There were considered to be five major rivers flowing in the Underworld, bearing the names that reflected emotions associated with death. They were: *Styx* (hatred), *Acheron* (pain), *Lethe* (oblivion), *Phlegethon* (fire) and *Cocytus* (wailing.)

¹⁹ D'Aulaire, *D'Aulaires' Book of Greek Myths*, p. 56

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 102

²¹ Burkert, Walter, 1986, *Greek Religion Archaic and Classical*, referring to Homer's *Iliad* 20, 61-65, as cited in Casey's *After Lives*, p. 72

Though undoubtedly confined to a grim realm the souls could not be said to be fully aware of their surroundings, as having drunk from Lethe, the river of oblivion, they flutter in a sedate state impervious to their surroundings. Post the judgement performed by the three judges of the Underworld, Minos, Rhadamanthus and Aeacus, most Greek souls were to continue their postmortem existence in the Asphodel Meadows. A plain which Homer describes as being covered with white asphodels (*Asphodelus albus*) where the souls of the common folk dwell²². Very few have been deemed wicked enough to have themselves doomed to Tartarus, an abysmal pit of torment and suffering, as 'far beneath Hades as heaven is above earth'²³ where they undergo eternal punishments (e.g. Sisyphus who is to forever roll a stone uphill only for it to roll back down upon, or Tityos whose liver is perpetually torn by vultures)²⁴. Likewise, the admittance to the Fields of Elysium was of highly elitist nature, reserved for demigods, god-like men and heroes. Homer sings of Elysium as a paradise-like place, located at the western edge of the earth, where life is easiest for men and Okeanos perpetually sends western winds of refreshment²⁵. Hesiod further develops the idea in the form of Isles of the Blessed:

And they live untouched by sorrow in the islands of the blessed along the shore of deep-swirling Ocean, happy heroes for whom the grain-giving earth bears honey-sweet fruit flourishing thrice a year, far from the deathless gods, and Cronos rules over them²⁶

Much like the ancient Greeks, Old-Norsemen too, envisioned a place especially fit to host the distinguished dead. They called it Valhalla, the 'Slain-hall' a venue of majestic proportions where half of those who died in combat are taken by valkyries²⁷ to enjoy the eternal life of bliss in the presence of the Corpse-father, Odin²⁸, the main old-norse god. Located in Ásgarðr²⁹, the world of Æsirgods, Valhalla is described as a truly majestic palace, before which stands Glasir, tree of red-golden foliage and its roof is thatched with golden shields³⁰. It is said to be reached via Bifröst, a burning rainbow bridge that connected Ásgarðr to Miðgarðr, the world of men³¹. The other half of those slain in battle were taken by

²² *Odyssey* 24, as cited in the translation of Rouse, William Henry Denham, 1949, *The Odyssey: The Story of Odysseus*

²³ Homer, *Iliad* 8, 15-20

²⁴ Casey, *After Lives*, p. 81

²⁵ *Odyssey* 4, 560-565

²⁶ Hesiod, *Works and Days*, 170-175

²⁷ The valkyries, literally 'choosers of the slain', were Odin's maidens who selected warriors and led them to Valhalla as attested in *the Elder Edda, Völuspá* 30, translated by Orchard, Andy, 2011

²⁸ *The Elder Edda, Grímnismál* 8, translated by Orchard, Andy 2011

²⁹ One of the nine realms of the Old Norse mythology, connected to others by Yggdrasil, the tree of the worlds.

³⁰ Struluson, Snorri, cca. 1220, *The Prose Edda*, translated by Brodeur, Arthur Gilchrist, PhD., 1916, p. 143-145

³¹ *Ibid.*, *Gylfaginning*, p. 24-28

the goddess Freya, to a meadow named Fólkvangr³²³³. But for all those who did not die in combat, there is no place in the heavenly realm of Ásgarðr. Much closer to the roots of Yggdrasil, under the ground lays Niflheim, the misty world of primordial ice and home to dishonourable dead. The halls of Niflheim are ruled by Hel, a goddess dreadful to behold but easy to recognise as ‘she is half blue-black and half flesh-color ... and very lowering and fierce’³⁴. Her halls are spacious and of exceeding height, and as dreadful as her appearance. There in her many halls lies Náströnd, a hall standing far from the sun, with its doors facing north, woven out of the backs of serpents, rivers of venom flowing through and its name ‘Corpse Shore’ a testimony to what it hosts – a hill of piled up corpses of men guilty of murder, adultery and breaking of oaths, being feasted on by the terrible dragon Níðhöggr³⁵³⁶. Niflheim, too, is guarded by a hell-hound called Garm who sits at the entrance gate, and it is possible to reach it (Niflheim) after riding for nine nights across dark and dismal bogs. Then one will arrive to the river Gjöll and Gjallarbrú (Gjöll-bridge), which spans Niflheim with the world of living men.

A roofed bridge ‘thatched with glittering gold’ is guarded by a giantess named Móðguðr³⁷. If a living person is to try and cross, the bridge will thunder under them stronger than it does under ‘five companies of dead men’³⁸; the living will also be given away by the colour of their cheeks³⁹.



Emil Doepler, 1905, *Heimdall on the Rainbow*



‘Náströnd’ as depicted on the album cover of *Muspellz Synir* by Náströnd, 2008

³² *The Elder Edda, Grímnismál 14*, Fólkvangr is attested to as the ‘Battle-field’

³³ Struluson, Snorri, *The Prose Edda, Gylfaginning*, p. 38, Fólkvangr appears in its name

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 42

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 82

³⁶ *The Elder Edda, Völuspá 38-39*

³⁷ *The Prose Edda, Gylfaginning*, p. 73

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 74

³⁹ *Ibid.*

Now as we have witnessed, almost all ancient pagan cultures established a trend of sending their dead into more or less gloomy underground worlds, and the 2005 animated feature *Corpse Bride*⁴⁰ has certainly been guilty of following that fashion. By a bizarre twist of fate the young man Victor Van Dort [Johnny Depp] is spirited away by a wedding dress-wearing corpse [bride] Emily [Helena Bonham Carter] and is pulled underground. Upon fainting, Victor is awoken in the 'Land of the Dead', and to his surprise finds it to be a rather joyful and festive place. Like Norsemen, Burton and Johnson too decided to rely on colour as a means of disambiguation between the living and the dead. 'The Land of the Dead', is a world full of vivid, highly saturated colours, with gleeful bars swarming with bands of singing skeletons, witty worms and sultry spiders, and half-decomposing corpses of blue complexion and cheery disposition. On the contrary, *Corpse Bride's* 'Land of the Living' far more resembles the Greek Hades or the Norse Niflheim than its 'own' underworld. Land of the Living is a grim, cheerless and dreary place reminiscent of some Victorian-era European town dressed in about a hundred shades of grey, and its inhabitants albeit alive seem so rigid that they might as well be dead already—at least they appear to be on the inside. Perhaps as a way of portraying the joy of being released from the confinements of puritanical codes of conduct they were required to follow whilst alive, here the dead finally get to indulge in simple hedonistic pleasures and enjoy the *joie de vivre* lifestyle, ironically enough. The quirky, eccentric denizens of the 'Land of the Dead' seem to spend most of their days/ nights in a local bar, drinking, dancing and singing, which does seem like an image of the afterlife most modern men and women would gladly wish for themselves.



Corpse Bride, 2005, Victor waking up in the Land of the Dead

⁴⁰ Burton, Tim and Johnson, Mike, *Corpse Bride*, 2005, United Kingdom/ United States, Tim Burton Productions, Laika Entertainment distributed by Warner Bros. Pictures



Corpse Bride, 2005, Emily and Victor dancing in the Land of the Dead



Corpse Bride, 2005, Wedding reception in the Land of the Living

At least the Talking Heads thought so, when in their song *Heaven* they sing of an eponymous bar:

Everyone is trying to get to the bar.
The name of the bar, the bar is called Heaven.
The band in Heaven plays my favorite song.
They play it once again, they play it all night long⁴¹

But perhaps it is the following line, 'Heaven is a place where nothing ever happens', that paints the picture in a slightly more sinister tone. Maybe the Talking Heads longed for a perchance boring serenity, because they knew things could be far worse.



Nathan Coley, 2010, *Heaven Is A Place Where Nothing Ever Happens*, installation view, ACCA, courtesy of ACCA Archive

And they could be. Dante's painstaking detailing of the christian hell in his *Inferno*⁴² certainly does not lack activity, and can certainly testify that the 'comedy' part of the title *the Divine Comedy* is a misnomer. Deemed one of the greatest works of world literature and one of the most imaginative and evocative visions of the afterlife, the Divine Comedy is an epic poem/ travelogue that chronicles the poet's [Dante's] journey through Hell, Purgatory and Paradise in the company of his classical colleague, ancient Roman poet Virgil. Dante's comedy draws on medieval christian theology, namely on the teachings and philosop-

⁴¹ The Talking Heads, *Fear of Music*, Sire, SRK 6076, 1979, Vinyl, Jacksonville Press

⁴² Alighieri, Dante, 1308-1320, *The Divine Comedy, Inferno*, translated, with notes, by Cary, Henry Francis, 2009

hy of St. Thomas Aquinas⁴³ and so reflects their respective views on afterlife and how it is structured. While the Old-Norsemen might have started the segregation of the more distinguished and worthy dead over the lesser, and moved the 'v.i.p. section' of the afterlife realm up into the skies, it was definitely the monotheistic Christians who re-affirmed and fortified the distribution and allocation of the dead in the afterlife, and they did so based on their behaviour during their earthly lives. Three options are available for the dead Christians to reside in for eternity, and those are the realms of Hell, Purgatory and Paradise, based on the level of their righteousness/ wickedness with Paradise being assigned to the most virtuous and Hell to the most sinful. Hell too was located underground and in his *Comedy* Dante structured it so that 'as the gravity of sins increases, so the damned souls are farther and farther from God, who is light and love, and are finally immersed in ice and darkness'⁴⁴, while the virtuous resided in the Heaven above in God's eternal presence. The abysmal ditch of Dante's Hell, was created by Lucifer's i.e. Satan's fall from Heaven⁴⁵ and was structured as nine concentric circles, each hosting a specific group of sinners according to the severity of the sins committed. Inferno [Hell] is so intricately detailed and complex, that it is not at all surprising that Dante's and Virgil's journey through it lasted three full days. After passing the 'Gates of Hell' which held the ominous inscription: 'All hope abandon, ye who enter here'⁴⁶⁴⁷ they entered the Vestibule of Hell, where the screams of the 'Uncommitted' echoed. The Uncommitted were those who in their lives never took sides, but were rather preoccupied with purely their own well-being and benefit, the neither good nor evil opportunists, and angels who neither sided with God nor Lucifer during his rebellion. Naked and futile they are forced to race an elusive, wavering banner of mist, symbol to their pursuit of their ever-changing self-interest, while being stung by wasps and hornets. They are not in Hell, nor are they out of it, but are rather made to dwell on the shores of Acheron⁴⁸, unable to board the ferry of Charon, that would take them to Hell proper. Dante and Virgil continue further on their tour of Inferno, where in each circle sinners are being punished in the method of '*contrapasso*', a symbolic instance of poetic justice, a 'punishment that fits the crime'⁴⁹ by which each class of sinners is assigned dreadful torments equal to the horror of their sins⁵⁰. Thus the first circle, Limbo, hosts 'the guiltless damned', virtuous but unbaptised pagans who are punished by having to stay in a deficient form of Heaven, Heaven with a factory default error if you will, and are tormented

⁴³ Casey, *After Lives*, p. 147-148

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Dante, *The Divine Comedy, Inferno*, Canto 34, 121-126

⁴⁶ Ibid., Canto 3, 9

⁴⁷ A few centuries later the said inscription adorned the room doors of many angsty, rebellious teenagers including yours truly.

⁴⁸ While primarily moulded on Christian theology, Dante, as Casey writes (*After Lives*, p.148), derived a lot from Aristotle and ancient Greek mythology, therefore it is no wonder many of the denizens of Hades make an appearance in his Inferno.

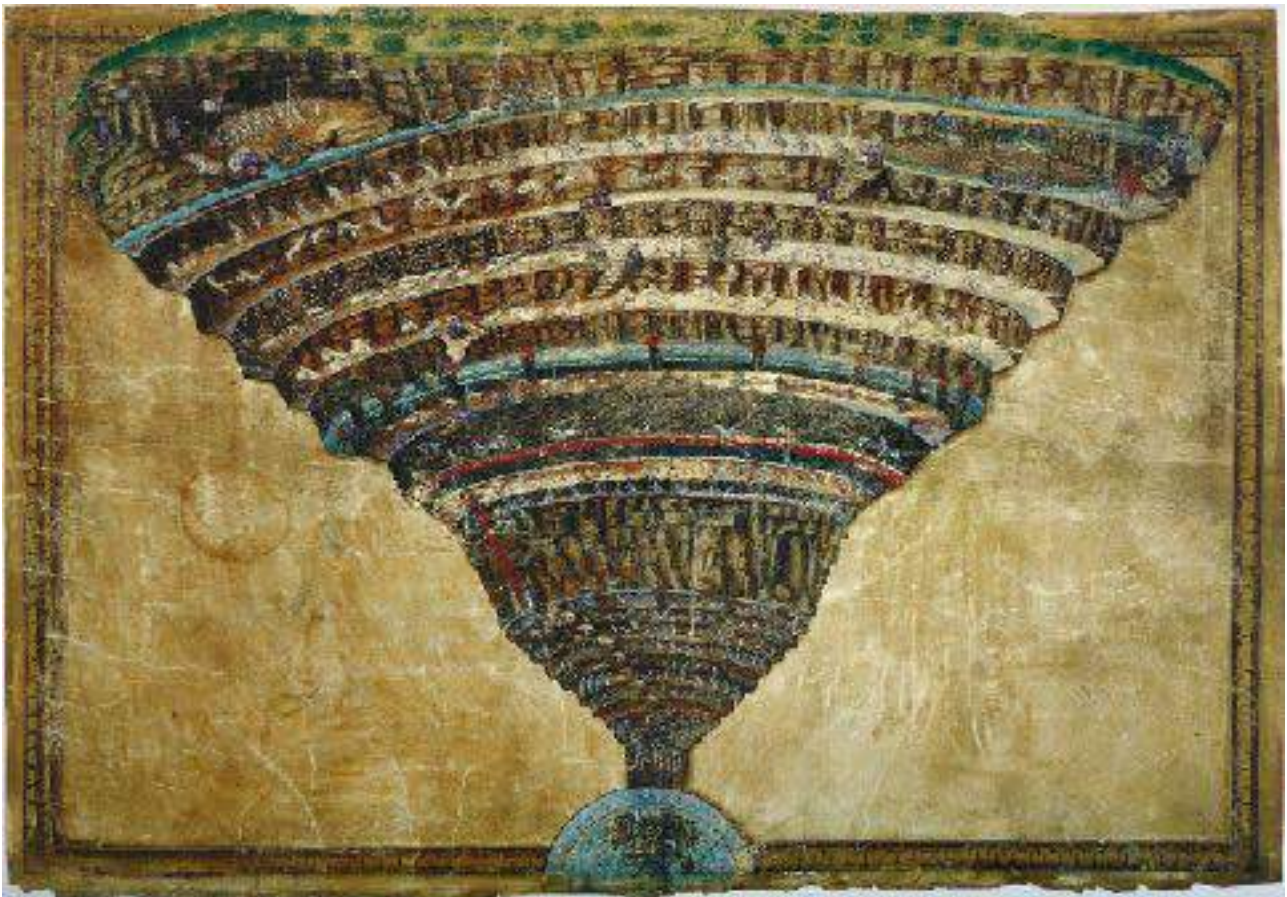
⁴⁹ Garret, Greg, 2015, *Entertaining Judgement*, p. 134

⁵⁰ Ibid.

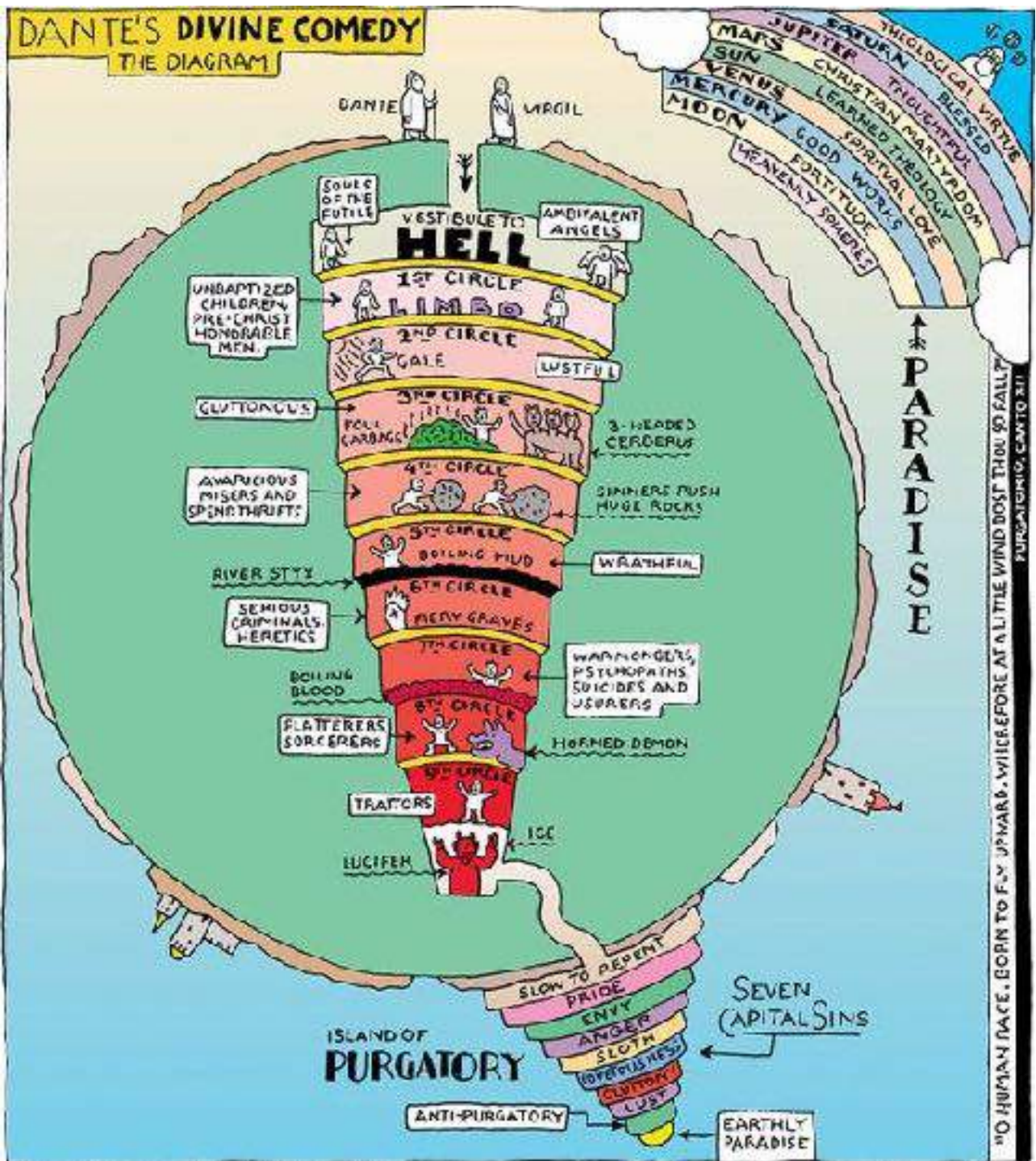
by hopeless longing since they will never be granted the eternal presence of the omnipotent, all-loving God. By descending further into Hell proper we meet the lustful residents of the second circle, who are forever blown back and forth by terrible, violent storms as in life they were blown aimlessly by lust. In the third circle we see the gluttonous wallowing in a vile, putrid slush while being showered by a ceaseless and foul ice-cold rain. Here the three-headed hound Cerberus re-appears, his duty this time to guard the gluttonous sinners lying in the freezing decomposing mire.⁵¹ Further down, in the fourth circle, are the avaricious who are forced to eternally pile and push large amounts of heavy weight and in the fifth [circle], in the swampy, foul-smelling waters of the river Styx, are hosted the wrathful. Those who were guilty of active wrath are made to battle each other viciously on the surface of the Styx's slime, while the passively wrathful lie sullen beneath the water. With the fifth circle ended the section of Hell devoted to sins of incontinence, and Dante and his guide Virgil approach the fiery red mosques of the City of Dis, surrounded by Stygian marsh and hosting lower Hell within its walls. The Walls of Dis are guarded by fallen angels, the Furies and Medusa. In the sixth circle heretics are trapped in flaming tombs, while the seventh circle hosts those guilty of violence. The seventh circle is subdivided in three rings, first of which is assigned to the violence against neighbours — murderers, plunderers, war makers and tyrants are immersed in Phlegeton, a river of boiling blood and fire. In the second of the three rings lies the Wood of Suicides, of those who were violent against self. Their souls are transformed into thorny, gnarly trees and are fed upon by Harpies and the trees are allowed to speak only if broken off and bleeding. Third ring, for those violent against God, Art and Nature, consists of a great plain of burning sand where the blasphemers, the sodomites and the usurers either lie stretched supine, run in circles or crouch huddled and weeping while being scorched by flaming rain. By climbing down a vast cliff Virgil and Dante reached the *Malebolge* or the 'Evil Ditches' of the eighth circle, the pit of Hell devoted to fraud and fraud-related sins — in each of the ten *bolgias* the variously fraudulent are eternally tortured. While the seducers and panderers are whipped by horned demons, the flatterers are stuck in excrement and simoniacs are shoved head down in tubular holes while their feet are set aflame. Further on, the sorcerers and fortune-tellers are contorted so that their heads are on backwards while they are made to march forward. The barrators are immersed in a lake of sticky, boiling tar and torn away by demonic *Malebranche* i.e. 'Evil Claws', the hypocrites are adorned with gilded, leaden robes weighing them down while aimlessly walking a narrow track. Horrible snakes and lizards are biting away the thieves, counsellors of fraud are enwrapped in eternal flames while the sowers of discord are hacked and mutilated by a sword-wielding demon, their bodies divided as they have in their lives tried to divide that which God intended to be united. In the tenth, final *bolgia* dwelled falsifiers and alchemists plagued by horrible diseases, stench, thirst, filth and darkness, after which came the central well of the *malebolge*, the 'Well of Titans'. Past the well, further down, in the ninth and final circle lies the vast frozen lake Cocytus which hosts those guilty of treason in its everlasting ice. Cocytus was also subdivided, in four rounds, corresponding to the severity of the treachery committed. In Caïna, the first round,

⁵¹ See note 46.

traitors to their kin are immersed in ice until their shoulders, in the second, Antenora, those who betrayed their country are immersed until the backs of their heads unable to bow their necks. Ptolomaea, the third round, hosts the traitors of guests who lie prostrate in ice while the tears freeze in their eyes, stripping them even of the comfort of crying. Lastly comes Judecca, where lie traitors to their lords and benefactors. Judecca is completely silent, its sinners fully submerged in ice, twisted and contorted. Bellow it is the centre of Hell, where Satan is shackled for committing the ultimate sin, a personal treason against God. The arch-traitor Lucifer is trapped waist-deep in ice, his once beautiful angel wings are now bat-like and their battings are futile, since the cold winds they produce further re-enforce the ice locking him down. He is portrayed as a giant, terrifying beast with three faces, all of which are weeping tears of blood and pus. Dante and Virgil finally escape Inferno by descending down Satan's fur and exiting through his navel and through the centre of the universe emerging at the Southern hemisphere under the stars where they will continue their journey up Mount Purgatory to its final sky-bound destination, Paradise, where God awaits them — further chronicled in the *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso canticas* of *The Divine Comedy*.



Sandro Botticelli, 1485, *The Abyss of Hell*, Biblioteca Apostolica, Vatican City



Seymour Chwast, *Diagram of Dante's Divine Comedy* as appeared in New York Times Book Review in 2001

Dante could be considered one of a kind in his epic portrayal of the afterlife as conceived by the christian-catholic dogmatic and biblical accounts, with perhaps his only peers in this endeavour being John Milton with his 1667 epic poem *Paradise Lost* and James Joyce with his first novel *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* published in 1916. If not with his literary colleagues, one could say that Dante found his counterpart in the Dutch painter Hieronymus Bosch, *the Divine Comedy* meeting its match in Bosch's painting *the Garden of Earthly Delights*, dating from ca.1503⁵². The triptych chronologically depicts, following the left to right order, 'causally dependent events in the history of the world and human kind'⁵³ with *Paradise and the Creation of Eve* painted in the left wing, *Humankind before the Flood* in the centre and *Hell* adorning the right panel wing⁵⁴.



Hieronymus Bosch, c. 1503, *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid, Spain

While both the Dante's *Comedy*, Bosch's *Garden*, Milton's *Paradise Lost* and Joyce's *Portrait* reflect the artists' respective beliefs and convictions as well as their unique vision and artistic expression, it is their works and other similar works, that are embedded in our culture and set the precedent for the popular fashion of conceiving and depicting hells as atrocious, dreadful pits of horror hidden away under the ground, while heavens are thought to be plains of eternal ease, gleaming light and fluffy clouds. Many a film and television series have been liable to following said trends such as *Carouse*⁵⁵, *Heaven Can-*

⁵² Fischer, Stefan, 2013, *Hieronymus Bosch, The Complete Works*, p. 101

⁵³ Baldass, Ludwig, 1959, *Jheronimus Bosch*, p. 234 as cited by Fischer in *Hieronymus Bosch, The Complete Works*, p. 101

⁵⁴ Fischer, *Hieronymus Bosch*, p. 101

⁵⁵ King, Henry, 1956, *Carousel*, United States, 20th Century Fox, based on *Liliom*, a play by Molnár, Ferenc, 1909

*Wait*⁵⁶, *South Park: Bigger, Longer & Uncut*⁵⁷, *Futurama*⁵⁸, ... to name a few. However, cotton candy clouds and scorching flames didn't take all the glory, for another nether-worldly trend emerged.



Carousel. 1956. Billy Bielow polishing a star in Heaven



South Park: Bigger, Longer & Uncut, 1999, Kenny in fiery Hell

⁵⁶ Beatty, Warren and Henry, Buck, 1978, *Heaven Can Wait*, United States, Paramount Pictures, based on *Here Comes Mr. Jordan*, a play by Segall, Harry, 1941

⁵⁷ Parker, Trey, 1999, *South Park: Bigger, Longer & Uncut*, United States, Paramount Pictures/ Warner Bros. Pictures

⁵⁸ Groening, Matt, *Futurama*, 1999-2003, United States, The Curiosity Company/ 20th Century Fox Television

Vestibules, Waiting rooms and Way-stations

Vladimir: 'Well? Shall we go?'

Estragon: 'Yes, let's go.'

[*They do not move.*]

*Curtain.*⁵⁹

Waiting for Godot, Samuel Beckett

When, in the opening scene of the 1943 film *Heaven Can Wait*, Henry van Cleve [Don Ameche] descended the grand marble staircase and 'presented himself where innumerable people had so often told him to go'⁶⁰, he seems to be a tad baffled at first — no ceaseless flames or convoluted torture schemes anywhere, but an opulent art deco vestibule with numerous floor-to-ceiling bookshelves and a white reception desk. Behind the desk sits 'His Excellency', Satan [Laird Cregar] who in this reappearance takes on the role of a gallant and cheery receptionist and an authority on operating the trap-door through which the 'worthy' are admitted to Hell. And while this otherworldly receptionist [Patrice Martinez] seems to be rather curious and patient in hearing Henry van Cleve's testimony as to why his life actions would merit him to be accepted to pass the trap door to Hell, she certainly doesn't possess the same accommodating virtues as the receptionist whom the Maitlands [Geena Davis and Alec Baldwin] get to encounter in the ditzy, topsy-turvy and complex bureaucratic structure of the netherworld in *Beetlejuice*⁶¹ — despite otherwise resembling her



Heaven Can Wait, 1943, 'His Excellency' and Henry Van Cleve in the lobby of Hell

⁵⁹ Beckett, Samuel, 1954, *Waiting for Godot—Tragicomedy in two Acts*, p. 85

⁶⁰ Lubitsch, Ernst, 1943, *Heaven Can Wait*, United States, 20th Century Fox/ The Criterion Collection, based on *Birthday/ Születésnap*, a play by Bush-Fekete, Leslie, 1934

⁶¹ Burton, Tim, 1988, *Beetlejuice*, United States, The Geffen Film Company/ Warner Bros.

in many ways. After the car crash in which they met their terrible doom, the Maitlands have returned to their home, perfectly oblivious to their calamity only to discover an ominous book titled ‘the Handbook for the Recently Deceased’ placed on their nightstand. Now unlike the Egyptian Book of the Dead that was designed to aid the souls on their journey through the underworld, this piece of postmortem literature seems to be virtually indecipherable and futile in providing any explanations, as if to accentuate the bureaucratic nature of the afterlife. Upon finally arriving at the very Burtonian waiting room lit in a vivid green light and filled with a display of quite eccentric dead souls, the Maitlands are informed by the receptionist that if they do not have an appointment with their caseworker they will be forced to wait. And while every living person today could argue that endlessly waiting in bureaucratic structures is a very real actualization of hell on earth, it is when Barbara Maitland asks her husband if this is what happens when one dies, that the aggravated pink-haired receptionist says something important (yet, still somehow futile to the Maitlands):

This is what happens when you die.

That is what happens when he dies.

And that is what happens when they die. */Pointing to the other dead souls waiting/*

It’s all very personal.⁶²



Beetlejuice, 1988, Barbara Maitland entering the afterlife waiting room

⁶² Ibid.



Beetlejuice, 1988, the Dead in the afterlife waiting area

Another work that further explored the idea that the afterlife is tailored to each individual specifically yet retains the office-like elements is *After Life*⁶³, a Japanese film ten years junior to *Beetlejuice*. Set in a way-station reminiscent of decrepit governmental social services institution, it is the conception of afterlife that every Monday takes a new group of recently deceased who stay there for a week while being processed. Before the week's end they are each to choose their single happiest memory of their earthly lives, which is done in a series of a 'job interview' like conversations. After every one of the interviewees has chosen his/ her fondest memory, the bureaucratic/ social service structures turns into a dreamy production company that reenacts and replicates all of the memories into short films and screens them at the end of the week. Once the screening has completed, each person will stay with their chosen memory for eternity.



After Life, 1998, On the otherworldly film set

⁶³ Koreeda, Hirokazu, 1998, *After Life/ Wandafuru Raifu*, Japan, Engine Film/ Sputnik Productions/ TV Man Union



After Life, 1998, The final screening

Similarly, a major plot twist in the Cameron Crowe's 2001 science fiction psychological thriller *Vanilla Sky*⁶⁴, an American remake of a 1997 film *Open Your Eyes*⁶⁵, happens when the central character David Aames [Tom Cruise], a wealthy carefree heir to a publishing empire in New York City, finds himself in a lobby of an elusive corporation called 'Life Extension' where he is told by their sales representative Rebecca [Tilda Swinton] that they specialise in cryonic suspension, a process of freezing the bodies of people right after the moment of their death, their brain kept active in a lucid dream state until a cure for their affliction is found in the future. As it dawns on David that he too is in fact a client of L.E. and that the narrative of his life we have so far been following is in fact his own lucid dream gone wrong, he grows anxious and calls out for tech support. In what seems to be a boundless elevator ride, reminiscent of the closing scene of *Heaven Can Wait* (1943), a member of tech support explains to David that he has been suspended for the past 150 years living [after death] in a breezy assemblage of his fondest memories, pass-times and lifestyles, hence the title 'Vanilla Sky' referring to the sky in the Monet's painting *The Seine at Argenteuil* from 1873 which bore sentimental value to Aames.

Such conception of life after death as a linear collage of memories, fantasies and subconscious thoughts brings us to the final station of our voyage, the afterlife as an eternal dreamscape.

⁶⁴ Crowe, Cameron, 2001, *Vanilla Sky*, United States, Cruise/Wagner Productions/ Vinyl Films/ Summit Entertainment, distributed by Paramount Pictures

⁶⁵ Amenábar, Alejandro, 1997, *Open Your Eyes/ Abre los ojos*, Spain/ France/ Italy, Redbus Film Distribution, distributed by Live Entertainment

[After]Life in the Vivid Dream

“In the fatal hall, thoughts in greys,
Only your hair was still alive,
And told me: Be calm—in death we dream.”⁶⁶

Hair's Comfort, Antun Gustav Matoš

Although James Cameron's 1997, eleven Academy Awards winning and twelve years reigning highest-grossing film of all times, *Titanic*⁶⁷ isn't primarily concerned with the afterlife thematic but with the detailing of the sinking of RMS Titanic, its closing scene accompanied with the all too well known original score by James Horner remains imprinted in the minds of many. It follows the main protagonist and first-person narrator, 102 year-old Rose [Gloria Stuart], after having dropped the diligently sought-after jewel *Heart of the Ocean* into the sea, to her [death] bed and her final dream. As she passes the hallways of the Titanic's flooded wreck, the sight suddenly morphs — RMS Titanic is restored in its former pre-sinking glory and as the now young again Rose [Kate Winslet] arrives at the staircase she is greeted by the passengers who perished in the disaster. Lastly at the clock, their meeting spot, waits Jack Dawson [Leonardo DiCaprio], her greatest love who never survived the wreckage, and we realise Rose is wearing a white dress, the film ending in a symbolic, dreamy wedding and all of her wishes at last coming true.



Titanic, 1997, Rose's final dream

⁶⁶ Matoš, Antun Gustav, 1908, *Hair's Comfort/ Utjeha kose*, translated by Božica Cvjetković

⁶⁷ Cameron, James, 1997, *Titanic*, United States, 20th Century Fox/ Paramount Pictures/ Lightstorm Entertainment, distributed by 20th Century Fox/ Paramount Pictures

Much the same is the ending of another heartbreaking tale, *the Little Match Girl*⁶⁸, about an abused and neglected child who dies of hypothermia on cold winter streets. While trying to keep herself alive by burning the matches no one wanted to buy, she starts having hallucinatory visions, namely the vision of her grandmother, the only person who in life treated her with love and kindness. Upon striking the last match, the little girl freezes to death but there is a smile adorning her little face for she is reunited with her grandmother, and blissfully celebrating New Year on the other side.

It is a belief shared and hoped for by many, that in the life after we will be reunited with those we found to be our dearest in this life. One might also hope that the perils that have troubled them while alive will cease to be bothersome in death, and that they will be released from handicaps that have strained them, like little Karl Lionheart who after his death, in the magical land of Nangiyala found both his beloved brother Jonathan and the courage and strength he felt he so much lacked in his earthly life⁶⁹. Perhaps such personalised vision of afterlife, a wonderland of heartfelt reunions, 'where troubles melt like lemon drops'⁷⁰ and our wildest dreams come true, is the most human one as opposed to a vision of a universal, boundless souls-depot. It is certainly the most comforting, the one even the most skeptical towards the idea of postmortem existence would have a hard time not secretly wishing for. However, as aforementioned, no consensus exists and likely never will as to what really happens after we die — maybe one of the above mentioned possibilities, maybe a mix of a few or maybe none of them turn out to be true, which is why the question of it will forever be gripping, the answer never singular and all the subsequent representations of afterlife albeit alike, will be unique and all equally possible. And to avoid the threatening chance of falling into a false loop, I will use this opportunity as my key to flee the scene and leave you with my last words and conclusion on the subject.

⁶⁸ Andersen, Hans Christian, 1845, *The Little Match Girl/ Den Lille Pige med Svovlstikkerne*

⁶⁹ Lindgren, Astrid, 1973, *The Brothers Lionheart/ Bröderna Lejonhjärta*

⁷⁰ Arlen, Harold, 1939, *Over the Rainbow*, lyrics by Harburg, E.Y., written for and performed by Garland, Judy in the 1939 film adaptation of *The Wizard of Oz*, directed by Fleming, Victor

Last Words

I would like to start off the conclusion to this exotic journey by explaining why it is that I got interested in this subject in the first place. It might seem paradoxical to do so at the end of my thesis but then again it is also paradoxical in a way to ponder what happens after we die — we'll all find out in due time.

I got hooked on the question because it is one of those Schrödinger's cat type questions — all the answers we come up with are all simultaneously true and false until we actually kick the bucket and the answer reveals itself to us. This means that the nature of such questions allows even the craziest of answers, it fuels our imagination to run wild. One would think therefore, that there wouldn't be so many similarities and writing a text on trends of postmortem depictions would be a futile business at best, however all of the aforementioned examples of nether-worldly existence, and the examples I failed to mention, seem to share DNA. They are all metaphors or analogical representations of certain aspects of the earthly life that we closely tie to concepts related with the afterlife. The reason, for example, that the quirky post-obit bureaucracy of *Beetlejuice* strikes such a comic tone and seems to work so well, is that it equates the notion of eternal life of the soul with seeming eternity of bureaucratic processes, better yet it accentuates the analogy between the two. Same goes of Anubis, Hades and Garm, the three canine-like watchers of the gates of the underworld, while the go-to gate guardian pet to this day remains to be — a dog. The afterlives seem to be overlain with such analogies with the idiosyncrasies of the earthly life, and as witnessed much of them seem to make a recurring appearance throughout history.

Not only because humans are by nature impressionable, but because for a metaphor to work it must equate whatever it stands for with its analogous companion. This is what makes it relatable, and what ultimately makes some metaphors stronger than others, and better embedded in our common knowledge and culture.

As a maker of fictional, mainly absurdist, surrealist films and creator of their narratives I have found myself over and over being concerned with [visual manifestations of] metaphors i.e. making something into an analogy of itself thus either accentuating the element or shedding new light on it. Thus this research made me further aware of, and able to apply, how the metaphors and symbols are formed and what it is that makes them function, which I find inherently valuable for furthering my practice. Observing, tracing, cataloguing and describing the behaviour of metaphors, in this case related to the notion of afterlife, is what I find to be of cardinal importance in this text.

It was never my intention to try to find a universal answer to question of postmortem existence, or indisputably prove similarities in the way that it was conceived, ultimately that has always been and will remain to be a personal choice — no matter whether we think we will plunge to Hell through a trap door in a grand marble vestibule or we will completely disintegrate and no longer be able to conceive such thoughts, I do believe that our conceptions of afterlife are rooted in and like little mirrors provide insight into our way of life, our ideals and matters we find important in the earthly life.

On that note I would like to wrap it up with another metaphor:

Envisioning what comes after death and what the afterlife would be comprised of is like standing in a well lit room trying to look outside into a dark night through the window - you see some interesting abstract shapes and a flickering light here an there, and although mesmerising, in the end the thing you see most clearly is your own reflection.

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