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Tango for a Dream: Narrative Liminality and Musical Sensuality in Richard Linklater's *Waking Life*

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Abstract: *Richard Linklater's* Waking Life *(2001) combines unapologetically cerebral content with a sensuous audiovisual style; fragmentariness in the narrative with an all-encompassing breadth of ideas. Another aspect of* Waking Life*'s internal contradictions is the juxtaposition of the film's liminal narrative space with the most "earthly" of music genres, the tango. I will explore the contradictions of Linklater's film by viewing it in the context of the filmmaker's metaphysical concerns, showing how all his formal choices, including the rotoscoped visual style, the "narrative of digressions" (Linklater qtd. in Singer) and the choice and placement of music, resonate with the film's thematic undercurrents and its inquiry into the mysteries of existence, consciousness and time. I will argue that the tension between the film's narrative liminality and tango's erotic corporeality addresses the dualistic nature of human experience and that the film's references to Jean-Luc Godard's* Prénom Carmen *(1983) in the scoring not only evoke the French director's distrust of the film medium itself but also connect to* Waking Life*'s wider concerns with the nature of reality and our perception of it.*

The first feature film made using the technique of rotoscoping, Richard Linklater's *Waking Life* (2001) is a cinematic meditation on the mysteries of existence, consciousness and time. Presented through a *Slacker*-style "narrative of digressions" (Linklater qtd. in Singer), the film is assembled from loosely connected fragments of conversations, lectures, music rehearsals and soliloquies, all possibly part of Main Character's (played by Wiley Wiggins) lucid dream. *Waking Life* shares the same epistemological and metaphysical curiosity and taste for meandering narrative as Linklater's earlier films, such as *It's Impossible to Learn to Plow by Reading Books* (1988), *Slacker* (1991) and *Before Sunrise* (1995), and yet this is the only project which was directly inspired and conditioned by advancements in animation technology. According to the director, the idea for a story about a character caught in a dream loop came from a lucid dream he had as a teenager but "the literalness of film was too harsh for the idea of a lucid dream" (Linklater qtd. in Stone 139). Not until he saw the animated work of Bob Sabiston produced by one of his former collaborators, *Slacker* actor and production assistant Tommy Pallotta, did Linklater realise that he had found the perfect medium for conveying the oneiric, elusive feel of his uniquely cinematic metaphysical enquiry: "this kind of more ephemeral style that was real and yet was an artifice, that was an artist's rendering of real—that's what a dream is!" (Linklater qtd. in Stone 139).

Considering that for twenty years *Waking Life* existed only in Linklater's head as "a movie in search of a form" (Linklater qtd. in Johnson 137), the obvious question which I will explore in this article is, how does *Waking Life*'s audiovisual style reflect and embody the film's

ideas? In many ways, *Waking Life* seems like the epitome of contradiction: it is unapologetically cerebral and at the same time sensuous, each shot looking like a picture trying to settle in its frame; fragmentary and yet all-encompassing in the breadth of its ideas; simultaneously distancing and immersive. Even its audiovisual style seems contradictory, since the original digital footage shot by Linklater and Tommy Pallotta is assembled in the manner of documentary filmmaking, featuring mostly "talking heads" and on-location sound, but is transformed through rotoscopy into a flow of perpetually moving, unstable shapes and colours. As John Richardson points out, this in itself is enough to raise "questions about the nature of the audio-visual contract and the meanings it is equipped to convey" (75). At the same time, the fact that the film's liminal narrative spaces and esoteric topics are paired with the most "earthly" of music genres, the tango, makes the question of *Waking Life*'s internal contradictions even more intriguing. However, instead of positioning *Waking Life* in a neo-surrealist framework as Richardson does in his book *An Eye for Music*, I will view Linklater's film in the context of the filmmaker's philosophical and metaphysical concerns, arguing that all his formal choices, including the rotoscoped visual style, the fragmentary narrative, and the choice and placement of music, are the embodiment not so much of the surrealist obsession with the unconscious and the irrational as of *Waking Life*'s wider concerns with the nature of consciousness, reality and our experience of it.

A Movie in Search of a Form

The characters in Linklater's films are often on the move, wandering through the streets of Austin, Vienna, Paris, or travelling from Texas to California and back, as in Linklater's debut *It's Impossible to Learn to Plow by Reading Books*, in which the protagonist's voyage through anonymous backyards, bars, parking lots and waiting rooms prompted Rob Stone to compare these locations to Deleuze's concept of *l'espace quelconque* (any space whatsoever). This "mundane place of transit", says Stone, is "where the depersonalization and isolation of individuals occurs, but also one that is surrounded by an out-of-field indeterminacy that holds the potential for unique and singular experiences" (21). Stone adds that "the virtue of any space whatsoever is that the traveller can potentially choose to go in any direction whichever" (22). In *Waking Life*, however, we have for the first time in a Linklater film a character whose wanderings through different locations and conversations are chosen for him in advance. Not only does he not seem to have any control over where he goes and who he speaks to, but he can't even decide whether he is asleep or awake. Moreover, instead of a dreamscape populated by the content of the individual's subconscious and his/her daily experiences, the protagonist of *Waking Life* seems to drift through the layers of a *collective* conscious and subconscious, encountering philosophers, artists, slackers, cinephiles, raging lunatics and self-immolating activists who, as he himself says, keep exposing him to information and ideas that "seem vaguely familiar" but are at the same time alien to him.

Rather than "any space whatsoever", the narrative space of *Waking Life* is a "spectrum of awareness", to use Main Character's words, shaped by collective thoughts, ideas, dreams, knowledge, desires and frustrations, and yet it is hardly tangible or definable. This is a space that fits the very definition of liminality: a transitory, elusive space between life and death, conscious and subconscious, between real and dream, the very threshold of understanding the self, the

world and God. The characters in it muse on the nature of life, philosophy, identity, political engagement, human relationships and much else, but this wide range of topics begins to focus towards the end of the film on several of Main Character's pressing questions: Am I awake or am I still dreaming? Is it possible that I'm dead already and what then is this experience I'm having right now?

Considering the elusiveness of *Waking Life*'s narrative space, it is not surprising that it took a long time for Linklater to find an appropriate visual style for it. As Walter Murch has eloquently pointed out, any subject presented on screen is in danger of being "suffocated" by the very realism of the film image, let alone one which resists the confines of traditional narrative. As Murch explains, the problem is that film does not possess "the built-in escape valves of ambiguity that painting, music, literature, radio drama and black-and-white silent film automatically have simply by virtue of their sensory incompleteness—an incompleteness that engages the imagination of the viewer as compensation for what is only evoked by the artist" (247). The interesting thing—and one of the film's many paradoxes—is that the technique which provided Linklater with an "escape valve" from "suffocating realism" is precisely the one which was originally developed to give more authenticity to animated movement.

The technique of tracing over live action frame by frame to create animated film was invented as early as 1915 by Max Fleischer, a pioneer of American animation famous for creating cartoons such as *Betty Boop* (1932–1941) and *Popeye the Sailor* (1933–1942). Fleischer patented a device that projected live images onto frosted glass, which was then used by animators as a drawing surface. He employed this technique in his series *Out of the Inkwell* (1919–1929), but because the process was limited to tracing over the existing image, it frustrated creative animators and from the early 1930s was mostly used for preparatory work and for training newcomers in the field (Stone 139). Rotoscoped animation was used sparingly in Walt Disney's films *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (William Cottrell et al., 1937) and *Cinderella* (Clyde Geronimi, Wilfred Jackson, Hamilton Luske, 1950) to render a naturalistic effect to more delicate movements and the representation of animals. It was quite popular in the Soviet Union between the 1930s and 1950s where it was employed to insert "a sense of social realism into folk tales" (Stone 140), although it also proved useful in reducing the production costs of big animation projects such as China's first animated film, *Princess Iron Fan* (Wan Laiming, Wan Guchan, 1941).

Rotoscopy was resurrected in popular culture in the 1980s through the wide exposure of A-ha's music video *Take on Me* (Steve Barron, 1985). It was digitised in the early 1990s by videogame developer Smoking Car Productions, but the main breakthrough in its digital application came thanks to Sabiston's "interpolated rotoscoping". According to Stone, Sabiston first used computers to enable animators to "draw" over existing footage with a pen-shaped mouse, which could be "'dipped' in an electronic palette for any colour, texture, thickness or transparency" (141). The interpolation was the next step, which allowed software to fill in the movement between frames that had been traced by animators. As this could include a dozen or so untraced frames, interpolation gave the footage a quivery, shape-shifting quality typical of *Waking Life*'s visual style.

Linklater shot the film with live participants at real locations using a digital video camera and the film was then rotoscoped by a team of animators who drew over the live action applying Sabiston's software for interpolated rotoscopy. While this technique already incorporates an element of "instability" by the very fact that software is allowed to bridge the space between hand-drawn frames, another layer to the film's visual diversity was added by applying the "exquisite corpse" style of animation in which "each animator just got a little piece of the film to work on, with each interview subject in the film being drawn by three or four people" (Linklater qtd. in Stone 142).[1] Despite Linklater's original instruction not to stray from the content of the footage, this approach, which was devised and championed by the Surrealists, resulted in many colourful additions, as in the scene in which Kim Krizan talks about the meaning of language and where the nondescript background starts responding to her words, transforming into waves of water, a Sabre-toothed tiger lurking behind trees, or showing us the journey of the word "love" from the speaker's mouth to the listener's memory of love; or the scene in which two friends who discuss Bazin's philosophy of cinema decide to test his theory about the divine nature of reality and create a "holy moment" by looking into each other's eyes, which turns both speakers into cloud-like statues suspended in the sky. The collaborative nature of this process also resulted in a wide range of stylistic differences in the animation, which is in some scenes very light, allowing us to see the actor's face beneath, while in others it is downright cartoonish (as in Main Character's conversation with Soap Opera Woman). Thus, through the combination of the "exquisite corpse" style of animation and interpolated rotoscopy, a technique that was once the link between animation and reality became the main source of the film's air of ambiguity, liminality and ephemerality.

At first glance, *Waking Life*'s distinctly oneiric content and its invitation to view reality with new eyes seem to justify John Richardson's argument that Linklater's film illustrates the practice of audiovisual neo-surrealism. At the same time, Richardson's definition of neo-surrealism is so wide and permissive that it can accommodate almost any type of film that does not fall into the category of strictly classical narration. His cinematic examples of neo-surrealist aesthetics involve categories such as "reflexive", like Spike Jonze's *Adaptation* (2002), "playfully deconstructive", where he even includes Jim Jarmusch's *Broken Flowers* (2005), "noncommittally metaphysical" like Richard Kelly's *Donnie Darko* (2001), "grotesque in a Battaillean way" like Lynch's *Eraserhead* (1977) and *Blue Velvet* (1986), and "carnivalesque/burlesque" like Baz Luhrmann's *Moulin Rouge!* (2001). The broadness of Richardson's definition aside, the problem with his line of enquiry in relation to Linklater's film is that, while in many ways insightful, it seems too absorbed with the concerns of surrealist aesthetics to notice that *Waking Life*'s metaphysical undercurrents have a stronger root in spirituality than in the interest in psychic automatism and the Freudian unconscious associated with historical surrealism. Finally, Richardson's analysis of the film's "audiovisual contract" is directed towards emphasising the music's contribution to what he considers to be distancing qualities of Linklater's aesthetics (82), overlooking the music's role in the wider philosophical framework of the narrative which I will address later.

While the elusiveness of *Waking Life*'s narrative space may encourage the notion that Main Character ventures through the realm of the "surreal", the various discussions initiated by different characters and the questions posed by the film go beyond the surrealist fascination with

the unconscious and its exploration through creativity; they turn instead to philosophy and its incessant examination of the nature of being in the world, whether consciousness exists without the body and whether the world exists without consciousness. Acknowledging the spiritual and metaphysical underpinning of *Waking Life*'s oneiric feel and the fact that every false awakening of Main Character ends in another dream suggest that one of the possible answers in the search for a fully informed reading of this film can be found in the same quote from the Upanishads that David Lynch used to introduce his film *Inland Empire* (2006): "We are like the dreamer who dreams and then lives the dream. This is true for the entire universe" (qtd. in Kite 47). Both *Inland Empire* and *Waking Life* invite us to view the phenomenal world as an untrustworthy construct, but while Lynch's film veils its philosophical and spiritual content in a puzzling confluence of different temporalities and overlapping narratives, *Waking Life* challenges our notions of reality by transforming the digital film footage into a flow of unstable, permanently shifting shapes and pulsing colours.

Presenting *Waking Life*'s liminal narrative space through rotoscopy was certainly a significant step towards ensuring all aspects of the film were "formally and spiritually aligned" (Linklater qtd. in Johnson 137), but that is not the only element of the film's form that reflects and illuminates its metaphysical themes. The film's score composed by Glover Gill and performed by his ensemble Tosca Tango Orchestra is equally revealing in its choice of genre and the music's placement within the film. Although the use of tango—a highly sensual dance born in the working-class slums of Argentina and Uruguay—seems to contradict the film's lofty tone with its seductive sensuousness, certain elements of the music and its placement engage profoundly with the film's interrogative nature and its themes of liminality, the construction of meaning through observation and communication and, above all, the experience of being human. It is also important to note here that Gill's music in *Waking Life* appears both diegetically and nondiegetically, featuring in the scenes that show Tosca Tango Orchestra rehearsing and performing, as well as accompanying those in which Main Character flies above the city. The fluctuation of the music between diegetic and nondiegetic spaces is not unusual in itself—it has been pointed out many times by film music scholars that music is the only element of film that can effortlessly move between these two spheres (Gorbman, *Unheard Melodies* 22; Stilwell 184). At the same time, diegetic appearances of music in film are usually motivated by the narrative—a character goes to a concert, or turns the radio on, or performs music herself. In *Waking Life*, however, there is no narrative justification for the appearance of the chamber ensemble at the very beginning; its inclusion into the story is instead an unmistakable reference to *Prénom Carmen* (1983), a film by one of Linklater's heroes, Jean-Luc Godard.

Music In Between Worlds

Before discussing the role of music further, it is worth digressing to mention the recent debate surrounding the classification of music into diegetic and nondiegetic, which challenges the entrenched view that so-called "dramatic scoring" (nondiegetic music) belongs to a different level of narration than the diegetic one.[2] As Anahid Kassabian points out, music is one of many elements that produce the sense of diegesis in film; therefore it can't really be "outside" it (91). Following the same reasoning, Ben Winters proposes to replace the term nondiegetic with two

new ones in order to differentiate between music as a "narrating voice" (extradiegetic) and music which, even though it does not have an obvious source, is nevertheless "a product of narration, belonging to the same narrative space as the characters in their world" (intradiegetic) (228). Winters supports his notion of intradiegetic music by drawing on Daniel Frampton's concept of *filmmind* which sees film not as a reproduction of reality but a world of its own, "with its own intentions and creativities" (5), emanating "from a uniquely transsubjective *non-place*" (87; emphasis in original). The notion of intradiegetic music as part of film's "own mind" seems a particularly appropriate and useful concept when considered in the context of Linklater's film, which treats the "spectrum of awareness" as a dreamscape impervious to the rules of classical narration. At the same time, because of the distinctly ambiguous character of diegesis, one could argue that the presence of music in it can be understood as being simply metadiegetic: not a product of narration, but yet another aspect of Main Character's continuous dream loop, a dimension of his subjectivity.[3] Finally, considering the reflexive purpose of music which I am about to discuss in more detail, one could also make a case for music's extradiegetic status, contextualising it within *Waking Life*'s intricate web of intertextual references. The purpose of this differentiation is certainly not to complicate things with taxonomic minutiae but rather to draw attention to the ambiguous nature of the music's origin in *Waking Life*. So, while keeping in mind different possibilities for interpreting its status in the film, in order to simplify things in the discussion that follows I will retain the familiar terminology of diegetic and nondiegetic, with the caveat that the latter term comprises both the intradiegetic quality of music which is perceived as part of the narrative world, and the reflexive quality of music as a narrating voice.



Figure 1: "Dream is destiny". *Waking Life* (Richard Linklater, 2001). Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment, 2003. Screenshot.

In the opening sequence of *Waking Life* we see a boy and a girl playing with an origami fortune teller (a "cootie catcher"), the boy's random picks of colours and numbers resulting in the words "Dream is destiny". The words act as a cue for the entrance of gentle piano arpeggios and a melancholy accordion melody accompanying an image of the boy looking at the sky, his feet slowly leaving the ground, as if he is being pulled up or drawn to something above him. Before floating skywards the boy grabs the door handle of a car parked beside him and then we see Main Character waking up on a train, suggesting that the scene with the boy could be a

dream or a memory from Main Character's childhood. After a couple of the opening credit titles in blurry letters and the words "Waking Life", the character of the music changes drastically, harsh, scraping tones of violins playing *dietro il ponticello* (behind the bridge) (Richardson 80) bringing us into "reality", showing a chamber ensemble (string quintet, piano and accordion) in the middle of a rehearsal.

The appearance of the rehearsal scene immediately after the title is the first clue to making the connection with Godard's *Prénom Carmen* which has a similar opening, showing a string quartet in rehearsal after introductory images of night traffic, and then—following the film's title—images of sea and sky. Godard's film is only loosely based on Prosper Mérimée's novella *Carmen* and Georges Bizet's eponymous opera, and the network of allusions includes the association of the quartet's second violinist, Claire (Myriem Roussel) with the novella/opera's character of Michaela (Davison 82).[4] Nevertheless, the reappearances of the musicians rehearsing Beethoven's late quartets are never directly motivated by the narrative but are, in typical Godardian fashion, inserted into it almost randomly, like the repeated images of the sea that punctuate the film. The only explanation for the quartet's presence in the film is given at the very end when we learn that the same quartet has been booked by Carmen's gang to perform at the hotel where the kidnapping of a wealthy businessman is supposed to take place. The scene of the Tosca Tango Orchestra's rehearsal at the beginning of *Waking Life* also lacks narrative explanation and is accepted as one of the film's many digressions, which includes the second and final appearance of the ensemble at the very end performing in a bar where Main Character will have his last conversation with Pinball Playing Man (played by Linklater himself) before finding himself in the same yard as at the beginning of the film and then floating skywards. Thus, as the appearances of the quartet in *Prénom: Carmen* bookend Godard's intricately layered story of passion, striving and betrayal, so the Tosca Tango Orchestra's rehearsal at the beginning and its diegetic performance at the end of *Waking Life* frame Main Character's journey through discussions about the mysteries of life and consciousness.[5]

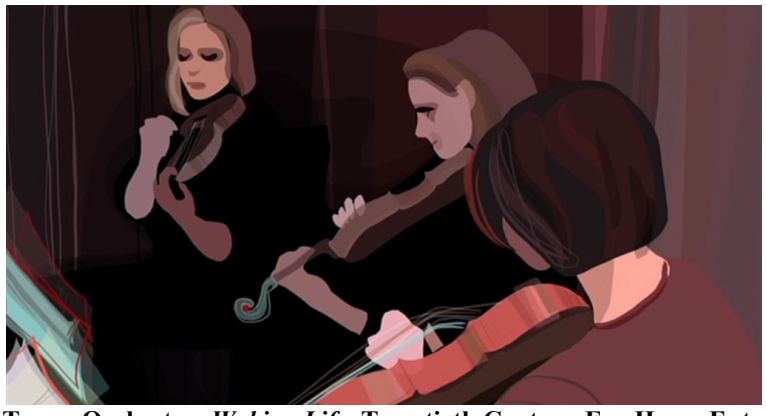


Figure 2: Tosca Tango Orchestra. *Waking Life*. Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment, 2003. Screenshot.

At first glimpse, this musical reference seems to be the only link that connects Godard's and Linklater's films as they don't have any other obvious similarities either thematically or

stylistically. Linklater does not share Godard's modernist inclinations to use disorienting cuts and a generally interrogative use of montage, or to play with the asynchronous use of sound. His style is not only less formally jarring than Godard's but in *Waking Life* he strives to maintain the effortless, dreamy sense of audiovisual flow. Even the use of nondiegetic music is much more structured than in *Prénom: Carmen* and is almost exclusively confined to scenes that show Main Character flying above the city or his point-of-view shots of flying. Why, then, is this musical reference to Godard's film significant?

As both Annette Davison and Claudia Gorbman ("Auteur Music") have pointed out, the appearances of the quartet in *Prénom: Carmen* are part of Godard's trademark deconstructive approach to the medium, a strategy that draws attention to the mediating nature of the cinema apparatus and its conventions by foregrounding elements of manipulation and mediation: "the purpose of the quartet is to embody a locus of confusion: it lacks narrative motivation; and, it undermines the role(s) of music as defined by classical Hollywood scoring and exposes such scoring practices as 'conventional' rather than established by 'natural law'" (Davison 83). Linklater's use of Glover Gill's score, which references Godard's film, clearly intends to convey a similar distrust of mediation and to prevent passive spectatorship, but the film's metaphysical ethos invites us to view Linklater's reflexive strategies in the context of *Waking Life*'s wider concerns with the nature of reality and our experience of it. The presence of the quartet in *Prénom: Carmen* and the lack of narrative motivation in its reappearances "enables the film's music to function as a questioning, active participant in the construction of the film's viewing-listening subject" (Davison 91). The movement of music through the liminal narrative space between diegetic and nondiegetic in *Waking Life* has a similar self-conscious purpose to that of the dialogue between Woman in the Bar and Man Writing a Novel who, answering the question of what his novel is about, also describes the film's narrative: "There's no story. It's just… people, gestures, moments. Bits of rapture. Fleeting emotions". However, the way the music in *Waking Life* floats between the diegetic and nondiegetic worlds, which are themselves unstable and elusive, not only draws attention to the cinematic codes of construction and questions the purpose of the diegetic/nondiegetic distinction but, like the film's wavy, quivering shapes and colours and its narrative space which lingers somewhere between dream and reality, conscious and subconscious, it also speaks of the unreliable nature of our perception and of reality as well. Godard's film deliberately spreads the seeds of confusion through nonchronological cutting and uses the film-within-a-film trope as a part of a subplot involving a hoax/cover for a kidnapping, thus multiplying the levels of mediation in order to challenge our perception of what is real in that film. Linklater's dream-within-a-dream narrative, on the other hand, questions the border between dreaming and waking life and asks: is there such thing as reality?

Unsurprisingly*, Waking Life's* widely cast net of metaphors, allusions and stylistic devices that participate in constructing the film's meaning, while simultaneously questioning the reliability of our perception, includes its own references to cinema. In one of the most memorable scenes in the film Main Character finds himself in a cinema watching the screen, which, instead of another movie, shows a conversation between Caveh Zahedi and David Jewell about André Bazin's ontology of film. It is, of course, ironic that Bazin's idea of cinema as a representation of reality is discussed in rotoscoped footage in a film which uses animation to remind the viewer that reality is an untrustworthy concept. At the same time, Zahedi's point

about Bazin's view of reality as an embodiment of the divine resonates with the film's own spiritual discourse. Let us also not forget that Bazin's understanding of reality was in no way simplistic or easily categorised; his tireless support of the aesthetics of the long shot and deep focus was led by the very hope that these devices would "give back to the cinema a sense of the ambiguity of reality" (37). After all, how one understands reality, or any other concept, is dependent on numerous factors, not least one's philosophical and religious beliefs and cultural background.

By putting Main Character in the position of a cinema spectator, this scene also emphasises the circuit that is established between spectator and film in the process of creating meaning (Johnson 57). *Waking Life*'s thematic framework encourages us, however, to consider that the scene is not only concerned with the nature of cinema spectatorship but also with the issue of making meaning in any other context and on a daily basis. The meaning of all aspects of life, the film implies, is experienced and interpreted differently by every individual. The film is projected but we project too (Johnson 57), imposing our own perception on each object, each situation, inferring meaning from the fragments of information that are available to us, depending on interactive experiences as necessary stages in completing the process. As one of the passers-by tells Main Character, "you haven't met yourself yet. But the advantage of meeting others in the meantime is that one of them may present you to yourself." Ultimately, by exposing the existence of the different layers of mediation involved in each experience and the construction of meaning, the Holy Moment scene fulfils the same purpose as the music which fluctuates between the intra-, meta- and extradiegetic realms, whose boundaries are themselves continuously readjusted with each successive false awakening of Main Character.

But what are we to make of the choice of tango in the context of a film that inhabits the realms of ambiguity and uncertainty? How does such an earthly, sensual and sensuous dance fit with *Waking Life*'s lofty themes?



Figure 3: Dancing with life. *Waking Life*. Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment, 2003. Screenshot.

The juxtaposition of the tango's corporeal, erotic nature with the film's elusive narrative space seems to reflect the same idea that is inherent in the dichotomy of the film's form which is at

once live action and animation, specificity and abstraction. The film's dichotomies emphasise the dualistic nature of our experience as it is interpreted through science, philosophy and theology, a coeternal binary opposition between body and mind, physical and metaphysical, yin and yang, consciousness and matter. Our life might be a dream and we might be sleepwalking through our existence, says Linklater's film, but we're nevertheless continuously drawn into the quotidian concerns of our day-to-day lives; we look for love, knowledge, political justice, enjoyment; we become consumed with rage and cause others pain as well. We are also compelled to create and connect, to understand our experiences and share them; we make music and dance along with it, enjoying its sonic vibrations, the movement of our own bodies and the touch of others. In that sense my understanding of the reason for using tango to frame musings about the nature of life in *Waking Life* is very different from Richardson's interpretation offered in his book *An Eye for Music*. While his contextualisation of *Waking Life* in a neo-surrealist framework is in many ways illuminating, it is hard for me to agree with his observations that "tango's abrupt head snaps, staccato footwork and sharp interlocking kicks desubjectify the body in a way that corresponds to Linklater's cool approach to images" or that "the rigid affective qualities of the tango provides a conduit for musical sounds that are never quite as human, expressive or *musical* as mainstream audiences are comfortable hearing" (83), since flexibility is as essential to tango as its distinctive steps and moves. Richardson's attempts to emphasise the concept of "coolness" and detachment so that it complies with his understanding of the neo-surreal are that more surprising considering that a few pages later he acknowledges the "corporeal feel of the music" (84, 85), and the "densely packed erotics of sound, movement and tactility that imparts a heady sense of intensified experience" (87).

Unlike Richardson, I see tango not as an instrument of detachment but, quite the opposite, as the most intense "grounding" force of the film, the embodiment of that aspect of life that makes us aware of our bodily needs and desires, dizzy with enjoyment and consumed with yearning. It is equivalent to the idea suggested by Wim Wenders in *Wings of Desire* (*Der Himmel über Berlin*, 1987) that small earthly pleasures—drinking coffee, taking a pull of a cigarette and rubbing your hands on a cold morning—might even lure an angel to abandon a purely spiritual existence in eternity. The tango in *Waking Life* is a symbol of that same power that keeps us attached to the corporeal reality that we are familiar with while consistently resisting the invitation that—according to the character of Pinball Playing Man played by Linklater himself—God keeps issuing: "do you want to be one with eternity?"

The representation of the actual dance accompanied by music takes place only in the penultimate scene, preceding Main Character's last conversation before he floats skywards. Just before he walks into a bar where the Tosca Tango Orchestra is performing, the stranger he meets on the street tells him that Kierkegaard's last words were "Sweep me up!" This encounter symbolically introduces the moment which emphasises the dualistic nature of human experience, the pleasure of being alive and the implicit proximity of death. The pleasure of being in one's body is here exemplified in a diegetic performance of music accompanying actual couples dancing. At first we only see the lower parts of the dancers' bodies, legs and feet moving in rhythm with the music, responding with elegance and ease to slight accelerations in tempo. On one hand, the animation undermines the corporeal aspect of the movement and what it represents as the scene's background and its different objects swim around the dancers and the instruments

wobble under the musicians' hands. On the other hand, the very presence of music grounds the images with its quality of sensory immediacy, like the recorded conversations and ambient sounds do in the rest of the film.

Dance is often perceived as a way of celebrating and enjoying life but significant aspects of partner dances like tango are also communication, coordination and, essentially, the connection between two human beings. This is an interesting point to note because one of the running themes in *Waking Life* is an awareness of the limits of verbal communication and the need to overcome them. The theme of connection—or the lack of it—is repeatedly explored in chance encounters (Soap Opera Woman; Girl from the Train Station), conversations about the power this connection has over us when it is genuine (Kim Krizan, The Holy Moment scene) and in a broader sense in scenes in which the same actor appears as different characters (Linklater as Man on Back of Boat-Car and Pinball Playing Man; Bill Wise as Boat-Car Guy and Shop Clerk). As Kim Krizan (playing herself) explains: "When we communicate with one another and we feel that we have connected and we think we're understood, I think we have a feeling of almost spiritual communion. And that feeling might be transient but I think that's what we live for."

According to connoisseurs, connection is the very *raison d'être* of tango as well. The dance relies on partners knowing their technique; it is structured and stylised but the fact that the steps can vary widely in timing, speed and character allows dancers to express their individuality and mood from moment to moment. Most of all, though, tango is meant to make partners feel safe and comfortable enough to express their authenticity and vulnerability so that they can experience the connection with each other: "the shared experience of dancing seems to take us as a whole … all of a sudden the movement of one body seamlessly fits with the movement of another, the musical intuitions and emotions of both dancers so attuned that for the duration of at least that one tango we seem to become a single blissful entity" (Pucci).



Figure 4: Tango is about connection and intimacy. *Waking Life*. Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment, 2003. Screenshot.

When Main Character sits down to observe the dancers, the music suddenly shifts into an extended *rubato*, the regular pulse of the previous section giving a way to slow, seductive phrasing embellished with glissandos, and we are shown the dancers' full figures, the details of

intertwined hands and faces close to each other embodying the idea of connection and intimacy. This moment of tenderness is quickly followed by a musical *accelerando* which symbolically pushes Main Character towards the final point of his wanderings, revealing the trajectory of the score on the macro level to be reflective of the protagonist's journey from childhood—or the memory of it—to his final acceptance of death. Tango, thus, also stands as a symbol of the "dance of life" or rather, the way we dance *with* life, bringing to mind the words of the Boat-Car Man from the beginning of the film: "You wanna go with the flow... The idea is to remain in a state of constant departure while always arriving."

Linklater once mentioned that *Waking Life* is a "film that's becoming aware of itself as a film on some level" (Linklater qtd. in Johnson 137), which as well as referring to its self-conscious nature also reflects the fact that every narrative segment, however digressive, ultimately fits within the constellation of the film's themes, and each audiovisual aspect, every stylistic and formal choice, resonates with its main ideas. Like Godard, Linklater uses the medium of film as an instrument of exploration and reflexivity, posing questions about art, society and human nature. Both directors are also interested in the process of constructing meaning, except that Linklater's scope of investigation stretches beyond the nature of the medium to reality itself, his interrogative methods illuminating not only the illusions of mediation but also of existence. At the same time, while *Waking Life* questions the reliability of our perception and the nature of reality, it also suggests, through both its content and audiovisual style, that the experience of connection and spiritual fulfilment is nevertheless part of the world as we know it, thanks to art and human contact.

Notes

[1] The "exquisite corpse"—a method of collectively assembling words and images—was invented by the Surrealists as a game but was later applied in the creation of drawings and collages, and in literature it inspired the cut-up technique famously used by William Burroughs. Although animation often involves a team of artists, they are rarely able to display the type of creativity which is encouraged by the exquisite corpse method. The creative playfulness associated with this method was not allowed in the next project of Linklater, Sobiston and Palletta, *A Scanner Darkly* (2006), which is possibly one of the reasons the local animators hired by Sobiston displayed a less enthusiastic commitment to it and were eventually replaced by a "more Disneyfied production line of experienced artists" (Stone 154).

[2] The distinction between diegetic and nondiegetic music that Claudia Gorbman (*Unheard Melodies*) introduced into film music literature is based on Gérard Genette's system of the nested narrative in which different narrative voices operate at various levels of literary diegesis (extradiegetic, diegetic, metadiegetic). In Gorbman's interpretation, nondiegetic (equivalent to Genette's extradiegetic) music operates at a higher level of narration than diegesis, implying intervention from the narrator. For recent notable contributions that challenge this notion see Kassabian and Winters.

[3] As Robynn Stilwell explains, metadiegetic refers to instances in which music "places us inside a character's head, within that character's subjectivity" (194).

[4] The plot of *Prénom*: *Carmen* involves a plan to kidnap a rich industrialist during a hoax filming organised by Carmen's gang. Only at the very end do we discover that the quartet has been booked to perform for the filming and that the quartet's second violinist, Claire, is the industrialist's daughter.

[5] In his book *The Cinema of Richard Linklater*, Rob Stone points out other instances of homages to Godard, including Richard (Zac Efron) and Gretta (Zoe Kazan) running through the museum in *Me and Orson Welles* (2008), evoking the famous moment from *Bande à part* (1964); or the shots in *Before Sunrise* and *Before Sunset* (2004) of Jesse (Ethan Hawke) and Céline (Julie Delpy) walking and talking like Michel (Jean-Paul Belmondo) and Patricia (Jean Seberg) on the Champs-Élyseés in *À bout de souffle* (1960) (63).

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