

## Skeptical Prologue

Some works of art leave a lasting impression precisely because they don't seem to be in control of their own themes. Questions are raised, ideas are alluded to, that the artist may not know how to develop or bring into focus. But that's OK, because maybe we don't know what to do with them either. Some ideas are just too hard to integrate into the dominant projects of our lives. Some ideas, by their very nature, will always take us by surprise.

Such a work of art—full of surprising, imperfectly integrated allusions—is *Source Code*, a mainstream Hollywood studio production released in 2011. Most critics passed it by with tepid approval, taking it for little more than a well-made thriller with a science fiction premise and a romantic subplot, notable mainly for the fact that its director, Duncan Jones, is the son of David Bowie. A few reviewers, however, caught a deeper resonance in the film—the tell-tale signs of an artist at work—even if they didn't quite know what to make of it.<sup>1</sup> One of the film's champions, Andrew O'Hehir of *Salon*, tried to put his finger on this special quality in his initial review. He was struck by a repeated scene in the film, a wide shot of geese taking off from a waterway. It's an anomalous image in a film that takes place mainly within constrained interior spaces: a commuter train, a suite of government offices, and a rugged one-man capsule like something left over from the Mercury Program. O'Hehir nevertheless connects this scene with the

development of the film's central character, Army pilot Colter Stevens (Jake Gyllenhaal):

Gyllenhall begins the movie playing Stevens as a clean, controlled, masculine Hitchcock-type hero, engaged in an individual struggle against the cruel machineries of God. By the end of *Source Code* he's become a different kind of hero, one who has stepped out of time for a moment and gotten a glimpse behind the curtain of existence, a la, I don't know, Dave Bowman in *2001: A Space Odyssey* or a Zen master or something. He has learned what we all already know but have trouble remembering, that all we ever have is right now: Someone spilling Coke on our shoe, a girl to kiss on a train, the sight and sound of geese taking off from water.<sup>2</sup>

In brief compass, O'Hehir sketches out two types of heroism and links them to two widely different views of how life acquires meaning, implying that it is the unresolved relation between these that gives the film its resonance.

My own way into the film takes a different starting point, but leads to a similar contrast between two distinct approaches to the meaning of life, and thus to a similar interpretive framework. My train of thought begins with a phrase that is repeated five times at crucial moments in the film: "everything's going to be OK."<sup>3</sup> What do we mean—what sort of belief do we entertain—when we invoke that phrase like a magic formula or exchange it as social currency? It's a remarkably common resource and refuge—a blessing that even the most skeptical among us will almost automatically confer on an anxious friend or a sleepless child; a token of support, hope, or denial. Although we have doubts about its literal meaning ("everything"?), we offer it nevertheless as a prophecy meant to be self-fulfilling. But what could it possibly mean? Given its transparent

improbability, where does it get its power to unravel fear and charm away skepticism? By deploying the phrase in a calculated way and in contexts that positively demand critical reflection, *Source Code* becomes an essay on what is at stake when we give or receive this sort of reassurance, and on what lies behind the unlikely notion that the world will prove adequate to our desires.

The problem is stated, so to speak, near the beginning of the film. We first hear the phrase from Christina (Michelle Monaghan), a young woman on a commuter train who tries to calm the agitated man she takes to be her boyfriend by telling him "everything's going to be OK." As soon as the words are out of her mouth, though, a fire-ball rips through the train killing all 800 passengers. It's a powerful scene—a punch in the stomach so ham-fisted in its irony that it's hard to tell whether the gasp it provokes is shock or laughter. It seems like a flat negation of the wish-fulfillment implied in the phrase, a quasi-Freudian critique, perhaps, of the illusions by which we live. In the larger context of the film, however, the effect of the scene is not to settle the issue, but to open a question. Granted: to be incinerated in an explosion is not OK. But surprisingly, this is not the end of the story. Thanks to the film's science fiction apparatus, the characters return and the plot goes on, leaving room for fresh possibilities. Thus, after hammering home what looks like a skeptical conclusion ("tough luck Virginia"), the film invites our wishes back into play. Maybe all we feel is relief that optimism has been vindicated—that we can still hold out for a happy ending. It seems to me, though,

that a more complex question has also been raised: namely, how can "everything's going to be OK" survive its own negation? What, if anything, does the phrase continue to offer after the myth is broken and its literal sense is exploded?

### **The Grammar of Hope**

A close reading of the phrase may help to answer this, or at least to prepare us for a look at the film's larger themes and irresolutions. O'Hehir discerned two modes of meaningfulness folded into the film's approaches to heroism. By unpacking the various aspects of "everything's going to be OK," we will discover a similar dichotomy between an idea of meaning that looks to narrative or future fulfillment, and one that focuses on the meaning that is intrinsic in momentary experience or in life itself.

I have said that "everything's going to be OK" is usually intended as consolation, but the reassurance it gives is a complex thing, wrapped in a grammatical puzzle. On one level, a statement is made about the future, about what *will* be ("is going to be" being a form of the simple future tense). But this is precisely the aspect of the phrase that is so easy to debunk. It doesn't take the explosion of a commuter train to remind us that events do not always live up to our desires. But perhaps the main point of the phrase is not to convey

presumptive information about the future, but to shape the present. Perhaps the phrase is primarily a tool to shake us loose from our preconceptions of what life ought to be like, or to disarm fear and so to offer rest and confidence here and now.

Grammatically, the seeds of this shift are in the fact that "is going" is the present progressive, a form of the present tense especially suited to call attention to the immediate, or to what is the case right now. ("John is reading," as distinct from "John reads.") "Is going to be" is thus a future tense that holds the present in its arms. It points ahead, but in a way that gives us an opening to think that the anticipated state already *is* or is in process. The longed-for consummation may already be present in the devoutness of our wish.

It is the same with the most famous expression of the sentiment that "everything's going to be OK" in English prose: Julian of Norwich's "all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well."<sup>4</sup> The emphasis here is clearly, or first, on what *will* be—the "shall" of the future. Felicity will be found in heaven or at the end of history, in some ultimate happy ending. But the exuberance of the sentiment is so strong that it overflows into the present. "Shall" morphs through repetition—a kind of incantation that sets its multiple meanings loose—into a conviction of what *must* be, what could not help but be, and what must therefore also somehow be available even now. If heaven is the implied

object, then heaven is something we begin to realize in the very expression of the conviction.

"Everything's going to be OK" thus has a double valence, pointing on the one hand "elsewhere," toward a remote possibility, and on the other hand "here," toward an immediate realization of whatever is desired. In this, the phrase reproduces in miniature an ambivalence that runs throughout the world's religions—a tension between two ways of configuring hope. The human spiritual predicament, let's say, begins with a sense of lack—the feeling that we are somehow lost, broken, or estranged. We want to feel whole, in place, OK. But how do we get there from here? The common approach, found in most religions, is to adopt a narrative—a story telling us how to proceed from fall to redemption, from *samsara* to *moksha*, from ignorance to enlightenment. Whatever the particulars, the narrative defines a path through time that begins with the problem and ends with its solution. The thing we long for is remote, but it is ours to attain (or to be granted by grace) if only we keep our eyes fixed on the other shore. Meanwhile, there is hope for the journey in the prospect that things *will* be OK (future tense) once the goal is achieved.

There is a second paradigm, however, a sort of spiritual minority report found in philosophical and folk religion alike, according to which our original restlessness—the sense that our real life is elsewhere—is itself a delusion. God, on this account, is closer to you than your jugular vein; all beings are already

Buddhas; the Tao that could be lost is not the eternal Tao; the seeker will find the treasure buried under his own stove. Wholeness, in other words, or whatever it is we feel we lack, is inherent in our condition. There is nowhere else we need to go; we can never be anywhere other than home. We may *feel* estranged, but this is a measure of our blindness, and the idea that we need to embark on a quest to find what we think is lost only deepens that error. All that is necessary for things to be OK is the full recognition that they already are. Accordingly, instead of attainment, this sort of religion speaks of non-attainment—*mushotoku* in Soto Zen—or as the Buddha is said to have put it in *The Diamond Sutra*: "When I attained Absolute Perfect Enlightenment, I attained absolutely nothing. That is why it is called Absolute Perfect Enlightenment."<sup>5</sup>

Thus there is a dualistic frame for spirituality that foregrounds narrative (the quest, the journey, a process that unfolds in time), and there is an alternative—sometimes called nondualism—that foregrounds a timeless radical immanence.<sup>6</sup> Film scholars sometimes note a similar dichotomy at the heart of their own subject: a tension between film's ability to manifest pure and simple *presence* through its images and the inherent sequentiality of the medium. Film unfolds in linear time; this is a major component of what we call its realism. The kind of truth to life to which many great filmmakers aspire, however, pulls away from time in the direction of timeless moments, or what Paul Schrader famously called "transcendence." (His cases in point in 1972 were Ozu, Bresson, and

Dreyer, a list to which we might now want to add Hirokazu Koreeda or Terrence Malick.) The result is a problem presumably as familiar to filmmakers as it is to religious thinkers: "How do we manifest nowness in the ongoing context of the relative?"<sup>7</sup> There will be more to say about this later.

For present purposes, the final point to make about this distinction is to note its instability. Neither paradigm—neither nowness nor narrative—is really conceivable apart from the other. Thus, for example, the realization of perfect immanence, however much it may seem to negate the importance of time, can only be represented in the context of a narrative. "I didn't get it, and then I did." "I was lost until I realized that I was home all the time." On the other hand, quest narratives are equally dependent on immanence. Narratives typically move toward climactic events—the moment when the truth dawns, salvation is achieved, love blooms, victory is assured, or harmony is restored. We call these "happy endings." But endings do not occur in time, for time itself never stops. A romance, for example, ends with a kiss or a marriage, just as the romance of the Christian Bible ends with the New Jerusalem.<sup>8</sup> The climax is what gives the whole drama its meaning. But the climax, as a moment of fulfillment, complete unto itself, floats free of time, completing the narrative by negating its flow. Any temptation to wonder what comes next—to slip back into the narrative mode—spoils the effect. Thus, to sum up, just as timeless moments are inevitably set in a narrative frame, narrative is incomplete apart from the intrinsic satisfactions that

give it its point. The two do not oppose each other so much as they oscillate, each undoing and enabling the other. Together these two basic directions in religious thought weave the ambiguous relations of present and future, eternity and time, already and not-yet, that have fascinated poets and theologians across the ages and that we glimpsed in seed in the grammatical ambiguity of “everything’s going to be OK.”

### ***Source Code's Ambivalence***

To get back to the film: *Source Code* participates in the oscillating senses of its tag-line in both literary and purely filmic ways. The intellectual drama of the film consists in a tension between two distinct ways of understanding the phrase, one literal and tied to the narrative and one that interrupts or evades the narrative by alluding to intrinsic or timeless sources of value. Things will be OK, that is, either because they will work out according to our wishes, or because they simply *are* OK in some profound sense that we are always just on the brink of realizing. Both and neither turn out to be the case.

The main plot of *Source Code* is fairly easy to summarize. Captain Colter Stevens, an all-but-deceased helicopter pilot from the war in Afghanistan, is being kept alive for experimental purposes as part of a government anti-terrorism program code-named Beleaguered Castle. Specifically, Stevens is being used as a

kind of probe into the past. The program's immediate goal is to discover who planted a bomb that destroyed a commuter train earlier that morning, and by means of that knowledge, to head off an even more disastrous nuclear attack on Chicago. The procedure by which they hope to gain access to the past is called "source code," explained by its inventor, the officious Dr. Rutledge (Jeffrey Wright), as an effect of "quantum mechanics, parabolic calculus...it's very complicated." (In other words, we can just ignore the details.) In any case, what "source code" does is to project Stevens back into the body of a man who died in the bombing, Sean Fentress, at a point eight minutes before the explosion of the train. Stevens is able to operate freely in this eight-minute window, repeat it as often as necessary, and learn from each repetition. (The precedent of *Groundhog Day* is probably what makes these temporal arrangements as easy to grasp as they are.<sup>9</sup>) Gradually, through numerous returns and numerous fiery deaths, Captain Stevens assembles all the relevant facts. Ultimately, he solves the case.

This is what we might call the film's heroic-professional narrative, involving what O'Hehir calls the Hitchcockian or technocratic brand of heroism. Captain Stevens is a consummate professional, disciplined and technically skilled. By means of professionalism he pursues his mission and struggles to keep his own fragiley constructed world together in the face of such bizarre challenges as an environment that disintegrates when he gets confused and the shock of seeing another man's face when he looks in the mirror.<sup>10</sup> In this struggle, he is aided by

Captain Goodwin (Vera Farmiga), his principal handler at Beleaguered Castle, whose own dogged adherence to protocol is at once supportive, limiting, and touching. Goodwin's character is almost completely defined by her commitment to professional duty. Although other dimensions of her personality sometimes flicker through, and although duty leads her into a significant ethical dilemma, in the end she is a woman whose highest praise for Stevens as a fellow soldier is to say no more, but no less, than "thank you for your service."<sup>11</sup>

What gives life meaning under the sign of heroic professionalism, then, is "service:" a courageous determination to get the job done, to achieve the goal implicit in the story you have chosen or have had thrust upon you. If it is true in this connection that "everything's going to be OK," it will be because the story plays out according to plan. Heroic professionalism in *Source Code* is thus associated with narrative as a source of meaning in life. As we have seen, however, *Source Code* has been raising questions about the privilege and plausibility of this mode of meaning ever since that first jarring juxtaposition of "everything's going to be OK" with the explosion of the train. That explosion did not completely discredit the hope for heroic achievement, but as a skeptical wake-up call, it opened the door to the consideration of alternatives.

One such alternative is suggested in the film through a style of human interaction that contrasts sharply with professionalism—call it play. If the hallmark of professionalism is goal orientation, the defining property of play is

that it is an end in itself. Play is intrinsically valuable; its meaning lies not in its end, but in its own performance. (We dance to dance; we play the game for the fun of it.)<sup>12</sup> In any case, play is the dominant note in Stevens' relations with Christina, the woman with whom he found himself on the train when he first came to himself—or not exactly to himself—as Sean Fentress. Fortunately for Stevens, she is a woman who jokes and banters; she takes it for granted that conversation involves role-play and put-ons. Given that Stevens hasn't a clue at first who he is or what he is to her, her playfulness gives him the room he needs to maneuver—to make mistakes and recover from them. Through the trial-and-error that humor allows, he finds his way into a working relationship with her. Moreover, he finds that he enjoys it. Christina's playfulness is not flippant or detached. On the contrary, she impresses Stevens as fully present, attuned to the moment, and fully responsive to the presence of others—a quality he is reaching for when he calls her "real" and "decent." In a word, he is charmed—charmed in the sense of delighted, but also entranced or captivated in a way that puts him at odds with his mission. For much of the film he must pull himself away from her and from the mindset she represents in order to do his work. But the attraction is strong, and in the end he will return. The goalless playfulness she represents seems to have become one of his goals.

But of course, "goalless" is an idealization. Neither Christina nor the concept of play is actually free from the pervasive ambiguity we have been

exploring here. Just as Stevens' goal orientation oscillates with the intrinsic value he finds in play, so play itself has a side that may be competitive, goal-oriented, or tied to a narrative of victory. As often as not, we "play to win," and Christina's playfulness sometimes partakes of that spirit. For instance, when Colter finally shows her some warmth, she crows to herself "*I knew* he was a keeper." Love, it appears, is another one of those areas where goal orientation is hard to disentangle from the timeless quality of its ends.

There is a sequence toward the end of the film when Stevens' heroic quests and his countervailing attraction to Christina both come to a head at once. It is the last time Stevens will be projected back onto the train. He has already solved the mystery, and as far as Rutledge and the project are concerned, his part in the story is over. From Stevens' own point of view, however, that story still falls short of dramatic closure. He now knows everything he needs to do to catch the bad guy, save the people on the train, reconcile with his father, and get the girl—to "save the world," as he jokes with Christina—but he hasn't *done* it yet. A big happy ending still beckons. So Stevens plays every card in his hand to get clearance to go back just one more time, and Goodwin has the grace to let him.

The sequence proceeds like clockwork, with Stevens using all the tricks he has learned through many life-times on the train to achieve his goals in rapid succession: disarm the bomb, catch the terrorist, patch things up with Dad—save the world. It's an absurd tour de force that we swallow gladly, a surfeit of

narrative satisfactions. Once all this hero-business is out of the way, though, Colter settles down. He returns to Christina mellowed, content, able to show her the same sort of charm or real-ness she had previously shown to him. As O'Hehir points out, the change is quite drastic. Stevens' entire meaning-system shifts toward the intrinsic, toward the attitude of "a Zen master or something," or toward what Christina will call making the moments count. Suddenly, he is struck with wonder at "all this life"—at every simple thing he sees around him. He starts to see his fellow passengers as driven and distracted, caught up in irrelevant stories of their own.<sup>13</sup> To charm them out of their tasks and into the moment, he pays a comedian to entertain the whole car, using play to break the bondage of time.

This culminates in the extraordinary scene in which time in the film literally stops—or rather, the action halts and the camera tracks through the frozen scene—at a moment of maximum happy ending potential. Colter and Christina kiss; the train is full of laughter; there is nothing more to want. Their lives, for all we know at that instant, are about to end once again, but the beauty of the moment stands. It transcends time in its own perfect sufficiency. The scene conveys the kind of meaning that pure, rapt moments can have, and exemplifies the power of film to take us up into them. It is also a neat illustration of the paradoxical nature of narrative endings pointed out above. While endings seem to be part of the story that generates them, they actually stand apart from time, evoking a sense of ultimacy or a "once and for all" that time itself cannot sustain.

Duncan Jones has said in an interview that he once thought of ending the film right here, with a pure affirmation of presence.<sup>14</sup> His choice to carry the stories of Colter and Christina an extra step, however, plunges us back into more familiar ambiguities, albeit by way of some highly technical background assumptions. What happens after the frozen scene dissolves is that life goes on, not back at Beleaguered Castle but right there on the train, with Colter and Christina gazing happily into each others' eyes and all the passengers still intact. We have to ask how this is possible given that a) Dr. Rutledge has told us that "source code" is not time travel, meaning that it cannot change the future, and b) the explosion of the train has already happened. The likely solution to this puzzle is one that follows from Rutledge's earlier offhand reference to quantum mechanics as a basis for the "source code" procedure. According to an increasingly mainstream account of quantum phenomena called the "many-worlds interpretation," every time a quantum wavefunction resolves itself into either a wave or a particle, the universe splits into one world in which one of the possibilities happened and another where things went the other way. The number of real branching universes is thus inconceivably vast. Every possible turn of events is real somewhere, and so, by extension, every possible "you" has a universe of its own.<sup>15</sup> What has happened at the end of the film, then, is that by means of "source code," Colter has slipped into a universe that took a different

track—one in which the explosion of the train never occurred, all the passengers are still alive, and he gets to go on living in the body of Sean Fentress. In universe A where the story began, it's all over. Stevens is dead, the train is lost, and Goodwin may be facing court martial. But here in universe B, the outcomes are more positive and life goes on. The point of the scientific rigmarole, then, is to allow further aspects of the narrative to emerge. By continuing Colter's story, Jones both ratifies his happy ending and destabilizes it, inviting us to peek behind the curtain and to imagine what comes next.

At first, it may seem like an unmixed blessing, a vindication of the simpleminded hope that things really *will* be OK. Colter and Christina, at any rate, get a very nice walk in the park together on a "perfect day." The nearly invisible problem with this picture, however, is that Sean Fentress has disappeared from it. For Colter to survive, Sean alone of all the people on the train had to die. It happens so smoothly and seems so right on purely narrative terms that the audience is not likely to find it disturbing. After all, we never get to meet Sean himself, and Christina clearly prefers Colter to the other man she was getting to know. Nevertheless, a little reflection shows how flawed this new situation really is. To put it bluntly, Sean has been "bumped off," erased from his world, and replaced by Colter Stevens in disguise. Quite apart from the ethical questions this raises, enormous practical difficulties lie ahead. Let time continue—let Colter try to take up Sean's life with none of his memories—and things are going to get

weird. (How will he deal with Sean's family, his employer, his friends...the police?) The film thus leaves us with the thought, if not with the immediate feeling, that this happy ending is just as doomed—just as certainly headed for a train-wreck—as previous iterations had been.<sup>16</sup>

### **Fatal Reflections**

There are many things in *Source Code*, then, that pull us in the direction of narrative satisfactions, and many things that raise doubts about their feasibility. We are repeatedly urged to believe that everything's going to be OK in some literal sense, and repeatedly reminded why this is so unlikely. Meanwhile, alternative sources of meaning in life are suggested: in the image of geese over water, in a young man's rapture, in a young woman's playfulness, and in a moment of frozen time. These have a weight and a charm that feels lasting. Nevertheless, the film relentlessly pursues happy endings. Ideals of immediacy and narrative meaning oscillate. What are we to make of the contrast?

The film's climactic meditation on this problem—grand but inconclusive—takes shape around a piece of sculpture, Chicago's *Cloud Gate*, a large ellipsoid abstract in Millennium Park with a perfectly reflective surface, locally nicknamed "The Bean." Christina wants to show it to Colter on their post-worldshifting walk in the park. Taken purely as an image, the sculpture is

ambiguous. In his commentary track for the DVD release of the film, Jones says he was drawn to the sculpture because of its distorting effects. In this connection, the sculpture illustrates the uncertainties of any subject's view of the world and the way uncertainty, in turn, provokes reflection—a theme that points us back to Stevens' various struggles to stabilize his world and identity. (Jones, after all, was once a PhD candidate in philosophy at Vanderbilt. Epistemology often seems to be as much on his mind as camera angles.) As a thing of beauty, though, the sculpture is as likely to provoke dumb wonder as skeptical doubt. Its effect is dazzling, for interesting reasons. It is a mirror that draws the surrounding world into itself. Thus it functions as a kind of postmodern *axis mundi*, a center made up of reflections. By concentrating the city into this center, it stands apart from ordinary space in the way that some intense moments seem to stand apart from time. It transcends its place—it warps us out of our ordinary coordinate system—but only by being so fully *of* its place, and only to remind us where we really are. In any case, whether the sculpture is taken to represent the central problem of modern epistemology or a kind of ecstatic response to that problem, its main significance in the film is the effect it has on Stevens. This requires closer examination.

Stevens' first words upon seeing the sculpture and taking in what he sees are "do you believe in fate?" The word "fate" has not occurred in the movie before, but as soon as it is spoken it assembles much of the action around itself.

There's the way each cycle of time that Colter has passed through moves (almost) inexorably through fixed markers ("soda can...coffee spill") toward disaster.

There's the image of the train itself, rumbling toward a fixed destination on steel rails—a classic trope for a deterministic view of life. There's the way the movie we're watching is also like a train in motion, a fixed sequence of events moving toward a predetermined end. But more to the point, there's the fact that Colter has seen this sculpture before. It was one of the images that flashed through his mind repeatedly in the *bardo* state he passed through at the end of each cycle, on his way back from Sean Fentress' body to what was left of his own. Seeing the sculpture in the park may make him think "fate," then, because it involves an unaccountable connection. Like an experience of *déjà vu*, Colter's encounter links past and present, as though a kind of foreshadowing were actually at work in the world, or as though it were "meant to happen."

Of course there are many ways to account for Colter's experiences here. His handlers might have told him early on that his mission was in Chicago, calling the trade-mark image of the sculpture subliminally to mind. In any case, a theory of fate in which things are literally meant to happen is not required to explain the connections. Nor is it required to account for Colter's use of the word. Like "everything's going to be OK," "fate" is a concept that can survive the explosion of its most literal or literal-minded interpretations. For example, if we understand fate as naturalistic determinism, then a world of fate is one of

unbroken cause and effect in which every moment is "meant to be" simply in the sense that it is the outcome of everything else that has ever happened. The whole is implicated in every moment, just as space is drawn together in the reflective surfaces of the sculpture. In this sense, to feel "fated" is to feel suspended in a cosmic web of interrelations. It is to feel profoundly in place, as Colter apparently comes to feel while gazing at the sculpture and contemplating the events that brought him there. To some persons in some moods, such a web of fate may feel like a prison; to others, it may feel like an ecstatic dance whose meaning is intrinsic, shimmering with the mystery of life itself. Colter's wonder at the end of the film partakes of this latter mood.

The story of Colter and Christina reaches its end, then, as they stand in front of the sculpture looking at a reflection of the Chicago skyline—an image that recalls the God's-eye tracking shots of the city that opened the film and that recur throughout it. "All this life"—this oddly static image of titanic human achievement—is now concentrated right here, and Colter's response is to the point: "This feels like exactly where we're supposed to be." "Fate," as noted above, can include the sense of being in place, of being fully part of a world that admits no alternatives (although there may be alternative worlds). Maybe some controlling power is doing the "supposing," or maybe not—the film does not require a choice. In any case, a world is assembled around us here and now, as

dense and dazzling as Indra's Net, and given a properly receptive mood, this may be enough.

The sequence that follows the scene of Colter and Christina at the sculpture is simply a coda that helps to explain how they got there. We are back at Beleaguered Castle, but still in universe B—the world in which the train never exploded. Colter has sent a text-message to Goodwin (or to Goodwin B) from the train, informing her of the unsuspected power of "source code" to open doors into alternate universes. He also has a message for the version of himself that still exists in the lab: namely, that "everything's going to be OK." The phrase sounds just as promising and just as opaque as ever.

### **Inclusive Conclusion**

What *Source Code* has to offer, then, is a story teeming with narrative satisfactions that also raises questions about the ultimacy or adequacy of narrative meaning. The most memorable aspects of the movie are the anomalous ones—the moments that stand apart from its heroic-professional plot and put the conventions of that genre in perspective, just as the shot of geese over water provides a kind of natural commentary on the dramas about to unfold on the train. The ultimate relation between such moments and the stories we tell about our lives is not something that this film can untangle. I think it is fair to say, though, that by

considering the various meanings of the phrase "everything's going to be OK," *Source Code* hits on a perfect way to stay true to the mystery. The phrase tells us that what we want is at once remote and immediately available. Its literal promise may be an illusion, but it has an honest heart. And that is the mystery—that somehow, in and through our often disappointing involvement in the dramas of desire, we get hints of an immediacy that generally eludes us. *Source Code*, along with the most self-reflexive strands in film and religion, is a custodian of such hints and glimmers, and its bewilderment in the face of them makes it an artful window on the bewilderment we live.

---

<sup>1</sup> The most searching responses were from Andrew O'Hehir, "Pick of the Week," *Salon*, 31 March 2011, accessed 20 June 2012, [http://www.salon.com/topic/source\\_code/](http://www.salon.com/topic/source_code/); Mike LaSalle, "A Thriller - and Poetry," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 1 April 2011, accessed 20 June 2012, <http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2011/04/01/MVC31ILS29.DTL>; and Walter Chaw, "Source Code (2011) + Certified Copy (2010)," *Film Freak Central*, 1 April 2011, accessed 20 June 2012, <http://www.filmfreakcentral.net/ffc/2012/05/source-code-certified-copy.html#more>, which finds significant comparisons between this film and contemporaneous work by Abbas Kiarostami

<sup>2</sup> O'Hehir.

<sup>3</sup> "Everything's going to be OK" does not appear at all in the original screenplay by Ben Ripley, if the undated manuscript posted on the internet is to be trusted. See <http://www.joblo.com/scripts/sourcecode.pdf>. The themes built around the repeated use of this line must therefore have been worked out in the shooting process. In the film as released, the phrase occurs first, spoken by Christina, at about 6:40 into the film, just before the first explosion of the train as described below in my text. At the second occurrence (39:45) it is spoken twice, once by Colter and once by Christina, under the same circumstances as the first. The third occurrence (1:02:10) is spoken by Colter after he and Christina have been shot and lie dying in a parking lot. (By this time, Colter realizes that "this isn't the end.") Fourth (1:23:00), the phrase is spoken by Colter when he realizes that the train is saved and time is going to continue. This time, it is "everyone's going to be OK," with special reference to his fellow passengers. Finally, at

---

1:26:40, it is the film's final line, a message from Colter to himself back at the Beleaguered Castle facilities. I suppose one could insist that "everyone's going to be OK" is a different line, but I would argue that it carries the same freight. In any case, given that one of the mentions of the phrase is double, I will stick with five for the total.

<sup>4</sup> Julian of Norwich, *A Book of Showings to the anchoress Julian of Norwich*, ed. Edmund Colledge and James Walsh (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1978), 405. (The line quoted in the text has been modernized from the original).

<sup>5</sup> *The Diamond Sutra*, trans. A. F. Price, quoted in Stephen Mitchell, ed., *The Enlightened Mind* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1991), 35.

<sup>6</sup> Although it appears throughout world religion and folklore, the most developed treatments of nondualism are found in Advaita Vedanta, Madhyamaka Buddhism, and philosophical Taoism. The best general discussion is still David Loy, *Nonduality: A Study in Comparative Philosophy* (Amherst, New York: Humanity Books, 1998).

<sup>7</sup> The quote is from Nathaniel Dorsky, "Devotional Cinema," in *The Hidden God: Film and Faith*, ed. Mary Lea Bandy and Antonio Mondas. (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2003), 270. The classic discussion of this general problematic in film is Paul Schrader, *Transcendental Style in Film: Ozu, Bresson, Dreyer* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972).

<sup>8</sup> The classic analysis of the Christian Bible as a single story arc is Northrop Frye, *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1982).

<sup>9</sup> Nearly every review of *Source Code* makes this connection with *Groundhog Day*, and it really is quite close. In both films, the main character is caught in a loop of time, has the freedom to vary events in each cycle, and is the only person involved in the loop who retains memories from one cycle to the next. The climax of both films is the breaking of the loop once the protagonist learns what he needs to know, and in both there is a woman to be won. Two striking differences between them are that in *Groundhog Day* there is no indication that anyone is in control of the process, and in *Groundhog Day* the happy ending is far less ambiguous.

<sup>10</sup> The way in which Colter becomes aware that he appears as another person to others is taken directly from the television series *Quantum Leap*. In this show, scientific principles that are every bit as obscure as those invoked in *Source Code* allowed the hero, Sam Beckett, to be projected across time into other people's bodies. The audience in both cases sees the protagonist's subjective image, as Beckett or Stevens. The way they look to others in the worlds they inhabit only becomes apparent to them, and to us, when they see themselves in a mirror. *Source Code* acknowledges this debt by using the voice of *Quantum Leap*'s star, Scott Bakula, as the voice of Colter's father.

<sup>11</sup> Goodwin's ethical dilemma arises over different conceptions of duty when a command from her superior, Dr. Rutledge, comes into conflict with her promise to Stevens as a fellow soldier.

---

<sup>12</sup> Two influential analyses of the concept of play along these lines are Bernard Suits, *The Grasshopper: Games, Life and Utopia* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1978) and James P. Carse, *Finite and Infinite Games: A Vision of Life as Play and Possibility*. (New York: Ballantine Books, 1986).

<sup>13</sup> Colter's comment to one fellow passenger about his absorption in daily business gets the sarcastic reply, "Thank you for that moment of Zen, but nobody was talking to you." The identification of timeless modes of meaning with Eastern religions, questionable as it may be, is clearly still a cultural commonplace.

<sup>14</sup> Gary Wolcott, "Unique Ending of *Source Code* — A Discussion," *Atomictown*, 1 April 2011, accessed 20 June 2012, <http://www.tri-cityherald.com/2011/04/01/1431520/unique-ending-of-source-code-a.html>

<sup>15</sup> A version of this idea of alternate selves in alternate universes is raised earlier in the film in more human terms in a conversation between Stevens and Goodwin: "do you think there's an alternate version of you, a Goodwin who made different choices?" Goodwin recognizes that this question is prompted by Stevens' own recent attempts to change the future by altering the past, and responds with the orthodox interpretation of the "source code" procedure, according to which changes achieved within the procedure leave no real traces. This turns out to be true as far as it goes (i.e. with respect to any given universe), but it is an incomplete picture of the possibilities "source code" can open.

<sup>16</sup> The strange implications of the ending received frequent comment from reviewers and fans. Manohla Dargis, "Don't Know Who You Are, but Don't Know Who I Am," *The New York Times*, 1 April 2011, accessed 20 June 2012, <http://movies.nytimes.com/2011/04/01/movies/jake-gyllenhaal-in-source-code-review.html>; and Keith Phipps, "Source Code," *A.V. Club*, 31 March 2011, accessed 20 June 2012, <http://www.avclub.com/articles/source-code.53950/> both see the ending as a flaw in the film. Walter Chaw on *Film Freak Central* sees its "messiness" as a strength—something that "opens up what initially seems a hermetically-sealed conceit into something of real depth and fascination." General fan discussion of the film's ending and its ethical implications was widespread on the internet.

### References

Bandy, Mary Lea, and Antonio Mondas eds. *The Hidden God: Film and Faith*. New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2003.

Carse, James P. *Finite and Infinite Games: A Vision of Life as Play and Possibility*. New York: Ballantine Books, 1986.

Chaw, Walter. "Source Code (2011) + Certified Copy (2010)." *Film Freak Central*, 1 April 2011. Accessed 20 June 2012. <http://www.filmfreakcentral.net/ffc/2012/05/source-code-certified-copy.html#more>

---

Dargis, Manohla. "Don't Know Who You Are, but Don't Know Who I Am." *The New York Times*, 1 April 2011. Accessed 20 June 2012. <http://movies.nytimes.com/2011/04/01/movies/jake-gyllenhaal-in-source-code-review.html>

Frye, Northrop. *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1982.

Julian of Norwich. *A Book of Showings to the anchoress Julian of Norwich*, ed. Edmund Colledge and James Walsh. Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1978.

LaSalle, Mike. "A Thriller - and Poetry." *San Francisco Chronicle*, 1 April 2011. Accessed 20 June 2012. <http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2011/04/01/MVC31ILS29.DTL>

Loy, David. *Nonduality: A Study in Comparative Philosophy*. Amherst, New York: Humanity Books, 1998.

Mitchell, Stephen ed. *The Enlightened Mind*. New York: HarperPerennial, 1991.

O'Hehir, Andrew. "Pick of the Week." *Salon*, 31 March 2011. Accessed 20 June 2012. [http://www.salon.com/topic/source\\_code/](http://www.salon.com/topic/source_code/)

Phipps, Keith. "Source Code." *A.V. Club*, 31 March 2011. Accessed 20 June 2012. <http://www.avclub.com/articles/source-code,53950/>

Ripley, Ben. *Source Code*. Accessed 20 June 2012. <http://www.joblo.com/scripts/sourcecode.pdf>

Schrader, Paul. *Transcendental Style in Film: Ozu, Bresson, Dreyer*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972.

Suits, Bernard. *The Grasshopper: Games, Life and Utopia*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1978.

Wolcott, Gary. "Unique Ending of *Source Code* — A Discussion." *Atomictown*, 1 April 2011. Accessed 20 June 2012. <http://www.tri-cityherald.com/2011/04/01/1431520/unique-ending-of-source-code-a.html>