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Cloud Atlas

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Abstract

This is a film review of *Cloud Atlas* (2012) directed by Tom Tykwer, Andy Wachowski, and Lana Wachowski.

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The ambitious and epic *Cloud Atlas* is written for screen by Lana and Andy Wachowski (*The Matrix Trilogy*, *V for Vendetta*), along with Tom Tykwer (*Run Lola Run*). It is based on the complex and popular book by David Mitchell which follows six interconnected plots, followed across several centuries. To emphasize the connections between the six timelines, the same actors and actresses appear in each, often with racial or even gender transformations accomplished with makeup. Moreover, the character interactions in each timeline are hardly linear or predictable. Since the tagline in one of the film's trailers is 'Everything is connected,' many have speculated that some notion of karma is required to provide coherence to the plots and character transformations, and that may well be true. A recurring tattoo on some of the characters would further suggest a notion of rebirth is at work.

On the simplest level of analysis, the six interlaced plots are each interesting in their own right as exultant celebrations of art, liberty, and love. In plot one, a slave-trade lawyer (Jim Sturgess) faints in the extreme southern heat and is poisoned thereafter by his doctor (Tom Hanks), who desires the key to a money-chest which hangs around the lawyer's neck. While returning home from a business deal, the lawyer harbors a stowaway slave (Keith David) and writes letters to his family. It is the slave who discovers the doctor's poisonings, and who saves the lawyer's life, causing him to abandon and resist the institution of slavery altogether. In plot two, a homosexual musician (Ben Whishaw) discovers the lawyer's love letters in the library of his rich patron, and he also writes intimate letters to his lover (James D'Arcy) about the creative struggles of composing the beautiful *Cloud Atlas Sextet*. Left in poverty and humiliation after assaulting his rich patron, he commits noble suicide, apparently confident of his contribution to humanity *and* of a new beginning. In plot three, the now aged lover (D'Arcy) informs a journalist (Halle Berry) of a pending nuclear reactor breach that will benefit the fossil fuel

industry, and he is murdered by a corporate hit-man. The letters from his youthful lover (Whishaw) pass to the journalist (Berry) who reads them and goes in search of the rare *Sextet*. Upon hearing it, she believes, to her amazement that she has heard the composition before. In the comedic plot four, the journalist's life story is given to a corrupt but harmless publisher (Jim Broadbent) who is institutionalized by his brother for outstanding family debts. After escapades leading to escape, the publisher settles with an old love, and writes his screenplay about finding freedom from institutionalization. In futuristic plot five, it is the publisher's biographic film that is illegally watched by the human clone, Sonmi 451 (Doona Bae) and a rebellious friend, who are forced to work at a fast-food diner. Inspired by the contraband film, she is encouraged to rebel from institutionalized slavery herself, and does so after being sexually harassed by a customer. She eventually becomes the icon of a rebellious pro-clone political faction, which is violently put down, but she records her messages about the value of love and freedom for posterity. When facing death, Sonmi 451 confidently declares, "I believe death is only a door. One closes, another opens." Finally, in dystopic plot six, the recordings and teachings of Sonmi 451 are seen as divine oracles to a post-apocalyptic tribe battling xenophobia, religious fanaticism, and extinction.

While the humanist messages associated with each plot are compelling enough, the deeper and really irresistible level of analysis pertains to the film's themes of interconnection and entanglement. However, even after several viewings, I was not always able to see clear links between the characters from one timeline to the next, which I suspect put many audiences off the film. Intimate characters in one timeline may only have a loose association in another, and a minor character early on can become a major character in a future plot. Because of the

complexity and obscurity of the associations between characters in each time, viewers who might have been expecting some transparent metaphysical message were surely frustrated.

To this I offer a speculation, perhaps fanciful, that what is needed is not a simple theory of karma, but also a multiverse theory, akin to *The Matrix*. In the Wachowskis' signature trilogy, Neo is told by the Architect that the Matrix has been rebooted a total of 6 times, which is suspiciously similar to the number of plots in *Cloud Atlas*. Patterns recur in each version of the Matrix, but slight novelties arise, as well. (For example, in Neo's sixth visit to the Architect, he chooses to save his girlfriend Trinity, rather than Zion.) In a multiverse theory, especially a cyclical multiverse wherein one universe follows upon another, one might expect the 'karmic' entanglements to be sometimes less direct or obvious due to the novelties that emerge as each universe unfolds.

I think my speculation finds especial support in the fifth *Cloud Atlas* plot, set in the year 2144. In this story, when Sonmi 451 escapes from the diner, she is tracked and hunted by the law. Some of the machine engines in the vehicles she used for her escape look suspiciously like the engines of machines from the Matrix films. Furthermore, Sonmi 451 discovers in her freedom that decommissioned clones are harvested for 'protein' for the privileged, which may anticipate the idea from *The Matrix* that humans are mere batteries for the machines that eventually take over. Finally, actor Hugo Weaving, who plays Agent Smith and Bane (i.e. the principle foils of Neo in *The Matrix*) plays nothing but villainous or evil characters in *Cloud Atlas*. In fact, in the sixth and most futuristic *Cloud Atlas* plot, he is positively satanic. He seems to be some kind of archetype for evil in every plot in both films.

I could be wrong, of course. But I found the invitation to speculate about the nature of the metaphysical connections suggested by *Cloud Atlas* to be irresistible and provocative. This

is not to say that the film is not flawed. It is long, complex, at times uneven, and I especially found the makeup transformations sometimes artificial. (The music score is extraordinary!) Despite all that and a disappointing box office, I yet found myself reveling in a celebration of art, liberty, and love, and sincerely wondering if there might be a pattern in the motions of the clouds, after all.