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Cloud Atlas

Abstract

This is a film review of *Cloud Atlas* (2012) which aims to address what constitutes the reasons for the success of this film and the humanistic theme in which they are rooted, despite the seemingly Buddhist philosophy such as reincarnation this film embodies.

Keywords

Dependent Arising, Reincarnation, Humanism

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Admittedly improvable in many ways, *Cloud Atlas* seems to me a successful adaption of the original novel written by English novelist David Mitchell. This review wishes to discuss what constitutes the reasons for this success, and will argue that these reasons are rooted in a seemingly-Buddhist humanistic schema.

Cloud Atlas tells the story of a soul that travels across six different eras with entirely different social and cultural contexts. To begin with, the focus on a comet-shaped birthmark of six main characters vividly illustrates the idea of reincarnation as suggested by Mitchell in the book, but is more significantly empowered by cinematic language. The recurrence of the birthmark throughout *Cloud Atlas* helps to demonstrate the rebirth of a soul in different characters.

In Buddhism, the idea of reincarnation arises from the concept of “dependent arising” (pratītyasamutpāda), which addresses the inter-relatedness of all things in the universe. According to this concept, things do not exist alone, autonomous or isolated, but instead through a web of interconnectedness.¹ In addition to rebirth, dependent arising also forms the foundation for the idea of karma, which appears to be another key element of this film. It is directly conveyed by a revelation of several protagonists throughout the film, “our lives are not our own. We are bound to others, past and present, and by each crime and every kindness, we birth our future.” In the opening sequence of the film, we see the six main protagonists’ birthmarks, in the shape of a comet, which then extend and together form a web of connections across the universe.

Furthermore, the comet shape seems to indicate something “scientific” yet mysterious, such as destiny or “love.” As one character (the niece of physician Rufus

Sixsmith played by James D'arcy) in the film remarks towards the ending, "My uncle was a scientist but he believed that love was real; a kind of natural phenomenon, he believed that love could outlive death."

This leads us to what I consider to be the second component of success in *Cloud Atlas*, the romanticized relationship among its characters. "Love" encapsulates the theme which I find largely humanistic and makes the philosophical ideas in the book more approachable for the audience. In the original book, David Mitchell focuses on developing storyline, structure and characters' inner dialogues, and "love" does not appear as a strong clue. For example, when asked whether she loved Hae-Joo Chang (the 'pure-blood' commander Chang, played by Jim Sturgess in the film), Sonmi-451 (a genetically engineered fabricant servant, played by Doona Bae) replied "that is for future historians to decide."² However, in the film, we hear a moving statement of love in a scene just before Sonmi's execution:

Archivist: Would you say that you loved him?

[Sonmi smiles]

Sonmi-451: Yes, I do.

Archivist: Do you mean you are still in love with him?

Sonmi-451: I mean, that I will always be.

We then see Sonmi back in the Satellite Communication Centre broadcasting her message, watching as the Enforcers attack the station with Chang and the rest of Union (a counter-corporate group hoping to overthrow the current regime and restore respect for human and fabricant rights) fighting them. However saddening it seems, this

relationship is given a redeemable ending in the film. While the book ends with the philosophical reflections of another protagonist, Adam, the film sees Adam - also played by Jim Sturgess as the reincarnation of Chang - reunited with his wife Tilda (Doona Bae, the reincarnated Sonmi), and together they begin a new life with a statement that is transformed from his monologue in the book,

Haskell Moore (Adam's Father-in-law): There is a natural order to this world, and those who try to upend it do not fare well. [...] no matter what you do it will never amount to anything more than a single drop in a limitless ocean.

Adam Ewing: What is an ocean but a multitude of drops?

The tragedy of Sonmi and Chang is eventually redeemed in the happy ending of Adam and Tilda. Similarly, the film ends with Zachry (a post-apocalyptic human, played by Tom Hanks) telling stories to his grandchildren on a new planet while looking at earth, his former homeland, and he then kisses his partner Meronym (played by Halle Berry) lovingly. As the relationship between Sonmi and Chang is rekindled via their reincarnated selves, Zachry and Meronym are also able to enjoy what they failed to have in their previous lives (Isaac, who is reincarnated as Zachry, was killed in a plane crash in his previous life).

However, although the major elements at play appear to be Buddhist, in particular the idea of reincarnation and karma, it seems to me what underlies it all is humanism. First of all, in Buddhism the notion of "dependent arising" is paired with another key concept of "emptiness." According to the principle of "dependent arising", things arise dependent on causes and conditions, and so "identity" is to exist in relation to other things. Therefore one's own self-identity is then merely a mirror of how one is perceived by others. Since there are no independent autonomous entities, all things are

empty of being independent autonomous entities, of having some intrinsic nature that comes from their own side without depending on external causes and conditions or on a subjective factor of those who observe them.³ That is the concept of emptiness. Therefore Buddhism praises the idea of no-self (anattā), a realisation of dependent arising and emptiness, through which one can gain true freedom. However in *Cloud Atlas* it is for the self-autonomy, rights, and self-recognition of each individual - the self-freed slave, the purebloods and fabricants who form the Union, the talented composer (Robert Frobisher) who aspires to be famous and asks for equality from his mentor, a fabricant who wants to gain identity and human knowledge - that centuries of struggles and search gain their significance.

In addition to the pursuit for self-identity, *Cloud Atlas* also celebrates democracy, a modern humanistic notion. Sonmi-451 composes a Bill of Rights which declares her understanding of equality, after realising the system of society based on slavery and exploitation of fabricants must be destroyed and restructured. As expressed in a conversation between Sonmi and Chang:

Sonmi-451: That ship... that ship must be destroyed.

Hae-Joo Chang: Yes.

Sonmi-451: The systems that built them must be turned down.

Hae-Joo Chang: Yes.

Sonmi-451: No matter if we're born in a tank or a womb, we are all Pureblood.

Hae-Joo Chang: Yes.

Sonmi-451: We must all fight and, if necessary, die to teach people the truth.

The sense of self-identity that Sonmi realizes includes her social identity, which is signified in her awakened concern for social order, and the devotion to question and rebuild that order.

Furthermore, *Cloud Atlas* also seems to embody modern humanism through its qualities of humanity rather than a transcendent entity. This becomes most implicit when one protagonist from the post-apocalyptic era comments that there is no god: what the villagers have been worshipping is only a human who lived a long time ago (Sonmi-451). It is also evident through Adam's question, that "if God created the world, how do we know what things we can change and what things must remain sacred and unviable?" This portrays a democratic and ethical life stance, which affirms a secular humanistic belief that human beings have the right and responsibility to give meaning and shape to their own lives.⁴ In contrast, the Christian view as articulated by the theologian Karl Barth affirms that the human being itself, the concrete, real human being, exists insofar as the living God is for him and with him.⁵

Last but not least, each story in *Cloud Atlas* happens in a different place across the globe, including the South Pacific Ocean, Cambridge, San Francisco, London, neo Seoul, and Scotland. And almost each story involves ethnicities of different sorts. A soul reborn through these ethnically varied characters living in different parts of the world in different eras, seems to suggest a universal humanity. This view owes its roots to a particular ideology from modern humanism, which constructs a universal, unencumbered "self," a belief in the power of unique autonomous individuals.⁶ It is a view which accepts the human being as an embodied, emotional, interactive self,

striving for meaning in wider historically specific social worlds and an even wider universe.⁷ The belief in a universal humanity restores hope and liberates us from uncertainties and tragedies as a species as a whole, as Isaac remarks before his life is ended in a plane crash:

Belief, like fear or love, is a force to be understood as we understand the theory of relativity, and principles of uncertainty. [...] These forces that often remake time and space, they can shape and alter who we imagine ourselves to be, begin long before we are born, and continue after we perish. Our lives and our choices, like quantum trajectories, are understood moment to moment, as each point of intersection, each encounter, suggests a new potential direction.

As this article has tried to argue, it is the belief in modern human values – self-identity, social justice, democracy and global ethics, that points to a new direction for a collective humanity in the film version of *Cloud Atlas*. More so than the book, the film has used these humanistic ideas as the basis of its vision, and so its use of Buddhist concepts can only be understood in this context.

¹ Elizabeth Napper, *Dependent Arising and Emptiness: A Tibetan Buddhist Interpretation of Madhyamika Philosophy* (Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 1989).

² David Mitchell, *Cloud Atlas* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 2004), 365.

³ Napper, *Dependent Arising and Emptiness*.

⁴ See Richard Norman, *On Humanism* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

⁵ Barth, *Humanismus, Theologische Studien*, 28 (Zollikon-Zurich: Evangelischer Verlag, 1950), 8.

⁶ Ken Plummer, *Documents of Life 2: An Invitation to a Critical Humanism* (2nd edition; London: Sage, 2001), 258.

⁷ *Ibid*, 255.

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