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Eternal Now: Recent Time Loop Movies and the Sanctity of the Moment

Abstract

I will examine three time-loop films—*Source Code* (2011), *About Time* (2013), and *Before I Fall* (2017)—to suggest that while they all look to this world as the place where meaning can be found, they do not entirely reject transcendence. The hero of *Source Code* actually transcends the cycle only when he accepts to exist in it fully, suggesting a view like Buddhism that one only finds transcendence when one stops looking for it. In *About Time* the hero learns that he must accept certain things that he cannot change, and that his ability to relive the past without changing anything is actually the key to happiness and meaning. In *Before I Fall*, the heroine returns her to the day before her death repeatedly to work out her own salvation through redemptive action. In different ways, each film suggests how meaning can be found through an awareness of the eternal now.

Keywords

Groundhog Day, Time-loop, Time travel, Eternity, Paul Tillich, Source Code, About Time, Before I Fall, Redemption

Author Notes

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Because of their distinctive form and plot devices, time-loop films are able to reflect in particularly trenchant ways on questions related to meaning and purpose in life. In this paper, I will offer a few observations on the ways some recent time-loop films have demonstrated how characters come to appreciate life's significance through reliving it, and how this also offers the viewers the opportunity to realize moments of eternity or transcendence in their own lives or experiences.

For purposes of giving a provisional definition, I would define a time-loop film as one in which a character or characters repeat a portion of time in a loop from which they may seek escape, but that this loop also offers opportunities for self-discovery of meaning or redemption through the indefinite number of repeats. These characters may be trying to change certain events, but while they have some ability to do so they may not be able to change the key thing they want to change or escape from the loop—until, perhaps, the final repeat.

Time travel films in general often feature going back in time to try to influence the course of history, changing something in hopes of correcting an error and setting things on a better path. The latter has a long pedigree in written science fiction and in films: notable examples include the *Terminator* films, in which characters with competing agendas (good or evil) are continually correcting the timeline, basically around the issue of whether humanity will survive or the machines will succeed in exterminating them. Within time travel films and narratives, also, there are at least two types: one which assumes the past cannot be changed and so the time traveler can only introduce a change that has already happened, and one in which events can be changed to introduce a new timeline. The first *Terminator* film was an example of the first type, as had not Kyle Reese come back to save Sarah Conner and her as yet unconceived child-savior of humanity

he would not have been there to impregnate her with the promised savior and so John Conner would not have existed to send Kyle back in time to impregnate his mother with him. The subsequent Terminator films, however, move into the second subcategory in which the timeline can be changed. Other examples of the first type of time travel, in which the journey back cannot change the past but only fulfill it, include Chris Marker's classic short film *La Jetée* (1962) which was also the basis for Terry Gilliam's feature film *Twelve Monkeys* (1995) which shares the same fatalistic view. Think of Greek tragedy: when the oracle tells Oedipus's parents that their son will kill his father and marry his mother, they abandon their infant child, which of course sets in motion the exact series of events which lead to those things happening. Trying to escape the prophecy just ends up fulfilling it, so the fated events cannot be changed.

Time loop films as a subgenre of time travel share the same tension around whether the past can be changed. In *Edge of Tomorrow* (2014), Cage (Tom Cruise) is stuck in a loop in which he continually dies battling aliens but begins to figure out how to use what he learns each time to change history and so destroy them once and for all. He is aided by Rita (Emily Blunt) who conveniently has also been in a time loop before but no longer has the ability to go back; each time he repeats, he needs to convince her he is looping so that she will help him with his plan. It's a lot like playing a computer game repeatedly until you win. But frequently, time loop films do not present such a neat possibility for escape. *Groundhog Day* (1993), the mother ship of all time loop films, presents Phil Connors as the weatherman who cannot leave Punxutawney on Groundhog Day but instead keeps reliving it there. He has no idea why this has happened to him and no purpose other than trying to escape, and/or to make the best of his situation. Like a Hindu or Buddhist in rebirth, he has to learn to give up his selfish desires which only cause him pain and suffering through becoming a genuinely compassionate person. He uses his knowledge of the town from

previous repeats to save and improve the lives of all the residents. He escapes from the loop and so can have an actual growing relationship with people (notably Rita, his coworker) only through getting to the point of embracing the loop and its possibilities rather than despising it. This could be seen as very Buddhist, in that one only reaches Nirvana when one stops caring about reaching it. Is Samsara perhaps then the same as Nirvana, as it is where Nirvana is attained, and no further goal exists? Some Mahayana Buddhists would say so, and maybe Phil agrees as he tells Rita at the end (on Feb. 3) that they should stay in the town and live there. Salvation is attained where one is and not somewhere else: one only needs to see the world in such a way that it becomes the theater for salvation.

In a paper that he gave at the International Religion and Film conference in Istanbul three years ago, Greg Watkins argues that many popular culture movies with “time-loop” plots have secularized religious themes through their exclusion of transcendence from the narrative, replacing it with a “meditation on the nature of time itself as a kind of hermeneutical key to human purposes and meaning.”¹ Because meaning is not injected into time from a transcendent realm, ordinary empirical time itself becomes the place where meaning is found, rather than in some other-worldly reality, and he references the philosophy of Nietzsche in this regard. Watkins cites Eliade’s insights about the secularization of the religious imagination which has repackaged aspects of the mythological view, not dispensing with them but so transforming them that the transcendent aspect is sublated into worldly experience. But there is no reason to suppose that the secularization of religious ideas—by which I mean their incorporation into cultural products that are not seen as ostensibly “religious,” merely because they are not named as such—would necessarily involve an evisceration of the transcendent. As for time loop movies in particular, I like their sometime

message that it is this life in which we must find meaning, not in an escape from it, and it is precisely in how we approach and live life that we find the transcendent.

One only has to go so far as Paul Tillich's classic sermon, "The Eternal Now," to find a modern Christian theologian expressing insights that are similar. Although he knows that many Christians long for an endless future time as a way to escape the anxiety of death, he does not believe that this is what eternity is.² Rather, eternity is found in each moment in which we fully experience the present as one of forgiveness and acceptance.³ Transcendence is experienced in time, now, through our ability to find the courage to accept finitude. This is somewhat different from Nietzsche's secular version of eternal recurrence, for while Nietzsche also advocates total acceptance of all aspects of our life, there is no conceptual framework of transcendence on which this hangs. Tillich, in contrast, has the Christian view that Christ reveals "the divine power of healing and fulfillment, of love and blessedness, made manifest in the one man and at work in all mankind, in all periods and in all places."⁴ This revelation justifies all of human history and reveals its significance in light of the eternal. While we might part company with Tillich's assumption that only Christ fully reveals the eternal significance of life (and in fact, his view of other religions as places of revelation was evolving at the time of his death—but that's another story) the point is that something is made manifest about the world in the world but that also transcends the world.

Recent time-loop movies also play with ideas of transcendence, and I have three examples to share. In all three, the main character must find meaning in the cycle of repetition before having the possibility of transcending it, whether literally by escaping from it, or by experiencing transcendence within it.

First of all, in Richard Curtis's *About Time* (2013), Tim (Domhnall Gleeson) learns that he is from a family in which the men (but not the women) have the ability to go back in time, within

their own lives, to relive and/or change the past. He is not caught in a time loop, but he can loop back to any moment as many times as he wishes, and this is not so much like a time travel narrative in which he goes back to fix things, largely because he discovers he often can't. He can fix awkward conversational moments (of which he has many) or help the actors in his friend Harry's play remember their lines, but he can't make Charlotte (Margot Robbie) fall in love with him in spite of multiple attempts, as she just isn't interested. He can go back and find Mary (Rachel McAdams), his true love, after he loses her phone number; but he only loses her phone number in the first place because he went back in time to fix Harry's play. He also learns that he can't go back before his children are born to change anything or he will erase their existence, which means he cannot save his sister Kit Kat the pain of an abusive relationship—but he can help her recover from it, which of course doesn't take time traveling abilities. The pain of life cannot be totally avoided, nor should it be. Tim's father (Bill Nighy) contracts terminal cancer, which introduces another unavoidable reality. Tim can go back and see him even after he "dies," but when he and Mary decide to have another child after his death, he realizes he must say good-bye to his father for the last time, and his father also understands the need for Tim to embrace life in this way. One last time, they return to an afternoon they spent together when Tim was a boy, which is only possible as they don't change anything or interact with anyone else. This relates also to the "secret formula" for happiness that his father earlier shares with him: he should experience ordinary life, and then return to experience the same days, not changing anything except his attitude towards them, "noticing how sweet the world can be" in spite of the tensions and worries. He learns to appreciate life as it is. And in fact, by the end of the film, Tim almost entirely avoids time traveling, instead choosing to just experience the fullness of each day once as any of us would who lacks the ability to time travel. His final line in the film is: "I try to live every day, as if I've deliberately

come back to this one day, to enjoy it, as if it were the full final day of my extraordinary, ordinary life.” Tim, then, comes close to what Nietzsche recommends, to experience joy in life by accepting everything just as it is. But this might also be called a genuine experience of the transcendent dimensions of life that are present within it.

Source Code (2011) offers a different sort of time loop film. Captain Colter Stevens (Jake Gyllenhaal) finds himself reliving the same eight minute period of time on a train that blows up each time. As the film begins, he does not remember why he is there, but gradually he learns that he has been given the mission to find the bomber. At the same time, he is told that this is not reality but only an afterimage he can experience mentally through new technology which places his consciousness into the brain of one of the people on the train who has already died. He can interact with the other people and change what happens within the source code—yet this (he is told) cannot affect the real world in any way. Eventually he learns that he has been declared dead in combat in Afghanistan but his body and mind are being kept partially alive for this military experiment, and that finding the bomber can give information that will be useful in the “real world” for finding the bomber and preventing further deaths. Once he does so, the military are ready to wipe his memory and use him again—but Captain Goodwin (Vera Farmiga) compassionately yields to his desire to die rather than be kept alive in this pseudo-existence, although first he would like to save the people on the train in his own reality of the source code, even if it has no reality outside of his mind. In what he believes to be the final eight minutes of his life, he finds the bomber and prevents the train’s explosion, calls his father to convey a message of repentance, and then creates a moment of joy for the passengers, as he wants to make this last moment perfect. Stevens truly has to find the eternal in each moment and “make each second count” for he only has these few minutes for his existence, and he succeeds admirably. The film might have ended there, but it does not: it turns

out that a new timeline has been created, and he can go on living, albeit with the identity of Sean Fentress, whom he has replaced on the train (the film does not deal with the ethical or practical implications of this). This is a sort of transcendence he did not expect, with the opportunity for a new life, but I believe the real transcendence occurs earlier on the train when time freezes in the eternal last moment of his previous existence. David L. Smith argues that the film oscillates between these two types of transcendence through two interpretations of a repeated catch phrase in the film: “Everything’s going to be okay.” That might mean that “things will be okay (future tense) once the goal is achieved,” i.e., once we reach an endpoint such as enlightenment or redemption⁵ such as that seen in the action movie aspect of the film, when Stevens rescues the train and gets the girl and a new life. Or it might mean—and Smith explicitly associates this with Zen Buddhism—that

Wholeness ... 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.⁶

But this is also a form of transcendence, in Smith’s view, just as it is to Zen Buddhists (and for that matter, to Christian theologian Paul Tillich).

A third film and a third form of transcendence may be found in *Before I Fall* (2017). This was adapted from the young adult novel by Lauren Oliver about Sam, a teenage girl who dies in a car crash and then has to repeat her final day over and over. At first she does not understand why this is happening to her (a common theme in many time loop films); she tries to prevent the car crash by avoiding that car ride, but still wakes up the next day with a reboot to the same day. Eventually she learns that the car she died in hit fellow student Juliet, who ran in front of them to end her own life, as she was made suicidal by emotional torture from Sam and her friends,

beginning years earlier when she was ridiculed as a bedwetter. Sam learns to be a kinder person not only to Juliet but to everyone in her life—including her younger sister, her parents, other fellow students she has judged or rejected—but also her friends with whom she tortured Juliet, especially ringleader Lindsay, who it is revealed was the actual bedwetter who had scapegoated and rejected her friend Juliet. Sam can express sympathy even for Lindsay, even after she knows all the facts—and she also knows that she finally has to sacrifice her own life to save Juliet's. Her time-loop, then, was given to her as a chance to redeem herself, not to save her life which was already lost. This certainly seems like a fairly traditional redemption narrative, modeled on Christian tropes of love and self-sacrifice, and yet it has within it the same dynamic Smith finds in *Source Code*; for while Sam moves towards a transcendent narrative completion of her journey, she also finds meaning already in experiencing the moments of joy in her life, even though she knows it will end. At the end of the film, Sam's monologue reveals as much:

Maybe for you there's a tomorrow.
Maybe for you there's 1,000 or 3,000 or 10.
But for some of us, there's only today.
And what you do today matters.
In the moment and maybe into infinity.
I see only my greatest hits.
I see the things
I want to remember.
And be remembered for.
That's when I realized that certain moments go on forever.
Even after they're over, they still go on.
They are the meaning.

We see her “greatest hits” on screen that she has in her memory, which does not mean that Sam is looping through them but rather experiencing the value of the eternal present in all those moments. Interestingly, the book has a somewhat different ending, in the epilogue. For while it includes some words much like the ending of the film and on which the screenplay was clearly based, it adds after these:

I'm not scared, if that's what you're wondering. The moment of death is full of sound and warmth and light, so much light it fills me, absorbs me: a tunnel of light shooting away, arcing up and up and up, and if singing were a feeling it would be like this, this light, this lifting, this laughing.⁷

It may be that screenwriter Maria Maggenti found these words, while typical of a young adult novel, perhaps too cheesy for the film—or too religious for a general audience—in any case, I myself heard author Lauren Oliver express nothing but satisfaction with Maggenti's adaptation of her novel, when she took questions at the Sundance Film Festival Q and A for the film. Still, I find this final section that is only in the book to move away from the notion that the meaning and the transcendence is to be found in this life, to a more traditional notion of an afterlife as fulfillment of this life, complete with the standard “moving towards the light” that features in so many near-death accounts in contemporary popular culture. Perhaps it can be both; but I still prefer the shorter screenplay version, if only because it does not mute the idea of transcendence experienced here with the apparent notion that this life requires an afterlife to have meaning. As Tillich said, eternity is not meant to be a prolongation of this life, but finding the meaning within it. I think the first part of the quotation expresses this well, especially when juxtaposed with scenes of love and friendship from earlier in the film, even if they come from several of the various versions she has lived of this day.

Will viewers find all these ideas in these films? I would hypothesize that the poignancy of the films, and perhaps any success they have with viewers, relates to the fact that even though we cannot literally relive our lives, we can reflect on past events via memory which allows us to evaluate the significance of events in light of a larger whole, and we can make choices about how we view our lives as a whole. Tim in *About Time* finally avoids going back in time at all, and has learned to appreciate the significance of each moment as it occurs. When he and his father relive a day from his childhood, they change nothing, suggesting that memory can function to help us

appreciate key moments and their significance. In a similar way, Sam in *Before I Fall* remembers all the moments of her life as she enters death, suggesting an ability that is also available to all of us to look back and appreciate what we have done for others and how we have forgiven them as well as ourselves. And in *Source Code*, Colter Stevens finds meaning not through the unexpected reboot at the end of the film as he gains the identity of Sean Fentress, but through choosing to save the train in what he believes will be his final moments of life. Knowing that he must die, he asks to have this experience of saving others as a way of bringing meaning and closure to his life. This is once again an experience that viewers could identify with insofar as they have also wish to leave this life believing that they have alleviated the suffering of others, achieving a sense of purpose in the process. He also has the opportunity to be reconciled with his father through a phone conversation, bringing forgiveness and closure to that relationship.

To conclude: time-loop films can offer a particularly poignant expression of the notion that transcendence is to be experienced in this life. This idea is found in the religious traditions of Christianity as well as those of Buddhism, as well as other traditions, and so was not invented by modern secular thinkers like Friedrich Nietzsche. Furthermore, I find the film versions of this notion not to be eviscerated forms of the original religious idea, but rather of a piece with their dual nature: expressing both a longing for the beyond and a celebration of the here and now, which can be seen as transcendent in significance for those who have eyes to see and ears to hear.

¹ Greg Watkins, "Time the Redeemer: Time as an Object of Cinema in a Post-Metaphysical Age," *Journal of Religion & Film* 20:1 (Special Issue: The 2015 International Conference on Religion and Film in Istanbul), 1.

² Paul Tillich, *The Eternal Now* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1963), 125.

³ Tillich, 129, 131.

⁴ Tillich, 76.

⁵ David L. Smith, "'Everything's Going to Be OK: Source Code and the Dramas of Desire,'" *Journal of Religion & Film* 16:2 (October 2012), 6.

⁶ Smith, 7.

⁷ Oliver, Lauren, *Before I Fall*, enhanced edition (New York: HarperCollins, 2016), 470.

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