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You'll Laugh, You'll Die: Conceptions of the Afterlife in Modern American Comedic Cinema

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When it comes to film, there is a premium placed on tragedy. Tragic films win awards, accrue critical acclaim, and undergo academic analysis. However, there is another category of films, which deals with very similar subject matter yet receives none of this treatment. These films contain graphic violence, suicide, rotting corpses, assault, murder, and nearly exploding schools, and they also happen to be comedies. The fact that these movies are both comedies and are so closely linked and inseparable from death is what makes them so interesting and so ripe for analysis. As a society, the United States tends to view death as inherently sad, definitely not a laughing matter. However, if this is the case, why do directors continue to make movies about death and the afterlife that are funny to watch?

When this question is initially posed, many people, critics and casual movie watchers, will answer the same way. A lot of times, the response may be: “oh, that’s easy. It makes death palatable.” However, it may not be as simple as that. Critics like Bassett have asserted that these films are used to ameliorate fears about death either by arguing that living eternity is not as appealing as it seems or by asserting that a meaningful life inherently has to be finite (71). As Bassett states, comfort may be a part of the reason, but it certainly is not the entire reason:

These films ameliorate fears of death by offering powerful affirmations of the plausibility of death transcendence, yet reactions to such films cannot be reduced merely to escapist or wish fulfillment motives; rather, such films also point out gaps and inconsistencies in audiences' beliefs about the afterlife, spurring them towards more serious contemplation of metaphysical questions and challenging them to struggle with the possibility that a finite existence might be more valuable and meaningful than an infinite one. (68)

This seems to make sense within the contexts of these films. They are creating secular views of the afterlife. None of them seem to be aligned with the typical Judeo-Christian view of heaven or hell. Therefore, instead of merely a comforting force, these films could be viewed as an

exploration of death, especially for a secular audience, which does not have monolithic guiding views about what death and the afterlife could and should be like. However, these films are not exclusively for a secular audience either. As Bassett asserts, there is a place in both the religious and secular imaginations for these films:

For secular audiences, these films might represent almost the only means of exploring such questions, but religious audiences might find the cinematic depictions more accessible, interesting, and emotionally engaging than scholarly or sacred writings. Such film portrayals represent a supplement or alternative to traditional religious sources that people can use as a mechanism for contemplating metaphysical questions about the feasibility and nature of the afterlife. (67-68)

This exploration of these afterlives from a new perspective, not tied to past religions, allows for an overhaul of what the afterlife could mean. This makes sense as the afterlife also does not function in the exact same way in all of these films. If the point of these films were just to make people feel better about death, then why were these not simply happy depictions of afterlives where people all lived in harmony and saw those they had lost and loved? Once again, the idea of finitude, struggle, and meaning are called into question: “If the afterlife is merely a series of idealized family vacations, would it not eventually become monotonous and meaningless?” ((Bassett 77). No, there was something else going on here. These afterlives were not necessarily happy places: they were desert wastelands. They were full of skeleton dogs and disgusting creatures. They were places of judgment where you were forced to relive every detail of your past life by being put on trial and judged for how you lived. These are not inherently comforting depictions of the afterlife.

When first approaching this issue, it was important to focus on the general genre, if you can call it that, of comedy. It is a common adage within the comedy community that comedy equals tragedy plus time. This works particularly well in comedies about death because what affords characters more time than the eternal afterlife. This makes sense in the context of these

movies. They are dealing with what in American society is considered inherently tragic material. However, through the afterlife, this material is able to breathe and given time to be processed. Frequently, the death of the main characters is at the very beginning of the film. This gives the audience a whole hour and a half to sit with these circumstances.

However, this type of research inherently leads to an unsurprising roadblock. There is not nearly as much academic criticism and discourse surrounding comedic film as there is about tragic film. For example, there is a lot more ink spent on the critique of Stephen King's 1976 film *Carrie* than on Michael Lehmann's *Heathers* (1988). This is not to say that horror doesn't have its own stigmas surrounding it. There certainly are people in the academic world who see horror as low art, but regardless King is critically acclaimed for much of his work, or at least their adaptations to the screen. However, at the end of the day, both films deal with very similar subject matter, and both films have horror elements within them. Both are films about high school, specifically high school girls, the way society treats them, and the power which these girls yield that is both exciting and destructive. However, *Carrie* is more or less serious, and *Heathers*, although definitely a dark comedy, is funny. However, *Heathers* is just as rich with social commentary than *Carrie*, if not more so. *Heathers* also includes biting humor and strong ideas of what makes a life worth living. However, *Heathers*, along with many of these comedies about the afterlife, are mostly untapped and uncritiqued texts.

With this in mind, it is important to watch comedic films about death and the afterlife with a critical eye. Within modern American cinema, it is possible to categorize these films into three relatively broad categories: afterlife as redemption, afterlife as freedom from society, and afterlife as reinvention. "Afterlife as" is used to mean that this is the function that the afterlife takes in the main character's lives. In the films covered, these afterlives range from literal to

figurative and none of them look quite the same, and absolutely none of these afterlives are uncomplicated, happy places.

The first category within this classification system is afterlife as redemption. This tends to be the most straightforward of categories. This falls within the framework of many classical Greek myths. For example, Odysseus having to go to the underworld and return to the land of the living to complete his journey would also fall within this category. The first example of this type of film is *Defending Your Life*, a 1991 film directed by and starring Albert Brooks with Meryl Streep as his love interests. The premise of the film is that Daniel Miller, Brook's character, has died accidentally in a car accident and is sent to a purgatory of sorts, where he will be put on trial to see whether he is ready to ascend to the next stage of consciousness. DiMatteo explains in great detail just how seemingly perfect this purgatory is:

When he wakes up, the poor schlump finds himself in a gleaming modern Shangri-La – a vacation resort of self-discovery, known as Judgment City. The place is designed to minimize apprehension, so that those who have been sent there can confront and work through their fears. To facilitate self-exploration, everything has been made perfect, including breakfast, which is the same fabulous eggs-bacon-toast-fruit-and-juice delight each morning- and you don't have to worry about weight gain. The temperature in Judgment City is 74 degrees every day, and, as the Weather Channel proclaims, it's 'perfectly clear all the time.' (18)

However, although this city has everything someone could want, it is very notably just a rest stop between one stage of consciousness and another. The point of the town is solely to make people more comfortable as they await and undergo their trials. This is a worrying proposition for Daniel, since he was and is a rather cowardly guy, a fact reinforced by the clips shown of him in the courtroom and again once he gets a glimpse at all of his past selves, all of whom are shown to be equally spineless. Daniel never gets what he wants and he certainly never takes action to ever get what he wants. This all changes when he meets and falls in love with Julia, Streep's character. She is vivacious and brave. In one hilarious scene, a video from her life is shown

where she courageously saves her whole family from their burning home and then goes back to save their cats as well. It is clear that she will most likely win her trial and move onto the next stage of consciousness while Daniel will be left behind and reincarnated in another life on earth. This also means that the two will be separated, meaning an end to their relationship. However, in the final scene, Daniel shows his growth as a character and takes action to get what he wants. He runs after the bus Julia is on that will take her to the next stage of consciousness and pries the doors open. Upon seeing this act of bravery and determination, his supervisors allow him to go with her to the next stage of consciousness, seeing how he has redeemed himself.

Brooks was very deliberate in the way that he constructed his view of the afterlife. The medium of film allowed him to construct a very fantastical and larger-than-life purgatory. Brooks in a 1991 interview discussing the film talked about how he came to this depiction of the afterlife. Brooks, despite being Jewish, set out to make a new, secular idea of what the afterlife could look like:

Maybe the universe runs a little bit like a corporation, like IBM. Maybe not, but there is certainly a shot that it does. What if the afterlife is a progression, almost like a promotion, but not necessarily a promotion for do-gooders, but for people who could take care of themselves? If human beings were to have anything more than this, you'd want to let them move forward. You'd want to make sure they were functioning, and it would be almost like, you know, before you could solo in an airplane you gotta go land in that simulator. So I focused on fear for the movie. (I'm actually explaining this like I never did before. Make a note of it.) The only thing that seems to bind us all is that we're afraid of something. Human beings are scared, we run into bomb shelters, we hide, and we all share that. In my own life, I am always trying to deal with the things that make me nervous" (DiMatteo 19).

This conception of the afterlife as a business certainly comes across in the movie. All of the lawyers for the deceased who are "on trial" are dressed in business suits, and the entire structure of the afterlife is based around the advancement through one level of the afterlife to another.

Brooks also gets at the heart of what promotion is based on: fear. Those who are able to conquer

fear are able to progress or be redeemed. Those who are aware of the finite nature of their life and therefore are able to properly value and live their lives are the ones who are promoted. This goes back to what Bassett's claim about what these films seek to do, which is redirect the focus from immortality to a finite life meaningfully lived (76). This is at the core of Daniel's redemption at the end of the film. Only by risking his life in order to be reunited with Julia is he fully able to redeem himself. He realizes that taking a risk in despite of fear is the key to a happy, fulfilled life.

Another film which follows the afterlife as redemption trope is *Wristcutters: A Love Story*, a 2006 dark comedy. *Wristcutters* follows Zia, a disillusioned twenty-something who kills himself after a bad breakup with his girlfriend Desiree. He hopes that by killing himself she will know the pain that she has caused him. The opening shot of the film is Zia cleaning his room, showering and getting dressed, and then slitting his wrists and bleeding out on the floor of his bathroom. Once he has died, Zia is transported to a sort of purgatory afterlife for people who have committed suicide. It is a desert wasteland with no stars and where no one can smile, but otherwise quite like real life. Another disturbing element of this afterlife is the fact that it is visually apparent how the other people Zia encounters have killed themselves. Occasionally a character will remove a hat or turn a certain way and a gunshot wound or winding scar is revealed.

For the most part, Zia goes about his mediocre life in this purgatory until he finds out his ex-girlfriend Desiree has also killed herself, which causes Zia to go on a road trip with his friend, Eugene to find her. While on their trip, Eugene and Zia come across a mysterious woman, Mikal, who claims she has been sent to this afterlife by accident, since she didn't kill herself but instead accidentally overdosed, and is now in search of the people in charge in order to send her back to

real life. While on their journey, the three characters happen upon this camp run by a man named Kneller, where people can perform minor miracles such as changing the color of a fish or letting a match float into the sky. However, Zia cannot perform any of these because, as Kneller informs him, he cares too much about it. Only when he stops caring will he be capable of performing a miracle.

Meanwhile, over the course of the trip, Zia and Mikal grow increasingly close, and Zia begins to fall in love with her. However, towards the end of the film, Zia reunites with his ex-girlfriend Desiree, but soon discovers her reason for killing herself was because she had joined a cult run by a man named Messiah King, who had killed himself to show he could separate his soul from his body. She had killed herself to follow him into the next life. However, when King attempts the ritual again, there is a huge scramble and the people in charge show up. In the chaos, Mikal is taken away and next thing Zia knows, she has been sent back to real life. Zia goes back to living his life and accepts that he is happy that Mikal got what she wanted. However, just then, Zia too is transported back to real life thanks to Kneller, who was actually working for the people in charge. The last shot of the movie is Zia waking up in a hospital bed with bandages on his wrist. He looks over and sees Mikal in the hospital bed opposite him and the two smile at each other.

The afterlife as depicted in *Wristcutters*, as mentioned before, is a desert wasteland. The film emphasizes not only how vast but how barren this afterlife is. As Zia and his friend Eugene drive down the road, there is almost nothing insight despite the occasional rest stop or gas station. There are repeated shots of the sky where it is incredibly clear there are no stars shining down on the characters below. Almost everyone appears to be working jobs that require menial labor, and the only night time activity seems to be going to the local dive bar and guessing how

other people died. This most likely is meant to represent Zia's mental state. Although the film represents mental illness inaccurately, equating depression and suicidal ideation in many ways for the purpose of the film, the desert wasteland could be considered as a visual representation of Zia's mental state. He is trapped in an ongoing sense of monotony and sadness, something which is also reflected by the fact that no one around him can smile. According to Berritta, narratives about mental illness have a finite way in which they are resolved:

Naturally, a film's narrative resolution is dictated by the genre to which it belongs, but if a film features a mentally ill character (who is being used as a protagonist or another lead role), then there are only three possible endings that a film can take. The first is that the ill character overcomes their illness, either through their own personal willpower, medical treatment, or falling in love. The second is that the sufferer does not overcome their illness, and their futures are left open, with the resolution of the film being highly ambiguous. Finally, the third is that the character does not overcome their illness, and dies as a result. Essentially, there is a happy ending, a sad ending, and an open ending, with each of these narratives being able to be included in a wide variety of genres. (135-136)

Since *Wristcutters* is a comedy, it follows the first of these tropes. In the end, Zia is redeemed through his relationship with Mikal. In this case, love is the thing which allows Zia to break out of his depressive state. This is also partnered with Zia learning to let go and accept life for what it gives him are ultimately the things which redeem him and send him back to the mortal world.

Now, these two film's skeletons are incredibly similar. They begin with the death of the main character. The character then goes to the afterlife, which is very different than they expect. However, they present very different images of the afterlife. In *Wristcutters*, the afterlife is a slightly worse version of real life whereas in *Defending Your Life*, the afterlife is a paradise filled with unlimited delicious food and entertainment. These movies also have very similar plotlines relating to the female love interests present in them. Both Julia and Mikal act as agents of redemption for the protagonists. Their love of life and determination to get what they want

inspires the protagonists to rethink what it means to live a worthwhile life. However, in the case of *Zia*, this follows a similar “rom-com” plotline, in which the characters are brought together due to their own mental illnesses. According to Berritta, “In this sub-genre, it is common to see both the lead character and supporting characters being depicted as unstable in one form or another, in which case it is their illnesses which often bring them together as a romantic item” (133-134). Despite the similarities of these films, the takeaways about what it means to be a worthwhile life and to be redeemed and given a second shot are ultimately once again very different. In *Defending Your Life*, this means taking action and getting what you want, but in *Wristcutters* it means letting go and taking what life gives you. Despite this difference, the films also end similarly, with the lovers being reunited, either going to the next plane of existence or back to the real world, having been redeemed for wasting their lives and given a second chance.

The next category of film is afterlife as freedom from society. A wonderful example of this construction of the afterlife is in Tim Burton’s 2005 film, *A Corpse Bride*. Burton takes an incredibly familiar societal construct, marriage, and uses it as a means to represent societies greater expectations for a purposeful life. The main character Victor’s parents want him to get married to a young lady, Victoria so that they can rise through the social ranks. Victoria’s parents want her to get married because despite being of social standing, they have run out of money, and need her to get married to a rich family in order for them to keep up appearances. Although both Victor and Victoria are initially upset by the prospect of marrying someone they do not know or love, upon first meeting the two are immediately smitten with each other. However, everything goes awry when in the woods the night before his wedding, Victor accidentally betroths himself to a corpse bride while practicing his vows. This leads him to be dragged into the underworld until he can free himself from his accidental wedding to the corpse bride, Emily.

The most striking aspect of the underworld presented by Burton is its contrast in color palette in comparison to the real world. Burton uses Claymation, and therefore, his complete control over the environment he can create, in order to create a cohesive and evocative view of the underworld, especially in comparison to the world of the living. The world Victor comes from is almost entirely grey and black. It is dreary, uninviting, and as rigid as the society it represents. There is no focus on feeling or liveliness and if one didn't look closely, it might seem as if the underworld and mortal world were swapped by accident.

However, Emily's world, the underworld, is decked out in beautiful colors. All of the inhabitants are loud and happy and full of life. They are free from the rigidity and confines of the real world. They can laugh, cry, and fall in love how they please. This is tempting to Victor, and at one point he even agrees to stay with Emily in the afterlife as her husband, but eventually, that plans fall through and he returns to the real world and marries Victoria. However, this is not the traditional happy ending you would expect. It is treated with a lot of ambivalence. Despite his love for Victoria, Victor had also developed a deep fondness and connection with Emily, who is a feeling and determined woman, and there is a profound sense of loss in the final scene when she disappears in a cloud of butterflies after being freed from her curse. Victor has, by choosing Victoria and shunning the underworld, also chosen the life of society, rigidity, and an unending palette of black and grey.

This brings us to the final category, afterlife as reinvention, or rather as identity formation, which is exemplified by the 1988 film, *Heathers* as well as another of Tim Burton's films, *Beetlejuice* (1988). These films struggle with one of the most interesting and long pondered questions about death. What becomes of someone's sense of self after they die? Beyond the loss of the body, what happens to their non-corporeal self, or as some would describe

it, their soul? As Bassett states, death and life after death raise interesting questions about identity, since the body ceases to exist as it once did while living:

Related to questions about the nature of relationships in the afterlife is the issue of what aspect of personal identity exists after death. Given that people change both physically and mentally across the developmental stages of a lifespan, the natural question arises: In which of these previously experienced states will we spend eternity? If one postulates a spiritual immortality as merely a disembodied soul, then at which stage of cognitive development and identity development will the soul exist which previous memories and experiences will that soul retain awareness? (77-78)

In many ways, *Heathers* seeks to answer the question of what remains of a person's identity after death, especially when it comes to the way in which society defines our identities. Unlike *Corpse Bride*, which posits that through death one can escape the confines of society, *Heathers* instead posits that even in death a person cannot free themselves from societal expectation and categorization. However, society can still redefine you, even after you're dead. *Heathers* follows the story of high school senior Veronica Sawyer, who is a part of the popular clique at the school, which consists of Veronica and three other girls, all named Heather. Veronica, as is traditional in these types of mean girl movies, hates her friends. Then everything takes a turn for the deadly when Veronica meets a mysterious guy, JD, who is just as fed up with the Heathers and the social hierarchy that they perpetuate. Soon after starting their relationship, Veronica and JD accidentally kill the head Heather, Heather Chandler. To cover it up, they forge a suicide note for her. This leads to a series of semi-accidental murders on the part of Veronica and JD, which are staged as suicides, until Veronica gets fed up with JD's anarchist tactics and he is killed in a final showdown, where Veronica stops him from blowing up the entire high school.

Heathers has a few scenes that depict a physical form of the afterlife. They frequently look space-age and somewhat discombobulated, even though they take place in the same church that the real funerals do. They appear somewhat futuristic, or more likely, straight out of an

MTV music video. The mourners all wear white jumpsuits and paper 3D glasses. Even in the afterlife, these markers of pop culture and teen life cannot be escaped. As the priest states while standing in the pulpit, the reason for Heather Chandler's death is not heaven or god but instead "a society which tells its youth that the answers can be found in the MTV videogames". This statement not only emphasizes the adults being out of touch with what teenagers are going through but also the prevalence of MTV and media within these teenager's lives. The struggles and influences of being a teenager cannot be escaped even in death.

Although *Heathers* has some depictions of a physical afterlife, the type of afterlife that *Heathers* deals with more is a metaphorical one: the way that the teenagers who die in the movie are memorialized after their deaths. As Bassett writes, "the thought that death is the complete annihilation of the self can evoke terror and denial due to our fundamental drive for self-preservation" (80), and this is fundamentally what's at stake in *Heathers*, since frequently the way the characters are thought of after their deaths has very little to do with who they were while they were alive. As Long states, "More than any other contemporary film, *Heathers* shows adolescent life as centered around identity. Yet underlying the embrace of roles is the extermination of the teenager as a self. There is no basis for an identity as a teenager" (163). JD and Veronica kill two misogynistic football players, who start a rumor about Veronica having had sex with them, and Veronica and JD stage it as a suicide pact that the two men had made since they could no longer hide their gay romantic relationship. Heather Chandler is immortalized as much more caring and thoughtful person than she had ever been while she was alive. "Murder offers a new, improved meaning for the self, only affirming, however, the enormous empire of signs. Death is refiguration" (Long 165). Therefore, when these characters

die, not only do their bodies die, but their identities and chosen sense of self die with them. They are transformed into someone who is akin to their image in a funhouse mirror.

This creation of identity is also linked to the transition from adolescence into adulthood, which is made synonymous with death. As the characters move from adolescence to adulthood their identities are solidified in the eyes of society. JD is aware of this, and tries to dismantle it using anarchist, violent means. This may be most famously summed up in his line "People are gonna look at the ashes of Westerburg High and say: There is a school that self-destructed not because society didn't care but because the school was society". However, JD in his attempt to destroy society merely plays into his own societal role as the rebel. As Scott Long wrote:

The engines of identity-construction can turn even J. D.'s rebellion against adult selfhood into a reified self. He has, after all, learned his destructiveness from his father, a mad bomber who has harnessed his explosive skills as a destroyer (and developer) of buildings. Dad is a successful businessman. Destruction pays. And J. D. too finds that his putative differences, his anarchy and madness, only make him "cool" in others' eyes. "The extreme always makes an impression," he says, but that is all it does - it becomes part of an economy of impressions. "You're not a rebel," Veronica shrieks at him, more truly than she knows. For all that she calls him immature, he is really a grown-up too, inhabiting another category, playing another role. The search for a liberating corner of strangeness in adolescence is doomed to fail, even when it turns to death as its refuge and strength. There is no safety there: death is, it turns out, just more of the same.

Therefore, death offers no relief. When one heather dies, another will replace her. Even fighting against the system is a part of the system. Death acts a solidifying force in the perpetuating and changing the identities that people create for themselves, and in the end, those identities matter more than the actual people themselves.

Veronica views the situation differently. The reasons for her actions are fundamentally different than JD's. She instead views these deaths as a type of reformation. Her desire to take down the Heathers comes from a place of sadness instead of anger. "I just want to make my high school a nice place" can sum up her attitude towards the situation (Long 164). However, when

she sees this fail, she is forced to turn against JD to prevent him from wreaking havoc on the entire school. However, this betrayal of JD also means an embracing of the current social structure, which also actively works against those within it. “Veronica defuses the killer bomb at the last minute - but in doing so she affirms her social loyalty, loyalty to a social identity, which is equally a form of self-murder. J. D.'s last words to Veronica sum up the film: "Now that you're dead, what are you going to do with your life?" Not to be or not to be: That is the question. What can be done with a life that is death itself?” (Long 166). By preventing physical death, Veronica condemns her and her classmates to a life of metaphorical death. The death of their sense of self outside of their societally formed identities in return for the continuation of their physical bodies.

This link between afterlife and identity can be seen once again in another one of Tim Burton’s films, *Beetlejuice* (1988). The movie follows the lives of the Barbara and Adam Maitland, played by Geena Davis and Alec Baldwin, respectively. At the beginning of the film, the wholesome couple is totally preoccupied with remodeling their house, despite pleas by a local real estate agent to sell it. However, on their way to the store for supplies, the Maitlands swerve off of the road in order to avoid hitting a dog and end up dying in a car accident. They find themselves transported back to their house, where they discover a handbook titled *The Handbook for the Recently Deceased*. When they try to leave, they enter a desert wasteland fraught with giant sandworms, at which point they realize they cannot leave their house and that they have been left in the afterlife to haunt their own home.

Not long after, their house is sold to a new family, the Deetz family, who quickly move in and start remodeling every aspect of the house, which the Maitlands so meticulously decorated. Luckily, the Maitlands are able to lock the door to the attack before the Deetzes arrived, assuring that they and Adam’s incredibly intricate model town are not discovered. In the mean time,

Delia, Charles Deetz' new wife, goes on a crusade against the interior of the whole house with her friend Otho, decking it out in the most grotesque and avant-garde style. In order to seek advice on the matter, the Maitlands visit their afterlife caseworker, Juno, who tells them, according to the bureaucracy of the afterlife that they will have to haunt the house for 125 years. In order to try and get the Deetzes to leave, the Maitlands attempt to scare Delia and Charles, but realize that the Deetzes cannot see them. However, Charles' daughter, Lydia, a lonely, goth teenager and aspiring photographer, is able to and quickly strikes up a friendship with the couple.

After many unsuccessful attempts to scare out Delia and Charles, the Maitlands decide to call on the "bio-exorcist" named Betelgeuse, who lives inside Adam's model town in the attack and is summoned by saying "Betelgeuse" three times. The Maitlands quickly regret this decision though, since he is disgusting, crass, and comes onto almost any woman in sight. However, it is too late and Betelgeuse still tries to go about scaring the Deetzes at a dinner party. The plan ends up backfiring since the Deetzes see the haunting of the house as a huge potential investment opportunity. However, in order to get investors, Charles need to prove the ghosts exist. In order to do this, Otho tries to carry out a séance but instead ends up performing an exorcist, almost killing the Maitlands. In order to save them, Lydia agrees to marry Betelgeuse in exchange for his help. However, after he revives the Maitlands, they quickly come to Lydia's rescue and Betelgeuse is devoured by a giant sandworm that Barbara rides through the house. The last scene of the film is a much cleaner-cut Lydia returning home from school to show the Maitlands the high marks she's received on her report card. To celebrate, the Maitlands conjure a group of football player ghosts, which dance around a floating Lydia to Harry Belafonte's "Jump in the Line".

Much like *Heathers*, the central conflict in *Beetlejuice* revolves around the Maitlands' sense of identity or more specifically the use of death and the afterlife as a means of identity transformation. Before their deaths, they are very contented in their quaint, suburban Connecticut lives. They even choose to spend their two week vacation in their home with Barbara working on renovating the house and Adam perfecting his model town. This security is reinforced by the fact that they refuse to sell it, even though they are reassured that they could sell it for a profit, but they are content in this life and with each other. They are very comfortable in their identities, which are intrinsically linked to their home and the time and effort they put into decorating it. In this way, the house comes to be a central symbol for the way that the Maitlands' identities shift and are threatened throughout the film.

This security is tested however once they find out they are dead. The house is invaded by the Deetz family. When they return to the home soon after their death, they find the house completely overhauled and foreign, filled with strange sculptures they have never seen before. The house is now unsettlingly modern instead of quaint and homey. All of their furniture and belongings are gone. The only stronghold left is the attic of the house, where Adam's miniature town model lives. Burton in many of his films has shown a penchant for shrinking down cities, and "in *Beetlejuice* (US, 1988) he exhibits more than a little taste for shrinking his protagonists into his sets" (Higley 7). The quaint miniature town can be seen as a reminder of the Maitlands' past hominess and control over their identities, but even this is invaded by Betelgeuse, a specter of death and chaos. When the Maitland's summon him, they are shrunk down to the size of the town and are forced to dig Betelgeuse up, unearthing foam and various crafting materials. By shrinking them down into the miniature, Burton takes something which is entirely familiar and contained, namely the model town, and transforms it into something entirely overwhelming and

grotesque. The Maitland's entire world is transformed, and they are no longer in control of it as they once were.

However, this is not only true of the miniature but also of the Maitland's entire world. According to Le Blanc and Odell, "To the Maitlands, outside the wholesome house is a barren Daliesque desert landscape with howling winds and Dune style sand worms that roam the plains. These are huge stripy beasts with further copies of themselves emerging from their jaws" (33-34). Despite the fact that the inside of the house has changed dramatically and has become a hostile environment, the outside world is equally uninviting and dangerous. Therefore, despite the fact that the Maitlands can no longer even recognize the interior of their house, they are still trapped inside of it. They are then forced to witness the involuntary transformation of their house's interior, simultaneously mirroring their own tumultuous shift in identity.

Burton uses the landscapes he creates in an incredibly affective manor in order to help the audience visually map the identity transformation of the Maitlands. This is where Burton shines in his use of the film medium in order to get his point across. Burton's use of models and clay animation would not be possible in any medium other than film. Transporting the Maitlands into these strange and hostile places, in which they are not only small but out of place, allows the audience to witness, with similar discomfort, the transition the Maitland's undergo from living to dead.

At the same time, this sense of identity transition is reinforced by the use of *The Handbook for the Recently Deceased*. The use of a handbook or self-help book signals to the audience that not only is this a physical transformation but a mental one. To be dead is not only to lose your corporeal form but also means that your personality and role must change from one of living to haunting. One could also argue that this coincides with another sort of role change

for the Maitlands, one from the role of the happily married couple to the role of parent. Over the course of the movie, the Maitlands form a close bond with Lydia, one which she does not share with her own father and step-mother. Lydia is moody and sulks constantly. This is emphasized time and again at the beginning of the film. As she sits at the dinner table with an over-sized black lace veil over her face, her father Charles insists that they will build Lydia a darkroom in the basement she replies, “My whole life is a darkroom. One big dark room”. However, once she meets the Maitlands, she forms a genuine tender bond with them. She is protective of them and seeks to defend them. She even agrees to marry Betelgeuse in order to save them from being exorcized.

The Maitlands’ bond with Lydia and their surrogate parenthood is solidified at the end as we see Lydia return from school. Her countenance is now much softened: her bangs are no longer gelled into spikes, her makeup is much lighter, and she has swapped her gothic clothes for a school uniform. She is greeted home by the Maitlands who are hurriedly tidying the house and anxiously awaiting her arrival home. After Lydia reveals that she has gotten an A on her math test, the Maitlands celebrate by levitating a dancing Lydia into the air where she dances to “Jump in the Line” surrounded by ghostly football players. The adult Deetzes, Charles and Delia, though shown living in the house in harmony with the Maitlands, take no part in Lydia’s celebration. In a way, it is the Maitlands who have taken over their role as guardian, which seems to be suitable for everyone involved in the situation.

This recreation and solidification of the Maitlands’ identity is once again mirrored by the condition of the house at the end of the film. In the final scene, the house is once again restored to its rustic beauty. When the camera pans upstairs to Charles’ office, we see Delia still holding up her grotesque sculptures, but they are no longer present in the main area of the house. The

modern architecture and sculptures seem to have almost disappeared entirely from the interior of the home. However, the Deetzes still live inside along with the Maitlands. This signals that although the Maitland's identities have been restored to a certain extent, there are still new elements present, namely that they are now caretakers or surrogate parents to Lydia. This is represented by the fact that the Deetzes still have a place in their home, the sculptures are still present, but overall order has been restored and the interior of the home is back to normal.

Now, none of the afterlives depicted in these films are particularly simple or inviting propositions. Instead, they act as complicated worlds unto their own, filled with pitfalls, positives and negatives. However, one thing that they do all pose is that death is a fundamental lens through which to view life instead of as an endpoint. It is either a means with which to measure the fulfillment and pleasure one derives from a well-lived life, a freedom or subversion of all of the structures that society has set up, or a means of perpetuating and forming one's identity. But perhaps the most interesting aspect of death that they all pose is that it can be funny.

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