

## Semiotics in Sleepy Town

by Joshua Siegal

There is a point in Richard Linklater's film *Waking Life* in which two individuals are sitting at a table discussing Bazin and Truffaut, and the following idea: if existence is the result of divine emanation, and film captures a record of existence, and further, if every moment is holy because it is permeated with divine emanation, then is every moment that has ever been captured on film a "holy moment" because it has captured a thin slice of the glory that is every moment that ever was and ever will be?

Possibly, Linklater feels so. He is, after all, the director who gave us *Slacker*, the movie "about" the seemingly ever-tangential lives of 100 characters, seen within 24 hours in a single town. But then, *Slacker* was fiction. Or improvised non-fiction. And so, apparently, is much of *Waking Life*, in which an unnamed protagonist portrayed by Wiley Wiggins shows up to observe long segments of soliloquy about life, philosophy, evolution, spirituality, and lucid dreaming. He moves from scene to scene throughout the film, and is rarely seen using any mode of transport. It is almost as if the scenes begin and end around him. Can you have a movie where the main throughline is a single character who contributes almost nothing to the movie itself?

Probably not, if your movie requires a story. *Waking Life*, like *Slacker* (and certain other Linklater films), seems to be instead a collection of stories that weave together to form a tapestry, or a mosaic, from which the viewer is expected to draw their own (or Linklater's subtly mottled) conclusions. The basic plot, so to speak, of the movie is as follows. A young man is

run over by a car. He wakes, to realize that this has only happened in a dream. He listens to a lot of deep, involved talk about life from some fairly weird individuals, then wakes again. He realizes that it all has been only a dream. He listens to more deep, involved talk, and is introduced to the concept of lucid dreaming. He wakes again, and again, and as he does so, he learns that every time he awakens, it is into yet another dream. He despairs of ever really waking again. He begins to suspect that he really has died, and is existing in some post-mortem, pre-enlightened dream-state, from which he will never regain consciousness in life. In the end, he relents to this, and is drawn up into the heavens.

The plot is thin, but the monologues and dialogues to which it is anchored are pretty profound. There is a certain view of the afterlife in which lessons from life are brought with one past the mortal coil, to be shared with other spirits. In a movie, this makes for a pretty interesting premise, but not much else. At some point, we would expect to see some dramatic tension beyond the main character's existential crisis.

In theater, it is apparently perfectly acceptable to construct a long-form performance that centers exclusively around identity confusion or chronological-spatial misplacement, with little plot. In the realm of film, however, this kind of exercise is the marginal stuff of experimental art films and ponderous documentaries. Perhaps it works better in a live setting, where the audience can appreciate a vivid, visceral figure, a being within the same immediate space, wrestling with weighty (or ephemeral) ideas. In the film-discussion scene mentioned above, the two men at the table speak of the ontology of film and photography. According to one of them, characters, even fictional ones, who are captured by these representational media cannot truly engage the

imagination of the audience because of their particularity. This should, apparently, call into question the entire enterprise of narration in film.

The man making this claim in *Waking Life* is, himself, being witnessed by the main character as a projection on screen in a movie theater. In his movie-projection self, he has hair that constantly waves, although no wind is evident, and he has lightning bolts and electric sparks that dance in his hands as he talks. He is animated. But he is also real. *Waking Life* was produced using Bob Sabiston's innovative improvement in the rotoscoping technique: it takes video shot by Linklater and allows animators to digitally draw over it in layers, similar to those of a graphics composition program. Wiggins' main character, watching the conversation unfold from the theater seats, is also thus animated, as is everything in Linklater's film.

The knowledge (thoroughly promoted when the film was released and by now widely available) that the movie is an animated version of actual actors and personalities is important to understanding and parsing out the message of the film. As one of the characters discussing film says, "it's all about layers, isn't it?" Dreams within dreams and films within films. But let's peel back a layer and take a look at what this movie would be like without the swaying blocks of color and dancing phantasms created by the animators. Thanks to the special features on the *Waking Life* DVD, we can do just that.

Watching the original video, unanimated, is striking. The footage of Wiley Wiggins sitting, listening, absorbing a cascade of philosophy, science, and religion - or wandering to his next encounter - is particularly difficult to watch. If film itself is ontologically less suited than

storytelling to the imagination of the audience, then removing the veil of animation in this movie literally makes it about "that guy", ie, Wiley Wiggins, the protagonist without a character, sitting in one chair or another, listening and gamely looking pensive. We wonder, 'who is this guy? Is he the film-maker's brother? What is he doing in every scene?' It seems as if we are watching a documentary entitled *Geniuses and Weirdos of Austin, Texas*, and Wiggins is the director, obtrusively including himself in the interviews.

Add the touches of the animators, though, and his passivity comes into play (and question), as the characters opposite him jump into lively relief. Suddenly, because he is drawn (even digitally so), there is a dissociation that occurs between his character and the audience. He now, through the imaginations of the animators, comes in closer contact to the imagination of the viewer than he would as a concrete (or more accurate) visual representation of the actor. He, like the background scenery, becomes a mass of colored shapes, and his silence serves to reinforce his position as surrogate witness for the audience, rather than to make it painfully obvious. The film is now relying on the ability of the human mind to interpret visual symbols, but does this trump our need to identify with the purported protagonist in a narrative or drama?

As the movie progresses, and tension (finally) settles in through Wiggins' realization that he must self-actualize in the lucid limbo he occupies, he begins to understand that awareness of his perpetual dream may grant him new powers. Others he meets in the dream talk of being able to recognize the dream state and leave behind neurological pretensions that separate dream-life from conscious-life. They speak of exploits such as flying around at will, seeing in 360 degrees at once, and one character actually demonstrates the wicked trick of discussing psychology while

playing the ukulele. After this point in the movie, Wiggins begins to notice that he is constantly dreaming, and this is where the film shows incredible restraint.

Animation, of course, allows for literally anything to happen in a film that can happen in a director or animator's mind. Only the limits of imagination and technique define the boundaries of the possible. Once Wiggins determines that he is dreaming, why does he not attempt some of the neat tricks that would be theoretically possible for him in such a state? He makes no willful flights, cavorts with no self-conjured lovers, partakes of no dream-sensual pleasures. He does not sample any new or outrageous food. He attempts no previously unavailable skills or flights of fancy. The only thing he does with his neverending dream state, upon making this realization, is to ask another person what it's like to be a character in his dream. Then, he asks someone how to wake up.

This decision could have been made for technical reasons, or it could have been some rule of the production that no scene that couldn't be created with a mini DV camera and a green screen would be animated. The movie was shot and edited before it was digitally rotoscoped, so the possibility for these parameters exists. However, given that the various animators used to create the film each added his or her own surreal images to the scenes, it seems unlikely that some kind of literal interpretation of the video was driving the lack of Wiggins' dream experimentation.

For Wiggins' protagonist to begin such mental or spiritual exercises would be to ascribe to his character the same level of higher consciousness as the film seems to impart to most of the characters that Wiggins encounters. In this movie, one of the main tactics of the animation

(besides the somnolent floating of the background layers) is to allow characters the ability to bend, poke, and twist their surroundings, as well as to call into existence various sprites, phantoms, and incarnate iconography. When a character is pointlessly (though not unironically) shot in one scene, the letters "OOF" and "SPLAT" fly to the floor after appearing in the air. This is an old animation gag, but the context of the dream-world renders it newly relevant. If, in the dream state, anything is possible as a projection of the mind, are the letters then literally lying on the floor in a more real way than they would even in, say, a vaudeville routine?

By this code, the animation in *Waking Life* imparts a great deal of knowledge to the audience about the relative spiritual or philosophical advances made by each character. It firmly establishes the protagonist as a neophyte in this world, which is important, as his lack of dialogue early in the film could otherwise be interpreted as stoic recognition (instead of naïve, yet active, assimilation). It is natural that the animation extract and distill the nature of the speaking characters in the movie, but it also adds another layer to the characters, that of the personality of each animator working on a particular scene. This serves a dual purpose: it further dissociates the audience from the actual personality in the original video, and it provides a different aspect to Wiggins' character in each of the movie's vignettes.

The animation in *Waking Life* can be seen as merely a neat visual-technical trick that highlights some interesting textual content in a movie with very little plot. It does do this. But it also engages the symbol-interpretation aspects of the viewer's imagination and then both toys with this faculty and uses it to add mystery and depth to its characters. Does this make up for a dry and occasionally absent plot? In my opinion, it absolutely does, and Linklater is admirably

content to let the new animation technique do this work without blowing out the scope into complete fantasy and ruining the labor of decoding its imagery that he asks his audience to do.

In that scene where the two men are discussing the implications of film capturing the holy moments of existence that constantly occur, one of them suggests that they try to create spontaneous awareness of a "holy moment" on the spot. It is unclear after their brief silence what has happened. It is touching to see the raw video of actual people so involved in this attempt, staged or not. But when they are animated, with sparks flying at their fingertips, morphing into human cloud bluffs in the end, their attempt is rewarded metaphysically, and they can be anyone.