

Idea-dropping

by [Daniel C. Richardson](#) in the [November 21, 2001](#) issue

Most of Richard Linklater's previous films, such as *Dazed and Confused*, *Slacker* and *Before Sunrise*, have enjoyed great success by holding up the mirror to 20-somethings' intermingling of curiosity and apathy. Judging by the almost universally positive response he's received for his latest film, *Waking Life*, the formula is anything but tired. In addition to praising its meandering dialogue, critics are calling the colorful visual landscapes in which these ideas are presented a breakthrough in film animation.

Linklater shot the film with digital video and then, assembling a group of more than 30 artists, "painted" each frame using computer animation technology. The result is a colorful, active film that is not quite animated, not quite filmed. Abstract fields of yellow, orange, green and blue take familiar shapes as they emerge from and recede into the background while sketchy outlines zigzag over the screen to suggest human faces, bodies and their surroundings. However, that which makes a film noteworthy does not necessarily make it good. The visual aspect of *Waking Life* does complement its overall theme--the distinction, or lack thereof, between dream and reality--yet is ultimately unable to help provide any depth.

The protagonist, a nameless character played by Wiley Wiggins, is himself a 20-something wanderer who encounters an assorted cast of characters in a variety of settings in which they have a series of quick "conversations" (though Wiggins hardly says a word most of the time) that wander from Plato to Sartre, Augustine to Schweitzer, Stevenson to Lorca. Wiggins and company touch on familiar territory for anyone who has taken introductory courses in the humanities, as they cover some of the major dichotomies from the history of critical thought: life vs. death, free will vs. determinism, being alone vs. being with and, perhaps most obviously, dream vs. reality. While such a stimulating screenplay might sound like it would be a real intellectual feast, one gets the sense that these characters (and ultimately Linklater himself) are merely engaging in "idea-dropping." From beginning to end, the viewer is pelted with bits of ideas that treat similar themes yet don't ultimately go anywhere.

Wiggins listens passively to each character he encounters and moves on, only to wake up into yet another dream with yet another conversation. A comparison to Harold Ramis's *Groundhog Day* (1993) reveals *Waking Life*'s lack of depth. In *Groundhog Day*, Phil Connors (played by Bill Murray) wakes up again and again on the same day until he gets his life right, subtly eliciting many of the same ideas while weaving together a cohesive and entertaining narrative. In *Waking Life*, there is no such focus. The viewer follows aimlessly through an intellectual landscape that is a mile wide and an inch deep. Wiley Wiggins even voices concern about his own passivity, but is reassured by another character that it is always a valid response to simply listen. One can't but hear Linklater in these words, giving himself an excuse for simply tossing out some concepts he thinks are "cool" without giving voice to critique or how one should then live in the light of these ideas. The temptation, of course, and perhaps Linklater's greatest fear, is didacticism. It is a healthy fear. But isn't it possible to push the viewer to think in *one* direction without insisting it is the *only* direction? Perhaps here Linklater might continue to claim that he is simply acting as the mirror to a meandering, sometimes curious, sometimes apathetic generation. Though a gifted filmmaker, he is capable of more.

The best scenes are the ones in which the dialogue is all but absent and we are able to "hear" the ideas that come from the colorful visuals. One particularly effective scene toward the end of the film is simply composed of an orchestral ensemble (who actually open the film in rehearsal) playing a lively piece to which couples dance in front of them. After attempting to process all of the ideas that have preceded this portion of the film, one can clearly see in this scene Linklater's depiction of the artists, writers and thinkers he has quickly paraphrased as those with the musical instruments, those who give the rest of the world a framework in which to live--music by which they dance.

Keeping up with Wiggins by mentally filing all that is thrown in his direction is nearly impossible in one sitting. Yet *Waking Life* does not seem to move the audience beyond the theater. Judging by one audience's response--a healthy round of applause and a patient silence while the credits rolled--the curiosity that should have propelled people out of their seats and into a library or classroom had somehow fallen back into passivity. Perhaps relieved that nothing more was required of them, they felt that what they'd experienced was somehow enough.