

# THOUGHT EXPERIMENTS:

*Drive Angry, the Reboot*

A thought experiment or Gedankenexperiment (from German) considers some hypothesis, theory, or principle for the purpose of thinking through its consequences. Given the structure of the experiment, it may or may not be possible to actually perform it, and, in the case that it is possible for it to be performed, there need be no intention of any kind to actually perform the experiment in question. The common goal of a thought experiment is to explore the potential consequences of the principle in question.

–Wikipedia

Einstein was famous for them. Me, I'm not trying to solve the fundamental mysteries of the universe, just tell better stories, maybe make some sense out of history and life.

by  
R. P. Bird  
rpbird.com

# THE PROBLEM

Today, a brief one. Just how does one rebuild a failed movie in such a way as to make it an enjoyable experience for the viewer? Case in point: *Drive Angry*. Here's what my favorite place says about this motion picture:

Drive Angry is a 2011 American action film starring Nicolas Cage and Amber Heard, and directed by Patrick Lussier. It was released on February 25, 2011. Shot in 3-D, the film was met with a mixed reception and grossed almost \$30 million....The film has received mixed reviews from critics. It currently holds a 45% rating on Rotten Tomatoes, based on 111 reviews, and an average rating of 5.3/10. James Kendrick said it was 'loud, vicious, tasteless and inane'. He then went on to say 'it thunders at you from every direction with a wild abandon that is more irritating and desperate than enlivening'. Mark Jenkins from the Washington Post commented that 'Even at its most lurid, though, the movie is a little dull. And it only gets less compelling as the back story fills in.' Thomas Layer from the Toronto Telegraph said the film was an "abysmal nightmare" and that this film was "more evidence that Nicolas Cage is a monotone, uninspiring thespian whose films should be avoided at all costs". On the other hand, Elizabeth Weitzman from the New York Daily News wrote, "Drive Angry is pure grindhouse, so committed to its own junkiness that it is, in its way, a pleasure to behold." The Evening Standard film critic Stewart Pulsey praised the film for its "resilient desire to unmask the hypocrisies of patriarchal desire systems" but felt that the final act left an "acrid taste of laudanum and deflated erotica" in audiences' mouths.

—yet more Wikipedia (great summary of the plot here, too)

Well...ouch. Didn't even make its dev costs back, ain't that a kick in the pants. Since I'm gonna hold this essay to a shorter length, I'll let the reader choose whether or not to read the plot summary over at aforesaid favorite place. Not going to force that misery upon you. What we're left with after either watching the thing or reading the summary is a list of complaints. Might as well number them.

1. A mind-numbing dullness about the action sequences. I love action, especially frenetic Hong-Kong action movie kinda action, but this is grimly inevitable, drab, with a layering of sameness. Car crash, bang, bang. Car crash, bang, bang. The central characters are: a cult leader (Jonah King, played by Billy Burke) with charismatic powers and maybe psychic abilities; an undead fugitive from hell (John Milton, played by Nicolas Cage); a gun-toting female sidekick for the undead fugitive (Piper, played by Amber Heard); and a retrieval expert (the Accountant, played by William Fichtner) sent out by Lucifer to bring the fugitive back. That kinda mix

should yield the fun one would expect from an action film featuring vampires, Jedi, gangsters, and hardcore mercs. It doesn't.

2. Overly complicated story. This should be the simplest story in the world. It needs to be so. Not that I mind complicated plots or intricate storytelling. Why the horribly involved recruitment story for Piper? She works as a waitress, withholding sex from her boyfriend, Milton's car breaks down, blah, blah, boyfriend tries to beat up Piper, is beaten up by Milton instead, blah, blah. Get rid of this Piper and substitute a drug-dealing, gun toting Piper bound for hell. More fun that way, plus it makes thematic sense. "Like attracts like."

3. The God Killer. It's a gun God created and gave to Lucifer to smoke gods. Great idea. It should be the central element in a whole *other* movie, but it shouldn't even be in *this* movie. Get rid of it.

4. Jonah King is portrayed as just another cult leader. He's a liar and a fool, whose foe is literally unkillable. How's he supposed to beat Milton? By the halfway point in the movie, our guess about Milton's indestructible nature is confirmed. We know nothing can stop him. When it's Bambi versus Godzilla, it doesn't matter if Bambi is Evil Bambi, the story ends the same. The scales have to be balanced, otherwise the conflict inherent in the story doesn't seem like a conflict. It takes on the aspect of a slaughter. Give Jonah gnarly powers of some sort. Make him immortal, too.

5. The Accountant's character is first one way, then another, then a third. He's Milton's enemy. He's Milton's friend. He acts like a good guy. He acts like a bad guy. He saves Piper. He helps Milton. He threatens Piper's life. What. The. Fuck? This is lazy-boy-watching-TV-while-doing-homework writing. Part of the potential fun of this story is the turnabout nature of the characters. The story hints at a flip on the traditional depiction of demons, only to flop back because... clichéd plot point – only to flop again because... plot point. The four central characters should take up most of the screen time. Secondary characters should talk about them, talk to them, interact with them. We get to see what makes each one tick. Stay with the stereotype flip, that's where the fun is. And never, ever undermine it because of lazy thinking and clichéd plot points.

6. We want to see Lucifer give Jonah his comeuppance. Milton and the Accountant have been talking about the guy from page one. It's obvious that the Lucifer in this movie isn't some horn-wearing terror. We want to see him and we want to see him in action. Who am I to say no to someone who's paid a hard-earned buck to see this movie?

7. It's...grindhouse. We should forgive the movie because it's a homage to grindhouse cinema. Right? Right? Fuck grindhouse, okay? Cheap, second-rate movies made by people who should know better. There's only one reason to make a grindhouse movie, a fast buck. If they have to fuck over the movie-goer by delivering second-rate shit, hey, just business, man. Why pay homage to dreck like that? It only confirms my initial guess – "What's the diagnosis, Doc?" "Clinically insane." – Tarantino is nuts. Gimme quality product. The cheapest way to do that is with a good script containing a few cool ideas.

###

Those are the Big Seven. Fix them and this piece of cinematic trash goes from the bargain bin at Hastings to epic status...or at least it earns its money back. However, as I've alluded to, there are parts of this movie I like. I'll take you on a tour, by the numbers.

1. I like the idea of hell not as an abode of evil but as the biggest, baddest supermax prison in existence. It's a nice change of pace from the usual "Oh noes, it's hell" crap. This is the trope turnabout I mentioned earlier. What's not to love when a script plays with ideas?

2. The Accountant. In the movie as it is, the Accountant is a goofy plot-point driven character who confuses the audience more than he entertains. There is an interesting core to the guy, that, if liberated from plot-point hell, would lead to some real fun. He's not a demon. He's an immortal being that works in hell, but he isn't evil. He's a retrieval expert, a divine form of a U.S. Marshal. Through him, the audience can see the weird new reality of hell-as-a-penitentiary. "The devil's NOT evil?" "There are levels and trustees? There's a non-violent offender wing?" "Where are the angels?" "Most angels are off smashing planets to dust, toe-to-toe with hypernazis, that sort of apocalyptic thing. There's an apocalypse every second somewhere in the universe. It's a big universe." "God?" "The Singularity of Righteousness? What about it? Have I seen God? Have you? It's said that there's a little bit of god in every sentient being. Don't know if that's true or not, above my pay grade."

3. Escapee running against the clock to save a child. At its most fundamental, the plot of *Drive Angry* has a Hong Kong edge to it that whispers of bizarro fights and spectacular showdowns. Fulfilling the promise of the concept is the problem.

Let's get to fixing.

## THE FIX

The protagonist is a good place to start. Milton is already dead, so he can't be killed. He'll just come back at the bad guys again and again. I realize there's a certain adolescent charm in that last sentence, but believe me, when it's actualized in cinema, it's boring as hell. Heh, made a funny....boring as hell, about an escapee from hell chasing cultists trying to create a hell on Earth...never mind. Ahem. How to fix this?

A: Get rid of the concept through a nice dialog with the Accountant, who informs the Piper that if he dies a second time, he'll get the express elevator straight to hell, and this time it's the deepest, darkest, most secure part of hell. "We call it the Eichmann Level."

B: There are massive disadvantages to being an immortal escapee from hell. He might be immortal, but his body has to obey the laws of the physical universe. He keeps losing parts of himself! His body is rapidly falling apart, so he's had to improvise with duct tape and rivets. The sex scene of the original movie is transformed into the ultimate in impotence jokes. "Once you die, sex becomes a little less interesting." "Come on, baby. I've never been with a dead guy. You know you want it." "Important parts of me would break off if I tried. I'm dead, got it? All of me is dead. All. of. me."

C: A plus B. He's not immortal and he's a zombie from hell prone to losing vital parts of himself as he takes damage. I like it!

###

Better action sequences inspired by modern Asian action films would help the situation. I can't address the lack of good action sequences, this being totally inexplicable and also in the realm of the director, not the script. The following films, a random assortment off the top of my head, are easily available for purchase or rental just about anywhere, watch them and think what could have been done with the clumsy, boring nonsense that made it into this film: *Chocolate*, *Hard-Boiled*, *Thirteen Assassins*, *War of Arrows*, *The Protector*, *Ong-Bak*, *The Killer*, *Oldboy*, and *A Better Tomorrow*. Get more frenetic with the fights, less grim slaughterhouse boredom.

###

We have already committed ourselves to the deletion of the God Killer. The Accountant is a cop, not a demon, his actions determined by his character, not the plot points. The Accountant's story path is simple, from antagonist to ally. He becomes committed to the survival of the baby girl. He's the one who summons up the gate to hell.

Lucifer appears to clean up the cult – heh, the cult members get exactly what they wanted, not what they expected. Then they didn't want it anymore. If I had been writing the script, that's a button I would have pushed during the climax.

Lucifer has to make an appearance. He's a guy dressed like a middle manager, flanked by guard-demons of the most ferocious sort. "He's going. She's going. They're going. That one's definitely going. Er...you get a pass. Be good!" Like the Accountant, he's a divine being, an angel, sent down from the godhead to confine the evil. "Thank god I got here in time. Give that little one to me. Hi there. Hi there! Gonna giggle for me? That's it. You're a sweetie. Wish I could keep you, you little cutie, but hell is no place to raise a family. We'll find you some nice people to raise you. Yes, we will! Yes, we will."

EVIL CULT FOLLOWER #1

Close it! Close it! You got the portal open, how do you close it?

JONAH KING

(busy with the spell book)  
I'm trying!

A chorus of "Close it! Save us! Run for it!" comes from the mob of cultists as they run about in fear. The mob disintegrates as they run for the main gate. Immense demons materialize to block the gate.

EVIL CULT FOLLOWER #2

We don't want Satan anymore! Send him back!

EVIL CULT FOLLOWER #3 backs away from Lucifer.

EVIL CULT FOLLOWER #3

I take it all back. I don't want to meet you. Please go away.

LUCIFER

(playing with baby in his arms as he speaks)  
Now that's just rude. I was the guest of honor to this party. You were going to sacrifice this beautiful little creature by way of an invitation for my attendance. Well, here I am.  
(to nearby demon)  
This one goes. Eichmann Level.

Lesser demons begin handing out pencils and forms on clipboards. The bigger muscle-boy devils are shoving the cultists around, getting them into a line.

GUARD DEMON

(shouts in the background)  
Line up for processing. Be sure to keep Copy D of the entry form for your records.

Milton comes stumbling up as Lucifer walks over to Jonah.

LUCIFER

(to Jonah)

As for you....You're trying to order me around? ME? I take orders from one person, and you aren't it.

Fortunately for this cute little baby, I got a head's up and got here in time. Otherwise...I'd say more, but not in front of an impressionable child.

(to Milton)

I believe you have something to say to this man?

MILTON

Yes, I do.

Kabam. Milton beats the crap out of Jonah before falling apart, literally, the pieces of him falling to the ground next to a prostrate Jonah.

Jonah opens his eyes.

JONAH

I'm alive!

Lucifer looks down at him, still playing with the baby in his arms. The baby grabs and pulls at one of the fingers of his free hand.

LUCIFER

No, you're dead. Get in line.

(to a nearby clerk demon)

This one, transfer him straight to the Hubbard Level.

Lucifer walks over to the pile of body parts that is Milton.

LUCIFER (CONT'D)

Quit pretending and get up. You think you can fool me?

Milton opens his eyes. He struggles to his feet.

MILTON

Sorry. Worth a shot. You gonna take me to hell, now?

Piper stumbles up, one of her arms grasped firmly in the hand of a demon.

GUARD DEMON #2

What about this one, boss?

LUCIFER

(to Piper)  
Are you dead?

PIPER

Uh...

LUCIFER

I can assure you, you are NOT dead.  
You are in a sad state, that's for  
sure.

(Lucifer raises a finger.)  
Straighten up and fly right, or  
I'll be waiting for you at the end  
of the trip.

He touches his finger to her forehead, the same finger the  
baby had been playing with. Piper is instantly transported  
to a hospital ER. Nurses and doctors swarm her.

MILTON

What did you do to her?

LUCIFER

She was hurt. I sent her to an ER.  
What did you think I'd do to her?

MILTON

(shrugs)  
Nothing.

The Accountant has by this time worked his way through the  
crowd of despondent cultists and business-like demons.  
Lucifer glances at him.

LUCIFER

Fix him up.

Lucifer plays with the baby while the Accountant gleams  
Milton, restoring his zombie body to showroom condition. The  
line of the damned behind the Accountant trudges forward  
toward the gate of hell, shepherded by demons handing out  
paperwork.

ACCOUNTANT

Good as new.

MILTON

Thanks. Sorry about all the things  
I said about you.

ACCOUNTANT

Don't give it a thought.

MILTON

(to Lucifer)  
Thanks. What about my



granddaughter?

LUCIFER

I know just the home for her.

MILTON

Don't make any mistakes.

Lucifer glares at Milton.

LUCIFER

I can see to bottom of a being's soul. No one can lie to me or deceive me. That's the real reason I am called the Master of Lies. Come on.

Boom, the inner city.

MILTON

Here?

LUCIFER

What's wrong with here? The righteous of the Earth are everywhere. At this moment, in all the Earth, this is the best home on the planet for a baby girl.

Knocks on the door. Impoverished black couple answer the door.

LUCIFER (CONT'D)

For you.

They fuss over the baby. Lucifer, Milton, and the Accountant walk out into the street. Kids playing ball. Laughter.

LUCIFER (CONT'D)

Time to get back.  
(To Accountant)  
You drive.

A sleek black cadillac appears at the curb.

LUCIFER (CONT'D)

As for you...you get points for saving the kid. There's a work-release program you might be eligible for in about a thousand years, if you toe the line.

They get into the car, Lucifer in the back. Off to hell.

Same dev costs. Better movie. It's the script. It's almost always the script.

R P Bird  
rpbird.com

October 2012