

Lights Out on the Borgesian Orgy Or A Tale Without a Twist

In approximately 2 hours Eric Lumf will be dead. This would come to him as no particular surprise, since – at 94 – he is already 5 years past his life-expectancy, and he suffers from a combination of respiratory ailments, each with its own rather miserable prognosis.

Eric is in Screen 17 of Streatham Hubplex, watching the latest Jago M. Cruciblé masterpiece. He is content, now throwing a chocolate drop into his mouth, now scratching at his moustache in his favourite spot. Not particularly fond of his own appearance, he is happy here to be blanketed in darkness, face-to-face with nobody, only faintly illuminated by the comforting glow of the big screen. He fears that in his old age he has taken on the look of an old, desiccated slug. But here none of that matters; even the slugs can bask in the art.

This will be the 6th film that Eric has watched today. He watched the first 2 (vintage works: *Groundhog Day*, *The Game*) from the moment he woke up, at 1.5x speed, projected onto the ceiling of his bedroom. He barely moved a muscle until nature called, near the end of the second film, when Nicholas van Orton (Michael Douglas) is about to jump through a glass ceiling. It will be in this same bed, in around 2 hours' time, after Eric snuggles up to bed, ready to read another half-dozen O Henry short stories, as is his wont, when his life will end.

As a voracious consumer of all forms of story, Eric is typical of his generation. The year is 2129 and human life the globe over is gorging itself on books, films, plays, games, simulations, outré creative experiments – anything which can tell a tale and tell it well. People had wondered what would follow the Age of Information, and the Age of Robots, but not many people had predicted that it would be this: The Age of Narrative. The Age of Submission to the Story. Since science had been all but solved, global transport had been rendered a mere triviality, and the machines had taken over all the jobs – quite amicably – humanity had gradually settled into what it liked doing best: story time.

The prophesised dystopias of the past were woefully inaccurate in their paranoia. Eric Lumf is not exploited, dehumanised, or even farmed; he is enjoying his chocolate drops and grunting in appreciation as the plot plays out.

Of course, he is an addict, just like everybody else. But that's just his nature. That is just how he is made.

As the end credits roll, Eric Lumf can't shift a sense of disappointment. The film closes on what he judges to be an anti-climax, somewhat out of character with the films by Jago M. Cruciblé that he'd grown up with. Yet as he groans his way out of his chair, he hears a crescendo of *aaah!* and *ooh!* bubbling through the auditorium. Eager to see what's elicited these murmurs of wonder, Eric looks to the back of the room. Here, in place of what had previously been the back wall of the cinema, is a gaping rectangular hole that opens up to the starry night-sky. There, on columns, right in the middle of this view, is a gigantic diorama showing a scene – a spectacularly beautiful scene – which must be none other than the *real* final scene of the film.

At the moment the hairs stand up on Eric Lumf's neck, he realises: Jago M. Cruciblé has done it again. It is as if the entire film, which up to this moment laid in delicate but disconnected sections, has been threaded together, pulled taught, and erected, revealing a wondrous three-dimensional sculpture. They must have been constructing that diorama throughout the whole film, completely unbeknownst to the viewers. Eric admonishes

himself: he should've noticed the giveaway clue in the second act. And he damn well should've noticed the breeze.

All in all, kind of neat, Eric thinks to himself, as he lets the climax of the film wash over him. He shrugs, squints for the exit, and checks his watch to see if he's still got time to grab a hotdog.

What Eric Lumf is addicted to isn't something so base as food, or sex, or drugs. Nothing so infantile; nothing so grubby. Along with the vast majority of the human race, Eric Lumf is addicted to one thing: the twist. Sure, he loves stories, he delights in a straightforward yarn, but what he really needs – in greater quantities, in purer forms – is a twist. That which changes everything. That which makes it all make sense.

Eric Lumf lumbers out of the cinema, and onto Streatham Common. He was too late for the hotdog, but he does not let this get to him, as he fumbles his headphones into his ears and resumes his current audio book, *'The Planet of Gold'*. He is 504 hours, or 3500 pages, into this character-driven story, and it has provided him with many a minor twist and turn – less of a regular diet than a reliable cupboard of snacks. He decides to take a diversionary stroll across the common, because why not? He is slow - slower than ever - but he has nowhere to go, nobody to meet.

Eric takes from his jacket pocket a much-abused copy of *'Twisted: Essays on the Turn'*. He taught himself at a very young age the rather useful art of being able to consume two or three pieces of media simultaneously, and so he has no problems following the audio book as he picks up *Twisted* where he left off. Unfortunately it is some tiresome essay comparing episodes of *The Twilight Zone* to the works of Jorge Luis Borges. Eric can practically see the straws that are being clutched at.

As he reads and listens, he walks. He *knows* that the dimly lit common at night looks a rather enchanted, tranquil place, with its gentle slope rising up to the hint of wilderness, and it makes him happy to be *aware* of this, even if he doesn't look up from his book to actually *see* it. He finishes that essay and thumbs the book on to the next one, 'How to Engineer the Twist'. Horribly dated. What'd be more relevant would be an essay on how the writers and directors are all driving themselves crazy, racking their brains for novel twists, checking into whatever rehabilitation centre is *en vogue*, while a multi-trillion-pound industry of self-help books and self-appointed twist 'gurus' grows around them like pus. But this essay is from the good old days, when new twists came as easily as ripe fruit from trees.

Eric has 1 hour left. He is enjoying his audio book more than his essays. He is listening to the final passage, of the final book, as he lumbers on. People probably don't notice him; he is barely noticeable. They cannot see, but could have guessed, that he lived his early life as an office worker (an auditor), that he lives alone, and that he likes to garden. There is so little about Eric Lumf that would come as any surprise to any passerby. Everything in his life has run along the grooves.

Eric comes to a dramatic halt. He stands bolt upright, stock-still. The audio book, *'The Planet of Gold'*, has ended. A hiss of manufactured silence is all that remains in his ears.

What a cleverly engineered ending, Eric thinks, what a piece of work. He had thought it was a book about *characters*. But all along it'd been a book about... How had the author done that?

Wanting to stay in contemplation of this twist for longer, Eric leaves his headphones in, and continues home with the ears still comforted by the gentle hiss.

He passes the war memorial, where, in the deep darkness by the bench, a hooded figure is passing little objects surreptitiously to two others. This area has a bad reputation for this sort of thing; the figure in the hood must be a drug dealer. Eric shudders to think what he's passing on, and at what cost. Yet he feels incredibly guilty knowing just how much he lusts for it himself. He looks on the ground at all the evidence he needs: discarded envelopes, hand-scrawled titles, and home-brewed video discs. This is where the young kids get their illicit hits of twist: perhaps the synopsis of an unreleased blockbuster, complete with shock ending, or just a couple of words precious and powerful enough to invert a whole TV series that's been running for a decade. A couple of boys sit huddled in the dark, dank corner of the park, enrapt in a slip of paper and sighing in ecstasy.

If you get caught dealing a twist, you'll get 2 years imprisonment, with no appeal, no parole, and no *deus ex machina*.

Just to the right of them, there's somebody who's taken it too far. He's sprawled out on the bench and in a bad way. He's one of *the turned*. He let the stories go to his head, and now he sees twists in any little thing. These people are a sad sight to behold. To these people, it was always earth all along. They were dead from the beginning. They are stuck inside a computer simulation from which they cannot break out.

Sickening.

45 minutes left for Eric Lumf. He does something naughty himself; he breaks his self-imposed book-reading discipline by skipping on to another essay, which he's actually read before, on just *why* people crave twists. Why do corporations spend the equivalent of the GDP of a small nation on concocting the brand new head-fuck? Why is a new twist more celebrated and revered than the world's finest poems, paintings and novels? Why can people not just make do with The Good and The Beautiful and The True?

The essay is preceded by a list of the credentials of the author, Professor Brainwaith – Oxford, Yale etc. It's called 'The Escape Hatch' and it's written very clearly and simply. Its argument is very convincing. The essay became world famous, and everyone had searched for Professor Brainwaith on the lecture circuit. But the twist, of course, had been that there'd never been a Professor Branwaith; the essay had been written by an eleven year old girl as a piece of English homework.

This gets at why you can't really blame those sad figures, *the turned*. Storytelling has seeped into every crevice of everyday life and the escalation in twists continues unabated. It has exhausted people. Eric (35 minutes left) looks on as a dozen or so cleaners try to put Streatham High Road back in order. This was the scene of an experimental 5-year-long project where thousands of people had taken on roles within the town, and kept perfectly in character as a beautifully crafted drama had played out, completely unknown to the rest of the residents. A tenth of the town had been actors; the other nine-tenths the audience. They had reached their finale yesterday, with the big reveal of the council-funded ultra-twist. Then some fireworks and beers.

Whole cities now participate in these grand charades, and they will do until they find something new. No walk of life is safe from the possibility that it may be turned on its head and shown to be something else. As Eric looks at the detritus of the festivities on his high road, he experiences a rather common feeling of giddiness. In the modern world it is very difficult to tell which way is up.

30 minutes.

Then there'd been that day, when the moon had turned out to be the sun, and the sun had turned out to be the moon. Exhausting.

Of course, the fundamental paradox of this one-up-manship of deception and inversion is that *something* needs to be twisted. The dull characters need to be introduced; the clichéd plot must plod along; the plain status quo must be established. So in order for the majestic meta-world of twists and turns and vertigo to grow, it must feed on what is left behind, making the everyday world ever drabber, ever greyer. The plainer the backdrop, the sharper the contrast.

20 minutes.

There's no backdrop as plain as this Streatham suburbia. The apartments roll on endlessly; the strangers all dress the same; the air is completely still.

Part of Eric wishes that the twists had never escaped the pages and the screens, because this is where he enjoys them best. In a story the events and the characters can be kneaded, flung around, and turned inside out, but there needs to be something there, underneath it all – a surface hard and flat and cold.

The cleaners have nearly finished clearing up the show and everybody else appears to be going home. Even after a twist, the world must go on. At the end of it all, Nicholas Van Orton had to have a cup of cocoa and get himself to bed. Even Neo had to, at some point, do the laundry.

As this town's Borgesian orgy comes to its end, Eric reaches his front door. He still has that hiss in his ears. He puts his key in. It opens.

What gnaws away at Eric's thoughts these days is the yawning chasm between the stories which he consumes, and the content of his daily life. Not that he's got anything to complain about with his life. He is content. But in the times when he's not being bewitched by a story, sometimes he just feels a little bit suffocated by the feeling that he's holding his breath for what's going to come next. For the curtains to open. Even just a cliff-hanger would do. It dawns on Eric that for so many years he has been unable to give his undivided attention to the present, to actual happenings, because he's forever waiting, forever on alert, for the arresting denouement.

10 minutes.

For the final twist.

Eric settles himself in bed. He checks that his slab of O Henry stories is there by his bedside and tucks himself in. But he cannot focus. He keeps thinking back to 'The Escape Hatch', written by (but *not* by) Professor Brainwaith. His thoughts tumble from a memory of one story to another. He feels a rising anxiety, and when he tries to put his finger on it he gets this: for the whole life it's like he's been comforted by a gentle soundtrack, played by a friendly orchestra. But their music's been building and building, getting more and more rousing. This change has been imperceptible at any given point, but it is now all so clear.

8 minutes.

More and more instruments have been brought in. More and more melodies have been introduced, each struggling over each. The music seems to be charging at something. The melodies are yet to harmonise. Everything wants to get resolved, but the pressure of the music just mounts and mounts.

6 minutes.

Eric cannot focus on the words he has in front of him. He thinks back to 'The Escape Hatch'. He wishes he could just fall asleep now, but what did it say? Something about the twist being the most ingenious sort of escape mechanism: the potential for an infinite number of escape hatches. Professor Brainwaith described how this must surely say

something about the human condition: that man is never satisfied? That man is never happy with his own perspective – with looking out from his own eyes?

4 minutes.

Eric is waiting for his crescendo. He thinks that maybe now is the time.

I'm just content, Eric assures himself. But he knows, deep down, that he, just like everyone else, in his heart of hearts, thinks that his life will be finished off with a twist. The escape hatch. The crescendo. Nothing banal, like 'the earth was all an experiment run by alien scientists', or-

3 minutes.

Not 'this was all in someone else's head'. Nothing cliché or trite like that. But anything, Eric thinks, surely there has to be *something*?

He imagines the orchestra, trying to maintain its momentum, stalling, faltering, breaking off into discord. They cannot hold their breath.

Perhaps it'd do if it was just a cliché? If 'it had all been a dream'? Or even just a subtle twist, Eric thinks, like I find out that I haven't actually had a dull life after all, I've actually been monumentally successful, in some ingenious way in which I am yet to find out. Or perhaps I find out there's some really clever chain of coincidences, of lots of little things, and these all combine to-

2 minutes.

Or couldn't it just be, Eric insists - rather panicked, hearing a great orchestra grow into a cacophony - that I've struggled on, all alone, for all these years, and I find out in the last few moments that it's all been worth it? There's been some greater meaning to my life all along?

The escape hatch must be around here, Eric thinks, eyes open, staring at the black ceiling. Perhaps something to do with God? Perhaps that Amy Flannigan down at No. 73, who always goes out of her way to say "Good day!" and wanted to have a conversation about-

1 minute.

Eric can no longer hear an orchestra. He feels embarrassed for ever thinking he could.

He just lies there, clutching his duvet, hoping beyond hope that his life won't have the worst twist of all: the twist that there is no twist. This wasn't a dream. Everything was as it was. The page is turned but it's blank.