Father of Man: An Exploration of the Afterlife in Cinema

Theodore Barrett Burgin

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Honors Thesis

FATHER OF MAN: AN EXPLORATION OF THE AFTERLIFE IN CINEMA

by
Theodore Barrett Burgin

Submitted to Brigham Young University in partial fulfillment of graduation requirements for University Honors

Department of Theatre and Media Arts
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Advisor: Jeffrey L Parkin
Honors Coordinator: Dean W Duncan
ABSTRACT

FATHER OF MAN: AN EXPLORATION OF THE AFTERLIFE IN CINEMA

Theodore Barrett Burgin
Department of Theatre and Media Arts
Bachelor of Arts

This thesis investigates five films about the afterlife from various cultural perspectives and seeks to glean cultural insights based on their methods of portrayal. The films include Heaven Can Wait as an example of corporate America, After Life as an example of Japanese domesticity, Orpheus as an example of post-war France, and A Ghost Story as an example of secular postmodernism. Additionally, I examine my own BYU senior capstone film, Father of Man, as an example of Latter-day Saint influence. Apart from the visual choices of these films, which reveal interesting insights as to their culture’s imaginings of an afterlife, they also reflect implicit ideologies found in their respective communities. I hope that after studying filmic interpretations of the afterlife, the reader may better understand what others value in this life, leading to a richer connection between other cultures and perspectives.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to express my deepest gratitude for all the family members, friends, and mentors who have encouraged me from the first script pages of *Father of Man* to writing this thesis. The film’s culmination would not have been possible without the work of many talented students who devoted their time, sweat, and creative vision to making our film the best it could be. To my friends, I hope you are proud of the final piece and that it honors your noblest values. I also hope this thesis will do the same.

To my mother, Beth: thank you for the long nights of review, for sacrificing precious family time, and for encouraging me to finish. Most of all, thank you for the lessons you’ve taught me about recognizing the spiritual in our story, as in all things. To my love, Jessica: thank you for your tireless suggestions and for innumerable hours of support, which have granted me the freedom to chase these ambitions without restraint. Any success I am blessed with is indebted to you.

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I would be remiss not to thank my Heavenly Father, as in all things, but especially for guiding me in a piece that aims to better understand Him.
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I. Introduction

In Plato’s famed allegory of the cave, he suggests most people are like prisoners deep under the earth, made to gaze at dancing shadows which they take to represent reality. However, these shadows are mere imitations, fabricated by the light of an unseen fire. Beyond the flames lies the mouth of the cave, the true world, illuminated by the greater light of the sun. Plato employed this metaphor for those that seek definitions of truth beyond the superficial, but he also uncannily predicted the literal flickering shadows of our modern age—movie screens.

Movies are probably best known in popular culture for the ways in which they subvert reality and entertain through the extraordinary. They are fantasies which employ powerful optical and auditory illusions that convincingly lie to the viewer, enabling her to be bedazzled and escape reality for a while. But perhaps more than any other artistic discipline, films also have the potential to reflect reality. They capture and combine images and sound to simulate a live experience. They have the power to transport the viewer to important places and perspectives they may have never otherwise considered. To some degree, even fiction films are lies revealing deeper truths. In fact, renowned film theorists such as Siegfried Kracauer and André Bazin argued that film was the consummate technological and artistic medium to mimic reality, and was best used when doing so. Bazin specifically suggested that the development of film and photographic images perfected the art of exact rendition, forcing traditional visual arts to become more illusionary.

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Rather than simply mirroring the physical world through shadows on a silver screen, select filmmakers, like philosophers of old, seek to explore even deeper truths. They want to imagine a glimpse into that greater light, the world beyond the world of the cave, the “other side.” Plato described this as the world of Forms⁴, where all matter is its truest manifestation; contemporarily, the most common idea of the world beyond is the afterlife. While religious activity is steadily declining⁵, the belief in an afterlife is actually on the rise.⁶ The hope for a post-mortal existence appears to be intrinsic to the human experience. Artists have attempted to capture this sphere from their first stencilings, and the tradition persists in the modernity of motion pictures.

While the desire for a continued existence is a constant, versions vary dramatically. Capturing a vision of the afterlife on screen proves to be quite different than simply writing words. Vivid scriptural descriptions, for example, do not easily translate into literal depictions. Therefore, filmmakers have found a variety of ways to interpret ideas about the other side. A host of factors can influence the way we imagine our afterlives: religion, geography, socio-economic status, family dynamics, generation-shaping events—in short, our culture.

Conversely, insights about these cultural factors can be gauged from one’s creative interpretation of the afterlife. Critically examining such creative choices can open new doors of understanding to a specific artist or even entire societies. Imagine you’re the director and have every resource available to cement your vision in cinema. What would your mansion above look like, and what would it tell us about you?

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The purpose of this paper is to explore four cinematic depictions of the afterlife and touch on their contextual and cultural backgrounds, attempting to understand what caused these specific interpretations and why. After reviewing these four primary sources and comparing them with supplementary secondary sources, I will examine my own BYU Capstone film, *Father of Man*, and determine some idea of my film reveals about my culture. Specifically, my piece depicts the Latter-day Saint interpretation of the “Spirit World,” and is influenced by aesthetic and iconographical elements from my faith tradition. I will also evaluate more implicit, subconscious values that worked their way into the film.

Perhaps the more difficult process in an examination such as this is actually narrowing down the material on such a broad topic. Obviously the aesthetic choices of the films I have settled on cannot be entirely representative of a cultural experience; every director brings his unique vision and personal beliefs to the work. The corpus is also imbalanced, given American budgetary advantages and a proclivity for the subject matter. There are Western films about the afterlife in abundance. On the other hand, filmic renderings from Middle Eastern or Indian cinema seem to be extremely rare, possibly because of an aversion to depictions of Jannah, or widespread beliefs in reincarnation that reject the idea of some spiritual realm. The lack of afterlife films also tells us something about a culture.

After extensive research of media dealing with the afterlife, I have settled on four films that I feel adequately cover a range of perspectives on the hereafter and form a firm foundation for intertextuality and insight. My primary sources will be: *Heaven Can Wait* (1978, directed by Warren Beatty and Buck Henry, based on the play by Harry Segall); *After Life* (1998, written and directed by Hirokazu Koreeda); *Orpheus* (1950, written and directed by Jean Cocteau, based on
the Greek myth of Orpheus); and *A Ghost Story* (2017, written and directed by David Lowery). In each section, I will articulate in further detail what led me to these selections and will cross reference them with relevant and related texts. This paper will not provide a definitive reading of each film, but rather analyze elements applicable to each specific rendering of the afterlife.

No two individuals imagine the world outside the cave in quite the same way, even if they share a faith tradition; many might even describe the cave and its shadows as more fitting symbols for religion, and the world beyond as scientific enlightenment. However, any belief in an afterlife assumes the existence of something beyond this world, in which case the cave becomes a fitting symbol for life on earth. While far from comprehensive, I hope that my contribution can inspire a deeper look into how cultural circumstances shape the way we perceive the afterlife. Many have followed what is referred to as the “abundant style,” trying to capture imagined glories of a world beyond through spectacle. For others, there arises an aversion to literal depictions of the spiritual or supernatural, citing that any artistic rendering cheapens the indescribable, and favoring a more subdued and subtle self-awareness. The following examples might render opportunities for the reader to consider which visage she most identifies with and why.

II. Heaven Can Wait

*Heaven Can Wait* (1978, directed by Warren Beatty and Buck Henry) is actually the second film adaptation of its source material; the original is called *Here Comes Mr. Jordan* (1941, directed by Alexander Hall), and both are based on the play *Heaven Can Wait* by Harry Segal (who consequently won an academy award for best original story for the first film
adaptation). The 1978 version follows Joe Pendleton, an ambitious quarterback for the Los Angeles Rams. While preparing for his big break at the Super Bowl, he is suddenly killed in a bike accident. He finds himself floating in a cloudy abyss littered with corporate iconography, such as a massive airliners and angels sporting suits and ties. At first Pendleton assumes he is dreaming. After angels finally convince him of his fate, he argues he was taken from life too early. He meets Mr. Jordan, one of the highest authorities in the afterlife, who investigates and confirms that there was indeed a mistake: an overly eager angel (called an Escort) took Pendleton from his body prematurely by over fifty years. The angels try to rectify the situation, but discover that Pendleton’s body has already been cremated, so they set out to find a new body for him. After reviewing several options, they persuade Pendleton to take the body of a snobbish millionaire, Leo Farnsworth, who has just been poisoned and drowned by his cheating wife and her lover, Farnsworth’s personal secretary.

Pendleton uses his new life as Leo Farnsworth to pursue his Super Bowl dream, to the astonishment and horror of the conspirators (who wonder how Farnsworth survived). Making use of Farnsworth’s enormous fortune, Pendleton thrives in his new life: he buys the Los Angeles Rams with the intention of becoming their star quarterback; he convinces his old friend and trainer to help get him back in shape; he falls in love with Betty, an environmental activist who was opposed to the corporate policies of the original Farnsworth; and he receives frequent guidance from Mr. Jordan, who only Pendleton can see or hear.

All circumstances are positive for Pendleton until Mr. Jordan informs him he will have to give up Farnsworth’s body, citing he isn’t the right fit. Pendleton resists, but senses the coming

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change is inevitable. He says goodbye to Betty, hinting that she may recognize him in someone else someday, and is shortly after shot dead by his conspiring secretary. At the Super Bowl, the Rams start another quarterback, Tom Jarrett, who is himself injured and killed. Mr. Jordan places Pendleton into Jarrett’s body, and Pendleton subsequently leads the Rams to their Super Bowl victory. After the game, Mr. Jordan erases all memories from Pendleton’s past lives. The film ends with Pendleton running into Betty, who doesn’t recognize him in Jarrett’s body but senses something familiar about him.

*Heaven Can Wait* is unique in its approach to the afterlife, with its originality spelled out in the title. The entire plot is built around the premise that someone can resist moving on to heaven and take another’s body on earth, so long as there was some mixup in the order of things. These rules noticeably cater to justice for earthly participants, with a sort of “customer’s always right” mentality—if there’s a mistake, it’s the job of Mr. Jordan or the Escort to rectify it. This does not mean Pendleton is spoiled or entitled as a character. In fact, he’s an extremely likable paragon of all-American values. He’s hardworking, honest, easygoing, ambitious, and a Super Bowl-winning star quarterback (played by none other than Warren Beatty himself, the beloved American moviestar). Pendelton’s perfection as a character may include a hint of irony, representing more of a hero to admire than a relatable everyman. But the film categorically caters to that status, largely overlooking realities such as disease, starvation, poverty, and other injustices in untimely deaths.

Seminal works of fiction on the subject of death often reflect its frequency, inevitability, and purposelessness. Such is the case in texts like *Candide* by Voltaire, *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* by Leo Tolstoy or *A Farewell to Arms* by Earnest Hemingway. Ivan Ilyich dies from scratching
himself on a curtain, a manner as accidental as Pendleton’s bike crash. But he approaches this fatal mishap with far more incredulity: “What is it all for?...I lost my life over that curtain as I might have done when storming a fort. Is that possible? How terrible and how stupid. It can’t be true! It can't, but it is.” Like Pendleton, Ilyich feels his death is undeserved, but eventually has no choice but to resign himself to it. While these texts are not interpretations of the afterlife, all of them address facing death and are even steeped in religious symbolism. We know each of these authors came from communities which dealt with death on a frequent, firsthand basis (maybe simply because of the time periods in which they lived), and it shows in the tones of their work, which range from cynical to resigned.

In *Heaven Can Wait*, however, characters demand their deaths be fair. The angels don’t appear to witness many young deaths, as every single person in line for the plane is elderly. Pendleton arrives in the afterlife insisting it couldn’t possibly be his time to die. And the angels are surprised by this; apparently his sentiment is the exception. The characters’ reactions seem to be shaped in a community where young deaths are infrequent and therefore feel unjust. Accordingly, in 1978 the U.S. mortality rate had been dropping rapidly since the 1920s.

The film’s overall tone is incredibly optimistic. Pendleton ultimately gets what he feels he’s entitled to. In true American fashion, his recompense includes not only taking someone else’s body, but the sudden amassing of wealth and the chance for a woman to fall in love with him, largely because of the way he chooses to use that wealth (such as changing Farnsworth’s

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corporate policies for the better). He gets the girl, he gets the money, he gets a second chance—in short, a future full of promise.

Even if well intended, Pendleton’s afterlife also represents a sort of faux liberalism prevalent in many Hollywood pictures. He gets to feel like the good guy while maintaining all his privilege. He supposedly changes Farnsworth’s damaging policies, but without ever actually enacting a specific reform that helps the paying public. This is best exemplified in his relationship with Betty. As noted in the online journal *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media*, “[Betty] sets up the political dilemma of the film by angrily denouncing the free enterprise system's victimization of the economically powerless. Her force and cogency seem to suggest that she is articulating the film's values in calling for increased corporate responsibility. The rest of the film, however, is a cautiously devised retreat from this statement.”

Because most of the film takes place on earth, the afterlife is actually depicted only a few times. However, the details of those depictions provide some interesting insights. When Pendleton and The Escort arrive there, the sky is white and they are walking on some sort of fog or clouds. There is an airplane waiting for him; it’s noticeably white, slick, and new. The whole aircraft reflects with a glossy sheen, and is somewhat Jetsonian in its futurist influences. Pendleton is still in his workout clothes, but all the other people lined up for the plane are dressed in dark, neutral tones, wearing suits and ties, dresses, and even glasses. The Escort and Mr. Jordan are dressed especially spiffily, with pressed white shirts and ties and popping black suits. The names of people are checked off a clipboard as they enter the plane in an orderly,

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single-file line. When Pendleton evades the line and runs around the plane, his Escort desperately explains there are consequences for violating the rules or “questioning the unifying principles.”

In *Heaven Can Wait*, the corporate aesthetic, presence of technology, and orderly system in the afterlife correspond with patterns present in several other Western films. For example, in *A Matter of Life and Death* (1946, directed by Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger), Peter Carter has the opposite problem as Pendleton: he was “misplaced” by heaven when he should have died after jumping out of a burning plane. We follow his wrestle with an afterlife that comes calling as it scrambles to get things back in order. Like in *Heaven Can Wait*, the “Other World” is full of efficacious, sterile machinery, such as the enormous heavenly clock, which sets punctuality for the universe. The angelic workers are dressed like airline stewardesses, complete

![Image](image.png)

Figure 1. In the afterlife, passengers board a futuristic aircraft in *Heaven Can Wait* (1978). © Paramount Pictures.
with angel-wing pins, and are busy checking in fallen soldiers. Alarm bells ring when things aren’t right in the systematized record office, but, as one angel points out, there “hasn’t been a mistake [there] for a thousand years.” Perhaps most fittingly, everything in heaven is monochromatic, while all the sequences on earth are shot in technicolor.

Another example of this pattern is found in the film *Defending Your Life* (1991, directed by Albert Brooks). While it was produced nearly fifty years after *A Matter of Life and Death*, it continues a remarkably consistent pattern of design. When Daniel Miller is hit by a bus and dies, he finds the afterlife is an ordered metropolis filled with bustling professionals and gleaming skyscrapers. He takes a heavenly tram to get around, passing golf courses and gourmet buffets. Like Pendleton, he’s not actually in heaven, but at a sort of way station where his life will be judged. He meets his lawyer, Mr. Diamond, who is dressed in a suit and tie and works in an office filled with filing cabinets and 1990s computers. Over the course of his stay, Daniel watches key moments of his life on a large movie screen, as his actions are debated over to determine his future. He also falls in love with another recently deceased person, and eventually finds the courage to confess his feelings.

These two films feel similar to *Heaven Can Wait* in some striking ways. They all depict an afterlife replete with industrialization. Those who run things are well-dressed professionals referred to with formal titles, such as *Mr.* Jordan or *Mr.* Diamond. Heaven is rule oriented, run by charts and probabilities and systems that rarely make mistakes or exceptions. And—perhaps most strikingly—there is no hell. None of the films determine whether a character will go to heaven or hell, and one of them explicitly states it doesn’t exist. One might reasonably surmise that these similarities grow out of a capitalistic, corporate vision of Heaven, as they reflect many
Western values. Order and structure, professionalism and plenty—these are not just dreams for many Americans, they’re expectations. There is nothing ambiguous or awe inspiring about corporate heaven. It is practical, physical, and utopian, complete with the technology that has so often sprung from the West.

*Heaven Can Wait*’s original version *Here Comes Mr. Jordan* started a trend of “guardian angel” films, including *It’s A Wonderful Life* (1946, directed by Frank Capra), *The Bishop’s Wife* (1947, directed by Henry Coster), and *Angels in the Outfield* (1951, directed by Clarence Brown), to name a few. In these films, the “guardian angels” are summoned or have to seek out the protagonist wherever he is—never the other way around. Angels make the calls, figure out the logistics, articulate legal defenses, and ultimately exist to serve the protagonists. They are not true characters so much as guides, and while they often need something to accomplish a goal, they rarely change and are never taught.

All the butlering suggests an imagining of an afterlife that has it all figured out. It might make some technical errors now and then, but it’s largely an infallible institution, a sort of North Pole that watches over earth, makes sure everything gets sorted, and delivers what we want or need. The characters exhibit certitude in the heavenly structure, which may betray the ideological sureties of the real world artist. If a filmmaker feels he is part of a good socioeconomic system, it only follows that he would portray heaven as a perfected version of that system, complete with a suit and tie. Mr. Jordan varnishes this idea in religious-sounding rhetoric when he states to

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Pendleton, “You must abide by what is written. There’s a reason for everything. There’s always a plan. Your destiny is not in my hands.”

The consistent chance to keep moving forward after death and give it another shot (whether due to failures in life or a system error) is more indicative of American values than Judeo-Christian doctrine, as is the complete disregard of hell.\textsuperscript{13} In fact, the lack of any meaningful religious implications or principles (such as faith leading to salvation) suggests a subconscious pushback against the prevalence of Western religious dogma. For three famous films about the afterlife, they are surprisingly irreligious.

In the case of \textit{Heaven Can Wait}, the writers are at least moderately aware of their influences. When Pendleton first arrives he assumes he’s in a dream, and refuses to board the plane. The Escort explains that he hasn’t yet reached his “ultimate destination”, citing that the airplane is just a waystation. He expounds that there is a “basis for which this system is organized,” and that “the rules of this waystation derive from your own. They are a product of your image and the image of those who share your image.” In an interesting way, this comment actually acts as a qualifier for the airplane and two piece suits. The spirit world might actually be whatever you imagine it to be, and heaven is what is beautiful, or at the very least accessible, to the individual.

This same sentiment is echoed in other American works such as \textit{The Green Pastures} (1936, directed by Marc Connelly and William Keighley), in which heaven is reimagined with God as an African American preacher who eats boiled pudding, smokes cigars, and declares “let

\begin{quote}
\textsuperscript{13} Included as part of an analytical list compiled by Robert Kohls are the values of “Future Orientation” and “Personal Control Over the Environment,” Kohls, L. Robert. \textit{The Values Americans Live By}. Meridian House International, 1984.
\end{quote}
the fish fry proceed.” The angels ride clouds to go fishing, wear ornate Sunday hats, and sing old spirituals all day. While the film suffers from some problematic elements of its time, it's an incredibly sincere work that suggests heaven appeals in a comfortable way to the specific imaginings of all cultures and communities, a melting pot ideal that feels very American. *Heaven Can Wait* seems to lightly incorporate this same mechanic, providing a personalized heaven to every individual.

III. After Life

*After Life* (1998, directed by Hirokazu Koreeda) is a Japanese film that blends real, unscripted interviews with actors and a plot. Similar to some of the films previously mentioned, the story takes place at a waystation for recently deceased spirits. This area takes the form of a traditional Japanese hotel in which new arrivals comfortably stay, and where “social workers” take care of and interview them. The hotel is simple, neat, quiet, and accommodating, embodying the understated Japanese values of calmness and courtesy. Each week a new group of the recently deceased arrives and are given a simple instruction: they are to take a few days to select their happiest memory. They are told the workers will film a re-creation of that memory which the subjects will watch in a theater. This will be the only memory they take with them into eternity, becoming a personal heaven in the next state of existence.

While the story follows several characters, it most closely centers on Takashi and Shiori, two “counselors” who work and live at the waystation. Shiori plays a secondary role to Takashi, as she often follows him around, learning from him. Takashi is assigned to assist an old man

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named Ichiro, who can’t decide on his memory and wants to review his entire life. While watching video playback of Ichiro’s life, Takashi is shocked to learn that Ichiro married Takashi’s former fiancée after Takashi was killed in World War II. He immediately requests to have Ichiro assigned to another counselor, but is still troubled by Ichiro’s memories and returns to them many times, though he keeps this from Ichiro. As Shiori watches Takashi wrestle with the memories of his fiancée, it becomes apparent that Shiori is in love with Takashi and she worries about his troubled fixation.

After several more interviews, the social workers get to work recreating memories. They replicate each subject’s memory with precision, applying details in the costuming and production design. When Ichiro finally decides on a tender moment he shared with his wife, they film the memories and screen them. Later, Takashi finds a note from Ichiro stating he was aware Takashi was his wife’s previous fiancée. Ichiro thanks Takashi for his kind gesture in never mentioning it during their time together. Takashi still struggles feeling like he never shared a moment of vulnerability with his fiancée before he died, so in an act of love Shiori helps Takashi locate the memory his fiancée chose to live in. They watch it together and Takashi sees his fiancée chose a memory of her time with him. This finally brings Takashi peace. He decides he will choose a memory and move on himself, to the heartbreak of Shiori. Takashi selects a recent memory of his time working at the waystation and vanishes. Shiori eventually accepts Takashi’s decision to leave and moves up in rank to take Takashi’s place as lead counselor.

There are some superficial similarities in After Life to the films heretofore mentioned. For example, in the American films there is no hell; the same is true in this world. However, “heaven” or the next state of existence feels even more ambiguous than in the Western films. It is
a destination kept from even the way station workers. Also similar is the fact that there are employees who know their tasks and perform their duties in an office with documents. But while Hollywood has leaned hard into mechanization and structure, this film does the exact opposite—the office is simple, rustic, more like a Japanese house furnished by filing cabinets. There is no pomp and circumstance. Compared to the impersonal buttoned suits of Western guardian angels, these workers are fleshed out characters, as human and complex and “alive” as the subjects being interviewed. In fact, the workers are the true protagonists as opposed to plot devices. They fall in love with one another and even function like a little family, living in close proximity and with weekly responsibilities. Rather than perfected orderly beings, everyone who works shares a fundamental flaw: while they push the subjects to meet their deadlines, it’s revealed that all the social workers were unable to choose a memory themselves, keeping them forever at the waystation.

Instead of trams, futuristic planes, and skyscrapers, these workers live in apartments with steaming tea kettles and full dishwashers and over-exposed photos on the wall. They listen to music with headphones and take baths. This heaven has backyard gardens and street lights and old paintings. They still live by the days of the week; the electricity goes out on Friday. The subjects are provided a special way to review moments from their life: old VHS tapes in SD Quality. Beyond the hotel, counselors can wander into an entire world bustling about, complete with cars, parks, stripmalls, and existing, real world businesses. The film doesn’t even bother trying to clarify distinctions between the spirit world and the real world. It doesn’t matter. The Hollywood heaven seeks to be the ideal—this Japanese life after death is as close to the everyday on earth as to be indistinguishable. One would never know this story has anything to do with the
afterlife from the visuals alone.

It is possible that the use of normal, earthly objects is a creative choice intended to allow the story to shine through. Or it could be a practical necessity, one which complements the realism of employing non-actors to recall real stories. Perhaps the director, Hirokazu Koreeda, felt that anything miraculous would simply call attention to itself. Some elements of Japanese culture traditionally tend toward simplicity and the quiet, imperfect beauty found in domestic details.\(^\text{15}\) Maybe Koreeda intentionally wanted the audience to take note of the accessibility and openhandedness, as if such familiarity were a gesture of kindness. The extent to which the earthiness is highlighted feels intentional, and brings a certain warmth. This film is so self-aware

that even the artifice of filmmaking is deconstructed; the memories are recreated using the exact same elements as movies on earth, complete with location scouting, lighting, production meetings, production design, makeup, and miniatures.

Similar to the Western films, the afterlife has rules requisite to pass on into the next state of existence. These rules can also be broken, so some choose to resist. In one instance, a twenty-one year old stubbornly refuses to select a memory to live in. Another individual wants evidence that he actually lived a life, and wants proof it had a purpose in order to intellectualize the ramifications of his death rather than just accept it at face value. Counselors also abide by the rules for subject assignments, but can request permission for change in special circumstances.

The rules of this afterlife are also far more open to scrutiny than what is depicted in the previously mentioned Hollywood examples. The twenty-one year old who refuses to select a memory actually presents concrete and logical reasons for his decision, to which the counselors have no answer. This young man makes the case that he would like to imagine a distant future for himself instead of a memory, since memories are mostly imagination anyway, largely inaccurate constructs we tell ourselves. He even goes so far as to criticize their entire afterlife system, stating the whole thing needs rethinking. His “imagined future” idea is shot down of course, but he provides a reasonable debate against the conventions of the afterlife, something not even considered in the previous films. Later, even Takashi questions the system: “Recreating memories for the dead. What are we doing it for?”

One might reasonably quantify this skepticism toward the system as residual bereavement from the crushing defeat in World War II16 and the complete obliteration of power

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of the Japanese monarchy. While the Western capitalist system thrived and rewarded its citizens throughout the 20th century, many of the Eastern Asian systems did not, and it would only follow that many of these communities became inherently suspicious of social structures, able to recognize flaws in tradition and willing to propose new ideas. While *After Life* ultimately finds beauty and catharsis in its system of the spirit world, the film also has enough nuance to let the characters critically examine themselves.

*Heaven Can Wait* feels more upbeat and superficial than *After Life*, and though the Japanese characters don’t seem to mourn their deaths, the film more seriously contemplates reflection on life itself—its disappointments, purposes, and relationships. Perhaps one reason for a more honest, peaceful approach to the afterlife comes from the way Eastern Asian culture approaches death. While there is a trend among secular Western society of avoiding the topic because of its hopelessness, “East Asian people believe that through family names and rituals they are able to keep their spirits alive symbolically. Therefore, a person is never forgotten nor dies.”

This thoughtful approach to the afterlife can also be seen in *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives* (2010, directed by Apichatpong Weerasethakul), a Thai film that completely focuses on contemplation and relationships in the afterlife. The story is told from the perspective of Uncle Boonmee, a man on his deathbed who has called together all his relatives to say goodbye. *Uncle Boonmee* is opposite to *After Life* in some ways, being far more surreal, esoteric, and absurd—Boonmee remembers moments from past lives that are completely foreign.

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to human experiences (such as his bizarre time as a catfish). This seriously calls into question whether the film is even about an “after life.”

The design is far more extreme and evocative than the simple realism of the waystation, but like After Life, the primary story of Uncle Boonmee remains in a small, domestic setting. Spirits appear over simple family dinners or in hot bedrooms with a blowing fan and an open window. While on his deathbed, Boonmee sees the ghost of his dead wife materialize and offer advice. In the woods behind his home, his estranged son appears in the form of a jungle creature. The films clearly endow meaning to one’s place of dwelling, which is a common custom throughout Asia.18

Nature also plays a role in both films. In After Life, there is an emphasis on the weather changes throughout the week, shown in long, drawn out shots. The characters also utilize the outdoors as set elements in their dramatizations, such as a bamboo forest. In Japan, there is a longstanding “close relation between an aesthetic appreciation of nature and the religious.”19 It only follows that this connection would be depicted in the afterlife. In Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives, nature is also present, set in the jungles of Thailand, incorporating special locations such as caves into the cosmology of the spiritual. The presence of nature in both films could also be attributed to the Eastern Asian prevalence of Buddhism; while not referenced directly, its geographical pervasiveness makes it difficult to discount as a cultural influence. Buddhism has been called “a religion of nature,”20 and Buddhist literature usually does not

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portray nature as outside of the human experience, but rather as an extension of human love. Therefore, one could surmise that these films’ use of nature link the afterlife to human love.

The core values of the two films are similar, dealing with forgiveness, reconnecting with old relationships, acceptance of one another, and appreciating simple moments in a domestic setting. The personal connections are authentic, and the characters reconcile real world problems. Like Boonmee, the recently deceased in After Life also come to terms with their lives rather than wonder what’s next. One man says none of his memories are happy; one woman reminisces about falling in love; one person feels his life didn’t have any purpose. The Hollywood films were about moving on, forward, or reclaiming what was lost—these Asian films’ approach seems to be about appreciating what was had. As one review states, “One of the most beautiful subplots concerns an aged lady who seems utterly untouched by the situation she’s in, until the workers realise she has no need to agonise over her favourite memory, as she’s evidently a person who had found peace in her lifetime and was living in her own form of ‘heaven’ already.”

After Life’s themes are far richer, dealing with forgiveness and catharsis.

Takashi is heartbroken and jealous that Ichiro had a long and happy life with his fiancée, but he is never bitter or resentful; he only renders kind service to Ichiro in combing through his memories and helping him select the right one. Ichiro is jealous that his wife held on to the memory of her old fiancée, but he doesn’t say anything to Takashi about it, and instead leaves him a note praising and thanking Takashi for helping him find meaning in his relationship. Shiori is perhaps the most presently jealous, having never had love in life and being deeply in love with

Takashi, yet she works against her own self-interest and helps Takashi find his old fiancée’s memory. These instances are archetypal of Japanese core values, such as considering others and self-sacrifice. They provide human depth to the relationships. And while these characters are not blood related, it seems fitting that the setting is similar to a home—the characters live and work together with family-like bonds. Perhaps this is not a traditional depiction of heaven, but the gestures of kindness between people who love and forgive each other are the kinds of peaceful actions you might expect to belong there.

IV. Orpheus

*Orpheus* (1950, written and directed by Jean Cocteau) is a French film that contemporarily reimagines aspects of the Greek myth of Orpheus. It is considered the central film in Cocteau's “Orphic Trilogy,” the first being *The Blood of a Poet* (1930) and the final being *Testament of Orpheus* (1960). All of these films deal with religious imagery and invoke mythological elements such as angels and demons, but *Orpheus* is the only film to so explicitly take a journey from our world into the afterlife, a landmark depiction which was heralded for its simple but ingenious special effects.²³

The story begins with the famous poet Orpheus, who embodies French values of liberty and sexual latitude.²⁴ One day he witnesses the death of a fellow poet named Cégeste, who is run down by two men on motorcycles. A Princess who sponsors Cégeste is present for his death. She

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has Cégeste’s body carried into her car to “take him to the hospital.” She notices Orpheus and insists that he join them to act as a witness. However, Orpheus soon realizes they are not heading anywhere near a hospital and that Cégeste is dead. Instead, they drive to a looming dark mansion, accompanied by the Princess’s henchmen, revealed to be the two motorcyclists.

Once inside the mansion, Orpheus is shocked to see the Princess reanimate Cégeste and lead him through a mirror, followed by her henchmen. Orpheus tries to follow them, but is unable to pass through the mirror. He drifts to sleep and suddenly finds himself in some remote sand dunes, where the Princess’s chauffeur, Heurtebise, is waiting for him. Heurtebise takes Orpheus home to his pregnant wife, Eurydice, who has been worried over his disappearance. Eurydice tries to inform Orpheus she’s pregnant, but he irritably brushes her off, obsessed with finding this mysterious Princess again. Heurtebise claims to know very little about his employer or when she might return, so Orpheus invites him to stay in their home until Heurtebise hears from the Princess. Orpheus is so obsessed that he becomes a recluse, to the chagrin of the townspeople, who suspect him for the disappearance of Cégeste. As Orpheus ignores his wife and pours over clues that might lead him back to the Princess and her otherworldly powers, Heurtebise gradually falls in love with Eurydice.

Throughout Orpheus’s obsession, the Princess appears in his room at night and watches him sleep. It is revealed that the Princess has these powers because she is actually a manifestation of Death (known as La Mort). Jealous and possessive of Orpheus, La Mort secretly brings her henchmen into his home and takes the life of Eurydice, leading her through a mirror to the underworld. Heurtebise tries to stop La Mort, but to no avail. He convinces Orpheus of La Mort’s true identity and persuades him to pursue Eurydice into the underworld. In turn, Orpheus
reveals he may have fallen in love with La Mort, and isn’t totally sure which woman he intends to retrieve. Heurtebise hands Orpheus a pair of special surgical gloves that were accidentally left behind by La Mort’s henchmen, and Orpheus is able to use them to pass through the mirror.

Orpheus and Heurtebise travel through the underworld, which is depicted as a ruined city, until they reach a building filled with halls and tunnels. They wander until they eventually find La Mort and join her as witnesses in the investigation of the premature passing of Eurydice. They are interrogated by a tribunal of omniscient judges, who rule that Eurydice was taken illegally. The judges agree to restore Eurydice’s life on one condition: Orpheus can never look at her with his own eyes again as punishment for his indiscretions. Orpheus agrees to the terms, and they return home accompanied by Heurtebise, who has volunteered to assist them in adapting to the restriction.

Eventually Orpheus accidentally glances at Eurydice, sending her back to the underworld. Shortly after, an angry mob of townspeople confront Orpheus for the death of Cégeste and shoot him, sending Orpheus to the underworld as well. Once there, Orpheus declares his deep love for La Mort. She, however, has decided to “die” in Orpheus’s place so that he might become an “immortal poet.” The tribunal of judges considers this a fair trade and sends Orpheus and Eurydice home with no memory of the underworld or any of the events that took place. This time when Orpheus learns he is to be a father, he is overjoyed. For their meddling, La Mort and Heurtebise are both sentenced to an ambiguous but extremely unpleasant fate.

A myriad of symbols and cinematic ideas show up throughout the film, but the director Jean Cocteau openly acknowledged the major themes of his work:
The three basic themes of Orpheus are: 1. The successive deaths through which a poet must pass before he becomes, in that admirable line from Mallarmé, tel qu’en lui-même enfin l’éternité le change—changed into himself at last by eternity. 2. The theme of immortality: the person who represents Orphée’s Death sacrifices herself and abolishes herself to make the poet immortal. 3. Mirrors: we watch ourselves grow old in mirrors. They bring us closer to death.25

What might this creative marriage of mirrors and the afterlife indicate about Cocteau’s culture? The motif of mirrors and Death’s personified beauty are both very physical, visual elements related to the human body. These align with the prominence of the sensual in French culture, a country “which has a famously libertine disposition toward sex.”26 Conjointly, the pursuit of immortality is achieved through art, a chief value of the French and one that at times tiptoes the tightrope of perversion. The film also links death with art, exalting the sensual passion for one’s art above any other virtue. As stated by Cornelia Tsakiridou of La Salle University, “The Orphic journey to the underworld, to art’s classical workshop—whose overseer, La Mort, is at once a ghost and a desirable eroticized body—is a coded, enigmatic cinematograph of Cocteau’s artistic life.”27 The veil separating the two worlds is thin in this imagining, and death is little more than a beautiful archway; the real thematic goal is to have significance in eternity through art.

The film is obsessed with death, not just as a character but as a motivation, a reason to create art. The main character pines after the female “Death,” a visual metaphor for preoccupation with one’s own mortality. There is a certain hubris that permeates the work, not in

overly showy technique or references to one’s own auteurism, but rather the implications that death exists to serve art. The film intentionally exalts the immortality of poetry to match the magnitude of the world beyond. The film is thereby void of a certain degree of reverence for the spiritual, and instead seeks the sensual.

*Orpheus*’s dismissal of death’s finality is consistent with earlier classical approaches on the subject, such as *Faust* by Goethe (whom Cocteau actually cites as an influence) or the Greek epics, in which characters sometimes pass in and out of the underworld with relative frequency. While there is no way to know Cocteau’s intentions with certainty, his conflation of death and art as the ultimate value could also be tied to his country’s long history of violent revolutions and strong participation in the Renaissance and its Greco-Roman influences. With a blood soaked history, rediscovering artful Greek insights on death could give more meaning to one’s own.

To pass into the underworld, La Mort leads a man through a mirror, with one aesthetic implication being that the “other side” is little more than a reflection of the mortal world. Cocteau first visualized mirrors as doorways thirty years earlier in his film *The Blood of a Poet*, but in *Orpheus* they are much more connected to the underworld. The use of mirrors as props or set pieces is smattered throughout the film, making these mirrors a clear visual motif for being closer to death. In antiquity, reflections are associated with both vanity and eternity; by pairing them so directly with the afterlife, Orpheus ties the afterlife to focusing on one’s self and leaving one’s mark in death. “Mirrors are the doors by which death comes,” notes one character sagely. “Look a lifetime in a mirror and you will see Death at work.”

In contrast with the touched upon Hollywood versions of the afterlife, which are organized, in control, and determined to set things in their proper state, this French imagining of
the other side is more Grecian altogether. Like the gods of Mount Olympus, the supernatural powers that be have passions that drive them. For example, La Mort pines after a mortal every night and falls deeply in love with him. This goes against the protocol of her world and eventually she is arrested for it.

She willingly takes on some unknown eternal consequence to save Orpheus, demonstrating that even those with godlike powers can be punished by others with higher powers. The afterlife in Orpheus may not be so polished and futuristic as the American tradition, but it certainly doesn’t have the simple and practical domesticity of Japan. The underworld is huge and gothic, with crumbling stone and endless chasms. This imagining is similar to the ostentatious descriptions of hell in Dante’s *The Divine Comedy*, complete with other wandering
souls. Clearly in this interpretation the underworld and hell are not quite the same, however—when Orpheus comments that he would follow his wife to hell, Heurtebise responds that he “needn’t go that far” to retrieve her. It is worth noting that hell actually does exist in this film interpretation, as does the constant threat of pain or punishment (a threat delivered upon for La Mort and Heurtebise at the end). The underworld itself, however, is not some fear inducing impetus for righteous behavior. The characters are still constantly driven by adulterous, masochistic love, with Orpheus notably falling for Death herself.

The tribune of the underworld is curiously casual toward extramarital affairs. While acknowledging that some of this may stem from the Greek source material, the attitude is still surprising for a film that directly references the Bible. There could be a number of reasons for this. Orpheus is openly unfaithful to Eurydice without any indication of inner conflict. His character might be a manifestation of long held privileges for wealthy men of status in France. According to historical court proceedings, French leaders have thought for many centuries (and some perhaps still do) “that a wealthy Parisian [should] have the right to have sex where and when he likes with the partner of his choice...They have money, power and influence so, to them, it is only logical that they should have women, too.” The underworld parallels this French cultural background; they punish Orpheus out of principle, but in the end, adultery does not maintain its biblical seriousness.

The supernatural beings in Orpheus are unique in the way they interact with the living. Citizens of the underworld are as tangible and present as one’s neighbors or friends. They have

special abilities, such as apparating or passing through mirrors, but there are no distinct
metaphysical limitations in their earthly exchanges, such as the inability to move corporeal
objects or invisibility to the naked eye. While supernatural beings seem to have unfettered
abilities, there are still ideological rules they must abide by: citizens of the underworld are not
allowed to fall in love with the living. They are supposed to follow orders when performing their
responsibilities and can report one another if there are problems. Perhaps the agency that
accompanies their powers is a reflection of the French emphasis on personal liberty. The
supernatural beings can choose to use their powers however they wish; they will just have to face
the consequences of their actions. La Mort even differentiates between the rules of the two
worlds in the case of Eurydice, admitting that it’s possible she overstepped her boundaries. She
hints at the presence of a higher power they are subject to, and La Mort goes so far as to
reference biblical consequences for disobeying the rules: “Won’t you ever learn not to look
back? People have been turned into a pillar of salt for that!”

Though based on a Greek myth, the milieu of Orpheus can’t escape its pervasive
Christian influence, in which faith is always the ultimate impetus. When Orpheus is confused
about how to pass through a mirror to get to the underworld, Heurtebise responds, “You don’t
have to understand. You just have to believe.” And yet, La Mort directly disavows any definitive
personification of a higher power. The god-like “he” who orders the underworld exists nowhere,
not unlike the ubiquitous nature of the Trinity. She expounds: “Some say he thinks of us...others,
that we are his thoughts. Others say that he sleeps and we are his dream...his bad dream.” La
Mort’s blatant rejection of an accessible God stands out more like ideological commentary than
the simple rules of worldbuilding.
There is a mystical ambiguity present in the design, as some aesthetic choices are given no explanation. This is quite different from the utilitarian imaginings of the American heaven or the minimalist Japanese afterlife. In this French tradition, not everything serves a clear purpose; sometimes it is simply present for art’s sake. For example, like the other filmic representations, Heurtebise acts as an escort, leading Orpheus by the hand through the deeper levels of the underworld. But upon entering that world himself, Heurtebise’s body responds differently than Orpheus’s. Heurtebise floats motionless and looks as if he is standing in a gust of wind when there is none. This is not a story mechanism, it’s just an unexplained creative choice, as Heurtebise uncharacteristically refuses to answer Orpheus’s questions about how or why he is floating.

There are, however, a myriad of creative mechanics on how one is shepherded to the underworld, which include reflections of contemporaneous technology. Whenever a portal to the underworld opens, one of La Mort’s servants sends out cryptic messages using a radio transmitter. This aesthetic choice calls to mind the codes sent during wartime, and is a natural inclusion given the recent backdrop of World War II, for which the country had recently suffered invasion and numerous casualties. Apparently La Mort also uses gloves when taking people’s souls, like a murderer who doesn’t want to leave fingerprints. She reproves a servant for forgetting La Mort’s gloves by insisting absolute discipline like on a ship, indicating that while we don’t know why they need the radio or gloves, there is a sophisticated order to exercising their powers.

The underworld characters wear fashionable, modern attire, allowing them to blend in. Heurtebise sports the formal uniform of a chauffeur, and “Death” herself has the smoky and
seductive ornamenting of a femme fatale, with dark makeup, long black gloves, dramatic low key lighting, and even cigarettes. Using film noir conventions to personify death this way could also point to post-war influences, and implies a certain cynicism that a femme fatale traditionally represents. La Mort’s muscle men wear slick leather jackets and never remove their motorcycle helmets. A formally dressed committee oversees the rules of the underworld, and their dark suits call to mind the guardian angels of the American tradition. But these figures are positioned more like a tier of politicians than businessmen in a corporate boardroom. They are even referred to as judges.

The use of political figures in a tribune setup calls to mind the lasting legacy of domineering, omniscient authority figures in French history. In pre-revolution France, the church and state jointly condemned the people through oppressive, punitive measures. The tribune delivers the hair splitting rule that Orpheus can never look at his wife, a fittingly archaic detail retained from the source myth. They dole out the excruciating torture intended for La Mort and Heurtebise. The punishments inflicted on characters in Orpheus reflect this kind of overreaching regime, familiar to the French historical experience. Perhaps it is little wonder that the film is so concerned with relishing the sensual in the face of eternal consequences.

Heaven Can Wait looks forward; After Life looks back. Orpheus looks at itself. With mirrors as a fitting symbol, the reflection is not so much an inward analysis as a fascination at the outward legacy one leaves in art, love, and death. Though a story about the afterlife, its carnal mindedness keeps it at death’s doors. While the film mentions hell, it never concerns itself with heaven; it’s too preoccupied with the terrestrial world.

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V. A Ghost Story

David Lowery, writer and director of *A Ghost Story* (2017), has described himself as an atheist. Fittingly, he has also remarked, “I don't believe in the afterlife, but I do believe in ghosts.” In this quiet and reflective film, Lowery ruminates on postmodern ideas about personal ghosts and moving on in the afterlife. The film serves as a timely reflection of secular perspectives on the wrestle with death, particularly in cases of scientific skepticism. Lowery has referred to it as “a cosmic love story about TIME and the enormity [of] our existence.” *A Ghost Story* was distributed by A24, a recently formed independent entertainment company known for curating contemporary arthouse films and academy award winners.

The film opens on a couple who live a simple life in a small house. The unnamed husband spends time working on his music career while his wife searches online for a new house they might move into. That night they hear a bang from their piano, but don’t find anything after searching the house.

One morning the husband is killed in a car accident just outside of their home. His wife identifies his body at the hospital and covers it with a sheet. After she leaves, the body sits up as a ghost, still covered. The ghost wanders around the hospital, unseen, until he comes upon a door of light. He does not pass through, however, and it closes.

The ghost wanders home and examines every room. Time passes, and he watches his wife grieve his death. He tries to comfort her, but she cannot see or hear him. One day he notices

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the lights flicker and looks out the window to see that there is another ghost wearing a sheet in
the house across from his. The other ghost waves hello and tells him it’s waiting for someone,
but it can’t remember who.

Some time later, the ghost’s wife brings a man home and kisses him. This infuriates the
ghost, who flickers the electricity and hurls books to the floor. Reflecting on a memory of him,
the wife listens to a song by her husband, and shortly after decides to move out. As she packs her
bag, she writes a note to her husband and hides it in a slit in the wall, then paints over it. The
ghost tries to retrieve the note, but is unable to. Before long, children run through the
house—someone else has moved in.

The ghost watches the new family grow as they practice the piano, enjoy family dinners,
and celebrate Christmas. The children become aware of the ghost and are bothered by him. The
ghost, frustrated by the family’s presence, breaks a picture frame and throws plates and glasses
against the walls and floor. Terrified, the family moves away. The ghost continues to try and
retrieve his wife’s hidden note, but to no avail. Through the window, he sees that the other ghost
is still waiting in the other house, looking even sadder than before.

The main ghost wanders through his house and finds that the new tenants are throwing a
party. He listens to a partygoer berate a woman for trying to write a book and then launch into a
sort of theoretical tyrade. The partygoer describes that while most people try to leave a legacy,
everything will eventually be forgotten or destroyed. Upon finishing his speech, the partygoer
notices the lights flicker.

Years later, the house is run down and completely abandoned, void of any furniture
except an overturned piano. The ghost still tries to recover the note from his wife in the wall. Just
as he secures a grasp on it, a bulldozer levels the home. The ghost is left standing in the rubble. He looks over and sees his neighboring ghost, whose home has also been destroyed. The neighbor ghost accepts that the person it’s waiting for isn’t coming and immediately vanishes.

A skyscraper is erected where the ghost’s home used to be. He is present for all of its construction and completion. He wanders the halls as corporate meetings take place and stares out of boxy windows. From the top of the skyscraper, he looks over a high-tech world he no longer recognizes. The ghost jumps off the top of the building and falls until he finds himself transported to an ambiguous time.

The ghost watches some early settlers construct a homestead and live there in peace. One day he notices the young daughter write a note and hide it under a rock. As she does so, she hums the song the ghost wrote while he was alive. Shortly thereafter, he sees the family has been massacred in an Indian attack, including the little girl. He watches their bodies decay into bones.

Suddenly, the ghost finds himself back in his house as it was when he lived there. He watches himself and his wife come into the house and explore it for the first time. The ghost hears his living self write the song. As he listens to the song, he watches his life with his wife play out: their dinners, their disagreements, their tender moments. The couple argues about moving out. The ghost watches his living self reluctant to move anywhere else even though he’s unsure why. The night his living self finally agrees to leave, the ghost bangs on the piano, causing the sound for which they could not find the source.

Time jumps ahead again, and the ghost sees his earlier ghost self watch his wife leave. The ghost attempts to retrieve the note one last time, and finally succeeds. The front door swings open, and the moment he reads the note, the ghost vanishes. The film ends on his empty sheet.
A Ghost Story is noticeably concerned with the present, material world over any imagined spirit realm. Even more so than After Life, this film is nostalgic. It refuses to move on and instead pines away for lived experiences on earth. This is most apparent in the scene where a doorway of light opens to the ghost, presumably the gateway to pass on into the next state of existence. The ghost, however, deliberately refuses to walk through the door. He chooses instead to cling to his familiar, physical home on earth. The ghost’s refusal can be taken to reflect modern culture’s anxiety surrounding death, as well as the worth placed upon the tangible world. The anxiety signifies the rise in secularism that has made death “forbidden” and “unnamable.”

Swiss psychiatrist Elisabeth Kübler-Ross laments that in this postmodern, a-religious and secular society, few of us die in what she calls the fifth stage of acceptance.

The door to the afterlife shines with light and color, but is ultimately void of detail, making it inaccessible and unfamiliar. Unlike the previous films, which take most of mortal life for granted or leave it behind completely, A Ghost Story cradles it, drinking in the senses and seasons, each blade of grass and every brick. To one who doubts the existence of an afterlife, fleeting moments increase in value. The construction of a house, the beauty of its origin, and the circumstances surrounding one’s place of love and death could carry more importance to an atheist than one who believes that, in the words of C.S. Lewis, we were “made for another world.”

This material importance is the prevailing theme of the movie, and it continues to manifest itself in a number of ways.

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Everything about *A Ghost Story* is physical; it is a longing for a return to the material world. The ghost endows meaning to the everyday actions of the living, such as cleaning, listening to music, or eating dinner. The film spends enough time on these scenes that the viewer has no choice but to reflect on the immanence of these quiet moments in their own life. There are drawn out shots of each room in the house, and the only way for the ghost to interact with anyone in the house is by handling the tangible. While the previously mentioned Hollywood films are focused on forming new relationships, or the Asian films appreciate them and move on, *A Ghost Story* is in a state of paralysis with its earthly relationships. The film constantly hovers over them, refusing to let go. The ghost is devastated that his lover would move on, but has no catharsis other than finally coming to peace with the passing of time. Even the 4:3 aspect ratio creates a closed environment, and visually indicates that there is nothing more beyond the present imagery.

After a sheet is placed over the ghost’s face at death, he keeps it draped over his head for the remainder of the film, calling to mind the immediately recognizable bedsheets ghost imagery that dates back to the 17th century. 36 This was a smart and practical aesthetic decision, but one that comes with grounded, corporeal implications: one does not ever truly escape death in an afterlife on earth. There is always a physical token, a separating sheet from full access to life, a constant reminder that one’s body is meant for the ground. For the most part, the film is also void of dialogue. The silence of the ghost’s world is like the silence in death. Life moves around him, but for the most part, scenes are very still, particularly when the ghost is alone.

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This silence is sharply broken in the party scene for the most dialogue dense moment of
the film: a partygoer berates another guest for trying to write a book. He delivers an extended
monologue on his existential musings, which really feels like societal commentary on the
transient nature of existence and our cosmic insignificance (an idea which continues to grow as
scientific discoveries about the vastness of the universe continue to increase). The partygoer
explains that while people try to be remembered for their legacy, eventually everything will be
forgotten. He gives the example of Beethoven’s 9th symphony, and acknowledges that while the
entire world remembers to it today and may even take it beyond this planet in the distant future,
one day most of humanity will inevitably be destroyed by a tectonic shift or Yosemite exploding,
and the song will fade from memory. He qualifies this, however, by suggesting that perhaps one
day after mankind has returned to scraping by in caves, someone will remember a tune they once
heard and Beethoven’s 9th will live on by meaning something to someone. The musical example
in his qualification makes a return, but not before he finishes by ultimately siding with his
nihilism:

The universe will keep expanding, and it'll eventually take all matter with it. Everything
you've ever strived for, everything that you and some stranger. On the other side of the
planet share with some future stranger on some entirely different planet without even
knowing it, everything that ever made you feel big or stand up tall, it'll all go. Every atom
in this dimension... will be pulled apart by force as simple as... And then all these
shredded particles will contract again... and... the universe is gonna suck itself back into a
speck too small for any of us to see. So, you can write a book... but the pages will burn.

doi:10.1111/nous.12030
You can sing a song and pass it down. You can write a play and hope that folks will remember it... keep performing it. You can build your dream house... but ultimately none of that matters any more than digging your fingers into the ground to bury a fence post.

The fact that the ghost is standing right alongside as this theory is presented seems like the visualization of an inner conflict. The filmmaker leans into themes of nihilism but simultaneously personifies hope in a ghostly existence, juxtaposing these ideas in tandem with one another.

Interestingly, the partygoer’s words do come full circle in the form of both the ghost’s song and his wife hiding the note. When the ghost travels back in time, he notices a pioneer girl hum the tune he wrote. She also hides a note under a rock, similar to his wife. In one of the first lines of dialogue in the film, the ghost’s wife even reveals she also did this as a little girl: “When I was little and we used to move all the time, I'd write these notes, and I would fold them up really small... and I would hide them in different places, so that if I ever wanted to go back, there'd be a piece of me there waiting.” These cyclical manifestations hint at a continued loop of life and meaning, and serve as a counterexample to the nihilism presented by the partygoer.

Time as a concept tonally shifts throughout the film. At first, it is painful. The sequences of years passing is terrifying and cold, conveying a deep dread that the world will move on without you. The partygoer cites the billions of years during which things will change and be forgotten, with the earth eventually becoming enveloped by the sun. Families move in and out of the ghost’s home until it is abandoned and destroyed. He waits around until he is in a future world that he does not even recognize, and sees bodies decompose and erode. After the ghost transports back to the past, however, time slowly evolves into a comforting concept, as he is able

Figure 4. The ghost decides not to enter the doorway of light in *A Ghost Story* (2017). © A24.

to relive moments of his life to find catharsis. He even haunts himself, suggesting that in some ways it is our memories which are our ghosts.

The dread of losing precious moments in life ultimately springs from a lack of certainty about what is beyond, hence the ghost not stepping through the door of light. This is not limited to *A Ghost Story*. The science fiction film *The Discovery* (2017, written and directed by Charlie McDowell), which came out the same year as *A Ghost Story*, takes place after a man has scientifically proven the existence of an afterlife, leading to incredibly high suicide rates. As the story progresses, the characters discover that not only does an afterlife exist, but it is an alternate version of one’s life, only with different choices made. The characters guard this secret, knowing that if the information got out, millions more would commit suicide in hopes to improve their current lives.
While plunging into suicide in the hopes of a happy afterlife appears to be the complete opposite of *A Ghost Story*’s desperate hold on mortal life, they stem from the same necessity: certainty. The ghost won’t pass through the door of light because he does not know what is on the other side. In *The Discovery*, it is notable that people want to move into the afterlife once they are certain it exists. Other contemporaneous texts employ a futurist approach in quelling this anxiety. Synthetic afterlives are present in many recent science fiction shows, such as *Black Mirror* (2011 – present, created by Charlie Brooker) and *Westworld* (2016 – present, created by Jonathan Nolan). Both of these shows feature episodes in which characters are able to live on in a tailor made “afterlife” (referred to as “San Junipero” or “The Valley Beyond,” respectively) by uploading their consciousnesses to a server or cloud. The minds of these characters can then exist for eternity in a state of peace and paradise, mirroring traditional concepts of heaven, but achieved through scientific means. Rather than risk the chance of an afterlife for the soul, these synthetic alternatives provide the absolute certainty in building one ourselves. Identical concepts are present in the film *Transcendence* (2014, directed by Wally Pfister) and the video game *SOMA* (2015, directed by Thomas Grip).

While there is a sense of wonder or mystery about what is to come in the traditionally Western or Asian backgrounds, nowhere does this same panic manifest itself. The tone of previously analyzed films indicate a sense that there must be *something* in the great beyond. In short, there is an element of faith. Only the secular cinematic perspective insists on creating a sense of certainty or laments over whether an afterlife really exists.

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VII. Father of Man

*Father of Man* (2019) is my senior capstone short film I wrote and directed as part of Brigham Young University's Media Arts Program. While the culture, doctrine, and values of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints are the foundation of the school, intentional and direct exploration of these elements are relatively uncommon among student capstone films.\(^4^0\) Perhaps this is due to the overwhelming influence of the Church and therefore a perceived feeling of oversaturation and homogeneity in the subject matter. In an attempt to explore these elements creatively while remaining universally accessible as a story, *Father of Man* is purposely steeped in imagery that pulls from Latter-day Saint traditions and lore. However, beyond the intentional aesthetic choices, I will reflect on and analyze implicit ideologies which manifest themselves as a result of my religious culture, as I have done with previous films.

*Father of Man* opens on Boyd, a well-dressed elderly gentleman. He waits outside an apartment door holding a gift: a small, decorative stone engraved with the image of a child and grandfather. The door opens and Boyd is greeted by his pregnant daughter-in-law, Sophia, to whom he presents the stone. His son, Emmett, comes around the corner and greets Boyd by going in for a hug, but Boyd coolly deflects this with a handshake. As Boyd sits with Emmett and Sophia over Thanksgiving dinner, Boyd rudely berates Emmett for pursuing a music career. Sophia attempts to soothe the tension by suggesting that Emmett perform his latest song, “Who Am I to You.” As Emmett picks up his guitar and sings, it becomes clear to Boyd that the song is about him. Through the lyrics, Emmett yearns for a deeper relationship. Boyd becomes

\(^{40}\) As of 2019, over forty fiction capstone films have been produced since 2009 (studentfilms.byu.edu). While some of the films reflect inherent Latter-day Saint values, only two of them directly reference Mormonism in terminology or visuals: *Stickup Kid* (2019) and *Father of Man* (2019). Five of them hint at a pioneer connection through stories about the Old West; three of them overtly reference Catholicism.
uncomfortable and interrupts the song by offering to pay for Emmett’s college, insisting his
grandson “needs a father, not a rockstar.” Burning with humiliation, Emmett rejects the offer and
tells Boyd he’s never needed him or his money. Boyd silently storms out of the apartment,
insulted.

As Boyd makes his way down the apartment stairs, he suffers from a sudden heart attack
and collapses. Medical professionals are unable to save his life and Boyd dies. After a moment,
the spirit of Boyd finds himself in a vast Spirit World, which appears to be an endless sea of
glass under a rising sun. Another figure appears and introduces himself as Gary. He tells Boyd
there isn’t much time and holds up a white, glowing stone—suddenly Boyd sees a vision of
Emmett’s possible future. In the vision, Emmett decides he isn’t ready to be a father and leaves
Sophia and his newborn son to pursue a worldwide tour with his band. When the vision closes,
Boyd is irate that Emmett would leave. Gary asserts that only Boyd can persuade Emmett to stay,
but Boyd refuses, citing that his son never liked or listened to him. Gary informs Boyd that he
will soon be transferred and will be unable to help Emmett. He begs Boyd to try for the sake of
his grandson, and finally Boyd reluctantly agrees.

Gary uses his white stone to transport them to a concert which features Emmett’s band.
Gary informs Boyd that Emmett will sign a contract for the world tour and they can’t let that
happen. No one is able to see or hear the spirits, but Gary demonstrates how they can influence
the living by whispering suggestions to them and giving them ideas. As the band waits to
perform offstage, Emmett’s band mate and drummer, Shaun, approaches with the contract.
Emmett looks over it, but the band is called onstage. Gary encourages Boyd to give Emmett
fatherly encouragement, but Boyd instead reprimands Emmett until he begins playing his guitar, cutting Boyd off.

Boyd tries to shout over the music, but Gary points out that Emmett is too distracted to hear their influence, and rushes off to try and solve the problem. As Boyd listens to the band’s song, he notices it’s a faster-paced version of “Who Am I to You.” Boyd soon realizes that the lyrics in later verses are laced with bitterness and resentment toward him. As he glances between Emmett’s passionate singing and the audience’s cheers, Boyd feels embarrassed and betrayed. Meanwhile, Gary manages to influence two junkies to cut off power in the building, which shuts down the band. Gary rushes back on stage to give Boyd his moment, but instead of encouraging Emmett, Boyd lambastes him for singing a hateful song in front of everyone and sneeringly reminds him of his new responsibilities as a dad. While Emmett does not physically hear Boyd, he feels Boyd’s aggression and disapproval. Emmett defiantly pockets the world tour contract from Shaun. Gary sighs in failure and warps them back to the Spirit World.

Back in the Spirit World, Gary presses Boyd for why he stayed a part of Emmett’s life. Boyd dodges the question by listing off everything he did for Emmett growing up such as preparing lunches and teaching him how to work, and earnestly asks if all of that counted for something. Boyd suggests that Emmett just needs to actually see his son, so they warp back to a doctor’s appointment with a scheduled ultrasound. Although Sophia encourages Emmett to be present for the ultrasound, Emmett chooses to wait in the lobby. Boyd is irritated by this, but Gary holds Boyd back, wanting to avoid another disastrous clash. Gary influences a young couple to verbalize what a special experience seeing their baby was and Emmett overhears them. He becomes curious and finally decides to go see the ultrasound for himself.
Upon joining Sophia in the room, Emmett is transfixed by the ultrasound image of his son. Boyd and Gary follow behind him, and Boyd is also moved by seeing his grandson. After a moment, Emmett opens up and expresses his doubts about being a father to Sophia. He nervously suggests that he might not be ready. Sophia starts to encourage him, but Boyd chimes in by laughing off Emmett’s concerns and telling him to buck up. Though well intended, feeling this influence upsets Emmett, who believes he’ll never escape the disapproval of his father. Emmett sulks out of the room and Boyd realizes his words were hurtful. Emmett pulls out the world tour contract and signs it, and the spirits warp back to the Spirit World.

Gary chastises Boyd for his sharpness, but Boyd defends his actions by reminding Gary he doubted his ability to help Emmett in the first place. However, Gary insists that Boyd is the only one who can fix the problem, and that the only reason Emmett is running away is because Boyd made Emmett feel like he could never be good enough. Gary teaches Boyd that the real way to help his grandson is to help his son.

It’s now around Christmastime, and the spirits watch Emmett secretly pack his bags. When Sophia walks in, she brings Emmett a gift: Boyd’s decorative stone of the child and grandfather, but with a father holding a guitar painted in. Although torn over his decision, Emmett presents Sophia with the contract. She is shocked Emmett is leaving, but is even more devastated when he implies he won’t be coming back. Emmett assures Sophia he will send them money, but asserts that his son will be better off without him because fathers just criticize their sons. Boyd steps in and begs Emmett not to leave. However, Emmett still prepares to go until Sophia goes into labor and they rush to the hospital.
Feeling like he’s failed, Boyd admits to Gary he’s always felt like a terrible father, but Gary encourages him for doing the best he could. Gary then informs Boyd that he’s being transferred. He hugs Boyd and tells him he loves him before vanishing, leaving Boyd alone. Boyd notices his painted stone and reaches down. Upon being touched, the stone glows white with power, and Boyd uses it to warp away.

Emmett accompanies Sophia to the hospital room, but doesn’t follow her inside. He breaks down in the hallway, unsure of whether to stay or go, until he feels the presence of Boyd. Boyd apologizes for being so hard on Emmett. He admits he stayed a part of Emmett’s life because he loves him. As Boyd embraces his son, Emmett becomes somewhat aware of Boyd’s presence. Emmett is overcome by emotion at this spiritual experience with his father, and Boyd comforts him and tells him he can do it. As they hug, Boyd slips the painted stone into Emmett’s pocket. Emmett feels it there and looks over the stone. He deliberately throws away the contract and joins Sophia in the birthing room.

As Sophia delivers the baby, Boyd is surprised to see Gary standing by. Gary slowly descends as a cloud of light into her womb, and Boyd understands that Gary was the spirit of his grandson. He audibly whispers Gary’s name, which prompts Emmett and Sophia to name their son Gary. The film ends as Emmett softly sings the tender version of “Who Am I to You” to baby Gary and Boyd stands by.

As was mentioned, I intentionally included many aesthetic and iconographical elements from Mormonism’s cosmology and mythos. Some of these include depicting the Spirit World as an endless sea of glass, surrounded by rings of fire, planets, and stars (I imagined these to be
Kolob or Oliblish)\textsuperscript{41}, as well as Gary’s use of a white stone to transport himself and peer into the future. The white stone and sea of glass imagery are direct references to the Latter-day Saint scriptures found in the Doctrine and Covenants:

The angels do not reside on a planet like this earth; But they reside in the presence of God, on a globe like a sea of glass and fire, where all things for their glory are manifest, past, present, and future, and are continually before the Lord...Then the white stone mentioned in Revelation 2:17, will become a Urim and Thummim to each individual who receives one, whereby things pertaining to a higher order of kingdoms will be made known.\textsuperscript{42}

The white stone was also intended to call to mind the frequent use of other stones in the Latter-day Saint liturgy. These include Joseph Smith’s seer stones or “interpreters”\textsuperscript{43} and the sixteen small stones in the Book of Mormon which were “white and clear, even as transparent glass.”\textsuperscript{44} The Spirit of the Lord touching these stones to give them light is directly referenced when Boyd’s spirit touches the decorative stone, making it glow.

Initially, incorporating these elements was meant to push the boundaries of what has been explored in Latter-day Saint art and cinema. There is certainly a discrepancy within the religious community between what is official history and doctrine and what is depicted in art, with seer stones being a primary example. This is succinctly stated by Anthony R. Sweat, Associate Professor of Church History and Doctrine at BYU and prominent Latter-day Saint artist:

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{41} \textit{The Pearl of Great Price}. Facsimile 2. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. 2013.
\item \textsuperscript{42} \textit{Doctrine and Covenants}. 130:6-7, 10. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. 2013.
\item \textsuperscript{43} “Seer Stones.” The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/history/topics/seer-stones?lang=eng.
\item \textsuperscript{44} \textit{The Book of Mormon}. Ether 3:1. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. 2013.
\end{itemize}
“...None of the images ever printed in the history of the *Ensign* (or recent Church videos, such as *Joseph Smith, Prophet of the Restoration*) depict the translation process of the Book of Mormon as having taken place by placing a seer stone or the Nephite interpreters in a hat. Is there any wonder, then, that there is confusion in the minds and hearts of believing persons when they learn through repeated scholarly sources that the Book of Mormon was apparently translated through seer stones...?”

While *Father of Man* does not tackle historical accounts of visions or sacred objects, instead pulling inspiration from obscure and esoteric scripture verses, it is an attempt to synthesize core Latter-day Saint ideas into a more concrete picture of the Spirit World—one which has not often been depicted in art. Perhaps this hesitancy stems from a reverence for the danger of misrepresentation. Sweat has also described the responsibility religious artists have to their communities, noting that when overt spiritual art is connected to a certain faith tradition, those of the faith tradition will see the film didactically and “learn doctrine” from the film, whether intended or unintended, conscious or subconscious.

As a case in point, the scriptural references in *Father of Man* cannot escape the influence of personal interpretation, even while pulled from canonical descriptions. For example, the description of the earth as a “sea of glass” refers to the doctrinal idea of the earth becoming like an enormous “Urim and Thummim”46 (which are often described like glass or crystal), and may be more metaphorical than literal. The film also conflates a description of God’s heaven47 with

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both the postmortal and premortal Spirit Worlds, whereas official church scriptures and teachings do not, providing no doctrinal stance on the issue. According to current Latter-day Saint theology, these spiritual spheres of existence could just as easily be separate and distinct, meaning the spirits of Boyd and Gary would not necessarily interact on the other side. While my artistic choices were intended to push a more specific and scriptural source of inspiration, they might also inadvertently depart from strictly defined Latter-day Saint doctrines.

However disruptive, my effort to explore divine elements may actually be more indicative of my religious cultural than I previously thought. While incorporating mystical visuals into the film felt bold and idiosyncratic on a personal scale, there is actually a broad, established history of Latter-day Saint films that tackle spirits and visitations. Neal L. Maxwell Senior Fellow at BYU, Dr. Terryl L. Givens, notes, “The willingness in Mormonism to collapse the sacred distance between the common and the divine is evident in the depiction of holy beings.” This is even a feature which is actually somewhat unique to the faith tradition. He continues, “Latter-day Saints have often been criticized by surrounding cultures not ready to disregard boundaries that keep heaven and earth apart.”

From the angel’s appearance in *The Life of Nephi* (1915, produced by Chet and Shirl Clawson) to the depiction of deity in *The First Vision* (1976, directed by David Jacobs) and subsequent versions, Mormonism has a rich legacy of visualizing spiritual beings. The Spirit

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World even makes an on screen appearance in To This End Was I Born (1993, directed by Russell Holt). By grouping Father of Man within this corpus, it can be surmised that the comfortable inclusion of metaphysical, ethereal elements suggests a background in which these ideas are accessible, familiar, and essential—an immanence to the everyday far more present than even A Ghost Story. As a Latter-day Saint, it was natural for me to interpret the afterlife this way, not because of canonical scriptural references, but rather due to the tangibility of visions and angels that are baked into the culture.

In his book Transcendental Style in Film: Ozu, Bresson, Dreyer, Paul Schrader calls for a more subdued, transcendent form of cinema which provides the viewer with an authentic spiritual experience. He suggests manipulating audience expectations in the use of mundane and everyday stories, highlighting the disparity between the spiritual existing within the physical, and
achieving “stasis” through long shots that eventually cut to a “blast of music” or “an overt symbol.” Schraeder asserts that the buildup and release provides a moment of spiritual transcendence. He believes this is preferable to what he considers to be a false syllogism, the abundant means—to “simply put the spiritual on film. The film is ‘real,’ the spiritual is ‘on’ film, ergo: the spiritual is real.”

However, because the miraculous is recent and readily available within Mormonism, the naturalness with which Father of Man employs any “abundant means” may be inescapable. Thomas Lefler and Gideon Burton address this problem in their essay Toward a Mormon Cinematic Aesthetic: Film Styles in Legacy when they state that a “significant problem for Latter-day Saints in accepting the transcendental style of film is the fact that Schraeder’s approach rests upon a theology that perceives spiritual reality as immaterial and ‘other,’ with little connection to physical reality or experience. This is fundamentally at odds with LDS belief about the physical nature of God and the spiritual nature of physical matter.” To some Latter-day Saints, the depiction of spirits whispering ideas into people’s heads may read as present and everyday as doing the dishes. There is no disparity.

Perhaps what grounds Father of Man over a traditional grandiose interpretation is its relationships. While the film features dramatic and tactile depictions of the immaterial, the story is not about Joan of Arc or Moses or even Joseph Smith. It’s about simple, normal people—more specifically a baby boomer and his millennial son who don’t know how to communicate. The abundant elements are not the centerpiece, but are rather taken for granted; they exist only to serve a story about a family. Featuring an average, imperfect family as part of a vast and ethereal

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milieu is inherent to the Latter-day Saint experience (if not one of the most fundamental ideas). One could reasonably infer from this aspect of the film that familial connections are important to Latter-day Saints. But implicit ideologies surrounding family relationships show up in a number of other ways as well.

Gary’s knowledge of who his parents will be, as well as his interest in staying connected with them, springs from the Mormon folk doctrine that individuals knew each other and made promises in the pre-existence, and can be found in other Latter-day Saint films that deal with premortal life, such as Saturday’s Warrior (2016, Michael Buster). The idea that Gary’s spirit can consciously exists outside the womb before being born was explicitly derived from two Latter-day Saint concepts: the doctrine of a premortal existence and the more ambiguous example of Christ’s voice coming to a prophet on the other side of the world, even though Christ will be born “on the morrow.” I interpreted this scripture to suggest that Christ did not pass through a “veil” of forgetfulness and gain the ignorance of an infant until the moment of birth, and so I applied the same idea to Gary.

This is a fitting example of how overt spiritual art carries didactic connotations, even if unintended. While I saw Gary’s conscious preexistence before birth as an inherent condemnation of abortion, one might actually view the film as a spiritual justification for it, since Gary is not technically seen within his body until the moment of birth. I had always imagined Gary’s journey with his grandfather as a sort of prenatal out of body experience, a rare occurrence in which his

spirit was able to step out while his infant body slept, until it was “transferred” there permanently. Since the film never explicitly states this (the closest it comes is Gary’s line “I’m not technically supposed to be here”), there is no reason for the audience to interpret it the same way. However, perhaps the most implicit ideology connected to Gary is one which is certainly indicative of core Latter-day Saint doctrine, and especially manifested in his relationship with his grandfather Boyd: that families are even connected in the afterlife.

In the previous films, continuing family relationships are not present. Heaven Can Wait does not even deal with Pendleton’s family. After Life definitely addresses family relationships, but they are largely let go of as characters find inner peace and catharsis by taking a lone journey into the next existence. Orpheus is more focused on present love, as the familial elements are cheated on with Death and regained in life. A Ghost Story pines for lost relationships as they pass away forever. Only in Father of Man are family relationships not only present in the afterlife, but a vital part of it.

One notable example that shares ideas about family is Terrence Malick’s experimental masterpiece The Tree of Life (2011). The film involves scenes of the afterlife that include family members wandering together and greeting one another (filmed on the Bonneville Salt Flats, no less—the same location I used for my Spirit World depiction). Malick certainly observes the lasting kindnesses and cruelties found in family ties, even in the wake of the boundless cosmos. He also paints his work with Judeo-Christian thought specifically, citing the very words of God to Job. However, when it comes to the afterlife sequence, the film goes no further than a brief and wondrous reunion between family members. Perhaps this is out of reverence to Christ’s

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56 “The Tree of Life.” IMDb, IMDb.com.
teachings about marriage in the afterlife or the mystery of what lies beyond. “Eternal families” is a concept that many established religions won’t even claim, but for Latter-day Saints one that is inextricably bound to the afterlife itself.

*Father of Man* also exalts the family in its messaging. Its title sets the stage. The implicit ideologies can be summed up in little statements: family problems carry into the next life and must be resolved. Our family members minister to us from the other side. Gary needs a married mother and father. Emmett chooses family over art, even when his band needs him and he’s signed a contract to tour with them. Sophia moves forward with a pregnancy, even though Emmett doesn’t feel ready and it nearly destroys their marriage. These familial themes were not conscious decisions, but rather religious values that naturally manifested in the work.

Perhaps the greatest indicator of what *Father of Man* communicates about a broader cultural perspective can only be found by examining the breadth of its viewers. Will it resonate the same for those in and out of the faith? Surely *After Life* reads a little differently to a Japanese audience; *Orpheus* reflects Europe from that specific time. But there is something universal in all of these films. In my attempt to translate a peculiar and inaccessible grandeur into a simple, universal story, I hope that *Father of Man* not only proudly waves the banner of its heritage, but contributes in some small way to every viewer’s personal truth.

**VIII. Conclusion**

The examination of artistic depictions of the afterlife in other cultures provides not only personal edification, but can also open one’s eyes to what others value most in *this* life, leading to a richer appreciation of various backgrounds and perspectives. The few examples this paper
includes differ dramatically, though some of them share geographical or political backgrounds. Small differentiations in time, space, or social structures clearly have a prodigious impact on the way artists interpret the Great Beyond. In studying these interpretations, perhaps one can only find synthesis in death.

Due to the sheer volume, a plethora of texts involving the afterlife worthy of consideration have not been not included in this humble analysis. In certain additional media depictions, one can see elements of crossover between the styles previously analyzed in this text. The recent American television series *The Leftovers* (2014 – 2017, created by Damon Lindelof and Tom Perrotta), for example, features a scene which continues that traditional corporate aesthetic, replete with suit and tie wearing guides, heavenly technology, and vast concrete skyscrapers. However, the show also wrestles with that secular question of certainty, as it largely centers on how modern society deals with the disappearance of thousands in a cataclysmic event called “The Sudden Departure.” Another program, *The Good Place* (2016 – 2019, created by Michael Schur), jumps in and out of the afterlife constantly, and uses real studies of ethics and philosophy to examine whether an afterlife system is even effective, a challenge also present in *After Life*. The continued study of additional examples could render a well of endless insight.

While films about the afterlife probably ought not be compared with the more absolute manner in which documentaries or historical dramas reflect reality, Plato reminds us of the world beyond the cave. In the New Testament, the Apostle Paul wrote “For now we see through a glass, darkly.”

58 Perhaps the camera lens can in fact show us something of ourselves in a world to come—if not literal depictions, then types and shadows. Although secularism grows, with its

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perspectives increasingly interwoven into the filmic liturgy, the afterlife somehow remains relevant. Maybe it's simply our inability to let go, or perhaps a deeper and intrinsic yearning for the truer world. Whatever the reason, even in the age of the “nones,” more and more people continue to cling to a belief in an afterlife. Consequentially, as long as communities increasingly believe in life after death, it will continue to be portrayed in new, imaginative ways.

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FATHER OF MAN
(originally titled GUARDIAN)

written by

Barrett Burgin

SHOOTING SCRIPT – 09/25/18
BLUE DRAFT – 10/08/18
PINK DRAFT – 10/15/18
YELLOW DRAFT – 10/20/18

barrettburgin@gmail.com
EXT. STUDIO APARTMENT - EVENING

BOYD (60) hovers outside an apartment door. A self-made gentleman, clothing conservative but expensive. In his hands, he holds a DECORATIVE ROCK tied with a ribbon, engraved with two figures—a CHILD and GRANDFATHER. He nervously turns the rock and sighs, then KNOCKS on the door.

INT. STUDIO APARTMENT - EVENING

The front door swings open--within the small, modest apartment is SOPHIA (28), artistic, observant, very PREGNANT. Boyd examines the space for the first time.

BOYD
So this is where he keeps you locked up?

SOPHIA
Happy Thanksgiving, Boyd.

BOYD
(hands her the rock)

(seeing Emmett)
Ah--son.

EMMETT (30) lingers behind Sophia, a mess of color and creativity, his GUITAR always nearby.

EMMETT
Dad. Thanks for coming.

Emmett moves in for a hug, but Boyd deflects it by grasping hands in a quick, firm SHAKE. Sophia and Emmett share a look.

INT. KITCHENETTE - EVENING

Tucked in a kitchenette, EMMETT obsesses on trimming a rogue piece of turkey. Boyd plays Emmett's guitar in the attached dining room.

BOYD (O.S.)
Is this my old guitar?

EMMETT
Yes!
BOYD (O.S.)
If you're so professional, why'd
you keep it around so long?

Emmett doesn't answer. Sophia tastes a bite.

SOPHIA
Okay. You've really done it--he's
going to be impressed!

Emmett relaxes, hopeful. He kisses her.

BOYD (O.S)
Son! We gonna start before
Christmas?

Emmett grimaces.

SOPHIA
I know you don't believe me, but
you're blessed to still have your
dad with you. Everyone needs their
dad.

(touching her stomach)
This little guy will change things
between you two. You'll see.

Sophia gives Emmett a quick kiss and winks. You've got this.
Emmett nods. Maybe tonight will be different.

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INT. STUDIO APARTMENT - EVENING

The THANKSGIVING DINNER is crammed onto a dressed up coffee
table. Boyd flinches from a TIGHTNESS in his LEFT ARM, but
doesn't let that stop him munching down. He's impressed.
Sophia smiles. Emmett brightens. He offers Boyd the gravy
boat.

EMMETT
Try it with the gravy! It's got
fresh sage.
BOYD
(to Sophia, re: the food)
Emmett has no idea how lucky he got marrying you. If his mother
could've cooked like this, I'd have been a lot more torn up when she
ran off to be a Vegas dancer.

Emmett sulks, overlooked.

EMMETT
The Nevada Ballet's a big deal,
dad...

SOPHIA
Actually, Emmett made the dinner.
Pretty incredible, huh?

Emmett and Sophia wait. Boyd chomps away, says nothing.

SOPHIA (CONT'D)
You raised a talented son, Boyd.
His new song is getting a lot of
attention! Their label wants to
center a tour around it--but that
will wait for the baby of course.

Emmett stares at his plate.

BOYD
The next Mozart, I'm sure.

EMMETT
Dad only likes music if it's more
than a hundred years old.

BOYD
When it was worth listening to.
Sorry Sophia, I tried to teach him
that music won't pay the bills for
a wife and son.

SOPHIA
Guys, please, c'mon! We're all
we've got. Boyd! Be nice! Emmett, I
want you to play your song for your
dad, ok?

Emmett swallows and lifts his guitar as though bearing his
soul. He starts to sing: "Who am I to you?" The lyrics are
clearly about a father and son. Boyd shifts, uncomfortable,
then finally INTERRUPTS-
BOYD
Well while he’s doing that, I have
an announcement!


BOYD (CONT’D)
(to Emmett)
Since you're going to be a parent,
how much will it take for you to
finish school? Little Boyd needs a
father. Not a rockstar.

Emmett burns with humiliation. He's had enough.
EMMETT
Do you know, Dad, that I actually make enough with the band to cover rent, this dinner, and even health insurance? I don’t want—or need—your money! Or you! I never have!

Boyd is silent, then stands and storms out. Emmett reaches for the gravy and pours it all over his meal.

EXT. SMALL STUDIO APARTMENT - NIGHT

Boyd slams the front door, but halts. There it is again—THROBBING in his ARM. He grasps at it, but starts to sink. He CRIES OUT as terrible pain bursts in his CHEST. Boyd topples down the apartment stairs.

EXT. SPIRIT WORLD - DAY

Boyd's eyes shoot open. He stands up and discovers himself in an ENDLESS SPACE filled with LIGHT, over a sea of glass.

The ground under him shifts. He looks down and does a double take: through it he sees his own DEAD BODY lying on the pavement surrounded by PARAMEDICS. Boyd deflates.

A young man in white clothing rushes up to Boyd—he is GARY (20s), optimistic and all smiles, but today very stressed.

GARY
Boyd. Boyd! There isn't much time--

BOYD
Who the hell are you?

GARY
I'm Gary. Technically I'm not supposed to be here, I'm getting transferred soon. So, if anybody asks, just call me your escort, okay? Anyway, there's a problem coming...Look.

Gary reveals a WHITE STONE and turns it like a dial. Suddenly, moments from Emmett's future FLASH by (for Boyd and the viewer).

-- FLASH: Emmett sings on stage.
-- FLASH: Emmett tells Sophia he doesn't want to be a father.
-- FLASH: Sophia alone in the hospital with her NEWBORN, as Emmett gets onto a BUS.
-- FLASH: Emmett playing alone in an arena.
-- FLASH: A little boy swinging alone, fatherless, snow falling around him.

Boyd is pulled out of the vision.

    BOYD
    Little Boyd...

He is dazed, worried, then shakes his head, angry.

    BOYD (CONT’D)
    You're blaming me for this? I never taught him to run away. That's his mother. He was never the kid I wanted, but he needed a father. So I stayed.

    GARY
    Why did you stay?

Boyd fights his emotions.

    BOYD
    I made lunches, drove him to school, taught him to work. Doesn't that count for anything?

Gary puts his hand on Boyd's shoulder and he instantly calms. Gary gives a soft smile.

    GARY
    You did the right thing. And now, he needs you again.
BOYD
That kid never liked me, never listened to me. You do it.

GARY
I've tried. For some reason, Father must feel that you have to fix this. But I'll help you...


GARY (CONT’D)
Unless they transfer me first. You've got to stop Emmett from leaving--your grandson needs a father.

BOYD
It's not hard. You just have to lay down the law. I'll show you.

Gary shifts his white stone. The glass under them becomes a music venue. They step inside.

6 OMITTED [MOVED TO 10B] 6

7 OMITTED [MOVED TO 10A] 7

8 INT. MUSIC VENUE - NIGHT 8

A modish music venue. Light and fog pool into a psychedelic soup.

GARY
Emmett's friend is going to try to get him to sign a contract. You have to stop him.

BOYD
You can't stop that? Guess your rock's not as magic as you thought, huh? Where is he?

Boyd and Gary wander over to Emmett, who prepares in the wings with his colorful BAND MEMBERS. His tatted DRUMMER stands off to the side, talking on the phone. Sophia sits with a box of paints, brushing color over an UNSEEN OBJECT. Boyd watches Emmett laugh with his BASSIST as they prep for the set.
BOYD (CONT’D)
See? He doesn’t even miss me.

GARY
Actually, he just puts up a good
front. You know that. Just wait.

Gary moves next to the Bassist and whispers in his ear.

GARY (CONT’D)
Did you check the mic?

The Bassist turns away from laughing with Emmett to check on
the mic.

GARY (CONT’D)
(to Boyd)
Look.

Emmett tunes Boyd’s guitar. Boyd steps closer and sees
Emmett’s sadness as he stares at the guitar and remembers.

DRUMMER (O.S.)
Yo, Emmett!

Emmett snaps out of it. As he looks toward the Drummer, he
notices Sophia and lingers on her pregnant belly. He looks
toward the stage with relief.

GARY
Teach him he can be a father. Tell
him why you stayed.

BOYD
I don’t need to tell him something
he already knows.

GARY
Does he?

The Drummer approaches Emmett, unaware of Sophia. He hangs up
his phone as he lights a CIGARETTE.

DRUMMER
Bruh, that was the label. They need
your contract for the tour! You
told the old ball and chain that as
your band’s front man, you won’t
abandon us?

Emmett blanches, looking to Sophia. The Drummer follows his
gaze. Oh crap. Sophia, hiding her emotions, stands slowly.
SOPHIA
The doctor's appointment is early; I need to get some sleep. I'd really like you to go with me, Emmett. For once. Have a good show.

Sophia leaves. Boyd watches her go, shaking his head at Emmett and stepping toward him. Gary holds Boyd back.

EMMETT
(yelling after her)
So you don't want to hear me sing either, huh?

DRUMMER
Don't let her pull the father card on you, my dude. My old man was in marketing. Gone all the time--I turned out great! Come on. Sign it.

The Drummer holds up a CONTRACT. Boyd rushes up to him.

BOYD
Hey, you stay away from my son--

The Drummer absentmindedly blows smoke into Boyd's face. An MC announces the band.

DRUMMER
Will you sign it?

BOYD
Emmett!

Gary puts a hand in front of Boyd to stop him from yelling. Boyd stares back at Gary--what's the problem?

EMMETT
We need to get out there.

The band walks on stage. Boyd rushes after them as Gary trails behind.

8A INT. STAGE - NIGHT 8A

Boyd marches on stage, but sees the crowd and steps back. Gary comes up behind him.

GARY
They can't see you!
The band sets up. As Emmett lifts up an ELECTRIC GUITAR, he pauses. He sets the Electric guitar aside and reaches for the acoustic instrument that belonged to his dad.

GARY (CONT’D)
Tell him why you stayed!

Boyd hesitates. He steps toward Emmett.

BOYD
(to Emmett)
Son, I taught you better than this!
Don't you even think about going on
that tour with a bunch of losers--

Emmett seizes the ELECTRIC GUITAR and strums it hard, cutting his dad off. The other band members join in. The crowd cheers.

BOYD (CONT’D)
Emmett! Do you hear me? Snap out of
the stupidity!

Emmett turns up the volume and launches into the song from before, singing "who am I to you?", but this time rougher, louder, angry. Boyd tries to shout over the music but his voice is drowned out.

GARY
He can't hear you! Let me see what
I can do!

Boyd finally steps back and listens to the words of the song.

INT. BACK HALLWAY – NIGHT

Dipping down a hallway, Gary finds some JUNKIES near the fuse box.

GARY
Wouldn't it be hilarious if you cut
the power during a song?

JUNKIE 1
(laughing to Junkie 2)
Right on, man.

He opens the fuse box.
The song gets louder and louder. Emmett pours out lyrics about wishing he didn't have to earn someone's love. Boyd reflects, hurt. He looks at the crowd. Were these always the words to the song?

Then, right at the end—ZAP! The power goes out. The crowd groans, the MC does damage control. Gary jumps back on stage. Emmett notices BOYD'S REFLECTION in a MIRROR and whips around.

Emmett pauses. It's as if he's staring right at Boyd. Gary leans in.

GARY
Tell him.

Emmett reaches out—but Boyd recoils, emotional.

BOYD
I'm glad you got to tell everyone about your hateful dad. But guess what--you have responsibilities now too. I would have loved to play guitar all day, but I was too busy being your father.

Emmett turns away. The Drummer extends the contract.

DRUMMER
What do you say? We need you Emmett! You're our leader!

BOYD
Don't touch that contract!

Emmett grabs the contract and stuffs it in his pocket. The Drummer beams.

The power comes back on and the Junkies are escorted away. The crowd cheers. Gary gapes at Boyd. It's worse than he thought. Boyd jerks back into the spirit world.
EXT. SPIRIT WORLD - DAY

Boyd stares off, alone, still upset about the song.

After a moment, Gary reappears and paces away, unsure of what to do.

BOYD
I can't believe he sang that song about me. He's always been so ungrateful.

GARY
He signed the contract...
(turning, to Boyd)
Why did you stay?

BOYD
The day his mother left, I was done too. I didn't want anything to do with either of them anymore. But then I saw Emmett, just sitting there. Just a little boy. And I, I just couldn't leave him...

Boyd stops—he realizes the solution.

BOYD (CONT'D)
Emmett just has to see his son, too. The doctor's appointment--

GARY
What do you mean?

BOYD
Take us down.

GARY
He doesn't need a lecture, Boyd. He just needs to know he can do it.

BOYD
Down.

Gary turns the stone. They step back into the glass.

INT./EXT. CAR - DAY

Boyd and Gary find themselves in the back seat of Emmett and Sophia's car. They are parked outside of a Doctor's office. Sophia starts to leave; Emmett stays put.
SOPHIA
Won't you come in just this one
time? You can see the baby.

Gary smiles at Boyd, understanding.

GARY
Good idea.

EMMETT
I really need to practice some
sets. I'll just wait here.

Emmett grabs his guitar from the back and mindlessly picks
out a tune. Sophia starts to leave, but Gary leans forward.

GARY
(to Sophia)
If you get him into the waiting
room, his curiosity will get the
best of him.

SOPHIA
Can you at least come wait for me
inside?

Emmett hesitates, then nods. They step out of the car with
Gary and Boyd trailing behind them.

10C INT. WAITING ROOM - DAY 10C

Emmett sits. The SONOGRAPHER enters and motions to Sophia.
Sophia lingers, then ambles over. Emmett gets a text from the
DRUMMER: DID YOU SIGN IT? Sophia turns to Emmett.

SOPHIA
Are you sure you don't want to
come?

EMMETT
I'm sure.

BOYD
Oh, for the love-

GARY
Sshh!
(whispering to
Sonographer)
It's pretty incredible.
SONOGRAPHER
(to Emmett)
It is pretty incredible.

Emmett simply shakes his head. The Sonographer and Sophia walk down the hallway. Boyd takes a step toward Emmett.

GARY
Just wait, I know what I'm doing!

BOYD
And I know how to deal with the kid who pouted like this his entire senior year of high school.

GARY
Please!

BOYD
You've got 15 seconds to try it your way, then I'm getting him in there to appreciate my grandson.

Boyd looks up at a CLOCK on the wall. Gary frantically scours the room for an idea. He sees a young WIFE AND HUSBAND exit the hallway.

GARY
(to Wife)
Isn't seeing your baby the most special moment of your life?

WIFE
(thinking, tearing up)
That may have been the most special moment of my life.

Emmett doesn't budge. Boyd shakes his head and advances, ready to lay into him. Gary rushes to the Husband, desperate.

GARY
(to Husband)
What did it mean to you?

The Husband considers, hugging his wife. He looks at Emmett.

HUSBAND
That was pretty freaking cool.

Emmett watches them leave, then leans to look down the hall, curious. He can't help himself.
INT. EXAM ROOM - DAY

Sophia leans back on the exam table, the ultrasound PROBE on her belly. On the monitor: a SLEEPING INFANT. Emmett quietly enters the room, transfixed by the IMAGE of his son.

Boyd and Gary trail in behind Emmett. They too are drawn in by the image on the monitor. Boyd beams, proud to be a grandfather.

SONOGRAPHER
Yup, definitely a boy!

They all chuckle. Gary looks away, embarrassed.

SONOGRAPHER (CONT’D)
Okay, everything's looking really good. The Doctor will be in to see you in just a moment.

CLICK. The Sonographer turns off the machine and steps out. Emmett comes to, remembering his hesitancy.

SOPHIA
What's the matter?

EMMETT
I don't know. Having a kid...what if I screw this up?...What if I'm not ready to be a father?

SOPHIA
Emmett, you'll be great.

Emmett smiles, believing her for the first time. Sophia carefully watches him as she navigates his concern.

SOPHIA (CONT’D)
Sometimes as a parent, you'll have to give up...

Sophia's voice is drowned out by Boyd's.

BOYD
(to Emmett)
Son, enough. Buck up, take some responsibility. I never expected you'd be a wuss.

Emmett's face becomes stony.

EMMETT
It's always going to be like this isn't it?
SOPHIA
What are you saying?

EMMETT
Just forget it.

Emmett checks his phone and steps out.

INT. WAITING ROOM - DAY

Emmett slips back into the waiting room. Gary and Boyd follow. Emmett dials a number on his phone and pulls the contract out of his pocket. He stares at it.

EMMETT
Hey. Count me in.

Gary hangs his head and yanks Boyd back into the Spirit World.
INT. SPIRIT WORLD - DAY

Boyd spins around, surprised. Gary throws his hands in the air.

GARY
Why did you say that?

BOYD
Hey, I can't help that he's so sensitive. I told you I wasn't the man for this.
GARY
You're the only man for this. He's running away because you made him feel like he'll never be good enough.

BOYD
I gave him every opportunity to prove himself. But he never even tried! The kid is just like his mother-

GARY
And you're his father!

Boyd opens his mouth to protest, but Gary jolts the white stone. The image of the boy REAPPEARS. There he is, alone on a swing in the snow. Boyd is moved by the sadness in his grandson's eyes.

GARY (CONT'D)
You really want to help your grandson? Help your son.

Boyd looks down, embarrassed. Gary puts a hand on his shoulder as a token of peace and leads him through the glass.

INT. STUDIO APARTMENT - NIGHT

An ANGEL CHRISTMAS TREE TOPPER watches over the little apartment. Boyd and Gary see Emmett and Sophia wrap gifts under the CHRISTMAS TREE. It's a Wonderful Life plays in the background. Gary calmly watches Boyd.

GARY
You need to tell him why you stayed.

Boyd looks down, unsure. Emmett is distant and distracted until Sophia reveals a SECRET GIFT.

SOPHIA
Merry Christmas.

Sophia smiles. Emmett forces one back. He opens up the gift--it's the DECORATIVE ROCK Boyd gave him--but Sophia has painted in another figure between the grandad and grandson. A FATHER, playing the guitar. Her fingers are stained with color.

SOPHIA (CONT'D)
I'm sorry I left the show the other night.

(MORE)
SOPHIA (CONT’D)
I know you’re making sacrifices right now, but I just wanted you to know how much I support your music.

EMMETT
Listen, Sophia, we need to talk about something.

Gary dials his white stone; the rock slightly glows. Emmett looks down at the images of the father, son, and grandson, but then sets the rock aside.

He slowly reaches into his pocket and shows Sophia the SIGNED contract.

BOYD
No, son, stop! STOP!
SOPHIA
...When were you going to ask me about this?

EMMETT
I'm not asking.

SOPHIA
When will you be back?

Emmett doesn't answer. Sophia's eyes well up with tears. Boyd lunges forward, desperate to fix the problem. Gary suddenly starts FLICKERING in and out.

GARY
Oh no.

EMMETT
I'm sorry. I'll send money. He'll be better off without me.

BOYD
(to Emmett)
That's not true! Don't take your anger out on them.

SOPHIA
He needs a father.

EMMETT
For what? To criticize him his whole life?

Boyd reaches for Emmett's hand, but just passes through it. Gary watches Boyd's attempts at reconciliation.
BOYD
(to Emmett)
The only way you'll disappoint your
son is if you walk out on him.

EMMETT
Well, I'm sorry to be a
disappointment. Music's all I have.

SOPHIA
You have us.

Emmett stands up, but Sophia clings onto his guitar. Emmett
yanks it back, and stumbles, knocking the rock away. Gary is   *
broken-hearted. Boyd slumps over, defeated.

BOYD
See? I told you I couldn't do it.
I'm a terrible father. Always have
been.

GARY
You did the best you could. Some
people don't have a father at all.

Gary FLICKERS.

GARY (CONT'D)
Listen...I'm getting transferred
now. But thank you for trying. It
meant everything to me.

BOYD
Now? Wait, not yet, I need your
help!

Gary pulls him in for a hug. Boyd resists, but Gary won't let *
go. Boyd lets the feeling sink in.

GARY
I love you, Boyd.

And Boyd feels it--this is the bond he never had with Emmett.
He starts to hug Gary back, but Gary FLICKERS AWAY--gone.

Emmett swings his guitar around his back, ready to leave.
Sophia suddenly CRIES OUT and clutches her stomach.

EMMETT
Sophia? Sophia!
Boyd jolts, concerned. He steps forward to help, but Emmett carries Sophia past him, out of the room.

Boyd is left alone, unable to leave. He notices the rock and reaches down for it. He touches it—it becomes white and translucent like Gary's stone. He dials it.

INT. HOSPITAL HALLWAY - NIGHT

At the hospital, Sophia is rushed away into labor. Emmett hesitates at the labor room door. He looks down the empty hallway, then back to the door. He breaks down.

BOYD
Emmett.

Emmett pauses. Boyd reaches out for Emmett's shoulder.

BOYD (CONT'D)
Don't go.

Emmett shakes his head and shrugs Boyd's hand away. He starts down the hallway.

BOYD (CONT'D)
Wait, son! I love you.

Emmett freezes. Boyd moves toward his son.

BOYD (CONT'D)
I'm sorry I was hard on you--It wasn't your fault. I stayed because I love you Emmett.

Boyd envelops Emmett in a fatherly hug. Emmett is taken aback by a warm feeling. Tears stream down his face.

EMMETT
(whispering)
Dad?

BOYD
Do you hear me, son? I love you.
You can do this.

Boyd tucks the stone into Emmett's pocket. We see now that it is just Emmett standing in the hallway. He reaches into his pocket and is surprised to find the DECORATIVE ROCK from before. He stares at the image of the family together.

EMMETT pulls out the contract and rips it in half. He rushes into the labor room.
INT. LABOR ROOM - NIGHT

MONTAGE:

- Emmett holding Sophia's hand
- Sophia cries out during birth
- They lift up the baby, now born

Standing nearby is Boyd. He looks up and sees Gary appear briefly, who gives a nod of approval.

SOPHIA
What should we name him?

Gary then gradually dissipates downward, becoming the spirit of Emmett's new SON.

BOYD
(to himself, realizing)
Gary.

Emmett hugs his newborn son. Boyd puts his hand on Emmett's shoulder.

EMMETT
Gary.

Emmett sings the song from before, "who am I to you", but with tenderness. His little family listens to him sing, including Boyd, who sings along. He beams, basking in the talent of his son.

THE END.