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8 January 2019

Honors Thesis Proposal

Working Title

Father of Man: An Exploration of the Afterlife in Cinema

Project Purpose

The purpose of this project is to explore cinematic depictions of the afterlife and their contextual and cultural backgrounds--what causes certain interpretations and why. Specifically, my film depicts the Spirit World, and is influenced by aesthetic and iconographical elements from my faith tradition. These should be examined against other renderings, as to identify the many sources of inspirations for various visual choices. The research aspect of this project will be to more deeply explore historical depictions of the afterlife in film by identifying how religion, geography, and other cultural factors (conscious and subconscious) determine what goes onto the screen. This may render additional insights into why some artists seek to display an afterlife, or are averse to it.

Project Importance

For all of human history, people have wondered what lies beyond this life, and have explored this massive question through religion, storytelling, and art. The hope for an afterlife drives millions of people in their everyday meaning and purpose, and the age-old question “what happens when I die?” is one that has carried into the motion picture artform. However, putting something on the screen proves to be something quite different than simply writing words. Vivid

scriptural descriptions, for example, do not always translate as easily once depicted literally. Filmmakers have found a variety of ways to depict or interpret ideas about the other side. I would like to build on this massive artistic tradition by specifically examining what inspires these visual choices, detailing whatever insights I may find. Art can open new doors of understanding to a specific artist or an entire culture. I believe looking closely at the way the afterlife has been imagined will reveal, or at least suggest, important insights and human truths, as film analyses frequently aim to do. Also, an additional purpose of my film is to contribute to the current cinematic traditions in this area, incorporating a Latter-day Saint imagining of the Spirit World as my interpretation (an approach that is rarely explored on the screen).

Project Overview

The major focus of my work so far has been in the creative development of my Media Arts Capstone film, *Father of Man*. Since the beginning of the academic year, I have worked closely under my faculty mentor, Jeff Parkin, on the ideation, script-development, pre-production, and production of this BYU sponsored short film. The story follows a father who dies and goes to the Spirit World, but has to repair his relationship with his son from the beyond the veil. It has been a challenging but rewarding opportunity to direct a team of over forty students and to collaborate with them creatively, especially in the imagining of the Spirit World. Our project has been purposeful in pulling from various ideas and suggestions in how to depict the afterlife. Research into markedly Latter-day Saint aesthetics and mythos included sections of the Book of Revelation and the Doctrine & Covenants, which mention “a globe of glass and fire” and “a white stone”, as well as sources of cultural folklore, such as *Visions of Glory: One Man's*

Astonishing Account of the Last Days by John M. Pontius and The Message by Lance Richardson. Moving forward will include the consideration of what colors and visual effects to incorporate into our edit of the Spirit World, which will be largely influenced by the research done over the next semester.

While ideating this capstone, I also did some primary source research in order to incite inspiration, and that will be relevant in the research to come. This research included watching films that explored depictions of the afterlife. Some of these titles are *It's A Wonderful Life* (1946 directed by Frank Capra), *A Matter of Life and Death* (1946 directed by Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger), *The Tree of Life* (2011 directed by Terrence Malick), and *The Lovely Bones* (2009 directed by Peter Jackson). Additional media I've examined includes the television series *The Good Place* (2016--present, written by Michael Schur) and video game *The Legend of Zelda: Skyward Sword* (2011 directed by Hidemaro Fujibayashi). Although a few of these examples are not specifically focused on the afterlife, they explore elements of a spirit world or "other side" that are relevant to the development of our capstone film.

Regarding the written portion of this project, I have yet to do most of the secondary research into any academic writing on this topic. In regards to my own faith tradition, I have done considerable reading on Latter-day Saint Cinema traditions, depictions, and explorations, including the *BYU Studies Journal* 46:2 (Mormons and Film), and various books and articles by Mormon Cinema scholar Randy Astle. However, this knowledge is severely limited to my own milieu and does not go into the artistic traditions of other cultures and approaches, especially in regards to the supernatural or otherworldly. The bulk of my research will be pouring over what has been written more broadly in the field. I will be aided by some level of understanding I've

gained in prior film theory classes, in which we have examined various forms of approaching narratives, settings, and mythos, and I'm eager to study the works of critics and scholars who have written extensively on the subject.

Once I have familiarized myself with the basis of thought and research that has already been done regarding renderings of the afterlife in cinema, my plan is to select and examine a few specific films that widely vary in their depictions. I intend to do a primary analysis of the film itself, then closely examine the way the afterlife functions and is represented. From this, I hope to draw conclusions about the filmmaker, as well as the cultural and personal influences and implications that might lead to this sort of depiction.

Through consultation with my faculty mentors Dean Duncan and Jeff Parkin, I have compiled a list of films and texts relevant to depictions of the afterlife. This list includes a wide variety, and the bulk of my work ahead will largely be to view, analyze, and narrow these works down to three to five primary sources in order to compare, contrast, and juxtapose my own work against. I intend to explore a diverse spectrum of interpretations, selecting one option that is completely different in its portrayal and cultural background, one that is comparable, and one that is mostly neutral (with the possibility of including two additional texts that examine doctrinal differences specifically, such as premortal vs. post-mortal concepts.)

So far, my list of candidates includes Asian Cinema such as *After Life* (1998, directed by Agnieszka Wojtowicz-Vosloo) and *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives* (2010, directed by Apichatpong Weerasethakul), as well as Western approaches that are both steeped in religious tradition or grow from modern agnosticism, including *The Green Pastures* (1936, directed by Marc Connelly and William Keighley) and *A Ghost Story* (2017, directed by David

Lowery), respectively. Other titles include *Heaven Can Wait* (1978, directed by Warren Beatty and Buck Henry) and *Defending Your Life* (1991, directed by Albert Brooks). I will also be consulting literary texts that deal with this concept such as *Lincoln in the Bardo* by George Saunders and *The Divine Comedy* by Dante.

While these previously mentioned films may not be the sources ultimately I settle on, they come from a well-thought out list (which I can provide) of about twenty films that will inform my research. Many of them have influenced one another, and will add additional context to the background of the final selections.

Qualifications of Thesis Committee

Faculty Advisor: Jeff Parkin

Professor Jeff Parkin is the faculty advisor for my capstone film, and has already been working with me extensively on exploring these kind of thoughts and questions throughout the entire process of writing, shooting, and editing. Already the primary overseer of this Media Arts Capstone creative piece, he is the natural candidate to be my advisor on the Honors Thesis portion. I have also taken a number of classes from Professor Parkin, emphasizing screenwriting and story development, film language, directing, and editing. He is a qualified professional mentor, and is constantly writing, directing, and producing independent projects outside of his time as a university professor. He has also directed a web series of his own that deals with Latter-day Saint aesthetics and iconography, and is interested in exploring this area of comparative scholarship with me.

Faculty Reader: Anthony Sweat

Professor Anthony Sweat is a religion professor and artist who specializes in Latter-day Saint artwork, especially on previously undepicted, important aspects of church history to promote visual learning. He teaches an LDS Art course, has published a number of religious education books, and centers much of his research on the exploration and development of the kind of art explored in my capstone film. I have met him in the past at various Mormon Art Center events, such as the conference held in New York City this past summer of 2018. His feedback and contribution will be vital in the self-examination as I approach my own work and identify the culture, mythos, and doctrine that influenced my choices in depicting the Spirit World.

Department Honors Coordinator: Dean Duncan

Professor Dean Duncan teaches a number of critical studies and history classes that deal with both traditional narrative approaches and non-narrative forms. He is extremely well-read and is familiar with many works on the subject I seek to explore (having already helped me assemble a list of relevant films for research). As my department advisor in Media Arts, I have enjoyed a long and positive relationship with him, and he will be guiding the critical analyses and juxtaposition of my other primary sources throughout the process.

Project Timeline

September 2018 - December 2018: Writing, pre-production, and production of capstone film (already completed)

January 2019 - April 2019: Primary editing of film, weekly Wednesday meetings with faculty advisor Jeff Parkin

January 2019: Viewing of films, reading texts, narrowing down specific comparisons

February 2019: Selection of primary sources to compare, begin in-depth analysis

March 2019: Draft written portion of thesis, feedback from thesis committee

April 2019: Additional post-production of film (color correction, sound editing, visual effects)

May 2019: Polish thesis essay, conclude post-production of film, submit and present both

June 2019: Thesis defense

Conclusion

As a filmmaker and engaged Latter-day Saint, I hope to better understand the importance of weaving personal beliefs, connections, and cultural elements into one's own work, and the way this can positively inspire other members of society. I also intend for this creative work to be a positive and sophisticated reflection of my time at BYU and the unique opportunities I've enjoyed here. I intend to submit this capstone film to a number of festivals, including Sundance, South by Southwest, the LDS Film Festival, and other reputable and local venues. I am sure it will be screened at a number of these, and hope this piece will cause personal reflection, thought, and inspiration.