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Pennies from Heaven: Death and the Afterlife in World War II Fantasy Films

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Pennies from Heaven: Death and the Afterlife in World War II Fantasy Films

A Thesis by

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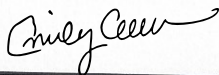
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ABSTRACT

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by Elise Williamson

Wartime fantasy films produced by major Hollywood studios during World War II integrate the supernatural (i.e., ghosts, angels, and the afterlife) into wartime settings with relevant protagonists and themes to address the psychological trauma of wartime death and loss. Three case studies – *The Human Comedy (*Clarence Brown, 1943), *A Guy Named Joe* (Victor Fleming, 1943), and *Between Two Worlds* (Edward A. Blatt, 1944) – explore fantasy narratives and conventions unconventionally blended with the war film genre, and illustrate how the war film setting (home front vs. combat front vs. war zone) influences character focus (civilians vs. military), the depiction of death (onscreen vs. offscreen), and henceforth, the nature of their fantasy elements and the role of supernatural forces and the afterlife. Moreover, each film provides a unique scenario of loss and mode of emotional addressal for the wartime audience, specifically the different emotional through-line of grief, mourning, and hopelessness. This thesis argues the exemplary films function as emotional propaganda by utilizing supernatural devices and settings as a divine authority to transform the grief response into a direct threat to the wartime social order and war effort for both the films' characters and audiences. Placing *The Human Comedy, A Guy Named Joe, and Between Two Worlds* in dialogue compellingly demonstrates how the unconventional blending of the fantasy and war film genres not only acted as entertainment for wartime audiences but also propagandistic texts (made in cooperation with the U.S. government's oversight) to deploy instructional messages on appropriate, safe, patriotic, and moral emotional conduct in response to feelings of grief, bitterness, and hopelessness resulting from inevitable war-related losses.

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Introduction

In the wartime fantasy film *Happy Land*, a minister sermonizes to a grieving father who has recently lost his son: "I can't just sit by and watch this happening to you, this . . . this bitterness . . . if there's one thing I've learned, the thing we must all learn is that suffering, and pain are part of life too. We must accept that . . . Rusty died a fine death, Lew. He died for his country."[1] By 1945, after a war effort that saw the mobilization of an entire nation of Americans and the combined deaths of several hundred thousand American servicemembers, the film's central moral would have been relevant and resonant to its characters, and by extension, the audience of the American public, bearing itself as a powerful example at the nexus of Hollywood, the war effort, popular media and the propaganda machine. [2] In the mediation of World War II, the war film, the women's film, and *film noir* genres dominate the academic study of 1940s Hollywood cinema. In contrast to the decades of scholarship examining the origins, aesthetics, and ideological underpinnings of these wartime and postwar genres, many of the decade's films classified as more escapist, such as science fiction, horror, and fantasy have been critically neglected. Accordingly, scholarly work on the fantasy genre output from the 1940s is both very scant and has not been substantially advanced since the 1970s. In actuality, the fantasy genre thrived across all the major Hollywood studios and multiple subgenres, and most fascinatingly, the contemporary wartime melodrama.

This thesis explores how fantasy narratives and conventions, unconventionally blended with the war film genre during World War II, addressed the psychological trauma of wartime loss. In this thesis, I argue the exemplary films function as emotional propaganda by utilizing

[1] *Happy Land*, directed by Irving Pichel (1943: 20th Century-Fox).
[2] Department of Veteran Affairs, "America's Wars." Washington, D.C.: *Office of Public Affairs*, Nov. 2020, accessed January 7, 2020, https://www.va.gov/opa/publications/factsheets/fs_americas_wars.pdf.

supernatural devices and settings as a divine authority in order to transform the grief response into a direct threat to the wartime social order for both the films' characters and audiences. Specifically, this work analyzes three films that demonstrate the versatility of fantasy devices, settings, and circumstances of loss engaged with across the subgenre of supernatural fantasy – *The Human Comedy* (Clarence Brown, 1943), *A Guy Named Joe* (Victor Fleming, 1943), and *Between Two Worlds* (Edward A. Blatt, 1944) – produced and released by major Hollywood studios during World War II, focusing on those that integrate the supernatural (i.e., ghosts, angels, and the afterlife) into wartime settings with relevant protagonists and themes.[3] These fantasy films merit further exploration in scholarship for 1940s Hollywood, the war film genre, and in the history of U.S. fantasy, in addition to the wider selection and variety of fantasy films released during that decade. Significantly, this alternative proposal provides a new way to look at theories on fantasy, escapism, Classical Hollywood, and the World War II film long-presumed to be universally applicable.

However, the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on academia broadly, including this thesis, are undeniable. State and local guidelines for institutional closure prevent important access to archival evidence, such as production budgets and profit margins in studio ledgers, censorship files from the Production Code Administration, and documents from the Office of War Information regarding Hollywood coordination and cooperation. As a result, certain information pertinent to this thesis is either directly inaccessible or requires the indirect assistance of reputable institutions with archival research such as the American Film Catalog. Nevertheless, the restrictions of the pandemic must be acknowledged.

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[3]Additional relevant texts for reference include 20th Century-Fox's *Happy Land*, M-G-M's *The Canterville Ghost* (Jules Dassin, 1944), and RKO's *The Enchanted Cottage* (John Cromwell, 1945), which in addition to *The Human Comedy* and *A Guy Named Joe* (M-G-M) as well as *Between Two Worlds* (Warner Bros.) span four of the five major studios during this era.

First, this thesis positions itself within the discourse on 1940s Hollywood cinema, followed by a review of the relevant literature to address the valuable insights as well as the limitations of pivotal scholar Peter L. Valenti's foundational works on the study of 1940s fantasy films. Second, an alternative social function for the wartime fantasy film is proposed – utilizing supernatural fantasy as a divine authority in order to frame irresolution of grief or trauma in response to wartime deaths as a social threat or ill – in opposition to Valenti's and other's centering of comfort and consolation as the films' primary moral justification. Finally, the case studies illustrate how the war film setting (home front vs. combat front vs. war zone) influences character focus (civilians vs. military), the depiction of death (onscreen vs. offscreen), and henceforth, the nature of their fantasy elements and the role of supernatural forces and the afterlife. [4] Consequently, textual analysis of the narrative, characterization, dialogue, and prevalent themes in the exemplary films demonstrates how the successful yet specious resolution of wartime trauma support this alternative social function.

I. Heaven Is a Place on Earth: Valenti, Fantasy, and Genre in the 1940s Hollywood Discourse

The first and most pivotal academic to discuss the wartime fantasy films released in the 1940s, and whom nearly all criticism on these films cite and address, even tangentially, is English scholar Peter L. Valenti. Nonetheless, scholarly work on the fantasy genre output from the decade has not been substantially advanced since Valenti's brief work in the 1970s (1978; 1979).[5] Subsequent significant scholarship on the Hollywood film industry during World War II

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[4] This study marks a distinction between the home front (domestic, contiguous United States), combat front (area of specific campaigns, e.g., Continental Europe, the Pacific, North African, Russian), and a war zone (locations like England with aerial campaigns and active wartime conditions but lacking ground warfare).

[5] Peter L. Valenti, "The 'Film Blanc' : Suggestions for a Variety of Fantasy, 1940–45," *Journal of Popular Film* 6, no. 4 (1978): 294–304, accessed August 1, 2020, https://doi.org/10.1080/00 472719.1 978.9943446; "The Cultural

and the 1940s, published in the four decades since the initial studies, either disregard the fantasy

elements, classify the films as religious dramas, suppress the supernatural qualities to favor the

discourse of the home front war drama, or ignore the fantasy genre altogether.[6] This negligence

ignores the sheer amount of fantasy films produced by Hollywood during the decade, from

comedies and musicals, animation and holiday films, to period fiction and heroic adventure

films.[7] Snelson contends that this cycle of fantasy as well as horror films resulted from an

expansion of overall interest in the supernatural across media platforms, reported by the news

media in the "popularization of all manner of spiritual and psychic practices and practitioners,

including séances, astrology, telepathy, spiritualist mediums, and tea leaf readers."[8] This

resurrection of occult fascination was, he argues, an attempt to engage with the emotional and

spiritual uncertainties of wartime.

 Fantasy storytelling itself is linked strongly to traditions built through millennia of myth,

folklore, and legend, recalling human encounters with supernatural forces.[9] Regardless, fantasy

remains a difficult genre to conceptualize, often blurring the boundaries with the other genres of

the fantastic (i.e., horror and science fiction). Although the studio era saw the crystallization of

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Hero in the World War II Fantasy Film," *Journal of Popular Film & Television* 7, no. 3 (1979): 310–321, accessed October 28, 2019, https://doi.org/10.1080/ 01956051.1979.9944206.

[6] See Clayton R. Koppes and Gregory D. Black, *Hollywood Goes to War: How Politics, Profits and Propaganda Shaped World War II Movies* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1987); Thomas Schatz, *Boom and Bust: The American Cinema in the 1940s* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1999); Thomas Doherty, *Projections of War: Hollywood, American Culture, and World War II* (NY: Columbia University Press, 1999); and Steve Neale, *Genre and Hollywood* (NY: Routledge, 2000).

[7] See *I Married a Witch* (Paramount: René Clair, 1942), *Topper Returns* (M-G-M: Roy Del Ruth, 1941), *Yolanda and the Thief* (M-G-M: Vincente Minnelli, 1945), *Cabin in the Sky* (M-G-M: Vincente Minnelli, 1943), *Down to Earth* (Columbia: Alexander Hall, 1947), Disney-RKO co-productions *Fantasia* (James Algar, et al., 1940), *Dumbo* (Norman Ferguson, et al., 1941), *Pinocchio* (Norman Ferguson, et al., 1941), *It's a Wonderful Life* (Liberty & RKO: Frank Capra, 1946), *Miracle on 34th Street* (Fox: George Seaton, 1947), *The Bishop's Wife* (Goldwyn & RKO: Henry Koster, 1947), *The Blue Bird* (Fox: Walter Lang, 1940), *The Ghost and Mrs. Muir* (Fox: Joseph L. Mankiewicz, 1947), *One Million B.C.* (Hal Roach & UA, Hal Roach, 1940), and *A Thousand and One Nights* (Columbia: Alfred E. Green, 1945).

[8] Tim Snelson, "A-Class Monsters: The Escalation into Prestige Productions, 1944-1945." in *Phantom Ladies: Hollywood Horror and the Home Front* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2014), 91.

[9] Jacqueline Furby and Claire Hines, *Fantasy* (NY: Routledge, 2012).

genres into recognizable types for both producers and consumers, fantasy did not exist as an

independent singular genre, but primarily as a co-dependent genre element, or a "fantasy mix,"

evidenced by the fluid genre boundaries that allowed for numerous and varied subgenres.[10] Much

fantasy scholarship refers to the work of literary theorist Tzvetan Todorov on the Fantastic,

which he describes as any seemingly supernatural event.[11] Vivian Sobchack, elaborating on

Todorov, is one of the few critics to provide a "working definition" of fantasy: "Fantasy

adventure and romance is the appealing and impossible personal wish concretely and objectively

filled."[12] For Sobchack, it is the initial grounding in a realist form that is essential to fantasy, and

for Todorov, fantasy lies in the liminal space of doubt and uncertainty of whether the events

were of the real world or of the mind. Christine Cornea extends this delineation, concluding that

the fantasy genre deals in the "visualisation of imagined images" which reflect their significance

in the juxtaposition with reality.[13] Specifically, she emphasizes the aesthetic and thematic

significance of fantasy's juxtaposing or blending that which exists beyond human rationale and

imagination, the expected objective reality, *as well as* the emotional and subjective.

Valenti introduced the concept of "*film blanc,*" a genre label he retroactively applied to

wartime and postwar fantasy films that he defined in direct thematic and aesthetic opposition to

film noir.[14] Specifically, the label of *film blanc* is attributed to romantic fantasies with optimistic,

life-affirming outlooks that are spiritual, bright, highly sentimental or emotional, and carry

themes of tolerance, forgiveness, and acceptance. Recurring topics include all manner of

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[10] Steve Neale, *Genre and Hollywood* (NY: Routledge, 2000), 219–228; Furby and Hines, *Fantasy*, 95.

[11] Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, trans. Richard Howard (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1975), 31–32.

[12] Vivian Sobchack, "The Fantastic," in *The Oxford History of World Cinema*, ed. G. Nowell Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 312.

[13] Christine Cornea, *Science Fiction Cinema: Between Fantasy and Reality* (Scotland: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), 8.

[14] Peter L. Valenti, "The 'Film Blanc' : Suggestions for a Variety of Fantasy, 1940–45," *Journal of Popular Film* 6, no. 4 (1978): 294-304, accessed August 1, 2020, https://doi.org/10.1080/00 472719.1 978.9943446.

magical, mystical, and supernatural staples: angels and devils, dreams and alternate realities, ghosts, magic and sorcery, reincarnation, "strange" romance, and meditations on heaven, hell, death, and time. Furthermore, Valenti also describes a kind of "cultural hero" that emerged from fantasy films of the 1940s.[15] Due to the death and loss during World War II, he proposes that society had to bear its trauma by contriving a sense of reason and higher purpose for the conflict. This archetypal repetition positions fantasy films as offering a meditation on overarching mythic values in a contemporary setting. Therefore, this heroic pattern, would embody certain cultural values and reinforce a specific credo – great suffering will lead to greater societal transcendence. *Film blanc*'s optimistic through-line and its formulation of a "cultural hero," according to Valenti, emphasized the transcendence of loss and the transformation of wartime tragedy into social good, resolved usually through a romantic coupling. In this way, fantasy mediates the relationship between everyday life and the larger universal forces, giving it the ability to create emotionally-appealing ideal existences (e.g., fantasy of Great Depression-era musical spectacles).

Valenti's work is oft-cited in individual case studies on most films that could fall under this subgenre and has been directly inherited and taken up by Lyn and Tom Genelli and Terry Lindvall et al.[16] Close-textual readings, such as those authored by Andrew Gordon, Michael Anderegg, Robert Singer, Margaret D. Stetz, Thomas Cooksey, and Murray Leeder,[17] exemplify

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[15] Peter L. Valenti, "The Cultural Hero in the World War II Fantasy Film," *Journal of Popular Film & Television* 7, no. 3 (1979): 310-321, accessed October 28, 2019, https://doi.org/10.1080/ 01956051.1979.9944206.

[16] Tom and Lyn Davis Genelli, "Between the Worlds: Some Thoughts beyond the 'Film Blanc,'" *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 12, no. 3 (1984): 100–111, accessed August 1, 2020, https://doi.org/10.1080/01956051.1984.10661977; *Death at the Movies: Hollywood's Guide to the Hereafter* (Wheaton, IL: Quest Books, 2013); Terry Lindvall et al., "*Film Blanc* Comedy," in *Divine Film Comedies: Biblical Narratives, Film Sub-Genres, and the Comic Spirit* (NY: Routledge, 2016), 109-119.

[17] See Andrew Gordon, "You'll Never Get Out of Bedford Falls: The Inescapable Family in American Science Fiction and Fantasy Films," *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 20, no. 2 (1992): 2–8, accessed December 15, 2019, https://doi.org/10.1080/01956051.1992.9943963; Michael Anderegg, "Home Front America and the Denial of Death in MGM's *The Human Comedy*," *Cinema Journal* 34, no. 1 (1994): 3-17, accessed August 1, 2020,

the predominant form of criticism utilized for fantasy films of that decade. Furthermore, most

relevant writings (citing Valenti or otherwise) tend to question why the films were made and

why the studios produced them – queries they could not answer without archival material.

Additionally, the studies in question lean towards literary analysis of the films' source materials

or focus on a solitary film, ignoring the shared qualities, generic traits, and industrial trends.

While Valenti and his successors align with a larger consensus of fantasy scholarship discourse

which favors reading comfort, consolation, and escapism as fantasy's expected social function,

Valenti's foundational work, perhaps due to its brevity (only two journal articles), has rarely

been questioned critically. The next section necessarily lays bare the limitations of Valenti's

early theories, elevates the valid criticisms of his contemporaries (Norden; Markey),

acknowledges the meager scholarship that attempts to counter the fantasy-as-escapist consensus,

and most significantly, details the vitalness of a counter-reading and alternative social function

for wartime fantasy films of the 1940s.

II. Battle Beyond the *Film Blanc*: An Alternative Proposal on Wartime Fantasy

Altogether, Valenti's theorization of the films' initial social functions proves resonant,

both informing and aligning with subsequent scholarship, not only on the *film blanc* but the

broader fantasy genre. However, while Valenti was the first academic to address the subgenre

and group the wartime fantasy films together, the *film blanc* label remains underdeveloped and

lacks the understanding of the industrial, political, cultural, and creative specificity of its *film*

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https://www.jstor.org/stable/1225652; and, Robert Singer, "One Against All: The New England Past and Present Responsibilities in 'The Devil and Daniel Webster,'" *Literature/Film Quarterly* 22, no. 4 (1994): 265-271, accessed August 1, 2020, https://academicworks.cuny.edu/kb_pubs/89; Margaret D. Stetz, "'The Ghost and Mrs. Muir': Laughing with the Captain of the House," *Studies in the Novel*, no. 1 (1996): 93-112, accessed October 15, 2019, www.jstor.org/stable/29533115; Thomas L. Cooksey, "'Talk Not of a Wife': *The Devil and Daniel Webster*, *Cabin in the Sky*, and *Damn Yankees*–American Contributions to the Faust Legend," *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 27, no. 3 (1999): 18–27, accessed August 1, 2020, https://doi.org/10.1080/019560599 09602805; and, Murray Leeder, *Cinematic Ghosts: Haunting and Spectrality from Silent Cinema to the Digital Era* (NY: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015).

noir counterpart. This is echoed in the work of his most direct successors, Lyn and Tom Genelli, who later released a book transferring these ideas to current fantasy, though it fundamentally lacks scholarly rigor and a sufficient academic approach to the relevant literature.[18] Furthermore, Valenti's "cultural hero" emphasizes romantic coupling but fails to recognize the role of family and community in the processing and resolving of the psychological toll of wartime loss. In summary, the *film blanc* proves itself an incomplete theorization and an insufficient framework for substantially analyzing and engaging with the films' complex relationship to the war effort as emotional propaganda rather than mere escapism.

Martin Norden argues in near complete opposition to the conclusions of other fantasy scholarship.[19] Foremost, he finds the purely escapist characterization inadequate. While a majority of 1940s fantasy films do disregard the war's existence in favor of escapist narratives, subgenres, and attractions (e.g., comedies, musicals, heroic epics, star-studded casts, Technicolor), wartime and postwar fantasy films were neither always optimistically fantastical nor euphoric escapist material. Instead, Norden frames the films as a "retreat" for the American audience in response to these realities. Lastly, Norden comes to some general conclusions: The films blend comedy and divinity to soften the effects of witnessing mass death, offer a romanticized and "falsely optimistic" view of death and the afterlife, but also visualize "those complicated and bewildering sources of [wartime and postwar] anxieties."[20] Although he initially posits himself as more critical than scholars like Valenti, he comes to very similar conclusions through contradictory methods. Norden claims that generalizations about the connections

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[18] Tom and Lyn Davis Genelli, *Death at the Movies: Hollywood's Guide to the Hereafter* (Wheaton, IL: Quest Books, 2013).
[19] Martin F. Norden, "America and Its Fantasy Films: 1945 – 1951," *Film & History* 12, no. 1 (February 1982): 1–11, accessed November 17, 2019, muse.jhu.edu/article/486651.
[20] Ibid., 6–8.

between film and society are simplistic and tenuous, however he goes on to make his own generalizations while also miscasting the darker elements of the fantasy films as "negligible" to serve those shaky assumptions. Norden also fails to distinguish between concerns of wartime as opposed to postwar fantasy films. The anxieties expressed through 1943's *Happy Land* (i.e., the effect of loss on a small town) are drastically contrasted with the implicit postwar attempt to return to normalcy of *It's a Wonderful Life* in 1946 and the explicit anti-war rhetoric of *The Boy with Green Hair* in 1948.[21]

Constance Markey, Valenti and Norden's closest contemporary (although she cites neither), provides a more nuanced perspective on the social function of the fantasy film genre that develops past the *film blanc* concept.[22] Markey transplants this mode of fantasy to industrial-historical trends of the genre and analyzes how shifts towards the expected heroic traditions and conventional values during times of cultural stress are fundamentally intended to have a restorative function. Essentially, wartime films attempt to reorient a film audience in a larger destiny, wherein one can embrace the "breakdown of heroic tradition, as well as a loss of conventional values" (i.e., *film noir*) or instead, use archetypes and myths to transcend the temporary social disorientation of the stressor, which she argues is "accomplished both in ritual and in film in a consistent pattern."[23] By ascribing some grander purpose to the breakdown, these films allow this trauma to transcend individual human realities and instead, achieve a "transhistorical justification."[24] Despite their differences, a through-line connects both Valenti's work and that of his contemporaries, namely a preoccupation with fantasy films, the emotional

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[21] *Boy with Green Hair, The*, directed by Joseph Losey (RKO, 1948).
[22] Constance Markey, "Birth and Rebirth in Current Fantasy Films," *Film Criticism* 7, no. 1 (1982): 14–25, accessed October 28, 2019, https://www.jstor.org/stable/44018715.
[23] Ibid., 15.
[24] Ibid., 15.

intent and reception of the productions, their social function, and the use of genre as a container or conduit for cultural anxieties.

Although the social function for wartime fantasy films has long been limited to comfort and consolation, there are a few exceptions that problematize this reading. In brief, Anderegg, specifically speaking on *The Human Comedy*, agrees on the general consolatory function but emphasizes how the film's strategies for achieving this goal encourages a denial of death and the repression of grief. [25] Doherty as well as Richard Striner connect World War II fantasy films to their World War I origins in the form adaptations or diegetic referents, especially in the ideological evolution regarding international conflict towards pro-war effort propaganda and away from anti-war consensus. [26] Lastly, Wheeler W. Dixon proposed that the films softened death and romanticized it as a recruiting tool for the war effort. [27]

From this more contemporary scholarship, gaps in the academic consensus on the fantasy genre, its dominant social function, and World War II-era cinema become self-evident. In response, this thesis advances a counter-reading of and alternative function for World War II fantasy films: The exemplary films utilize supernatural devices and settings as a divine authority in order to transform any ambivalence towards or emotional resistance to the immediate resolution of the trauma of wartime loss – namely through feelings of bitterness, grief, and hopelessness – into a threat to the wartime social order for both the characters and by extension, the audience. Essentially, if a central character refuses or is unable to quickly process and resolve their grief and other negative feelings in direct connection to a loss resulting from wartime

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[25] Michael Anderegg, "Home Front America and the Denial of Death in MGM's *The Human Comedy*," *Cinema Journal* 34, no. 1 (1994): 3-17, accessed August 1, 2020, https://www.jstor.org/stable/1225652.

[26] See Doherty, *Projections of War: Hollywood, American Culture, and World War II*, 85–100; and, Richard Striner, *Love in the Afterlife: Underground Religion at the Movies*. (Lanham, MD: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2016).

[27] Wheeler W. Dixon, *Visions of Paradise: Images of Eden in the Cinema* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2006), 139–140.

activity, then their behavior is portrayed as destructive and a potential threat to the continued war effort and domestic moviegoing wartime audience. This final section examines the elements of setting, character focus, death within the narrative, and the role of supernatural fantasy conventions in the exemplary texts, and how they support this alternative social function. Significantly, each film provides a unique scenario of loss and a different emotional through-line of grief, including bitterness in *The Human Comedy*, mourning in *A Guy Named Joe*, and hopelessness in *Between Two Worlds*. Thus, with these three case studies, this study hopes to re-examine and expand the focus on these World War II fantasy films beyond isolated examples and the dominant discourses of one-dimensional escapism and comfort, instead utilizing a dialogical approach that reveals the complex relationships between genre and propaganda, Hollywood and the war effort, and text and the expected wartime audience.

III. To Die a "Fine Death" : Analyzing Loss in *The Human Comedy*, *A Guy Named Joe*, and *Between Two Worlds*

The Human Comedy, released by M-G-M in March of 1943, is a slice-of-life comedy-drama following the Macauley family in the small, fictional San Joaquin Valley town of Ithaca during World War II. Directed by the 30-year M-G-M veteran Clarence Brown, the film is an adaptation by Howard Estabrook from the original 240-page script by Armenian-American novelist William Saroyan, who based Ithaca on his real life hometown of Fresno, California.[28] By the end of its theatrical run, *The Human Comedy* proved a financial success, grossing $3.8 million against a $1 million production budget, closing as the 4th highest grossing film released by M-G-M in 1943 and the 23rd highest grossing film released by a major studio in that same

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[28] Bosley, Crowther, "The Screen: William Saroyan's First Picture, 'The Human Comedy,' with Mickey Rooney and Frank Morgan, Opens at the Astor," *New York Times*, March 3, 1943, 19; Anderegg, "Home Front America and the Denial of Death in MGM's *The Human Comedy*," 7.

year.[29] In addition, the film garnered five Academy Award nominations, including Best Actor (Mickey Rooney), Best Black-and-White Cinematography, Best Director, and Best Picture, finally nabbing the accolade for Best Story for Saroyan.[30]

Overseen by the ghost of the Macauley patriarch, *The Human Comedy* follows Homer (Rooney), the second eldest son, who is pulling triple duty as a high school student, *de facto* "man" of the house, and delivery boy for the local telegraph office. Marcus (Van Johnson), the eldest son, is stationed in South Carolina as an enlisted private awaiting shipping orders. The only daughter, Bess (Donna Reed), volunteers for the Red Cross and looks after Marcus's fiancée Mary (Dorothy Morris), but secretly wants to take a more active role in the war effort. Lastly, the youngest son Ulysses (Jackie Jenkins) struggles to understand the war and permanence of death amidst attempting a normal childhood. Meanwhile, a cast of minor characters fill out the small town milieu, such as the Macauley matriarch (Fay Bainter), Homer's boss Tom Spangler (James Craig), the telegraph operator Willie Grogan (Frank Morgan), and Marcus's fellow enlistee and friend Tobey (John Craven).

The film's episodic structure of quotidian vignettes in addition to the rural, small town mise-en-scène establish the setting's pathetic appeal to the thoroughly average and ordinary, henceforth, relatable to its audience whether through lived experience or implicit recognition of

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[29] Scott Eyman, *Lion of Hollywood: The Life and Legend of Louis B. Mayer* (NY: Simon & Schuster, 2005), 349; "Top Grossers of the Season," *Variety*, January 5, 1944, 54.

[30] Rooney's popularity with a prewar and wartime public is evidenced by his consistently ranking in the top 10 money-making stars list from 1938-1943, ranking # 4 (1938), #1 (1939–1941), #4 (1942), and #7 (1943) (Anderegg, 7). His reign ended with his induction into the U.S. Army in 1944 where he entertained the troops in America and Europe in Special Services. His first film upon discharge was his penultimate turn as Andy Hardy, in *Love Laughs at Andy Hardy* (Goldbeck, 1946), which saw the character return to civilian life after the war (Crowther, "Rooney to Resume Andy Hardy Role," *New York Times*, March 11, 1946, 19). See "The 16th Academy Awards," *Oscars.org*, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, n.d., accessed January 7, 2020, https://www.oscars.org/oscars/ceremonies/1944.

the aesthetics and iconography at the core of M-G-M's brand.[31] Consequently, Ithaca functions

as a M-G-M-crafted simulacrum of small-town America akin to the fictional town of Carvel,

popularized by the studio's *Andy Hardy* series which also famously starred Rooney. Such

recognizable sites of rural Americana include a crowded Main Street, rambunctious children

roaming fields and playing along dirt roads, chicken coops and intimate family parlors, small

wooden school rooms and dirt track fields, a solitary telegraph office and quaint libraries. Each

character and set piece construct an M-G-M-certified America, supposedly ordinary and

universal in its comprehension and appeal. Furthermore, M-G-M retained an interesting element

of Saroyan's original script, integration of non-white characters in the home front experience (to

varying degrees).[32] The film begins with an African-American tramp singing on a train passing

through Ithaca and concludes with a well-intentioned if awkwardly-staged multicultural town

parade.[33] Two particular scenes contain notable inclusiveness, the first being a poignant scene of

a Hispanic mother learning of her son's death when Homer delivers the telegram notice, and the

other, Marcus's train ride upon shipping out which features Asian-American soldiers in group

shots. The fore-fronting of the Macauley family and small-town America within the narrative, in

addition to these small gestures of racial integration – especially in the M-G-M vision of

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[31] Thomas Halper and Douglas Muzzio, "It's a Wonderful Life: Representations of the Small Town in American Movies," *European Journal of American Studies* 6, no. 1 (2011), accessed January 15, 2020, https://doi.org/10.4000/ejas.9398.

[32] U.S. Census documents reveal that Fresno, before World War II, had many ethnic neighborhoods, including enclaves for Armenian, German, Italian, Japanese, and Chinese immigrants. See Campbell Gibson and Kay Jung, "Historical Census Statistics On Population Totals By Race, 1790 to 1990, and By Hispanic Origin, 1970 to 1990, For Large Cities And Other Urban Places In The United States," *United States Census Bureau*, 2005, accessed January 20, 2020, https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/working-papers/2002/demo/POP-twps0056.pdf.

[33] However, at the start of the war, the local fairgrounds and assembly center were utilized as an intermediary facility for interned Japanese-Americans facing relocation because of Order 9066. *The Human Comedy* portrays the diversity of its Fresno surrogate, Ithaca, but not the racist realities. See Jeffrey F. Burton et al., "Assembly Centers," in *Confinement and Ethnicity: An Overview of World War II Japanese American Relocation Sites*, *National Park Service*, 1999, accessed January 20, 2020, https://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/active_learning/explorations/japanese_internment/confinement_ethnicity_nps_sm.pdf.

Americana, both during wartime and mourning war deaths – support the film's attempt at broad wartime appeal.[34]

The Human Comedy's home front setting determines what characters the story focuses on, the depiction of death, and how both will relate loss to the audience. While Marcus's liminal role between civilian and soldier is uncommon, most of characters are strictly civilians. The ensemble cast captures multiple, recognizable areas of the war effort through an "average" "American" family: Homer works at the telegraph office and delivers casualty telegrams, Bess and Mary volunteer for the Red Cross, and Marcus is a soldier in basic training. A group of furloughed combat soldiers (played by Barry Nelson and the uncredited Don DeFore and Robert Mitchum) complete the home front set. The Human Comedy's representation of the home front interestingly contradicts the gendered, female-centered spaces typical of the home front war drama, exemplified by films like Tender Comrade (Edward Dmytryk, 1943) and Since You Went Away (John Cromwell, 1944), or even the romance-centered narratives of wartime musicals like Thousands Cheer (George Sidney, 1943) and Star Spangled Rhythm (George Marshall, 1942). [35] In contrast, The Human Comedy, Happy Land, and immediate postwar fantasy releases like It's a Wonderful Life (Capra, 1946) focus on male protagonists on the home front, who for varying reasons are not draft eligible. For all three, the primary themes are sacrifice, compromise, and unity for those left behind amidst the demands and adversities of a global conflict. The aforementioned films also contradict Valenti's "cultural hero" concept, which entirely relies on narrativization or integration of the wartime male into society and resolution of anxieties vis-à-

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[34] A surveying of eight Black-owned newspapers across the U.S. revealed not a single review of any of the six wartime fantasy films released between 1943 and 1945. The film to receive the most extensive coverage however was M-G-M's other 1943 release, Cabin in the Sky, an all-Black musical. Publications include Atlanta Daily World, The Baltimore Afro-American, Chicago Defender, Cleveland Call and Post, Los Angeles Sentinel, Michigan Chronicle, New York Amsterdam News, and Philadelphia Tribune. The studio's attempt at broad wartime appeal through semi-integrated wartime fantasy films was not universally effective.
[35] Doherty, Projections of War, 153–155.

vis a romantic coupling, and instead, they illustrate the importance of family and community in articulating and processing those anxieties.

Although the war front is never visible in *The Human Comedy* and war-related deaths are not explicitly portrayed, the threat of both looms palpably in Marcus's time at the military base as he awaits shipping orders, and in his eventual demise. Home front films rarely included narratives or scenes on the war front, so war deaths were usually offscreen, as Marcus's is or Robert Walker's in *Since You Went Away* or Robert Ryan's in *Tender Comrade*. Instead, they focus on those left behind and the effect of death on the families, communities, and other loved ones rather than the individual who may face or has experienced death. *The Human Comedy*, and other 1940s supernatural fantasy films, provide an indirect integration of death and the afterlife into the living home front experience. Despite the wartime audience's intimate exposure to loss, the films carefully avoid the potentially traumatizing collision between the domestic war effort and actual renderings of dying and pain through combat fatalities. Later analysis of *A Guy Named Joe* and *Between Two Worlds* complicate this due to their utilization of fantasy devices within war zone and on combat front settings.

Consequently, the exclusion of onscreen war deaths in home front fantasy films results in a strategy of projection, or the use of on- or offscreen deaths of either paternal figures or non-ensemble characters as death surrogates. Although this pattern repeats itself in *Happy Land*, *The Canterville Ghost* (Dassin, 1944), *The Enchanted Cottage* (Cromwell, 1945), and to some extent in *It's a Wonderful Life*, *The Human Comedy* utilizes this strategy to the greatest quantity with three separate examples: 1) the death of the Macauley patriarch two years prior to the narrative and whose narration frames the film, 2) the Hispanic mother who grieves the loss of her son (foreshadowing the likely reaction to Marcus's death), and 3) the death of Homer's paternal

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figure, telegraph operator Mr. Grogan, who collapses from a heart attack upon transcribing Marcus's death notice. Each death contributes to Homer's experience with and exposure to death and mourning, finally culminating in the (offscreen) loss of his brother Marcus. [36] However, even if the home front genre excludes death, the wartime fantasy film includes the dead in the form of ghosts and angels.

The ghostly Mr. Macauley frames *The Human Comedy*'s narrative, which opens with his otherworldly voice (and eventually, his disembodied spectral face in the sky) introducing himself and revealing "I have been dead for two years." Occasionally appearing within the story but invisible to the living, he clearly sets up the folksy, quotidian, and normalcy of both Ithaca and the Macauley family specifically, in an appeal to relatability and "realism." He also closes the film by walking side-by-side back into the Macauley home with the ghost of the recently-deceased yet still uniformed son Marcus. René Thoreau Bruckner argues that ghosts often function to disturb traditional constructions of time and invoke a tension and anxiety between past, present, and future through the contradiction of a specter's simultaneous presence and absence. [37] However, the 1940s fantasy film specifically does so to introduce themes of transcendence over the disruptive power of physical death. In conjunction with Mrs. Macaulay's speech early in the film, the role of the supernatural forces establishes and reinforces *The Human Comedy*'s central view of death and the afterlife: Death is not a definitive end, and the afterlife is watching over loved ones rather than a separate, distinct heaven that the dead move on to.

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[36] The death of Mrs. Sandoval's (Ann Ayars) son is cinematically portrayed through a superimposition of a shot showing the mother cradling her son, a visual reminiscent of the pietà (i.e., the artistic rendering of the Virgin Mary holding the dead body of her son Jesus popular in Catholic art).

[37] René Thoreau Bruckner, "Bad Sync: Spectral Sound and Retro-Effects," in *Cinematic Ghosts: Haunting and Spectrality from Silent Cinema to the Digital Era*, ed. Murray Leeder (NY: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), 97–14.

One night in the family parlor, an inquisitive six-year-old Ulysses questions his mother on matters of life, death, and the war:

> Ulysses: Where's my father gone?
> Mrs. Macauley: Where each of must go someday. And where we hope we'll all be together again. That day came for your father, two years ago. I know it isn't easy for you to understand.
> U: If we wait, will he come home like Marcus after the war?
> M. M: Not the way you mean. He won't come walking down the street, up the steps, across the porch and into the house, the way he used to.
> U: Why?
> M. M: Death is like the day, Ulysses. You fall asleep and tomorrow comes. Remember the day you saw a train and you found an egg? Oh, tomorrow they'll be gone. But the excitement of seeing that train and the wonder of finding that egg will be in you always. So will your father. Nothing can take him from us. Because he lives in us. In our hearts. In our thoughts. In our talk with one another, in our song.
> U: You mean, he is right in the room with us?
> M. M: Yes. Try to remember that nothing good ever ends. If it did, there'll be no people in the world. No life at all, anywhere.

Throughout, *The Human Comedy* is structured much like this scene, philosophical monologues framed as folksy universal platitudes, couched in vignettes of the ordinary with a rural aesthetic and laden with M-G-M Americana symbolism. However, it saves its most important message for the final third of the film. In a three-minute, unbroken single take, Homer reads a letter from Marcus aloud to telegraph operator Mr. Grogan, as a flurry of emotions – happiness, nervousness, fear, and sadness – evolve and play across Rooney's face. Within the lengthy letter, Marcus expresses his pride in serving in the military, his determination to be the "finest soldier" to honor his family and country, and his genuine anxieties about death. Homer's fears over his brother dying are conveyed effectively through his immediate verbal response to Marcus's letter: "If my brother is killed in this war, I'll spit at the world. I'll hate it forever. I won't be good, I'll be bad. I'll be the worst there is. I'll be the worst that ever lived." This reaction to death, undeniably bitter, is mirrored in the character of Mr. Grogan, Homer's closest paternal figure. Grogan, long-time telegraph veteran, is defined by his devotion to his job (i.e., receiving all

incoming and relevant news for the town) and his explicit alcoholism, which he attributes to "a reason not necessary to mention," likely decades of transcribing death and tragedy notices over early 20th century events. Therefore, once Homer storms off, Grogan's first action is to retrieve his bottle of booze. Homer's potential bitterness about his brother's death, his actual reaction to the death, and the simultaneous passing of Mr. Grogan demonstrates this film's ultimate message: Dying is as essential to the war effort as other forms of service, but the refusal to quickly move on fosters bitter, destructive impulses and threatens the community. This is also exemplified by the father's arc in *Happy Land*, although it takes place in the aftermath of his son's death, whereby the ghost of his grandfather leads him away from the emotions of grief and bitterness that alarmed and disturbed his fellow small town residents.

The Human Comedy's characterization of death denies its permanence, and encourages the repression of grief, or more accurately a compression of the grieving process in order to stem the threat that bitterness, rage, or pessimism potentially poses to the family and community. Anderegg argues that the home front discourse in Hollywood war films produced during World War II are consolatory yet often contradictory in their depictions of death, specifically how the films both center death as their foremost issue but also possess inherently conflicted agendas in their deflection, denial, and repression of death and its psychological consequences.[38] Anderegg also reveals crucial cooperation between M-G-M studio head Louis B. Mayer with the Office of War Information (OWI) on the film (as well as most others), demonstrating a synchronicity between the industry and the propagandistic messaging government institutions worked to convey. The film's final sequence, a truncated attempt at closure for its characters' loss, further

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[38] Anderegg, "Home Front America and the Denial of Death in MGM's *The Human Comedy*."

illustrates the new counter-reading: the compression of grief precipitated by a community representative and the divine authority of a supernatural figure.

Upon Grogan's passing, Homer's intense stare barely contains the brimming emotions of anger, contempt, frustration, and confusion, then numbness. He worries how he will tell his family and Mary. He expresses feeling lost and seeing the world differently, immediately recanting his earlier statement of bitterness. Homer's grief is quickly neutralized by a stunningly brief conversation with his boss Tom followed by a game of horseshoes. Furthermore, his emotional response is weighed against the slow-motion death of Mr. Grogan from fatal alcoholism, suppressed trauma, a heart attack, shock from Marcus's death notice, or a combination thereof. However, just as suddenly, a bright light illuminates Homer's face as he sits on a park bench alone, and his father's voice of wisdom speaks over him and as if by magic, Homer smiles with an oddly immediate renewed sense of optimism. He returns to his home to find Pvt. Tobey George, his brother's closest friend, and they walk warmly into the Macauley home, trailed by the ghosts of Mr. Macauley and Marcus. *Happy Land* concludes similarly with the deceased son's friend coming to visit the family, acting as surrogate to comfort the grieving. Integration of supernatural elements is less comprehensive in *The Human Comedy* than *Happy Land*, but in both films, they function as a moralizing framing device and deus-ex-machina provided to resolve the central dilemma of loss and grief before Homer's and Mr. Marsh's (*Happy Land*) bitterness can threaten the home front communities of Ithaca, California, Hartfield, Iowa, and beyond.[39]

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[39] Furby and Hine's "fantasy mix" concept resonates with the varying degrees to which supernatural fantasy elements are integrated into wartime fantasy films, sometimes as framing devices and other times, generating the entire premise and pushing forward the plot.

While demonstrating the same messaging on grief as *The Human Comedy*, *A Guy Named Joe* primarily addresses mourning on the war (England, Scotland) and combat fronts (Pacific), although integrating its fantasy devices differently. Helmed by another M-G-M contract director, Victor Fleming, *Joe* is an original story from screenwriters Chandler Sprague and David Boehm and later adapted by Dalton Trumbo and Frederick Hazlitt Brennan. The film premiered in December of 1943 before nationwide release by M-G-M in March of 1944, where it grossed at least $4.5 million, becoming one of the studio's most successful wartime films, alongside *The Human* Comedy, *The White Cliffs of* Dover (Clarence Brown, 1944), and *Thirty Seconds Over Tokyo* (Mervyn LeRoy, 1944).[40] In addition, it earned a Best Motion Picture Story nomination for Sprague and Boehm.[41] Mixing fantasy, romantic comedy, and a multi-front wartime setting, *Joe* follows the (after)life of roguish and stubborn Air Force bomber pilot Pete Sandidge (Spencer Tracy) who dies in an aerial attack helping to get his squadron to safety. Upon death, he meets "the General" (Lionel Barrymore), a legendary dead pilot who assigns Pete to return to earth as a guardian angel for a rookie airman named Ted Randall (Johnson).[42] But when Pete learns that Ted is dating his former fiancée, ace civilian pilot Dorinda Durston (Dunne), he must set aside his jealousy and prepare Ted for a dangerous bombing mission.

Due to its war front setting as opposed to the home front of *The Human Comedy*, *A Guy Named Joe* focuses mostly on soldiers, specifically characters who serve in the U.S. Air Force

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[40] "123 Pix's B.O.–$245,000,000," *Variety*, January 3, 1945, 134. See Mark H. Glancy, "MGM Film Grosses, 1924-1948: The Eddie Mannix Ledger," *Historical Journal of Film, Radio & Television* 12, no. 2 (1992): 127–144, https://doi.org/10.1080/01439689200260081. Both *The White Cliffs of Dover* and *Thirty Seconds Over Tokyo* share cast and crew with *A Guy Named Joe*, the former starring actress Irene Dunne while the latter stars Spencer Tracy and Van Johnson (who plays another pilot named Ted) as well as screenwriter Dalton Trumbo and editor Frank Sullivan. Lastly, Clarence Brown served as director on both *Dover* and *The Human Comedy*. This demonstrates continuity across studio job delegation and genre as well as the look and feel of the films.

[41] "The 17th Academy Awards," *Oscars.org*, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, n.d., accessed January 7, 2020, https://www.oscars.org/oscars/ceremonies/1945.

[42] Two other actors who appeared in *The Human Comedy* as soldiers, Barry Nelson and Don DeFore, both also appear in *Joe* as a deceased and living soldier, respectively.

(although Dunne's Dorinda, as a civilian cargo pilot, is an interesting inclusion).[43] While both

emphasize themes of sacrifice and unity in times of war, *Joe*'s fore-fronting of bravery and

courage in the direct face of death as well as the depiction of death itself and the nature of the

story's supernatural forces drastically contrast from the home front context. The film does not

project wartime death into the past, offscreen, or onto a civilian figure, and the afterlife for

cowards is described as unforgiving and is clearly framed negatively. [44] The central death of

"Joe" is both portrayed onscreen and rendered in an extensive, realistic, and implicitly "violent"

manner. While completing a reconnaissance mission of a German aircraft carrier, Pete is spotted

and attacked. To save his squadron, he dive-bombs into the carrier before his plane is blown up,

falling into the ocean as a flaming wreck. Like many studios of the time, M-G-M actively

cooperated with the War Department to procure equipment, which in addition to the use of matte

paintings and miniatures, demonstrates a devotion to achieving authenticity (including for the

death scene). In Air Force-centered war films especially, the "only really permissible form of

self-assertion was the act of self-annihilation" because "no matter how powerful the emotional

pull, the war came first."[45] However, unlike *The Human Comedy*, *Joe*'s production had an

uneasy relationship with the Office of War Information (OWI), according to files from the

National Archive and Production Code Administration vis-à-vis the American Film Catalog.[46]

They required script rewrites due to the perceived negative "psychological effects" their

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[43] As a pilot, Dorinda does not align with the typical roles of women in wartime films, even for war front films which tended to be male-centered barring romantic dramas. She is not the Rosie the Riveter, War Department office worker, combat front nurse, resistance fighter or spy of films like *Tender Comrade*, *Government Girl* (Dudley Nichols, 1943), *So Proudly We Hail!* (Mark Sandrich, 1943) and *Cry 'Havoc'* (Richard Thorpe, 1943), *Edge of Darkness* (Lewis Milestone, 1943), and *Ministry of Fear* (Fritz Lang, 1944).

[44] Another wartime fantasy film released by M-G-M in 1944, *The Canterville Ghost* is also set in England with similar themes of bravery and courage under wartime duress. However, no soldiers die on- or offscreen, and instead the consequences of cowardice are projected backwards through the death of the titular specter (Charles Laughton) for his lack of bravery and honor.

[45] Doherty, *Projections of War*, 111.

[46] "A Guy Named Joe," National Archives, *AFI Catalog*, n.d., https://catalog.afi.com/Catalog/moviedetails/464.

portrayal of death and ghosts could have on audiences and recruits, as was acknowledged by

Dixon.[47] Furthermore, as Pete's death is the inciting incident rather than the final heroic act

(*Human Comedy*), the narrative examines the mourning (and the afterlife) rather than concluding

it before the credits roll.

The ghosts of *A Guy Named Joe* are all servicemen, or rather the spirits of pilots who

died in the line of duty. The film also represents the afterlife as an actual physical space coded to

resemble the military, specifically to signify a pilot's domain – in the sky and above the clouds,

with a God-pilot figure ("The General"), spiritual chain of command, and ordained professions

for pilots. However, they are not simply ghosts watching over familial connections but guardian

angels with charges, duties, and rules. Angels, according to Lindvall, often function by "holding

up mirrors to . . . predicaments" through divine intervention in the lives of humans.[48] Although

analyzing angelic fantasy comedies of the 1940s (of which there were many), Lindvall

distinguished the decade's cinematic angels as "more than ombudsmen, but very fallible

creatures themselves, awkwardly helping to usher in fanciful comic deus ex machina endings."[49]

Pete cannot be seen by the living, but his voice functions as a kind of whisperings for the living

characters. His role within the narrative is dual: First, as a guardian angel, he assists the next

generation of pilots in honing their skills, gaining confidence, and achieving courageous acts; but

second, as a deceased human being, he must help his loved one (Dorinda) resolve her grief.

According to *Joe*, death is not the end (like *Human Comedy*), but instead the afterlife is souls

continuing to be "of service," even in the war effort. The latter message proves a powerful

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[47] Dixon, *Visions of Paradise*, 139–140.
[48] Lindvall et al., "*Film Blanc* Comedy," in *Divine Film*, 109.
[49] See *Here Comes Mr. Jordan* (Alexander Hall, 1941), *I Married an Angel* (W.S. Van Dyke, 1942), *Cabin in the Sky* (Vincente Minnelli, 1943), *It's a Wonderful Life* (Capra, 1946), *Angel on My Shoulder* (Archie Mayo, 1946), *The Bishop's Wife* (Henry Koster, 1947), and *Heaven Only Knows* (Albert S. Rogell, 1947). See Lindvall et al., "*Film Blanc* Comedy," in *Divine Film*, 118.

reminder of Dixon's characterization of the film as a tool for recruitment and affirmation for the audience.

By the final sequence, Dorinda's arc delivers the exact same message as that of *The Human Comedy* but escalates the grief-as-social-threat theme to more literal and explicit extremes. Having endured Pete's untimely death, she finds it difficult to move on, even six months later. While her grief is completely reasonable, her continued mourning is scolded and admonished by Pete's best friend Al (Ward Bond) for devoting herself to the war effort, which in a home front film like *The Human Comedy* would have been acceptable and self-sacrificing. Her grieving process is characterized as unhealthy and worrisome, and later, self-destructive. Slowly, she warms to Ted, Pete's charge, and accepts his marriage proposal. However, she later breaks it because she admits to Ted that she is not over Pete and was initially taken with Ted due to the many physical habits and figures of speech he had unconsciously absorbed from his guardian angel. When she later discovers Ted will be going on a very dangerous mission, she proceeds to have a complete break with reality. She steals an expensive military plane with the intention of going on a suicide mission in Ted's place. Not only is it a rupture in the film's attempt at realism in terms of its setting and recreation of the war front, but it has no foundation in the narrative logic or Dorinda's characterization up to that point. Throughout the film, she is shown to be a competent pilot and intuitive about unnecessary risk-taking and recklessness, a trait Pete lacks while living although he spends most of his time with Dorinda chauvinistically trying to convince her to give up flying. Regardless, the conclusion features Dorinda's mental break and attempt at self-sacrificing heroism, which when perpetrated by "Joe" (causing his death) is considered heroic sacrifice, or acceptable "self-annihilation." Dorinda eventually abandons her plan, upon spiritual guidance from Pete, but her grief and mourning of her trauma is framed as

not only as a personal dilemma but as an actual threat to national safety and security, therefore the war effort. As in *Human Comedy*, Dorinda's grief is resolved immediately by the film's conclusion, but the narrative's alternative function remains: prolonged mourning is of no service to the war effort and could instead, become a dangerous impediment.

Between Two Worlds, released by Warner Brothers in May of 1944, takes the self-destructive impulses brought by unresolved grief as portrayed in *A Guy Named Joe* to the next level: hopelessness, actual suicide and the afterlife.[50] Directed by Polish émigré Edward A. Blatt and scripted by Daniel Fuchs, the film is set in war-torn London, following an ensemble cast of strangers who inexplicably find themselves aboard a mysterious ocean liner traveling through the abyss of purgatory towards final judgement.[51] As the opening pre-death scenes take place in war zones though not on an active combat front, the liminal space between civilian and direct exposure to the war is unique to this fantasy film, in addition to its choice to transplant the setting from its World War I origins to the contemporary. Essentially, the setting permits a mix of civilians (i.e., citizens and refugees), military and war-adjacent characters who are all on a home front but also navigating an active war zone within a bombed-out London. Like *Human Comedy*'s home front, many characters represent different facets of the war front – the war profiteer, the marine, the war correspondent, and the refugee – therefore a greater variety of relevant experiences are capable of speaking to a larger audience.

Unlike *Human Comedy* (an adaptation of a contemporary novel) or *A Guy Named Joe* (produced as an original story), *Between Two Worlds* is a film adaptation of a popular play

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[50] While specifics regarding production budget, gross, and profit are unavailable, the film did not generate a loss (Mark. H. Glancy, "Warner Bros Film Grosses, 1921-51: The William Schaefer Ledger," *Historical Journal of Film, Radio & Television* 15 (1): 55–73. https://doi.org/10.1080/01439689500260031).
[51] "Obituary: Edward A. Blatt," Variety, February 17, 1991, accessed January 18, 2020, https://variety.com/1991/scene/people-news/edward-a-blatt-99125932/.

written after World War I, in 1923. *Outward Bound*, the work's original title, was penned by

British playwright Sutton Vane.[52] Vane joined the British army at the outbreak of World War I

but suffered intense guilt for being invalided before the war's end. Regardless, he soldiered on as

an entertainer for the troops, even during times of heavy artillery and within range of possible

sudden death. Premiering five years after Armistice Day, the play does not specifically name a

particular international crisis for the action's jumping-off point. A previous adaptation from

Warner Bros. was produced in 1930, and the play was revived multiple times, including in 1940

just before the start of World War II.[53] Similarly, wartime fantasy film *The Enchanted Cottage* is

also an adaptation of a British play performed in the early 1920s, with a previous film adaptation,

and meditations on the psychological fallout of death after the First World War.[54] Significantly,

both films produced during the 1940s, *Between Two Worlds* and *Enchanted Cottage*, explicitly

ground the drama in the experiences and horrors of World War II.

This connection aligns with the general trend in wartime Hollywood to re-mythologize

the war and mass loss of World War I, beginning with films produced just before and during

World War II. At the time of the First World War, Hollywood was still in its "embryonic" form,

therefore ill-equipped to participate in the kind of extensive propaganda campaign it executed by

the time of the Second World War. [55] Furthermore, the former "resisted celluloid rehabilitation"

due to its brutality and nebulous political justification. As a result, the first wave of World War II

propaganda functioned to "demythologize" the earlier conflict in order to counteract a decade of

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[52] Striner, Richard. *Love in the Afterlife*, 7–11; Elizabeth R. Hibbs, "Special to The New York Times– Hampshire: New Plays at White Mountain Theatres," *New York Times*, July 28, 1940, 106.

[53] *Outward Bound*, directed by Robert Milton, Warner Bros., 1930.

[54] Arthur Pinero, *The Enchanted Cottage: A Fable in Three Acts* (London: William Heinemann, 1922).

[55] Doherty, *Projections of War*, 87–88, 100. This includes film like Warner Bros.' *The Fighting 69th* (William Keighley, 1940), *Sergeant York* (Howard Hawks, 1941), and *This Is the Army* (Michael Curtiz, 1943) as well as M-G-M's *Random Harvest* (Mervyn LeRoy, 1942), *For Me and My Gal* (Busby Berkeley, 1942), and *The White Cliffs of Dover* (Clarence Brown, 1944).

depictions emphasizing "despair, meaninglessness, [and] pacifism." Lastly, the "genre work [of these films] is twofold: (1) to re-mythologize World War I as a national crusade worthy of admiration, and (2) to reconcile the conflict between state (patriotism) and church (morality)." This rehabilitation of World War I extends to the fantasy genre through the adaptation of plays like *Outward Bound* (*Between Two Worlds*) and *The Enchanted Cottage* as well as inclusion of World War I-era sequences in *Happy Land* and *It's a Wonderful Life*. The latter specifically features a poignant scene of the local druggist reacting to his son's death notice by almost poisoning a patient with a bad prescription (i.e., grief is destructive to the community). Furthermore, despite *It's a Wonderful Life*'s framing narrative taking place in World War II, none of the principal characters die or lose someone to the war, meaning the trauma of death and loss is projected backwards or outwards like in *The Human Comedy*, *Happy Land*, and *The Canterville Ghost*. Connections among grief, death, loss, and morality are drawn thoroughly within and across each wartime fantasy film discussed here.

Death, in *Between Two Worlds*, is portrayed twice onscreen although not in the prolonged manner of *A Guy Named Joe*. The first occasion is the car bombing that ends the lives of eight of the ten principal characters, who are on their way to board a transport ship to the United States, the deceased going as follows: a priest venturing beyond his parish for the first time (Dennis King), an elderly woman who has just retired (Sara Allgood), a washed-up war correspondent (John Garfield), a failed aspiring actress (Faye Emerson), a greedy businessman-war profiteer (George Coulouris), a discharged merchant marine headed stateside to see his newborn child (George Tobias), and an upper class yet miserable society couple (Isobel Elsom, Gilbert Emery). The second scene is the protagonists' suicides – Austrian resistance fighter-turned-refugee Henry Bergner and his American expatriate wife Ann (Paul Henreid, Eleanor Parker). While Ann is

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legally allowed to purchase a ticket to the United States, Henry must wait several months for visa papers. Unable to stand the waiting and feeling hopeless, Henry decides to commit suicide in their apartment via gas asphyxiation and upon discovery, Ann soon follows. Of the films analyzed, *Between Two Worlds* has the largest quantity of deaths. Neither death scene is graphic but in dialogue with *A Guy Named Joe*, the suicide of traumatized and hopeless refugees is unfavorably compared to the noble "self-annihilation" of soldiers.

For most of the characters, however, death is just the inciting incident. Instead, the afterlife, judgment, and moral introspection take the forefront. *Between Two Worlds* is an example of a supernatural fantasy narrative where the experiences of living characters are largely offscreen. Moreover, it is one of the only wartime-centered films, in addition to *The Enchanted Cottage* that utilizes a fantasy setting rather than solely supernatural figures. The supernatural forces of *Between Two Worlds* are both ghosts and angels, and like *A Guy Named Joe*, they exist within a spiritual hierarchy and afterlife bureaucracy. Every human dies, but some may move on to individualized hells and heavens while some become stewards of the purgatorial ship (Edmund Gwenn) or an arbiter of judgement like the Examiner (Sydney Greenstreet). Furthermore, the afterlife is not earthbound (*Human Comedy*) or sky high (*A Guy Named Joe*), but a process of judgement and sentencing depending on both the moral conduct of their life *and* death. Beset by an ever-present fog, the film's narrative takes place aboard an otherworldly ship that is eerily empty and cast in shadow. Every passenger shines with a ghostly, silver glow, contrasted with the deck's shadows and the murky unknown that lies beyond the ship's edges.

This fog-laden ship instead becomes a liminal site for "atonement" or "transition" between life and death, according to Dixon and the Genellis, respectively.[56] The latter argues that

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[56] The depiction of death as a figurative boat passage signifies an incorporation of Greek mythos, resembling Charon, the ferryman of the dead on the River Styx (Dixon, *Visions of Paradise*, 155). Furthermore, the clear

Between Two Worlds as well as other 1940s fantasy films utilize the metaphor of death as transit, or generally, as a period of transition. Essentially, the metaphor (i.e., life to death via ocean liner, soldier to civilian life), in accordance with Valenti, showcased a need for philosophical resolution around the mysteries and despair surrounding such mass and personal death. Therefore, death as constructed in films like *Between Two Worlds* functions within parameters akin to real life – in a physical place, in a timely manner, with a sense of protocol and justice, and from a definite process of transition towards closure and conclusion. This view of death and the afterlife significantly contradicts those of *The Human Comedy* and *A Guy Named Joe*, presenting death as a definitive end to the human experience on earth, meaning no watching over loved ones or post-mortem occupations (for the most part). In contrast, reading the ship as a site for atonement indicates a focus on sin and morality, which speaks to the heart of the alternative messaging and function films like *Between Two Worlds* attempt to convey.

By the end of *Between Two Worlds*, each character has been judged for their moral or immoral behavior in life (*and* death). The three bombing victims with direct ties to the war – the war profiteer, the merchant marine, and the war correspondent – are all judged according to their wartime conduct. The profiteer is sentenced to "hell" for the suffering he has inflicted, with no means for bribery or intimidation to escape. The marine, initially angry that he died before seeing his family, is comforted that he will see them in the afterlife, so he moves on quietly to await them in "heaven." The cynical and bitter correspondent, however, is sentenced to an eternity of unhappiness, existing as he always has but without the defense mechanisms of

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condemnation of suicide victims aligns with Catholic Christianity's view of suicide as the one unforgiveable sin (Sara Sligar, "Reserving the Kill: The Suicide Ban and Criminal Punishment in Code-Era Hollywood Film," *Film History: An International Journal* 31, no. 4 (2019): 1–29, accessed February 1, 2020, muse.jhu.edu/article/748827). See Dixon, *Visions of Paradise*, 153; Tom and Lyn Davis Genelli, "Between the Worlds: Some Thoughts beyond the 'Film Blanc,'" *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 12, no. 3 (1984): 100–111.

sarcasm and condescension. Lastly, the fates of Henry and Ann Bergner are proclaimed. Ann, having followed after Henry, is permitted to leave the ship and enter "heaven." However, Henry as the initiator of the suicide, is condemned to stay aboard the ship as a steward for the rest of time. From these judgements, the afterlife is framed as a punishment for those immoral (e.g., profiteers, the bitter and jaded, the hopeless) and relief for the moral (e.g., the patient, loyal, faithful, and patriotic). Feelings of grief, bitterness, and especially hopelessness become threats to the wartime social order, and above all, suicide and the extreme emotions that precede the act are positioned as the ultimate sin from which there is no redemption. This moves these issues beyond the personal and national to the universal, and in doing so, posits them as high-stakes questions of morality, worthy of damnation if the answer (i.e., emotions, reactions, conduct) dares do not meet expectations. By a magical twist of fate, Henry and Ann are rescued from the brink of death when debris from the bombing breaks their apartment's window, letting fresh oxygen in and airing out the toxic gas. They are allowed a second chance at life, even one under wartime conditions. Placing *The Human Comedy*, *A Guy Named Joe*, and *Between Two Worlds* in dialogue compellingly demonstrates how the unconventional blending of the fantasy and war film genres not only acted as entertainment for wartime audiences but also propagandistic texts (made in cooperation with the U.S. government's oversight) to deploy instructional messages on appropriate, safe, patriotic, and moral emotional conduct in response to feelings of grief, bitterness, and hopelessness resulting from inevitable war-related losses.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this thesis explores how fantasy, unconventionally blended with the war film genre during World War II, addresses the psychological trauma of wartime loss. Fantasy narratives, devices, and characters are used to directly address the inevitable prospects of death

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during wartime, both for the individuals and communities within the films and the contemporary moviegoing audience. The films strive for this goal by using multiple settings (war, home, and combat fronts) and diverse war effort perspectives (military, civilians, refugees, expatriates), as well as emphasizing the emotional resolution of both survivors and the deceased by the end of the film narrative. In each film, the prevailing emotions of grief (*A Guy Named Joe*), bitterness (*The Human Comedy*), and hopelessness (*Between Two Worlds*) are characterized on narrative and thematic levels as inconvenient, dangerous, destructive, and immoral, a detriment to the war effort. The exemplary films utilize supernatural devices and settings as a divine authority to transform any emotional resistance to the immediate resolution of that trauma, especially in response to the loss of a loved one, as a threat to wartime social order for both the characters and audience. To reiterate, the texts analyzed in this thesis as well as the dozens of other fantasy films released during the decade, should be included in the scholarly discourse for 1940s Hollywood, the war film genre, and in the history of U.S.-American fantasy. Opening academic study to fantasy films of the 1940s blows apart the neat chronology that divides 1930s horror and 1950s science fiction and presumes a vacuous hole in between, supposedly dominated by trends towards realism. Fantasy, and all its numerous "fantasy mixes" flourished well into the postwar period and throughout the decade. Furthermore, examining World War II fantasy films expands the discursive assumptions on the nature of propaganda in narrative cinema. Aside from the straightforward war front and home front films which focus on the tangible, physical war effort – suggesting audiences join the army, collect metal scraps, volunteer for the American Red Cross, and buy war bonds – these fantasy films appeal to psychological response and emotional conduct of that same mobilization, specifically to experiences as widespread, anticipated, and inevitable as death and loss but also in explicit terms that address what comes after and what is left behind.

This thesis functions as a beginning to this re-examination, one that must be dialogical as well as critical of the consensus that dismissed, ignored, or oversimplified this genre in general and these films in particular. With greater access to archival resources in a post-COVID-19 environment, further research would be necessary and should prove exciting.[57] Lastly, the alternative proposal provides a new way and fresh counter-reading to look at theories on fantasy, escapism, Classical Hollywood, and the World War II film that have gone long uncritiqued and unquestioned in a substantive, comprehensive form for decades.

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[57] Such archival resources that could prove fruitful for analyzing these films and others further include the financial information available in Eddie Mannix's ledger (Margaret Herrick Library) or general studio files for M-G-M (UCLA) and Warner Bros. (USC), production files (Academy Library), censorship files from the Production Code Administration, and documents from the Office of War Information and National Archives, or the collections of individual directors like Clarence Brown (University of Tennessee). While pandemic conditions affected material access, archival research and textual analysis are not interchangeable, and choosing the latter was not a consolation for this thesis but a deliberate choice.

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