



Journal of Religion & Film

Volume 21
Issue 1 April 2017

Article 41

4-1-2017

“To See My Home Before I Die”: The Trip to Bountiful, Memento Mori, and the Experience of Death

Margaret Sullivan
Marshall University, sullivanm@marshall.edu

Recommended Citation

Sullivan, Margaret (2017) "“To See My Home Before I Die”: The Trip to Bountiful, Memento Mori, and the Experience of Death," *Journal of Religion & Film*: Vol. 21 : Iss. 1 , Article 41.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol21/iss1/41>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@UNO. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Religion & Film by an authorized editor of DigitalCommons@UNO. For more information, please contact unodigitalcommons@unomaha.edu.

“To See My Home Before I Die”: The Trip to Bountiful, Memento Mori, and the Experience of Death

Abstract

This article analyzes the portrayal of death in Peter Masterson's 1985 film *The Trip to Bountiful*. My claim is that the experience of death, in the film, functions as a tool both for the elderly main character's increased self-understanding and for her conscious, ethical action. I enter this discussion through an examination of late deconstruction's ethical turn and the argument that aporetic unknowing, if experienced and endured, leads to the chance for real, authentic action. I then demonstrate how the film depicts such an aporetic encounter with death, and do so, in large part, by focusing on the film's final scenes, in which Carrie Watts returns to Bountiful, her cherished childhood home, and finds death and decay all around her. While previous scholars who have analyzed *The Trip to Bountiful* have found it to be a story of home, or nature, or family, I bring to light another interpretive approach: *The Trip to Bountiful*, through its sustained engagement with the very event of death, uses that experience of death to foster a real and tangible shift in one woman's interactions with the world.

Keywords

death, aporia, film, deconstruction, Derrida, Heidegger

Author Notes

Margaret Sullivan received her Ph.D. in British Modernist Literature from Saint Louis University in 2011. Her additional research interests are religious studies, deconstructive ethics, and queer theory. She currently teaches at Marshall University.

Such a caring for death, an awakening that keeps vigil over death, a consciousness that looks death in the face, is another name for freedom.

--Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death*¹

Jacques Derrida, in the above words, elucidates one of philosophy's most potent concepts: Living with the constant knowledge of one's own mortality, of the inevitable end that will eventually come, leads—paradoxically—to a fuller and more vibrant understanding of death's opposite side: life. The thought of dying enhances the process of living, in other words, and what Derrida calls “caring for death,” “keeping vigil over [it],” results in absolute self-determination, or a “freedom” in which we fashion of our selfhood free of obligation to any religious, political, or cultural system. As Simon Critchley puts it, in a useful discussion of Heideggerian “being-towards-death,” the anticipation of death “mobilizes mortality as the condition for free action in the world.”²

In many respects, such an understanding of death is similar to the ancient Christian idea of *memento mori*, which can be roughly translated as “remember mortality.” The more direct translation is “remember that you will die.”³ Ideas of *memento mori* haunt texts ranging from Ecclesiasticus' injunction “in all you do remember the end of your life” to the skulls and rotting fruit inhabiting sixteenth and seventeenth century *vanitas* paintings to the verbal reminder that accompanies the administration of ashes on Ash Wednesday: “remember, man, you are dust and to dust you will return.”⁴

Much has been written about memento mori in the arts. For example, Martin Jay finds memento mori's "specter of mortality" strongly present in Roland Barthes' ruminations on photography and memory.⁵ Additionally, Jonathan Blower notes that Goethe's *Elective Affinities* "consciously and consistently mobilizes historic monuments and relics of times past as premonitions of future death."⁶ Texts outside of literature are also read through memento mori: Phillip Shaw calls Patti Smith's classic album *Horses* "a form of memento mori, an artistic meditation on the limits of mortality," Louis Kaplan finds memento mori throughout the photography of the AIDS epidemic, and Benjamin Bennett-Carpenter finds memento mori in the contemporary films titled *Power of Ten*, *Notebooks on Cities and Clothes*, and *Blue*.⁷

Each of the previous texts presents perceptive analyses of the fundamental impulse behind memento mori: the injunction to keep death always before one's eyes. Bennett-Carpenter's point that "one discerns one's limited future, takes (or refuses) action in light of this discernment, and these actions (or refusals) have material (including psychological and social) consequences for one's life, but especially for coming generations" is indicative of the strong work that has already been done theorizing the myriad implications of facing one's own death.⁸ What thinking about memento mori has yet to examine fully, however, is how the awareness of one's future death can function as Derridean possibility, as what I referenced above as honest action and "the seizure of absolute responsibility." The

purpose of this essay is to consider memento mori in such terms. In particular, I will investigate Peter Masterson's 1985 film *The Trip to Bountiful* and demonstrate that the awareness—and experience—of impending death functions to mobilize free and ethical action for the film's elderly main character, thus not only increasing this character's self-understanding but also pushing her to select priorities and to take responsibility for the life she leads. For this reason, a careful look at Masterson's film adds immensely to critical analyses of memento mori, doing so by placing the longstanding idea in conversation with late deconstruction and its "ethical turn."

A summary of the film's most important events helps in fleshing out the above claims. In brief, *The Trip to Bountiful* (set in 1947) tells the story of Carrie Watts (played by Geraldine Page), an elderly woman living in a one-bedroom Houston apartment with her dutiful son Ludie (John Heard) and none-too-pleasant daughter-in-law Jessie Mae (Carlyn Glinn). "Mother Watts" (the name that the film most frequently uses for Page's character) is unhappy in the confines of the family's small Houston apartment, and desperately wants to return to her childhood home: the small east Texas town of Bountiful. Mother Watts schemes to hide her government check, eventually escapes, and, in the words of Jessie Mae, "runs off to that old town of hers."⁹ Although Mother Watts faces many setbacks along the way, she does finally make it to Bountiful, where she finds death everywhere. Buildings are ruined, the friend she had hoped to visit has died just a few days

before, most of the townspeople have deserted Bountiful leaving its once thriving farmlands unused, and Mother Watts' own childhood home—the focus of her relentless journey—is just a shell of what it once was.

But it is in Bountiful, as Mother Watts witnesses the all-encompassing devastation around her, that this essay's opening idea—the knowledge of death as the possibility for free action—takes its clearest shape. Mother Watts and Ludie talk with an honesty never before present in the film, for instance. Furthermore, their topics of conversation, which include the cycle of the land in Bountiful (birth, death, rebirth) and their own future deaths (“in ten or twenty years,” as Mother Watts says, “when [all of them] will be gone”), further demonstrate how this film is formed by the figure of impending death.¹⁰ Also, Mother Watts and Jessie Mae agree to “live together in peace,” thus indicating that this encounter in Bountiful has led to a change in both women.¹¹ Finally, although the film's ending hints strongly at Mother Watts' death in Bountiful (she sits, in a state of near collapse before her old home, then is taken away, seated in the back of a car, in scene that evokes a funeral procession), that death is never confirmed. In fact, among the film's final images is an intense close-up of Mother Watts' very-much-alive face. The film thus negates the possibility of a coherent narrative; it resists ready-made interpretations and refuses to solve questions of death. Did Mother Watts die a happy death in Bountiful? Or did she return to what was once a living death in Houston? Each viewer answers those questions individually, thus recalling the

connections between the conflation of opposites (death, life) and the opportunity for real, honest, indeed *ethical* positionings.

The Trip to Bountiful is surprisingly understudied. Only a few scholars have analyzed the film, and those who have studied it generally remark on sweeping themes such as home, family, the land, and belief-systems. Charles Watson, for instance, has written a perceptive literary biography of Horton Foote in which he sees the film as “the story of the human need to belong to a family.” “[*The Trip to Bountiful*] capture[s] the mythical pattern of coming home,” Watson explains, and further argues that Foote, “recognizing an absence of belonging in modern life, [...] believes that the sense of belonging to a place, a family, and a house gave meaning to the people of rural America.”¹² Marian Burkhart finds a similar universality in the film; Burkhart characterizes Mother Watts’ trip as a “pilgrimage” and argues that the “systematic violence” in the work “thwarts good and natural ends.”¹³ Robert W. Haynes also spots “epic themes” in *The Trip to Bountiful*, and perceptively analyzes constructs of nature. “Nature is an essential theme,” Haynes states, “including both the nature of the main characters in terms of experience, personality, and potential and the nature of nature to which Carrie Watts longs to return, the world of the country in which she was raised.”¹⁴

All of these critics make fine points. Without a doubt, *The Trip to Bountiful* is a film with grand themes; it looks closely and carefully at longstanding questions about human spirit and human consciousness. What these critics have been less

willing to consider, however, is *Bountiful* as something radically other than heartwarming narrative. At the core of *The Trip to Bountiful* is deep and sustained engagement with the process of death. The film narrates not only one woman's (Mother Watts') slow demise, but also the death of her dreams, the death of her friends, and the death of the land that once gave her life. It could be a disturbing picture—all this death—and it certainly shapes *The Trip to Bountiful* as a far more troubling work than it appears on the surface. What ultimately emerges, however, from *Bountiful*'s sustained engagement with death is an invitation to consider death in markedly late deconstructive terms—specifically the confrontation with death as invitation to an honest, responsible, ethical relation to self and other. When Mother Watts, surrounded by Bountiful's death and arguably facing the final moments of her own life, uses that seeming devastation to change both her conceptual priorities and her very real life circumstances, what follows is an indication that, for Mother Watts, this engagement with life's ultimate border has fostered a real and tangible shift in her ethical relations with the world. Far more than a simple move into nonexistence, death, for Mother Watts, is a chance, an opportunity, a radically individuating moment, and the very event that Derrida, in this essay's opening remarks, called “another name for freedom.”

A closer look at just how the paradox of experiencing one's death functions as ethical possibility will help in spotting the film's consistent engagement with the process of death. My argument here builds on two primary points: first,

Heidegger's seminal work with death as "the possibility of the impossibility of any existence at all" and second, Derrida's aporia of death, which extends Heidegger's formulation.¹⁵ In both cases, at stake in the thinking of death is a fundamental understanding of what it means to be an authentic human being. As Derrida puts it, "thinking of the end of man [...] is always already prescribed in [...] the thinking of the truth of man."¹⁶ It is this premise—that the analytic of death opens up the work of fashioning an authentic self—that is foundational to my study of *Bountiful's* thematic of death and its relationship to Mother Watts' real, honest, *authentic* life.

Let us look briefly, then, at Heidegger's important analysis of death as the penultimate chance for self-actualization. "Death is in every case mine, insofar as it 'is' at all," Heidegger writes in *Being and Time*, thus making the point that the experience of one's death is utterly and completely singular.¹⁷ Each human, as Magda King explains, "stands before himself in the possibility that is most his own."¹⁸ In other words, there is no proxy, no stand in, for one's own death. My death is—and can only be—"mine." Thus death can be understood as a supremely authentic moment: each human approaches the event without prior experience and each goes about death in an utterly singular way.

However, at the same time that a subject's death is a completely authenticating experience, it is an experience that never can be completed by the self-contained subject. The event of death equals the demise of the subject, and

thus that death is always a future possibility, never a present actuality. Heidegger explains: “In running ahead to this possibility, [...] [death] reveals itself as something which knows no measure at all, no more or less, but means *the possibility of the measureless impossibility of existence*.”¹⁹ Heidegger makes the point that “running ahead” to death exposes the subject to an impassable border. At the moment of death, when the subject is most supremely authentic and self-actualized, that same subject is experiencing a moment that never will be completed; in effect, a moment that never will be fully possible. In Heidegger’s words, death places one before a “measureless impossibility.” The upshot of this reasoning is to align two oppositional poles: the event of death makes clear and present (indeed *possible*) that it can never happen—that it is always *impossible*.

And it is that formulation of death—as the event that makes possible its own impossibility—that gets us to late deconstruction and its important engagement with the event of death as ethical opportunity. For Derrida, this possibility of the impossible equals “aporia,” specifically the aporia of death.²⁰ Like Heidegger, Derrida wonders about “my death.” “Is my death possible?” Derrida asks in a late text titled *Aporias*, and thus clearly draws on Heidegger’s words. “How can we understand this question? [...] What does the syntagm ‘my death’ mean?”²¹ Derrida’s words suggest that he has located the same impasse as did Heidegger. He too argues that when an individual ceases to be, when death ends an individual’s life, there is no “my.” Therefore, when a speaking “I” utters, or “poses,” this

linguistic unit of “my death,” the result is that one has uttered what is, at its core, an impossible utterance.

But Derrida goes further. He expands on Heidegger and connects aporia—whether that aporia be of death, or of others such as the gift and hospitality—with the possibility for real, authenticating action.²² “I suggest that a sort of nonpassive endurance of the aporia [is] the very condition of responsibility and of decision,”²³ he explains, and thus makes the point that enduring suspension in illogic—in other words, actively engaging with and experiencing aporia’s pervasive unknowing—is *central to the seizure of responsibility*. In a 2004 interview with *L’Humanite*, Derrida further addresses the connection he locates between impossible sorts of logic (death as both possible and not, in the context of this essay) and ethics: “I question the impossible as possibility of ethics. [...] To do the impossible cannot make an ethics and yet it is the condition of ethics. I try to think the possibility of the impossible.”²⁴ This iteration is the final link that connects the experience of death—as we witness it throughout much of *The Trip to Bountiful*—with the possibility for ethical action. Derrida’s basic point is this: when prior knowledge systems have failed (when death both is and is not possible, for instance, or when Mother Watts witnesses the loss of all she knew about Bountiful) and when an individual, immersed in that loss of prior systems of thinking, nonetheless acts, when that individual just does something, *then that subject’s action brings with it an unmistakable authenticity*. Simon Critchley, a Derridean commentator who

argues forcefully for deconstruction as ethical opportunity, glosses Derrida's position by saying that "the place of the ethical moment is not that which mediates the passage from undecidability to the decision, but rather that which governs the whole field of undecidability."²⁵

Conjoining these ideas—that the experience of death is, by necessity, an aporetic positioning and that aporia, when endured, experienced, and testified to, offers a chance for an authentic act, an act that is un beholden to any prior system of knowledge—forms the root of my argument for how the thematics of approaching death operate in *The Trip to Bountiful*. Specifically, Mother Watts' awareness and experience of death, as those operations appear in the film, function as markers of opportunity for change. Let us return, then, to the film, and closely track how narratives of death play out in that piece.

From *The Trip to Bountiful's* very beginning, specifically its opening scenes that foreground the interplay of youth and old age, thematics of an approaching death haunt the narrative. The film opens to a highly evocative and deeply textured sequence: Ludie, as a young boy, runs through a field of bluebonnets, Mother Watts, as a young adult, runs behind him, and the soundtrack accompanies both with a sparse and haunting version of the traditional Christian hymn "Softly and Tenderly." The imagery and the sound invoke a timelessness: the young Ludie and Mother Watts, surrounded by Edenic flowers and enmeshed in the physicality of youth, seem free of temporal constraints and unaware of the passing of time.

Immediately, however, the image on the screen dissolves into the Edenic scene's seeming antithesis: Mother Watts, now an elderly woman, sits in a rocking chair, looks through a small window in which the view is only an uncomfortably close brick wall, and quietly hums the very hymn that opened the film. The juxtaposition invites comparison: the once running woman now seems trapped, her once brown hair is now white, the Texas wildflowers have been exchanged for aging bricks, and the formerly beautiful and complete hymn is now just a few hummed measures. The result is an uncomfortable consideration of a life that is passing by. Although the viewer, at this early point in the film, knows nothing of Mother Watts and her situation, it is clear that the woman in this scene has relinquished her former vibrancy. Sealed up in this small space, she has become old, and her death seems rapidly approaching.

The artistic elements of this opening scene also add to its thematization of a life passing by. The room where Mother Watts sits is heavily darkened, and while the darkness is potentially offset by the small window, even that window offers no light. Furthermore, the camera moves from an intense close-up of Mother Watts, who wears a tattered bathrobe and an unkempt hairstyle, to panning the overstuffed room, where the walls and furniture have faded from any lushness they might once have had. The effect is to fill the viewer's eye with symbolism of time's passing. From aged faces to aged furniture to clothing that has "seen better days," this scene evokes consideration of a life with very little future left.

Later in the scene, Ludie enters, emerging from a bedroom in which a married couple's separate beds testify to a relationship lacking fertility. As the scene progresses, and Mother Watts and Ludie begin to talk, the topics of their conversation become increasingly significant. Not only do they discuss the transition from youth to old age, but—a mere twenty lines into the film's dialogue—Mother Watts directly brings up the specter of death. Having determined that the reason Ludie cannot sleep is the night itself, specifically the night's full moon, she remarks on how Ludie, as a young child, associated that full moon with death.

I remember once when you were little and there was a full moon, and you couldn't sleep. I woke you up and dressed you and took you for a walk with me. [...] There was an old dog howling away somewhere, [...] and you were trembling with fear. You said that somebody told you that when a dog was howling a person was dying somewhere. And I held you close to me, and then you asked me to explain to you about dying. And I said you're too young to worry about things like that for a long time to come.²⁶

The effect of this opening conversation is to establish that considerations of time passing, and the approach of death, are indexes of meaning in the film. Other topics quickly appear (and just as quickly disappear) in the two's conversation: Ludie's job, for instance, his insomnia, and even the insomnia Mother Watts shares with him. But, in keeping with the injunctions of *memento mori*, Mother Watts chooses to focus on the human condition of mortality; she chooses to “remember death.” Furthermore, by remarking that such “worry[ing]” about death is not the proper concern of the young (“you're too young to worry about things like that”), she

implicitly connects that engagement with life's finitude with the old, in other words with herself, a clearly far from young woman.

Thus *The Trip to Bountiful*'s beginning places this film in conversation with the process of memento mori. Mother Watts is clearly aware of death; she feels its approach, and she is shaped—according both to script and cinematography—as a woman living on death's brink. Notably, however, there is no engagement with the aporia of death, and hence the opportunity for ethical action, yet visible in the film. While Mother Watts is aware of death, while she meditates on it, and while the viewer is asked to consider how time, in the lives of Ludie and Mother Watts, is quickly passing, that simple warning—of death's futural presence—is all we have, at this point in the film. Mother Watts has not engaged with the experience of death; rather she is only aware of its inevitable approach. Thus, as with so many other texts with themes of memento mori, *The Trip to Bountiful* is operating, at this early juncture, simply as a reminder that humans should be conscious of mortality. “Remember that Mother Watts will die” is the implicit message of these opening scenes, as is the injunction to note also that she is well on her way, and to remember to ask: what was she able to do with her life?

Much happens after the film's highly significant opening scenes. Mother Watts' daughter-in-law Jessie Mae appears in the film, for instance, and the viewer watches a sad scene in which the spoiled Jessie Mae acts as a near-bully to the older woman. It also becomes clear that Mother Watts is not a one-dimensional

stereotype of a soft, sensitive, and sad old woman. The film demonstrates that Mother Watts has schemed to hide her government check—keeping it for herself rather than depositing it in Ludie and Jessie Mae’s bank account—and that she intends to use that money to get what she wants: a trip back to her childhood home, the east Texas town of Bountiful. Additionally, the action follows Mother Watts’ bus ride as she tries to reach Bountiful, and as she meets, and talks with, an overly innocent young bride named Thelma. During that conversation, Mother Watts’ many losses and struggles become clear: she tells of her children who died young, her lost relationship with the man she loved, her struggles to find peace in the Houston apartment, and how “Jessie Mae hates [her].”²⁷

While all of the film’s middle scenes are worthy of a close investigation, particularly the bus ride and the accompanying monologue, which is in itself a stunning demonstration of Geraldine Page’s ability to command the screen, for the purposes of this essay it is useful to move ahead, to when Mother Watts actually arrives in Bountiful. As I will demonstrate below, it is in Bountiful, amid the death and devastation that has overtaken the town and its lands, that thematizations of death move from memento mori, and the awareness of a death always looming, to thought-provoking demonstrations of what comes—really and honestly—when one is immersed in the very process of death.

Mother Watts’ encounter with death in Bountiful begins with an arrival that, in many respects, opens up into several endings. Specifically, Mother Watts’ trip

has gotten her to a bus stop a mere twelve miles from Bountiful, and thus her dream of a happy return to Bountiful seems near its completion. But, after only a few minutes in the station, Mother Watts learns, in a troubling conversation with the ticket attendant, of the many deaths in Bountiful and its surrounding area:

Attendant: "I don't know why you're going to Bountiful. The last person in Bountiful was Miss Callie Davis, and she died the day before yesterday. [...] Was that who you were going to see?"

Mother Watts: "Yes, she was my friend, my girlhood friend." [...] Do they still have dances in Borden's Opera House?"

Attendant: "No ma'am. It's torn down. They condemned it. [...]"

Mrs. Watts: "I used to trade in Mr. Ewing's store. I knew him to speak to."

Attendant: "Which Ewing was that?"

Mrs. Watts: "George White Ewing."

Attendant: "He's dead."²⁸

The film, at this juncture, has moved far beyond its opening portrayal of Mother Watts in Houston's small apartment, a woman who meditated on death, but for whom that death was a future possibility. Instead, now death—an event strikingly present in Mother Watts' life—has taken on the shape of a Derridean aporia. Cherished friends are gone, as are acquaintances, and also once significant locations, but what also has died is a significant part of Mother Watts' subjectivity, her "I"-ness. Upon learning of these many losses, Mother Watts watches the death of the single dream that gave her the thought of a future: her hopes for a renewed

life in Bountiful. Thus, it is possible to say that death, for Mother Watts, is happening, at this very instant, and yet, at the same time, death is not fully realized. Mother Watts' own physical death still looms, and in all likelihood she wonders about how many more dreams will die. Those deaths, however, are still futural possibilities.

Deconstructive analyses of death's aporia make the point that, when confronted with aporetic impasses, individuals have choices. The significant decisions that Mother Watts makes, upon learning of these many deaths, suggest that she too can say something about aporia as the opportunity for ethical action. Specifically, Mother Watts' response to the troubling news is a renewed conviction to continue her journey. "It has come to me what to do," she says. "I'll go on. That much has come to me. I feel my strength and my purpose strong within me. I will go to Bountiful. I will walk the twelve miles if I have to."²⁹ Thus Mother Watts' process is to use this series of devastating losses as the impetus for pursuing her own strengthened goals. She is responding, honestly and with highly significant ("responsible") decisions, to an impasse that has threatened to block her way. When Mother Watts reaches the decision that she "[will] go on", she is taking a clear, determined, indeed ethical stance, one that harkens back to Critchley's earlier words: Mother Watts is "mobiliz[ing] mortality for free action in the world."

As the story of Mother Watts' trip continues, it becomes increasingly clear that she is internalizing discourses of death. Bountiful's sheriff arrives at the

station, having been asked by Ludie and Jessie Mae to hold Mother Watts until they can arrive to take her back to Houston. When Mother Watts pleads with him to let her “go these twelve miles”—the tenor of her remarks demonstrates a clear awareness that her life, at this moment, is defined by its impending end.³⁰ In a series of desperate utterances, which range from the twice-repeated “time is going” to “I have made myself one promise: to see my home again before I die” to “I am going to die, [...] and it is Jessie Mae’s will that I die in those two rooms [...] but it is my will to die in Bountiful,” Mother Watts makes it clear that she understands, all too well, the reality of her approaching encounter with death.³¹ Linguistic formulations are important in this exchange. The repeated references to the individual subject—the “I”, the “my”—create, on the one hand, a sense of intimacy with Mother Watts. They enhance the personal desperation the viewer gleans from Mother Watts, but the formulations also emphasize what is, in effect, a Heideggerian and Derridean awareness of “my death.” At issue in the utterance is the very structure of Mother Watts’ continued subjectivity. Mother Watts, as a living, breathing “I,” is at risk of being no more.

After Mother Watts’ near-collapse from emotion (in itself, another marker of her impending demise), the sheriff finally relents, and the two begin the final part of Mother Watts’ trip. At the same time, the film begins its own journey toward the climax of its engagement with narrating the experience of encountering death. In a direct recollection of the film’s opening scenes, the sheriff’s car moves through

lush, green fields, the screen visibly lightens, the opening hymn returns, and Mother Watts' face seems joyful in a way that has been virtually absent from all the preceding scenes. The effect is to create hope, just as happened in the film's beginning, but it quickly becomes clear that these scenes will quash hope rather than endorse it. When the two reach Bountiful, the Edenic greenery fades into repeated images of devastated, clapboard houses. Fallen trees also permeate the landscape, as do bridges that have succumbed to brokenness and disrepair. The result, then, is that Mother Watts' arrival in Bountiful is more a reversal of the film's Edenic opening than repetition of it.

Such a thematic—of a hope that has faded into bleakness—rapidly gains strength, reaching its apex when Mother Watts arrives at her childhood home. What she finds, it seems, is far from the utopic place that had taken shape in her memory: Mother Watts' former “home” is just a broken structure, full of rotting floors, rusted playthings, and walls and ceilings that provide no shelter. Svetlana Boym's remarks on nostalgia help in making sense of Mother Watts' return to the place of her youth: “nostalgia is a mourning for the impossibility of mythical return,” Boym explains, “for the loss of an enchanted world with clear borders and values; it could be a secular expression of a spiritual longing, a nostalgia for an absolute.”³² Boym's words are spot on, especially when placed in the context of *The Trip to Bountiful*. Mother Watts' intense yearning to return to Bountiful does appear to function as a sort of spiritual longing—the film's Edenic scenery lays the

groundwork for such a reading. Additionally, it seems that Mother Watts, from the opening scenes in the Houston apartment to the bus ride and her stories of loss and struggle, has immersed herself in mourning for a life that could have been, for a life that now, has proven to be “impossible.” Mother Watts’ poignant line, as she both remembers and reflects on her passed family, makes clear the loss that has engulfed her. “I guess when you’ve lived longer than your family, you’ve lived long enough.”³³

Mother Watts’ experiences while at her childhood home further separate this part of the film from the scenes that opened it. At this point, *The Trip to Bountiful* has clearly exceeded that act of meditating on a death that will come. It is, instead, the story of a death that has come. Thus what is happening, at this point in the film, is Mother Watts’ aporetic experience of a death that will always be “impossible” and yet, at one and the same time, is disturbingly possible, present, and active. While, according to the facts of the film, Mother Watts may not have died (yet, I argue), what has died is everything she cared about: her parents, her friend, her home, Bountiful’s land, and the “babies [she had to] bury.”³⁴ The film is therefore asking the viewer to consider what comes when all is lost.

At this point, it is useful to return to an earlier point from this essay, and this is because that point now has taken shape in the film. I remarked earlier that *The Trip to Bountiful*, although deeply invested with themes of human spirit and human consciousness, is mostly interested in presenting a deep and sustained

engagement with the very process of death. These scenes, in *The Trip to Bountiful*, are the narration of that death—the death of the land, the death of parents and children, indeed the death of a hope, and—only a few frames forward—the possible death of Mother Watts.

Before Mother Watts' climactic (and possible) death, however, Ludie and Jessie Mae arrive. Not surprisingly, Mother Watts' and Ludie's conversation centers on the passing of Mother Watts' father, the childhood friend that she just learned has passed (Callie Davis), and the cycle of Bountiful's now unusable land; such topics only further the thematic of loss. But, what also begins to appear are reflections on an enhanced sort of knowing, an augmented form of understanding, indeed, a newly "responsible" (in Derrida's conception of the term) relation to self and other. "You see those trees over there?" Mother Watts asks Ludie. "I expect some day, people will come, cut down the trees, and maybe even wear out the land again. And then their children will sell it and move to the cities. And then trees will come up again. And we're a part of all that. We left it, but we can never lose what it's given us."³⁵ Such words indicate that Mother Watts, at this point in the film, is a vastly different woman than she was earlier. No longer desperate, no longer scheming, no longer misreading Bountiful as a place of utopic perfection, as the cure-all for her miserable life in Houston, Mother Watts has reached a peaceful sense of understanding, indeed even a Derridean sort of "responsibility" to self and other.

And this change in priorities has happened, one must remember, because Mother Watts has experienced the process of death; she has confronted life's finitude; she has "look[ed] death in the face," as Derrida put it in the words that opened this essay. It is for this reason that I claim that the film is interested in narrating death, in seeing what comes of engaging with its process. What Mother Watts has found, from her experience of the death that is everywhere present in Bountiful, it seems, based upon the sense of peace now available to her, is indeed what Derrida terms "freedom." Using Mother Watts' sense of peace and enhanced understanding as an interpretive schema, it seems that she is no longer beholden to prior knowledge systems—specifically, the very thinking that led her to return to Bountiful; the thinking that shaped Bountiful as nostalgic myth, as a place of Edenic peace, fertility, and what Mother Watts, only a few scenes forward, will call "eternally quiet."³⁶ Furthermore, Mother Watts has found her own sort of knowledge, one must remember, because of her intense engagement with Bountiful's death. Looking death in the face has led, paradoxically, to an enhanced sense of life.

Soon, the film reaches its conclusion, doing so by opening up its last and clearest engagement with the aporia of death. Although Mother Watts is supposedly on her way to Ludie's car, to begin the ride back to Houston, she does not move directly to that car. Instead, first Mother Watts crumples on the ground in a pose that is eerily reminiscent of bodily collapse, and then she sits, a little too

peaceful and somber, in the back of a car that evokes the feeling of a funeral procession. It is difficult to know what to make of this ending. The two images of Mother Watts, when placed in conversation, prompt questions about her possible death in *Bountiful*. Mother Watts' earlier-cited remarks ("I am going to die, "It is my will to die in Bountiful") only further such thinking. But, what the film actually presents is a subject—Mother Watts—who is very much alive. She is sitting upright, framed in an extreme close up, and is riding in a car, supposedly back to Houston. Furthermore, as if to make the equation even more difficult, the hymn that opened the film returns, and that hymn boldly proclaims its chorus—"ye who are weary come home"—at the very moment the camera settles on Mother Watts' face.³⁷ These cinematographic choices are purposefully hard-to-decipher. The goal here is to trouble interpretation in a way that earlier parts of the film have not. The film thus refuses closure, as it presents, paradoxically, a subject who is both (at one and the same time) possibly dead and possibly not.

From my perspective, the film's ending—with its refusal to provide answers—recalls the ethical opportunities that late deconstruction locates inaporetic undecidability. Unlike *Bountiful*'s earlier scenes—in which it is clear that an old woman, rapidly approaching death, is living in a miserable situation, and that she escapes that situation in the hope of a better life—this ending gives the viewer no definitive interpretation. What does result, however, is that the chance for decision shifts to the viewer. And, in keeping with the idea that if a subject, while

enmeshed in aporetic impasse, can respond with a decisive act, then that act has ethical implications, any decisions *The Trip to Bountiful*'s viewer makes reflect significantly on his or her imposition of meaning.

Such deliberate undecidability, both here and throughout Mother Watts' sustained engagement with death, is what makes *The Trip to Bountiful* most worthy of critical analysis. When what seems, at first glance, to be a relatively simple story of an old woman's journey home, becomes instead a deep meditation on the process of dying, and by extension on the actions, choices, and responsibilities that come with that inevitable process, then the result is a film that opens into the ontological foundations of being. While we may never know whether or not Mother Watts died in Bountiful, it is clear that she faced the breakdown of a cherished past and that—at one and the same time—she both lamented that loss and testified to its life-shaping import. It is therefore possible to say that the experience of death is an interpretive event in this film—death works; it is at work, and it shapes the film as one that forces the viewer, through relentless scenes of breakdown, to reckon with the concept. Ultimately, *The Trip to Bountiful* asks us to give dying its due, and to respond, thoughtfully and honestly, to life's impending end.

-
- ¹ Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death*. trans. David Willis. (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1995), 15.
- ² Simon Critchley, "Being and Time Part 6: Death." *The Guardian*. July 13, 2009, n.p.
- ³ See Bennett-Carpenter, p. 2-4, for a thorough discussion of the term's etymology and history.
- ⁴ Ecclus. 7:36, *Holy Bible: The New Revised Standard Version* (Nashville: Catholic Bible Press, 1993); *New St. Joseph Sunday Missal, Complete Edition*. New York: Catholic Book Publishing Company, 1986.
- ⁵ Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 452.
- ⁶ Jonathan Blower. "Monuments as Memento Mori in Goethe's *Elective Affinities*." *Future Anterior*. 8.2 (Winter 2011), 39.
- ⁷ Phillip Shaw, *Patti Smith's Horses (33 1/3)*. (New York: Continuum, 2008), n.p. For thoughtful analysis of memento mori in the AIDS epidemic, see Louis Kaplan's claim that much of the photographic art associated with the AIDS epidemic "provide a contemporary variant of nineteenth-century memento mori" (102). Kaplan joins several others who have also considered the intersections between AIDS and memento mori. See also Alexander Garcia Duttman, Susan J. Palmer, and Bennett-Carpenter's above-referenced *Moving Pictures*.
- ⁸ Bennett-Carpenter, 4.
- ⁹ Horton Foote, *The Trip to Bountiful*, directed by Peter Masterson (1985, Santa Monica: MGM Home Entertainment, 1985), DVD.
- ¹⁰ Ibid.
- ¹¹ Ibid.
- ¹² Charles Watson, *Horton Foote: A Literary Biography*. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2003), 82.
- ¹³ Marian Burkhart, *Horton Foote's America: A Critical Analysis of His Plays*. (Minneapolis: Mill City Press, 2003), 11.
- ¹⁴ Haynes, Robert W. "The Nature of Nature in Horton Foote's *The Trip to Bountiful*." *Southwestern American Literature*. 31(2006), 2.
- ¹⁵ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), 307.
- ¹⁶ Derrida, Jacques. "The Ends of Man" in *Margins of Philosophy*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 121.

¹⁷ Heidegger, 284.

¹⁸ King, Magda. *A Guide to Heidegger's Being and Time*. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001). 152.

¹⁹ Heidegger, 307

²⁰ Derrida, especially in his late work, does a great deal with aporias, such as the aporia of the gift and of hospitality. While volumes could be written on Derrida's aporias, the basics of the term are that it comes from Greek logic and means "a blocked way" or, as Nicholas Royle explains in his study of Derrida, a basic overview of the term, the word, when taken apart, is composed of *a* (without) and *poros* (way or passage). In aporias such as those of the gift and of hospitality, Derrida is interested in how what Derrida calls an "undecidability" emerges from a sense of blockage or impasse. For perceptive analyses of Derrida and aporias, see Jack Reynolds, *Merleau-Ponty and Derrida: Intertwining Embodiment and Alterity* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2004), J. Hillis Miller, *For Derrida* (New York: Fordham, 2009), Richard Beardsworth, *Derrida and the Political* (New York: Routledge, 1996), and Nicholas Royle, *Jacques Derrida* (New York: Routledge, 2003)

²¹ *Ibid*, 21-22.

²² Derrida, in his late work, engages extensively with the aporias of the gift and of hospitality. For his work with the gift, see Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, trans. David Willis (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995). For analyses of hospitality, see Jacques Derrida, *The Politics of Friendship*, trans. George Collings (New York: Verso, 2005), Jacques Derrida, *Of Hospitality*, trans. Rachel Bowlby (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), and Jacques Derrida, "Hostipality" from *Acts of Religion*, ed. Gil Anidjar (New York: Routledge, 2002)

²³ Derrida, *Aporias*, 16.

²⁴ "Jacques Derrida, penseur de l'événement," interview in *L'Humanite*, Jan. 18, 2004, www.humanite.fr

²⁵ Simon Critchley, *The Ethics of Deconstruction*. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1992), 111.

²⁶ Foote, *Trip*.

²⁷ *Ibid*.

²⁸ *Ibid*. The references to Border's Opera House and Mr. Ewing's store are in regard to the town of Harrison, a town bordering Bountiful and that Mother Watts visited in her younger years.

²⁹ *Ibid*.

³⁰ *Ibid*.

³¹ *Ibid*.

³² Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*. (New York: Basic Books, 2001), 8.

³³ Foote, *Trip*.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid. The lines are from the hymn “Softly and Tenderly,” composer Will L. Thompson, 1880.

References

Beardsworth, Richard. *Derrida and the Political*. New York: Routledge, 1996.

Bennett-Carper, Benjamin R. *Moving Memento Mori Pictures: Documentary, Mortality, and Transformation in Three Films*. Ph.D. diss., Catholic University of American, 2008.

Blower, Jonathan. “Monuments as Memento Mori in Goethe’s *Elective Affinities*.” *Future Anterior*. 8.2 (Winter 2011): 37-48.

Boym, Svetlana. *The Future of Nostalgia*. New York: Basic Books, 2001.

Burkhart, Marian. *Horton Foote’s America: A Critical Analysis of His Plays*. Minneapolis: Mill City Press, 2003.

Canby, Vincent. “Review: *The Trip to Bountiful*.” *New York Times*, December 20, 1985.

Catholic Church. Missal.

Critchley, Simon. “Being and Time Part 6: Death.” *The Guardian*. July 13, 2009.

Critchley, Simon. *The Ethics of Deconstruction*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1992, 1999.

Derrida, Jacques. *Aporias*, trans. Thomas Dutoit. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993.

Derrida, Jacques. “The Ends of Man” in *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982.

Derrida, Jacques. *The Gift of Death*, trans. David Willis. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1995.

Derrida, Jacques. “Hospitality” in *Acts of Religion*, ed. Gil Anidjar. New York: Routledge, 2002

Derrida, Jacques. *Of Hospitality*, trans. Rachel Bowlby. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000.

Derrida, Jacques. *The Politics of Friendship*, trans. George Collins. New York: Verso, 2005.

- Duttman, Alexander Garcia. *At Odds With AIDS: Thinking and Taking About a Virus*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996.
- Foote, Horton, 1985. *The Trip to Bountiful*. DVD. Directed by Peter Masterson. Town, Country. MGM.
- Haynes, Robert W. "The Nature of Nature in Horton Foote's *The Trip to Bountiful*." *Southwestern American Literature*. 31(2006): 9-18.
- Heidegger, Martin. *Being and Time*. New York: Harper and Row, 1962.
- Jay, Martin. *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994.
- Kaplan, Louis. *American Exposures: Photography and Community in the Twentieth Century*.
- King, Magda. *A Guide to Heidegger's Being and Time*. Ed. John Lleweyan. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001.
- L'Humanite, "Derrida, Jacques. penseur de l'evenement," Jan. 18 (2004), www.humanite.fr.
- Miller, J. Hillis. *For Derrida* .(New York: Fordham, 2009),
- Palmer, Susan J. *AIDS as an Apocalyptic Metaphor in North America*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997.
- Reynolds, Jack. *Merleau-Ponty and Derrida: Intertwining Embodiment and Alterity* Athens: Ohio University Press, 2004.
- Nicholas Royle. *Jacques Derrida*. New York: Routledge, 2003.
- Shaw, Phillip. *Patti Smith's Horses (33 1/3)*. New York: Continuum, 2008.
- "Review: *The Trip to Bountiful*." *Variety*. December 31, 1984. Accessed 15 January 2016. <http://variety.com/1984/film/reviews/the-trip-to-bountiful-1200426398/>
- Watson, Charles. *Horton Foote: A Literary Biography*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2003.