PAYKAREH
Volume 14 Issue 42 Winter 2026 Pages 16-28

Original Research Article

Visualizing the Afterlife and the Hero's Journey: A Comparative Study of Hercules, Corpse Bride, and The Book of Life

MohammadSajjad Taheri[1]; Seyyed Najmoddin Amir ShahKarami[2]

1. Master's in Animation, Faculty of Art and Architecture, Tarbiat Modarres University, Tehran, Iran.
2. Corresponding Author, Assistant Professor, Department of Animation and Cinema, Faculty of Art and Architecture, Tarbiat Modarres University, Tehran, Iran.
E-mail: najmedin@modares.ac.ir

Received: 30 June 2025 Revised: 14 September 2025 Accepted: 14 October 2025

Abstract

Introduction: This study aims to conduct a comparative examination of the visual representation of the afterlife and the hero's journey in the animated films «Hercules», «Corpse Bride», and «The Book of Life». The primary objective is to analyze how these works render abstract and complex notions of life after death through visual and narrative strategies. The study addresses the central research problem: In what ways do the selected films, through their use of the narrative structure of the 'hero's journey' and the integration of visual and storytelling elements, construct a tangible, comprehensible, and believable representation of the afterlife?

Research Method: Adopting a qualitative, descriptive–analytical approach grounded in Joseph Campbell's 'monomyth' theory, the study examines visual evidence and library-based sources. Data analysis was carried out in two stages: analysis of narrative structure and analysis of visual elements.

Findings: The representation of the afterlife in «Hercules», «Corpse Bride», and «The Book of Life» aligns with mythological, religious, and philosophical perspectives. Moreover, visual elements—particularly color, light, and form—not only help delineate the worlds of the living and the dead alongside character development but also render the more abstract aspects of the afterlife concrete and convincing within each film.

Conclusion: The findings indicate that the selected works, by employing the hero's journey framework and a rich array of visual devices, draw on the capacities, possibilities, and techniques of animation to reconstruct the afterlife—an immaterial and complex concept—in innovative and believable ways. Grounded in mythic traditions and religious beliefs, these strategies not only add narrative depth but also cultivate emotional resonance, thereby enriching the audience's understanding of metaphysical concepts.

Keywords

Animation, Afterlife, Corpse Bride, Hercules The Book of Life

How to cite this article: Taheri, M, & Amir ShahKarami, S. N. (2025). Visualizing the Afterlife and the Hero's Journey: A Comparative Study of Hercules, Corpse Bride, and The Book of Life. *Paykareh*, 14(42), 16-28.
DOI: https://doi.org/10.22055/pyk.2025.20309

©2025 by the Authours.This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International (CC BY-NC 4.0 license) https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0

Introduction and Problem Definition

The question of what life after death looks like has long constituted one of humanity's most fundamental spiritual curiosities and inquiries—so much so that it has become an enduring and influential question at the heart of human culture. This concept has inspired the creation of numerous artistic works throughout history, including representations in contemporary performing arts such as animated films. Compared to other visual and performative arts, animation possesses extensive and diverse capacities for expressing hypothetical and metaphysical ideas, a feature that enables the vivid articulation of complex philosophical and spiritual concepts. The animated films «Hercule»s (1997), «Corpse Bride» (2005), and «The Book of Life» (2014), produced through 2D animation, stop-motion, and 3D animation respectively, each depict the realm of the afterlife. These works, owing to their compelling storytelling and distinctive visual styles, exert significant influence on viewers' perceptions of death and their attitudes toward the afterlife. The protagonists' entry into and potential return from the afterlife inherently constitutes a transformative journey—one involving departure from the known world, crossing an unfamiliar threshold, and confronting challenges within a supernatural realm. This narrative structure aligns with the archetype of the «Hero's Journey». Therefore, the central problem of this study concerns the modes through which the concept of the afterlife is visually and narratively represented. The guiding research question is as follows: How do the selected films, through their use of the narrative structure of the Hero's Journey and through the integration of visual and storytelling elements, render the afterlife in a tangible, intelligible, and believable manner?

Research Method

The examination and comparison of the features of the works were conducted qualitatively and through a descriptive–analytical approach based on Joseph Campbell's 'monomyth' theory. The data were gathered through library research and visual analysis of the three animated films «Hercules» (1997), «Corpse Bride» (2005), and «The Book of Life» (2014), which were selected as exemplary cases relevant to the focus of the study and chosen for their differing structures and perspectives on the concept of the afterlife. Furthermore, narrative and visual content analysis of the films was conducted to examine modes of storytelling, and reliability was ensured through alignment with the theories of Campbell and Jung as well as interdisciplinary review. Data analysis was carried out in two main phases: the analysis of narrative structure, which included the plot of each film based on the stages of the 'hero's journey' (departure, initiation, and return) and the transformation of characters in the underworld; and the analysis of visual elements, which involved identifying and categorizing key visual components (color, light, form, and symbolism) within scenes depicting the afterlife.

Research Background

The study of imaginary and spiritual journeys into the afterlife has a long and profound history within the humanities. In Iranian scholarship, research has primarily concentrated on the analysis of classical texts. «Mohammadi» (2014) examined Vogler's version of the Hero's Journey in the works of Miyazaki and Burton, focusing on character transformation through a comparative narrative approach. «Mansouri Aria» (2016) explored the representation of the world of the dead in stop-motion films, analyzing the concept of death through an existential lens and using Yalom's model to address the challenges of

representing complex themes through clay and puppet-based spaces. «Movahedi» (2021) investigated depictions of death and the afterlife in the animated film Coco, emphasizing the educational implications for children within a religious and analytical framework, particularly the role of narrative in Islamic pedagogy. Moreover, «Nieuwboer» (2019) analyzed the representation of Mexican culture in Coco and The Book of Life, using a cultural approach to examine the influence of Día de los Muertos (the Day of the Dead) traditions and demonstrating how the films transmit cultural beliefs. «Liu» (2020) studied narrative strategies surrounding the theme of death in Coco, examining children's understanding of death through the lens of Theory of Mind and characterizing the film's narrative as non-threatening. While these studies explore cultural and narrative dimensions of the afterlife, none undertake a comparative analysis of visual elements alongside the Hero's Journey framework across animated films rooted in three distinct cultural contexts—Greek, Victorian, and Mexican—and employing diverse production techniques. The present study addresses this gap through an integrated visual–narrative approach.

Theoretical Structure

This study integrates interdisciplinary theories encompassing cultural–mythological foundations, psychological-narrative models, and aesthetic analysis to examine how the afterlife is visualized in animated films. Such an undertaking becomes possible through a deep understanding of 'myth'. As Alan Dundes notes, myth encompasses a range of meanings—from traditional sacred narratives to imaginative stories (Esmaeilpour, 2008, 1-6). «Mircea Eliade» describes myth as «a highly complex cultural reality» that recounts primordial sacred history and explains the origins of the real world (Eliade, 2007, 14). «James George Frazer» understands myth as a link between magic and religion, emphasizing its roots in early religious thought (Frazer, 2009, 126-128). Carl Gustav Jung, by introducing the concept of collective unconscious, argues that archetypes, symbols, and universal patterns manifest in the form of mythic gods and heroes (Yung, 1997, 13).

1. The Afterlife: Conceptions of the afterlife in world religions are deeply rooted in belief systems and sacred texts. In Islam, descriptions of the hereafter are presented in the Qur'an and Hadith literature. Paradise (Jannah) is depicted as a lush and abundant garden, while Hell is portrayed as a fiery realm of punishment and suffering (Lange, 2016). In Eastern religions, conceptions of the afterlife are often more complex and multilayered. Similarly, Buddhism presents the concept of a cycle of rebirth, in which the ultimate goal is the attainment of nirvana (निर्वाण, 涅槃)—a state of supreme mental serenity and liberation from this cycle (Harvey, 2013).

2. Psychological and Narrative Models: The study draws on Carl Gustav Jung's theory of archetypes and Joseph Campbell's comparative mythology. In Jung's framework, archetypes are symbols of collective unconscious that reflect shared human experiences. Campbell expands upon this notion by proposing the «hero's journey», a recurrent narrative structure in which the hero undergoes transformation through descent into the underworld or the realm of the dead. Campbell's «hero's journey» provides an archetypal narrative pattern that traces the hero's process of transformation through a sequence of exemplary stages (Campbell, 2008, 23). The hero's journey includes three major phases—Departure, Initiation, and Return—which chart the hero's passage from the ordinary world into an

unfamiliar realm and back, bearing newfound wisdom (Campbell, 2008, 36-246). The «Initiation» phase is particularly significant, as the hero often descends into the underworld, a concept analogous to the Islamic notion of barzakh. This flexibility makes the hero's journey a suitable analytical tool for examining narratives of death and the afterlife in animated cinema (Qur'an, 23,100; Lange, 2016).

3. An Integrated Visual- Narrative Approach: While Campbell's and Jung's theories are foundational for analyzing structure and meaning in mythic narratives, understanding animation as a visual medium requires a framework that systematically links visual form and narrative. Previous studies have often treated narrative analysis and aesthetic analysis separately. The innovation of the present study lies in proposing a unified visual–narrative analytical model that synthesizes these domains. This model consists of three interrelated layers: 1. Mythic- Narrative Layer (Structural Analysis): Campbell's hero's journey is employed as a narrative roadmap to determine how entry into the afterlife shapes plot structure and drives character transformation. 2. Psychological- Archetypal Layer (Semantic Analysis): Drawing on Jung's concept of collective unconscious, characters and situations are interpreted as manifestations of universal archetypes such as the Hero, Mentor, and Shadow. Descent into the underworld functions symbolically as a journey into the psyche in pursuit of psychological wholeness. 3. Aesthetic- Expressive Layer (Formal Analysis): This layer examines how visual elements—color, lighting, form, and design—are used to materialize the abstract nature of the afterlife and the hero's psychological states. Informed by «David Herman's» narrative theories (2009), this approach regards visual elements not merely as ornamentation but as primary carriers of symbolic and emotional meaning within the narrative. Thus, the novelty of this framework lies not in the creation of a new theory but in its synthesis of these perspectives into an operational model demonstrating how «mythic narrative», «psychological depth», and «visual expressiveness» converge in animation to render a complex concept such as the afterlife intelligible and believable for viewers.

Research Findings

The narrative affordances of animation provide vast expressive potential for representing spiritual concepts and visualizing metaphysical ideas. Works such as Pixar's «Soul» (2020), which depicts an abstract realm where souls form identities before birth and transition into the afterlife (Docter & Powers, 2020), and the series «The Good Place» (2016- 2020), which presents a humorous exploration of moral judgment in a bureaucratic afterlife (Schur, 2016), exemplify this creative inquiry. Scholars emphasize the cultural impact of such representations. Visual culture plays a major role in shaping societal conceptions of the afterlife and attitudes toward death and immortality. Gibson argues that contemporary media not only reflect existing beliefs but also generate new discourses on death, providing a platform for exploring existential questions concerning identity, consciousness, and the meaning of life (Gibson, 2019). Rankin (2020) further identifies animation as a particularly suitable medium for such explorations due to its ability to express abstract concepts through striking imagery and symbolic motifs. Although the three animated films examined in this study are inspired by distinct religious and mythological traditions—Greek underworld mythology, Victorian Gothic spirituality, and the Mexican Day of the Dead—they ultimately offer unique yet accessible visions of the afterlife. By integrating Campbell's narrative model with visual analysis, the study demonstrates how animation bridges ancient

archetypes with contemporary perspectives, enabling deeper comprehension of this profound concept.

Table 1. Overview of the Selected Films. Source: Authors.

Title	Hercules	Corpse Bride	The Book of Life
Year	1997	2005	2014
Studio	Walt Disney Pictures	Warner Bros. Pictures	20th Century Fox Animation
Director(s)	Ron Clements & John Musker	Tim Burton & Mike Johnson	Jorge R. Gutiérrez
Animation Technique	Traditional 2D animation combined with CGI	Stop-motion	3D animation
Art Style	Classic Disney	Gothic, Fantasy, Expressionist	Colorful, inspired by wooden puppetry
Source Material	Greek Mythology	Victorian Culture	Day of the Dead Tradition
Cultural Impact	Revitalized Disney animation	Influential in Gothic animation aesthetics	Global promotion of Mexican culture

The temporal gap between the production of these three works corresponds to a period marked by significant advancements in animation technologies, which provided more powerful expressive tools for visualizing metaphysical concepts. In «Hercules», digital ink-and-paint processes were combined with live-action reference models to create stylized mythological characters and a graphic visual world. In «Corpse Bride», the transition from film to digital photography in stop-motion animation, together with the use of sophisticated internal armature mechanisms within the puppets, enabled subtle movements and highly expressive facial performances within its Gothic universe. With the maturation of three-dimensional animation in «The Book of Life», advanced lighting techniques and shader technologies were employed to animate the «Land of the Remembered» with dynamic richness, rendering its wooden textures and vibrant colors in a visually compelling and immersive manner.

The Animated Film «Hercules»

1. Narrative Structure and the Hero's Journey: «Hercules» (1997) offers a vivid and stylized reinterpretation of the Greek myth of Hercules, depicting the underworld through the lens of Joseph Campbell's hero's journey framework. Hercules, the protagonist, embarks on a turbulent quest for self-discovery in order to regain his divine status and locate his true place in the world—a journey that ultimately leads him into the underworld to rescue Megara's soul. The narrative follows Campbell's tripartite monomyth structure (departure, initiation, return) (Campbell, 2008, 36- 246). In the «departure» stage, Hercules inhabits the «ordinary world», where the revelation of his divine lineage functions as a «call to adventure», one he initially «refuses». He then crosses into the supernatural realm, and through his encounters with Zeus and his mentor Philoctetes, commits himself to the heroic path. The «initiation» stage comprises the «road of trials», which includes Hercules' external challenges (his battles with the Hydra and other monsters) as well as his internal struggles (Megara's initial betrayal under Hades' influence). His descent into the underworld to retrieve Megara's soul functions as the «belly of the whale»—the pivotal moment of transformation. By risking his life and descending into Hades' domain, he performs the ultimate act of self-sacrifice and attains «apotheosis» (Campbell, 2008, 90-108). In the «return» stage, Hercules emerges from the underworld, rejects the offer of

restored divinity in order to remain with Megara, and becomes the «master of two worlds»: a hero who accepts the limitations of the mortal sphere while simultaneously cherishing and delighting in it (Campbell, 2008, 298).



Figure 1. «Hercules» (1997), key stages of the Hero's Journey. Clockwise from upper right: **a.** Ordinary World, **b.** Meeting the Mentor, **c.** Trials, d. Rebirth. Source: Screenshot adapted from Hercules (Clements & Musker, 1997).

2. Visualization of the Afterlife: The afterlife is rendered as a visually hybrid realm, drawing on Greek iconography and executed through traditional two-dimensional animation. This comprehensible underworld stands in stark contrast to the vibrant world of the living. The domain governed by Hades is depicted as a cold, desolate, and uncanny space, dominated by shades of blue, purple, and grey that evoke a sense of decay and eeriness. The River Styx—one of the recurrent motifs in Greek mythology and a threshold between life and death—is portrayed as a dark waterway filled with translucent, green-tinged spirits, emphasizing their spectral nature (Clements & Musker, 1997). This visual world reflects the ancient Greek conception of the underworld as a dim and liminal realm, an interpretation also found in The «Odyssey» (Homer, 1996, 640). Hades' fiery domain, rendered in blazing reds and fierce oranges, stands in stark contrast to the underworld's cold hues, highlighting his malevolent power and the sense of eternal dread associated with him. This intense color opposition not only underscores the terrifying nature of the underworld but also encourages viewers to reflect on the moral dimensions of the afterlife—where human destiny is tied to earthly deeds, a theme reminiscent of the Christian concept of judgment (Revelation, 20,15). The bleak, fog-laden architecture of the underworld further conveys disorder and instability and intensifies the challenges faced by the hero. These visual elements, together with Hercules' narrative of sacrifice, deepen reflections on

mortality, reward and punishment, and invite the viewer to contemplate the mysteries of the afterlife through both mythological symbolism and an empathetic storytelling perspective.

The Animated Film «Corpse Bride»

1. Narrative Structure and the Hero's Journey: The story of «Corpse Bride» opens in a Victorian village where Victor Van Dort inadvertently enters into a marriage pact with Emily, the titular corpse bride, and is subsequently taken to the land of the dead. This narrative aligns with Campbell's monomythic structure of the hero's journey (Departure, Initiation, Return), as Victor undergoes a transformative path toward self-acceptance and an appreciation of life (Campbell, 2008, 36-246). In the «Departure» stage, Victor's accidental marriage to Emily constitutes his «call to adventure», which he initially «refuses» due to his love for Victoria. Supernatural aid arrives in the form of Emily, who leads him into the «Land of the Dead» and over the «first threshold». The «Initiation» stage unfolds entirely in the afterlife. In this vibrant yet melancholic world, Victor traverses the «road of trials», grappling with the consequences of his unintended marriage and his conflicting emotions toward Emily and Victoria. His interactions with the deceased—particularly the guidance of the skeletal Elder Gutknecht—and his eventual decision to sacrifice his own desires for Emily's sake lead him to a symbolic «atonement with the father» (here representing responsibility and selfless devotion), culminating in an «apotheosis» achieved through self-awareness (Burton & Johnson, 2005). During the «Return» stage, Victor comes back to the world of the living, reunites with Victoria, and emerges as the «master of two worlds», having learned the true value of life. Victor's journey echoes existential concerns and philosophical reflections on death similar to those found in works such as «The Darkened Room» (Owen, 1989, 45-67), which explore Victorian spiritualism. «Corpse Bride», through its cross-world romantic narrative, captures humanity's enduring longing for connection and redemption.



Figure 2. Key stages of the hero's journey in «Corpse Bride»—Victor: clockwise from top right: **a.** the ordinary world, **b.** meeting the mentor, **c.** trial, and d. resurrection. Source: Author's compilation based on Corpse Bride (Burton & Johnson, 2005).

2. Visualization: In «Corpse Bride», the afterlife—called the «Land of the Dead»—is rendered in deliberate contrast to the bleak, gray-toned world of the living. The realm of the dead is presented as bright, dynamic, and saturated with luminous, pure colors. Through the tactile aesthetics of stop-motion animation, this contrast conveys that death is not an end but a continuation of existence within a lively, celebratory community. The Land of the Dead, bathed in vibrant greens, blues, and purples, features dancing skeletons, singing corpses, and a carnival-like, bittersweet atmosphere (Burton & Johnson, 2005). This approach is consistent with Rankin's (2020) argument that animation can materialize metaphysical states and make abstract ideas experientially accessible. However, the afterlife remains tinged with Gothic melancholy. Skeletal trees, decaying architecture, and a pervasive mist envelop the characters in an aura of instability. These elements collectively evoke a purgatorial environment in which spirits reflect and undergo purification—a concept reminiscent of Christian purgatory as well as the Islamic barzakh (Lange, 2016). The fog and dilapidated buildings symbolically mirror suppressed emotions, unfulfilled love, and Emily's tragic past. The film's score, composed by Danny Elfman, further reinforces this duality of despair and hope, fluctuating between lively and melancholic melodies that deepen the interplay of sorrow and joy. By blending Victorian Gothic motifs with rich emotional symbolism, «Corpse Bride» constructs a visually and affectively complex representation of the afterlife—one that challenges simplistic fears of death and invites viewers to reconsider existential anxieties while appreciating the fragile beauty of life.

The Animated Film «The Book of Life»

1. Narrative Structure and the Hero's Journey: «The Book of Life» unfolds through visually rich landscapes deeply infused with the cultural motifs of Mexico, particularly the traditions of the Day of the Dead. The narrative follows Manolo, a young man who journeys across three realms—the Land of the Living, the Land of the Remembered, and the Land of the Forgotten—in order to reunite with his childhood love, María, and save his hometown. The story adheres to Joseph Campbell's classical structure of the hero's journey (Departure, Initiation, Return), while remaining faithful to Mexican cultural roots and universal themes of love, courage, and tradition (Campbell, 2008, 36-246). In the «Departure» stage, Manolo's «call to adventure» emerges from the tension between his heartfelt passion for music and his family's expectation that he continue their bullfighting legacy. His initial «refusal of the call» is followed by a series of events—including a wager between the gods of death (La Muerte and Xibalba) and his apparent death—that send him into the realm of the dead. The «Initiation» stage consists of the «road of trials» within the vibrant Land of the Remembered and the desolate Land of the Forgotten. Manolo's encounters with his ancestors and deceased spirits, along with his confrontation of Xibalba and the overcoming of his deepest fears and doubts, culminate in an «apotheosis» marked by the demonstration of true courage and self-sacrifice (Gutierrez, 2014). In the «Return» stage, Manolo comes back to life, defeats the primary antagonist, Chakal, and achieves the status of «master of two worlds» by reconciling personal desire with familial and social expectations. While containing archetypal elements of the underworld descent (katabasis), reminiscent of the story of Orpheus, Manolo's journey is firmly rooted in the cultural specificity of Mexico.



Figure 3. Key stages of the hero's journey in «The Book of Life»—Manolo: clockwise from top right: **a.** the ordinary world, **b.** meeting the mentor, **c.** trial, and **d.** resurrection. Source: Screenshot adapted from The Book of Life (Gutierrez, 2014)

2. Visualization: «The Book of Life» offers a dual conception of the afterlife inspired by Mexican beliefs about life, death, and remembrance: the Land of the Remembered and the Land of the Forgotten, each rendered through distinct visual and auditory aesthetics shaped by Mexican folk art and Day of the Dead traditions. The Land of the Remembered is a realm filled with warm, vibrant colors—orange, pink, yellow—radiating festivity and joy. Its inhabitants wear calaveras, and the world is adorned with «papel picado» decorations. With its lively music, energetic dancing, and endless celebrations, this realm portrays death not as an end but as an extension of the life cycle (Gutierrez, 2014). The warm palette and dynamic character designs—such as skeletons adorned with flowers—embody the spirit of the Day of the Dead and align with Rankin's (2020) view of animation as a medium capable of materializing mystical concepts. In contrast, the Land of the Forgotten is depicted as a dark, monochromatic, and sorrowful space marked by deep grays, muted greens, and decaying, abandoned structures. The stark contrast between the two realms highlights the film's central cultural belief: the remembrance of the dead ensures their continued existence, whereas being forgotten leads to eternal oblivion. This notion resonates with the Mexican proverb, «You live as long as you are remembered» (Fuentes, 1992, 30). This visual dichotomy is further intensified by the film's soundtrack, which blends traditional Mexican instruments with contemporary musical elements—cheerful mariachi themes accompanying the Land of the Remembered and eerie melodies underscoring the Land of the Forgotten. Religious motifs, including the judgment of souls, parallel Christian eschatology (Revelation, 20, 12) as well as the Islamic concept of barzakh (Qur'an, 23, 100; Lange, 2016), and they inform the design of the afterlife. By merging these universal themes with the vibrant aesthetics of Mexican folk art, «The Book of Life» presents a visually captivating and culturally layered depiction of the afterlife, which invites viewers to reflect on memory, legacy, and the enduring bonds between the living and the dead.

Analytical Highlights of the Cases Under Study

1. Multidimensional Reflections of the Afterlife: «Hercules», «Corpse Bride», and «The Book of Life» vividly demonstrate the expressive potential of animated cinema to visually materialize supernatural and metaphysical realms: all manage to depict the complex, abstract conceptions of the afterlife. Drawing on distinct cultural prisms—Greek mythology, Victorian Gothic spirituality, and Mexico's Day of the Dead traditions—these films construct diverse yet interrelated visions of life beyond death. «The Book of Life», through its emphasis on cultural heritage, vibrant visual artistry, and evocative music, conveys the message that death, refracted through the lens of memory and remembrance, constitutes an integral part of the life cycle.

2. Shared Concepts and Visual Patterns: Although each of the selected films adopts a unique approach to conceptualizing the afterlife, they converge in several thematic and structural patterns:

- The Hero's Journey: All three films draw, to varying degrees, on Joseph Campbell's model of the hero's journey. Their protagonists traverse an unfamiliar realm—the world of the dead—encounter transformative challenges, and ultimately return to their own world endowed with renewed knowledge and insight.

- Creative Visualization of the Afterlife: Each film constructs its own distinctive vision of the afterlife through stylistically unique imagery—from the cold, shadowy dominion of Hades in Hercules to the vividly saturated landscapes of the dead in «Corpse Bride» and

«The Book of Life». These visualizations represent imaginative renderings of humanity's long-standing contemplations about the world beyond.

- Memory and Legacy: Particularly in «The Book of Life», and likewise in «Coco» (2017), the preservation of the memory of the dead plays a central role. The notion that an individual remains alive as long as they are remembered is made strikingly evident in these films.

- Existential Inquiry: Each film engages, in its own way, with the search for life's meaning—whether through the pursuit of true love in «Corpse Bride», or the quest for purpose in Hercules and «The Book of Life», these works raise profound questions of what life and death really are.

- Interconnectedness of the Living and the Dead: All three works portray some form of connection between the realms of the living and the dead. This linkage may manifest physically (e.g., the River Styx) or spiritually through emotional and metaphysical bonds.

- Color and Light: Chromatic and lighting choices play a decisive role in rendering perceptible the imagined space of the afterlife. In «Corpse Bride» and «The Book of Life», the afterlife is characterized by luminous, vibrant colors, while the world of the living appears more muted, thereby underscoring differing attitudes and symbolic values associated with each realm.

- The Visual Discourse of Death: By presenting diverse—and at times positive—representations of life after death, these films help mitigate the anxiety commonly associated with death and open up discursive space around a topic that remains taboo in many societies. «The Book of Life», in particular, acquaints viewers with varied cultural perspectives on death and commemorative rituals. Moreover, through their deep existential questioning, these films invite viewers to reflect on ontology, the value of the present moment, and the significance of life itself—even while engaging them in narratives rooted in the theme of death.

3. Similarities and Differences Among the Films: Across the three films, several shared elements emerge: dual realms of the afterlife, the judgment of souls, symbolic visual motifs, supernatural beings, deities presiding over death, love stories transcending mortality, the centrality of memory and remembrance, transformative journeys into the realm of the dead, and the theme of self-sacrifice in pursuit of higher purposes. These commonalities reflect universal human curiosities and imaginings about death and the world beyond. Key differences in depicting the afterlife include:

- Cultural Origins: «Hercules» draws from Greek mythology; «Corpse Bride» reflects Victorian Gothic sensibilities; «The Book of Life» is rooted in the traditions of Mexico's Day of the Dead.

- Visual Style and Animation Technique: Hercules employs 2D animation enhanced with CGI elements; «Corpse Bride» relies on stop-motion with a distinctly Gothic aesthetic; «The Book of Life» utilizes 3D animation influenced by Mexican folk art.

- Atmospheric Tone: Hercules blends comedy and heroism; «Corpse Bride» cultivates a melancholic romanticism; «The Book of Life» presents a vibrant, musical, carnival-like tone.

- Nature of the Afterlife and Representation of Death: Each film conceptualizes the afterlife differently—from a realm structured around reward and punishment, to a liminal and socially reflective space, to a world where existence depends on the memories of the living.

- Visual Spectacle: Through their distinctive uses of form, color, lighting, and animation techniques—harmonized with their respective soundscapes—each film creates a unique

visual register. These stylistic divergences contribute to their individuality and artistic identity.

Conclusion

This study set out to identify and interpret the factors contributing to the visual realization of dual worlds and the transformation of characters within them, addressing the central question: How do «Hercules», «Corpse Bride», and «The Book of Life» employ the narrative structure of the hero's journey, together with visual and storytelling elements, to portray the afterlife in a tangible, comprehensible, and credible manner? The analysis revealed that the representation of the afterlife in these works is achieved through the creative interplay of form, color, lighting, and visual motifs, which collectively evoke the presence of characters in an imagined metaphysical realm. Through such visual strategies, each film constructs a convincing depiction of both the world of the living and the world beyond, enabling viewers to follow the hero's journey into the afterlife and to suspend disbelief regarding its imagined form. Moreover, by employing the expressive resources of animation—including its capacity for imaginative visualization—these films converge the realms of the living and the dead into coherent aesthetic worlds. They demonstrate animation's effectiveness as a medium for representing complex ontological ideas, using universal themes, culturally embedded narratives, and stylized imagery to offer speculative answers to fundamental human questions about death and the metaphysical beyond, while encouraging philosophical reflection on these enduring concerns.

Author Contributions

This article is derived from the first author's master's thesis in Animation, entitled «Visualizing the Afterlife and the Hero's Journey in Selected Animated Films», completed under the supervision of the second author at Tarbiat Modares University.

Acknowledgment

This research has no acknowledgments.

Conflict of Interest

The author (s) declare that there are no potential conflicts of interest related to this research, in writing, and publication of this article

Research Funding

The author (s) did not receive any financial support for conducting the research, writing up, and publication of this article.

References

- Burton, T., & Johnson, M. (2005). *Corpse Bride* [Film]. Warner Bros.
- Campbell, J. (2008). *The hero with a thousand faces* (3rd ed.). Joseph Campbell Foundation; New World Library.
- Clements, R., & Musker, J. (1997). *Hercules* [Film]. Walt Disney Pictures.
- Docter, P., & Powers, K. (2020). *Soul* [Film]. Pixar Animation Studios; Walt Disney Pictures.
- Eliade, M. (2007). *Myth and reality* (W. R. Trask, Trans.). Waveland Press.
- Esmaeilpour, A. (2008). *Myth as symbolic expression*. Soroush Publishing. **[In Persian]**
- Frazer, J. G. (2009). *The Golden Bough* (F. Firuzmand, Trans.). Agah Publishing. **[In Persian]**
- Fuentes, C. (1992). *The Day of the Dead: A celebration of life and death* (Exhibition catalog). Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia/ Museum of Fine Arts, Houston.
- Gibson, M. (2019). *Death and digital media*. Routledge.
- Gutierrez, J. R. (Director). (2014). *The Book of Life* [Film]. Reel FX Creative Studios.
- Harvey, P. (2013). *An introduction to Buddhism: Teachings, history and practices* (2nd ed.). Cambridge University Press.
- Herman, D. (2009). *Basic elements of narrative*. Wiley-Blackwell.
- Homer. (1996). *The Odyssey* (R. Fagles, Trans.). Penguin Classics.
- Lange, C. (2016). *Paradise and hell in Islamic traditions*. Cambridge University Press.
- Liu, Y. (2020). Narrative strategy of death theme in animated films under children's cognitive perspective: A case study of *Pixar's Coco*. In *Proceedings of the 4th International Conference on Community Engagements (ICCE) in conjunction with the 3rd International Conference on Education, Science and Social Development (ICESSE)* (pp. 58-62). Atlantis Press.
- Mansouri Aria, M. (2016). *Representation of the World of the Dead in Stop-Motion Puppet Films Based on Irvin Yalom's Existential Approaches* (Master's thesis in Animation). University of Art, Tehran. **[In Persian]**
- Mohammadi, F. (2014). *A Study and Comparison of Christopher Vogler's Hero's Journey in the Works of Hayao Miyazaki and Tim Burton* (Master's thesis in Animation). University of Art, Tehran. **[In Persian]**
- Movahedi, R. (2021). *Representation of Death and the Afterlife in the Animation «Coco» and Its Implications for the Religious Education of Muslim Children in Tehran* (Master's thesis in sociology). Allameh Tabataba'i University. **[In Persian]**
- Nieuwboer, M. (2019). *Representation of Mexican culture in animation films for children: An analysis of Coco and The Book of Life* (Master's thesis, Utrecht University). Utrecht University.
- Owen, A. (1989). *The darkened room: Women, power, and spiritualism in Late Victorian England*. University of Chicago Press.
- Rankin, D. (2020). *Film and the afterlife*. Routledge.
- Schur, M. (2016). *The Good Place* [TV series]. Fremulon; 3 Arts Entertainment; Universal Television; NBC.
- Yung, C. G. (1997). *Four Archetypes: Mother, Rebirth, Spirit, Trickster* (A. Faramarzi, Trans.). Astan Quds Razavi. **[In Persian]**