THE EARTH TURNED TO BRING US CLOSER

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I

The opening image is of eros, the first to emerge from chaos.¹ A couple in a sunlit bedroom, bathed in the afterglow of love; one sleeping heavily, lost in a dream; the other puffing on a cigarette, lost in thought. Then a disordered sequence of seemingly unconnected scenes: two young children in a restaurant with their father; a tattoo-covered man urging a troubled youth to give up criminal gangs and instead follow Jesus; a woman at a 12-step meeting telling the others that having children saved her from drugs; another woman telling her doctor she wants to get pregnant with her dying husband; a flock of birds in an urban landscape, suddenly breaking into chaotic flight under a cloud-covered sky. At length we understand we are seeing a sort of a triptych mosaic, an assemblage of fragments adding up to three connected stories. The movie, whose title refers to the putative weight of the soul,² is a philosophical melodrama about lives shattered and brought together by a singular occurrence. My purpose in this Essay is to look at the film as an allegorical meditation—an attempt to “say the unsayable”³—on the topic of this Symposium.

One you have seen the movie, you know that its triptych, mosaic design is meant to trigger several associations, one being the famous three-body problem in celestial mechanics.⁴ When two objects exert gravitational force on each other, their trajectories are easily computed according to Newton’s laws of motion. But in the

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² 21 GRAMS (This Is That Productions 2003).


case of a three-body system—such as the interactions of the sun, moon, and earth—everything changes, as Henri Poincaré showed after the king of Sweden offered a prize for a general mathematical solution to the problem in 1889. In a series of papers, Poincaré demonstrated that no such general solution, or general set of equations, exists for a system comprised of three (or more) objects; their relative orbits may take any number of forms, and the laws of physics cannot tell us which one. What this means, Poincaré remarked, is that long-term prediction is impossible for dynamical systems composed of three or more bodies, so long as there is the chance (as there always will be) of even a tiny error in measuring their present states. It also means that even a small disturbance—the flap of a butterfly’s wing, someone would later say—may have enormous long-term consequences. Poincaré’s insight gave birth to what would come to be called the study of chaos.\(^5\)

The film’s triptychal design also alludes to a well-known passage in Plato’s *Symposium*, in which Aristophanes traces the origins of love to a mythic version of the three-body problem.\(^6\) Human beings, the poet claims, were once spherical-like heavenly bodies, and came in three types—females descended from the earth, males descended from the sun, and androgyne descended from the moon. They were strong, proud, and reckless, so much so that they ascended the sky to make an ill-fated assault on the gods. To punish their crime and prevent its recurrence, Zeus cut them all in two, slicing them down the middle like fish. Ever since, humans have been doomed to live as fragments, each of us longing for the other half that was lost. Love, on this account, derives from our quest for wholeness, from our desire to heal the wound inflicted on our celestial forebears. Those descended from the moon are attracted to members of the opposite sex; those descended from the sun and the earth are attracted to members of the same sex. And so, the film reminds us, the theory of eros—like the theory of chaos—derives from the unruly dynamics of a three-body system.

Yet another version of the three-body problem echoed in the film concerns the mathematics of divinity. Is God one or multiple?


\(^6\) See Plato, *Symposium* 189d-193d, in *SELECTED DIALOGUES OF PLATO*, *supra* note 1, at 229-34. In this work, comic poet Aristophanes is presented as one of several participants in a conversation on the nature of love.
On one familiar account the answer is, both—the deity is both three and one at the same time, a numerical paradox with considerable resemblance to the problems that interest modern set theorists.\(^7\) That the film is alluding to this account is evident from, among other things, the names of its three principals. One equates the beginning to the word, and asserts that all things come into being through God, without whom not one thing comes into being: the name of this person is Jack.\(^8\) Another suffers unjustly, yet forgives the agent of her suffering, and brings redemption to those around her: the name of this person is Cristina. The third is a teacher and evangelist, an apostle of views not unlike those under consideration in the present Symposium, which is why I have chosen to explore the film here. This third character wonders aloud about the nature of the event, has a mathematical view of ontology, and preaches a message of universalism. His name, of course, is Paul.\(^9\)

II

Written by Guillermo Arriaga and directed by Alejandro González Iñárritu, *21 Grams* is a striking departure from the spatial and temporal conventions of classical narrative cinema.\(^10\) Spatially, the film jumps around among several stories lacking any apparent connection to one another; temporally, it blurs past, present, and future, making it initially impossible to discern the chronological relations among different events. Taken alone, neither of these qualities is unusual: many recent movies adopt the strategy of intercutting between apparently unrelated plotlines, gradually revealing the hidden patterns that connect strangers;\(^11\) others abandon the linear representation of time, instead presenting events

\(^7\) One such paradox is that some infinite sets (e.g., the integers) can without contradiction be put in a one-to-one correspondence with a subset of themselves (e.g., the even integers). Fractal objects, discussed below, involve similar paradoxes, such as finite spaces with boundaries of infinite length.

\(^8\) *See John 1:1-3.*


\(^11\) Recent examples include *CRASH* (Bob Yari Productions 2005) and *SYRIANA* (Warner Bros. Pictures 2005).
in radically achronological sequences.\textsuperscript{12} It is very unusual, though, for a movie to combine both features, moving between multiple plotlines and, within each, oscillating between past, present and future. \textit{21 Grams} seems to bounce around haphazardly, as though reels of film from several different movies had been cut up into 100 pieces, most less than a minute in length, and then randomly reassembled on a single reel. As viewers, we initially ask ourselves whether the film has a writer or director. Sooner or later we realize that is precisely the question the film is posing, not about itself but about the world.

Its strategy is to make the viewer feel as lost as the characters are, at least for the first twenty minutes or so. A man preaches obedience to the law in a church, and minutes later (or is it earlier?) he is being led to a prison cell. A woman speaks gratefully of her recovery from drug addiction, and shortly afterward is snorting cocaine in a bathroom. A man lies connected to life support machines in an intensive care unit, on the verge of death; minutes later he is sitting in a deck chair next to a drained pool, a gun in his hand. The same man is in a hospital recovery room, a huge surgical incision on his chest; then he is on the floor of a seedy motel room, bleeding from a gunshot wound; then he is in the bloom of health, ringing the doorbell of a comfortable suburban home. \textit{I don’t know when anything began anymore, or when it’s going to end}, he says early in the film, in an interior monologue that establishes him as

\textsuperscript{12} Recent examples include \textit{Irreversible} (120 Films 2002) and \textit{Memento} (Newmarket Films 2000).
the film’s locus of consciousness. Here he speaks for us too. But we quickly detect certain recurrent motifs: repeated allusions to pregnancy and childbirth, to death, wounding, and loss; images of cars, bathrooms, swimming pools, glasses of liquor. Recurrence itself becomes a motif, as the film constructs repeated parallels among the mises-en-scène of different episodes. There are hints here at a deeper order, lying beneath the surface chaos.

Three narrative threads slowly emerge. Jack (played by Benicio del Toro), an ex-convict with a long history of drugs, alcohol, and gangs, is a born-again Christian struggling to turn his life around. He drags his family to services at an inner-city Pentecostal church, preaches the word to teenage offenders, and drives a pickup truck with Jesus dangling from the rearview mirror and evangelical messages blaring from the radio. He won the truck at a church raffle. You know what? It wasn’t luck, he tells a troubled youth, trying to persuade him of faith’s rewards. It was Jesus who wanted me to have that truck. Paul (played by Sean Penn), a math professor with a troubled marriage and a history of infidelity, suffers from cardiac disease and is on the verge of death. His estranged wife has come back to care for him, and seeks a doctor’s help so she can have Paul’s child after he dies. But Paul is unexpectedly restored to health by a heart transplant, and sets out to learn the identity of the anonymous donor. Cristina (played by Naomi Watts), whose

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13 He is the only character whose thoughts we hear in voiceover.
14 Except where otherwise indicated, all italicized passages in this Essay are quotations from the film.
onetime drug habit nearly killed her, is a wealthy suburban mom who
dotes on her family and exercises religiously at her swimming club.
Her life is shattered when her husband and two young daughters are
killed in a hit-and-run accident involving a pickup truck.

The accident, we come to realize, connects the three stories. It
happens like this: Jack loses his job at a golf club because its members
dislike his tattoos (stigmata he bears from his earlier gang life),
which include a heart-shaped one on his neck. A few days later he
meets a friend about another job, which makes him late for the
birthday party being held for him at his house. Rushing home in his
Jesus truck, he takes a turn too quickly, runs over Cristina’s husband
and kids at an intersection, then panics and leaves the scene without
stopping to help his victims. Cristina’s daughters die minutes later,
and her husband suffers catastrophic head injuries. That night
Cristina, told that the accident has left her husband brain dead,
authorizes the hospital to transplant his heart to
an unknown patient. The recipient of the heart is Paul. Months later, after
recovering, Paul hires a private detective to find out the source of
his new heart. He tracks down Cristina, starts obsessively trailing
her, and befriends her; she finds herself inexplicably attracted to him.
When he reveals his identity to her she pushes him away in horror,
but quickly relents, and they become lovers. Cristina persuades him
to help her find and kill Jack, who has vanished after spending a few
months in jail. As Paul sickens again from heart disease—the
transplanted heart has started to fail—he and Cristina locate Jack
living in his grungy motel in the desert and prepare to kill him.
All of this is given to us in fragments, which gravitate toward several critical events. The accident, which we never observe, is represented by scenes of the circumstances that led to it—Jack losing his job, meeting with his friend, getting into the car to head home; his friends gathering at the party that awaits him; Cristina’s little girls chasing a pigeon near the fatal intersection—and of its immediate aftermath: a leaf blower dropped by a bystander, which blindly scatters leaves into the air; the reaction of Jack’s wife when she finds blood on the bumper of his truck; Cristina’s anguish when she hears from the doctors that they could not save her family; the telephone call to Paul’s house announcing that a heart has been located for transplantation. Cristina and Paul’s affair, some months later, is also given to us in bits and pieces: scenes of Paul learning her identity, stalking her in her neighborhood, approaching her, befriending her; and scenes from their tragic, turbulent romance. These fragments circle around and approach the instant in which she falls for him, beguiled by his magical talk of mathematics and poetry. The final focal event is Cristina and Paul’s encounter with Jack in the desert: we see images of them stalking Jack, of Paul cornering Jack with the gun outdoors, of Jack prowling outside their motel room; images also of Cristina pleading with Jack to help a bleeding Paul, of the two of them rushing Paul to the hospital in a car driven by Jack, of Paul in a hospital bed breathing through a respirator. These fragments converge toward an enigmatic nighttime incident involving the three of them in a motel room, in which Paul suffers a gunshot wound.

Every évènement, the film suggests, is embedded in a web of connections so dense that it can never begin to be understood. As viewers we return again and again to the moments surrounding the accident: the young girls chasing a bird on the sidewalk, Jack getting into his truck; Jack’s wife reconnoitering the accident scene, accompanied by the church pastor, ambulance lights flashing everywhere; Cristina haunting the deadly intersection in the ensuing months, searching for witnesses, obsessively replaying the phone message left by her husband as he left the restaurant. The more information that pours in, the less that we, like the characters themselves, comprehend how or why it is that the path of Jack’s truck intersects with that of Cristina’s family; and how or why such a momentary coincidence has such reverberating consequences. Paul and Cristina’s unlikely love affair is also explained, in the sense that we see what has led to it, but also remains essentially mysterious. So many things have to happen just for two people to meet, Paul says to Cristina, noting just one of the infinitely long chain of occurrences that lead strangers to fall in love. The circumstances of Paul’s
gunshot wound in the motel room, too, are eventually revealed, sort of: in the waning minutes of the movie we learn that Paul shoots himself in the shoulder to keep Cristina from murdering Jack. It is a weird, enigmatic act, done in a state of semiconsciousness, clarifying everything and nothing. The outer mystery has been explained, leading only to what the film treats as an inner mystery.

Part of the inspiration for the film’s spiraling construction is the mathematical study of chaos, a subject no longer in fashion among cultural theorists, though it may have a second life ahead. In Gleick’s well-known account, the modern story begins with meteorologist Edward Lorenz’s work in the 1960s on the mathematics of turbulence. Lorenz’s model showed the interactions of several variables—three, to be exact—whose relations were assumed to be nonlinear; they were combined in a system of three comparatively simple differential equations. Using a computer to see how the system would behave over time, Lorenz was surprised to find that tiny changes in the initial values of the three variables made an enormous difference in their long-term trajectories. In a sense, his work generalized Poincaré’s discovery concerning three bodies in a gravitational system, lifting it to a higher level of abstraction and extending it to many possible nonlinear dynamical systems. It suggested that complex systems in nature would remain forever unpredictable, and also that minor disturbances, amplified over time, might have enormous and irreversible consequences. This idea—“sensitive dependence on initial conditions,” a.k.a. the proverbial butterfly effect—has since been applied to a wide range of phenomena, from global weather

15 Cameron, supra note 10, at 74, also notes 21 Grams’ mimicry of chaos theory. As a cultural paradigm, chaos is a bit out of fashion; it was often linked with postmodernism and deconstruction, and lost its cachet around the same time they did. (For examples of work exploring their connections, see the essays in CHAOS AND ORDER: COMPLEX DYNAMICS IN LITERATURE AND SCIENCE (N. Katherine Hayles ed., 1991), and David Steenberg, Chaos at the Marriage of Heaven and Hell, 84 HARV. THEOLOGICAL THEOL. REV. 447 (1991).) However, the investigation of chaotic systems is closely connected to the study of networks, which is all the rage and likely will be for some time. On other films built around the theories of networks, complexity, and chaos, see Wendy Everett, Fractal Films and the Architecture of Complexity, 2 STUD. IN EUROPEAN CINEMA 159 (2005).

16 See GLEICK, supra note 4, at 11-31.

17 The number three pops up a lot in this field. The work that gave chaos theory its name is a 1975 paper entitled Period Three Implies Chaos. See id. at 65-69. And as I noted before, the work that anticipated some of the main results in the field was Poincaré’s work on the three-body problem. Seizing on this coincidence, the movie links chaos theory to the holy trinity and to the three planetary bodies in Aristophanes’ theory of love in Plato’s Symposium.

18 The expression seems to trace to a lecture Lorenz delivered in 1972 entitled “Does the Flap of a Butterfly’s Wings in Brazil Set Off a Tornado in Brazil?” Originally the lecture title referred to a seagull’s wings, which was the metaphor Lorenz had used up until then. The organizer of the lecture substituted a butterfly, and the name stuck. See EDWARD N. LORENZ, THE ESSENCE OF CHAOS 14-15 (1993).
Lorenz’s work revealed not one but two butterfly effects, the second very different from the first. Assign any arbitrary set of values to the variables $x$, $y$, and $z$, and calculate the values they will acquire through successive iterations of the three equations in the model. As the product of the last iteration is plugged into the equations to produce the next, the values of the three variables go up and down erratically, without rhyme or reason. Plot them graphically on three-dimensional cartesian coordinates, however, and it becomes clear that their trajectories, while unpredictable, are hardly random. They produce a shape—known as the Lorenz attractor, one of the signature images of chaos—resembling the wings of a bird or butterfly. (An attractor, in James Gleick’s helpful formulation, is “the trajectory toward which all other trajectories converge.”)

As the equations are iterated again and again ad infinitum, they continue to trace out the distinctive winged shape, filling it out in greater detail but never hitting the same point twice. Because of this peculiar property, the figure takes on the evocative label “strange attractor”; the term is applied to describe any system whose graphical representation remains confined to a finite space, within which it generates an infinite number of values, never repeating any of them. The emergence of this figure is what I mean by the second butterfly effect: if the first (sensitivity to initial conditions) implies that nonlinear dynamical systems will be marked by disorder and unpredictability, the second (the strange attractor) implies that a deep pattern lies beneath the surface of their erratic behavior.

Strange attractors have a “fractal” structure, meaning that they are of fractional dimension, in contrast to the integer dimension that characterizes ordinary Euclidean objects. This peculiar idea—what does it mean to say an object’s dimension is between 2 and 3?—is connected to the equally odd idea of infinitely long lines contained within finite spaces, an offspring of Cantor’s work on set theory. The Lorenz attractor, for example, is plotted in three-dimensional space, but does not truly “occupy” it: no matter how big you make
the figure, no matter how any times you iterate the equations that define it, it never fills even a finite portion of space. It always contains empty spots, giving it a dimension of 2.073, according to one estimate.\textsuperscript{23} The other key feature of objects with a fractal structure is self-similarity across different scales, meaning that the object can be continually subdivided into parts, each of which is roughly a smaller copy of the whole. Zoom in more closely on the object and you will see roughly what you saw before; no matter how much you magnify it, the basic appearance never changes. You will keep encountering smaller and smaller versions of the same thing forever. For this reason, these odd objects have been called a way of seeing infinity.\textsuperscript{24}

References to mathematical ideas of chaos have been popping up in the movies for years, and storms resulting from the flap of a butterfly’s wings long ago became a cinematic cliché. What makes \textit{21 Grams} worth our attention is its treatment of what I have called the second butterfly effect. Veering between its fragmented narratives, the film recalls the seemingly random movement of $x$, $y$, and $z$ in the Lorenz diagram—a point here, a point there, the next one not predictable from the last. But there is a buried logic to the movement, a pattern of repetition and difference reminiscent of the way in which $x$, $y$, and $z$ in the diagram are drawn to the system’s attractor, folding over and back without ever quite repeating themselves. The result is a cinematic object that can only be called fractal—one of fractional dimension, not filling cinematic space as conventional Euclidean narrative films do, but rather looping back and forth and leaving myriad “empty spots” where explanation is missing; a seemingly endless recursive structure, not so much bending ordinary space and time as lying somewhere outside them; minute rhyming details that become more and more intricate, recalling fractal self-similarity across scales.\textsuperscript{25} The movie has a mystical, heavily symbolic streak that is not to everyone’s taste; viewers unwilling to think in metaphoric terms will balk at the story’s implausibility. Despite nearly unanimous acclaim for its camera work and editing and the astonishing performance of its cast,\textsuperscript{26} some viewers dislike what they see as its melodramatic excesses or its

\textsuperscript{23} See H. Peitgen, H. Jürgens & D. Saupe, \textsc{Chaos and Fractals: New Frontiers of Science} 655 n.38 (2d ed. 2004).

\textsuperscript{24} Gleick, supra note 4, at 98.

\textsuperscript{25} In its evocation of the formal properties of fractals, I think \textit{21 Grams} goes a good deal further than the films discussed by Everett, supra note 15.

\textsuperscript{26} Del Toro and Watts both received Oscar nominations for their performances. Penn undoubtedly would have as well, had he not been nominated that same year for his performance (which ultimately won the Oscar) in Eastwood’s \textsc{Mystic River} (Warner Bros. Pictures 2003).
pretensions to depth. To those inclined to view cinema as a form (or forum) of philosophic reflection, though, the film should be of considerable interest. Look at the leaves falling diagonally toward the earth in the closing minutes, bearing an uncanny resemblance to the birds seen at the beginning: what we are seeing is the emergence of a winged shape out of seeming disorder. The image furnishes a stark reminder that this movie is an allegory of the strange attractor, with all of the connotations—erotic, philosophical, theological—that this seductive term summons forth.

III

What brings the characters together in the movie is the attempt each makes to bring order out of the chaos that the accident has produced. No one knows Jack was the driver, his wife Marianne (played by Melissa Leo) discovers, when she visits the accident scene immediately afterward, and hears that there were no witnesses. But Jack is racked with guilt and tells her he is going to surrender to the authorities. *What if these were our children?* he says, referring to their own young son and daughter. *But they’re not*, replies Marianne, who cannot see what good it will do for him to wreck their own family by going to jail. But Jack’s duty is to God, not his family, and he sees it as God’s will that he be punished. He goes to jail and resists her efforts to get him released. During a jailhouse visit, Marianne, who has had mixed feelings all along about his turn to religion, angrily tells him she liked him better before his conversion. *I was a fucking pig,* he says. *At least it was you,* she replies; *now I don’t have slightest fucking idea who you are.* Their debates about who he is, and who their children are, underscore the film’s persistent probing of the nature of identity, which complements its questioning of time and space. Whoever he is, Jack cannot live with himself for having left for dead the accident victims. He flees his family and exiles himself to the desert, feeling unworthy of fatherhood and abandoned by God.

Cristina learns of his identity after he surrenders to the police. Her family wants her to press charges, but she sees no point; nothing will bring her family back, she says. She passes the days swimming at her health club, getting drunk alone, and renewing her acquaintance with her old drug pusher (played by Catherine Dent), who prowls a local nightclub. When Paul, identity unknown to her, approaches and starts making overtures she pushes him away, wanting to be left alone. One night he trails her to the nightclub, where she gets so stoned she cannot see straight; he drives her home in her car, leaving
her safely asleep in the car with his coat wrapped around her. A week later they have lunch, and she finds herself oddly drawn to him. That night, at her house, he blurts out that he has her husband’s heart. She explodes in fury and throws him out, but later accepts his explanation for approaching her. His arrival in her life revives her and relieves her loneliness, but also ignites thoughts of revenge against Jack. She owes it to her husband to kill the murderer who now walks the street a free man.

Paul is drawn to her by a desire to understand. After he recovers from the transplant operation he starts making inquiries into the donor’s identity. The mathematician has to make things add up, to comprehend the arithmetic by which he was given back his life. His wife Mary (played by Charlotte Gainsbourg) thinks this hunt for knowledge will only stir up trouble and urges him to concentrate instead on their earlier plan of having a child. But things have changed for Paul, who has been brought back to life by the surgery, but is now uncertain of his own identity, living as he does on someone else’s heart. I need to know who I am, he tells Mary. He distances himself from her—just as Jack abandons his own wife—and spends his time tailing Cristina. When she learns his identity, his pleas for understanding defuse her anger. It was very painful, he says, to learn how it came about that his life was saved. He does not understand why three people had to die in order for him to live. He bears a burden of guilt and a debt of gratitude, which he thought he could not discharge except by contacting her. (Don’t be scared, I have a good heart, he quips, a line with which the film gently pokes fun at itself.) Her revulsion gives way, and they soon become lovers.

None of the three lead characters can view the accident as just an accident, a random eruption of violence with no larger meaning. Each of them is on a quest to situate the event in some larger pattern or order. We might say that for Paul, the goal is the acceptance of fate; for Cristina, the goal is justice; for Jack, the goal is God’s love. This oversimplifies—the characters are full of contradictory desires—but it capture the positions that each of them vocalizes most clearly. To Paul, life goes on; there are no beginnings or endings; generations come and go, and the earth abides forever. The universe is majestically indifferent to our doings, and he asks nothing of it. He just wants to understand the strange working of destiny, and to find some reason for the gift he has been given of a second birth. To Cristina, life has come to a halt. At first she is paralyzed by the idea that nothing can be done about the accident, that the law is an empty gesture. Later she becomes convinced that that the law is everything, that the universe has been put out of balance and only bloodshed will restore equilibrium. She
demands the harsh justice of an eye for an eye, a heart for a heart. To Jack, God directs every occurrence, and his love is the only thing that matters. Ask no questions, seek no explanations; we are fallen creatures, born in sin, dependent on divine grace. Jesus is the water that quenches our thirst, as his minister puts it; without him we shrivel and die in the desert. By these separate paths—very roughly, Paul’s pagan fatalism, Cristina’s demand for justice, Jack’s need for redemption—the film shows the characters drawn toward the intersection that awaits them.

A central theme of the movie is that these pathways, or worldviews, crisscross and fold into one another, like turbulent flows. The theme is embedded into the structure of the film itself. Its looping, cyclical design recalls the outlook I have loosely termed pagan—as do the constant revisiting of scenes and motifs, the countless visual parallels and between different settings and occurrences, the temporal oscillations, the reverberating music of the soundtrack, and the cyclical arc followed by the characters, each of whom returns to a setting (bedroom, doorstep, life support system) approximating the one we encountered them in near the beginning. But the film also follows a legalistic compensatory principle: accounts are settled, though not quite in the way expected, and a sort of moral equilibrium is restored in the end.

Paul, having received the gift of life from the others, gives it back to them. And yet the film also has a messianic, pentecostal element to its design: that apocalyptic scene in the motel room where Paul is shot, we come to realize, bears the mark of the miracle, of the sudden appearance of the savior in the flesh, of the event that comes out of nowhere and transforms everything. Much of the film’s aesthetic achievement lies in the way its architecture realizes, in its formal design, its implied thesis concerning the hidden affinities between very different ways of comprehending the world. 21 Grams has a Gnostic quality, hinting at the revelation of a mystery that cannot quite be spoken, implying that there are ineffable truths concealed by words and distorted by church doctrines, and gesturing toward the soul’s release from the deceptive appearances of the world.

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27 It is not an accident that Paul’s last name is Rivers, that Jack’s is Jordan, and that Cristina is always swimming.

28 Plato’s Symposium, one of the clear inspirations for the film, is also full of internal parallels and echoes. See John E. Ziolkowski, The Bow and the Lyre: Harmonizing Duos in Plato’s “Symposium”, 95 CLASSCAL J. 19 (1999).

29 The news of Cristina’s pregnancy at the end recalls the story of Job, who is given a new family as recompense for the one that was taken away from him.

30 For a lucid introduction to the varieties of belief that fall under that umbrella term, see Karen King, What Is Gnosticism? (2003).
The theme runs parallel to the film’s investigation of the question of identity—of what separates us from one another and defines us as individuals, of how the one is related to the many. It is said we all lose 21 grams when we die, Paul muses to himself at the end. With this urban legend, which traces back to a paper published by a physician a century ago,31 the film triggers a series of questions familiar to religion and philosophy. What is the weight of the soul, what is its location, what is its connection to the body? If my heart belongs to someone else—the film literalizes that metaphor—am I still me, or do I become that person, or something in between? Do I live on after I die, in my children or in others whom I have affected? How many lives do I live—one, many, or a fraction of one? Am I one person, or many, or a fraction of one? If our lives intersect, do our identities do so as well? Am I anything other than the sum total of the episodes of my life? What is the significance of the event: if something happens that changes everything, am I still the same person or do I become someone else?

The film presses these questions by blurring the characters and the worldviews they are associated with. It questions their separateness from the beginning by the visual rhymes it sets up between disparate scenes and settings, creating parallels between individuals who seem worlds apart. And as events unfold, the characters undergo outward and inward transformations that make them increasingly hard to distinguish. Jack acquires a beard like the one Paul has at the beginning, and has the same defeated look Paul had before the operation; Paul’s growing weakness from the failing transplanted heart mirrors Cristina’s sickness from drug use; all three of them are taken over by self-destructive monomanias; their differences in social position disappear from view. As their orbits interact, the neat classification I have drawn—pagan Paul, redemptivist Jack, retributive Cristina—is eventually erased. Paul and Jack both embrace at one point or another the demand for justice, law, and punishment that Cristina voices most clearly. Paul and Cristina both implicitly embrace the vision of redemptive grace that Jack articulates. Jack and Cristina both embrace Paul’s life—goes-on paganism. In the end the positions they stand for merge, creating a hybrid that crosses many boundaries within theology and philosophy. Cyclical views of time blend with rectilinear views; atheism combines with faith; heresy meets orthodoxy; Hellenist ideas of knowledge merge with and Hebraist ideas of action; biblical

31 Reporting tests he performed in 1907, Dr. Duncan McDougall of Haverhill, Mass., claimed that human bodies lost 21 grams at the moment of death, while canine bodies lost no weight at all. See Duncan MacDougall, Hypothesis Concerning Soul Substance Together with Experimental Evidence of the Existence of Such Substance, AM. MED., Apr. 1907.
sources are intertwined with motifs from Platonism, orphism and the mystery religions of the ancient Mediterranean world. I think the film itself is meant as a kind of rite of initiation, for the viewer as well as the characters, into a modern mystery religion that blends these elements.\(^{32}\)

Jack’s transformation commences as he sits in jail after turning himself in. Visited by his minister, Reverend John (played by Eddie Marsan), he voices doubts about the God who answered his faith by making him a killer.

REVEREND JOHN Well, thanks for finally agreeing to see me. They tell me you won’t eat.

JACK I’m not hungry.

REVEREND JOHN Jack, Jesus didn’t come to free us from pain. He came to give us the strength to bear it.

JACK Maybe he wanted this pain for me.

REVEREND JOHN He had nothing to do with this. It was an accident.

JACK No, it wasn’t an accident. Jesus chose me for this.

REVEREND JOHN Jack. Ask the mercy of Jesus Christ.

JACK If it was an accident, why do I have to ask for his mercy? I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion.

REVEREND JOHN Don’t be so prideful, that’s a sin.

JACK But the fearful, and unbelieving, the abominable, and the murderers—

REVEREND JOHN Jack, listen to me. Listen to me. Jesus—

JACK the whoremongers, the sorcerers, and idolators, and ALL LIARS—

REVEREND JOHN Jesus came to save us, not to damn us.

JACK —shall have their part in the lake which burneth with fire and brimstone. Revelation twenty-one eight.

REVEREND JOHN Jesus loves you. But he also knows how to punish arrogant sinners like you.

JACK As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten. Revelation three nineteen. [Kicks bible across floor] Jesus betrayed me.

REVEREND JOHN Stop this shit or you’re going straight to hell.

JACK Hell? This is hell [points to his head]. Right here!

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\(^{32}\) The leading scholarly work on the pagan mystery religions remain WALTER BURKERT, ANCIENT MYSTERY CULTS (1987). For a concise introduction with citations to the literature, see THE OXFORD CLASSICAL DICTIONARY 1017-18 (3d ed. 2003), which also has entries on many of the concepts I have referred to in this paragraph.
**Reverend John** You’re damning your soul. You shut up right now and ask Christ to forgive you.

**Jack** *Forgive* me! I did *everything* that he asked me to do. I *changed*. I gave him my *life*. And he betrayed me. He put that fucking truck in my hands so I could carry out his will. Made me kill that man and his girls. But hey, he didn’t give me the strength to stay and save them.

**Reverend John** Don’t blaspheme, you bastard. Christ had nothing to do with this!

**Jack** God even knows when even a single hair moves on your head. And you taught me that.

So begins a long, slow spiral into anguish and self-destruction. After his release he briefly returns home, but leaves after he is pushed away by his little boy, his familial agonies (rejection by the son) echoing his spiritual ones. He cuts the tattooed crucifix from his arm with a heated knife and disappears into the desert, exiling himself from his family and from the God who betrayed him. In the final confrontation with Paul and Cristina he demands to be killed and, after Paul shoots himself, tells the police that *he* shot Paul. Like Cristina, he has become possessed by the idea that he must be punished. He is unwilling to leave after the police, disbelieving his story about shooting Paul, release him. *What if I really am guilty?* he asks the police investigator. *It won’t be the first time and it won’t be the last*, the officer replies, summing up the cyclical view of life that opposes Jack’s apocalyptic vision. Jack leaves the apocalypse behind and returns home to his family.

The film sets up a symmetry in Cristina’s transformation.
After she takes up with Paul, her slow-burning anger about the accident flares up. As she revisits the scene and pores over her family’s final moments, her thoughts turn murderous, propelled by her drug use. She tells Paul he owes it to her to help her rid the world of her family’s killer.

CRISTINA  Katie could have lived. She’d be alive right now. But that bastard left her there, lying in the street. He left the three of them like animals. He didn’t care. She could be here with me. That son of a bitch is walking the streets, and I can’t even go into their room.

PAUL  Who’s walking the streets?
CRISTINA  I want to kill him.
PAUL  You want to kill him.
CRISTINA  I’m going to kill Jack Jordan. I’m going to kill that son of a bitch.
PAUL  Slow down. Honey, just slow down—
CRISTINA  Slow down. Slow down while I what, huh? While I what?
PAUL  Take it easy—
CRISTINA  Take it easy! My husband and my little girls are dead, and I’m supposed to take it fucking easy! I can’t just go on with my life! I am paralyzed here. I am a fucking amputee. Do you see that? Who are you? You owe it to Michael—you’ve got his heart, you’re in his house fucking his wife and sitting in his chair. We have to kill him!
PAUL  Not like this. Not like this.
CRISTINA  Then how? Tell me how!

He does not tell her how. But in the end she sees it herself. In the hospital after Paul’s shooting, she gives blood for a transfusion, being type O (the “universal donor”). The nurse, having tested the blood, emerges with the news that she must end her drug use, because she is pregnant. Later Jack wordlessly approaches her and they trade glances, his eyes asking for mercy and her eyes granting it. In that instant she relinquishes, as he does, the mad desire to see him punished. Perhaps she considers the debt settled and justice done, now that she knows that he has been through hell; perhaps she is turning the other cheek, submitting to some idea of redemptive grace; or perhaps she sees that life will, in fact, go on. The father of her unborn child, we realize along with her, is Paul.

Paul, for his part, comes under the sway of Cristina’s demand for justice, but later becomes associated with Jack’s messianism. When his surgeon (played by Denis O’Hare) tells him the transplanted heart is failing and urges him to check back into the
hospital, he begins to speak about salvation.

PAUL  You want me to wait for a new heart.

SURGEON  You have no choice.

PAUL  I can’t do that.  I can’t wait for someone else to die locked up in a fucking room.  I can’t do it.

SURGEON  You’re dangerously close to heart failure, Paul.  You might die, a lot sooner than you think.

PAUL  Let me ask you something.  And I want you to be really honest with me, OK.  If I stay, will I be saved?

SURGEON  I can’t guarantee it.  But if you don’t come back to the hospital, you’re condemning yourself to a terrible death.  Your heart won’t work any more.  You’ll die, asphyxiated.  It’s an awful death, Paul.  You can’t imagine it.  At least here we can help you—

PAUL  You can help me die better.  That’s what you’re saying.  You can help me die better.  Well I’m not going to do that, OK?  I’d rather die outside.  I’m not going to do it again.

**Will I be saved:** the question is not survival, but salvation.  His decision to stay out of the hospital is his first step toward martyrdom.  It enables him to die in a way that makes it possible for the others to return to life.  Thus he, like the other characters, passes through the ethical universes of fatalism, justice, and redemptive grace, finally landing in a space that lies somewhere between.  At the film’s close, we see the line of his electrocardiogram flattening out; Cristina, speaking of her reckless drug use at the beginning of the movie, had spoken of how she had lived after flatlining.  Paul, too, lives on after flatlining, even though he is dead; he lives on, the film suggests, in the myriad ways—religious, philosophical, biological—that every life is a pre-life to another.

Once you have seen the movie, you know how heavily it draws on a poem written by Eugenio Montejo, the contemporary Venezuelan poet known for his elegies to time, loss and love.\(^{33}\) The poem, which is worth looking at carefully, is not difficult to follow in the original if you can read some Spanish.  I reproduce it here in full.\(^{34}\)

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\(^{34}\) The poem, first published in the 1980s, appears in *Eugenio Montejo, Poemas Selectos* (2005), and in *Montejo, The Trees*, supra note 33, at 52.  It is reprinted here with the permission of both Bid & Co. and Salt Publishing.
La tierra giró para acercarnos,
giró sobre sí misma y en nosotros,
hasta juntarnos por fin en este sueño,
como fue escrito en el Simposio.
Pasaron noches, nieves y solsticios;
pasó el tiempo en minutos y milenios.
Una carreta que iba para Ninive
llegó a Nebraska.
Un gallo cantó lejos del mundo,
en la previda a menos mil de nuestros padres.
La tierra giró musicalmente
llevándonos a bordo;
no cesó de girar un solo instante,
como si tanto amor, tanto milagro
sólo fuera un adagio hace mucho ya escrito
entre las partituras del Simposio.

It translates as.\(^{35}\)

The earth turned to bring us closer,
it spun on itself and in us,
until it finally brought us together in this dream,
as was written in the Symposium.
Nights passed by, snowfalls and solstices;
time passed in minutes and millenia.
A cart that was headed to Nineveh
arrived in Nebraska.
A rooster was singing a long way from the world,
in the pre-life of at least a thousand of our fathers.
The earth turned musically
carrying us on board;
it didn’t stop turning for a single instant
as if so much love, so much miracle
were just an adagio written long ago
in the scores of the Symposium.

\(^{35}\) In translating the poem I have tried to stick to the exact wording of the original. A more graceful but slightly freer translation by Peter Boyle is contained in MONTEJO, THE TREES, supra note 33, at 53.
Notice how the opening of the poem ties chaos to eros in the ways I described at the Essay’s outset. At the drinking party recounted in the Symposium, each of the participants makes a speech about the nature of love. Phaedrus, the opening speaker, remarks that love is the oldest of the gods because, as the ancient poets report, it was the first to spring from chaos, quickly followed by the earth. This explains its power, Phaedrus says, which leads people to die for its sake, or (in Orpheus’ case) to descend into Hades to rescue the beloved. 36 Aristophanes, when he finally takes his turn to speak (he was initially disabled by a case of the hiccups), offers his theory that we are all planetary fragments, in search of the half we are missing. 37 The poem, picking up these threads, puts Phaedrus and Aristophanes together, linking the chaotic movements of the planets to the movements of souls.

Time and space are nonlinear in the poem. We are depicted as being on a path of uncertain trajectory that nevertheless involves repetitions of familiar patterns. The references to the seasons, to the passage of night into day, to the spinning of the earth, and to agriculture (the rooster, the farm state) suggest a cyclical view of time, echoing the Symposium’s emphasis on the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth. 38 But there are also strange diagonals connecting distant times, places, and identities. Our ancestors’ lives constitute a kind of pre-life for us; we were alive then, and they live on in us. An ancient city burned to the ground becomes a site of growth thousands of years later and halfway around the globe. 39 Pues cuando ardió la pérdida/Reverdecieron sus maizales is the film’s closing caption: For when what was lost is burned/the corn fields will become green again. And echoed in the poem’s equivocations about the location of the earth—outside us or inside us?—you can hear the debate between Jack and Reverend John about the location of hell: the minister, taking the Bible at its word, thinks it is a place somewhere else, while Jack, losing his faith in the written word, is coming to see hell as a place inside him. As in the film, spatial and temporal dislocations in the poem figure a deeper breaking of boundaries separating life from death, self from other, metaphor from literal reference, and dream from reality. 40 They imply a deep structure to

36 See Plato, Symposium 178b-178c, in SELECTED DIALOGUES OF PLATO, supra note 1, at 213.
37 See Plato, Symposium 189d-193d, in SELECTED DIALOGUES OF PLATO, supra note 1, at 229-34.
39 Nineveh, a major city in the Assyrian Empire, was razed by the Medes and Babylonoians in 612 B.C. Its pride and downfall are described in Matthew 12:41 and Luke 11:32.
40 Dionysus, the figure in Greek myth most associated with boundary crossings of this kind,
existence, a connectedness, not apparent from the scattered fragments of data we call ordinary experience.

The poem also enacts a folding together of worldviews. In the Bible, Nineveh is associated with the punishment of pride, but also with forgiveness; when in the book of Jonah God spares the city after it repents, Jonah cannot accept this and for a time is swallowed by the whale, to learn the value of clemency. The rooster has overtones of Christian scripture and apocrypha, signaling Christ’s birth, death, and resurrection; it also has Platonic associations, the bird making an appearance in the *Symposium*—it crows as Socrates leaves the other revelers behind, asleep and brought together in a dream—and also in Socrates’ last words after drinking the hemlock and reassuring his acolytes of the soul’s immortality. The poem’s musical earth calls to mind the Pythagorean music of the spheres; the music it links to the *Symposium*, with its Dionysian themes of death and rebirth, calls to mind the lyre of Orpheus. The reference to miracle situates the divine love celebrated by Christianity next to the erotic love celebrated in the *Symposium*, evoking a merger of sacred and profane love. In this way the poem weaves biblical themes of vengeance, forgiveness, and redemption together with strands of Greek philosophy and pagan myths concerning the nature of the soul. And like the film it inspired, it sees planetary gravitation as a metaphor for these strange attractions.

IV

*Who are you, Paul?* Cristina asks you that in the movie, as you ask it of yourself after the heart operation. The movie practically cries out for us, the viewers, to ask it of you as well: who are you, Paul? Mathematician of love, philander and seducer, poet and rhapsodist of the computational beauty of the cosmos; rescuer of the woman who is both your lover and the one who gave you life, crosser of the liminal spaces between life and death, bringer of salvation to others; investigator and celebrant of mysteries who remains shrouded in one himself. Just who are you?

You have the trappings of Dionysus, twice-born god of wine and ecstasy, of masks and ambiguity, known for his shifting identity and his ability to cross existential boundaries, whose death and

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is also a central presence in the *Symposium*. For a discussion, see John P. Anton, *Some Dionysian References in the Platonic Dialogues*, 58 CLASSICAL J. 49, 50-52 (1962).

41 On orphic themes of death and rebirth in other Montejo poems, see Roberts, Poetic Responses, *supra* note 33.
resurrection are the foundation for the ancient Mediterranean mystery religions. He too had a mixed parentage, being—as you are—the offspring of a mortal mother and a nonmortal father, given birth by means other than ordinary human procreation. And he too, on some accounts, was resurrected by means of a heart transplant: when the titans tore the infant Dionysus limb from limb, his father Zeus retrieved the heart and implanted it in the womb of a new mother, giving him a second life. Here’s to all those who didn’t think I would die, you say to your friends, raising a glass of wine at a raucous dinner party in your honor; at this party the celebration of your recovery, the talk of having children, the jokes about your sexual potency, call to mind bacchanalian festivals celebrating the god-man’s rebirth and the fertility of the earth. Parallels to the dionysian myth are reinforced by the drama of pregnancy in the film: your wife, who desperately wants to have your child but cannot, is like Persephone deprived of her baby Dionysus, while Cristina, who ultimately bears your child, resembles Semele, the mother responsible for the god-man’s rebirth and second life.

And the climactic scene in the motel room at the end, with its mixture of erotic love and murderous violence, is an unmistakable reenactment of the rituals of the Dionysian mystery religions—a rite of love and intoxication, trances and evil spirits, intoxication and bloody sacrifice; a “festival of dissolution and inversion, with a women’s uprising.” Late at night Cristina affectionately cuddles with you in bed, believing your fabricated story about having shot Jack that afternoon. There is a knock at the door; it is Jack, a hulking apparition resembling a werewolf. Here I am, he says to you, shoot me. As you hold the gun, he presses up against it, pointing it toward his own throat, trying to force you to pull the trigger. Everything now happens in washed-out sepia tones, with the sound muffled out, as if in a dream. You and Jack scuffle over the gun and you fall, crushing a glass under your bare feet. Cristina grabs the wooden lamp and starts pummeling Jack in murderous rage, hitting him again and again as he crumples to the floor. He is bent

42 For an overview with references to the literature, see THE OXFORD CLASSICAL DICTIONARY, supra note 32, at 479-82.
43 What I am suggesting here is that Paul’s “mother” is Cristina and that his “father” is Cristina’s dead husband, who in a way sires Paul from the heavens.
44 See Vittorio Macchario, Orphism and Paulism, 8 J. OF RELIGION 337, 341 (1928). Because the official, Homeric view of the gods held that they were all immortal, the story of the dismemberment of Dionysus was “kept secret as a doctrine of mysteries.” WALTER BURKERT, GREEK RELIGION 298 (1985).
45 BURKERT, GREEK RELIGION, supra note 44, at 163. See also BURKERT, ANCIENT MYSTERY CULTS, supra note 32 at 89-114, and THE OXFORD CLASSICAL DICTIONARY, supra note 32, at 479-82, 1017-18.
on dying, and she is bent on killing him. Gasping for breath on account of your weakened heart, you look around in confusion, unable to move. Barely conscious, you pick up the gun and shoot yourself in the side, near the shoulder. The gunshot breaks the silence, and the movement of images returns to normal speed; it is as though a spell has been broken. Cristina halts her attack and rushes to you, sees you bleeding from the side, then starts screaming at Jack for help in saving you. *Call a fucking ambulance*, she moans, pleading with the man she was on the verge of murdering five seconds earlier. Now we start to understand the inexplicable scenes we saw earlier in the movie, of Cristina holding you in the back of a speeding car driven by Jack, asking him—in an ironic reversal, given how her family died—why he can’t drive any faster. We were seeing the aftermath of the blood sacrifice. Like the annual festivals at Eleusis and other ancient cities, this orgy of violence has been a rite of passage, revealing to the initiated some of the secrets of the Dionysian mysteries. And as at those long-ago festivals, a scapegoat has been offered up, infused with the spirit of the god-man whose death and rebirth must be ritually reenacted, so that those around you can undergo symbolic death and rebirth, as Jack and Cristina both do. You died and were reborn earlier in the movie, in the heart operation; now you must die again, to be reborn again in the child Cristina carries.

Or perhaps you are Jesus, whose martyrdom left the same marks on his body as your martyrdom leaves on yours. As you lie on the floor after the gunshot wound, the camera moves from the wound in your side to the soles of your feet—recalling an earlier image in the
movie—and shows them cut and bleeding, punctured by the glass you stepped on. Cristina holds you in her arms, sobbing *I love you, baby*, cradling you like a child; you are still alive but your skin is pale and your eyes are lifeless, like Jesus in the arms of Mary in a thousand images of the *pietà*. As in his case, your selfless act is unexplained, and its significance does not register until afterward. It is accompanied by familiar allusions to grails of wine, to baptism and fishing, to the miracle that takes place in the barren desert. And so the man in whom Jack lost faith arrives after all, though not in the form endorsed by church authorities. You are no celibate, to put it mildly; your musings on the weight of the soul and the number of lives we live have Buddhist inflections; and your overdetermined set of bodily characteristics—transplanted heart borrowed from one godman, bleeding stigmata borrowed from another—hint at the heretical notion that Jesus and Dionysus are really the same deity, or emanations of a deeper, more universal deity lying beneath both biblical and pagan sources. And this Jesus, unlike the orthodox one,

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46 Near the film’s beginning, the camera shows us Paul in his study, and gives us an unexplained close-up of his bare feet. They are pointed to form parallel lines, echoing the geometric shapes lining the wall of his study, and calling attention to the film’s more general consideration of parallelism among events.

47 Paul offers advice to Cristina about her swimming technique. Much later we see her floating in a fetal position, evoking both gestation and baptism. The fishing references are more sly: Paul’s private investigator locates Jack in the desert by tracing calls to his ‘fishing buddies’; the marquee on a run-down movie theater says *Cod save the United States*.

48 For recent books aimed at a popular audience that develop some of these themes, see *Dan Brown, The Da Vinci Code* (2003), which presents Jesus as a husband and father; *Elmar Gruber & Holger Kersten, The Original Jesus: The Buddhist Sources of*...
does not know who he is. *I need to know who I am*, you told your wife Mary, as you embarked on your quest.

Or perhaps that makes you Oedipus, he of the swollen foot, called to mind by the close-ups of your feet and the wounds they sustain. He too unknowingly killed his father and married his mother as, in a sense, you have done: Cristina and her dead husband are the ones who bestowed life upon you; he died at an intersection where—literally and figuratively—three roads met, and you are alive only because he is dead, a fact that now consumes you with guilt. (His father was killed, as yours was, by a man who was driving with the very best of intentions, which is precisely what led to his undoing.)

And now you have become your mother’s lover, have all but married her (that liquor glass crushed underfoot), and have fathered her unborn child. In Oedipus’s case, as in yours, the drama is propelled forward by an insatiable desire to learn one’s identity and destiny. Your hiring of a private investigator only highlights the parallels to the first of all detective stories in the western tradition. Mary, sensing danger, tries to dissuade you from investigating how, and from whom, you received your heart. Like Jocasta, she fears that your search for the truth will have excruciating consequences, and she is right. The entire film evokes Greek tragedy’s idea that we are the playthings of the gods—who punish the innocent for no reason, who promise one thing and deliver another—while at the same time ending on a note of affirmation, gesturing not toward nihilism or pessimism but toward a sense of wonder, a sense of *amor fati*.

Or are you Socrates, who, like you, seems to walk everywhere in his bare feet? He too was a seducer of students, mixing instruction with sex, as you are accused of doing by one of your friends at the wine-drenched party in your honor. He too mused on the properties of the soul, and thought of his job as having something to do with

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49 In this sense the role of Oedipus is divided by Jack and Paul, as the role of Jocasta is divided by Mary and Cristina. Jack, I should note, is the one who is proud and impulsive, and has a problem with anger. And it is he who, listening to Jesus as Oedipus listened to the oracle, is driven to destruction.

More generally, I should emphasize that there is no neat one-to-one correspondence between the characters in the film and those of the myths I am discussing. I think that is very much the film’s point: mythic characters have been broken into fragments and reappear in various configurations in the movie’s characters, a procedure that underscores the movie’s themes of shared fates, fluid identities, and theological universalism.

50 Hahn, *supra* note 10, at 57-58, remarks on other thematic connections to Sophoclean tragedy.

51 See Plato, *Symposium* 220b, in *SELECTED DIALOGUES OF PLATO*, *supra* note 1, at 272.
And he too took part in a strange, intoxicated philosophical inquiry into the nature of love. For this movie is nothing if not an extended dramatic interpretation of the *Symposium*. Look at the constant references to inebriation and the self-destructive side of desire, which play such a prominent part in Plato’s dialogue; look at how each of the characters risks excessive consumption of an alluring but deadly intoxicant: liquor, in recovering alcoholic Jack’s case; narcotics, in recovering addict Cristina’s case; cigarettes in your case, suffering as you do from advanced cardiovascular disease. All three characters embody Aristophanes’ theory of people sliced down the middle, in desperate search of their missing halves. We see the vertical scar on your chest, where you have been cut nearly in two for the operation; we see a despairing Jack severed from Jesus, brutally cutting the crucifix tattoo from his arm;53 we hear Cristina, deprived of her family, proclaim that she is an “amputee.” We see the three characters in the three sexual configurations described by Aristophanes: love scenes between you and Cristina; a scene in which Jack is embraced by a fellow male inmate in the shower, a tableau with clear homoerotic overtones;54 immediately before that, a nightclub scene

Straight to heaven: Cristina scores with her drug pusher (Catherine Dent)


53 The camera is initially out of focus as he sterilizes the knife with a cigarette lighter, making it look as though he is preparing to shoot heroin.

54 The inmate comes into the shower area just as Jack is asphyxiating from a botched attempt to hang himself. He removes the sheet from Jack’s neck and holds him in his arms as Jack sobs. Tattooed across the inmate’s chest is the name Maria Eliada, the director’s wife, to whom the film is dedicated in the closing credits.
in which Cristina’s scantily-clad female pusher seduces her into trying a new dangerous drug, another tableau with unmistakable homoerotic overtones. \textit{(You take two of these, you go straight to heaven,} the pusher promises. \textit{That’s my girl,} she says after Cristina swallows them.)\footnote{This woman, Cristina’s pusher, is a sort of opposite number to Jack’s minister Reverend John, who (in the immediately preceding scene) tells Jack what will send him straight to hell. Her diabolical quality is underscored by her red outfit and the reddish glow at the nightclub.}

You have trailed Cristina to that nightclub, where music is blasting everywhere; listen carefully to the singer, whose words are about another modified Socrates. \textit{True philosophies from the lips of black Socrates,} he sings, giving us one of the scores of the \textit{Symposium}.\footnote{The song is “Cut Chemist Suite,” performed by Ozomatli.} Later that night, you will drive Cristina home and leave her there as she sleeps, putting your coat over her, recalling the conclusion of Plato’s work, in which Socrates leaves after tucking in the revelers who have finally dozed off.\footnote{See Plato, \textit{Symposium} 223d, in \textit{SELECTED DIALOGUES OF PLATO, supra} note 1, at 277.}

Or perhaps, finally, you are Orpheus, figurehead of the Pythagorean cults, whose followers spoke of the music of the spheres (\textit{La tierra giró musicalmente})\footnote{From the Montejo poem quoted above, supra.} and the ontological primacy of numbers, and who speculated that a quantifiable soul leaves the body at the moment of death.\footnote{The Pythagoreans are credited with introducing into Greece the doctrine of the transmigration of the soul. For an introduction to the Pythagoreans with references to further reading, see \textit{THE OXFORD CLASSICAL DICTIONARY, supra} note 32, at 1283-85. On their relation to the Orpheus myth and to Hellenistic ideas of love, see BURKERT, supra note 44, at 296-300, and \textit{WALTER BURKERT, LOVE AND SCIENCE IN ANCIENT PYTHAGOREANISM} (1972). On their interest in geometry of forms such as the nested polyhedra in Paul’s office, see H. E. Stapleton, \textit{Ancient and Modern Aspect of Pythagoreanism} (I), 13 \textit{OSIRIS} 12, 40 (1958).} Orpheus’s tragic love for Eurydice is recapitulated, in slightly jumbled form, by your own doomed affair with Cristina. You rescue her from the underworld nightclub where the diabolical drug pusher, bathed in hellish red lighting, tries to drag her to perdition; a week later, after learning that you are her unknown benefactor (but still not knowing your real identity) Cristina agrees to have lunch with you. We see the two of you at the restaurant: you are talking animatedly, with infectious enthusiasm; she is smiling for the first time in ages, listening with rapt attention, as captivated by the strains of your voice as Orpheus’s auditors were by his. Your words have brought her back to life. In the snippet of conversation we hear, you deliver an ode that initiates her into the mysteries of chaos and eros.

\begin{quote}
\textit{Paul.} There’s a number hidden in every act of life. In every aspect of the universe—fractals, matter—there’s a number screaming to tell us something. [Pause] Am I boring you?

\textit{Cristina.} No. [Laughs.] No!
\end{quote}
PAUL  I just—I try to tell them that numbers are a door to understanding a mystery that’s—bigger than us. How two people, strangers, come to meet. There’s a poem by a Venezuelan writer that begins:

The earth turned to bring us closer,
It turned on itself and in us,
Until it finally joined us together in this dream.

CRISTINA [Pause]  That’s beautiful.

Cut to a shot of the two of you walking down the street after your meal, then standing in front of her house. The sun glows overhead through the winter trees. Like planetary bodies, each of you is now locked in the other’s orbit.

Fractals, Paul says in the restaurant scene just quoted. To what does he refer? Fractals: from the Latin *fractus*—broken, fragmented. As in, fractured beings forever in search of wholeness. Or as in, a poet torn to pieces like the god-man whose praises he sang, like the effigy torn to pieces by his acolytes in the ceremonies

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60 The term was coined by Benoit Mandelbrot to describe objects of fractional (i.e., noninteger) dimension. See GLIECK, supra note 5, at 98.
THE EARTH TURNED

of the mystery religions. Or a fragmentary, misleading series of pictures we call physical reality, concealing even as they point to a truth lying beyond the sensory realm. Or a fractured narrative, a disjointed assemblage of themes and motifs, the viewer’s task of putting them together apparently envisioned as a form of gnosis, the secret knowledge of reality resembling the one enjoyed by the platoic philosopher. Or an object of fractional dimension, described by a line of infinite length that is paradoxically confined to a finite area, and also by the endless iteration of similar patterns on smaller and smaller scales. Or—this too, it seems to me, is the point of Paul’s allusion to fractals—a fragment of film that is a sort of microcosm of the larger work.

The restaurant scene, so redolent of the Symposium banquet, seems to me to be the key to the film. Aside from unlocking the chain of associations I have pursued in this Essay, Paul’s words hint at a theme I have not yet mentioned, namely the connection between “universality” in chaos theory and “universalism” in theology. His remark above, in every aspect of the universe—fractals, matter—there’s a number screaming to tell us something, refers to the discovery in the 1970s of the Feigenbaum constant, a number that seems to be embedded in all chaotic systems, uniting them despite whatever other differences may separate them. The number (4.699, rounded off) is a ratio that pops up over and over again in iterated nonlinear systems, seemingly regardless of their physical properties or mathematical specifications. The remarkable ubiquity of this number has been given the name universality, signifying as it does the presence of a sort of universal mathematical structure built into the rhythms of the cosmos. This number screams out everywhere, as Paul puts it: it is found, among many other places, in the mechanics of water turbulence, in the cycles of birth and death found in population dynamics, and—needless to say—in the palpitations that signal the onset of cardiac arrythmia.

To mathematicians, this universality represents a kind of deep order beneath the roiling surface of the chaotic world, providing an uncanny echo of ancient beliefs that hold “the elements of numbers

61 Orpheus, like Dionysus, was said to have been ripped to pieces, and orphic cults would symbolically reenact the dismemberment of Dionysus with an effigy. See W. K. C. GUTHRIE, ORPHEUS AND GREEK RELIGION 42 (1993).

62 Specifically, the number appears in systems involving iterated bifurcations, for example in a fractal composed of smaller and smaller self-similar pieces. It turns out that the distances between bifurcations stand in a constant ratio, which (rounding to three decimals) is 4.669. This seems to be true regardless of the system’s mathematical details; the number is virtually built into the idea of self-similarity. For a discussion of its discovery and significance, see GLEICK, supra note 4, at 157-87. Obviously, Paul’s remarks also refer to the number 3, which plays an important implicit role in the film, as well as in the theory of chaos. See supra note 17.

63 See GLEICK, supra note 4, at 171, 175-77, 280-92.
to be the elements of all things, and the whole heaven to be a musical scale and a number.”64 To the film, it is also a figure for theological universalism, both in the sense of syncrétism—the union of disparate or contradictory systems of belief, of the kinds I have tried to describe—and in the sense of universal salvation or apocatastasis, the notion that “the end is always like the beginning,”65 that no one will be eternally damned, that everything will be restored to what it was once was.66 Will I be saved? Paul wonders, uttering the question facing all of the characters. The film’s answer seems to be: yes, you will—provided that sufficiently flexible, inclusive definitions of “I” and “will be” and “saved” are used. Identity may not be unitary or discrete; time may not be unidirectional; salvation may come from within rather than from without. Fate, as the film would have it, is fractal: an infinitely long thread contained in a finite space, endlessly self-similar but never exactly repeating, neither line nor circle but a shape of fractional dimension, cutting across the spatiotemporal boundaries that supposedly separate us. Everyone and everything will be repeated, but not exactly: fractal objects consist of an infinite number of points confined within a finite space; if the universe were to last

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66 Apocatastasis was originally the term for the pagan doctrine of eternal return, most closely associated with the Stoics. Writing in the fourth century, the Syrian Christian philosopher Nemesius summarized it as follows:

The Stoics say . . . that at set revolutions [the planets] bring about the conflagration and destruction of what exists and again establish the universe anew in the same state, and, as the stars travel once again in the same way, each of the things that came to be in the previous cycle is brought to be unchanged. For Socrates and Plato will exist again, and each person with the same friends and fellow-citizens, and they will have the same experiences, meet with the same events and undertake the same activities, and every city and village and field will be reconstituted as before. The reconstitution of the universe occurs not once but many times, or rather, to infinity, and the same things will be reestablished without end.


Nemesius, as it happens, also had a highly developed theory concerning the relations between blood circulation, the operation of the heart, and the human soul. See NEMESIUS, supra, ch. 16.
Forever, it might return again and again to similar configurations without ever hitting the same point twice. Each occurrence will be new but familiar. And God, the film seems to say, may be just another name for the strange attractor, the figure you get when you connect the dots of everyone’s separate trajectories.

Like Being and Event and its successors, 21 Grams gives contemporary voice to the ancient conviction that mathematics is somehow isomorphic to being, that the theory of numbers contains clues to the deepest existential riddles. At the film’s end Paul is hooked up again to a life support machine, his life ebbing away through the “pneumatic” oxygen tubes. He speaks in a voiceover:


As we hear his zenlike musings, we see a sequence of brief shots: Cristina’s family leaving the restaurant immediately before the

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67 “These loops and spirals were infinitely deep, never quite joining, never intersecting. Yet they stayed inside a finite space, confined by a box.” Gleick, supra note 4, at 140 (describing the Lorenz attractor). The doctrine of eternal return had held that in a universe of finite space but endless time, every configuration must be repeated over and over again. We now know that this was a fallacy: even in a finite space, a system can touch an infinite set of points without ever repeating itself exactly.

68 For the most recent appearance in English of Badiou’s work in this vein, see Alain Badiou, Number and Numbers (2008).

69 Pneumatic comes from pneuma, spirit.
accident; Jack waving to his friend and getting into the deadly truck; Jack approaching Cristina in wordless contrition, answered with a glance signaling forgiveness; Jack returning home to his family; Cristina sitting in her daughters’ room, midway through her new pregnancy; Paul’s heart monitor, its fluctuating line flattening out, its digital number dropping toward zero. The implication is that somehow everything adds up, though the arithmetic may remain forever hidden from us, buried in the folds of infinite sets. At some mysterious crossroad, where knowledge intersects with faith and desire, humanity—the film seems to say—will find that its destiny is to remain broken into self-similar fragments, forever in search of wholeness, never quite realizing that the deity people are chasing may be just the uncountable sum of their selves. You are bearing God about with you, you poor wretch, and know it not, says the Stoic.\footnote{Epictetus, \textit{Discourses} 2.8.15, \textit{in EPICETUS: THE DISCOURSES AS REPORTED BY ARRIAN, THE MANUAL, AND FRAGMENTS} 263 (W. A. Oldfather trans., reprint ed. 2000).} Is that so different from Badiou’s metaphysics?