



April 2022

Maika

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Recommended Citation

Lyden, John C. (2022) "Maika," *Journal of Religion & Film*: Vol. 26: Iss. 1, Article 8.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.32873/uno.dc.jrf.26.01.008>

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol26/iss1/8>

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Maika

Abstract

This is a film review of *Maika* (2022), directed by Ham Tran.

Keywords

Science Fiction, Children's films, Death, Grief, Extra-Terrestrials

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John Lyden is Professor of Religious Studies and the Blizek Professor of Religion and Film at University of Nebraska Omaha. He has been the Editor of the *Journal of Religion & Film* since 2011. He is the author of *Film as Religion: Myths, Morals, and Rituals* (NYU Press), and the editor of the *Routledge Companion to Religion and Film* and co-editor (with Eric Michael Mazur) of the *Routledge Companion to Religion and Popular Culture*. He also co-edited, with Ken Derry, *The Myth Awakens: Canon Conservatism, and Fan Reception of Star Wars* (Wipf and Stock 2018).



Maika (2022), dir. Ham Tran

Ham Tran is a child of Vietnamese refugees who returned to Vietnam as an adult, where he has directed several films since his feature film debut, *Journey from the Fall*, premiered at Sundance in 2006. This is his first children's film, however, and his first foray into science fiction—two genres that are underrepresented in Vietnamese films. The result is a touching story about death and grief, as well as how to make an alien friend.

The obvious parallel here is to *E.T.: The Extraterrestrial* (1982), and this film includes several of the elements found there: a lonely boy who makes a secret friend of a space visitor, a need to make a transmitter to contact the mother ship, menacing scientists who want to interfere with this plan, adults who don't believe in aliens, healing powers, and even a flying vehicle. Spielberg's film, however, was his own childhood fantasy for surviving the divorce of his parents,

whereas in this case the boy's mother has died. Maika is a great playmate, using superpowers to beat up bad guys, fix damaged things, and help Hung's father's business. She also provides Hung with the opportunity to realize that families can survive loss and move on, always remembering those who are gone so that they stay with them in memory, as his mother does for Hung and his father.

The film is also a shoutout to a 1978 Czech television program of the same name which has a similar story, and which was popular in Vietnam as well. The idea of a space visitor who learns what it means to be human and helps others do the same was not invented by Spielberg; in fact, such stories seem to have a Christological shape to them, which has been observed not only about *E.T.* but also science fiction classics such as *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (1951). Religious have been talking about transcendent visitors who bring wisdom and compassion for a very long time, and children's fantasy and science fiction films have created their own forms of this trope. This film doesn't really break any new ground in that way, but it is a charming addition to the genre and to Tran's work.