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Realizing Death: The Journey of American Cinema

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Professor Newman

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Since their inception, movies have served as the meter of popular culture, reflecting the customs, tastes, and thinking of their times. As such, films provide benchmarks for the history of psychological development within their timeframe. In reviewing movies that deal with death and dying, therefore, it is no great surprise that their creators' personal and cultural experiences are imprinted on their films. Equally, it should come as no surprise that there are an abundance of films dealing with every type of death and dying possible. The range of topics covers drama, comedy, war, natural disasters, suicide, homicide, horror, disease, youth and old age. Due to the enormous appeal and broad distribution of film, these ideas and interpretations have reached and influenced a universal audience and have transformed and evolved according to prevailing public, political, and medical views of death and dying. In reviewing relatively modern films, it is apparent that, in general, Western films reflect an avoidance of dealing directly with death and dying. The nature of death itself is often made a source of comedy, as a means of addressing yet dissociating from its unavoidable presence. Ultimately, these films have portrayed a romanticized version of death and dying that presents a condensed, shallow, and tidy experience, leaving the mechanics of death to TV series and grisly scenarios to war or horror films.

Social norms prior to WWII called for familial responsibilities and interaction, with wakes for the dead generally held at home, unlike today's sterile funeral home environment. Yet early American popular cinema thrived on the entertainment value inherent in film and overwhelmed the social mores in place at the time—accepting death, while at the same time denying it. Melodramas raised and played upon emotions and served as mini-morality plays showing everything in black and white standards. Hence, the histrionics of the death of Greta Garbo in *Camille* (1937) or the more realistic yet determinedly antiseptic portrayal of dying by Bette Davis in *Dark Victory* in which she manages to remain neatly coiffed and exquisitely

dressed until her predicted death. Filmed in 1939, *Dark Victory* was actually ahead of its time in its portrayal of the patient-physician relationship in discussing death and dying. A study done in 1961, showed that "...the majority of physicians in the United States did not disclose the diagnosis of cancer directly to patients..." (Candib, 2002). It should also be noted that the predominant practice of psychology at that time followed the "...classical Freudian position [that] emphasized disengagement and separation as the ideal outcome..." in resolving the grieving process (Sedney, 2002).

War movies brought audiences in the closest contact with naturalistic portraits of death and dying during this period. It was only with this genre that the physical realities of death anxiety were visualized. *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1930) was unique in showing war as negative and dehumanizing. Its stunning final image of the soldier reaching for a butterfly, or life, presented death as metaphor and remains a classic cinematic moment. Another distinctive film, *Death Takes a Holiday* (1934), dealt with the personification of death and made the abstract real in a highly entertaining Technicolor manner. Generally, due to the political connection that existed between Hollywood and the government, propaganda needs required that war films be heroic in nature and therefore unrealistic. However, the enormity of death caused by America's involvement in the two world wars brought about a resocialization of values. The dropping of the A-bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki erased much of the glamorization of the war film.

The European film industry was also defining itself by its independent viewpoint. Ingmar Bergman's *The Seventh Seal*, was made in 1957 at the height of the existentialist movement and reflected a new, modern look at death (Smith, 2004, p. 99). The representation of Death as a living being dates to prehistory, and the symbolic figure of the "Grim Reaper" dressed in a long black robe and carrying a scythe originates from 15th century England.

Utilizing this personification of death, *The Seventh Seal* provides modern film with its most identifiable image of death, as does the *danse macabre* at the end of the film. Why depict Death as a person? Such actualized symbolism allows people to cope with the enormity of death by focusing their emotional energy against a tangible, central figure. The notion of the ambiguity of death is controllable if death becomes a living creature. Here, too, it permits the physical concepts of playing games with and “cheating” and “fighting” against death that are raised in the film, only to be brought back to the reality that death is irreversible. As Bergman stated: “In the middle Ages, men lived in terror of the plague. Today they live in fear of the atomic bomb. *The Seventh Seal* is an allegory with a theme that is quite simple: man, his eternal search for God, with death as his certainty” (Steene, 1972, p. 93). Here the causality of death is overpowered by the irrevocable and universal aspects of Death that “...offers no consolation, no guarantees, no answers...” (Steene, 1972, p. 84). “The figure of Death stands only on the threshold of the unknown; he is not a messenger, but merely a blind instrument” (Steene, 1972, p. 96). Yet even in its darkest images, there is a positive message given by the Knight’s squire to “...feel, to the very end, the triumph of being alive.”

With the late 1950s-1960s, Elizabeth Kubler-Ross’s *On Death and Dying* brought new thinking to the medical field and classrooms, increasing public discussion and understanding of the manner in which people respond to death and dying. Popular films like *Love Story* (1970) still presented death as a highly romanticized, sterile event, but aspects of death were changing. Medical practices were also evolving and “...by 1977, the situation had changed dramatically, with 98% of physicians stating that their usual policy was to disclose” terminal diagnoses directly to their patients (Candib, 2002). There were even films that were critical of the

American way of death such as 1965's *The Loved One* (1965) that satirized the funeral industry and the new vocabulary of euphemisms for death and dying that had developed around it.

With the Vietnam War, a new generation of war films was born. Starting with *Apocalypse Now* (1979) they showed graphic details of the physical horrors of war. Fate and determinism were depicted more and more as the tools of death and dying, and the vast scale of the statistics of the war alienated personal feelings. How could any one person develop coping mechanisms sufficient to deal with the "...over 50 million people [who] died as a result of war in the 20th century..."? "...Numbers do not convey the stench of death" (Smith, 2004, p. 104). In the case of such war films, the alienation lent itself to the antiwar political sentiment of the films' messages. Films that came later about the Holocaust, the AIDS pandemic, and September 11th dealt with the same statistical overload, but needed to minimize their scope to achieve identification with the victims. They, therefore, used various cinematic devices, such as individual storytelling and strong central figures, to further the audience's understanding of the scope of mass death and dying.

With the new ability to speak openly about death and dying, cinema took advantage of the very real coping properties of humor. Parodies of *The Seventh Seal* and Grim Reaper became popular subjects of film. Woody Allen's *Love and Death* (1975) features him in a *danse macabre* with Death as he plots the assassination of Napoleon. The British Monty Python film *The Meaning of Life* (1983) portrays Death as a dinner party-crasher. Its hilarious dialogues diminish the seriousness of dying, spoofing the etiquette of dealing with "unwanted guests." Death is still irreversible but it is somehow more palatable and controllable if you can talk back to it! Using the same treatment of death personified as a comedic figure and rendering a direct parody of *The Seventh Seal* is *Bill & Ted's Bogus Journey* (1991) wherein the protagonists give

Death a wedgie and play Battleship, Clue, electric football, and Twister for possession of their souls. In *Meet Joe Black* (1998), a remake of *Death Takes a Holiday*, Death is personified by Brad Pitt. The comedy of his learning to like peanut butter and dinner table etiquette makes death appear vulnerable, less fearful, and actually likeable. All of these films were extremely popular and highly successful commercial ventures. Of course, the personification of death is unrealistic, but such films relieve its tension and anxiety, bringing down the high emotional barriers that most people feel towards the inevitable.

Films that depict the afterlife also serve to deflect the harshness of death's irreversibility and may be termed escapist in that respect. The idea that connections can be maintained between the living and the dead has always been a popular subject in cinema from the days of *Topper* (1937) and *The Ghost and Mrs. Muir* (1947). *Ghost* (1990) follows along these footsteps and provides a highly colorful portrait of grieving and acceptance of death. It also signals a return to the concept of a morality play wherein the good are rewarded with a walk toward the light while the bad are dragged away by bestial, sinister forms. Whoopi Goldberg's role as a psychic who really can communicate with the dead offers comic relief as well as a telling glimpse at the way con artists can take advantage of people who are emotionally devastated by grief. The visually stunning film *What Dreams May Come* (1998) absorbs its audience into a vision of the afterlife that is sheer beauty and happiness as the main character is reunited with his beloved wife and dog. Here the central action is caused by the fact that his wife has committed suicide, a forbidden death in Western Christian culture, causing him to go to Hell to bring her back. All ends happily as befits popular American film.

In other cultures, disengagement and the avoidance of direct disclosure is the rule and, as such, should be respected. However, the "...dominance of the North American viewpoint on

disclosure in medical settings...” has put emphasis on “...the requirement for truth telling” (Candib, 2002). *Terms of Endearment* (1983) brought a down-to-earth approach to death and dying to the screen, showing how death affects a family. Although it has several side stories that distract from the main plot, it can be argued that the progress of dying also is caught up by life’s happenings. Here a mother and daughter, Aurora and Emma, experience a realistic, contentious yet loving relationship, which culminates in Emma’s facing the prospect of death at a young age, leaving behind three small children. The “truth telling” that follows between her mother and husband is superbly handled, and the usual Hollywood formula of the ideal dad is refreshingly broken when the husband admits that he would not be able to care for his kids after Emma dies. The scene wherein Emma tells her two boys that she is dying is powerful but spare. This follows the developmental understanding of death modeled by Maria Nagy (DeSpelder, 2009, p. 51). The younger boy clearly understands that death is final; the older boy understands but feels a deeper emotional impact. He resents dying, reacting against his mother. Emma demonstrates the need to leave her sons with memories and addresses the issues of guilt and mistrust that her sons are undergoing in simple, strong language, and important “teachable moments”. There is little glamour or fanfare in Emma’s eventual death and the correct balance is struck by this film in its depiction of how families handle death and dying.

The current thinking about death “...focuses on the need to find new ways to feel connected with the person who has died” (Sedney, 2002). *My Girl* (1991) is another commercial film that hits its target. The hypochondriac main character here is a child whose father works as a mortician. Her mother has died, and the girl, Vada, suffers frequent panic attacks, reenacting symptoms of her mother’s final illness. These exaggerations of continuing the connection with the deceased make Vada seem precocious, showing how the early loss of a parent may speed a

child's development. The tragedy of her friend's death serves as the central catharsis in the movie, studying of the nuances of children dealing with death. The circumstances and setting that Vada finds herself surrounded by are unique, but her very real responses to the death of her mother and close friend are intelligently portrayed. The reactions and guidance that the adults provide to her are also well drawn. This is an important film as "In contemporary North American culture, television and movies are at least as likely as books to be mediators through which children are introduced to stories of their culture" (Sedney, 2002). While children and adults may be sheltered from experiencing the immediacy of death in the modern age, there is an increased exposure to death from the omnipresent media that surrounds them.

Film remains intrinsically linked to the social and cultural mores of its time. The progression of psychological thought about death and dying over time has been incorporated not only by the medical community but also by an increasingly naturalistic portrayal of death and dying in American cinema. However, the film industry still centers on entertainment and commercial products, so American movies still have not fully realized death. As Frank Capra's *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946) so aptly illustrates, we remain a death-denying nation, preferring our movies to romanticize and condense the process and to provide hope that death is not the inexorable end, but the beginning of a new, more meaningful life.

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