



THE END HAS NO END

FRAMING DEATH

AND THE PHENOMENOLOGY OF DYING

IN DOCUMENTARY CINEMA

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Editora online em acesso aberto

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Título: *The end has no end: framing death and the phenomenology of dying in documentary cinema*

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Série: Ensaio

ISBN: 978-972-9370-25-0

Citações do texto:

PEREIRA, Carlos (2016), *The end has no end: framing death and the phenomenology of dying in documentary cinema*, Amadora, ESTC Edições, disponível em <www.estc.ipl.pt>.



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Edição eletrónica e conceção gráfica: ESTC, Gabinete de Comunicação e Imagem

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Introduction

IN ONE of the main sequences of *The Crowd* (King Vidor, 1928), when the daughter of the protagonist dies, another character tells him abruptly: “The world doesn’t stop just because you are in pain.” Besides working as the perfect translation of the consciousness of mortality as the most avoided subject in our contemporary world, the film sequence entails the self-reflexive and ironic contradiction of a cosmos – the cosmos of the film viewer – that *stops its march* to see the human vulnerability towards death in front of its eyes.

Even though *The Crowd* is a work of fiction, a construction underpinned by the line of thought of Vidor and obeying a predetermined arrangement and narrative, what is here at stake is the same profound critique to a phenomenon that is, to our mind, mainly brought to the fore through the indexically real framings of documentary films. In 1928 as in 2015, Western societies seem to repudiate mortality. Following that line of thought, I argue that the intersection between the phenomenology of death and image and the phenomenology of time consciousness demands new viewpoints and updates.

It is imperative to underline, nonetheless, that the classical juncture of death, image and time had prevailed throughout history as one of the most recurrent motifs. In *What is Cinema?*, André Bazin described an intersection linked to the act of embalming time, where cinema could exist as objectivity and perseverance. Affirming that all arts are based on the presence of the man, he suggested photography as the only exhibition window taking advantage of one’s absence.¹ In *Death Every Afternoon*, to which I will return later on, Bazin presented the suggestive claim that “before cinema there was only the profanation of corpses and the desecration of tombs.”² For Mary Ann Doane, focused on the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, the tendency to depict death in a direct and unmediated way for the gaze of the spectator constituted a brief moment in film history.³ In *The Emergence of Cinematic Time: Modernity, Contingency, the Archive*, a vital reference concerning image and temporality, Doane explored the disturbing moving-images of executions as registered in the short-lived genre of the actuality, stating that “death would seem to mark the insistence and intractability of the real in representation.”⁴

The hypothesis of the present thesis is that a methodological approach using film phenomenology in relation to the representation of dying in documentary cinema can be an effective way to decode symptoms of consciousness towards the inexorable death, as well as exploring our

¹ André Bazin, *What is Cinema?*, ed. and trans., Hugh Gray (Berkeley and LA: California University Press, 1967), 9-16.

² André Bazin, “Death Every Afternoon”, *Rites of Realism: Essays on Corporeal Cinema*, ed. Ivone Margulies, trans., Mark A. Cohen (Duke University Press, 2003), 31.

³ Mary Ann Doane, *The Emergence of Cinematic Time: Modernity, Contingency, The Archive* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England: Harvard University Press, 2002), 164.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 145.

perceptive and existential modalities while having as a starting point aesthetic experiences. I argue, however, that a phenomenological approach to the filmic experience should be materialized beyond solipsistic descriptions of the sensory or the haptic, without renouncing to their value and evocative manifestation. As Malin Wahlberg, I also acknowledge semiotic phenomenology “as a continuous, mind-opening, and nontotalizing discourse where the problems and shortfalls of both classical philosophy and contemporary theory meet with the insights into existential, psychological, and aesthetic issues that were consciously bracketed and excluded after the structuralist turn.”⁵ Following that line of thought, I have conceived a thesis between film phenomenology, film analysis and film theory, where the I/eye of my intimate experience and corresponding views, descriptions and interpretations intersect concrete theoretical framework and sociocultural existential matters. Through the aesthetic representation of dying in *Near Death* (Frederick Wiseman, 1989) – equivalent to the disquieting rise of a roller coaster before the expected fall, since in both fear coexists with a vulnerable promise of protection – I will attempt to find the junctures where I can, to some extent, encounter the other and myself within the lived-world, a shared place haunted by the enigma of our limited time.

In the first chapter, *Death, Dying and Film Phenomenology*, I expose the denial and deconstruction of death within the contemporary world, supported by the ideas of Philippe Ariès and Zygmunt Bauman and considering the emotional responses of the Western culture. By presenting some examples of death as an indexically real screen event, I underline the opposition between the effects of its abstract and concentrated depiction in fiction and its provocative and ethically charged representation in documentary. Due to widespread real-images of death beyond the cinematic, I will also attempt to describe how these moving-images of new media influence our readings of documentary cinema.

Even more than a necrophobic attitude or a limited understanding of a final void, I argue that it is the representation of *dying as a documentary event* what activates self-awareness towards death. In order to present the core tools of my methodology and theoretical framework, I introduce my readings on Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s existential phenomenology and on Vivian Sobchack’s semiotic phenomenology, which luminously applied Ponty’s *Phenomenology of Perception* to the filmic experience.

In the second chapter, *On Near Death (Frederick Wiseman, 1989)*, I analyse one of the mementos in which, to my mind, death’s vibrant density is justly represented – because aware of its own mysteries – and able to confront our blurred perception. Studying a documentary film as *Near Death*, which moved me and disquieted me sorely, can, ultimately, produce new questions around the complexities in the representation of mortality and underscore unsolved outcomes regarding the film viewer. My main research question is here highlighted: Is the filmic representation of dying as an indexically real event capable of motivating self-awareness towards death? If yes, how can film phenomenology help to describe, thematize and interpret that consciousness? Departing from the idea of the dying body as a body *in between*, I explore the cinematic concepts of the face, voice and temporality. Among other authors, I will work under the ideas and impressions of Maurice

⁵ Malin Wahlberg, *Documentary Time: Film and Phenomenology* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), Introduction, xii.

Merleau-Ponty, Vivian Sobchack, Mary Ann Doane, Margaret Gibson, Gilles Deleuze, Don Ihde and André Bazin.

Why to establish a dialogue with *Near Death*? Why this particular film? If a film such as *Near Death* remains so meaningful and provocative today, it is primarily due to what Amos Vogel reminded us: “There are so few film records of individuals dying of natural causes; it is rather war deaths or executions that have been caught on film.”⁶ Even though the human figures of Wiseman’s documentary are less abruptly violated by death than going downstream in the course of life, watching them close, withdrawing them from anonymity, produces equally disquieting feelings. Challenged by their own existential thoughts, the human representations within the film attempt to define and comprehend death themselves, existing beyond the objectifying sphere of the dying body. By allowing us to know the person within the body, Wiseman enhances our emotional responses. Our encounter with a dying subject is undeniably different from death as a general and abstract cinematic motif, generating new interactions and interrogations.

On a filmic scope where real death is, as depicted by the numerous paradigms I will further mention, linked to an abrupt and swift happening, how can we deal with a documentary showing an extended survey of the dying process? When registering the act of dying, the filmed subject shares, concomitantly with the other and with himself or herself, a personal and idiosyncratic experience, through an approach never comparable to the filmic representation of the body-object. In other words, the existential phenomenology revealed by an attentive look at dying is, I argue, the closest I can be to my own existential interrogations concerning the event of death. The body *in between* still belongs, to a large extent, to the dimension of the lived-world, opposed to the realm of the unknown of death’s aftermath. Through semiotic phenomenology, and always underpinned by mediated sound and images, I will attempt to describe my relation with the film’s dying subjects while reflecting on the space-time experience they inhabit.

In the third chapter, *Remind Me (of Our Limited Time)*, I conceptualize and suggest a philosophical supposition – *remind me* – as a contract between the film viewer and the representation of dying as a documentary event. Returning to the pitfall of the subjective experience in film phenomenology, I will use the Winter Garden Photograph of Roland Barthes’ *Camera Lucida* in order to reinforce my arguments as a supporter of a phenomenological and intimate approach regarding the subject of death and image. What is at stake is, ultimately, the recognition of the dying process on the screen as a technology of the memory and of the self.

Epicurus affirmed that “death is nothing to us, since when we are, death has not come, and when death has come, we are not” (Principal Doctrines, II). While discussing the *nothingness* of death, I aim to contribute to film phenomenology with new outcomes, both relevant for scholars and filmmakers, establishing bridges between *how* (to represent) and *why* (representing). I determinedly believe that the relevance, urgency and complexity of the present questions are bigger than the conceivable drawbacks. To produce a territory where the confrontation with our past, present and future ghosts is possible can, after all, generate new ways of thinking. ■

⁶ Amos Vogel, *Film as a Subversive Art* (New York: Random House, 1974), 266.

Chapter 1

Death, Dying and Film Phenomenology

1.1. A CONTEMPORARY DENIAL

“Everything is ridiculous if one thinks of death.”
Thomas Bernhard

WHEN PHILIPPE ARIÈS affirms that “death loves to be represented”⁷, one of the main contradictions of the contemporary occidental world seems to come to light. If it is accurate to state that death had always find its own vehicles in order to be embodied in the physical world of the living, it is also true that there seems to be a new averseness in giving death any visibility, expressing “the growing belief that death is nothing and that nothingness cannot be represented or imagined.”⁸

In *Western Attitudes Toward Death: From the Middle Ages to the Present*, Ariès proposes three stages concerning the way we have addressed, throughout history, the core question of our limited time. The first period could be described by the maxim *Et moriemur* (“and we shall all die”), expressing a time when death was omnipresent, familiar, comprehended as an irrevocable law of the species from which mankind did not attempt to escape or sensed as terrifying. The second period, beginning on the twelfth century, grabbed the idea of collective destiny and replaced it by the concern for the individuality of each person, due to phenomena focused on *La mort de soi* (“one’s own death”), such as the thought of Last Judgement at the moment of death. Between the sixteenth and the eighteenth centuries, several motifs in art and literature linking *Thanatos* and *Eros* forced man to perceive death as an irrational rupture with the quotidian and the society, which was naturally followed by a dramatized, restless and amplified conception of mortality and mourning, concomitantly connected to an increasing significance of *La mort de toi* (“the death of the other person”). The third stage, corresponding to the present time, is defined as “a brutal revolution in traditional ideas and feelings”⁹ where death disappears, condemned to private spheres and seen as shameful and morbid:

One must avoid – no longer for the sake of the dying person, but for society’s sake, for the sake of those close to the dying person – the disturbance and the overly strong and unbearable emotion caused by the ugliness of dying and by

⁷ Philippe Ariès, *Images of Man and Death*, trans., Janet Lloyd (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1985), 1.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 266.

⁹ Philippe Ariès, *Western Attitudes Toward Death: From the Middle Ages to the Present*, trans., Patricia M. Ranum (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974), 85.

the very presence of death in the midst of a happy life, for it is henceforth given that life is always happy or should always seem to be so.¹⁰

An understanding of this shift is feasible by using the excavating processes of media archaeology in order to decode inner contradictions and tensions in post-mortem photography. In fact, the act of duplicating death allows us, more than outstrip human mortality, to produce knowledge about life itself and what characterized it in a specific time. In other words, post-mortem photography entails a shared acquaintance approaching both the narratives of the dead and the narratives of the living.

The practice of photographing the dead kept pace with the invention of photography in the middle of the nineteenth century, following the conception of daguerreotypes and ambrotypes. Some of the most mesmerizing post-mortem photographs were, incontrovertibly, taken during the Victorian Era. Even though it was considered a period of environmental and health enhancements, a cholera epidemic took place in London throughout the years of 1848 and 1849, killing thousands of people within a society where hospitalization practices were not common. People died and had their wakes at home, surrounded by families and friends. What is curious after an intimate observation of post-mortem portraits is how the bereaved had dissimilar modes of framing the dead bodies. On the one hand, many photographs seem to avoid the idea of death, representing the deceased as if they were peacefully sleeping or in everyday positions, sustained by wooden braces and with the eyes wide open. On the other hand, other photographs appear to accentuate a *death's pose*, an idea of eternal sleep and everlasting stillness, surrounding the bodies with elements such as crown of flowers to commemorate the last rite of passage.

Independently of its angles and variations, it is undeniable that post-mortem photographs are, without exemptions, filled with certain forms of tension and countless frictions, enclosing an emotional burden for the one who sees them in the light of modern times. Perhaps the apparatus itself encircles the roots of this response, especially having in mind Susan Sontag's words when proclaiming that "all photographs are *memento mori*. To take a photograph is to participate in another person's (or thing's) mortality, vulnerability, mutability... all photographs testify to time's relentless melt."¹¹ A twofold act of remembering and accepting, photographing the corpses commenced to be an extinct practice. Ingrid Fernandez writes that "several factors in the twentieth century have shaped the relationship of the living and the dead, most prominently war, advances in technology promising the optimisation and prolongation of life, and the monopolisation of death by both the medical and funeral industries."¹² In both twentieth and twenty-first centuries, collective death phenomena and corresponding imagery – vivid through numerous pictorial registers and new-fangled in its formats and extent – produced different and unsettling effects. Images regarding two world wars, the Holocaust, the AIDS epidemic, natural catastrophes and global terrorism generated, before and now, reactions of shock and trepidation.

In our recent history, the events occurred during the 11th of September of 2001 still work as a prototype of what striking and grotesque images can entail. People jumping in despair from the windows of the World Trade

¹⁰ Ibid., 87.

¹¹ Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Farrar, Straux and Giroux, 1977), 15.

¹² Ingrid Fernandez, "The lives of the corpses: Narratives of the image in American memorial photography", *Mortality*, vol. 16, No. 4 (November 2011), 353.

Center's towers reminded us all of our own fragility, separating us from the comfort zones or the precise coordinates of the quotidian. These tiny figures forced a confrontation with our own tininess, with our own transition, highlighting in their violent strength that the world is larger than us in scale, duration and impetuosity. Reproduced countless times, both in the aftermath of the 9/11 and in contemporary revisitations, these bodies still echo in our society through conscious and unconscious reverberations, as if we are continuously falling by their side and shadowing them in their enduring *in between*.

Can images linked to death restructure established images and signs? Film analysis, for example, always taught us to see a low-angled shot – this is, a shot taken with the camera in a position below and upward at the subject – as the aggrandizement of the subject in focus. Filming a tower or a skyscraper, once associated with magnitude, can now connect us to reverse ideas: power becomes vulnerability, ascending becomes tumbling.



Fig. 1 – *The Falling Man* (Richard Dryer, 2001)

The example of the falling bodies of the 9/11 is not unintentional. In fact, what the present thesis proposes has less to do with dead bodies than with *dying bodies*, the ones *in between*. I argue that our contemporary denial of death is not as much related to necrophobic repulsions as it is with the void of the passage from being to nonbeing. It is the moment where the shift from life to death happens, the anticipation of invisibility and the uncertainties surrounding the last gasp what truly alarms us.

Furthermore, it is compulsory to underline that deaths are not comparable: a collective death caused by a tsunami is not comparable to one caused by a terrorist attack; a suicide is not comparable to a murder; the death of a person at the age of ninety years old is not comparable to the death of a child; etc. The infinity of contexts, from ethical and religious perspectives to socially accepted values, makes unreasonable the task of dealing with the multiplicity of deaths by using a single and generalized approach. The impracticability of

the act of gathering *all the world's deaths* in terms of the effects produced within individual or collective consciousnesses is deeply connected to the unfeasibility of measuring any sort of magnitude. Nonetheless, in what unfolds to be a contradiction, *a death is a death*, always the *same* death, continuously inexorable independently from any laws of causality.

Zygmunt Bauman's idea that modern societies are *deconstructing death* can, however, link Western perceptions of human mortality. Influenced by phenomenology and psychoanalysis in *Mortality, Immortality & Other Life Strategies*, Bauman stresses the impossibility to define death, considering it "the absolute *other* of the being, an *unimaginable* other, hovering beyond the reach of communication."¹³ According to the author, death is a final void, a non-existence, "an absolute *nothing*" that cannot be experienced. Bearing in mind that we all retain the knowledge of our mortality, this acquaintance cannot be forgotten but "only be *not remembered* for a while, with attention shifting to other impressions."¹⁴ This mental state of denial points our lives toward permanent productivity and creation, toward the constant need for action and, ultimately, the search for immortality; a key concept to Bauman, who affirms that "immortality is not a mere absence of death; it is *defiance* and denial of death" and, following that line of thought, grasps that "such a life – life forgetful of death, life lived as meaningful and worth living, life alive with purposes instead of being crushed and incapacitated by purposelessness – is a formidable *human* achievement."¹⁵

The deconstructed death defended by Bauman consists in the argument that in modern societies nobody dies of mortality, but of particular causes of death (a haemorrhage, a heart arrest, a lung collapse, etc.). Since death defies reason – it cannot be thought by it – it is necessary to suppress it, as we relentlessly attempt to do with our most offensive and belligerent thoughts:

The truth that death cannot be escaped 'in the end' is not denied, of course. It cannot be denied; but it could be held off the agenda, elbowed out by another truth: that each particular case of death (most importantly, death which threatens the particular person – me; at a particular time – now) can be resisted, postponed, or avoided altogether.¹⁶

So we forget. Not merely individually but predominantly collectively, amongst the crowd that King Vidor simultaneously fictionally represented and negatively preconized. Because "there is no more secure place to hide than the crowd. The bigger and denser, the better."¹⁷

1. 2 – THE PHENOMENOLOGY OF DEATH AS A SCREEN EVENT

"AND YET (...) the nothingness of death occupies an important place in one of the arts of our own time, which is an art of the image, of the *living* image – namely, the cinema."¹⁸ Although we ought to take into account other

¹³ Zygmunt Bauman, *Mortality, Immortality & Other Life Strategies* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 1992), 2.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 2-3.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 7.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 137-138.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 172.

¹⁸ Ariès, *Images of Man and Death*, 266.

exhibition windows regarding contemporary depictions of mortality, I argue that cinema still works, within its own space-time spheres, as one of the most suggestive platforms dealing with the multifaceted relation between death and its mysterious signs.

Rethinking death as a screen event as a whole extent, this is, without being underpinned by the complex concept of the cinematic, makes more perceptible a contradictory landscape. On the one hand, between fictive representations, Internet's visual policies and the conventions of television reports, we unswervingly observe non-graphic, edited, camouflaged, inferred and out-of-screen representations of mortality, in which any possible shocking effects are under control. These depictions, which we absorb massively in our daily life, seem to collectively integrate the *current state of the world* in a socially accepted way, reminding us that death is out there – *it lives* – and yet it still occurs far away, disquieting only a reality of anonymity that does not intrude on my life or my inner domains. On the other hand, there is a second group regarding death as a screen event that seems to produce an interruption, splitting us from the linearity of the quotidian and forcing us to experience effects understood as exceedingly provocative, aggressive or unbearable. Inside this set of representations we can pinpoint fictive genres, such as gore cinema, or other graphic registers, from the commonly called sensationalist television reports to documentary films exposing mortality in what are socially considered to be abrupt, violent, direct, overwhelming and emotional forms. This second category is nevertheless very intricate to circumscribe, since the limits of the agonising sensations it unfolds cover a sensible spectrum that goes from the bloody excess of fictive violence to the unintentional act of registering mortality. In addition, there is still a very critical line, between ethics and referents, dividing the fictive and the real. A *real death* is always a death with no filter, closer to social mirrors, closer to us. The indexically real – “this is real” – as well as the referentially real – “this story is based in real events” – always produces an unusual control panel within our inner perception, a permanent alert, a sharper knife. A *real death* opens a precedent: it happened before, it could happen again, it could happen to me.

I argue that two extremely different processes underpin the apparent contradiction between overrepresentation and underrepresentation of death as a screen event. The first case, dealing with the immense volume of socially accepted representations, works as a collaborator of the contemporary denial. Functioning by addition and by planting seeds, it tries to erase any possible meanings regarding mortality itself, whether linked to social, cultural, historical, personal or collective values. As Zygmunt Bauman reminds us, “(...) if taken daily, (...) the awesome poison seems to lose its venom. Instead, it prompts immunity and indifference to the toxin in the inoculated organism.”¹⁹ The second case, rare but not inexistent, is a case of resistance, always active and never submissive, operating through mementos designed to motivate and trigger self-awareness towards the core question of our limited time.

In spite of its universal breadth, there are motives to believe that death as a screen event requires qualitative analysis. The cinematic framework is not an exception: divergent contexts, from religious influences to social-historical backgrounds, are one of the main reasons why creating dialogues and establishing comparisons between films regularly sounds as an incomplete and extremely daunting task. If we rethink a documentary film such as *Of the*

¹⁹ Bauman, *Mortality, Immortality & Other Life Strategies*, 188.

Dead (Des Morts, Jean-Pol Ferbus, Dominique Garny, and Thierry Zéno, 1979), underpinned by an unusual fusion of direct cinema, experimentation and film-essay, what is at stake? The disparities within the world are here revealed through profound dichotomies between countries such as the United States or Belgium and some rural communities in Thailand or South Korea. The first group seems to entail a realm where death is directed to the anonymity of the hospital and funeral houses, bodies frozen under undetermined promises of eternity and grieving expressions repressed in cold urban landscapes. The second one appears to point towards a cosmos linked to a primitive relationship with the nature, in which the rituals of mourning embrace the apparent excess of manifestation, from the sacrifice of animals to the shouting laments and human uproar. All of these sturdy variations between individuality and community, silence and noise, lack of contact and touch, visible and invisible, contribute to the general understanding that certain cultural engagements define our relationship with death and its images. From a Western point of view, *Of the Dead* reinforces the idea of death as a visual taboo, since its approach largely relies on exposing unseen scenes, functioning therefore as morbid, disquieting and, in contradiction with its indexicality pointing towards the real, phantasmagorical. Somehow, it maintains today what Amos Vogel observed in 1979, the same year of the film's release:

Now that sex is available to us in hard-core porno films, death remains the one last taboo in cinema. However ubiquitous death is – we all ultimately suffer from it – it calls into question the social order and its value systems; it attacks our mad scramble for power, our simplistic rationalism and our unacknowledged, child-like belief in immortality.²⁰

“Why have you died?”, shout the weeping faces in a woman's funeral in South Korea. The abrupt and unsettling sound of the question becomes, together with the collective cries of the figures reunited disorderly around her body, disquieting for the film viewer. A sound that contrasts – in its form but not in its stirring effects – with the monotonous and clinical voice that describes the embalming process of a dead man's body in San Francisco, USA, explaining in detail the perseverance processes of the *rigor mortis* while discoursing about tubes, arteries and disinfections. This tension between coldness and exuberance, dehumanization and hysteria, accentuated by the parallel editing and dialogue between milieus, provokes contradictions beyond the rational. Both images and sounds appear to converge towards ritualized practices, at the same time they seem curiously unwonted. Ultimately, all the framings throughout *Of the Dead* are presented as having no precedent, concomitantly attractive and appalling, as if the filmmakers were exploring uncharted or forbidden territories, observing themselves these images for the first time.

A step forward in the register of the dead body is *The Act of Seeing With One's Own Eyes* (Stan Brakhage, 1971), an experimental short filmed on 16mm inside a Pittsburgh's morgue. Exposing several autopsies and surgical procedures, from embalming techniques to the removal of organs, the film is composed by exceedingly graphic images, always partial, functioning as a zoom-in into bodies deprived of any other qualities than their own carnal values. Skin, bones, organs, fluids and blood fill the frantic framings, contradictorily generating a sense of emptiness, as if life was never nearby. The creation of the human hollowness is aided by the lack of sound, being

²⁰ Amos Vogel, “Grim Death”, *Film Comment* 16, No. 2 (March-April, 1980), 78.

the non-narrative of the film presented as an unbearable circle of human leftovers. Brian L. Frye wrote: “The key image of *The Act of Seeing With One’s Own Eyes* is quite likely the bluntest statement on the human condition ever filmed. In the course of an autopsy, the skin around the scalp is slit with a scalpel, and in preparation for exposing and examining the brain, the face of each cadaver is literally peeled off, like a mask, revealing the raw meat beneath. That image, once seen, will never leave you.”²¹

Correspondingly thought-provoking regarding the act of filmmaking and the act of film viewing, *The Act of Killing* (Joshua Oppenheimer, 2012) raised many criticisms and condemnations considering the delicate area between documentary film and ethics. Following the most powerful death squad in North Sumatra, responsible for the 1965-66 anti-communist massacres, Oppenheimer’s film plays with continuous re-enactments of the atrocities, operating with real murderers and real memories. In one of the most asphyxiating sequences of the film, debatably cathartic, the squad leader Anwar Congo exhibits to the camera a roof surrounded by high walls as the place where he used to do the killings. What follows is a convulsive body trying to vomit, gagging in vain, producing the sound of nausea and viscerality without being able to expel any matter. Even if Congo claims to grasp the thousands of deaths he was responsible for as an accomplishment to be glorified, this unexpected and involuntary self-exorcism works, ultimately, as the perfect metaphor for the unbearable experience of death as atrocity and, most of all, as a disquieting image that we cannot face. The context is the opposite of the one of *natural death*, but it is vital to confront the violent images of the extremes in order to expose the vast array of connections we are exposed to when it comes to defining a phenomenology of death and image in contemporary societies.

Following that line of thought, *Grizzly Man* (Werner Herzog, 2005) explores the outlandish decision of one man, Timothy Treadwell, to live for thirteen summers among the wild grizzly bears of an Alaskan reserve. Timothy, who believed he could peacefully live among the bears, ended up attacked and killed by one of them in 2003. Herzog’s documentary is built upon real footage filmed by Treadwell, intercalated with interviews with his friends, family and nature connoisseurs. The disconcerting effect of the documentary does not have its origin in the brutal death of its protagonist, but in the way death is consistently foreseen, with the idea of a lethal nature grasped by him as a real and undeviating possibility. By posing himself the question of “what is it worth dying for?”, Tim Treadwell finds his own controversial answer, converting *Grizzly Man* into a compelling juncture where death encounters human signification.

Likewise on the other side of death as a natural occurrence, it is commanding to evoke *The Bridge* (Eric Steel, 2006). The film director, together with a camera crew that filmed night and day using several close-up lenses and wide-angles shots, spent a year filming people attempting to throw themselves from San Francisco’s Golden Gate Bridge, one of the most popular suicide sites in the world. Even though “articles have described the film as ‘irresponsible,’ ‘exploitive,’ ‘voyeuristic,’ ‘ghastly’ and ‘immoral’,”²²

²¹ Brian L. Frye, “Great Directors”, *Senses of Cinema*, Issue 23 (December, 2002): <http://sensesofcinema.com/2002/great-directors/brakhage/> (accessed May 25, 2015).

²² ABC News, “The Bridge of Death” (October 20, 2006): <http://abcnews.go.com/2020/story?id=2592841&page=1&CMP=OTC-RSSFeeds0312>

Steel affirmed that the crew was always ready to inform the responsible authorities every time they thought someone was about to attempt suicide, instead of simply waiting for death to happen. “All of us came to the same conclusion that we were human beings first and filmmakers second,”²³ Steel declared, defending his process of filming from the accusations concerning non-ethical behaviors. The fact that they did not manage to save more people is linked to one of the conclusions of the documentary: the unexpectancy of the jump, the apparent and external non-difference between the touristic contemplation and the contemplation of death. The inability of the camera to film those peoples’ intentions is set against the testimonial voices of the relatives and friends of the suicide victims. When the stories of the dead, as told by their poignant speeches, are presented to us, the *falling bodies* on the screen detach themselves from anonymity and become humanized, existing way beyond the astonishment and filled with complex inner narratives that create a warmer relationship with the film viewer.

“I can tell you, the first time I saw someone die was incredibly painful. And even now when I watch it in the theaters, or if I watch it on a small screen, it still affects me deeply.”²⁴

The director’s testimony regarding the impact of the *falling body* hitting the water brings three questions of the present thesis to the fore. How to define the effect of shock produced within the film viewer after contemplating – or anticipating – the transformation from being to nonbeing on the screen? Furthermore, how to interpret the suggestion that this effect of awe seems to neglect dichotomies between exhibition windows – for example, big screen *versus* small screen – when it comes to the visceral impact of death and dying? Last but not least, what are the implications of a screen event that can be reproduced infinitely in front of our eyes? It is vital to understand if being a witness of the irrevocable instant in time when someone ceases to exist creates self-awareness towards one’s death, if it truly affects our perceptual modalities and establishes new emotional cartographies within our individual and collective imageries.

In that sense, it is imperative to take into account the way moving images displaying human mortality also deal with collective traumas. Whether in its audiovisual approach or in subsequent reception, these depictions commonly offer insights into states of repression and denial. What is at stake are healing processes, also brought to the surface by a collective imaginary of death.

The most notable examples of such cinematic representations are related to the Holocaust, being *Shoah* (Claude Lanzmann, 1985) and *Night and Fog* (*Nuit et Bruillard*, Alain Resnais, 1955) at the filmic mountaintop. Lanzmann declined any archival record for *Shoah*, claiming that there was not a single image to represent the event.²⁵ Using cinematographic strategies, Lanzmann guides the film viewer throughout a contemporary and potential revisitation of the horrifying happenings. Capturing echoes still reverberating in landscapes once submerged in death, he finds their way to the present through the human faces, voices and gestures of those who survived and experienced the historical brutality. During 556 minutes of testimonial faces, Lanzmann manages to generate a sense of immersion and a vast collection of

(accessed May 25, 2015).

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Wahlberg, *Documentary Time: Film and Phenomenology*, 55.

voices that gives the film viewer an impression of horizontal and vertical entirety.

Working on the other side of the truth, *Night and Fog* opens with travellings along a deserted concentration camp. Covered in green grass, the signs of any past inner movement appear to be hidden. These signs, nevertheless, are what the director is looking for, between archival footage and old photographs, in order to contextualize the Nazi machine and recreate the march towards death: trains, train rails, wires, dorms, gas chambers, crematoriums. The bodies, at first depicted naked, tattooed, numbered and working under hideous conditions, will culminate in piles of burned figures, traces of hair, skin and bones. It is by exposing a shared, unanimous state of denial that Resnais ends his documentary: "We turn a blind eye to what surround us and a deaf ear to humanity's never-ending cry." Nevertheless, what is at stake in both films is, more than a phenomenology of image and death, cinematic schemes regarding trauma, the atrocity, and the fallacious representation of memory. Through different approaches regarding visible signs and evidences of the gruesome, both Lanzmann and Resnais attempted to unveil the traces and vestiges of the lived horror.

Almost at the end of *How to Survive a Plague* (David France, 2012), one of the members of ACT UP says: "The last one to die, please turn off the lights." Lights being turned on, lights being turned off. Cinematic light has always set up ambiances, creating particular worlds in a game of light *versus* shadow, remembering *versus* forgetting, visible *versus* invisible. The recent wave of documentaries regarding the AIDS epidemic is, undoubtedly, *keeping the lights on*, forcing us to see and remember. Films such as *How to Survive a Plague*, *United in Anger: A History of ACT UP* (Jim Hubbard, 2013) or *We Were Here* (David Weissman, 2011), by using testimonies in direct address with tangible hesitations, anxious breathings, silent pauses and self-reflexive interrogations, reveal mourning processes still far from any closure. Moreover, it is curious to observe how these films are not afraid of showing bodies confronted with their own mortality: wounds, injured skin, loss of weight. Having in mind media strategies, individual and collective bodies are used as a main form of activism: human streams in protest, ashes thrown in the wind, kisses, screams. In sum, suffering bodies used as the ultimate weapon, a logical process when there is nothing else to lose.

What does it mean to frame a human body closer to its own death, confronted and disarmed by it? In *What Now? Remind Me (E Agora? Lembra-me)*, Joaquim Pinto, 2013), during one of the several flights between Lisbon and Madrid in order to take part on an experimenting HCV treatment with new and unapproved medications, Pinto, living with HIV and HCV for twenty years, films the airplane window. What is at stake here, apart from the search for transcendence within quotidian images, is an issue of framing. The window – an open or closed window to the world, depending on the film viewer's reading – reveals a self-reflexing game of what framing entails: a selection that is linked to partiality, perspective, angle and out-of-frame. In other words, it indicates a position to the viewer, both location and relocation, both subject and object, which can be translated into a core phenomenological question: where am I situated in relation to what I see? It is intriguing how we usually recognize and contemplate the world through windows, particularly the physical ones from our own homes. Working as perception holdovers, windows underpin our memory and subsist as key points in our personal timelines. Pinto's open/closed window to the world unfolds an accurate translation of the wounded bodies living *in between*. The airplane, true synonym of a *no man's land*, expresses, more metaphorically

than analogically, an idea of struggle to locate one's own body, showing us the non-place par excellence where the dying body is condemned to inhabit.

Nowadays accessibility to the shocking images of real death is producing, unquestionably, new mind-sets towards exposure, violence and the abrupt conversion from being to nonbeing. The revolting and nauseating terrorist videos of ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria), in which foreign hostages are beheaded in front of the camera while staring at it, might play a huge role in the way death is being understood as unnatural and unfair. The current state of death's denial is subsequently stressed, since what lies beneath the disturbing surface is the fragility of the human body and an overall sense of evilness that resists any idea of acceptance or linearity. Other online videos, such as the accident at Indore, India, where a five-member family is swept away by a flood, falling from Patalpani's waterfall, produce similar effects regarding the imperious lethality of nature itself. The *falling bodies* work, once again, as an accurate translation of the disquieting unknown towards the end of life: a fall into the void, registered from the top of the waterfall and not allowing us to see, thus, what happens afterwards. Two of the family members managed to survive, while the other three drowned. In a world enduringly reminding us that *nature kills* in apparently arbitrary choices and leaving behind visual evidences, our self-defence mechanisms concerning mortality tend to be almost continuously activated.

Even though these media registers of death are not films, in the sense they do not conventionally integrate a wide-ranging and pre-established set of criteria or organized narrative, it is becoming more and more challenging to circumscribe boundaries around the complex and open concept of the cinematic.²⁶ An ontological sense of the materiality of the moving-image is starting to be invalid if we consider the spread of the digital, translating everything into zeros and ones and democratizing the filmic apparatus; the gigantic impact of the film theatre does not seem to be imposingly taken into account when it comes to any screen mediated confrontation between the viewer and a real death; and even the Deleuzian idea of cinema as something drastically different from natural perception tends to lose its meaning when discussing the phenomenology of image and death, since death as a screen event linked to veracity seems to fight, independently from exhibition formats, the natural perception of the world. In point of fact, death is an open concept that defies human perception. These new media images, by being images that *are already there*, work simultaneously as a countermovement and a striking visual wound impossible to escape.

Regardless of the fact that the film viewer's magnitude of self-awareness or shocking effects cannot be measured, I argue that it is within the aesthetic experience that the importance of the film form regarding the discernment of death and dying can be found. In any case, in each qualitative analysis, and even if every moving-image has its own codes, it is imperative to understand that, facing today's visual diversity, any filmic experience exists simultaneously within and beyond the cinematic. If the documentary should be rethought, according to Tom Gunning and in the light of media archaeology, as a post-actualities practice, shaped and influenced by

²⁶ Even though the present speech constitutes a truism in the contemporary world, I find necessary to update the on-going debate regarding the colossal influence of new media images of death and dying and respective accessibility. Regarding the disappearance of the photographic ontology in the art in film, the advent of multiple exhibition windows, the social and cultural consumption of images and consequential discussion around *the death of cinema*, see for example D. N. Rodowick's *The Virtual Life of Film* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: University of Harvard Press, 2007).

previous modes of nonfiction, then hybrid and contemporary documentary forms must reassess intermediality and the multiple and simultaneous referents of a fast-paced lived-world. In other words, other visual registers outside the filmic form must continuously be taken into account, considering not just their influence on documentary aesthetics, but also the fact they are sowed within the film viewer's cognizance and allegorical language. A re-evaluation that would not forget, rather rethink, "the tradition of documentary, a tradition filled with both beauties and terrors, scenarios of power and resistance, turning on the act of looking and the creation of the view."²⁷

Even if the representation of death and dying is a salient theme of much scholarly attention, I argue that the documentary and media examples presented above are still overlooked and underrated by the contemporary film viewer, deserving therefore a deeper debate and subsequential visibility. The vast majority of the presented models deal with death as a cinematic motif linked to the grotesque, the carnage, the trauma or the abrupt interruption of life, never developing an intimate relationship with the dying process or the dying body but with its causes, consequences or neighbouring territories. Nonetheless, they all bring subjects – from the lifeless figure to human signification, from the *falling bodies* to voyeurism – that will rebound throughout the following pages, echoing interrogations and images, by correspondence or antagonism, while contaminating the filmic phenomenology of dying.

1.3 – WHY FILM PHENOMENOLOGY?

IN *PHENOMENOLOGY OF PERCEPTION*, Maurice Merleau-Ponty defines phenomenology as *the study of essences*, applying it to a world existing prior to reflection and that is always *lived*. The definition of phenomenology is, nonetheless, and according to his words, far from any resolution, remaining permanently "in a nascent state, as a problem and as a promise,"²⁸ a suggested and suggestive notion which "most important accomplishment is, it would seem, to have joined an extreme subjectivism with an extreme objectivism through its concept of the world or of rationality."²⁹

Ponty prioritizes the importance of oneself's body, considering it the tool that establishes a point of view upon the world. I would like to accentuate this idea of our own body as "one of the objects of the world,"³⁰ since what interests me is a body that is simultaneously part of the world but also adds to the world, interacting with it, creating it, updating it and, ultimately, generating signification. Applying Ponty's concept to the phenomenology of image and death is not only valid but also predominantly consonant. Even though we cannot experience our own death, in the sense that a live – and lived – body is indispensable to experience the world, the recognition of death and dying can work as "the *Sinn-gebung* [sense-giving], the active

²⁷ Tom Gunning, "Before Documentary: Early Nonfiction Films and the 'View' Aesthetic", *Uncharted Territory: Essays on Early Nonfiction Film*, ed. Daan Hertogs and Nico de Klerk (Amsterdam: Stichting Nederlands Filmmuseum, 1997), 24.

²⁸ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans., Donald A. Landes (New York: Routledge, 2012), 8.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 21.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 99.

signifying operation that might be the definition of consciousness”³¹ in our *Lebenswelt* - the lived world -, as outlined by Edmund Husserl, the first pillar of the school of phenomenology. Furthermore, the fact that Ponty’s world is an entity that is lived and not thought-out does not exclude, to my mind, the possibility of prospection and sense of future time as derived from the experience of the real and complementary to it, being through subjectivity and intersubjectivity that we can describe anticipations, fears and desires towards life and death.

Ponty reminds us that “we must – precisely in order to see the world and to grasp it as a paradox – rupture our familiarity with it, and this rupture can teach us nothing except the unmotivated springing forth of the world.”³² The unsparing constitution of death and dying as an indexically real event can produce a shocking, visceral effect on the film viewer, working precisely as a separation from any kind of continuity, a hindrance to the permanent unfolding of life and its circumscriptions.

How can we represent and perceive an idea as complex as the idea of mortality within documentary cinema, and, particularly, within a film as Frederick Wiseman’s *Near Death*? Film phenomenology, so linked to the concepts of consciousness, subjectivity, affectivity and immersion, allows new understandings of the disconcerting moment of encounter between the film viewer and the dying body in documentary cinema. As mentioned by Frank P. Tomasulo, phenomenology and film could work hand in hand, having in mind the latter “is so dependent on the explicitly *visual* experiences of time, space, perception, signification, and human signification.”³³

Underpinning my point of view, together with Merleau-Ponty’s existential phenomenology, is Vivian Sobchack’s semiotic phenomenology of death in documentary film as described in *Inscribing Ethical Space: Ten Propositions on Death, Representation, and Documentary*, considering that “such a phenomenology of representation attempts to describe, thematize, and interpret death as it appears on the screen and is experienced by us as indexically real, rather than iconically or symbolically affective.”³⁴ According to the author, death works as a threat presented to representation, being commonly regarded as an unexpected and erratic happening if reconsidering that our exposure to violent depictions of death has been amplified. Death is, in our culture, “the sign that ends all signs,” “the ultimate act of semiosis,” being an occurrence that concomitantly embodies the development of sign fabrication and the end of representation, always inventive, eccentric and appalling.³⁵

Death as a screen event can produce inner displacements, forcing us to lose our affective coordinates. As Sobchack reminds us, “the representation of the event of death is an indexical sign of what is always in excess of representation, and beyond the limits of coding and culture: Death confounds all codes.”³⁶ Having in mind that the “nonbeing is not visible” and that “it can only be pointed to, the terminus of its indexical sign forever off-

³¹ Ibid., lxxv.

³² Ibid., 14.

³³ Frank P. Tomasulo, “Phenomenology: Philosophy and Media Theory – An Introduction”, *Quarterly Review of Film and Television* 12, no. 3 (1990), 2.

³⁴ Vivian Sobchack, “Inscribing Ethical Space: Ten Propositions on Death, Representation and Documentary”, *Quarterly Review of Film Studies* 9, no. 4 (1984), 283.

³⁵ Ibid., 286.

³⁶ Ibid., 287.

screen, forever out-of-sight,” the task of exploring death as a screen event resists definite answers and concrete demarcations.³⁷

Sobchack analogously underlines a lack of representation of death in documentary films, as opposed to the concentration of its depiction within cinematic fictions – which “tend to satisfy us.”³⁸ It seems that “the narrative representation of death is experienced as a visualization in the abstract, whereas the documentary representation of death seems experienced as a visualization of the real.”³⁹ An indexical reality, one might affirm, which requires ethical justifications, social acceptance, visual legitimation and other valid permissions. The contemporary denial of death pushes its limited perceptibility into the shadows, silencing it and forcing it to cultural consent every time it comes to light. A semiotic phenomenology of death and dying in documentary cinema could help us to understand the contradictions of the film viewer in relating to a multiplicity of signs that struggle to be visible in the corporeal world of representation, recognizing physical and psychological impacts and describing affective experiences between fear and the desire to know, feel and see. However, the documentary exemplification of the dying body remains more accessible to the human eye, constituting the film phenomenology of dying a more graspable area than the line of the horizon constituted by death. As Malin Wahlberg affirms, “the most provoking figure of death is not the image of a dead body but a body transforming into corpse.”⁴⁰ The dying body, as an *in between* still graspable by the visible signs and as a halting pose, can allow an intellectual and physical engagement by the film viewer that death, as an immaterial concept, cannot admit.

Regarding the issue of indexicality and veracity, one of the examples highlighted by Vivian Sobchack is the real death of a rabbit in the fictive narrative of *The Rules of the Game* (*La Règle du Jeu*, Jean Renoir, 1939). The sequence seems to exist on the other side of fictional realm of killings, where death is “a commonplace – rather than taboo – visual event.” Contextualized by his or her own cultural and ethical knowledge, the film viewer understands the death of the rabbit as a rupture that “exceeds the narrative code which communicates it.”⁴¹ An even more striking, updated and contemporary paradigm of this effect can be seen in the Argentinian film *The Dead* (*Los Muertos*, Lisandro Alonso, 2004). During a journey back home, Vargas, the main character, kills a goat with his own hands, slaying it with a machete. From the slitted throat to the blood stream, the slow death of the animal – filmed in real time and without editing – becomes, simultaneously with the initial visceral shock, an unbearable experience for the viewer. In *Near Death*, dying entails a slow process. The dying body, in which death acts from the inside to the outside and never the opposite, is an entity that simultaneously extends time and has no time.

It is important to underline my agreement with Sobchack’s words when affirming that semiotic phenomenology is “necessarily culturally informed and historicized.”⁴² It is not a coincidence that Philippe Ariès’ historical approach opens the present thesis, categorizing our attitudes towards death through delineated times (from the Middle Ages to the present), demarcated

³⁷ Ibid., 287.

³⁸ Ibid., 287.

³⁹ Ibid., 290.

⁴⁰ Wahlberg, *Documentary Time: Film and Phenomenology*, 47.

⁴¹ Sobchack, “Inscribing Ethical Space: Ten Propositions on Death, Representation and Documentary”, 293.

⁴² Ibid., 283.

places (the Western societies), and a specific arch (from acceptance to denial). It is due to the recognition that a spectator in cinema is always a prisoner of his or her own context and time that I tend to reject Allan Casabier's theories of transcendental phenomenology in *Film and Phenomenology: Toward a Realist Theory of Cinematic Representation*, underpinned by an acknowledgement of a consciousness that exists beyond the film viewer's schemata. Even though I am supportive of Casabier's idea that there are "advantages of a phenomenological account of the documentary form,"⁴³ I am not absolutely convinced by the impression of a filmic experience not linked to the spectator's beliefs, languages, susceptibilities, social-historical backgrounds and inner politics of the feeling, so ontologically related to experiences and anticipations, anxieties and desires. As Wahlberg puts it: "If so, how is it that when talking about film we often disagree on what was shown? How can we neglect that perception involves interpretation and constructed frames through which we react to sensory qualities as well as semantic information and symbolic signs?"⁴⁴ Nevertheless, I agree that death as a filmic motif can blend and muddle the most intimate coordinates and inner outlines, defending that dying is, particularly, made of signs that *brings us together*, not as universal knowledge or experience, but as collective recognition, intuition and fatality. Additionally, I also resist Casabier's notion of cinema as discovery of the realm presented in front of him, since what I defend is the cinematic representation of death and dying as an indexically real reorganization of the signs. In other words, a rediscovery of the already known problematized by an oblivious request of the film viewer – *remind me* – always standing between the wish to recall and the fear to know any potential truth.

Following that line of thought, I position myself on the side of Vivian Sobchack's vision of the embodied nature and dialectical structure of the film experience defended in *The Address of the Eye: A Phenomenology of Film Experience*, being stimulated by the same "desire to cry out my *inherent qualification* of the world of essences and universals" and accepting "my *existential particularity* in a world I engage and share with others." What is at stake is, as in Merleau-Ponty, a body that is not only part of the world but also adds to the world.⁴⁵

I suggest that the phenomenology of dying does not promote alienation but rather a hard experience of labour and new attitudes towards the moving image, since mortality is embodied in a human consciousness that tries to permanently deny it. The language of death always reveals itself to us as a new language and a reinvented collection of signs, trying to find a voice and a graphic vocabulary to express its own void. After all, "death is a motif that is both excessively visual and impossible to represent."⁴⁶ Nonetheless, having in mind that "a film is an act of seeing that makes itself seen, an act of hearing that makes itself heard"⁴⁷ and that, as defined by Sobchack, the intersubjective foundation of objective cinematic communication has its origin in shared structures of embodied experience and ways of being-in-the-world, the image of dying is an affective and effective perceptual modality connecting the I and the other in our inextricable knot and, particularly, in our common and inexorable mortality. There is no other life event capable of establishing so many

⁴³ Allan Casabier, *Film and Phenomenology. Toward a Realistic Theory of Cinematic Representation* (Cambridge, Mass.: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 147.

⁴⁴ Malin Wahlberg, *Figures of Time. On the Phenomenology of Cinema and Temporality* (Stockholm University, 2003), 111.

⁴⁵ Vivian Sobchack, *The Address of the Eye: A Phenomenology of Film Experience* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1991), xiii-xv.

⁴⁶ Wahlberg, *Documentary Time: Film and Phenomenology*, 47.

⁴⁷ Sobchack, *The Address of the Eye: A Phenomenology of Film Experience*, 3.

existential intersections between human beings and activating collectively our embodied vision and attentiveness.

However, and since I do not consider a consciousness beyond the film viewer's personal schemata, I share Vivian Sobchack's binary proposal of an I/eye of the screen and an I/eye constituted by the film viewer. Even though I understand the framed event of death and dying in cinema as the most capable of destroying the walls splitting human perception from cinematic perception, confounding the codes and relocating personal coordinates, there seems to exist a mutual space that, as Sobchack insinuates, is always negotiated. This occurs, primarily, due to the proposition "'There, where I am not,' as the space consciously and bodily inhabited and lived by an 'other' whose experience of being-in-the-world, however anonymous, is not precisely congruent with the viewer's own."⁴⁸ What interests me in this suggestion, always focusing on the classical topic of image and death, is the link between film, filmmaker and film viewer, based on their "capacity to localize and unify (or 'centre') the invisible (...) and make it visible"⁴⁹ within the rules and criteria of their own intersubjective communication. On the reversibility of cinematic expression and expression, Vivian Sobchack writes:

The film's vision and my own do not conflate, but meet in the sharing of a world and constitute an experience that is not only intrasubjectively dialectical, but also intrasubjectively dialogical. Although there are moments in which our views may become congruent in the convergence of our interest (never of our situation), there are also moments in which our views conflict; our values, interests, prospects, and projects differ; something is not understood or is denied even as it is visible and seen. Cinematic vision, then, is never monocular, is always doubled, is always the vision of the *two viewing subjects* materially and consciously inhabiting, signifying, and sharing a world in a manner at once universal and particular, a world that is mutually visible but hermeneutically negotiable.⁵⁰

To confront the mortality of the other on the screen implies, always, a confrontation with our own mortality, which is, therefore, ontologically linked to the end of monopolarity. Subsequently, by attempting to see through the eyes of the other, identity and consciousness are activated and reopened to new readjustments. This process, nevertheless, never happens before an inner struggle that does not reveal its defensive strategies, its filters or its measurements. In that sense, I occupy an *in between* dimension where cinema is more than "one of these intellectual robots"⁵¹, as outlined by Jean Epstein when defending the difference between the machine and the human mind. Nonetheless, they are not accurately analogous, since my (dis)enchantment towards cinema departs from a rupture from my perceptual and existential modalities, regrouping the codes of the *already lived* with the ones of the *yet to live*.

Dying as a real screen event is the ultimate paradox, since what is at stake is concomitantly the rediscovery of a certainty – the one of my own mortality – and the impossibility of reason or epistemological orientations – since it constitutes a void that exists beyond my own body and consciousness. In this scenario, the dying person and the *falling body in between* are the ultimate indications of a sphere still impassable to us, since it is simultaneously mediated and mediator, vanishing subject and announcing object. ■

⁴⁸ Ibid., 10.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 21.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 24.

⁵¹ Jean Epstein, *L'intelligence de une machine* (1946), *Jean Epstein, Critical essays and new translations*, ed. Sarah Keller and Jason N. Paul (Amsterdam: University of Amsterdam press, 2011), 310.

Chapter 2

On Near Death (Frederick Wiseman, 1989)

2.1. THE HOSPITAL AS MICROCOSM OF THE IMPERSONAL



Fig. 2 – Boston's Beth Israel Hospital, *Near Death* (Frederick Wiseman, 1989)

DEATH IN THE HOSPITAL is no longer the occasion of a ritual ceremony, over which the dying person presides amidst his assembled relatives and friends. Death is a technical phenomena obtained by a cessation of care, a cessation determined in a more or less avowed way by a decision of the doctor and the hospital team. Indeed, in the majority of the cases, the dying person has already lost consciousness. Death has been dissected, cut to bits by a series of little steps, which finally makes it impossible to know which step was the real death, the one in which consciousness was lost, or the one in which breathing stopped. All these little silent deaths have replaced and erased the great dramatic act of death, and no one any longer has the strength or patience to wait over a period of weeks for a moment which has lost a part of its meaning.⁵²

Even if *Near Death* has no voiceover, the words of Philippe Ariès can echo as murmurs throughout Frederick Wiseman's documentary film. In the aseptic white rooms and corridors of Boston's Beth Israel Hospital, life and death are discussed between the wishes of the terminal ill patients and families and the possibilities and opinions given by the doctors. During the 358 minutes of the film, we observe the quotidian of a Medical Intensive Care Unit and the decision-making processes on life-sustaining treatments, following the ethical, personal, legal, psychological, religious and medical confrontations.

⁵² Philippe Ariès, *Western Attitudes Toward Death: From the Middle Ages to the Present*, 88-89.

Always surrounded by machines, tubes and ventilators, we listen to discussions over restrained breathing, explanations about intubation procedures, choked voices trying to be heard and repeated phone calls revealing frustrating, anger-provoking prognosis. Occasionally, some vocalised words bring us to life – oxygen, heartbeat, blood stream – but the film depicts a world of uncertainties: “We don’t know what do to”/“I don’t know what to do” constitutes the main binary relation between professionals and the involved relatives.

The first moments of the film seem to hamper the process of immersion that will, later on, become its core structure. In one of the hospital rooms, a Rabi says to a motionless woman’s body: “Can you hear me? (...) We won’t leave you alone, okay?”, additionally mentioning the fact that her son is coming from Chicago to be by her side. On the following shot, under a different light setting that does not allow us to apprehend specific time coordinates, a doctor auscultates the heart of the same woman with a stethoscope: “Okay, she’s dead, 10h43.” To see one of these silent deaths that Ariès defined, testifying the invisible transformation from being to nonbeing, underscores death as a merciless event capable of erasing human signification.

The conversations of the hospital staff on responsibility, manipulation of life and criteria regarding future directions of the patients’ conditions, even if habitually professional and serious, sporadically achieve levels of lightness which seem to point towards human indifference, presenting the hospital as a contemporary microcosm of the impersonal. Even though the ambition is continuously to maximize the comfort of the patient, improving the function of the body and discover the best solutions, all of the professionals surrounded by death seem, at intervals, to forget death itself, deconstructing it into codes, concepts and contradictory definitions between the clinical, the physiological and the existential.

Around the middle of the film, a doctor mentions the word purgatory. The hospital represents, ultimately, the outlying territory of these bodies permanently *in between*, imprisoned amid life and death, trapped among the never-ending corridors and claustrophobic rooms that form a non-place par excellence. It is not accidental that Wiseman depicts recurrently the daily life within the hospital through reflexes on the windows’ glass or through backlight framings, eradicating at times the physical qualities of the labyrinthine space. Dying becomes, phenomenologically, reflection and infection. As in the interior of a prison, every action doubles its meaning: capturing an eye closing after anaesthesia produces a movement as intense as ambiguous, always in the borderline between passing away and survival, always composing death as a Russian roulette.

When Philippe Ariès discusses the displacement of the site of death from one’s home to the hospital, he defends that “one no longer goes to or will go to the hospital to be healed, but for the specific purpose of dying.”⁵³ Emphasising the loneliness of contemporary death and the prevailing repression of humanity, the author concludes that “emotions must be avoided both in the hospital and everywhere in society. One does not have the right to become emotional other than in private, that is to say, secretly.”⁵⁴

⁵³ Ibid., 88.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 89.

Frederick Wiseman, as a remarkable filmmaker that has filmed institutions throughout his entire life, manages to depict the hospital of *Near Death* as a location that matches Ariès' analysis while, at intervals, deconstructing it. How to introduce life in a place of death, re-entering the human and transforming the dying body into dying person? Firstly, by the decision of following four particular patients – John Gavin (72), Bernice Factor (70), Manuel Cabra (33) and Charlie Sperazza (73) – offering the film viewer the time to understand particular conditions and recognizable faces. Through that shrewd strategy, Wiseman exterminates anonymity and indistinctness, spawning familiarization with each patient and respective surroundings. Secondly, by presenting a figure such as Dr. Taylor, foregrounded by the humanity of his voice and pose, owning an attitude that highly contrasts with a global sense of impersonality. Thirdly, by showing several moments of intimacy. Among these instants that go beyond the institutional and social requested interactions are the sweetened humour of Charlie Sperazza's wife after his well-succeeded surgery, the endearment of Mrs. Factor's husband explaining that her swallow hands are just temporary, or a close-up of Dr. Taylor's hand holding the hand of a patient's relative. Moments linked to image-affect, which seem to dismantle the social constructions depicted and alleviate the dismay provoked by the confrontation with death.

Disguised under an observational mode of filmmaking, Wiseman is an auteur. By offering a vision that is confrontational and always conscious while shooting, Wiseman fits, more than any notion of direct cinema, the criteria of the "interventional gaze" described by Vivian Sobchack when defining ethical representations of a visual encounter with death.⁵⁵ The camera of Wiseman addresses more than a distant look of the filmed reality, rather reconstructing it with meticulously measured and subtle strategies. The camera does not participate in an uncompromised register: it incorporates the interactions and zooms in into the unseen environment and experience of slow death. If *Near Death* is shocking, moving and engaging, it is because we are not simply observing dying bodies but existential portraits telling life stories that are, irrevocably, close to the final chapter. What is at stake is a collaborative effort, from the one who sees – Wiseman, the film viewer – to the one being seen – the dying person, always individualized and volatile.

I have argued that the hospital is still acknowledged today as a microcosm of the impersonal, a transitory space without a memory and capable of expunging humanity through wintriness and callousness. Nonetheless, it is also within the aesthetic experience of film and its immanent possibilities of framing unfolding events that new complex layers can emerge, deconstructing simplistic generalizations, privileging the why over the how, preserving instants, metamorphosing the detached into the attached and altering the microcosm into the cosmic. The poetics of the space, particularly in relation to the phenomenology of dying, are always composed by shifting and shady landscapes.

The idea for *Near Death* came from Richard C. Pasternak, director of Beth Israel's cardiac care unit, "who for many years had been concerned with the public's inaccurate, if not romanticized, conception of what goes on in intensive-care units." The film was aired as a six-hour show by Public Broadcasting Service stations – "the longest uninterrupted documentary in PBS history" – in order to preserve Wiseman's

⁵⁵ Sobchack, "Inscribing Ethical Space: Ten Propositions on Death, Representation, and Documentary", 296.

intentions. The director revealed that the shooting of *Near Death* “as ‘an amazing personal experience’, during which he came to terms with his own mortality.”⁵⁶

2.2 DYING BODIES AND THE PHENOMENOLOGY OF DYING



Fig. 3 – On the other side, *Near Death* (Frederick Wiseman, 1989)

WHILE FOLLOWING the medical and human condition of the first patient, John Gavin, we also witness conversations between Dr. Taylor and Gavin’s family. In one of those moments, the doctor talks with Gavin’s wife while, behind the glass window of his room, the patient sleeps. Even though the camera is moving, the main framing position of that segment consists of a perfect diagonal line, starting with Dr. Taylor in the foreground, accompanied by the attentive wife of the patient and, finally, finishing with John Gavin. Constituting a blurry image in the background, his body is almost blended with the landscape until the wife turns around to see him and his horizontal body becomes focused. The framing works as the perfect translation of the cinematic representation of the dying body that traverses, on the surface, the documentary film: bodies that are not entirely part of the world of the living; realistic depictions of half-ghosts *in between* dimensions, slowly being left behind, silenced by the glass walls, existentially denied due to the inexorable future they preconize. What is at stake is, one might say, a deconstructed *mise-en-abyme*, since the place of John Gavin will be, in time, replaced by the other two subjects that compose the image and, irrevocably, by the film viewer. I argue that the consciousness of mortality invoked by *Near Death*, always inclusive, limited and self-reflexive, exceeds the film screen, reminding the film viewer of his or her wait in line and corresponding position as the ultimate point of the diagonal. What is produced is, as Sobchack affirms, a technologically mediated consciousness, which is also, through the existentially functional body of the film, an immediate experience of consciousness of the expressed world.⁵⁷

⁵⁶ Donald C. Drake, “Tv’s ‘Near Death’ Experience Cruel Choices Must Be Made In An Intensive-care Unit, And Filmmaker Frederick Wiseman Shows Them. But He Also Captures Courage And Compassion In A Remarkable Work On Channel 12 Today”, *The Inquirer* (January 28, 1990): http://articles.philly.com/1990-01-28/entertainment/25906038_1_intensive-care-unit-high-tech-medicine-titicut-follies (accessed May 25, 2015).

⁵⁷ Vivian Sobchack, *The Address of the Eye*, 168.

Natural death, as observed in *Near Death*, does not allow any sense of naturalness, since the agitated and confused persons we see do not seem to consent death. “What is your sense of what is going on?”, a doctor asks to one of the patients. Through a visibly worried, frightened face we recognize a consciousness that is never far-reaching, serene or non-violent. The expressive movements and responses of those bodies are linked to anxiety, a deconstructed fear which is the source of the visible affectivity. A deconstructed variation of the self-aware state shared by the film viewer even though, as Vivian Sobchack affirms, “dying and death, particularly in documentary film, cannot be represented and made visible on the screen with an exactitude experienced as ‘fullness’.”⁵⁸ It is necessary to realize that, due to the impracticality of death as a repeatable experience, any conceivable consciousness is always partial, restricted, based on inferences beyond reason and knowledge. Nevertheless, if our relationship with the unknown is always subjective and unenlightened, the physicality of the dying reveals itself to us in a more apparent and measurable mode.

In *Near Death* we are not dealing with collective atrocity or unidentified bodies, but with disturbing and disturbed bodies that also exist between the weird and the attractive. Nonetheless, as we have previously seen, Wiseman metamorphoses the dying body into dying person, using his camera to create a personal and intimate sphere. The body becomes portrait, life-story, and the uncompromising spectacle shifts into an attentive affective cartography. If Wiseman’s film is so genuinely heart-rending, it is due to the embodied and synchronised contradiction of people alive within immobilized bodies.

It is therefore necessary to determine the paradoxes and possibilities of the phenomenological images of dying when confronted with the phenomenological messages of death, exploring the emotional data that can be originated from the dying as a visual and external process. I argue that the filmic *mise-en-scène* and its aesthetic qualities constitute a more helpful device to decode the existential questions to which so many filmmakers permanently return. How does the dying body, in its ephemeral aspect and as the most poignant of the indexical signs, create a moment of encounter with the film viewer able to produce emotional and intellectual impact? How does the dying body reflect dying as an intimate proximity to death?

During one of the sequences of the film, a doctor points a lantern to the eyes of a patient, looking for body responses. Later on, at the morgue of the hospital, a dead body covered with a white blanket epitomizes inactivity. Ultimately, “the moment of death can only be represented in a visible and vigorous contrast between two states of the physical body: the body as lived-body, intentional and animated – and the body as corpse, as flesh unintended, inanimate, static.”⁵⁹ I argue, however, that the most shocking and disquieting effects of mortality in contemporary societies do not have their origin in necrophobic attitudes but, as Sobchack affirms, in “the visible mortification of or violence to the existential, intentional, and representable lived-body which stands as the index of dying.”⁶⁰ In other words, it is the index of dying, not the index of death, the foundation of our abhorrence towards the filmic representation of human mortality, the same causality underpinning the dualistic contradiction between self-awareness and denial.

⁵⁸ Sobchack, “Inscribing Ethical Space: Ten Propositions on Death, Representation and Documentary”, 287.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 287.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 287.

As William F. May affirms, a man “not only *has* a body, he *is* his body.”⁶¹ How is the dying body represented in *Near Death* and how does it describe a phenomenology of dying? The first face we see belongs to an old man gasping for air, as a fish out of water. The atmosphere is baldly established: these are bodies trying to survive, captured in an ominous realm between life and death. Apart from Mr. Cabra, 33 years old, the patients exposed throughout the documentary are elderly. Their faces are thus closer to the index of dying that forms the core structure of the film, correspondingly linking the film viewer to cinematic politics of the feeling. About the human face, Alphonso Lingis writes:

It is peculiarly on faces that death is visible. To look upon faces is to look upon expression, moods, attitudes, solicitations. When this vibrancy and volatility is effaced by death, the face is vacant and desolate, as the surfaces of things cannot be. To look upon faces is always to sense this death that is latent, visible in the frail freshness of youth, the wrinkles of age.⁶²

Mouths breathing heavily, wrinkled skin, dark circles under the eyes, matted hair, scared eyes wide open: mortal faces covered in tubes, oxygen masks and nasal cannulas, half-awake under death as a hovering imminent menace. I argue that the face is the source of expressive recognition, a map of the sensible that grasps an emotional cartography and the coordinates of the self. The work of an artist as Francis Bacon – for example, in *Three Studies For a Portrait of Lucian Freud* – is imperative in order to underline the significance of the human face: when confronting a distorted, disfigured face, we lose the matching signs towards identification and the correspondences to selfhood’s performativity, stepping into the dimension of the unrecognizable and into a certain kind of void.

Elizabeth Cowie affirms that “through the other’s face I become aware of a world experienced by the other.”⁶³ Considering that documentaries offer “mise-en-scènes of desire and of imagining that enable identification even while, or rather because, it asserts itself as real,”⁶⁴ one might affirm that the faces of Wiseman’s film enclose our own doubts and anxieties regarding the proximity of the irrevocable moment of death. There is, undeniably, an innate “desire for knowledge, a wish to know, founded in the wish to know the desire of the other.”⁶⁵ In other words: What is inside the mind of the other? How does he/she experience, feel and think of the world? When does one’s desires and fears match my own? If I believe in film phenomenology as a way to end monopolarity, it is because I consider these questions to be the central key to stimulate and enhance our perceptual modalities, activating self-awareness towards the other and, subsequently, towards selfhood.

Following a parallel line of thought, Margaret Gibson says that we live with the knowledge that we are going to die, living this

⁶¹ William F. May, “The Sacral Power of Death in Contemporary Experience,” *Death in American Experience*, ed. Arien Mack (New York: Schocken Books, 1973), 116.

⁶² Alphonso Lingis, *Foreign Bodies* (London: Routledge, 1994), 167.

⁶³ Elizabeth Cowie, “Documentary Desire: Seeing For Ourselves and Identifying in Reality”, *Recording Reality, Desiring the Real* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 92.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 87.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 89.

knowing through the face of the others. Faces that work as an expressive diagram where, according to Gibson, character is formed and performed, fading and dissolving.⁶⁶ Borrowing Alphonso Lingis's title to describe the cinematic death scene – or, as she affirms, unscene – as an hectic moment which brings together “a community of those who have nothing in common,”⁶⁷ Gibson emphasizes that “representations of death may be experienced in a profound and moving way that fleetingly unites emotionally disconnected strangers and separate consciousnesses.”⁶⁸ Even though I have defended previously a film viewer's cognition linked to one's subjective schemata, I argue that death as an indexically real screen event, as an exceptional and unequal phenomenon, can trigger new layers of perception and intersubjectivity, defying pre-established sensitivities and emotional hierarchies.

Despite the slow deterioration of the dying body, what is represented in *Near Death* are human figures possessing a physicality corresponding to my own. Sobchack reminds us, ultimately, that “the act of seeing also suggests that the source of its activity shares a material equivalence with that which appears to it in the world it presents.”⁶⁹ In that sense, dying as a screen event is capable of bedevilling and generating a deceptive effect of disembodiment, which is, on the contrary, a more authentic acknowledgement of one's own body.

The dying bodies of *Near Death* generate a poignant and paradoxical face-to-face encounter. On the one hand, we know the person within the body is still conscious, capable of producing erratic gestures and sounds linked to the natural attitude of the human behaviour. On the other hand, what we see are limited bodies, prisons, deteriorating involucres. The reversibility process defined by Sobchack is here emphatically functional regarding immovability: seeing the dying produces no movement on the viewer; hearing the dying produces no sound. The embodied nature of film experience unlocks corresponding poses.

In other words, more accurately the ones of Francesco Casetti regarding the filmic experience, the subject of mortality as a truthful happening within documentary can create something more than just reception, interpretation or consumption, but “a situation which combines sensory or cognitive ‘excess’ (there is something that touches or addresses us, outside the taken-for-granted) to the ‘recognition’ of what we are exposed to and the fact that we are exposed to it (a recognition which makes us redefine ourselves and our surroundings).”⁷⁰

Even though Gilles Deleuze affirms that “phenomenology is right in assuming that natural perception and cinematographic

⁶⁶ Margaret Gibson, “Death Scenes: Ethics of the Face and Cinematic Deaths”, *Mortality*, vol. 6, No. 3 (2001), 307.

⁶⁷ Alphonso Lingis, *The community of those who have nothing in common*, (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1994).

⁶⁸ Gibson, “Death Scenes: Ethics of the Face and Cinematic Deaths”, 311.

⁶⁹ Sobchack, *The Address of the Eye*, 133.

⁷⁰ Francesco Casetti, “Filmic Experience”, *Screen*, 50, 1 (Spring 2009), 6.

perception are qualitatively different,”⁷¹ positioning himself on the other side of phenomenology and understanding the cinematic form as a machine substantially dissimilar from the human mind, I argue that his concept of affection-image is intrinsically related to the essence of our interaction with the lived world, which film phenomenology continuously attempts to evoke and describe. Furthermore, when Deleuze affirms that “the affection-image is the close-up, and the close-up is the face,” a film such as *Near Death* seems to entail new impressions. Being the affection-image defined as “both a type of image and a component of all images”, a “reflecting and reflected unity,”⁷² Sobchack’s binary configuration of the I/eye of the film and the I/eye of the film viewer arises instantaneously in our mind. What seems to be at stake is, ultimately, this reversibility process of seeing what I am and being what I see that the filmic form seems to allow.

Considering the face as the centre of the expressed and the close-up as having an effective reading of the whole film, Deleuze declares that we can ask two questions to the face: what are you thinking about and what do you sense or feel? In fact, throughout *Near Death*, those questions are literally posed to the patients: “Can you hear me?”; “How are you feeling today?”; “What do you think?”; “What is your sense of what is going on?”. Questions that cross the screen and rebound within an active film viewer, ambiguously transferred to those hospital’s beds and corridors.

What ensues when we observe a close-up within a film? According to Balázs, as interpreted by Deleuze, it abstracts us from all spatial-temporal coordinates and raises a state of Entity, a feeling-thing. The close-up does not operate as enlargement and, if it indicates a variation of dimension, this is a complete transformation: a mutation of movement that stops being translation and becomes expression.⁷³ In order to define what creates an affection-image, Deleuze evokes C. S. Peirce’s classification of images and signs, distinguishing two categories: Firstness and Secondness. Secondness encompasses all the images that have a relation to a second, a realm of the real and of the existing that contains everything which only exists by opposition and duel: exertion-resistance, action-reaction; excitation-response; situation-behavior, individual-milieu, etc.; whereas images categorized within Firstness, defined by Deleuze as pure definitions of what an affection-image is, would *be felt rather than conceived*, connected to a new and fresh experience, *fleeting and nevertheless eternal*. This is, their innate qualities are considered for themselves, without references to anything else and composing an immediate consciousness.⁷⁴

⁷¹ Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*, trans., Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 2.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 87.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 96.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 98.



Fig. 4 – Close-ups of dying, *Near Death* (Frederick Wiseman, 1989)

I argue that the close-up of the dying body can inherently grasp Peirce's definition of Firstness and Deleuze's delineation of affection-image, capturing the dreadfulness beyond reason caused by the anticipation of mortality. Considering death, as defined by Emanuel Levinas, as "a departure toward the unknown, a departure without return, a departure 'with no forwarding address'," ⁷⁵ the film phenomenology of dying in documentary is always a relation without referents. Only possible towards fractional visible signs of dying inscribed in the lived-body, from violence to decay, and having its climax in the representability of the *falling body in between* worlds, our relation with the death of the other, as accentuated by Levinas, "is not a knowledge about the death of the other, nor a experience of that death in its particular way of annihilating being. (...) It is an emotion, a movement, a disquietude within the *unknown*." ⁷⁶ The documentary image of dying, and particularly the close-up of its indexical veracity, is a portal amid worlds, a passageway to a dimension of immaterialities without any specific space-time coordinates, concomitantly linked to the materiality and emotional authenticity of the lived-world. The dying body is, ultimately, the utmost *new world*, simultaneously grasping and escaping the *yet to live* that constitutes our reduced sense of future.

2.3 DYING VOICES

"The dying die not so much in loneliness, as in silence" ⁷⁷

Zygmunt Bauman

WHEELED STRETCHERS being pushed across the hospital's corridors, telephones ringing, fast-paced steps, computers' keyboards, drawers being open and closed, papers being signed, televisions, machines, ventilators. There seems to exist a permanent background noise, on and offscreen, invading and infecting the framings of *Near Death*.

However, as explained by Michel Chion in *The Voice of Cinema*, it is the human voice that "hierarchizes everything around it," ⁷⁸ through a presence that structures the auditory space where it is heard. In order to further describe it, Don Ihde, in *Listening and Voice: Phenomenologies of the Sound*, defines the voice as a central phenomenon for the human being: "It bears our language without which we would perceive differently. Yet outward from this centre, voice may also be a perspective, a metaphor, by which we understand part of the world itself. For metaphor is to language what perspective is to perception, and both are integral to the way in which we experience things." ⁷⁹ The human voice of *Near Death* departs from distinctive human sources, from the patients and their relatives to the hospital staff, always entailing as many tones and qualities as the possibly matching interactions (patient/family, patient/doctor, doctor/doctor etc.).

⁷⁵ Emmanuel Levinas, *God, Death, and Time*, trans., Bettina Bergo (Stanford California: Stanford University Press, 2000), 9.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁷⁷ Bauman, *Mortality, Immortality & Other Life Strategies*, 131.

⁷⁸ Michel Chion, *The Voice in Cinema* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 6.

⁷⁹ Don Ihde, *Listening and Voice: Phenomenologies of Sound* (State University of New York, 2007), 189.

If in the vast majority of documentary films the human voice belongs to the testimonial face or to the narrator, privileging the word and speech, *Near Death* appears to be edified under the non-figurative human sounds of the terminally ill patients: coughing, sighs, groans, moans, voices dulled by the face masks, gasps, trembled breaths, intangible whimpers, lingering silences. Since Wiseman's documentary is intrinsically linked to the subject of the dying, establishing it from the very beginning, all of these sounds produced by the human voice take us to larger impressions regarding the bodies that emanate them, from pain to mental confusion. Having in mind the framework of the fictive form, here readapted to the documentary film, Barbara Flueckiger writes that "breathing and heartbeats (...) represent automatic bodily functions, without which no life is possible. They thus indicate not only nearness but (...) life as a value to be protected and as the opposite to death."⁸⁰

The speeches of the patients, most of the times inconsistent or close to nonsense, juxtapose with an attempt of objectivity, monotony and solid limpness of the words proffered by the nurses and doctors. One of the leading cinematic strengths of Wiseman's work is the opportunity to follow the speeches and interactions between people, if not entirely, at least to a large extent. From a phenomenological perspective of the events, the duration aspects of the film, by allowing us to observe and listen to a conjectural whole, reduce any sense of manipulation and contribute to an informed and direct interpretation between the said and the unsaid of the body language.

"What is it to listen *phenomenologically*? It is more that an intense and concentrated attention to sound and listening, it is also to be aware in the process of the pervasiveness of certain 'beliefs' that intrude into my attempt to listen 'to the things themselves'."⁸¹ Things essentially related, in the case of *Near Death*, to the radical dichotomy of life and death. Ultimately, to listen to Wiseman's film is also to listen to the asynchronies and contradictions between the voices and the bodies, which only seem to find consonance with a collective and external countenance of doubt. The prolonged silences and anguished hesitations seem to constitute the core sensorial engine that more sharply communicates the agonizing inner lives to the film viewer. The voice that cannot express, the silent scream, the sound made mute by the same body that is trying to produce it: these are the true echoes of the dying body. And, as reminded by Don Ihde, "with the experience of echo, auditory space is opened up."⁸²

⁸⁰ Barbara Flueckiger, "Sound Effects: Strategies for Sound Effects in Film", *Sound and Music in Film and Visual Media: A Critical Overview*, ed. Graeme Harper, Ruth Doughty and Jochen Eisentraut (New York and London: Continuum, 2009), 176.

⁸¹ Don Ihde, *Listening and Voice: Phenomenologies of Sound*, 49.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 69.

2.4 THE UNFOLDING OF THE LANDSCAPES



Fig. 5 – Against the stream, *Near Death* (Frederick Wiseman, 1989)

IN THE FIRST FRAMINGS of *Near Death*, with the city's skyline at the distance, a group of people inside a racing shell rows against the stream of Charles River. Silently, through two beautiful black-and-white shots, a cinematic idea is already established: Wiseman's documentary film is linked to a notion of time separated from everyday life – even though it is based, theoretically, on the hospital's quotidian. The wheeled stretchers of Boston's Beth Israel Hospital, as the racing shells, are transports that do not obey the time of the downstream, but rather challenge any natural linearity regarding the flow of time. Nonetheless, we should allow Maurice Merleau-Ponty to elegantly deconstruct the poetic association between water streams and life's temporality:

We say that time passes by or flows by. (...) If time is like a river, then it runs from the past toward the present and future. (...) But this famous metaphor is in fact quite confused. (...) Time presupposes a view upon time. Thus, time is not a like a stream; time is not a fluid substance. (...) The past does not drive the present into being, nor does the present drive the future into being; the future is not prepared behind the observer, it is planned out in front of him, like the storm on the horizon. If the observer is now placed in a boat and follows the current, it can certainly be said that he descends with it toward his future, but the future is in those new landscapes that await him at the estuary, and the flow of time is no longer the stream itself, but is rather the unfolding of the landscapes for the moving observer.⁸³

The unfolding of the landscapes, this is, the incessant and inexorable line of events that constitute life, between problem-solving and interactivity, between mapping out and aleatoric occurrence. We are simultaneously dragged by the course of the actions and attracted by the line of the horizon. Any stream is, in that sense, innate to our bodies, entailing concomitantly magnetism and deterministic movement. According to Ponty, "even if we in fact represent the future to ourselves with the help of what we have already seen, it remains the case that, in order to project it in front of us, we must first have the sense of the future."⁸⁴ I argue that the only possible sense of

⁸³ Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 472-473.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 436.

prospection can advent, not from a knowledge, experience or imagined sensation towards death, but from a recognition of our own mortality as the ultimate rite of passage, as a visible transformation from being to non-being, as a fall, from the highest mountain, into a misty void. In any case, it is a passage that seems to entail a struggle or a violent movement. As Jean Mitry writes, “the flow of time is not similar to the uniform continuity of a river. It is more close to a current where the constantly dispersed water wrestles against the rocks or retire in cascades.”⁸⁵ As much as we have the vehement impulse for survival, we carry, within our bodies, the intuition of death.

As Malin Wahlberg reminds us, “the philosophy of time is intrinsically related to and even propelled by human’s awareness of his or her death. The inevitable limitation of biographical time and the natural yet enigmatic transformation of life to death are problems that have always been pivotal in human’s reflection on time.”⁸⁶ The film phenomenology of dying in *Near Death* brings us close to the line of the horizon announcing the irrevocable moment of death, allowing us to watch closer and reminding us that we carry within a permanently violent state of alarm. I believe personal considerations on death and temporality can be metamorphosed, ultimately, into the two most radical questions, always intimate, always linked to subjective human signification: What is worth living for? What is worth dying for?

2.5 EMBODIED DURATION

“Death: a mortality as demanded by the duration of time”⁸⁷

Emmanuel Levinas

IN *The Emergence of Cinematic Time: Modernity, Contingency, the Archive*, Mary Ann Doane writes that “while photography could fix a moment, the cinema made archivable duration itself. In that sense, it was perceived as a prophylactic against death, ensuring the ability to ‘see one’s loved ones’ gesture and smile long after their deaths. What was registered on film was life itself in all its multiplicity, diversity, and contingency,” adding that film was understood as “an imprint of time itself (...), a time unharnessed from rationalization, a nonteleological time in which each moment can produce the unexpected, the unpredictable, and temporality ratifies indeterminacy.”⁸⁸ In fact, *Near Death* works, more than a register of the time of death (the line of the horizon), as an aesthetic experience of dying (the unfolding of the landscapes). The dying person, still enclosing the volatile and unforeseeable movements that only life entails, is challenged by an irreversible event that, despite its expected propinquity, cannot be accurately anticipated in time.

I argue that Wiseman’s documentary is a film of resistance in enduring expansion. In a Western world that continuously attempts to eradicate the concept of time, helped by the incessant torrent of production and

⁸⁵ Jean Mitry, “Des quelques notions de temps”, *Esthétiques et Psychologie du Cinéma 2. Les forms* (Paris: Éditions universitaires, 1965), 259: “Le cours du temps n’est pas semblable à celui, uniformément continu, d’un fleuve. Il ressemble bien davantage à celui d’un torrent où l’eau, constamment dispersée, butte contre les pierres ou se repend en cascades.”

⁸⁶ Wahlberg, *Documentary Time: Film and Phenomenology*, 44-45.

⁸⁷ Levinas, *God, Death, and Time*, 15.

⁸⁸ Doane, *The Emergence of Cinematic Time: Modernity, Contingency, The Archive*, 22.

immortality promoted by economical and socio-political systems, a film such as *Near Death* forces the film viewer to interrupt his or her human march among the crowd, looking attentively and considerately at the other and at himself or herself while reorganising inner responses to the core question of limited time. In several framings of the documentary, the doctors are framed with a clock behind their backs, revealing a time that never stops running. Instead of an obliteration of the passing time, the time is lived, subsisted, embodied by the film viewer and felt in its unbearable heaviness and density, a weight directly proportional to the denial of the subject of death.



Fig. 6 – Clocks, *Near Death* (Frederick Wiseman, 1989)

Doane affirms that “death is perhaps the ultimate trauma insofar as it is situated as that which is unassimilable to meaning,”⁸⁹ concluding that temporality “became the site of the critical control and regulation of cinematic meaning.”⁹⁰ Considering Wiseman’s decision to respect approximately the original duration of the events, and even aware that every cut or sequentiality departs us from any fundamentalist realism regarding the length of time, I argue that a conscious lack of the need to substantialize filmic time dimensions and consequent fluidity produces a double effect. On the one hand, it destroys and degrades meaning as imposed by autocratic, overthought and overworked structures. On the other hand, almost contradictorily, it offers the (im)possibility of meaning to the film viewer, orderly looking, seeing and discerning – by this order and not another – enforced by time duration to contemplate and perceive the unfolding of the landscapes from as many angles as possible. As Merleau-Ponty affirms, regarding spatial and temporal perspectives while observing a neighbouring house: “If I examine the house attentively and unreflectively, it seems eternal, and a sort of wonder emanates from it.”⁹¹ Embodying the real-time of the dying process can, as with the neighbouring house, generate new effects beyond the physical identification of a first glance.

Following that line of thought, Ponty affirms that analysing time “is not to draw out the consequences of a preestablished conception of subjectivity, but rather to gain access to its concrete structure through time. If we succeed in understanding the subject, this will not be in its pure form, but rather by looking for the subject at the intersection of its various dimensions.”⁹² Only by feeling time’s passage and duration becomes possible to map out the ways

⁸⁹ Ibid., 163.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 171.

⁹¹ Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 71.

⁹² Ibid., 472.

it unfolds the world around us. *Near Death* locates the film viewer inside the hospital as a place where time is occupied exhaustively in an attempt of recognition and self-reflection. Several framings in between the extensive dialogues show precisely the long waitings in the hospital's corridors or rooms, the sighs, the suggested inner thoughts of the human figures, transferring subjectively the film viewer into the eyes of the other, and vice-versa. On the surface, moments where nothing happens, wasted times, dead times. Nonetheless, a context infected by a time of self-awareness towards mortality cannot be an empty time. The time of dying is never a dead time.

It is imperative to consider film editing as shaper of time duration, since the *durée* of a film never exists *per se*, being rather the result of several criteria and lines of thought. If we manage to observe carefully the human verve inside Boston's Best Israel Hospital Medical Intensive Care Unit, it is also due to the decisions in the editing room. Considering that the point of view of the film director must be taken into account when evaluating the reversibility process of cinematic experience and subsequential search for the genesis of the moving-image, we should include Wiseman as the most relevant mediator, between the act of filming and the act of montage:

That is my job as the editor. So much of film editing – or at least editing these kinds of documentaries – has absolutely nothing to do with technical issues. It has to do with identifying to yourself what you think is happening in the rushes. (...) At least fifty percent of editing my films has to do with an attempt at an analysis of human behavior. The basic question is “Why?” Why does somebody ask for a cigarette at a given moment? Is there an explanation for the choice of one word rather than another? What's the significance of the dress that a woman is wearing? (...) Why does someone pause in mid sentence? Is there an explanation for a change of tone? I mean, these are the kind of evaluations one is always making in ordinary experience when you meet people.⁹³

It is through the editing that Frederick Wiseman finds, ultimately, the inner rhythm of the filmed spaces and of the people who inhabit them, posing himself the same questions that interest us in existential phenomenology, from an interrogative pose to immediate consciousness, from human experience to the visible signs of identification. Wahlberg affirms that a “real-time approximation may be a suitable term for the frame-breaking effect caused by a take whose length matches the duration of the filmed event. It, however, has less to do with the static camera or the long take as such, than with the relative signification of cinematic duration: the various expressive functions and psychological effects that figures of extended time may have in film.”⁹⁴ In fact, the intense effect of *Near Death*'s long takes never generates a metafilmic approach or self-reflexivity towards the cinematic apparatus and its length, rather creating a profound immersion derived from the ambiguities of the subject of death and the contradictions of the dying body, as an always incomplete puzzle from which we demand final and definite solutions. It is not the impossibility of an answer but our corresponding rejection of that impossibility, as beings with an inborn desire for knowledge and enlightenment, what sustains our engagement through time, together with our insatiable longing for movement and transformation.

⁹³ Daniel J. Scott, “An Interview with Frederick Wiseman”, *Filmmaker Magazine* (January 10, 2012): <http://filmmakermagazine.com/37042-an-interview-with-frederick-wiseman/#.VShLIbrHhYs> (accessed May 25, 2015).

⁹⁴ Wahlberg, *Documentary Time: Film and Phenomenology*, 93.

Many films have experimented the passing of time within the screen, from *Sleep* (Andy Warhol, 1963), following a man, John Giorno, sleeping for six hours, to the most recent *The Clock* (Christian Marclay, 2010), an art video installation constructed from thousands of time-related scenes from films and television shows, edited to be shown in real-time throughout the 24 hours of a day. The time duration of *Near Death*, extensive in its internal sequences and as a whole, ushers in a sense of voyeurism, especially considering dying as a neglected an unseen image in modern societies. If any critique can be made towards our connection with Wiseman's film, it is precisely around the pitfalls derived from the sense of observation, dissimilar from personal interaction and creator of an unresolved distance, innate to a technological mediated consciousness of the experience.

In the relation between the phenomenology of dying as a documentary event and the phenomenology of time consciousness, time duration plays a central role. When contemplating the gestures and inscriptions of dying in front of the camera, I become closer to emotional authenticity and consciousness of experience. In fact, from the protracted length of the filmic form, our involvement in confronting mortality can transcend the initial visceral shock, becoming recognition and pattern and familiarizing us with death. This happens through a gradual withdrawing of all the symbols that cover death, already impregnated with social constructions, external pressures and a horror that is, to a large extent, produced by the collective, by the force of the crowd. Ponty writes that "it is by living my time that I can understand other times."⁹⁵ I argue that, departing from the reversibility of the I/eye of the screen and the I/eye of the film viewer, the opposite is also true. It is through attentive surveillance of the time of the other and the time of individual dying that I can, ultimately, become closer to the limited duration of the body I inhabit.

2.6 PRESENTIFICATION OF TIME AND SISYPHIC GESTURE

WHEN I READ a newspaper article about the crash of an airplane stating that all the 150 passengers were killed, I respond to the gruesome incident, reacting physically and emotionally to the initial shock and unimaginable suffering of those who died and of those who are grieving. Nonetheless, this response is constituted by second-hand feelings, projecting my own fears without truly witnessing or experiencing them in first person. What happens is an open precedent, a referent that was presented to me in its veracious indexicality, and that therefore can be transferred to my own body and lived by it as a possible and arbitrary unknown, starting in the present and being extended to any time onwards from now. After the initial shock of the fact, the event becomes, through time, distant, forgetful, as far away as the physical distance I had from it when it happened. However, if I witness a man hit abruptly by a car while I cross a street, if I see it *with my own eyes* and share the same space-time coordinates, if the man dies *in front of me*, this experience will become literally crusted on me, breaking my perception of the lived-body, producing a tormenting effect beyond the shock and, consequently, echoing as a trauma. The idea that that man could have been me becomes stronger, together with the perception that my body weathered the storm for some reason that exceeds my rationality and acknowledgements. Death is no longer a hidden possibility that waits in the dark but a certainty in the daylight, burning as the sun of the noon in a

⁹⁵ Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 482.

tropical country. When death happens in front of me, in present time, it grasps haptic powers – *it touches me*.

According to Merleau-Ponty, “ultimate consciousness is the consciousness of the present”, since “in the present and in perception, my being and my consciousness are one.” Considering that “we hold time in its entirety and we are present to ourselves because we are present in and toward the world,” Ponty opens the possibility for a self-awareness of the film viewer within confrontation with the film form, since it is always primarily in the present that this immediate and rough relation is constituted.⁹⁶ As affirmed by Christian Metz, “the spectator always sees movement as being present (even if it duplicates past movement).”⁹⁷ The dying body of *Near Death*, due the infinite possibilities of its reproduction, is always a body in the present, eternally condemned to many deaths.

In Greek mythology, Sisyphus, King of Ephyra, is compelled to roll a giant boulder up a steep hill as a punishment. Every time Sisyphus arrived to the top of the hill, he observed the boulder rolling down, doomed to repeat his action for all eternity. The core structure of *Near Death* seems to grasp a Sisyphic gesture, depicting death as a never-ending circle and the task of re-establishing life as an always-incomplete action within the hospital’s corridors.

At intervals of approximately two hours, we return to the external world – to the movements and lights of the city, the dichotomy of day and night, the quotidian life where people exist without interruptions and cars come and go in the streets – in order to repeat, once again, a zoom-in toward Beth Israel’s Hospital. In one of the last framings of the documentary, a car carrying a lifeless body from the hospital’s morgue departs from the institution. The funerary car, which will soon be in the streets alongside the other cars crossing the city, works as a reminder of death as an insider hidden in every day’s chaos. The Sisyphic gesture of Wiseman’s film transports the boulder to the hands of an active film viewer, continuously designed to find, in vain, a closure or a visible sign of the moment of transformation from being to nonbeing. Death, as an invisible and unsparing villain, cannot be interrupted. In *Near Death*, the end has no end.

Vivian Sobchack affirms, following that line of thought, that “the classic ‘proof’ of the excess of death over its indexical representation was the fascination exerted by the Zapruder film of Jonh Kennedy’s assassination; played again and again, slowed down, stopped frame by frame, the momentum of death escaped each moment of its representation.”⁹⁸ The depiction of death within documentary entails, therefore, the possibility to infinitely reproduce and observe the indefinable passage from one state to the other while, at the same time, grasping tightly the exasperating impossibility to *truly* see it.

In *Death Every Afternoon*, André Bazin discusses *The Bullfight* (*La Course de Taureaux*, Pierre Braunberger, 1949) in the light of the limitless reproduction of the filmic register of death, “surely one of those rare events that justifies the term (...) *cinematic specificity*”:

⁹⁶ Ibid., 487.

⁹⁷ Christian Metz, *Film Language: A Semiotics of the Cinema*, trans., Michael Taylor (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 1974), 8.

⁹⁸ Sobchack, “Inscribing Ethical Space: Ten Propositions on Death, Representation and Documentary”, 287.

I cannot repeat a single moment of my life, but cinema can repeat any one of these moments indefinitely before my eyes. If it is true that for consciousness no moment is equal to any other, there is one on which this fundamental difference converges, and that is the moment of death. For every creature, death is the unique moment par excellence. The qualitative time of life is retroactively defined in relation to it. It marks the frontier between the duration of consciousness and the objective time of things. Death is nothing but one moment after another, but it is the last.⁹⁹

Considering *The Bullfight* as a film of profound physical realism, in which the editing creates an undeviating state of alarm and where mortality is always at stake, Bazin describes the sense of substantiality proposed by those moving-images: “I have never been to a bullfight, and it would be ridiculous of me to claim that the film lets me feel the same emotions, but I do claim that it gives me its essential quality, its metaphysical kernel: death.”¹⁰⁰ As Adam Lowenstein affirms, filmic time as understood by Bazin makes the instant of death recordable and rethinkable when welcoming the conversion from *subjective consciousness* to *objective thingness*.¹⁰¹ In Braunberger’s footage, organized between the documentary and the film-essay, a toreador called Manolette dies in the bullring. For Bazin, this representation of a real death is both a metaphysical obscenity – since “we do not die twice” – and a material eternity – since, “on the screen, the toreador dies every afternoon.”¹⁰²

In *Near Death*, where the narrative always begins *in medias res*, the (in)visible deaths in front of our eyes can also be repeated incessantly, reiterated, operating as an unpolluted *memento mori*. Filmic form always had, ultimately, the capability to imprint its own ghosts, protecting the fleeting from its own temporal status and living side by side with resurrection. Throughout time, Wiseman’s dying bodies will undeniably live many deaths. ■

⁹⁹ Bazin, “Death Every Afternoon”, 30.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 29.

¹⁰¹ Adam Lowenstein, *Dreaming of Cinema: Spectatorship, Surrealism, and the Age of Digital Media* (Columbia University Press, 2015), 136.

¹⁰² Bazin, “Death Every Afternoon”, 30-31.

Chapter 3

Remind me (of our limited time)

3.1 REMIND ME



Fig. 7 - Between life and death, *Near Death* (Frederick Wiseman, 1989)

IN *Technologies of the Self*, regarding the motifs of confession, purification and the adjustments between desire and action, Michel Foucault mentions Seneca, affirming that for him it was not "a question of discovering the truth in the subject but of remembering truth, recovering a truth which has been forgotten."¹⁰⁴ Hence, it is not unintended that, in his analysis of Plato's *Alcibiades*, when discussing the care of the self, Foucault mentions "a notion of a happy proximity to death – of old as a completion" emerging as an "inversion of the traditional Greek values on youth."¹⁰⁵ Besides opening the possibility of a relation towards death less progressive than cyclical, Foucault's words underline mortality as an already inscribed and embodied notion within one's body, existing between renunciation and the permanent possibility of remembrance.

When previously discussing my fascination for film phenomenology, I have mentioned the supposition *remind me* as an oblivious request from the film viewer regarding his or her own mortality; a contract having as the main goal a rediscovery of the already known, standing between the wish to know and the fear of any potential truth concerning the end of the lived-world. When positioned on the context of indexicality, this is, of death and dying as authentic filmic events, the film viewer invites the memory of previous recognitions, unlocked since the first open precedent of a real death.

Remind me. Remind me that, like the others, I am also going to die. Remind me of my biographical limits, of my corporal restrictions, of my transient signs and finite being. It is an existential invocation what is here at stake, when I attempt to put myself in the eyes of the other, in the eyes of the screen and, through them, struggle to see my own death. It is a movement that departs and ends in my body but needs necessarily, as a mediator, the dying body of the other, but also the film screen in which it is presented and represented. As affirmed by Sobchack, the screen constitutes also the expression of a personal and finite temporal existence, centring the *discrete, discontinuous* and *de-centred* experience of consciousness.¹⁰⁶ Moreover, if assuming Ponty is correct when sustaining that "consciousness is originally not an 'I think that' but rather an 'I can'"¹⁰⁷, *I can die* would be the logical assumption of a phenomenology of dying.

During a person's lifetime there are as many potentialities as the human experience allows. One can fall in love, travel to a new country or develop an incurable disease. Death, nonetheless, is more than a possibility. As defined by Martin Heidegger, it is a certain possibility. Through a film such as *Near Death*, it becomes clear, as Heidegger claims in *Being and Time*, that "one experiences daily 'the dying' of others", being death feasible to define as "an undeniable 'fact of experience'".¹⁰⁸ I argue that the indexicality of the screen

¹⁰³ Jacques Derrida, *Aporias: Dying—Awaiting (One Another at), the "Limits of Truth"*, trans. Thomas Dutoit (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1993), 21.

¹⁰⁴ Michel Foucault, "Technologies of the Self", *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault*, ed. Luther H. Martin, Huck Gutman and Patrick H. Hutton (University of Massachusetts Press, 1988), 34.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 31.

¹⁰⁶ Sobchack, *The Address of the Eye*, 210.

¹⁰⁷ Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 139.

¹⁰⁸ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans., Joan Stambaugh (State University of New York Press, 1996), 257.

event helps the experience of death metamorphosing into facticity, as living evidence and impression. Boaz Hagin, defending that it is indexicality what makes films unique traces of the registered objects and subjects, affirms that the moving-image of a dying creature “could solicit, for example, the same or similar reactions, obligations, evasions, discomforts, frustrations, satisfactions, or thrills which encounters with unkeyed deaths in reality could stimulate”, since the film viewer becomes witness of death.¹⁰⁹

Nonetheless, the question remains: How can a phenomenological description based on my film viewing experience improve a general understanding of viewing and, particularly, improve an analysis of dying as a documentary film event? It is known that personal subjectivity is commonly stated as the main pitfall of semiotic phenomenology. I argue that it is, conversely, its best value. How? We should go back to a classical example, more specifically to *the Winter Garden photograph* found by Roland Barthes after his mother’s death while he was alone at her apartment. The *punctum*, even if defined by Barthes in *Camera Lucida* in association with photography, is a quality of certain images that can be applied to the filmic form. Considered a detail that paradoxically fills the whole image and a partial object with no preference for morality or good taste containing a continuous power of expansion, the *punctum* works as an image-affect that annihilates the medium and the sign in order to become the thing itself;¹¹⁰ an accident that pricks, but also bruises and is poignant.¹¹¹ It was in an old photograph of his mother taken when she was five years old, in 1898, together with her brother in a Winter Garden, that Barthes, while *looking for the truth of the face he loved*, found *the assertion of a gentleness* that characterized her pose.¹¹²

Barthes, who defended that the photographic image grasps the assumption *that has been*, this is, a paradoxical time where the already dead figures meet concomitantly the undeviating vertigo of the time defeated,¹¹³ wrote: “My grief wanted a just image, an image which would be both justice and accuracy: just an image, but a just image. Such, for me, was the Winter Garden Photograph. (...) It achieved for me, utopically, *the impossible science of the unique being*.” For Barthes, that photograph gave him *a sentiment as certain as remembrance*.¹¹⁴ Even though the Winter Garden Photograph is related to an already dead and intimate figure, to personal memory and imagination, what interests me is the binary recognition of “this person has been”/“this person will die”, also offered by the phenomenology of dying on the film screen. Neither of these premises refers to an abstract world beyond the rational, but to the lived-world we can understand. Until the present day I have also been, and in the present day I also recognise I will die, even if I do not consciously consent the latter.

As reminded by Liz Kotz, it is “a possible banal image, or even a gruesome one, that triggers a flood of memory, a spark of recognition, and a sense that something private and precious has been disclosed.”¹¹⁵ As affirmed by the

¹⁰⁹ Boaz Hagin, *Mortal Frames: Death and Its Meaning in Film* (Tel Aviv University, 2007), 145.

¹¹⁰ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans., Richard Howard (New York, NY: Hill & Wang, 1981), 43-45.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 27.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 67-69.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 96-97.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 70.

¹¹⁵ Liz Kotz, “Aesthetics of “Intimacy””, *The Passionate Camera: Photography and Bodies of Desire*, ed. Deborah Bright (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), 207.

author regarding Barthes's notions, the *punctum* cannot be the same for everyone, while the *studium* would be related to the coded, public and official meaning. Dying as a general and visible cinematic motif would therefore work as a *studium*, while somewhere within its signs and echoes of presence and absence can subsist the intimate *punctum*.

Even if we avoid thinking about death, it does not mean it is not there shaping our lives and ourselves. The supposition *remind me*, as I have argued previously, feeds itself on a sentiment as certain as remembrance provoked by the confrontation of the film viewer with the dying images represented on the screen. A memory of the death of the other as facticity, but also an anticipated memory based on my sense of prospection when regarding death as the line of the horizon. *Remind me* is less a labour than an inner process of putting myself in a state of labour, in a state of openness; it implies always a partial *forget me*: my signs, my biases, my overthought and biased codes in a world I see but I must learn to see. Such a concept does not move towards a consciousness outside the film viewer's personal schemata, but entails a limited and potential state of understanding, in between the unknown and the lived-world, where I become closer to the dying process. A state where I attentively, through an immersion mainly allowed by the core aesthetic structure of a film – in this case, of *Near Death* –, am able to see beyond the visible signs, recognizing the unsparing embodiment of death in my own existential dying body. Hence, the body of the film viewer enhances its dynamic qualities, "informed by its particular sensible experience and charged with its own intentional impetus."¹¹⁶ What is at stake is, ultimately, a recognition of the irreducibility of my limited body through the dying person I see on the screen.

How can the sentiment of Barthes, so intimately subjective and internal, be able to move me and be shared with me, a subject in the distance, son of another mother and another time? Because it inscribes my inner desire to find my own *punctum*, awakening my wish to find phenomenologically my own Winter Garden photographs – this is, the images where I can return to the essences, poses and emotional substantialities of the already known, forgotten along the way by the continuous shift of attention induced by the unfolding of the landscape. By sharing his intimate subjectivity, by communicating it to me, Barthes uses a phenomenological approach in order to influence my perceptual modalities and restructuring them. He allows a return to the self while prioritizing, rearranging and cultivating. Like my body, his body is part of the world while adding phenomenologically to the world. As concluded by Sobchack, "any objective description of the experience of the phenomena cannot be truly objective unless it also accommodates the subjective mode of that experience and addresses the life-world in which we live as sensible and significant beings."¹¹⁷

Remind me is, ultimately, an emphasis of dying as a documentary event as a technology of the memory and of the self, rigorous but unpredictable. It is not a recall of an experience or an activation of imagination as in Barthes's case, but a remembrance of death as facticity and inevitability: a return to the unique being which is also a return to its inexorable end.

Bruno Forte wrote that "in the centre of the beauty we proclaim there is a mystery of death, of silence, of absence, linked to the silenced word that dies during the night, buried on earth; not a silence full of love secrets, but a

¹¹⁶ Sobchack, *The Address of the Eye: A Phenomenology of Film Experience*, 305.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 308.

silence of absence, of distance, of emptiness in the abandonment.”¹¹⁸ I argue that the supposition *remind me*, applied to a documentary film as *Near Death*, works in the reverse way: from a centre of death towards the mystery of life. If my first reaction to the film is underpinned by the unbearable weight of those immobilized bodies, by my rejection to those faces and restrained gestures and sounds where I lose the emotional coordinates, it slowly evolves, accordingly to the passage from dying body to dying person, to some sort of search for the holdovers of life. My attention stops being focused on the emanation of death by the dying body, but in what still links that body to the lived-world. Furthermore, my ability to imagine those bodies throughout a life that converged there, in that hospital, is bigger than my prospection of the corpses they will become. Perhaps it is merely my own denial performing, but the immersion process I inhabit allows within myself a perceptual transformation towards dying after the initial visceral shock. There is never an acceptance – since we never abandon our unconscious belief in immortality – but it establishes the dawning of a complex compliance and acclimatization of dying as a process inscribed in the lived-world.

It is curious that, every time I watch *Near Death*, I feel as if I am holding my breath, surrounded by an ambient noise analogous to a colossal vacuum. I recognize it now: it is the feeling of being immersed under water, as an embryonic state of existence. As Ponty affirmed, “we will find the unity of phenomenology and its true sense in ourselves.”¹¹⁹ ■

¹¹⁸ Bruno Forte, “Bellezza Splendore del Vero. La Rivelazione della Bellezza che Salva”, ed. N. Valentini, *Cristianesimo e Bellezza. Tra Oriente e Occidente* (Milan, 2002), 55; my own translation from the Spanish translation made by Pedro Sánchez Rodríguez in *Dios, La Muerte y el Más Allá en Cine Contemporáneo* (PPC, 2007): “En el centro de la belleza que proclamamos está un misterio de muerte, de silencio, de ausencia, se trata de la palabra callada que muere en la noche, sepultada en la tierra; no de un silencio lleno de secretos de amor, sino de un silencio de ausencia, de distancia, del vacío en el abandono.”

¹¹⁹ Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 8.

Concluding Remarks

THE PURPOSE OF THIS THESIS was to rethink the complex and controversial question of dying as a documentary event, particularly having in mind the convergence between the phenomenology of death and image and the phenomenology of time consciousness. Departing from an idea of denial and deconstruction of death expanding in Western societies, and considering documentary films dealing with the subject of death and dying as provocative, immediately ethically charged and commonly overlooked by audiences, I have attempted to analyse some of their reverberating and reverberated aesthetics.

Defending a qualitative filmic analysis due the wide spectrum of the issue of mortality and to the incomparability of the world's multiple deaths, I have found in Frederick Wiseman's *Near Death* my main conceptual example, around which I developed on the cinematic perception and invoked affects of dying as a reminder of our own mortality. Considering the almost inexistent issue of *natural death* in documentary, I have defined the dying body represented in the film as a body *in between*, decoding it aesthetically while considering the implications of a phenomenological response to its visible signs. From the emotional cartography allowed by the close-up of face to the vacillating voices that cannot express, the dying bodies represented by Wiseman metamorphose into dying persons. What is at stake are figures in the transit between life and death and human portraits telling life-stories that cannot be reduced to their objectification, even if immobilized, restrained and deteriorated. The dying body of *Near Death* can be grasped, even more than a visible sign pointing towards the line of the horizon constituted by death, as an entity *in between* the visible and the invisible, linked to the unfolding of the landscapes, as Maurice Merleau-Ponty defines the flow of time for the moving observer.

Misleadingly located under the act of direct cinema, Wiseman is a true auteur, conscious of the confrontation of his camera with the unfolding events and defining *Near Death* both during the shooting and in the editing room. His measured cinematic strategies create an act of viewing beyond the voyeuristic attitude, locating us within the hospital as a microcosm of the impersonal while deconstructing it intelligently. Through several moments of human communication outside the triviality of the social and institutional interactions, Wiseman inhabits and shares a phenomenology of dying and of the behaviours of those involved in the process.

Having in mind the film form as an art of the external applying the reversibility process of *seeing* and *being seen* defended by Vivian Sobchack, I have established bridges between dying as represented on the screen and my emotional and intellectual responses as a film viewer. In indexicality I have found the keyword to define our relation when confronting the real process of dying as a documentary event, since it leads us to emotional authenticity and to a stimulating fascination towards the screen events, both distressing and attractive. It is indexicality what transforms the filmed subjects into unique traces, closer to a simulation of a real encounter with dying regarding the reactions of the spectator. Expressing anxieties and

desires, sheltered by a voyeuristic distance and stimulated by real-time contemplation, the film viewer is defined as a witness.

In *Near Death*, the embodied duration and presentification of *the time of dying* allow an informed and immersive acknowledgement of the film experience. The address of our eyes and ears are turned into a landscape and soundscape of the dying being that, by entailing existential contradictions and revealing to be simultaneously disquieting and appealing, creates an attentive, poignant and thrilling gaze. We are confronting, ultimately, a quotidian event that keeps continuously to be dragged to the shadows. For being edified upon a world of the unseen, upon an intimacy that is not commonly accessible or leaves visual traces, *Near Death* can be considered an urgent and remarkable example when considering the phenomenology of dying within the cinematic structure. It not only activates our limited sense of prospection as it evokes the doubts of our unavoidable fading from the lived-world.

By proposing a philosophical and suggestive conceptual proposition – *remind me* – I have attempted to define the open and personal contract between the body of the film viewer, the technological body of the screen and the framing of dying in documentary cinema. Linked to a remembrance both personal and collective, since death can link separate consciousnesses, *remind me* is a request connecting the indexical moving-images of death and dying with the concerns of existential phenomenology, which can therefore be readapted and updated through other filmic descriptions.

Perhaps the act of writing the present thesis was an effort to rethink my own inexorable mortality, an attempt of confronting it and interiorize it. Cinema always constituted the central platform through which I have found myself questioning the controversial question of death and image, between ghost stories and last gasps. In the unification of film and phenomenology I have discovered a way to theorize and share my inner concerns while describing a sociocultural existential matter. Ultimately, in a contemporary world denying and deconstructing death and dying, it is imperative to frame and embody the core question of our limited time. ■

Filmography

Act of Killing, The (Joshua Oppenheimer, 2012)
Act of Seeing With One's Own Eyes, The (Stan Brakhage, 1971)
Bridge, The (Eric Steel, 2006)
Bullfight, The (*La Course de Taureaux*, Pierre Braunberger, 1949)
Clock, The (Christian Marclay, 2010)
Crowd, The (King Vidor, 1928)
Dead, The (*Los Muertos*, Lisandro Alonso, 2004)
Grizzly Man (Werner Herzog, 2005)
How to Survive a Plague (David France, 2012)
Near Death (Frederick Wiseman, 1989)
Night and Fog (*Nuit et Bruillard*, Alain Resnais, 1955)
Of the Dead (*Des Morts*, Jean-Pol Ferbus, Dominique Garny, Thierry Zéno, 1979)
Rules of the Game, The (*La Règle du Jeu*, Jean Renoir, 1939)
Shoah (Claude Lanzmann, 1985)
Sleep (Andy Warhol, 1963)
United in Anger: A History of ACT UP (Jim Hubbard, 2013)
We Were Here (David Weissman, 2011)
What Now? Remind Me (*E Agora? Lembra-me*, Joaquim Pinto, 2013)

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THE END HAS NO END

FRAMING DEATH

AND THE PHENOMENOLOGY OF DYING
IN DOCUMENTARY CINEMA

CARLOS PEREIRA

In a world denying and deconstructing mortality, the intersection between the phenomenology of image and death and the phenomenology of time consciousness seems to call for new attention in contemporary media culture. The recurrent motif of death in fictive film narratives is opposed to its far more complex and controversial counterpart in documentary cinema. In documentary, the framing of death and dying is immediately ethically charged and the image of death tends to be socially defined as obscene. At the same time, indexical moving-images of death have throughout film history achieved significance as spectacular screen attractions, where the immanent voyeurism of the film experience is linked to an intricate fascination for the real.

Through dying as a documentary screen event, our perceptual modalities and self-awareness towards the inexorable end are at stake. Turning to the film *Near Death* (Frederick Wiseman, 1989) as a conceptual example, the present thesis will attempt to theorize the cinematic perception and invoked affects of dying as an immediate and visceral reminder of our limited time.