Death in Classic and Contemporary Film

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DEATH IN CLASSIC AND CONTEMPORARY FILM
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FADE TO BLACK

Edited by
Daniel Sullivan and Jeff Greenberg
I dedicate my efforts on this book to Leah. And to my family, as well as Kyle, Johannes, and Jeff. Finally, many thanks to all our excellent contributors.

—Daniel S.

To my parents Murray and Edie, whose love and effort got me to Penn, where I developed a love of both Hollywood classics and foreign films.

—Jeff G.
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## CONTENTS

*List of Illustrations*  
ix

1 Introduction: When the Lights Go Down  
*Daniel Sullivan and Jeff Greenberg*  
1

### Part I  Terror Management Theory and Film

2 A Terror Management Analysis of Films from Four Genres:  
*The Matrix, Life is Beautiful, Iron Man 2,* and *Ikiru*  
*Jeff Greenberg and Alisabeth Ayars*  
19

3 The End Is Near: Mortality Salience in Apocalyptic Films  
*Joel D. Lieberman and Mark Fergus*  
37

### Part II  Aspects of Death Denial in Individual Films and Genres

4 *Little Murders:* Cultural Animals in an Existential Age  
*Sheldon Solomon and Mark J. Landau*  
55

5 Icons of Stone and Steel: Death, Cinema, and the Future of Emotion  
*Jennifer L. McMahon*  
73

6 Consumed in the Act: *Grizzly Man* and *Frankenstein*  
*Kirby Farrell*  
91

7 Black Swan/White Swan: On Female Objectification, Creatureliness, and Death Denial  
*Jamie L. Goldenberg*  
105

8 Death, Wealth, and Guilt: An Analysis of *There Will Be Blood*  
*Daniel Sullivan*  
119
9 The Birth and Death of the Superhero Film
Sander L. Koole, Daniel Fockenberg, Mattie Tops, and Iris K. Schneider

Part III Directors Engaging with Death
10 Bergman and the Switching off of Lights
Peter Cowie
11 Kubrick and Death
Susan White
12 Haneke’s Amour and the Ethics of Dying
Ashbjørn Grønstad

Part IV The Prospect of Transcendence
13 Visions of Death: Native American Cinema and the Transformative Power of Death
Jennifer L. McMahon
14 From Despair and Fanaticism to Awe: A Posttraumatic Growth Perspective on Cinematic Horror
Kirk J. Schneider
15 Conclusion: Cinematic Death Benefits
Daniel Sullivan and Jeff Greenberg

Notes on Contributors
Film Title Index
Subject Index
ILLUSTRATIONS

2.1 Watanabe faces his mortality in Kurosawa’s *Ikiru* (1952) 33
3.1 Kee’s baby in the postapocalyptic world of *Children of Men* (2006) 42
7.1 Mirrors permeate Aronofsky’s *Black Swan* (2010) 114
8.1 The passage of time in *There Will Be Blood* (2007) 128
10.1 Borg’s dream in Bergman’s *Wild Strawberries* (1957) 159
14.1 Justine, Claire, and Leo in von Trier’s *Melancholia* (2011) 227
15.1 Rocky Sullivan faces death in *Angels with Dirty Faces* (1938) 234
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION: WHEN THE LIGHTS GO DOWN

Daniel Sullivan and Jeff Greenberg

From the corpses of the horror genre to the immortal machines of science fiction, from the philosophical dramas of Ingmar Bergman to the comedies of Woody Allen, from the hilarious morbidity of Weekend at Bernie’s and Death at a Funeral to the somber reflections of Dead Man Walking and The Sea Inside, images of death, dying, and immortality have crowded the reels of many of the best (and best-loved) films. Like literature before it, which was largely inaugurated with the Sumerian Epic of Gilgamesh—a story that focused on the problem of death and the human response of seeking immortality—cinema has maintained a strong and persistent focus on mortality throughout its comparatively shorter history. The fact that filmmakers have consistently chosen to approach the issue of human mortality in such diverse ways—and the fact that audiences have so often positively responded to their efforts—is a testament to the fact that human life is characterized by two particularly resonant psychological realities: the fear of death and the desire to overcome it. Mortality is a recurrent theme in films across genres, periods, nations, and directors, and the range of films dealing with this theme alone suggests that the link between death and cinema is deserving of sustained analysis.

The problem of mortality even plays a role in many films that are not blatantly centered around death. Indeed, philosophical and psychological perspectives suggest that the human desire to deny the reality of mortality is a unifying construct that can be used to understand the content of
films that do not explicitly emphasize death (e.g., Sullivan, Greenberg, & Landau, 2009). In addition, the very act of making movies and going to the cinema can be understood as a social psychological process of mass death denial: Filmmakers and actors hope that their work will make them “immortal,” preserved on celluloid and disc for generations to come (Cave, 2012). And audiences crowd darkened theaters to confront death-related thoughts in safety and over buttered popcorn (Yalom, 1989) while gaining a sense of their own life extended in time as they experience simulated days, weeks, and often years in the span of two hours (Grudin, 1982).

The current volume examines the role of death in films by considering how the knowledge of mortality and the ways people cope with it are represented in particular films and genres of film. The contributing authors illuminate in different ways how the topics of death and humanity’s psychological responses to death contribute to the cinematic medium, and how films provide insight into these existential concerns. Some analyze the role played by death in the narrative of a particular film, while others examine the theme as it manifests in a set of films, the work of a particular filmmaker, or whole genres. Some of the common questions and themes addressed in this book are as follows: How is death portrayed in certain films, and how does death influence the characters and narrative within the film? How do portrayals of death affect the audience watching particular films? How does the human motive to deny or transform the meaning of death manifests in film plots or genres?

This introduction will selectively survey some broad past theoretical and empirical perspectives within the social sciences and humanities that have explored the issue of cinematic death portrayals. Although the present volume is the first anthology of scholarly writings exclusively focused on the importance of death in cinema, there is an extensive, interdisciplinary literature that has either peripherally acknowledged this issue or explored closely related topics, in particular the issue of filmed violence. We will therefore provide a brief overview of these past scholarly approaches to the topic of death and films. In our next section, we present suggestions for going beyond a unidimensional approach to this topic by contextualizing the issue of death in films. Finally, we provide an outline of the present book, and anticipate some broad themes that will emerge across its chapters.

Three Past Approaches to Understanding Death in Films

As in most other areas of human culture, death has been an integral part of film narratives from the inception of the medium (Hankiss, 2001; Niemiec & Schulenberg, 2011). Clearly, at a basic technological level, cinema’s capacity
INTRODUCTION

for reproduction and preservation of lived experience represents an advance
in the generative quest of human culture to seek forms of immortality. How-
ever, beyond cinema’s technical contribution to culture’s ostensible
“conquering” of death, narrative cinema specifically often involves death as
a key plot element or device and provides culturally sanctioned frames for
making sense of this inevitable yet unfathomable experience. Indeed, many
scholars (e.g., Grønstad, 2008) have noted that the connection between
death and the medium of film may be particularly important because films
are uniquely positioned to both show death and explore the influence of the
threat of death to self and others in human experience. One examination of
popular US films suggested that a death-related sequence occurs every 7–8
minutes in the course of the average film (Schultz & Huet, 2000). Director
Andrei Tarkovsky (1986) went so far as to claim that the ultimate purpose
of a film should be “to prepare a person for death” (p. 43).

Despite these observations, surprisingly little prior film theory and
criticism have focused directly on the issue of death in films. Neverthe-
less, the issue of cinematic depictions of violence in general—that almost always
connotes violent death—has been debated at length in the literature. This
debate is illuminating in its own right, because it demonstrates that one
of the most common ways in which cinema depicts death is as violent
and “unnatural.” Cinema depicts death as alternately romantic, heroic,
unexpected, graphic, and terrible—but it only occasionally depicts it as
a prolonged and tedious experience, despite the fact that this seems to be
how death is actually experienced by many people (Thomson, 2000).

Much of the theory and criticism on violence and death in films
acknowledge this basic fantastic quality of most cinematic depictions of
death, and venture from this starting point into explorations of the pur-
pose and consequences of such portrayals. Past scholarly frameworks that
might be applied to understand the issue of death in films can be roughly
classified into three camps or “schools” (naturally, alternate organiza-
tional schemes are possible).

The “fantasy and catharsis” school. The broadest of the three approaches
described here include some of the earliest theoretical perspectives on
films. What these different perspectives share is an emphasis on one (or
both) of two ideas: (1) films represent the enactment of certain fantasies
individuals have, such as immortality in the case of cinematic death treat-
ments; and (2) films depict anxieties that are typically repressed—such as
death anxiety—and therefore allow for cathartic, safe, and vicarious expe-
riences of these anxieties. At a very general level, this school would include
theorists who have argued that the purpose of art in general and film in
particular is to provide an “otherworldly” aesthetic experience: a window
to an ideal world that resonates with and yet stands outside the vagaries of imperfect, mortal existence. Influential early theorists like Münsterberg (1916/2004) and filmmakers like Tarkovsky (1986) argued that narrative cinema, rather than depicting the world as it actually is, approximates the psychological experience of a coherent and meaningful reality, and can therefore satisfy a yearning for the Divine, that is, for a perfect and extraordinary world. On this view, good films rejuvenate our minds by temporarily offering an image of the mundane world and its realities—including the reality of death—that imbues those realities with transcendent meaning and significance.

More specifically, various perspectives focus on particular fantasies or manifestations of anxiety that films allegedly address or enact. In these ways, films allow both their creators and their audiences to work through particular psychological issues for which everyday life does not provide many avenues of safe confrontation. The most straightforward of such perspectives would be that which reinvents Aristotelian notions of catharsis for the cinematic age, suggesting that audiences flock to see violent murder on the screen in order to purge themselves of aggressive tendencies or fears, perhaps even of some primal death instinct. Although it does not appear to be the case that many theorists have ever actually wholeheartedly embraced this theory, policymakers and filmmakers (notably Peckinpah; Dukore, 1999) have certainly invoked it, and many scholars have presented straw-man versions of the catharsis hypothesis against which to contrast their own accounts.

Beyond a simple catharsis explanation, one elemental notion shared by many variants of the fantasy/catharsis perspective on the presence of death in films is that events like (other people’s) death are simultaneously attractive and repulsive. According to this thesis, fantasy and anxiety are often the same, wedded in a kind of captivating ambivalence. This idea is expressed in Kolnai’s (2004) classic writings on the emotion of disgust, and it forms the basis of H. P. Lovecraft’s (1973) theory of horror, which prioritizes the construct of “cosmic terror,” a psychological blend of anxious uncertainty, curiosity, and awe that we experience when supernatural events are fictitiously portrayed. Such perspectives are not so removed from Freud’s (1963) concept of the uncanny, which suggests that entities that are simultaneously familiar and unfamiliar are uniquely frightening. Combining these different strands offers the insight that humans have a complex psychological relationship to mortality, especially when violently inflicted. Death is known to all of us on some level and yet necessarily unknown in a fundamental way; it is intriguing and potentially awe-inspiring, yet also something we supremely dread. Fantasy/catharsis
perspectives tend to imply that films permit exploration of these issues at a distance, thereby satisfying our morbid curiosities.

At a slightly higher level of complexity, theorists have put forward specific species or patterns of socially prominent anxiety and fantasy that films address. Many of these fantasies and anxieties are readily interpretable as desires to gain immortality and to avoid mortality. Wood (1979) classically put forward the formula “normality is threatened by the monster” to classify how different cycles of horror films give voice to changing social anxieties, while consistently constituting a creative process of the “return of the repressed.” The repressed anxiety that emerges more unwaveringly than any other is that of death. The “Other” that brings death may change with social norms—from Eastern European vampire to interstellar insect, from Soviet thug to Arab terrorist—but the threat of death always accompanies it. Similarly, a whole subset of the fantasy/catharsis school, derived from the writings of anthropologist Mary Douglas (1968) and their interpretation by psychoanalytic philosopher Julia Kristeva (1982), emphasizes the fascination of the ambiguous and the abject (for an example in film theory, see Creed, 1993). On this view, we define ourselves in contradistinction to marginalized persons and persons in interstitial circumstances of transition; the normal and integral are constituted over and against the ambiguous and fragmented. We are compelled by the spectacle of beings that combine different components of separate organisms (Carroll, 1990), and similarly by that of the person in the twilight space between life and death (Prince, 1998), because we contrast and define ourselves against these marginal states. As Kristeva (1982) writes, “The corpse, the most sickening of wastes, is a border that has encroached upon everything… The corpse, seen without God and outside of science, is the utmost of abjection… Imaginary uncanniness and real threat, it beckons to us and ends up engulfing us” (pp. 3–4).

These perspectives tend to focus on genre-specific and stylized enactments of our death-related fears and wishes. A last variant of the fantasy/catharsis approach applies to those films that consciously meditate on the everyday reality of death as it is typically experienced. This perspective (as put forward, for example, by Niemiec & Schulenberg, 2011) emphasizes the idea that some well-made (typically drama) films can actually prepare a person for death by imparting certain coping mechanisms. Films like Bergman’s *Wild Strawberries* (1957) or Kurosawa’s *Ikiru/To Live* (1952) deal primarily with the approaching death of the protagonist, who ultimately gains some degree of death acceptance and a renewed sense of meaning and spirituality as a result of his being-towards-death. Such films, as well as others across diverse genres that incorporate the death of a loved
one as a major plot element (ranging from *Bambi*, 1942, to *Amour*, 2012), do not primarily sate the nonconscious desire to temporarily experience repressed anxieties and fantasies. Rather, these films provide opportunities to consciously reflect upon and make strides in coming to terms with the problem of mortality—at least in theory.

The “learning/priming effects” school. This branch of prior approaches tends to be more empirical and less theoretical. Proponents of this approach also see cinematic depictions of death and violence less as an “effect” of deep-seated human needs to cope with basic anxieties, and more as a “cause” of negative social outcomes. In other words, these scholars are more interested in the consequences of portrayals of violent or glorified death. The “learning/priming effects” school has two major camps. The first comprises the social scientists who empirically investigate the effects of violent media and depicted killings on viewers. Major psychologists in this camp are Bandura (1962), Berkowitz (e.g., Geen & Berkowitz, 1966), Zillmann (1998), and Bushman (e.g., Bushman & Anderson, 2001). A major representative of this camp in the area of film theory is Prince (2000).

Based on studies in which viewers watch film violence (largely extracted from its narrative context) before being given the opportunity to aggress, these scholars argue (with some variation in the particulars) that viewing violent death exacerbates aggressive or violent tendencies in viewers. This argument is based on two psychological processes. The first is social learning. Humans have, from early childhood, a great capacity to learn through observation and are prone to imitate actions they observe, especially if they identify with the actor and the actions lead to good outcomes for the actor (Bandura, 1962). The second process is priming. When a particular concept is brought to mind, related concepts are also more likely to come to mind and related behaviors are more likely to be enacted (e.g., Chartrand & Bargh, 1996). On this view, watching violence does not purge us of repressed urges; rather, it primes us with and teaches content that actually makes us more likely to enact such urges in the future. As Prince (2000) suggests, this perspective should caution filmmakers and audiences to think critically about how they portray death, and whether fantastic or stylized portrayals can have negative social consequences.

A somewhat more sophisticated version of the “learning/priming effects” perspective is emphasized by another camp of this school, consisting of theorists who argue that film violence and death encourage the viewer to subsequently embrace or identify with the content of a film (including its underlying message) to a greater extent. This is a key component, for example, of Eisenstein’s (1929/2004) theory and approach to
filmmaking. This argument can be made based on considerable empirical evidence gathered in support of terror management theory (TMT) (see chapter 2, this volume). Although this theory will be presented in detail in subsequent chapters, here it will suffice to highlight one of its central tenets, namely, that humans invest in normative cultural belief structures as a way of overcoming their awareness of mortality. Our cultural worldviews imbue the world with death-transcendent meaning and hold out the possibility of literal or symbolic immortality. Based on this notion, numerous studies have shown that exposing people to images or thoughts of death—even outside conscious awareness—increases their subsequent psychological investment in aspects of their cultural worldview (for a review, see Greenberg & Arndt, 2011).

The context of death in films raises the interesting possibility that images of death spark a nonconsciously registered potential for anxiety in viewers, which film narratives often subsequently allay by bolstering certain normative aspects of the contemporary worldview. In essence, this approach combines aspects of the fantasy/catharsis and learning/priming effects schools. It proposes that conventional films have a heightened potential for influence to the extent that they juxtapose images of death and violence with culturally sanctioned plots and political undertones. Imaged death not only accentuates a narrative or provides aesthetic release; it also primes viewers with a fundamental but typically repressed anxiety, making them possibly more receptive to messages that reinforce the cultural defense mechanisms they rely on for protection against death awareness. In a similar vein, Zillmann (1998) argues that viewers most enjoy violent films that reinforce the belief in a just world and give them a sense of “negative empathy” by allowing them to revel in the violent downfall and ultimate death of the culturally conditioned enemy figure(s).

The “realistic necessity” school. One final identifiable school of thought on death in cinema is similar to the fantasy/catharsis school in its recognition that people need to portray and witness death on the screen as a means of attempting reconciliation with the harsh reality and unknowable nature of death. However, this smaller school is distinguished by its emphatic awareness of the inadequacy of films to ultimately help us cope with death. The scholars of this school are truly existential thinkers in their view of humans as organisms defined by an unrelenting battle against the inescapably absurd realities of which they are aware. After pointing out that no one ever seeks reassurance after a vivid nightmare by telling themselves that they have seen worse in the movies, Ligotti (1996) goes on to insist that the only real consolation of the horror genre is its acknowledgment that other humans besides oneself have realized the
intense misery we are all capable of experiencing. Another representative of this school, Sobchack (2000), has written of contemporary films: “there is no transcendence of ‘senseless’ violence: it just is” (p. 120).

**Contextualizing Death in Films**

As the preceding review of alternative scholarly frameworks suggests, images of death, and viewer responses to them, are not a one-size-fits-all phenomenon. This is the dominant theme of Hill’s (1997) qualitative study, conducted with small focus groups of 4–6 participants (UK citizens mostly between the ages of 18–30), in which participants watched a series of contemporary violent films and discussed their responses in interviews. Hill concluded that viewers’ prior knowledge base and expectations strongly influence their feelings during film watching and the conclusions they draw from cinematic treatments of any topic, death included. Although it would seem to be a self-evident truth, many theoretical and even empirical investigations of cinematic death depictions do not clearly acknowledge the diversity in potential viewer reactions.

Just as there are different viewer reactions to death in films, there are different ways in which death is typically presented in the cinema. Accordingly, it is important for scholars to contextualize the death-related images that occur in particular films. There are at least two ways to do this. One is to place this content in the historical context of changes in social attitudes toward death and its artistic portrayal. The second way is to situate the content in the narrative and formal/aesthetic context of the particular film itself (Gronstad, 2008).

*Contextualizing death in films historically.* Many scholars (e.g., Ariès, 1981; Goldberg, 1998; Shilling, 1993) have noted a curious phenomenon in the social history of death. It is argued that, beginning in the nineteenth century but especially in the twentieth, death became “less visible” for many middle-class and upper-class people living in the industrialized world. From the beginnings of human culture, death has been recognized as a major event that was symbolically incorporated into the communal culture through funerary rituals designed to strengthen the social fabric in the wake of an individual’s passing (e.g., Bloch & Parry, 1982). Through much of human history, death has been a common and socially shared experience. Funerary rituals continue to exist in the present, of course. However, with medical and technological advances in the past two centuries as well as general changes in social organization, death has become increasingly both a more private and a more “institutionalized” affair occurring largely in hospitals beyond the immediate awareness of anyone
save for a few close family members and experts (Ariès, 1981). Curiously, at the same time that death has become seemingly more remote from people’s everyday experience, there has been a proliferation in people’s exposure to *images* of death (including vivid, graphic images) in narrative cinema, television, and the news media (Goldberg, 1998; Shilling, 1993). This semiparadoxical state of affairs has been recognized by various critics and public figures over the course of cinema’s history. Some have claimed that because death has become a relatively sheltered and repressed experience, while simultaneously remaining a threat with which we are constantly bombarded (through crime reports, health scares, terrorism warnings, and so on), people need images of graphic death in narrative context to engage in sense-making processes (Sobchack, 2000).

When it comes to the history of cinematic depictions of death, everything changed in the late 1960s. This period was a watershed transitional moment in film history, when revolutionary stylistic changes in formal approach that had been burgeoning in various “New Waves” of world cinema (Cowie, 2004) became incorporated into US mainstream filmmaking with the creative efforts of the “New Hollywood” directors at the end of the decade (King, 2004). Where Hollywood is specifically concerned, this era can be viewed as one of irreversible transition from a period of “classical” filmmaking based on the studio system to a postclassical production mode involving greater diversity in film financing and distribution, as well as increased artistic license (e.g., Langford, 2005). One of the major changes in films that were discussed during this time and continued to be treated extensively in retrospective discussions was the resetting of the bar for cinematic depictions of death and violence (Prince, 2000; Sobchack, 2000).

Consider the following list of major, genre-revolutionizing films depicting death in new, more realistic or harrowing ways that were released between the years 1967 and 1969: *Bonnie and Clyde, 2001: A Space Odyssey, Hour of the Wolf, Satyricon, The Wild Bunch, Targets, Rosemary’s Baby, Night of the Living Dead*, and *The Dirty Dozen*. These films helped not only to redefine what films and film genres could be but also set cinema on an escalating course towards increasingly graphic depictions of death. Common factors that are highlighted as having contributed to the radical shift in film death during this period are the replacement of the Hays Production Code (which sharply limited depicted violence in Hollywood films) with the modern rating system, the development of new makeup and special effects technologies, and the media-generated rise in consciousness of contemporary death in the context of the Vietnam conflict and assassinations of prominent cultural icons (King, 2004; Prince, 2000).
This trend has continued unabated up to the present time in both films and television. For example, graphic depictions of autopsies in mainstream films would have been quite shocking well into the 1970s. They are now routinely depicted in living rooms around the world in popular network television shows such as *NCIS* and *CSI*.

*Contextualizing death in narrative and form.* In addition to situating cinematic death in historical context, it is finally important to consider its place in the immediate context of a given film’s narrative and form. A few remarks on this broad topic will suffice to set the stage for more detailed considerations in the following chapters.

The threat of death is a primary way in which films create suspense, conflict, tension, and excitement. We see this routinely in action films, crime films, film noir, horror films, mysteries, psychological thrillers, science fiction and fantasy films, war films, and Westerns. It is even used this way in many animated children’s films, ranging from *101 Dalmatians* to *Ice Age: Continental Drift*. The death of a character is commonly used in dramas to evoke sadness and to set up conflicts and problems for surviving characters. In other films, the death of a character or group of characters often provides narrative closure in a film (Russell, 1995). Classic films like *Citizen Kane* (1941) and *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962) use death as a framing device, whereby the narrative opens with and ultimately circles back again to the death and mourning of the protagonist. Russell (1995) asserts that there is an important difference between films like these in which death provides a sense of meaning-laden closure, and others in which death brings the action to a close but does so abruptly and without a clear sense of logic or narrative completion. *The Wild Bunch* (1969) is perhaps a prime example of a film where the mass death at its conclusion seems unavoidable and yet at the same time arbitrary and potentially meaningless.

In addition to considering the role death plays in the context of a film’s narrative, it is also important to consider the relationship between the physical reality of death and the aesthetic reality of films as a medium. Grønstad (2008) reviewed many critical and philosophical perspectives that have highlighted the connection between the raw cinematic act of recording and preserving segments of time, and the reality of human finitude. Such perspectives suggest that is it no coincidence that the filmmaker’s vocabulary is replete with verbs implying violence (e.g., “shooting,” “cutting”). Beyond the inherent connections between the cinematic medium, time, and mortality, Grønstad (2008) encourages scholars to contemplate how cinema’s fascination with death might cause us to rethink our basic assumptions about films. Many film theories assume a basic quality of mimesis, the notion that the cinematic image reflects real
experience in some fundamental way, however distorted. Yet cinematic
depictions of death complicate this assumption, because no one watch-
ing a film has experienced personal death (although they may have seen
the deaths of others). This suggests that an *animetic* approach to death on
films may sometimes be useful. Gronstad, Groebner (2004), and oth-
ers have suggested that, when it comes to analyzing films, death is one
topic that should be situated in the context of other films and representa-
tions. When we see death onscreen, we sometimes are reminded of actual
experiences of death; but more often we likely call to mind (consciously
or not) other images of death extracted from other films.

**Taking the Bull by the Horns: Examining the Psychology and Philosophy of Death in Films**

There are many ways that a particular analysis could closely examine the
topic of death in films. One can draw from a number of different psycho-
logical theories and philosophical perspectives. One could examine one
individual film in detail, a small set of films, a genre of films, films of a
certain era, or the oeuvre of a particularly filmmaker. Each approach can
be valuable, and dozens of interesting chapters could probably be written
taking each approach. The small set of chapters constituting this book
includes a variety of approaches, and yet barely scratches the surface of all
possibilities. For example, there is a chapter on Ingmar Bergman’s work,
and there is certainly no more apt choice of a director who explored
death. But of course it would also be fascinating to examine the role of
death in the films of Burton, Fellini, Hitchcock, Kurosawa, Spielberg,
and a host of other directors. In other words, while we hope this collec-
tion of essays examining death in films is provocative, penetrating, and
enlightening, it will not even pretend to be comprehensive—it is really
just an exploratory outing into this rich domain. This makes us even
more convinced that such an initial foray is sorely needed.

We have organized the chapters around a set of themes. A number of
the contributing authors utilize TMT to analyze films, a perspective that
was based largely on the existential psychodynamic writings of Ernest
Becker (e.g., *The Denial of Death*; Becker, 1973). According to TMT,
humans’ unique awareness of their impending death is a major (but largely
unconscious) motivating force behind much of their behavior. Chapters 2
and 3 introduce TMT and use its various elements to analyze a variety
of films. Chapter 2, “A Terror Management Analysis of Films from Four
Genres” (Jeff Greenberg and Alisabeth Ayars) explores how TMT can be
used to analyze four very different films. Chapter 3, “The End is Near”
(Joel D. Lieberman and Mark Fergus), draws on the extensive empirical literature on terror management to illuminate how apocalyptic films confront audiences with warnings of collective mortality.

Chapters 4–9 expand the consideration of cinematic portrayals of mortality, in part by introducing additional philosophical and sociological perspectives. These chapters discuss how films reflect changes and standing patterns in the variety of ways people across cultures and eras repress the anxiety of death. Chapter 4, “Little Murders: Cultural Animals in an Existential Age” (Sheldon Solomon and Mark J. Landau), shows how one of the great dark comedies portrays a variety of individualized ways people manage their terror in response to the awareness of death and consequent absurdity of life. Chapter 5, “Icons of Stone and Steel” (Jennifer L. McMahon), shows how the “emotionless” characters of many modern vampire and science fiction films serve a death-denial function for audiences by providing icons that transcend our mortal limits. However, as McMahon points out, denial of emotion as a means of death denial is problematic and presented as such in some contemporary films. Related to the denial of emotion is the human attempt to deny our animal nature. Chapter 6, “Consumed in the Act” (Kirby Farrell), discusses the problem of human creatureliness in the context of Herzog’s documentary Grizzly Man and the classic novel Frankenstein. Chapter 7, “Black Swan/White Swan” (Jamie L. Goldenberg), examines Darren Aronofsky’s Black Swan in light of psychological perspectives on female objectification and terror management research on animality denial. People stave off existential anxiety not only by denying emotion and animality but by seeing themselves as heroes embedded in meaningful realities, and these quests for significance are often displayed in movies. Chapter 8, “Death, Wealth, and Guilt” (Daniel Sullivan), discusses a cinematic portrayal of capitalism, one of the dominant paths to significance in modern culture. Chapter 9, “The Birth and Death of the Superhero Film” (Sander Koole, Daniel Fockenberg, Mattie Tops, and Iris K. Schneider), considers the cultural evolution of the superhero films from an escapist form of death denial to, in its modern incarnation, a more realistic confrontation with mortality.

Chapters 10–12 focus on directors, with Peter Cowie (“Bergman and the Switching off of Lights”), Susan White (“Death in the Films of Stanley Kubrick”), and Asbjørn Gronstad (“Haneke’s Amour and the Ethics of Dying”) addressing the role that sustained meditation on the problem of death has played in the oeuvres and particular films of Ingmar Bergman, Stanley Kubrick, and Michael Haneke, respectively.
In the final chapters, rather than discussing how films capture typical avenues of death denial, the authors instead highlight certain unique films that present examples of more productive ways to cope with the realities of death and death anxiety. Chapter 13, “Visions of Death” (Jennifer L. McMahon) and chapter 14, “From Despair and Fanaticism to Awe” (Kirk J. Schneider) discuss how two types of films—films derived from Native American culture, and horror films—hold out the prospect for audience members to confront death in ways that may foster personal growth. The book concludes with a final chapter “Cinematic Death Benefits” (Daniel Sullivan and Jeff Greenberg), which reflects on common themes throughout the chapters, some important themes that the foregoing chapters did not address, and finally the implications of the book as a whole for filmmakers, film scholars, and audiences.

Please note that, for the reader’s convenience, an index to all the films referenced in this book is provided at the end, in addition to the traditional subject index.

References


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PART I

TERROR MANAGEMENT THEORY AND FILM
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CHAPTER 2

A TERROR MANAGEMENT ANALYSIS OF FILMS FROM FOUR GENRES: *THE MATRIX*, *LIFE IS BEAUTIFUL*, *IRON MAN 2*, AND *IKIRU*

Jeff Greenberg and Alisabeth Ayars

As the volume introduction noted, the threat and occurrence of death are common elements of a wide range of films across eras and genres. While various perspectives can be fruitfully applied to examining death in films, in this chapter we focus on how films illuminate the psychological consequences of the human awareness of death. To do so, we utilize a well-supported psychological theory regarding how people manage the problem of death to discuss four superficially very different films that pertain to the human response to death.

**Terror Management Theory**

We humans share with other animals a variety of biological systems that serve to keep us alive. When a threat to our continued existence is imminent, we experience terror, and like other animals, fight, flee, or freeze. Unlike other animals, we know that these systems will eventually fail and the threat that terrifies us will inevitably come to fruition. Given this awareness of our mortality, how then do we live with equanimity and keep our terror of death in check?
As far as archeological evidence indicates, this question was first posed at least 5000 years ago in the Sumerian Epic of Gilgamesh. Ever since then, philosophers, poets, playwrights, novelists, and more recently, filmmakers and social scientists have grappled with this question. Drawing from these sources and more, Ernest Becker (1973) synthesized an analysis of the role of the fear of death in human behavior in his Pulitzer Prize winning book, *The Denial of Death*. This book inspired a trio of psychologists—this chapter’s senior author and his colleagues Sheldon Solomon and Tom Pyszczynski—to develop a formal theory of how people cope with the knowledge of their mortality, a theory that allows Becker’s ideas to be empirically tested and refined. The resulting terror management theory (TMT) has been supported by over 500 studies and is the primary extant theory in social science regarding how people cope with the psychological threat of death. In this chapter, we demonstrate the value of the theory for examining how the influence of death is portrayed in films. We also show the extent to which a diverse set of filmmakers, perhaps influenced by the same sources that inspired TMT, have conveyed in their films tenets of the theory and ideas supported by findings of TMT research.

TMT (see Greenberg & Arndt, 2011) posits that cultures offer their members worldviews that allow each of them to live out their lives embedded in a symbolic, meaning-laden view of reality, which gives them a sense that humans are beings with souls and lasting identities rather than transient animals fated only to no longer exist upon death. As long as we feel like valuable contributors to this meaningful reality, we sense that in some way we will exist beyond our physical death. Cultures offer two routes to feeling transcendent of death. For one, cultures allow us to feel *literally* immortal by providing conceptions of a soul that continues beyond death. Cultures also offer *symbolic* immortality by providing avenues for our identity and contributions to be preserved after our physical death. We can live with psychological equanimity, our death awareness kept at bay, as long as we sustain both faith in the cultural worldview to which we prescribe and confidence that we are people of value as defined by the standards of that worldview. These two psychological resources—the cultural worldview and one’s sense of self-esteem—afford effective terror management.

The theory has been supported by a variety of empirical findings (Greenberg & Arndt, 2011); here we will briefly note three. First, when faith in worldviews and one’s sense of significance are bolstered, people are less prone to anxiety in general and to death-related concerns in particular. Second, reminders of one’s mortality motivate people to strengthen faith in their own worldview and strive harder to live up to the prescribed
values of that worldview. Third, when faith in the worldview or one’s own significance is shaken, people become more prone to think about death.

We believe that TMT offers a fruitful framework for analyzing a wide range of films across eras and genres. Sullivan, Greenberg, and Landau (2010) were the first to examine films through the lenses of TMT, and one of their accomplishments was to show how the theory could illuminate parallels between two superficially very different films. Our analyses of four films will similarly reveal parallels between two pairs of very different films. The first odd couple will be the influential sci-fi classic *The Matrix* and the Italian comedy-drama *Life is Beautiful*. The second pair will be the blockbuster superhero film *Iron Man 2*, and the classic drama *Ikiru*.

**The Matrix**

The threat of death is ever present in the classic 1999 science fiction film *The Matrix*, as is common in violent action films. This first of a trilogy of films directed by Larry and Andy Wachowski metaphorically depicts a number of important aspects of the human condition emphasized by TMT. The most pertinent metaphor is the matrix itself, which conveys the illusory nature of the reality in which we all psychologically reside. At the start of the film, Trinity (Carrie Ann Moss) seeks out a renegade computer hacker named Thomas Anderson, who calls himself Neo (Keanu Reeves). Neo had always felt reality was more than what his senses conveyed and has been curious about the phenomenon called “the matrix.” His suspicions are confirmed when Trinity brings him to Morpheus (Laurence Fishburne) who tells him, “The matrix is everywhere. It is all around us. It is the world that has been pulled down over your eyes to blind you to the truth... you are a slave Neo, like everyone else. You were born into bondage, into a prison that you cannot smell or taste or touch, a prison for your mind. Unfortunately, no one can be told what the matrix is. You have to find out for yourself.” Morpheus offers Neo a choice of two pills. He informs him that if he takes the blue pill, he will wake up believing whatever he wants to believe. But if he takes the red pill, “I show you how deep the rabbit hole goes. All I am offering you is the truth. Nothing more.”

Neo chooses the red pill. What Neo rather painfully learns is that his entire life as he knew it was an illusion called the matrix, a computer program that simulates what life was like around two hundred years ago, back in 1999. In reality, the earth looks like a postapocalyptic nightmare and he has been encased in a pod and used by artificial intelligence machines as an organic battery, as are the vast majority of humans. The machines won a war with humans and now place human babies into pods
where they grow and spend their lives as an energy source. In order to pacify humans and prevent their rebellion, the machines plug them in to an illusory world, the matrix, which keeps the battery-fuel-humans from becoming aware of their terrifying reality. Similarly, real human beings plug themselves into a matrix of cultural fictions that allow them to deny the harsh aspects of reality, and particularly the finality of death.

The freedom Neo experiences upon exiting the matrix is similar to throwing off the shackles of one’s cultural upbringing to see the world independent of the cultural constructs that define good and bad, right and wrong, truth and fiction. A similar experience may be induced by consuming hallucinogens—a version of the red pill. A person tripping on LSD might come to realize that the numbers on that bedside clock are actually arbitrary designations, as are the days of the week, months of the year, and so forth. They might see that these are cultural constructions that help structure one’s conscious experience rather than representations of absolute reality.

Many points in The Matrix allude to the human drive to maintain illusion in the face of debilitating truths. Upon exiting the matrix, Neo exclaims, “I don’t believe it. It’s not possible!” and then, “Let me out! Let me out! I want out!” His protest is set against the blank backdrop of the loading program, the blankness symbolizing the absence of reassuring fictions. One freed human, Cypher, finds reality so unacceptable that he agrees to betray Morpheus to the machines in exchange for being rehooked up to the matrix. Morpheus says of the people hooked up to the matrix, “Most of them are so hopelessly inured, so hopelessly dependent on the system that they will fight to protect it.” Similarly, in the world today, people are willing to degrade or even annihilate dissenters of their own worldviews to preserve the illusion that their worldview is the “right one,” especially in the face of reminders of mortality (Greenberg & Arndt, 2011).

Once Neo is freed from the matrix, he learns that Morpheus leads a group of humans fighting to free other humans from their pods and the matrix. This is a dangerous way of life, as the machines are in constant pursuit of the ship in which Morpheus and his crew live. But the rebels are entrenched in their own worldview, one in which freedom is valued above all else and in which it is prophesied that a savior will come and facilitate this mass liberation. Thus, Neo does not really become completely unfettered from a meaning-providing worldview; rather he is converted from one fictional meaning system to another, like people who convert to a new religion, cult, or culture that challenges their previous worldview.

According to the worldview of Morpheus and Trinity, Neo is “the One”—the savior. Neo eventually comes to believe this as well. The focus
on a savior echoes many cultural worldviews that incorporate the idea of a savior or messiah who will make all right in this world or the next one. Neo’s messiah-like role is foreshadowed early in the film, when a customer exclaims, “You’re my savior, my own personal Jesus Christ!” after Neo provides him with illegal software. Neo indeed becomes a valuable freedom fighter when he develops the ability to “see through” the matrix and thereby alter reality within it, which is possible since the matrix is merely a computer program.

Locked in a battle with Agent Smith (Hugo Weaving), a computer generated enforcer of the matrix, Neo at one point seems to be killed. However, speaking to him after he apparently has died, Trinity reveals that she loves him and that furthermore, it was prophesied that the person she’d fall in love with would be the One. She kisses him and he comes back to life. Trinity’s life-conferring kiss reveals another theme of the film, a theme that is common in modern cultures and often promoted by Hollywood: that love can conquer death. In fact, a substantial body of research shows that reminders of mortality lead people to seek out love relationships, and loved ones are a source of protection from fears of death (e.g., Mikulincer, Florian, & Hirschberger, 2003).

The film also highlights, in accord with TMT, that humans need to deny the fact of their own insignificance to function with psychological equanimity, just as the freed humans in the film cannot accept the reality that humans have been degraded to the role of battery fuel (despite the fact that the humans inserted into the matrix are not necessarily suffering as a result of this role). Indeed, the abject state of the battery-fuel-humans is perhaps closer to the reality of the human condition than we would like to believe. Although we are not literally attached to machines using us for fuel, we will, upon death and decay, become mere “fuel” for worms and insects. Just as the battery humans are merely a “means to an end” for the machines, are we not mere vessels “used” by our DNA to replicate itself?

Interestingly, the film also cleverly connects physicality with insignificance and death, in alignment with TMT. TMT research has demonstrated that our own bodies and bodily functions remind us we are animals, made up of biological material that binds us to a finite life cycle (chapter 7, this volume). Part of the reason humans seek to cover their bodies and hide their bodily functions is to prevent their physicality from becoming salient, to avoid remembering this “truth.” In the film, the physicality of the human batteries is emphasized. All of the pod-encased humans are naked. We see scenes of humans being grown in fields and harvested as a crop. At one point, we see a dead human being liquefied in order to nourish a living one, reminding us that bodies, like metals and
other physical materials, can be melted down. When Neo awakens from
the matrix into the pod in which he is used as a battery, he sees himself
naked and hairless, fitting symbolism for his transition from illusion and
denial to truth of his insignificance in the machine-controlled world.

Of course, the degradation and insignificance of the humans and the
machine-controlled world is not presented as an inevitable reality; the
machine-takeover interrupted the norm of human reign, and the freed
humans are working to restore human “dignity.” In the film, human
insignificance is depicted only as the result of a string of rather extreme
circumstances (world domination by artificial intelligence). To put it dif-
fferently, the film provides viewers with a scapegoat for humans’ existential
predicament: the machines. It is the machines that degrade human beings
and preclude their flourishing. It is the machines that reduce them to ani-
mals. Unfortunately, in real life, there is no one to blame for our exist-
tential plight. There is no Grim Reaper that we can vanquish to literally
eliminate death. We can only fight the terror of insignificance and death
indirectly, by inserting ourselves into the matrix of our culture’s concep-
tion of reality.

Morpheus is right that we are all born into bondage—by our cultural
programming. To keep awareness of death at bay, we willingly enmesh
ourselves in such illusions—we choose the blue pill. At the end of the tril-
ogy’s final film, The Matrix Revolutions (2003), Agent Smith asks Neo,

“Why, Mr. Anderson? Why do you do it? Why get up? Why keep fighting?
Do you believe you’re fighting for something? For more than your survival?
Can you tell me what it is? Do you even know? Is it freedom? Or truth?
Vagaries of perception. The temporary constructs of a feeble human intel-
lect trying desperately to justify an existence that is without meaning or
purpose. And all of them as artificial as the matrix itself… You must be able
to see it, Mr. Anderson. You must know it by now. You can’t win. It’s point-
less to keep fighting. Why, Mr. Anderson? Why? Why do you persist?”

Neo responds, “Because I choose to.” The matrix is thus a powerful meta-
phor for the human condition, in which we must choose to believe against
the backdrop of grim reality.

Life is Beautiful

In a much quieter way, Life is Beautiful also metaphorically portrays key
aspects of the human condition and the cultural worldviews we use to
cope with it. Directed, cowritten by, and starring famed comic-actor
Roberto Benigni, this acclaimed 1997 Italian film won an Oscar for Best Foreign Language Film and the Grand Prize at Cannes. Benigni, who is not Jewish, took the risk of using comedy in a story about the Holocaust and effectively combined humor and pathos in the great tradition of one of his primary influences, Chaplin. The film is introduced as a fable of sorrow, wonder, and happiness by a son about his father. It initially follows the misadventures of Guido, an optimistic Jewish Italian waiter, beginning in Arezzo, Italy, in 1939 during the reign of Mussolini. The first half is a fairly lighthearted romantic comedy replete with the physical comedy Benigni was already known for, clever riddles, and subtle satirizing of Italian fascism. Guido mocks the myth of racial superiority by posing as an official from Rome and lecturing a grade school class on the perfection of his ears and belly button. In this way, he punctures the illusion that Aryans are somehow more than flawed animals and mere mortals.

The threat of death appears very early in the film as Guido and his friend exclaim “We are going to die” as their car’s brake system fails. Soon after, Dora (Nicoletta Braschi), Guido’s future wife, in first meeting Guido, falls from a loft on to him and declares “I almost killed myself.” These scenes show how comedy in general and slapstick in particular are often used to defuse the threat of death—dangerous situations are survived without a scratch. After Guido and Dora marry and have a child, Giosuè (Giorgio Cantarini), the film shows how Guido protects his son, who has a particular fondness for a toy tank, from understanding the threat they are under as discrimination against Jews becomes increasingly blatant under Nazi influence. And virtually all parents do likewise as they immerse their children in a benign worldview where mom and dad hide their own fears, promise they will always protect them, claim that Santa will bring them presents if they are good, and so forth.

The film takes a darker turn when Guido and his son are forced, on Giosuè’s fifth birthday, onto a truck headed to a train to a concentration, or more aptly, death, camp. Although not Jewish, Dora insists on joining them on the train. Guido tries to portray the journey as a desirable trip, and when Giosuè asks what kind of game this is, Guido concocts a way to convince his son that a nightmarish reality of brutality and death is something much more benign, full of meaning and purpose, much as TMT posits cultures do for each of us. In this case, he tells his son they are in a very tough competition in which whoever earns 1000 points first wins a real tank. The cultural worldviews that protect all of us from the harsh realities of an indifferent universe in which the only certainty is death are conveyed largely by the first language we learn as children. In Life is Beautiful, Guido takes advantage of the fact that his son does not
Guido ingeniously uses this false reality to protect Giosuέ through-out his stay in the death camp, even though Giosuέ repeatedly calls into question his dad’s benign version of ongoing events. Just as the Nazis are fleeing and the Allies are about to liberate the camp, Guido tries to find Dora to protect her and is executed, off camera, by a Nazi soldier. Giosuέ, who had been hiding as part of the game, comes out as instructed when all is quiet, and an American tank rolls in. Giosuέ finds his mom Dora and as they embrace, he declares triumphantly, “We won!”—one of the great bittersweet endings in film history.

The message fits TMT perfectly: that life is beautiful only if we con-trive through our worldviews to make it so. It is otherwise an intolerable nightmare that ends only in obliteration for self and all whom you love. In this sense, the film pulls no punches about the need for human imagi-nation to create illusions to make life palatable and even beautiful. The film promotes the value of such illusory worldviews and the role of love in our perpetuation of them.

TMT also pertains to the audience reaction to this film. Audiences and critics worldwide heaped great praise on Life is Beautiful, despite unortho-doxx, risky aspects of the film. First, of course, it is a comedy that deals with the Holocaust. Second, a key theme is the need for illusion to believe life is beautiful. Third, rather suddenly, the very charismatic and noble pro-tagonist is killed off. This is a great blow to the viewer that contradicts a longstanding implied contract between viewer and filmmaker that pro-tagonists, especially in comedies, will live. The murder is not shown, perhaps to make this violation more palatable. The death of the bright, charming, and loving Guido, while an unquestionably sad turn of events, grants the film honesty regarding the horrors of the Holocaust in particular and of life in general. It may be this element that saves the film from seeming too contrived, and honors the history sufficiently to avert criticism.

Even with this concession to the realities of the circumstances, it can be argued that the film takes an optimistic—perhaps overly optimistic—stance on the efficacy of illusory worldviews in mitigating the horrors of life. And this may be one key to its great appeal. Giousέ maintains faith in the conception of reality his father delivers to the end despite his moments of doubt. Is it realistic to think that a child, even a child of unusual inno-cence, could maintain faith in such a confabulation while surrounded by suffering and death? Furthermore, is it realistic to think that a father—no matter how devoted or ingenious—could maintain such an elaborate lie in a death camp, of all places?
The film’s rather rosy portrait of Guido’s success in sheltering Gioussé from the trauma of the camp serves a terror management function for audiences. The film endorses the idea that our illusions can protect us and our children even in the midst of unimaginable horror. This is a very comforting notion indeed. Death camps were abominable places of disease, death, and trauma. On top of this, they threaten our belief in a just world (that bad things only happen to bad people), remind us that good does not always prevail, and weaken our faith in cultures and government to protect people from harm. The fact that Guido symbolically conquered the monstrosity of a death camp, causing Gioussé to emerge relatively unscathed, allows us to maintain faith that human kindness and love can shed light even in the darkest of places. It is up to viewers to decide whether the power of love and kindness is that potent. Regardless, the positive reception of audiences to the film suggests that people like this second theme of the film—that with effort and a lot of love, we can protect our loved ones from the greatest horrors.

Finally, in accord with TMT, the film also promotes the idea that we can transcend death via heroics. Although Guido is killed, it is clear that his legacy is preserved. The adult Gioussé greatly honors his father and his efforts. Audiences either consciously or unconsciously recognize that since Guido’s investment in Gioussé made a lasting impact that transcended his own individual existence—he symbolically transcended death. In portraying this theme, the film illuminates a core insight of TMT: that the attainment of symbolic immortality can alleviate the tragedy of real death. By preserving and becoming heroes for our offspring, we remove the sting of our own mortality. And indeed, TMT research has shown that reminders of mortality increase the desire for offspring (e.g., Wisman & Goldenberg, 2005).

Thus, we see that Life is Beautiful conveys the necessity of meaningful but illusory worldviews to make life beautiful for ourselves and others, a central tenet of TMT. Furthermore, the film itself serves a terror management function to viewers by promoting the efficacy of these worldviews in shielding our loved ones from the ugliest realities, as well as advocating human ability to transcend death via heroism and investment in offspring. Life is Beautiful therefore illuminates TMT quite nicely, in both its narrative themes and viewers’ favorable responses to it.

Iron Man 2

Iron Man 2 is a 2010 big-budget superhero movie sequel directed by Jon Favreau. Superhero movies clearly have great appeal, and chapter 9 in
the present volume will focus on how this genre feeds the need for us humans to feel transcendent of death. Here, we will focus primarily on the specific narrative of the protagonist, one that highlights an important discovery from TMT research, namely, that there are two distinct sets of defenses against death. The first set, proximal defenses, is most utilized when death concerns are very salient. They involve distracting oneself from death, denying vulnerability, and blocking the anxiety any way possible. The second set, distal defenses, is designed to keep death concerns from becoming salient, and involves the worldview and self-esteem bolstering that preserve our status as enduring beings in a symbolic reality. Feeling symbolically immortal allows us to function with equanimity with limited need for more direct methods to minimize death anxiety.

To understand Iron Man 2 in context, a brief summary of the original 2008 Iron Man is useful. Tony Stark (Robert Downey Jr.) is initially an arrogant, albeit witty, womanizing genius who views himself self-righteously as the leading high tech weapons manufacturer protecting America. He also sees himself as continuing the legacy of his dad, Howard Stark, who helped develop the atomic bombs that secured victory in World War II. Along with weapons development, Stark had created a large arc reactor as a possible energy source; however, it had never been made cost effective.

While demonstrating a new missile in Afghanistan, Tony is nearly killed by a bombing. Shrapnel from the incident lodged near his heart requires him to have a battery-powered magnet in his chest to keep him alive. He learns there that many Stark Industries weapons end up in the hands of brutal bullies who oppose the United States. Shocked and sobered by this realization, as well as by the harsh reminder of his own mortality, he begins to consider the legacy he will leave behind when he is gone, saying that he does not want their only legacy to be a “body count.” He escapes capture by developing a metal bulletproof suit powered by a miniaturized version of the arc reactor. This suit protects him from weapons and allows him to fire his own, as well as to fly. On his return to the United States, he develops a more sophisticated computerized version of the suit, uses it to fight evil on his own in Afghanistan, and cleans up corruption in his own company. The movie ends with Tony announcing to the press that he is Iron Man.

Death hangs over Iron Man 2 right from the beginning (perhaps explaining its less enthusiastic reception from critics and fans alike), along with the primary theme of legacy—making a positive impact that lasts beyond personal death. At the start of the film, we watch Anton Vanko, who codeveloped the original arc reactor, lament the fortunes of his son
Ivan (Mickey Rourke) relative to the successes of Tony Stark. Anton abruptly dies and Ivan seeks to avenge his father’s fate and perhaps build the legacy he feels they were robbed of. In the very next scene, Tony is at a World’s Fair-like Stark Expo (set at the Queens, New York, site of the 1964 World’s Fair) bragging about his ability to bring the world closer to peace and pontificating about the importance of legacy, of making the world better for future generations.

Beginning with the expo opening and throughout the film, Howard Stark is portrayed as a paragon of a person who has successfully transcended death by leaving behind a legacy. Tony’s father appears on large, elevated video screens, as if presiding over the other characters. Although physically dead, Tony’s father achieved symbolic immortality by inventing valuable technologies. As the film unfolds, we learn that Tony is dying, as his use of the Iron Man suit has led to increasing blood toxicity due to the palladium used in the arc reactor that both protects his heart and fuels the capabilities of the suit. This problem threatens both his life and the viability of his greatest invention. Faced with failure, his impending death, and possibly his last birthday, Stark turns to drinking and partying that quickly get out of control. This way of coping with death is a proximal defense as it involves distracting oneself from death and self-medicating to control the anxiety. Tony has lost sight of his vision of legacy, of the symbolic immortality that allows one to feel transcendent of death.

A visit from Nick Fury (Samuel L. Jackson), leader of a group of superheroes known as SHIELD, turns Tony around. He tells him that Howard Stark saw Tony as the key to a better future for humankind, someone who will complete his dad’s mission by perfecting the arc reactor as an energy source. Tony is skeptical, as he notes that his dad,

was cold, he was calculating, he never told me he loved me, he never even told me he liked me, so it’s a little tough for me to digest when you said the whole future was riding on me and he’s passing it down, I don’t get that. You’re talking about a guy whose happiest day was when he shipped me off to boarding school.

Fury leaves Tony some of Howard’s property including some notes and some film footage. As Tony watches the film, he sees his dad address him directly and tell him,

I built this for you [a model of the city of tomorrow/the future] and some day you’ll realize it means a whole lot more than just people’s inventions; it represents my life’s work. This is the key to the future. I am limited by the
technology of my time but one day you’ll figure this out. And when you do you will change the world. What is and always will be my greatest creation is you.

With more securely grounded self-worth, and a more sincere concern for continuity and legacy, Tony becomes inspired to develop a new element that can better fuel the Iron Man suit. Luckily, the layout of the model of the city of the future provides a clue to the atomic structure needed. Further promoting the theme of impact beyond death, Tony notes that “Dead for almost 20 years, still taking me to school... Thanks dad.” This success extends his own life, saves his invention, and allows Iron Man to defeat Ivan and Justin Hammer (Sam Rockwell), a corrupt competing arms manufacturer, who attempted to steal Stark’s Iron Man technology.

From a TMT perspective, the prospect of death leads people to seek a sense of continuity from the past to the present and into the future. Landau et al., (2008) has shown that reminders of mortality lead people to see both more connections between events in the past and how they are now, and more connections between the actions they engage in now and their long-term future goals. As Yalom (1980, p. 124) noted, “What the purposeful man is always trying to secure is a spurious and illusive immortality, immortality for his acts by pushing his interests in them forward in time.”

And this is a central message of Iron Man 2. The villainous Vanko has the same concern as Tony; he is trying to restore a sense of legacy for his deceased dad and himself by developing his own superior technology. When Hammer conspires with Vanko, he advises him that the best way to destroy Tony is by destroying his legacy rather than killing him. Tony, after resorting to proximal defenses against death, becomes sincerely invested in symbolic immortality by recognizing his link to the past and the future. At the film’s conclusion, after reading a SHIELD report noting his proneness to self-destructive tendencies, one of Tony’s last lines, directed to Fury, is “I was dying, I mean please, and, aren’t we all?” This line, which could very well be a sly reference to Robert Downey Jr.’s own battles with booze and drugs, suggests that people often resort to proximal defenses of distraction and self-medicating to cope with their mortality. TMT and Iron Man 2 suggest that this is particularly likely when people lack a sense of connection to the past and the future, a fundamental basis of symbolic immortality.

We should note that the Iron Man series has been very popular, earning over 1.2 billion at the box office between the two films. Considering
the desire to overcome death sheds light on this mass appeal in two ways. First, like *Life is Beautiful*, the movies promote the value of symbolic immortality through leaving a lasting legacy. But like other superhero movies, the *Iron Man* films also promote the possibility of defeating death more literally, by transforming a biological human body into a body of “iron.” After all, it is our biological bodies that render us susceptible to death. TMT research has demonstrated that after viewing pictures that make bodily functions salient (such as pictures of vomit or a bloody finger), people are more likely to think of death (Cox, Goldenberg, Pyszczynski, & Weise, 2007), suggesting that people find the human body disturbing for existential reasons (as noted in our analysis of *The Matrix*). *Iron Man 2* allows audiences to indulge in the fantasy that we could do away with the limits of the body imposed by biology by protecting it in a layer of iron as well as adorning it with various weapons, thereby literally reducing its susceptibility to death and curing us of discomfort and disgust associated with the body.

**Ikiru**

Like our first pairing, on the surface, *Iron Man 2* and the 1952 Akira Kurosawa film *Ikiru* (“To Live”) could not be films that are more different. *Iron Man 2* is noisy, bombastic, political, full of big events meant to entertain and thrill. Its protagonist is an arrogant, witty, supersuccessful hedonist. In contrast *Ikiru* is a quiet, contemplative, personal story full of small moments. Its protagonist is a mousey mid-level civil servant, a paper pusher who has experienced and achieved little. Yet, like *Iron Man 2*, *Ikiru* is a film about coming to terms with death, one that explores proximal defenses, and ultimately promotes the distal defense of legacy. Kanji Watanabe (Takashi Shimura) visits the doctor for pain he is experiencing and wears an expression of terror as the doctor tells him he has a stomach ulcer. Because another patient informed Watanabe that the doctor tells patients they have an ulcer to avoid telling them they have stomach cancer, Watanabe knows that the diagnosis means he has only six months to a year to live. Watanabe thinks back on his dull years at the office and experiences horror at the thought that he will die not really having lived. Watanabe, like most of us, likely repressed thoughts of his own death in his daily life up to that point. Perhaps Watanabe was especially motivated to avoid thinking of death because of the scars left by the death of his wife, which is depicted in a flashback early in the film. Enmeshed in a low-key job where he could keep thoughts of his own mortality at bay, he lacked motivation to experience life to the fullest
or to make a lasting impression on the world. His diagnosis of stomach cancer forces him to acknowledge his own impending death, inducing immense regret at his failure to extract more out of life.

Watanabe subsequently goes through a progression of attempts to deal with his imminent death. He first tries to return to his comfortable cocoon of ignorance, drinking alcohol to quiet his thoughts. “For a little while,” he says, “I can forget my cancer, and other painful things.” Watanabe further attempts to forget about his cancer and assuage his dissonance at not having lived a full life by going on a pleasure trip with a stranger (Yûnosuke Itô) he meets at a bar. They drink, dance with women, and attend a striptease. Watanabe does not enjoy the night and is unable to forget his predicament. He ends up tearfully singing a melody about the brevity of life. Watanabe can no longer retreat into a world in which death is a far-off, unreal abstraction. Distraction and hedonism fail to help him cope with his predicament in a lasting way.

Watanabe, however, does not give up on the problem of death. Resolved, sensitive, and newly open to the lessons those around him might teach him, he attempts to find the answer he’s looking for in a vibrant young woman, Toyo (Miki Odagiri), who worked at his office. He idealizes her as the emblem of the life he wished he had lived, full of health and spontaneity, and attaches to her in a misguided attempt to be closer to the vitality he craves. However, psychological closeness to vitality does not provide him with the death transcendence he craves.

When Toyo describes the toys she makes for children, Watanabe identifies in himself a desire to “make something.” Watanabe’s desire to create something stems from the desire to leave a permanent mark on society, a method of symbolic death transcendence. Earlier in the film, Watanabe reflected on the impact he made on his son in an attempt to convince himself that he had made his mark on the world. Unfortunately, his son does not appreciate the efforts Watanabe made for him, and thus his son cannot act as Watanabe’s symbolic immortality project. Watanabe instead invests in turning a swamp into a playground for children.

During the second half of the film we see glimpses of Watanabe exercising great determination in fighting maddening bureaucracy to have the playground built. Watanabe has found his solution to the problem of his impending death, and he will stop at nothing to see it implemented. The film brilliantly depicts the strength of the human aversion to utter annihilation, the tenacity of the desire for one’s life—if itself brief—to result in something permanent. Watanabe finally succeeds, and dies sitting on the playground’s swing with the snow falling, a riveting visual image, depicted in Figure 2.1.
The movie explores a human paradox. On one hand, we all have the desire to transcend death by creating something permanent, something grand that will immortalize us. On the other hand, we are so fearful of death that we often repress thoughts of our own mortality and, along with it, our desire for death transcendence. Becker (1973) noted that most people try to deny and disguise their desire to leave a lasting legacy because of fear of failure and ridicule of others. By the time we acknowledge this motive, it might be too late, as it almost was for Watanabe. At Watanabe’s wake, his colleagues, mortality on their minds, vow to embody Watanabe’s resolve. However, when they return to work, they eventually settle into old habits, preferring to distance themselves from death. Will they end up regretting the manner in which they lived their lives? Is it better to live to transcend death, or hide in routine forms of comfortable denial?

At Watanabe’s wake, one of his colleagues exclaims that they all would have behaved as Watanabe did if faced with their own deaths. Another colleague says, “But any one of us could drop dead at any moment!” This exchange shatters our illusion that we are in a different position than Watanabe. Each of us has a desire to immortalize ourselves, to permanently impact our surroundings before we die. Yet people often rely on proximal defenses and try to think of death as something so far-off into
the future that it is not real, a strategy Chaplin (2000) described as “Not
me, not now.” In reality, death could greet us at any corner of our lives.

Ikiru spurs us to question whether we are living as we want to live, or
whether we should—or even can—move beyond our short-term defenses
to more effectively work toward the immortality we yearn for.

Further Parallels and Contrasts among the Films

Our TMT analyses have revealed parallels between Life is Beautiful and
the Matrix, and between Iron Man 2 and I kir u. But similarities and dif-
f erences are also revealed by additional comparisons. Most obviously, all
four films promote ways to feel transcendent of death through legacies
that have impact beyond one’s own lifespan. In addition, in all four films
the protagonist learns to see outside the cultural worldview in which
he is initially imbedded, and sparked by enhanced awareness of death,
develops new culturally validated paths to symbolic immortality. Neo
learns he has been perceiving reality within a computer program. Guido
learns that the fascist culture he makes fun of early in the film is far more
malignant and hard to work around than he originally thought. This
point is brought home most clearly when he expects the Nazi doctor,
who seemed so friendly and exchanged riddles with him in the restaurant
where he waited tables, to help him later when he sees him in the con-
centration camp. Guido learns that the doctor never really saw him as a
human being worthy of compassion. In Iron Man 2, Tony realizes more
and more how corrupt and dysfunctional the government his work has
long supported really is, and how much he has to retain control of his
own technological advancements. Finally, in I kir u, Watanabe shifts from
being fully imbedded in a monotonous bureaucratic role and routine to
fighting that very bureaucracy to forge a unique legacy.

Having acknowledged these commonalities, one key distinction
between the films is that two of them are explicitly imbedded in fantasy
worlds and can be viewed as escapist films, whereas the other two are
more tied to a grim past or current reality and deal more directly with
deeh. The Matrix and Iron Man 2 feature protagonists who are explicit
heroes with powers beyond other mortals, including the gift of flight.
These heroes view themselves as rebels, outside the confines of their con-
tentional culture even before they fully see through their worldviews.
Neo sells illegal software and is discontented with his life. Tony sees
himself as America’s greatest gift, someone who is above the rules that
apply to the 99 percent. They both achieve great things and immortal
legacies, but in the flashiest of ways. Neo becomes “the one,” a savior for
the human race in the battle against the machines. Tony develops the iron
man suit, a flawless legendary fighting machine, and becomes Iron Man. The improved arc reactor technology used in the suit holds the promise of providing renewable energy to the entire world.

In contrast, the more reality-based films involve humble protagonists of little note to the world. Guido is a waiter and Watanabe is a low-level civil servant. Both of them seem fairly satisfied with their routine lives until events bring the specter of death into focus. Like Neo and Tony, they both find a way to feel transcendent of mere oblivion, but they do so in much less dramatic fashion. Neither earns fame nor a name that will live on in the annals of human history. Guido simply saves his son from trauma and death, allowing his son to thrive. Watanabe is able to turn a useless swamp into a playground for children. Children will enjoy the fruits of his labor long after his death, but will not know the name of the man who enhanced their time on the earth.

The fantasy films, although more full of death through spectacular violence, are less realistic about transcending death. Like most mythic hero stories, they show routes to transcending death that audiences can identify with, but not generally emulate in their own real lives. Consistent with the value of such identifications, TMT research has shown that reminders of mortality increase valuing of fame and famous people (Greenberg, Kosloff, Solomon, Cohen, & Landau, 2010). Additionally, such reminders also increase fantasies of flight and fantasies of flight reduce defensive responses to reminders of mortality (Cohen, et al., 2011).

The more grounded (literally, as their protagonists cannot fly!) films feature the deaths of their “heroes,” and thus bring the reality of death more to the fore. Their heroes also find a way to symbolic immortality, but ways more attainable to the viewers who watch them, through selfless acts of giving. Consistent with this approach to legacy, studies have shown that reminders of death can increase anonymous charitable giving (e.g., Jonas, Schimel, Greenberg & Pyszczynski, 2002). At a broad level, this TMT analysis suggests that both escapist fantasy films and grimmer films involving tragedy often reinforce modes of terror management. But the more escapist fare does so more through vicarious identification, whereas the more realistic films do so by providing messages that people can more readily apply to their own lives. Interestingly though, at the present time, we see the flashy striving for fame and making a lasting mark with name attached becoming more widely embraced—there are more aspiring Tony Starks and perhaps fewer Kanji Watanabes. One reason for this may be that fame seems more attainable in the age of YouTube. Another reason may be that traditional forms of death transcendence, such as afterlife beliefs and identifying with death-transcending collectives, have become less prevalent in increasingly secular and individualistic modern cultures.
And a final reason may be the increasing salience of death all around us thanks to military conflicts, terrorism, and as the Introduction noted, the increasingly vivid and widespread depictions of death in film, television, and other forms of electronic media.

Hopefully we have provided an adequate introduction to TMT and have shown how the theory can be useful for understanding this diverse set of films. Some of the subsequent chapters in this volume will also use TMT, along with other psychological and philosophical perspectives on death, to illuminate aspects of particular films and genres.

References


A pocalyptic films are motion pictures that portray impending threats to the continued existence of humans. These films, by their nature, prey on an awareness and instinctual fear of mortality innate to humans. However, apocalyptic films are unique because characters must not only contemplate and respond to threats to their own individual existence, but must contend with societal annihilation as well. In this chapter we explore the psychological implications of mortality salience (through terror management theory; TMT), and discuss how those implications have been portrayed in apocalyptic films. We also discuss how a number of common central issues emerge as characters in the films confront and overcome the potential annihilation of civilization. We do so by examining apocalyptic films generally, and through a specific discussion of the plot of the film *Children of Men* (2006).

**Terror Management Theory**

According to TMT (introduced in chapter 2, this volume), humans are unique in terms of their mortality awareness. But rather than becoming incapacitated by the fear caused by the knowledge of our inescapable fate, humans attempt to manage the existential-based terror and anxiety by investing in, and adhering to, *cultural worldviews*. By upholding the values of those worldviews, self-esteem is enhanced and a protective
buffer against mortality-induced terror is provided. However, cultural worldviews are fragile social constructions that are dependent upon the support of others. We need to surround ourselves with people who share our values and who tell us that our behaviors and accomplishments are meaningful, so that we can maintain a sense that we are part of an enduring cultural entity.

Although research supporting TMT has been conducted only in the past quarter century, the central themes that the research is based on are timeless and universal. TMT research was originally inspired by the writings of cultural anthropologist Ernest Becker (1973; 1975). In developing an integrated model of human behavior, Becker examined the writings of many great Western minds in fields such as philosophy, psychology, anthropology, and economics (e.g., Sigmund Freud, Søren Kierkegaard, Otto Rank, Norman O. Brown, and Karl Marx). Consequently, Becker’s writings reflect an integration of cultural perspectives. Cinema also provides an avenue for reflecting upon cultural themes. Thus, it is not surprising that many of the concepts expressed by Becker, and empirically tested through TMT research, are reflected in film.

From a TMT perspective, one of the most interesting film genres is that of apocalyptic cinema. As noted above, in apocalyptic films, characters must not only contemplate and attempt to escape their own demise, but they must also contend with the potential extermination of society and associated culture. Under such circumstances it becomes impossible for culture to provide a sense of permanence and stability to an individual, because of its impending destruction. Consequently, cultural worldview mechanisms for obtaining symbolic immortality (e.g., achieving and surpassing cultural standards) no longer remain viable approaches for minimizing existential fear, as all worldview supporters face annihilation and enduring cultural artifacts may face destruction. Characters confronting apocalyptic circumstances must then confront death without the critical anxiety buffer function provided by normally enduring cultural worldviews. However, if a character dies, but is able to save humankind through his or her actions, then the protective nature of cultural worldviews is restored. Ultimately, such a character can achieve symbolic immortality through reverence bestowed upon him/her for acts of heroism that saved society and allowed the culture to endure.

**History and Types of Apocalyptic Films**

Thompson (2007) argues that themes of “apocalyptic dread” have been particularly prevalent in American films during the late 1900s and the
early part of the twenty-first century. He attributes this trend to the “social anxieties, fears, and ambivalence about global catastrophe” (p. 1) that underlies this motion picture genre. The popularity of apocalyptic themes in cinema is not surprising, given the pervasiveness of apocalyptic content in other media such as television, comics, and video games. In addition, an ABC.COM poll found that 16 percent of Americans expected apocalyptic events to occur on December 21, 2012 (an apocalyptic date predicted by the Mayan calendar). Further, a Time/CNN poll (2002) reported that 59 percent of Americans say they believe that prophesies in the book of Revelation are going to come true.

Apocalyptic plots are one of the oldest sources for narrative development, and, as Bendle (2005) notes, have inspired some of the most creative and terrifying images in cultural history. However, Bendle maintains that during the twentieth century, apocalyptic narratives changed from traditional religious battles between the good and evil forces of God and the anti-Christ, to a dystopian vision, where visions of the future involve social disintegration, violence, war, and ultimate catastrophe. This shift undoubtedly reflects societies’ emerging dependency on science and technology.

Despite the recent popularity of apocalyptic films (e.g., *2012* [2009], *Hunger Games* [2012], *I am Legend* [2007], *War of the Worlds* [2005], the trilogies of the *Matrix* [1999], *The Terminator* [1984], and *Transformers* [2007]), apocalyptic themes have actually been commonly used throughout motion picture history. Indeed even some of the earliest films depicted impending worldwide planetary destruction. For example, during the silent film era, the Danish film *The End of the World* (1916) portrayed worldwide destruction of the planet through natural disasters and social upheaval resulting from a comet that closely passes by earth. In 1931, the French film *End of the World* covered a similar theme. Natural disasters were also the focus of *Deluge*, a 1933 American film about a series of earthquakes that destroy the Pacific coast of the United States, and lead to a tsunami that submerges New York City in water, killing most of its residents. Early apocalyptic films also depicted the breakdown of society. Most notably, *Metropolis*, a 1927 German science fiction film, exposed audiences to a futuristic dystopia, where a great societal dichotomy exists between wealthy intellectuals, who live above the city in towers, and oppressed workers, who live far beneath them. Scientific invention leads to the creation of a robot that ultimately urges workers to revolt, causing enormous destruction to society.

Although relatively few apocalyptic films were made before the 1950s, the genre became quite popular in the latter half of the twentieth century.
During the 1950s destruction of the earth and/or its inhabitants was typically caused by either external threats in the form of aliens (e.g., *The Day the Earth Stood Still* [1951], *The War of the Worlds* [1953], *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* [1956]) or internal threats caused by atomic war (*Day the World Ended* [1955], *On the Beach* [1959], *The World, the Flesh, and the Devil* [1959]).

The number of apocalyptic films made continued to expand in the 1960s and the subsequent decades, leading to a wider range of portrayals of destructive causes. Mitchel (2001) has identified seven specific categories of apocalyptic themes: religious or supernatural (e.g., *The Seventh Sign* [1988] and *Runestone* [1991]); celestial collision (e.g., *Armageddon* [1998] and *Deep Impact* [1998]); solar or orbital disruption (e.g., *Solar Crisis* [1990] and *Where Have All the People Gone?* [1974]); nuclear war and radioactive fallout (e.g., *Dr. Strangelove* [1964] and its more sober counterpart *Fail-Safe* [1964]); germ warfare or pestilence (e.g., *Virus* [1980] and *I am Legend* [2007]; alien device or invasion (e.g., *War of the Worlds* [1953/2005], *Cowboys and Aliens* [2011] and *Independence Day* [1996]; and scientific miscalculation (*Crack in the World* [1965] and *Quiet Earth* [1985]). In addition, Mitchell includes an eighth category of “miscellaneous” that encompasses titles beyond the scope of these categories. He notes that films such as *The Last Man on Earth* (1964), which focuses on vampires threatening humanity, and *Voyage to the Bottom of the Sea* (1961), in which a belt of radiation covering the earth catches fire and threatens the planet, fall into this category. *Children of Men* (2006), which we discuss in detail below, would best be placed in this miscellaneous category, because it focuses on the extinction of humankind from an unknown cause. The human species is dying out because children are simply no longer being born.

**Central Issues in Apocalyptic Films**

Apocalyptic films typically involve plots where central characters must overcome the impending doom facing civilization by developing and implementing some strategy to defeat the planetary threat that exists. However, within that context, filmmakers typically portray a number of common central issues using a variety of different approaches. More specifically, heroism, the temporal context (immediate threat vs. gradually increasing threat), religious-based protection, the intergroup interactions (cohesion vs. conflict), and the importance of cultural artifacts are themes common to apocalyptic movies. We discuss each of these themes, and provide insight into how a particular film—*Children of Men* (2006), cowritten by one of the present authors (M. Fergus)—explores these issues.
**Children of Men**

*Children of Men* (2006) adapted from a novel written by the renowned British mystery author P. D. James ([James, 1992]) presents a dark view of a world set several decades in the future. By 2027, the world has dramatically changed. A mysterious affliction has struck humankind across the globe—the inability to reproduce. For almost two decades, no children have been born. Science has been powerless to determine the cause of the mass infertility, or to find a solution. The youngest person on earth is now eighteen and humanity is facing a long, slow progression to oblivion.

As humans face their march toward extinction of the species, much of the world has descended into chaos. Governments, which provide enduring symbols of the stability and strength of cultures, have collapsed around the world. The film is set in Great Britain, which represents the last functioning national government on the planet. However, it has become a totalitarian state, one in which citizens are all quite willing to sacrifice individual freedoms for some sense of order and normalcy in their world. In the face of death, the imposition of law and order is of primary importance within the nation. England has become a police state where immigrants are routinely rounded up and detained in a manner that clearly has elements reminiscent of Nazi Germany and Guantanamo Bay.

A revolutionary group known as “The Fishes” abducts the main character of the film, Theo Faron (Clive Owen). Through acts of protest and occasional public violence, the group members have been branded “terrorists” by the government, and its members are all wanted criminals. One of the group leaders is Theo’s ex-wife Julian (Julianne Moore). Theo and Julian have not had contact for many years, since the end of their marriage following the death of their young son to a flu epidemic, during the early days of the infertility plague.

Julian asks Theo to use his family connections to certain members of the government to secure traveling papers out of Great Britain for one of their group members. In need of money, Theo agrees to help Julian. After obtaining the transit papers, Theo is introduced to a young girl, Kee (Clare-Hope Ashitey), the one in need of the papers. The transit papers stipulate that Theo must accompany Kee out of the country.

As they attempt to escape the country, Julian is killed, and Theo learns that Kee is pregnant. It is the first time any woman in the world has become pregnant in almost 20 years. The transit papers were meant to deliver Kee to a group known as “The Human Project,” who will help her have a safe birth, and who hope to find in Kee a “cure” for the mass infertility. Thus, Kee and her child represent hope for survival of the
species, and in turn, survival of the culture. Theo also learns that mem-
bers of the Fishes who are accompanying them have no intention of let-
ting Kee leave the country, and plan to kill Theo and use Kee and the
child for political purposes.

Theo and Kee escape from the Fishes and flee to a nightmarish refugee
camp, where Theo helps Kee deliver her baby. The next morning, they
attempt to get to a nearby port, where they can access a boat and connect
with The Human Project on an offshore ship. However, as they make
their way through the streets, they must avoid random street violence, as
well as a raging battle between the British army and the Fishes, who have
infiltrated the camp to get Kee back. Finally, in one of the film’s most
dramatic and moving moments, the crying of the baby halts the battle.
The existence of new life (and a chance for humanity to survive) in the
face of immediate (i.e., the battle) and delayed death (i.e., infertility) is
overwhelming to the combatants. All guns are lowered as soldiers gape
upon the miracle of a child unfolding before them (see Figure 3.1).

As the battle picks up again, Theo manages to get Kee and her baby
through the streets and into a rickety rowboat in which they paddle out
to the rendezvous point. However, Theo reveals that he was shot during
the battle and is seriously wounded. Kee tells Theo that she has named
her baby “Dylan,” after Theo’s dead son. This decision provides a degree
of symbolic immortality to Theo in that his son’s name, and by extension
part of him, will survive. Theo helps Kee soothe her crying baby, then

Figure 3.1 Kee’s baby is humanity’s only hope in the postapocalyptic
dies, just as the Human Project ship, appropriately named the *Tomorrow*, arrives to take Kee to the mainland. A sense of hope is reborn as children are heard playing and laughing as the credits roll.

**Heroism**

*Children of Men* follows the traditional story line of apocalyptic films in which a person rises up to perform a heroic act to save humanity from extinction. In that process, the hero typically overcomes overwhelming odds against their success, often risking their life (and sometimes sacrificing it) for the greater good. Becker (1973) notes that “[h]eroism is first and foremost a reflex of the terror of death. We admire most the courage to face death; we give such valor our highest and most constant adoration; it moves us deeply in our hearts because we have doubts about how brave we ourselves would be. When we see a man bravely facing his own extinction we rehearse the greatest victory we can imagine” (pp. 11–12).

From a TMT perspective, the hero is of supreme importance because he or she allows society to be “delivered . . . from the evil of the termination of life” (Becker, 1975, p. 150). Thus, heroic behaviors are highly rewarded by cultures, allowing symbolic immortality to be achieved by those few who exhibit the highest levels of valor (see also chapter 9, this volume). It is not surprising then that research has demonstrated that individuals for whom mortality has been made salient express heightened support for targets who uphold cultural ideals (Rosenblatt et al., 1989), and are more likely themselves to behave in a prosocial manner (Jonas, Schimel, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, 2002).

However, heroism that involves a person engaging in high levels of risk-taking behavior seems contradictory to a terror management perspective. Risking one’s life, even in the aim of saving one’s species, requires a person to overcome intense self-preservation instincts. Thus, on the surface, it seems that TMT is unable to explain the actions of apocalyptic film heroes. Yet a deeper examination of the role of death in heroic behaviors sheds light on why humans engage in activities that can lead to serious injury or death.

As Hirschberger, Florian, Mikulincer, Goldenberg, and Pyszczynski (2002) note, the majority of cultures around the world value factors such as “courage, bravery, and valor” (p. 121). Consequently, risk taking allows an individual to gain significant acknowledgment from cultural supporters for flaunting danger. Paradoxically then, risk taking may serve an anxiety-buffering function. Hirschberger et al. investigated this...
possibility, and found that male participants expressed a greater willingness to engage in risk-taking activities if they had been asked to contemplate their own mortality.

Additional research indicates that individuals are more likely to express a willingness to sacrifice themselves for the greater good following mortality reminders. For example, Routledge and Arndt (2008) found that British citizens were more willing to make personal sacrifices to protect the British way of life, including dying to protect England. Further, Pyszczynski, et al. (2006) found that Iranians were more supportive of martyrdom attacks against the United States in defense of Islam, and were more likely to consider performing such acts themselves. Similarly, politically conservative Americans were more supportive of military tactics that could lead to the death of thousands of civilians to protect the United States against terrorist attacks. Consequently, there is cross-cultural evidence that in the face of death, individuals may be motivated to engage in risky and self-sacrificial heroic behavior to protect others who share their cultural worldview.

Temporal Context—Immediate Vs. Gradually Increasing Threat

Although the presence of a heroic character makes *Children of Men* (2006) similar to other apocalyptic movies, a key distinguishing feature of the film is the singular power of its premise: the world is not ending with a bang, but with a prolonged, terrible whimper. The loss of human fertility certainly means the “end of the world” (for humans, at least), but it is an end that will take nearly a century to run its course.

The story tackles a specific dilemma—what would the lack of future generations do to the human spirit? TMT maintains that cultural worldviews provide individuals with psychological equanimity against death anxiety through promises of either literal or symbolic immortality. Symbolic immortality can take many forms such as our children, our accomplishments, or at the very least through the ongoing tide of human-
War II mission movie (e.g., *Saving Private Ryan* [1998]). Apocalyptic films of this nature typically set up a key defining moment in which failure means the end of humanity: the meteor obliterates Earth, the virus spreads uncontrollably, or the aliens liquefy our citizens for food. Mankind is in a collective “fight or flight” mode (with no place to flee to), and there is no time for pondering the predicament of extinction or wallowing in self-pity. Species survival requires ingenuity, resourcefulness, and courage. Thus, heightened mortality salience produced by the urgent threat requires individuals to demonstrate the highest values in culture and achieve the heroic.

*Children of Men’s* (2006) temporal tone is very different. There are no aliens, hurtling space rocks, or even some plague-like microorganism to battle against. Consequently, there is no grand mission to be launched to save humanity. For decades, science has utterly failed to identify the cause of the mass infertility. Humanity’s desire to fight heroically, to pull out all the stops and rise to the impossible challenge, is denied any outlet. The inability to defend mankind in a heroic manner produces a collective malaise that slowly descends upon people across the planet. Cultural pillars become largely insignificant, and not surprisingly erode. It is a world in which nations find it extraordinarily difficult to have functioning economies because the potential for future values (and future consumers) no longer exists. Politicians’ promises for a better tomorrow are irrelevant because the concept of “tomorrow” is a thing of the past. Education no longer serves as a meaningful tool for building a better future. Our children, and our children’s children, will not reflect on our lives, our generation, and our struggles. Nor will there be any holidays commemorating mankind’s victory over imminent extinction. All that will be left—after humanity’s “enduring” achievements, great and small, have turned to dust—is silence. Thus, the citizens of *Children of Men’s* (2006) world must find ways to cope for the rest of their lives in an environment where most cultural worldview mechanisms for achieving symbolic immortality are meaningless.

**Religiously Based Anxiety Buffers**

In the absence of traditional symbolic worldview defense mechanisms, citizens in the world of *Children of Men* (2006) are forced to turn to other strategies for managing death anxieties. It is not surprising that religion becomes of heightened importance under such conditions. Apocalyptic films (including *Children of Men*) often contain images of individuals
shouting or holding signs that it is time to repent, as the end is near. Literal immortality in the form of an afterlife is promised by a variety of religions around the world. Similarly, cults and alternative philosophies may thrive under apocalyptic doom. Religious fervor is, of course, fitting in any apocalyptic film as the potential extinction of humanity brings up imagery associated with an Old Testament, wrathful God punishing humanity for its sins on judgment day. Within this religious context, the hero takes on a Christ-like martyr status.

From a TMT perspective, religion provides powerful security against the daunting death awareness humans must confront. Religion offers strong promises of literal immortality in the form of heaven, reincarnation, paradise, or other forms of continued conscious existence (Burket, 1996; Vail, et al., 2010). In addition, religions are ancient cultural institutions that dictate clear standards of behavior, providing mechanisms for symbolic immortality. It is not surprising then that researchers have found that death awareness produces greater investment in, and defense of, religious beliefs. For example, as noted above, when participants in TMT studies are reminded of their death, they exhibit enhanced positive evaluations of targets that share their religious background, and negative evaluations of individuals with different religious backgrounds (Greenberg et al., 1990). Mortality awareness has also been shown to increase a belief in God and the power of prayer, as well as feelings of religiosity (Norenzayan & Hansen, 2006).

Further, religious fundamentalism appears to provide individuals with an anxiety buffer against death, which, in turn, reduces a need for secular forms of worldview defense (Friedman & Rholes, 2008). Similarly, individuals for whom mortality is salient have less of a need to engage in worldview defense if they have been given purported scientific and medical research that supports the existence of an afterlife (Dechesne et al., 2003). Vail et al. (2010) note that religions provide a strong anxiety buffer against fear generated by awareness of one’s mortality that is more compelling for many people than secular forms of worldview defense. In addition, Weise (2012) reports that belief in a soul minimized the effects of death reminders and afforded protection to symbolic immortality threats. As a result, those who believed in an immortal soul reacted more positively to scenarios about the end of the world than those who did not.

**Intergroup Interaction—Cohesion Vs. Conflict**

Apocalyptic films have taken divergent viewpoints on how society would respond to awareness of impending doom. Some films such as *Independence*
Day (1996) and 2012 (2009) have portrayed humans as a species that will band together to create a survival plan to manage or resist whatever threat is present. However, Children of Men (2006) depicts a world where most nations have descended into anarchy. England has imposed a quasi-totalitarian regime to maintain order. Intense conflict for scarce resources has emerged. Economies have utterly collapsed. Law and order is barely attainable. In the face of societal demise, intergroup conflict has exploded across the planet. Director Alfonso Cuarón chose to highlight the current state of affairs in much of Europe, and in the United States (most notably with the Mexican border), through the lens of illegal immigration. In Children of Men, people flood into England, looking for a last bastion of stability that is long gone in their own countries. Native citizens display intolerance and hatred towards the immigrants and refugees, who are seen as a dirty, teeming, uncivilized drain on the few precious remaining resources. Raids commonly round up members of the “fugees” (a slang name for refugees) and other undesirables. Ghettos and prison camps (a cross between Dachau and Guantanamo Bay) are filled with out-group members who have been removed from society. As mankind draws its last breaths, there exists no spirit of “we’re all in this together,” but a renewed, virulent strain of “us vs. them.”

This dramatization of heightened intergroup conflict in the face of impending species mortality is consistent with TMT research findings. Mortality salience has been repeatedly and cross-culturally (in at least 17 countries) shown to produce out-group derogation (Motyl, Pyszczynski, Cox, Siedel, & Maxfield, 2008). For example, following mortality salience manipulations, German participants were more critical of their evaluations of Turkish confederates, and sought greater physical distance from them (Ochsman & Mathey, 1994, as cited in Motyl et al., 2008). Similarly, mortality salient Japanese participants have been shown to more negatively evaluate targets critical of Japan (Heine, Harihara, & Niiya, 1998). Further, and perhaps most relevant to the portrayal of the immigrants in Children of Men, mortality salience has led individuals in both Israel and the United States to evaluate immigrants more negatively (Florian & Mikulincer, 1997; Motyl et al., 2011).

Mortality salience has also been shown to produce increased liking for Americans among American participants (Greenberg et al., 1990), increased application of stereotypes (Schimel et al., 1999), and increased hostility toward those who pose a threat to the social norms and prescriptions of behavior relevant to one’s worldview (Rosenblatt et al., 1989). Reminders of death have also been shown to lead participants to behave in a greedy manner and consume greater resources (Kasser & Sheldon, 2000).
Most disturbingly, mortality salience has produced increased aggression towards individuals who hold opposing political views (McGregor et al., 1998). Consequently, research suggests that if an apocalyptic threat ever faced humans, they may be likely to react in a fractured manner with high intergroup competition, derogation, and destruction. Naturally, it is possible the obliteration of national identifications would reduce the need for worldview defense along these lines.

Cultural Artifacts—Something to Remember Us by

In one scene from *Children of Men*, Theo visits his cousin who is the curator for “The Ark of the Arts.” The Ark refers to a government program to collect humanity’s artistic and intellectual triumphs. Theo walks past works including Michelangelo’s *David* and Picasso’s great antiwar painting *Guernica*. Outside the Ark, there is a large floating pig, symbolic of the legendary British rock group Pink Floyd. These cultural artifacts, reflective of the history of humanity, are being placed in a protected bunker. Theo bemusedly asks his cousin about whom these cultural treasures are being preserved for. He points out that a century later there will not be anyone left to appreciate the artifacts.

In that scene, the Ark provides a moving yet almost absurd tribute to the human race’s hubris and faith in itself, its indomitable spirit of self-preservation, and its desire to transcend death even when that is no longer possible. It is an adamant refusal to allow the human flame to be extinguished. If humanity cannot survive in the flesh, our culture will survive, via a species-wide “time capsule” of sorts. Thus, the Ark of the Arts represents humanity’s final chance to avoid being forgotten. If there are any survivors, or other species evolve, or aliens find our world, they will also have relics of our culture to remember us by.

Although *Children of Men* (2006) portrays a formal collection of cultural artifacts, it is certainly not unique in its portrayal of the importance of such objects. For example, in the *Road Warrior* (1981), there is a poignant moment where Max (Mel Gibson), the main character, finds a dented, out-of-tune little music box that he eventually gives to a feral child, providing a flicker of beauty that is symbolic of a society that no longer remains. Similarly, WALL-E (Ben Burtt), the trash-collecting robot in the film of the same name (*WALL-E*, 2008), is captivated by cultural artifacts he collects on his daily routine. He marvels at the wonders of Zippo lighters, a Rubik’s cube, hubcaps, and plastic forks. Although he is not able to appropriately value the artifacts (as evidenced by a diamond
ring he discards while keeping the box it came in), he does appreciate that they reflect treasures of a lost civilization.

Perhaps one of the most moving examples of the power and importance of cultural artifacts in apocalyptic (and postapocalyptic) films is in the final scene of *Planet of the Apes* (1968).³ Taylor (Charlton Heston), the main character, finds the remnants of the Statue of Liberty and realizes that the ape-dominated alien planet that he has been stranded on is Earth. With the words “Oh my God. I’m back. I’m home. All the time, it was... We finally really did it,” he contends with the knowledge that his own cultural worldview, along with all of its supporters, has been annihilated and replaced with a simian culture.

According to TMT, cultural artifacts provide symbolic representations of one’s cultural worldview and should be more highly valued following mortality salience. Greenberg, Porteus, Simon, Pyszczynski, and Solomon (1995) found this to be the case when they gave American-born participants a problem-solving task that required them to use important cultural symbols in a highly unorthodox manner (i.e., using a US flag to separate sand from black dye, and using a crucifix to hammer a nail into a wall). Participants who first contemplated their own mortality were significantly more hesitant to use the culturally laden objects in an inappropriate way. Thus, in the face of death we are highly motivated to protect symbolic representations of our worldviews, and recoil at the thought of their destruction, with the knowledge that when they are gone, we are truly gone.

**Conclusions**

Apocalyptic themes are an ancient narrative form with biblical roots. These themes have been routinely used to generate compelling plots about the human race’s impending annihilation. The nature of the threats that must be overcome for species’ survival has evolved over the years, and to some extent mirrors technological and scientific advances, growing from natural disasters to scientific inventions to atomic wars to interstellar travel. Regardless of whether the threat is immediate and identifiable or amorphous and a generation away, characters in apocalyptic films must confront their own extinction as well as the obliteration of their culture. TMT asserts that the maintenance and defense of cultural worldviews are essential for managing the overwhelming anxiety associated with death awareness. Often, the main character in such films dies, but achieves heroic status by saving a society that will undoubtedly be eternally grateful, in turn providing the hero with protective symbolic immortality.
Notes

1. Zombie movies (e.g., *World War Z*, 2013, *28 Days Later*, 2002, and *Dawn of the Dead*, 1978) generally fit in this category, as zombism is often caused by, or spreads like, a plague. However, other causes such as supernatural forces (i.e., voodoo—*White Zombie*, 1932) or radiation from a space probe (*Night of the Living Dead*, 1968) sometimes exist.

2. This depiction of a futuristic world where the underlying specter of death leads citizens to support powerful governments is congruent with TMT research that has demonstrated that thoughts of death and reminders of the 9/11 attacks on America produced increased support for the then-current US President George W. Bush and his counter-terrorism policies including Homeland Security Policies (Landau et al, 2004). As Becker, has noted “It is [fear] that makes people so willing to follow brash, strong-looking demagogues with tight jaws and loud voices: those who focus their measured words and their sharpened eyes in the intensity of hate, and so seem most capable of cleansing the world of the vague, the weak, the uncertain, the evil. Ah to give oneself over to their direction—what calm, what relief” (Becker, 1971, p. 161).

3. It should be noted that the *Road Warrior*, *WALL-E*, and *Planet of the Apes* are technically “postapocalyptic films,” rather than “apocalyptic” movies. However, these two genres are (obviously) highly related, and a distinction between them is not relevant to the present discussion.

References


PART II

ASPECTS OF DEATH DENIAL IN INDIVIDUAL FILMS AND GENRES
The greatest recent event—that “God is dead,” that the belief in the Christian god has become unbelievable—is already beginning to cast its first shadows over Europe. For the few at least whose eyes—the suspicion in whose eyes is strong and subtle enough for this spectacle, some sun seems to have set and some ancient and profound trust has been turned into doubt; to them our old world must appear daily more like evening, more mistrustful, stranger, “older” . . . how much must collapse now that this faith has been undermined because it was built upon this faith, propped up by it, grown into it; for example, the whole of our European morality. This long plenitude and sequence of breakdown, destruction, ruin, and cataclysm that is now impending—who could guess enough of it today to be compelled to play the teacher and advance proclaimer of this monstrous logic of terror, the prophet of a gloom and an eclipse of the sun whose like has probably never yet occurred on earth?


According to cultural anthropologist Ernest Becker (1971; 1973; 1975) and the terror management theory (TMT) he inspired (see chapter 2, this volume), humans cope with their mortality by maintaining the sense that they are significant members of a meaningful universe, and thus eligible for immortality—either literally through the heavens and afterlives central to most religions, or symbolically through noteworthy achievements, amassing great fortunes, having children, or being part of a great tribe or nation.
Difficulties arise, however, when personal predilections, social dictates, or historical conditions (or some combination of these factors) make it difficult or impossible to live up to prevailing standards or confidently subscribe to one’s cultural worldview. People then employ a variety of coping strategies to blunt existential terror, including psychic numbing; adopting countercultural worldviews and lifestyles; deifying romantic relationships; exaggerated defense of mainstream religious and secular values; and reducing their conception of the world and themselves to exceedingly narrow dimensions.

Becker relied heavily on popular culture—especially novels, plays, and films—to develop and support his ideas. He frequently declared that Jules Feiffer’s cartoons, essays, plays, and screenplays afforded the most penetrating and insightful literary depictions of how human beings grapple with universal existential concerns, and how such efforts to transcend death go awry in times of historical upheaval. Nowhere is this more evident than in the 1971 film Little Murders, written by Feiffer based on his play of the same name and directed by Alan Arkin. The film is a sardonic depiction of the psychological and behavioral fallout from the disintegration of the post–World War II “American Dream” in the 1960s.

Feiffer described Little Murders as a “post-assassination play,” in the aftermath of President John F. Kennedy’s death. However, he also insisted that JFK’s November 22, 1963 slaying was just the iconic exclamation point of an “era of gratuitous violence,” the accumulated effect of a host of “little murders.” In this chapter we analyze Little Murders from a Beckerian perspective. Becker showed that personality—the characteristic ways in which a person makes meaningful sense of the world and strives for a sense of lasting personal value—is given motivational force from an underlying need to buffer mortality concerns. He also catalogued in rich detail the common styles of thinking, feeling, and acting by which people maintain confident perceptions that they are valued contributors to a meaningful cultural drama. The overall effect of these achievements is that the reader cannot help but realize that we are all neurotic (to varying degrees) in the sense that we filter our conception of reality through the lens of our cultural worldview, and we organize our lifestyle around a limited range of culturally prescribed roles.

Little Murders achieves the same humbling effect. Its characters portray various forms of self-imposed obliviousness: people shutting off experience and desperately clinging to a narrow, inflexible range of perception and action. And yet we see that this is not a failure of adjustment but just the opposite: it is a necessary adjustment to their situation—a refusal to face up fully to the types of creatures that they are—that enables them
to function with equanimity. Although the film’s characters represent extreme, ideal-typical portrayals of neurotic personality styles, they hold up a mirror to our own efforts to sustain meaning and positive self-views in our daily lives.

We unpack these claims by dwelling on convergences between Becker’s catalogue of terror management strategies and the characters of *Little Murders*. In both works, moreover, we will see that although neurosis is normal, it is far from harmless. It can fuel antisocial behavior and undermine the person’s self-determination and optimal psychological functioning. Yet, both the film and Becker’s corpus offer a glimpse at a more authentic—or at least innocuous—strategy for managing terror, which we consider later on. But first a synopsis of the film.

**Little Murders**

The film opens with Patsy Newquist (Marcia Todd), a self-assured 27-year-old interior decorator waking up in her apartment on a typical day—rife with petty crimes, cacophonous street noise, unsolicited phone calls from a former lover and an obscene breather, power blackouts, and unsolved homicides. Watching an apparently defenseless and unresisting man being pummeled by thugs, after unsuccessfully trying to contact the police, Patsy takes to the streets to repel and disperse the goons—while the victim, Alfred Chamberlain (Elliot Gould), an emotionally detached, self-described pessimistic, apathetic, family-hating photographer who takes pictures of dog shit for a living, saunters away humming and fiddling his cameras without bothering to defend or thank her.

Patsy confronts, castigates, and is subsequently attracted to the hopelessly hapless Alfred. Confident she can infuse him with her cheerful and optimistic conception of life, Patsy brings Alfred to dinner to meet the family: her father Carol (Vincent Gardenia), a cantankerous Archie Bunker-like lower middle-class bigot; her mother Marjorie (Elizabeth Wilson), a somnambulistic Harriet-like (i.e., *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet*) housewife; and Kenny (John Korkes), Patsy’s younger, effeminate, histrionic, aimless graduate student brother. Hilarious antics ensue, including Marjorie flirting with Alfred, Carol and Kenny trading insults (about Carol’s name and his physical weakness), Carol’s redneck agitation at Alfred’s militant apathy, Marjorie’s mortification by Alfred’s reference to his excremental images—all punctuated by power blackouts and phone calls from the breather, and then punctured by Marjorie’s postdinner revelation that Patsy’s older “dead brother Steve” had been “shot down in his tracks on the corner of Ninety-seventh Street and Amsterdam Avenue.”
Back on the street, Patsy cajoles Alfred into agreeing to marry her, and calls the Newquists to convey the good news. Patsy’s parents are delighted until Alfred grabs the phone and tells Mrs. Newquist to be sure to tell the minister not to mention God in the ceremony. Carol is outraged: “I’m going to have him arrested.” Nevertheless, Carol helps Alfred and Patsy try to find someone to marry them without using God in the ceremony, brokering an unsuccessful audience with the stereotypically Jewish Judge Stern who delivers a withering antitheistic diatribe.

Alfred and Patsy are ultimately married at the First Existential Church of Ethical Culture (after a call from the breather to a pay phone at the church), by Reverend Dupas in a profoundly funny (and yet extremely serious) service starting with the statement that: “There is so much sham about this business of marriage.” All in attendance, except for Alfred, are mortified throughout (like the audience at the premier of “Springtime for Hitler” in Mel Brook’s *The Producers*). Pandemonium then ensues at the end of the ceremony, when the Reverend insults Carol by proclaiming that he’d never heard of a male with that name; that he would not mention God in the ceremony despite taking a bribe Carol had given him earlier to do so; and making a public and very unsolicited reference to Kenny’s homosexuality.

Back at the newlyweds’ apartment, the breather calls again. Alfred is in fine spirits, but Patsy—demoralized for the first time—insists that Alfred go visit his parents in Chicago with a tape recorder and some questions to figure out why he is the way he is, instead of the way Patsy needs him to be. From their turgid academic psychobabble in response to questions about Alfred’s childhood, it is clear that their parental indifference fostered his emotional detachment and stimulated his self-imposed exile from Chicago after high school.

Home in New York, Alfred plays the recording of his conversation with his parents for Patsy, and goes on to describe an experience he had after college as an antiwar protestor with an FBI informant that also contributed to his pessimistic and detached worldview. Alfred then reveals to Patsy that he is ready to change; to start to see the glass as half full rather than half empty; to start to feel; and to start to fight—and that his first real feeling was worship for her. Patsy is obviously pleased by this revelation, and embraces Alfred passionately—until a sniper’s bullet from across the street shatters the window of their apartment, killing her instantly.

Bloodied and traumatized, Alfred rides the subway, barely noticed by the car full of passengers, back to the Newquists’ house. An all-out siege mentality results; multiple locks are installed on the doors and steel panels on the windows for protection. Marjorie wanders around the house in
a dissociated state mumbling about the good old days, and returns from shopping with a bullet hole in her bag and tales of people getting shot in the other side of the building. Kenny hides in Patsy’s closet. Alfred is in a catatonic stupor. Carol shaves and feeds Alfred in between visits to the local police station doling out bribes to detectives to solve his children’s murders (even the breather calls to express his regrets).

Lieutenant Practice (Alan Arkin), a ranting, paranoid police detective, drops by to report he has made no progress solving Steve’s murder (he cannot even remember that it was Patsy who just died), that the hundreds of unsolved murders in the city must be part of a vast conspiracy to undermine faith in law enforcement personnel, and inferring that the Newquists are implicated in this nefarious plot. This is the last proverbial straw for Carol, who pleads for his freedom in a bombastic tirade—clamoring for video cameras on every street corner, thrashing anyone who breaks the law (even minor offenses like cursing), lobotomizing poor people, and arming all decent citizens.

Carol’s anguish moves Alfred to go for a walk and take some (nonfecal) pictures in Central Park. Alfred returns with a rifle that Carol helps him and Kenny load. Carol, Kenny, and Alfred then take turns shooting people on the street, including Lieutenant Practice. Inspired and invigorated by their murderous outburst, the men swagger back to the dining room joking, cursing, and throwing food at each other (*Planet of the Apes* meets *Animal House*). The film ends with Marjorie’s serene observation at the dinner table that “It’s so nice to have my family laughing again. You know, for a while I was really worried.”

**Cultural Animals in an Existential Age**

“Patsy’s dead brother Steve” is one of the major characters in *Little Murders*, although he never actually appears in the film. Steve is “perfect” by cultural standards. At the Newquist house, his bedroom is maintained as a virtual museum attesting to his youthful accomplishments. Marjorie beams with pride when Alfred admires Steve’s picture in his baseball uniform, hyperbolically boasting that “He only pitched no-hitters.” And she is no less effusive in praise of his heroic military service, bombing Korea and Vietnam. Moreover, Steve had “not an enemy in the world” and “a brilliant future in electronics” when he was murdered in an apparently random act of violence.

Steve’s murder precipitated the shattering of the Newquists’ faith in the American Dream, which was already on the psychological ropes after numerous economic, political, and religious blows in the 1960s that
undermined its credibility, including: the “white flight” to the suburbs; widespread corruption, poverty, and violence in the cities; rampant racism; wholesale disenchantment with traditional religion; controversial (in part because unsuccessful) military interventions in Korea and Vietnam—highlighted by the assassination of JFK on November 22, 1963 (the “Greatest Generation’s” September 11, 2001). The idea of America as a divinely ordained, historically unprecedented “city upon a hill,” “the land of the free and the home of the brave,” where peace and prosperity reign and bad things do not happen to good people (certainly not to war heroes who only pitch no-hitters), which had served as a long-standing bastion of psychological equanimity, had (to borrow a phrase from Nietzsche) “become unbelievable.”

**Comfortably Numb: Tranquilization by the Trivial**

One way to manage the waves of existential terror unleashed by cultural disintegration is to resort to what Kierkegaard labeled as “philistinism.” Becker called this “normal neurosis,” which he defined as figuring “out how to live safely within the probabilities of a given set of social rules” and maintain a “low level of personal intensity” in order to “avoid being pulled off balance by experience” (Becker, 1973, p. 81). In *Little Murders*, normal neurosis is exemplified by Patsy’s and Alfred’s parents in scenes at the Newquist and Chamberlain households.

Marjorie Newquist takes psychological refuge in her role as mother and housewife, nostalgically longing for the “good old days” of flower-filled family picnics in the country with her parents, and poring over childhood pictures of her children. She spends her days at home, rarely venturing outside except to shop (and getting shot at when she does!), keeping Steve’s and Patsy’s bedrooms the same as when they were young, summoning the family to dinner with the spirited exhortation “Come and get it.” As she explained to Alfred: “I always said that to my children at mealtime. I’ve always found it a charming family tradition. I always say ‘Come and get it’ to my children. I dream of the day when I can hear Patsy say ‘Come and get it’ to her children.” Like the average individual, Marjorie adheres unreflectively to the dictates of her cultural worldview and the (gendered) social role assigned to her within its confines.

Carol, even before the kids’ murders, is struggling to acquire and maintain a modicum of self-regard as a vertically-challenged lower middle class American man shackled with a name generally associated with females (which he is repeatedly reminded of throughout the film). Like most Americans, he self-medicates via smoking, drinking, and watching television to blunt self-awareness and minimize self-recrimination for
his shortcomings. After a few drinks, a pack of cigarettes, and watching the nightly news punctuated with commercial banalities (“Fly Eastern. Number One to the Sun”), Carol blames the pacifists and the poor for any lingering psychological discomfort and personal dissatisfaction (“We have to have lobotomies for anyone who earns less than $10,000 a year. I don’t like it, but it’s an emergency.”)

The Newquists are a fine caricature of urban “white trash” familiar to most Americans: uneducated, uncouth, uncultured, and uninteresting. In contrast, the Chamberlains are a pointed reminder that culture and refinement are no assurance of psychological depth, and can also serve to keep people “comfortably numb.” Alfred’s parents serve as highbrow examples of philistines tranquilized by the trivial. They are obviously well-educated and thoroughly steeped in contemporary art, film, music, and photography. Moreover, they are clearly well-versed in contemporary psychoanalytic thought, without any seeming awareness that such ideas might actually apply to them as people or parents.

When Alfred comes to visit them at their home in Chicago, the Chamberlains, while unmistakably pleased to see him, behave as if he was a casual acquaintance who they saw on a regular basis, inviting him to go to an art gallery or a movie. When Alfred insists on asking them questions about his childhood, they respond to each query with alternating snippets of psychobabble that have nothing to do with him personally (and indeed, Mr. and Mrs. Chamberlain address each other rather than Alfred directly):

Question: “Was I a happy or unhappy child?”
Answer: “What is one to say? Well, every child has anxiety. I mean, we’re just not willing to accept anxiety anymore. Freud… I think it was Freud… dates all anxiety back to the birth trauma. Rank too.”

Question: “Was I breast-fed or bottle-fed?”
Answer: “Sullivan. Sullivan writes about the significance of powerless-ness. It’s years since I’ve looked at Sullivan. Doesn’t Sullivan also have something to say… it could be Adler, but I think it’s Sullivan… the dynamism of apathy?”

Question: “Was I difficult to toilet train?”
Answer: “Uh, Klein. Klein speaks of the coupling of early Oedipus wishes… with the fear of castration. The child’s desire to possess the mother’s feces.”

No wonder Alfred left home right after high school and became a self-described “apathist!”
Countercultural Worldviews and Lifestyles

Another means of managing existential terror is to embrace alternative cultural worldviews and lifestyles, as Kenny does in the film. As the youngest child in the family—with an overbearing father, a “perfect” older brother, and a brash and robust older sister—the cultural and psychodynamic odds were against him from the outset given his unimposing physical size and effeminate disposition. He always fell short (literally and figuratively) in his father’s eyes, compared unfavorably on all dimensions with Steve, and lost every childhood wrestling match with Patsy. Consequently, in an era of sexism, homophobia, and the predominance of traditionally masculine identity definitions, Kenny could not obtain self-esteem by viewing himself as a typical American, although he understood that he would have fared better had he not been burdened with a Y chromosome: “I should have been a girl. Girls have it easy. They’re better at studying. They’re not forced to play ball. They don’t have to have a job. I really could’ve handled it.”

So Kenny abandons the American Dream. He settles instead for an ineffectual lifestyle. He passes his days lounging around the apartment in his pajamas and reading soft-core pornographic fantasy novels (“Lesbians of Venus”). We gather that he is in graduate school to become a filmmaker, but we never see him take steps toward achieving that goal. When members of the household encounter challenging circumstances, he swiftly takes sanctuary in Patsy’s closet (perhaps a metaphor for his sexual orientation). Like many people, who, due to their genetic predispositions or personal preferences, are alienated from the cultural mainstream, Kenny abandons any hope of living up to the mainstream prescriptions for valued conduct.

The Romantic Solution

Patsy could, however, do quite well acquiring a sense of meaning and value as a denizen of mainstream culture given her vocational success as an interior decorator. Nevertheless, she relied on what Ernest Becker, following Otto Rank (1931/1961), designated as “The Romantic Solution” to address her existential concerns, by investing the bulk of her psychological energies in her current “significant other.” Such relationships often consist of a seemingly self-assured individual who is idolized by a seemingly self-deprecating subordinate other. Karen Horney (1950) dubbed such an arrangement morbid dependency, because each person in this kind of interaction is overly dependent on the other. The subordinate
individual (more or less) happily relinquishes her or his autonomy to draw strength from the other, whom they place on a psychological pedestal. The elevated individual in turn welcomes (indeed, often insists on) being worshipped because his or her veneer of self-confidence can only be sustained by constant external affirmation.

Moreover, such relationships are inherently unfair to both participants, and are ultimately unstable and unsustainable. It is unfair for the “superior” partner to claim constant adulation from the “subordinate,” and to divest her or he of their individuality—because the deified “loves being loved” more than he or she loves the actual partner in the relationship. And it is equally unfair for the “subordinate” to place the other on a psychological pedestal (even if they aspire to that lofty perch) and deify him or her. Treating a person like a god is asking too much of any mere mortal; and, indeed, because he or she is mortal—and hence fallible and subject to (as Ralph Waldo Emerson put it) “the accidents of the weary kingdom of time” such as sickness, aging, and death—the deified partner cannot possibly live up to such unrealistic and unattainable expectations. Consequently, although these kinds of relationships often appear auspicious initially, tensions generally arise shortly thereafter (often surrounding disagreements about the need for overt declarations of love and commitment; when Patsy tells Alfred “I think I’m falling in love with you,” his response is “I don’t know what love is!”), followed by a painful protracted decline and final dissolution. Ensuing relationships then tend to adhere to the same pattern.

This is a fairly accurate account of Patsy’s love-life in *Little Murders*. Before Alfred, there was Lester, Howard, Roger, as well as a musician, a stockbroker, and a Jewish novelist—each a psychic cripple in need of a romantic savior. As Patsy put it, “they want a woman they can collapse without shame in front of.” All of them adore her: “Alfred, do you have any idea how many people in this town worship me?” All of them, that is, except Alfred, who resists Patsy’s ardent efforts to transform him into a more compliant admirer: “I love the man I wanted to mold you into…. You’ve got to let me mold you. Please let me mold you!” Patsy is equally insistent that Alfred relinquish his overriding pessimism and share her more optimistic view of life.4

**God and Country: Law and Order**

Another typical response when “the rumble of panic underneath everything” (as William James put it) creeps closer to consciousness is to “double down” and bolster one’s faith in core religious and/or secular
principles. Judge Stern (Lou Jacobi) plays a short but important role in the film, presenting an impassioned (and hilarious) defense of God and religion as a means to diminish existential anguish. When Alfred and Patsy come to the Judge in hope that he will marry them without mentioning God in the ceremony (i.e., a civil ceremony), the Judge pelts them with an agitated tirade about his early life in a tenement house in lower Manhattan where Jews, blacks, and Italians lived together, sharing bathrooms, poverty and persecution. He relays in painstaking detail his childhood work history, making the poor waifs in Charles Dickens’ novels seem like card-carrying union members with full pensions by comparison. He credits God for his subsequent ascension to the judiciary, and for keeping his elderly mother safe in her retirement home in Florida. Finally, he admonishes Alfred and Patsy for being “glib about God” as Alfred leads the charge from the courtroom when it becomes quite evident that there will be no civil marriage without God in that particular courtroom.

Belief in an omnipresent omnipotent God—keeping an eye on things in this life, and more importantly, serving as gatekeeper for admission to the afterlife—is the ultimate antidote for death anxiety. And this is especially true under difficult social and economic conditions. When times are tough on earth, confident trust in a better life beyond the grave is the only thing that makes it possible to get up in the morning to, in Judge Stern’s words, “face another day of hopelessness and despair.” However (as Nietzsche predicted), it is difficult to maintain faith in traditional religious worldviews in modern, industrial, religiously heterogeneous communities.

This was certainly the case for Carol Newquist, who after Steve’s death, strives desperately to preserve his faith in law and order in a civil society. He goes to the police station regularly to check on the status of the case, leaving small “tips” (i.e. bribes) to keep the wheels of justice turning. He admits to Alfred prior to the wedding that mentioning God in the ceremony has little to do with his theological views: “I don’t say I believe in God. The question is wide open. But with me it’s not a matter of belief in God. It’s a matter of belief in institutions.”

Lieutenant Practice is also a great believer in law and order, especially order. Like Carol, Practice frantically attempts to make sense of the senseless, to find order amidst the chaos. Discombobulated by three hundred and forty-five unsolved homicides in six months, the Lieutenant declares (at the Newquists’ home while being shot at occasionally): “Sooner or later there’s a pattern. Sooner or later everything falls into
place. I believe that. If I didn’t believe that . . . I wouldn’t wanna wake up tomorrow morning and see the sunrise.” Then with exquisite pretzel-logic he proceeds:

A subtle pattern begins to emerge. What is this pattern? What is it that each of these three hundred and forty-five homicides have in common? They have in common three things: a) that they have nothing in common; b) that they have no motive; c) that, consequently, they remain unsolved. . . . When a case does not gel it is often not because we lack the necessary facts, but because we have observed our facts incorrectly. . . . Following normal routine we looked for a cause. And we could find no cause. Had we looked for effect we would have had our answer that much sooner. What is the effect of three hundred and forty-five unsolved homicide cases? The effect is loss of faith in law-enforcement personnel. That is our motive. The pattern is complete. We are involved here in a far-reaching conspiracy to undermine respect for our basic beliefs and most sacred institutions.

The daft Lieutenant speaks great truth if one overlooks the paranoid conspiracy part of his tirade. That is, “once respect for our basic beliefs and most sacred institutions” is undermined, symbolic, meaning-making, self-esteem-seeking social animals become disillusioned, demoralized, and . . . dangerous.

**Fetishism: Resorting to Concrete Bases of Self-Esteem**

Self-esteem—the primary psychological defense against mortality concerns—can come under threat when the validity of the worldview upon which it is based is called into question. To recap, faith in the worldview is sustained primarily by means of social consensus—the more people who subscribe to the worldview, the more veridical it appears to be (Berger & Luckmann, 1967). Consequently, encounters with ideologically dissimilar others (“He doesn’t want God in the ceremony?!”) can weaken the individual’s confidence that adhering to the worldview’s standards for value will ensure lasting personal significance. Restoring this confidence is normally achieved by defending the worldview (e.g., surreptitiously arranging to have God mentioned in the ceremony).

In his early works *Revolution in Psychiatry* (1964) and *Angel in Armor* (1969), Becker described a related but distinct type of self-esteem threat. He claimed that while people derive self-esteem from various specific sources, subjective certainty of one’s personal value essentially hinges on the perception that the self is capable of acting efficaciously—of exercising power over the social and physical environment. People look to their environment
for clearly defined and reliable standards for effective action (that is, for “meaning,” in Becker’s succinct definition). Therefore, when the standards for effective action in a situation are ambiguously defined or unreliable, people can become uncertain about their personal value. The worry here is less “Am I doing the right thing?” and more “What should I be doing?”

To compensate for this uncertainty, Becker claimed, people sometimes reduce their conception of the world and themselves to exceedingly narrow dimensions, or “fetishes,” that afford clearly delineated, concrete opportunities to act efficaciously and thus sustain self-esteem. People invest their fetishes with undue psychological importance, and rely on them to understand and relate to the world, because they help fend off the uncertain and negative self-views that might arise from relating to the environment in a more open, flexible manner.

Fetishes provide a basis for confidently held feelings of personal value primarily by virtue of their concreteness, not their consensual validation. That is why most fetishes are embodied in some tangible aspect of the world that can be pointed to and understood with objective certainty (e.g., a prop in a choreographed sexual encounter). That is also why fetishes tend to be idiosyncratic—one might say creative—in a way that mainstream worldview investment is not. Put simply, fetishes need not be shared to provide security. Next we consider two manifestations of fetishism that appear in Little Murders.

Alfred’s materialism. Successful interpersonal relationships are a conventional basis of self-esteem, but they come with an inherent challenge. The person can never really be certain what is going on in other people’s minds, so she can never know conclusively whether or not she is able to influence others’ thoughts and feelings in desired ways. Whereas most people tolerate this uncertainty, for Alfred it is oppressive. He lacks confidence in his ability to sustain emotional commitments and he shrinks from unfamiliar social encounters (“I hate families”). Interpersonal transactions no longer afford Alfred clearly-defined routes to effective action and thus a confident basis for viewing himself as valuable.

Alfred’s first line of defense is to downplay awareness of others’ subjectivity, dismissing the hidden, nebulous, and unreliable states that he feels powerless to influence. He does not attend to others’ emotional experience as communicated through their face or body language, nor does he seem intent on anticipating others’ reaction to his own behavior or persuading others of his specialness.

Still needing to feel a sense of mastery, though, Alfred has reduced his understanding of the world and his own behavioral repertoire to the narrow dimension of inanimate objects—things that lack subjectivity
and thus never betray or disappoint, resist or forget. Alfred recounts his descent into fetishistic materialism over the course of his photography career: “After a couple of years...things began to go wrong: I began losing my people. Somehow I got my heads chopped off, or out of focus...the harder I tried to straighten out, the fuzzier my people got and the clearer my objects. Soon my people disappeared entirely; they somehow never came out. But the objects I was shooting: brilliantly clear.”

The face/head—the most prominent window into others’ subjectivity—lost meaning for Alfred at the same time that manipulating objects filled in as a confident (albeit limited) basis for self-esteem.

The solace of sadism. Becker’s analysis of fetishism sheds light on perhaps the most surreal element of Little Murders, namely, the orgy of sadistic violence in the film’s final scene. Here we see Alfred, Carol, and Kenny break a window in the apartment and start shooting at random people in the street. We might interpret from their gorilla-like grunts and chest pounding that they have simply regressed to a pre-human stage of primate evolution. But that interpretation misses an important point. We are still witnessing creatures with a distinctive craving for meaning and self-esteem. Indeed, this scene includes two poignant instances of characters receiving long-awaited tokens of approval: Carol expresses fatherly pride for Kenny, and Alfred addresses Carol warmly as “dad.” So what is happening here?

As mentioned, Becker (1969) noted how the uncertainty involved in impressing one’s value on others, and keeping their sense of one’s value alive and alert, is a major obstacle to the person’s efforts to act effectively and thereby maintain self-esteem. We can try to convince others of our powers—show them we are smart, funny, and so on—but we can never know with certainty whether we have succeeded. When a person feels particularly insecure in his ability to understand and control others at a subjective level, he can avoid the interpersonal world altogether, as we just saw exemplified in Alfred’s materialism.

Another compensatory strategy is sadism: the assertion of one’s power over others through conspicuous physical violence. Sadism is appealing because it affords relatively indisputable evidence for one’s value. After all, if one can prove oneself physically stronger than another, or can gain power over the life of another, one’s own value can appear unambiguously superior: I am standing and you are not; hence, I had an effect on the world; there is no doubt about my powers now. The sadist protects himself against feelings of impotence by reducing others to the status of objects that can be physically overpowered and destroyed, thereby affording a tangible, concrete basis of self-esteem that leaves no one in doubt (at least
temporarily; Becker suspected that sadism supported self-esteem only in the short-term).

And that is what is happening in this scene. Alfred, Carol, and Kenny have been continually frustrated in their attempts to assert worth through conventional routes. Mounting nihilism and feelings of personal inadequacy have prompted them to abandon those conventional routes and switch to a more concrete, well-defined avenue for effecting some change in the world. The definitive Crack! of the rifle, the sight of motionless bodies on the ground: the sheer concrete certainty of physical conquest makes sadism so attractive when uncertainty about one’s value becomes intolerable.

**Death, Not the Breather, as an Existential Wake-Up Call**

Through analysis of the so-called normal personality, Becker showed how common modes of thinking, feeling, and acting represent strategies for maintaining the perception that one is a valued member of a meaningful cultural reality who will continue on in some fashion after death. The characters of *Little Murders* are walking caricatures of these strategies. Through them we observe how people’s efforts to deny their mortal fate often lead to antisocial and self-destructive behavior.

This grim diagnosis of the human enterprise may be humbling, but it need not be hobbling. Both Becker’s writings and *Little Murders* point at modes of personality capable of overcoming maladaptive responses to death. In some cases, reminders of mortality do not increase adherence to familiar sources of meaning and self-esteem; rather, they produce the opposite effect, breaking people out of their habitual modes of thought and action. For example, survivors of trauma or near-death experience often report emerging from their harrowing experiences ready to embrace a more expansive and flexible conception of the world and themselves (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004).

This is exemplified in Alfred’s initial response to Patsy’s death. Shortly after the murder, Alfred is on the subway, his shirt covered in Patsy’s blood. Other passengers see this pathetic figure, but none thinks to come to his aid. Instead, they look upon Alfred with disgust and contempt, shifting their bodies to avoid getting blood on their clothes. Alfred, typically deadened to others, finally has his apathy thrown back at him, and he does not like it. He is primed to open himself up to new modes of relating to the world.

Moments later we see Alfred in Central Park. As is his custom, he prepares to take pictures of feces, further indulging his fetishistic tendency to engage with the object world. Yet, seeing the park through Alfred’s eyes/
viewfinder, we sense his incipient curiosity and an urge to expand his horizon of possibilities to progressively greater degrees of vital dynamism. First he turns to trees (inanimate, yes, but more dynamic than feces); then to a statue of a man’s bust (static, sure, but at least a perceptible human face). Now he feels eligible to commune face-to-face with other persons in their full humanity—or at least to take pictures of them. He beholds an elderly man in lederhosen sitting under a tree. Next up: people interacting with one another. He catches a tender moment between lovers on a bench; now children waving enthusiastically and making funny faces; now a track team racing by. Note how each of these subjects—romantic love, fun, and athletic activity—was previously a target of Alfred’s cynical scorn. Finally, Alfred allows himself to be captivated by the mystery inherent in other people. He encounters a man impeccably dressed in a white suit that contrasts with his rustic surrounds, and he savors the man’s mystique. In the space of an afternoon, Alfred reverses his career trajectory, gradually relaxing his constricted focus on the object world and bringing “his people” back into clear view. For that afternoon, the world spoke passionately to Alfred, and he joined the dialogue.

In fact, Alfred’s expanded awareness extends to his own subjectivity and humanity. At one point he looks up to find that another photographer is taking pictures of him, and he seems offended at being objectified in this manner. Why should he be? Earlier in the film we saw him consenting to having his face bashed in by bullies (he even came prepared with a mouth guard!). At that point he accepted having his total personality reduced to the status of a passive punching bag. But now, having just participated in the ongoing flux of life, responding spontaneously to other’s actions and delighting in even fleeting moments of beauty, such objectification is unacceptable. Now Alfred is conscious of his own distinctive inner personality, and he wants assurance from others that they recognize him and not merely his body.

In short, Patsy’s untimely demise prompted Alfred to confront his existential limitations, particularly the inevitability of his own death, and this experience oriented him toward intrinsically rewarding activities and a greater acceptance and appreciation of life and all it has to offer. Is this a sustainable terror management strategy? The film suggests that it is not. In the very next scene, Alfred arrives at the Newquist residence with a gun, ready to enlist Carol and Kenny in a conspicuous display of power that reduces others to the status of moving targets. What happened? According to Otto Rank, people spend their lives oscillating between the need for psychological security and the growth mechanisms by which liberating activity is enjoyed and becomes integrated into one’s
character (see Pyszczynski, Greenberg, & Goldenberg, 2003, for further discussion). Rank noted that asserting individuality and tapping into liberating new expressive energies can elicit anxiety and guilt because it involves stepping outside of familiar sources of meaning and value that provide protection from basic fears. To minimize these negative feelings, the person may cling to those familiar sources of meaning and self-esteem even more rigidly, even if it means cutting off growth.

**Coda**

Nietzsche posited a will to power that drives humans to continually expand, seek new experiences, and move toward self-reliance, creativity, and realizing their potential. He described the process of growth with a parable about three stages of a person’s maturation: the camel who becomes a lion who becomes a child.

Much like a camel dutifully lugging baggage through the desert, the person at the first stage accepts the constraints on freedom imposed by other people's expectations, cultural standards, and their own internal impulses and habits. *Little Murders* offers vivid portrayals of the camel in Mr. and Mrs. Newquist, among other lesser characters. Nietzsche’s second stage of development is the age of lion—the person who rejects the limitations and rebels against his or her past, the cultural establishment, and the circumstances of his life. Nietzsche pointed out that the rebellious lion has a false sense of freedom, however, because by aggressively attacking traditional values and meaning systems he still defines themselves in terms of those external systems. That is, whereas the conformist camel looks at the mainstream worldview and says “it must be,” the rebellious lion says “it cannot be,” but both are alike in that they define themselves largely in terms of their relationship with that worldview (“for what we hate, we take too seriously”—Montaigne, 1925, p. 7). Alfred is the lion for the majority of the film, railing against convention and other repressive aspects of bourgeois culture.

This brings us to the third stage of maturation—the age of the child. Whereas the camel accepts limitations and the lion rejects them, the child accepts its limitations but turns joyously toward life and embraces new possibilities. Nietzsche claimed that people at this stage are not childish, but child-like in their curiosity and creative energy; they affirm life even when it seems unjust and absurd, and they strive to realize their personal potential. In the Central Park scene, Alfred offers a vivid example of the child who accepts his nothingness in the cosmic scheme of things but nevertheless turns around to say “Yes” to creative love and work.
Notes

1. The film originated as a Broadway play in 1967, which closed after only seven performances. A contemporaneous London production by the Royal Shakespeare Company, directed by Christopher Morahan at the Aldwych Theatre, was better received. Alan Arkin then directed an off-Broadway production of the play in 1969, which ran for 400 performances and garnered several awards.

2. In a February 1, 1967 letter to director Christopher Morahan during rehearsal of the London production of the play.

3. Thanks to Pink Floyd (“comfortably numb”) and Søren Kierkegaard (“tranquilization by the trivial”) for these phrases.

4. In fairness to Patsy, her affection for Alfred is sincere (above and beyond a dysfunctional romantic solution to existential concerns), and is genuinely reciprocated.

5. It is somewhat ironic, yet perhaps not insignificant, that this defense comes from a judge in a courtroom in a country founded on the principle of separation of church and state, in glaring contrast to Reverend Dupas’ take on traditional religion in a church (of sorts) depicted later.

References

The undesirability of emotion is a theme in many contemporary films and ambivalence toward emotion is not new in Western intellectual history. Ever since Plato cast suspicion on emotion in the fifth century BC, we have had a love/hate relationship with it. Whereas the mind has traditionally been associated with timeless rational principles and regarded as a necessary condition of human freedom, emotion has been seen as an obstacle to autonomy that is aligned with the ephemeral body, an entity subject to natural laws and limits, the first and foremost being death. This chapter examines Western culture’s longstanding antagonism toward emotion and maintains that the traditional interest in suppressing or altogether eliminating emotion is motivated in part by its ability to disclose human mortality. This fact is shown in a variety of cinematic works: particularly, and perhaps not surprisingly, those in the fantasy genre. Futuristic works such as I, Robot (2004) and Equilibrium (2002) present the eradication of emotion as a possibility. Likewise, the five films based on Stephenie Meyers’s The Twilight Saga and the eight films inspired by J. K. Rowling’s Harry Potter series illustrate the desire to master emotion and conquer death.

Mortal Fears: Death and Emotion

Before launching into a discussion of the films mentioned, it is necessary to discuss the relationship between emotion and cognition, particularly
the link between emotion and the awareness that individuals have of their finitude. While the works of famous philosophers such as Plato, Descartes, and Kant have encouraged the view that emotion is distinct from reason and frequently represents a threat to it, contemporary theorists of the emotions suggest that our affective and cognitive faculties are far more integrated than the traditional view indicates.\footnote{One can find evidence of this view in earlier philosophical works as well, including that of existentialist philosopher Martin Heidegger.}

Heidegger’s work is significant for present purposes not merely because it establishes a strong link between emotion and cognition (e.g., feeling and knowing), but also because it links emotion to awareness of mortality and recognizes the tendency that individuals have to try and suppress this awareness, or deny death. Heidegger comments on these subjects at length in his major work, *Being and Time* (1927/1996). For Heidegger, human being is fundamentally temporal and humans are creatures who exist in (and depend upon) the world are social and mortal. According to Heidegger, human being is *ecstatic*: it lies outside of itself. We are not self-initiating, self-contained, and fully autonomous creatures. Instead, our being is given to us years before we conceptualize it. In fact, throughout the full course of our lives, our being depends upon people and things outside us. Though individuals do not normally reflect upon their being in any formal way until maturity (if ever), Heidegger maintains that pre-reflective awareness of being is elemental to humans, and he uses the term attunement to describe this awareness. Attunement is initially and predominantly expressed emotionally, or affectively, as “care” (Heidegger, 1927/1996, p. 37). Care occurs “before all cognition” (p. 129); indeed, it is its necessary condition. Care originates in, and is principally about the individual (p. 39), but it directs the individual out to the world.

Like other living creatures, humans are initially and for the most part preoccupied with the world because we must procure specific things from it to survive. Of course, once we leave the womb, the world does not spontaneously give us everything we need, but we do not start out knowing this. Instead, an individual develops formal (reflexive) understanding of reality as her needs are not immediately met. When the individual’s needs are not met promptly, she experiences palpable “angst” (p. 171), namely, the feeling that her being is in jeopardy. Angst motivates care and cognitive assessment of the situation. This assessment discloses things in themselves and this revelation of discrete things produces what we commonly refer to as knowledge. Though knowledge can later be pursued for its own ends, Heidegger makes the point that it is initially pragmatic. He states that “in knowing [the individual] gains a new perspective…” toward
the world” (p. 58), a perspective that ideally helps her resolve concerns regarding her ability to obtain what she needs to sustain her being.

As the preceding paragraphs indicate, Heidegger believes that knowing begins in caring. Thus, cognition is motivated by emotion and one emotional response is critical: angst. According to Heidegger, angst is “the most fundamental kind of attunement” (p. 171). Angst motivates the care we exhibit toward the world by revealing the absolute nature of our dependence: without the world, we will die. Importantly, angst discloses not only our dependence upon the world, but also our mortality. Angst reveals that our being is inescapably finite and that death is our final possibility. Ultimately, angst reveals the inescapable threat that lies within our being rather than outside it. In fact, this powerful emotion is what motivates formal recognition of mortality. Of course, the formal recognition of death is not something that most individuals can stomach.

Though Heidegger asserts that individuals benefit from acknowledging and accepting their mortality, he recognizes that most individuals instead seek to “fle[e] from and forge[it] it” (p. 41). This fact leads Heidegger to distinguish between two basic modes of human being: authentic and inauthentic (p. 159). For Heidegger, when one lives authentically, one resigns oneself to the inescapability of angst, “endure[s]” (p. 241) angst, and intellectually confronts (and accepts) the features of the human condition that the emotions, or what Heidegger refers to generally as “moods” (p. 127) disclose, most notably, mortality. In contrast, those who are inauthentic “fle[e] . . . explicitly revealed thrownness” (p. 319), particularly awareness of their finitude. As Heidegger states, “evasion of death dominates everydayness . . . so stubbornly” (p. 234) that it is the norm rather than an “exceptional state” (p. 112). Inauthentic existence is problematic because it represents an “evasive turning away” (p. 128) from being and a “flight . . . from oneself” (p. 173).

Psychological theorist Ernest Becker agrees with Heidegger regarding the prevalence of inauthenticity, particularly the denial of death. In his book *The Denial of Death*, Becker (1973) credits Heidegger for placing mortality “at the center of existential philosophy” (p. 53). He maintains, like Heidegger, that the “fear of death is . . . a universal in the human condition” (p. ix), and that a substantial portion of human activity is “designed . . . to avoid the fatality of death” (p. ix). Confirming Heidegger’s thesis that anxiety regarding mortality anchors the basic existential concern that we display, Becker asserts that “fear of death . . . [is] present behind all our normal functioning” (p. 16). Likewise, just as Heidegger maintains that most individuals engage in modes of “distraction” in order to resist coming to the full formal awareness of death to which anxiety moves them,
Becker asserts “repression takes care of . . . death for most people” (p. 20). Becker also indicates that the fact that most people suppress their existential angst “does not mean the fear was never there” (p. 20), or that it does not persist in an altered or subconscious state. Indeed, both theorists concur that angst regarding death can be evaded, but not eradicated; thus, under repression, angst is transferred and finds expression in other more conventional fears such that the individual “who flees death is pursued by it even as [she] evades it” (Heidegger, 1927/1996, p. 389).

It should be noted that neither Heidegger nor Becker maintains that normal repression of the awareness of death entails that the individual deny that “death is a phenomenon of life” (Heidegger, 1927/1996, p. 229). Most individuals accept death intellectually as an abstract existential fact; however, they refuse to accept it as their personal destiny. Instead, they actively suppress feelings that suggest otherwise, and engage in activities that preclude formal thought about their demise. To the extent that virtually everyone is indoctrinated to avoid talking and thinking about death, Heidegger and Becker concur that our pervasive denial of death produces a culture that estranges individuals from their being. Heidegger and Becker also agree that preoccupation with mortality is neither a genuine sign of authenticity nor ultimately productive, but instead an atypical form of inauthentic being. Becker (1973) calls this “Prometheanism” (p. 85), a term that both captures the desire to conquer death and foreshadows the outcome of the enterprise.

Ultimately, the desire to eliminate emotion can be read as expressive of the denial of death that Heidegger and Becker assert is symptomatic of modern culture. The denial of emotion amounts to a denial of death because emotions are the principle vehicles that deliver awareness of mortality. It is angst that gives us a visceral awareness of our being toward death and simultaneously prompts us to move toward formal recognition of our mortality. However, as both Heidegger and Becker make plain, to the extent that humans find angst disconcerting, they more regularly seek to escape, rather than to embrace it, and this escape is mostly unconscious, or at least prereflective.² As Heidegger (1927/1996) states: humans “maintain [themselves] initially and for the most part in inauthentic being-toward-death” (p. 240); or, as Becker (1973) would say, humans “tranquilize” (p. 178) themselves with “vital lies” (p. 51). Yet both agree we cannot truly evade death because of the perennial reappearance of angst. Thus, though it may not be a practical possibility, the idea of eliminating emotion, particularly angst, appeals to our imagination because it offers the possibility of successful denial of death.
The Future of Emotion

*I, Robot* and *Equilibrium* present audiences with futuristic scenarios in which suppression of the emotions has been achieved. *I, Robot* is set in Chicago in the year 2035. Whereas the humans portrayed in the film are still subject to their emotions, advances in the area of artificial intelligence have facilitated the creation of humanoid robots that lack emotion and are governed solely by rational laws. Marketed extensively to the public, these robots are fully integrated into everyday life. They are programmed to live alongside and assist humans, and as the film suggests, humans have become highly dependent upon them. While the film offers a cautionary tale regarding our increasing reliance on technology and explores issues of identity, its robots also illustrate the fantasy we have of eliminating emotion.

*I, Robot*, focuses on two main types of robot, the NS-4 and NS-5 models, both of which are manufactured by US Robotics (USR) and are celebrated as the most advanced robots ever made. Importantly, their lack of emotion is regarded as essential to their efficacy, ensuring their ongoing and unequivocal operation as entities that support human enterprises. However, suspicion is cast on these icons of steel when the main character in the film, Detective Del Spooner (Will Smith), is called to investigate the death of a prominent scientist and the progenitor of the robots, Dr. Alfred Lanning (James Cromwell). Though Lanning’s death is initially thought to be a suicide, Spooner quickly concludes it is a murder attributable to the one other entity present at the time of Lanning’s death, an NS-4 robot named Sonny (Alan Tudyk).

Importantly, suspicions regarding Sonny’s involvement with Lanning’s death increase when it is revealed that Sonny is a very special robot, namely, one with “human emotions.” Indeed, the film plays upon the traditional suspicion of emotion in an early scene where Spooner interrogates Sonny. Here, Sonny’s emotions not only are made apparent, but also suggest he is volatile and potentially dangerous. He explodes at Spooner, denting a steel table and threatening physical harm. This portrayal is consistent with the conventional view of emotions and the concern we have that they can overpower us and endanger others. However, as the story progresses Sonny becomes an increasingly sympathetic figure in large part due to the awareness he has of his mortality, awareness that is occasioned by emotion.

Sonny’s awareness of and concern over his mortality is evident in a scene where he converses at length with Dr. Susan Calvin (Bridget Moynahan). Dr. Calvin is Lanning’s protégé, and senior scientist at USR, subsequent
to his death. In the scene, Dr. Calvin faces the task of deactivating Sonny, a task she finds troubling because Sonny has feelings. Though Sonny has resigned himself to being decommissioned, he expresses anxiety about dying, asking, “Will it hurt?” In these moments, Sonny strikes audiences as decidedly human because of his emotion and concern about his mortality. It is perhaps this humanity that leads Dr. Calvin to spare Sonny. As the plot progresses it becomes clear that Sonny’s emotions are not a danger to humanity, but the key to their salvation.

In the end, rather than emotion being portrayed as a problem, rationality unaided by emotion is questioned. Spooner discovers that the mainframe computer at USR, VIKI, an ironic “personification” of pure mind, can override human control of the newly released NS-5 robots. As VIKI explains, she overrides the controls in order to fulfill her obligation to the three laws. The laws state that a robot: (1) cannot harm a human, (2) must fulfill the orders of a human unless this conflicts with law 1, and (3) must protect itself unless it conflicts with law 1 or 2. VIKI contends that the laws entail that robots must subjugate humans in order to keep them from harming themselves. Though the violent subjugation of humanity seems perfectly logical to VIKI, it is an anathema to both Spooner and audiences.

As *I, Robot* shows, the NS-5 robots cannot think for themselves; they are bound by the limited logic of the laws. Most importantly, they personify the consequences of a life without emotion—cold, hard, anonymous, and incapable of discriminating judgment. In the climax of the film, as legions of emotionless NS-5s sweep in to attack Spooner, Calvin, and Sonny, they are portrayed like locusts, namely, as inhuman agents of death. The dream of eliminating emotion turns quickly into a nightmare. Happily, Sonny, the one robot with emotion, aids Spooner and humanity is saved.

*Equilibrium* is another film featuring a nightmarish illustration of a future without emotion. Set in the fictional city-state of Libria some time after a World War III decimated most of the human population early in the twenty-first century, *Equilibrium* depicts a society in which emotions have been virtually eliminated in an effort to ensure the survival of the human race. Here again, we see a direct link drawn between emotion and death. As the opening lines of the film state, “Those who survived [World War III] knew that mankind could not survive a fourth; that our own volatile natures could no longer be risked; so we created a new arm of the law...[to] eradicate the true source of man’s inhumanity to man—his ability to feel.” This new arm of the law, the Tetragrammaton, is comprised of highly trained “clerics” who enforce the new totalitarian
ideology, the elimination of emotion, achieved through the population’s mandated use of the emotion-suppressing drug Prozium. As Libria’s leader, Father, states, “Prozium [is] our great nepenthe. Opiate of our masses…Salve and salvation, it has delivered us from pathos…we embrace Prozium…[for] all that it has done to make us great.”

_Equilibrium_ focuses on the character John Preston (Christian Bale), a high-ranking cleric. Like other clerics, Preston locates and apprehends those who violate the state-sanctioned prohibition of feeling by refusing to take Prozium, and who harbor contraband, namely, emotion-eliciting material such as music and art. These individuals are identified as “sense offenders” and are subject to immediate and shocking sanction: incineration. Though Libria’s leadership maintains that the abolition of emotion is necessary for human survival, and certain features of the film express the traditional fantasy of transcending emotion, as the aforementioned example suggests, virtually all other aspects of the work combine to engender an unequivocally cynical view of a future without emotion.

The traditional suspicion of emotion and the fantasy that we have of transcending it are made manifest in the central premise of _Equilibrium_ as well as in its initial depiction of Preston and the clerics. In the opening scene, Preston is called to eradicate a “sense” ring. Like cops making a drug bust, Preston and his associates raid a dilapidated apartment house in order to apprehend sense offenders and seize illicit materials. The agents secure the scene with amazing speed due to their complete indifference to danger and death that is occasioned by the suppression of their emotions. Indeed, Preston storms an entire room of armed gunman without any hesitation whatsoever. He strides in like Superman and, to the audience’s wonder, systematically and unwaveringly kills everyone inside in less than a minute. As we come to learn, Preston’s efficacy comes not only from the absence of inhibiting emotions such as fear (which would arouse awareness of his mortality and potentially engender hesitation), but it also follows from his internalization of a wholly rational approach to combat. Preston, like the other clerics, is trained in _gun kata_, a fictional martial art based on a purely rational analysis of standard attack strategies (many of which are motivated by emotion) in order to determine the most statistically successful offensive maneuvers and defensive positions. Clearly, Preston’s early display of prowess and the initial suggestion of the clerics’ invincibility are expressive of the longstanding view that emotion can impair function and its abandonment can improve performance and forestall mortality.

Though elements of _Equilibrium_ allude to the traditional suspicion of emotion, it wastes little time making a case for feeling. In this respect
it differs from *I, Robot*, which initially capitalizes upon the traditional ambivalence we have regarding emotion in order to cast suspicion on Sonny and establish him as a red herring. *Equilibrium* makes its case for emotion from the opening sequences by playing upon positive emotive associations present in the audience. For example, in the opening scene, the film prompts audiences to be impressed with Preston, but immediately subverts this impression. While most viewers have been indoctrinated to align with law enforcement as a result of their conditioning by countless crime dramas, audiences are quickly encouraged to question their allegiance with Preston when they learn that the contraband he and his crew seek, and burn subsequent to its discovery, is not drugs or weapons, but priceless works of art including Leonardo DaVinci’s *Mona Lisa*. The audience’s emotions reel as this painting and other recognizable masterpieces are reduced to ashes while the clerics announce blithely that eventually they will “get rid of them all.”

Further suspicion is cast on the state’s ideology, and Preston’s character, when we learn that Preston’s wife and mother of their two young children, Viviana (Alexa Summer), was executed for sense offense and Preston condoned her execution. Whereas Preston expresses no feeling at the loss of his wife, audiences recoil at his indifference. Their indignation is compounded moments later when Preston unflinchingly executes his partner, Errol Partridge (Sean Bean), for the “crime” of feeling, and reading Yeats. Disdain for the state’s ideology is galvanized near the climax of the film when Mary O’Brian (Emily Watson), another sense offender with whom the audience has been encouraged to sympathize, is incinerated in a scene that is visually analogous to a witch burning.

Like *I, Robot*, *Equilibrium* portrays a future in which emotions have been eliminated. Rather than have unfeeling robots epitomize the transcendence of emotion, *Equilibrium* illustrates the prospect of transcending emotion through chemical means. Instead of portraying a fantasy world where humans are liberated from emotion—a prospect that the traditional view of emotion suggests is desirable—the film instead confronts audiences with a frightening vision, namely, a world without emotion where humans have become pitiless automatons, and murder, indeed massacre, are meted out indifferently, and justified as necessary for the preservation of the state. As O’Brian intimates in a scene where Preston interrogates her, without emotion, there is hardly a reason for life. Indeed, when she asks him, “Why do you live?” he hesitates before mumbling something unconvincing about living for the state. Happily, Preston regains his emotions and succeeds in overthrowing the government due to the drive they give him; however, before his emotions are
restored he is depicted quite clearly as an agent of death. Dressed in black with weapons at the ready, he kills one sympathetic sense offender after another. A heartless personification of the state and its goal of the elimination of emotion, Preston’s initial character, the inhuman quality of the clerics, and the lifeless setting of Libria combine to suggest that rather than forestall human fatality, the elimination of emotion brings it about. Paradoxically, the suppression of emotion for the benefit of humanity has instead yielded a situation where genocide is condoned and regular citizens are portrayed like the walking-dead marching grimly to and from work. Fortunately, in the end, Preston is changed and so is his society. He regains his emotions and rescues the masses from their anesthetized state. *Equilibrium* therefore offers audiences not only a frightening glimpse at a future without emotion, but also the hope of one with it.

**Mind over Matter**

The films that comprise the *Twilight* saga offer their audiences a different “happy ending” than that provided in *Equilibrium* or *I, Robot*. Whereas *Equilibrium* and *I, Robot* depict futuristic scenarios in which the value of emotions is questioned, but ultimately affirmed, the works in the *Twilight* saga are works of vampire fiction, which are set in the present and depict a fantastic alternative to conventional existence that is preferable to ordinary life. Indeed, the saga’s ending would be a sad one in the eyes of either Heidegger or Becker, because it is one that not only plays upon the traditional suspicion of emotion, but also reinforces it, encouraging the suppression of emotion and the denial of death. As various commentators have noted, vampire fiction is preoccupied with the emotions. Whether classic or contemporary, vampires are powerful figures that personify our fear of feeling. Vampires are defined by their thirst. They are “ravenous” (Sceats, 2001, p. 107) beings that represent the logical contrary to “rationality” (p. 114). They are passion unbound. As symbolic constructs, vampires personify our longstanding fear that our emotions will overwhelm us if we let them and transform us into something monstrous if they can. Thus, in traditional vampire fiction, the elimination (death) of the vampire represents the victory of reason over violent passion. Order is restored and human life is preserved by putting the emotions in their place: the ground.

Though not the first author to offer a sympathetic portrayal of vampires, Stephenie Meyers certainly changed the playing field for vampire fiction with her *Twilight* saga. Rather than depict vampires as entities deserving of disdain, her works, and the films inspired by them, have
enamored millions of people with vampires. Edward Cullen (Robert Pattinson) is the focus of this attention. Introduced in *Twilight*, Edward quickly becomes the romantic interest of the protagonist, Bella Swan (Kristen Stewart). While Bella is shy, unassuming, and somewhat clumsy, Edward is “devastatingly . . . beautiful” (Meyers, 2005, p. 19). Even after Bella discovers Edward is a vampire, she says he is more like an “angel” (Meyers, 2007, p. 354) than a “monster” (Meyers, 2005, p. 187). She even begs him to bite her so she can be a vampire too. Indeed, Edward functions as her savior; he saves Bella from being human, namely, from feeling anxiety and facing death. Of course, maybe Edward’s ideal status follows from the fact that he and the rest of his family are not regular vampires. They are killers with conscience. While they do suffer rapacious thirst, unlike more traditional vampires, they know it is wrong to kill humans, exercise rational restraint, and hunt animals instead. As Edward states, “It’s just mind over matter” (Meyers, 2005, p. 300), or reason over emotion.

Like the vampires of old, Edward Cullen, indeed all the vampires in the *Twilight* saga, personify desire in its primal form—desire for life. Blood is a powerful symbol of life, and entities that will do anything to get it, even kill, illustrate how strong the desire for life is, and conversely, how powerful the fear of death. Indeed, as Heidegger contends, the desire for life derives its force from the fear of death. Becker even speculates, “The continuing vogue of vampire movies may be a clue to how close to the surface our repressed fears are” (1973, p. 129). Clearly, vampires are objects of horror because they arouse our latent fear of death. At the same time, they command our interest because they embody our desire to be like them, namely, to be invulnerable, to elude death, and to achieve immortality. In at least certain respects, vampires have what we want. They are inhumanly powerful; they do not fear bodily harm in the way a normal person does because they cannot die. Not only have they transcended the normal fear of death; they have transcended death itself. As John Browning and Kay Picart report, vampires “reveal . . . our anxieties and hopes concerning new worlds,” including the brave new world of “immortality” (2009, p. xxii). What distinguishes Edward and the rest of Cullens from more traditional vampires is that they have sublimated their “natural” thirst. Where traditional vampires are prey to their desire for human blood, the Cullens resist the pull of the flesh. In part through their control of desire, they have become “dazzling” objects of audience interest, inspiring romantic allure, not horror.

The relation between emotion and awareness of death is clearly manifest in *Twilight’s* main character, Bella. Throughout the saga, she exhibits
not only conventional teenage angst, but also “horror” (Meyers, 2006, p. 519) at the prospect of aging and death. Her concern is heightened when she discovers that her love interest, Edward, is exempt from both. Her anxiety and frustration are made apparent in the opening dream sequence in *New Moon*. In the dream, Bella finds herself in a field facing an elderly woman who she thinks is her grandmother; however, as the dream progresses and Edward approaches the woman, Bella realizes that the elderly woman is herself. Bella springs awake in terror. In the texts upon which the films are based, Bella reflects upon the dream and describes time as a thief “lurk[ing] in ambush” (Meyers, 2006, p. 6), waiting to steal her life. She asks Alice, Edward’s sister, “What’s so great about mortality?” (2006, p. 10) and Edward to “set [her] free” (2007, p. 74) from it. She says being human is so “dangerous” (2007, p. 92) that she is, “anxious, even eager, to trade mortality for immortality” (2007, p. 269). She says she is terrified that she is “going to die” (2005, p. 476) and expresses no reticence about becoming a vampire, stating, “there [are not] any human experiences I [am] worried about missing” (2007, p. 345). She seeks to become a vampire because she feels she had “never been strong enough to deal with things…[had] always been human and weak…[barely able] to hold the blackness of non-existence at bay” (2008, p. 374).

Interestingly, while Bella is not worried about missing any human experiences by becoming a vampire, several of the vampire characters try to discourage her transformation. Both Edward and Rosalie (Nikki Reed) remind her that being human is special. This advice follows from their experience. They were human. Their transformation into vampires occurred in an effort to elude death. Specifically, when Carlisle (Peter Facinelli) was faced with the prospect of Edward’s and Rosalie’s untimely death, his powerful aversion to that outcome, and presumably their own “terror” (Meyers, 2008, p. 673) at their demise, motivated a joint desire to preserve their existence even in an altered state. Unfortunately, after her transformation, Rosalie speculates that the only “happy ends…[are] under gravestones”(Meyers, 2007, p. 154).

Though born of the desire to escape death, the vampires of *Twilight* ultimately personify it. Examples of the return of the repressed, they show that attempts to elude death instead result in its appearance. Not only are the vampires of *Twilight* agents that bring death; they are walking corpses. They have no heartbeat. They do not breathe. Their skin is gray, cold, and pallid, indeed more like the marble of a headstone than flesh. The films accentuate this by making vampires into icons of stone that are virtually impervious to human assault, vulnerable only to the attack of like-powered entities. Indeed, when vampires kill each other in
the films, rather than reduce one another to piles of flesh, they instead break one another apart and their severed limbs are depicted like pieces of broken stone. Like the robots in *I, Robot*, and the clerics in *Equilibrium*, they illustrate that in the attempt to eliminate emotion and thereby elude death one ends up conjuring it. However, while *I, Robot* and *Equilibrium* critique the deathly ideal that emerges in the wake of the repression of emotion, *Twilight* ultimately celebrates it.

Admittedly, elements in the *Twilight* saga raise some concerns about the desirability of being a vampire; however, this message is consistently subverted by the positive portrayal of the Cullens. In the end, the saga endorses abdicating humanity, at least if you can join the Cullen clan. After all, these vampires seem to suffer nothing, not even their own thirst. They are inhumanly beautiful; they do not age; and they have superpowers. The fact they do not hunt humans precludes them from becoming a ready target of human animosity, which if sufficiently focused could threaten their survival. As such, barring some unlikely contingency, these glistening creatures have achieved immortality through control over their desire. As we witness Bella’s transformation in *Breaking Dawn*, we are encouraged to believe that these kinder vampires, at least, are just like us, but better. Most importantly, insofar as audiences are encouraged to align with the protagonist, *Twilight* suggests that humanity is an inferior state that can and should be surpassed by (1) changing Bella into a vampire (a transformation that gives her all the power and grace she seeks), and (2) painting the picture of a perfect unending future for her and Edward. Rather than let its vampires serve as *memento mori*, namely, as figures that remind us that human life is something that needs protection and about which we should have concern (a function vampires in traditional vampire literature served), it instead conveys the dangerous message that being human is undesirable and something to regard with disdain. It fuels escapism in response to normal existential anxiety rather than authenticity.

**Wizards versus Vampires**

A saga that eclipses the *Twilight* saga with respect to popularity, and portrays the same desire to escape both emotion and death is the *Harry Potter* series. However, whereas *Twilight* ends in promoting inauthentic being toward death, *Harry Potter* depicts the inauthentic path, but celebrates its alternative.

The books and films that comprise the *Harry Potter* saga depict the desire to escape emotion and elude death in and through the character
of Lord Voldemort (Ralph Fiennes). Like the vampires in *Twilight*, he is a clear personification of death. From his corpse-like appearance to his grim consorts, his murderous acts to his menacing name—Voldemort is death incarnate. But he did not start out this way. Visions of his past are conveyed to the audience in *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince* when Harry looks into Albus Dumbledore’s (Michael Gambon) pensieve. Like Edward, Lord Voldemort did not start out in the inhuman form in which we find him. Instead, he begins as a human, in fact a boy with a regular name: Tom Riddle (Hero Fiennes Tiffin/Frank Dillane). The impression created by the scenes pertaining to Tom’s early life is that it was lacking. Tom was abandoned. Raised in an orphanage with little emotional support, he is an individual who, from the perspective of modern psychiatry, could easily be susceptible to anxiety, a candidate for attachment disorders, and highly desirous of control. As everyone familiar with *Harry Potter* knows, that is Lord Voldemort.

Interpreting Voldemort through the current lens of emotion and its relation to mortality, Riddle’s early life was characterized by anxiety about his being. This primal angst catalyzed a heightened concern for his being, which in turn engendered an unusually strong desire to escape the circumstance causing his angst: human life. Thus, Voldemort begins his quest to escape the bounds of human life not because he is fundamentally inhuman, but out of the human impulse to “fle[e]” (Heidegger, 1927/1996, p. 41) emotion and the truth that it tells us, namely, that we are dependent creatures who die. From the beginning of the saga to its final installment, Voldemort’s exclusive focus is immortality. We watch as he relentlessly pursues mechanisms by which he might escape death. He seeks to obtain both the sorcerer’s stone and the elder wand because of the power they would give him over mortality. Though they bring other powers too, the stone and the wand are uniquely important to Voldemort because he believes that they can liberate him from this mortal coil and the strangling angst that accompanies mortal being. He also believes they will give him the power to eliminate the one threat that remains to his being and thereby awakens angst: Harry (Daniel Radcliffe).

Whereas *Twilight* elevates the deathly ideal that emerges in the wake of attempts to repress emotion and the awareness of death it brings, the *Harry Potter* saga makes it clear that Voldemort, and the unearthly goals he pursues, are not only misguided, but are profoundly malign. This is evident not only in the unequivocally negative portrayal of Voldemort, but also in the positive alternative exemplified by Harry. While diametrically opposed in virtually all other respects, a bond exists between Harry and Voldemort. Unbeknownst to Harry until the *Harry Potter and the Deathly*
"Hallows II," Harry and Voldemort have a special connection because Harry holds a piece of Voldemort’s soul. As such, Harry is a horcrux, one made unknowingly when Voldemort killed Harry’s parents. Essential to the movement of the plot, this ontological connection between Harry and Voldemort is the basis for the prophecy that “Neither can live while the other survives.” It also allows the two characters to function as doubles, an impression fostered in the films by their telepathic connection, the uncanny superimposition of Voldemort’s facial structure onto Harry’s face in certain scenes, Harry’s possession of some of Voldemort’s abilities, and Harry’s adoption of some of Voldemort’s characteristic movements. The association between Harry and Voldemort reinforces the impression that Harry could be just like him. Thus, the saga conveys the message that the path of darkness is not predestined only to some, but one to which all individuals can be pulled, and which they can choose or resist.

Happily, Harry does not succumb to fear of death or to the allure of immortality. He experiences angst, to be sure, and the saga makes it clear that this anxiety is primarily about death by making personifications of death the catalyst for his concern. For example, Harry’s angst over mortality is depicted on the train to Hogwarts in *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* where Harry is immobilized with fear at the appearance of a dementor, a dark skeletal figure reminiscent of classic literary and cinematic portrayals of death. Likewise, in the comic scene where Professor Lupin (David Thewlis) instructs his class how to conquer their fears, Harry is again paralyzed when a dementor appears. Of course, Harry’s anxieties about death are not surprising. The loss of his parents places him in a position similar to that of the young Tom Riddle. In fact, given that Harry knows he is a target by virtue of his knowledge of the prophecy, he may even be more inclined to suppress feeling and make a grab at immortality.

As we learn at the conclusion of the *Harry Potter* saga, Harry does not choose to pursue a path analogous to Voldemort even though it is available to him. Though he gains possession of the elder wand, a wand that is fashioned by Death itself and gives its bearer absolute power, Harry has seen that the passion for power leads to isolation and a state that approximates death. He pursues something simpler and more satisfying: a normal life. At the close of *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows II* Harry models authentic being toward death, and authenticity generally, when he destroys the elder wand. Here, he shows that he has learned the lesson of the three brothers told earlier in *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows I*. This fable explains the origin of the three deathly hallows: the resurrection stone, the elder wand, and the invisibility cloak. Hermione Granger (Emma Watson) tells the story of the three brothers who trick Death
by using magic. Death, angry at their hubris, lays snares for them. Two of the brothers, hoping to cheat Death a second time, ask him to grant invincibility and the power to raise the dead. Death, in response, crafts the elder wand and the resurrection stone. However, as we learn, both men die using these tools of immortality. In contrast, the third brother treats Death with humility, not hubris. He asks only for a means to keep Death at bay, not to conquer him. Death, responsive to the man’s request, tears off a piece of his own garb, creating the invisibility cloak. The man wears the cloak and it protects him. As Hermione recounts, after some time and when the man reached “a great age . . . he shed his cloak . . . and gave it to his son; he then greeted Death as an old friend, and went with him gladly, departing this life, as equals.” Harry is aligned with the third brother by virtue of the fact that he has been in possession of the invisibility cloak since the first installment of the saga. This foreshadows both his success and his acceptance of death. Likewise, Voldemort’s destruction is foreshadowed by the fact he pursues ends analogous to the first two brothers.

At the end of the saga, Harry shows he has learned that we should not try to cheat death. Though Voldemort seethes with disgust at the weakness of human nature, an emotion born of his own sense of vulnerability, Harry exemplifies authentic awareness in *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*, when he challenges Voldemort’s claim of supremacy and indicates his acceptance of feeling, stating, “You’re the weak one, and you’ll never know love, or friendship, and I feel sorry for you.” Ultimately, Voldemort illustrates the great irony of Promethean quests to escape emotion and elude death. As Becker (1973) states, “the irony of man’s condition is that the deepest need is to be free of the anxiety of death . . . but it is life itself that awakes it, and so [to escape death] we must shrink from being fully alive” (p. 66). The *Harry Potter* saga begins with Voldemort literally shrunk by his efforts. His humanity has been reduced by his effort to achieve immortal power; indeed, his existence is portrayed as parasitic in *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone*. Harry, however, does not shrink from life, or the anxiety it brings. He faces death. Indeed, the whole saga can be interpreted as Harry’s confrontation with mortality. Voldemort is an embodiment of death and the desire to elude it. By confronting Voldemort Harry demonstrates his willingness to accept anxiety and face death. In emerging victorious over Voldemort, Harry shows he has transcended fear and defeated the desire to escape death. When he breaks the elder wand he shows he has accepted the mortal life.

Here is where we see the profound difference between the *Twilight* saga and the *Harry Potter* series. Whereas *Twilight* celebrates, indeed exacerbates,
the desire to escape life, the *Harry Potter* series recognizes the impulse to flee existence, but argues for its transcendence. A point that Heidegger makes and that the foregoing discussion hopes to illustrate is that emotion is not necessarily something negative that must be suppressed. Instead, it is adaptive. Its emergence marks an epistemological turning point. As Heidegger points out, angst is “neither an evasive forgetting, nor . . . an [explicit] remembering [of being]” (trans. 1996, p. 315); it can occasion either response. The search for immortality seen in characters such as Bella and Voldemort represents a search for infinite time and an effort to escape from ordinary life. It marks a flight from emotion and death that engenders an undesirable “leveling down of all possibilities” (Heidegger, 1927/1996, p. 119). In contrast, anticipation of death enhances our possibility. As Heidegger notes, it “tears [the individual] out of [the] endless multiplicity of possibilities offering themselves nearest by . . . and brings [it] to the simplicity of its fate” (p. 351). Though authenticity requires the acceptance of emotion and mortality, it alone affords the individual the opportunity to feel fully and live completely. Harry helps us see the value of this. Rather than encourage an escapist mentality that results in a deadening to life, Harry’s decision to break the elder wand and embrace the delights of an ordinary life reveal the extraordinary opportunity of being human. Thus, from the perspective of Heidegger and Becker, we are better off following a young wizard’s lead, than wanting to steel ourselves against emotion or fall for a dazzling vampire.

**Notes**

1. See works including Baron-Cohen (2011), Rorty (1980), and Solomon (2004). These works avoid the traditional disjunction between emotion and reason. They instead assert an “emotional grounding of rationality” (Solomon, 2004, p. 25).

2. It is important to note that most existentialists, Heidegger included, regard very little, if any, mental content as unconscious by virtue of the connection between emotion and cognition. Insofar as our emotions attune us to the world, they provide us with a primal understanding of the environment, one that is not truly unconscious. Thus, existentialists prefer the notion of prereflective awareness, or a visceral consciousness that has yet to become reflective to the traditional notion of the unconscious.

3. For further discussion of this dynamic, see Smith (2003). Here, Smith examines how “widely shared genre scripts” (p. 64) create “associative links” through “redundant cuing” (p. 29) that moves audiences to standardized “emotional orientation[s]” (p. 43) and predictable cognitive
impressions. At the same time, he discusses how authors and filmmakers can “play with the emotional possibilities” (p. 49) by modifying cues, engendering “nonprototypical emotion[s]” (p. 64) and correspondingly modified reflexive thought about characters and events. *Equilibrium* is an excellent example of this modified approach.

4. Rosalie’s comments and Edward’s discouragement of Bella’s transformation are suggestive of the fact that, at least at a certain level, Meyers’ text does invite criticism of the vampire mystique that it simultaneously encourages. However, it is my contention that this criticism, and the positive view of human life that accompanies it, is ultimately and decisively subverted by Meyers’ texts and their film adaptations. I explore this thesis in more detail elsewhere (McMahon, 2009).

5. This portrayal is reflective of the desire to escape aspects of human creatureliness (Goldenberg et al., 2001). In particular, *Twilight*’s beautiful vampires of stone exemplify the fantasy in which the vulnerable flesh “is transformed” (p. 428) into a substance less evocative of “our animal limitations” (p. 428).

6. This is seen most notably in Harry’s spontaneous ability to speak *parseltongue*, or to snakes.

7. It is interesting to note that in *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone*, the Mirror of Erised captivates Harry by allowing him to see his dead parents. As Dumbledore (Richard Harris) reminds him, the mirror does not give him knowledge or truth, but only reveals his “deepest and most desperate desir[e].” He warns Harry that men have “wasted” away in front of the mirror and advises Harry, “it does not do to dwell on dreams and forget to live.” I offer the same message here. While we may dream of changing certain aspects of the human condition, we should not become preoccupied with fantasies that undermine our ability to live.

References

CHAPTER 6

CONSUMED IN THE ACT: GRIZZLY MAN AND FRANKENSTEIN

Kirby Farrell

I

In its most grotesque irony, Werner Herzog’s documentary *Grizzly Man* (2005) shows a man literally consumed by the process of self-creation. Timothy Dexter, the conventional suburban Long Island youngster who failed to break into Hollywood and suffered near-fatal substance abuse, recreated himself as Timothy Treadwell, celebrity naturalist and uncanny intimate of Alaskan grizzly bears. Treadwell starred in hours of film that he shot to bring Alaskan bears to life for schoolchildren and nature enthusiasts.

As in the ambiguous names of the organization he helped found, “Grizzly People,” and Herzog’s film, *Grizzly Man*, Treadwell promoted a belief that his closeness to the bears made him a hybrid man and beast akin to mythic satyrs, centaurs, and shamanistic creatures. “In a letter to one of his sponsors in 2003 he wrote: ‘My transformation complete—a fully accepted wild animal—brother to these bears’” (Owen, 2006). At the same time, ignoring the contradiction, he insisted that he was braving mortal danger every minute. The myth took on a life of its own, and Treadwell achieved the symbolic immortality he had sought in Hollywood, when in 2003, weeks after the “complete transformation,” a hungry grizzly attacked and ate the hero and his companion, Amy Huguenard. Not for nothing does science label the animals *Ursus arctos horribilis*. 
Herzog plays up the controversy enveloping Treadwell’s story. To his defenders, Treadwell’s death was somehow sacrificial, consecrated by his “love” and dedication. They depict him as an eco-warrior protecting the wilderness from encroaching civilization. This is a canonical American theme, from Westerns to *The Great Gatsby*’s lament for the corrupted “fresh green breast of the New World.” The global threat is real enough, from climate change to the blocking of once inaccessible places into mining, logging, petroleum, and agricultural concessions. The Amazon has seen lawless encroachment displace indigenous people, with vicious expropriation of resources. The underlying anxiety is that biodiversity is collapsing and species extinction is out of control.

The problem is, Treadwell confronted none of these threats. The Katmai National Park in which he operated is a wildlife sanctuary. Although the eco-warrior swears mighty oaths for the camera, poachers do not menace the bears. In fact their population is growing. The fatally vulnerable creature proved to be not a bear but Amy Huguenard, for whose death Treadwell bore some tragic responsibility. And though he depicted himself as a modern Orpheus charming wild beasts—Treadwell recited poetry to favorite bears—the wisdom of the Orpheus myth ultimately lay in the artist’s sudden death.

So there is a serious disconnect between myth and reality. Instead of celebrating a martyr to the cause of conservation, critics from traditional native folks to wildlife biologists and Park Service officials have maintained that Treadwell was invading the bears’ space, ignoring scientific protocols, and elementary wilderness savvy. To Sam Egli, whose planes ferried him to his camp, Treadwell was childishly goofy, “acting like he was working with people wearing bear costumes out there instead of wild animals. He thought they were big scary looking harmless creatures that he could go up and sing to and bond with as children of the universe or something. He had lost sight of what was really going on.”

It would be logical to put Treadwell’s name in scare quotes since we only see him through the eyes of Herzog and others, and in his flamboyantly self-conscious role-playing before his own camera. But then, the man is compelling for us in part because he is a cultural fantasy. For example, the “Rotten Tomatoes” website digest of movie reviews fatuously proclaims that “Filmmaker Werner Herzog adds another real-life character to his growing pantheon of people who walk a fine line between visionary genius and madness.” The tendentious “conservative” website “Carnage and Culture” uses Treadwell as a straw man to bash “liberals.”

The self-consuming ambition to “be somebody” is the raw material of tragedy. To get at the deeper dynamics of Treadwell’s story, I want to
reconsider it in the context of Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818/2012). Shelley’s tale imagines self-creation as an obsessive struggle against death and alienation. Frankenstein’s creature embodies crucial qualities of Treadwell’s grizzlies. At home in majestic wilderness, the monster is at once an aspiring personality and also a creature of murderous power. Haunted by personal loss, striving to create a compensatory idealized life, Victor Frankenstein is consumed by the object of his imagination as Treadwell was. In Shelley’s phantasmagoric Arctic, the creator and the monstrous medium of his recreation both perish.

II

*Frankenstein* is most remarkable for its effort to dramatize the mysteries of agency in the creature’s emerging sense of self. Although the creature is a prodigious autodidact like Victor and Mary Shelley, the novel’s conflict centers on repeated failures of communication. Victor’s creature is supposed to be indescribably ugly, but the terror lies less in his particular deformities than in his need for other people to substantiate the self. He becomes a monster only when others refuse to relate to him as a person and he faces social death.

We are richly ambivalent about agency. We are programmed to imagine agency everywhere, from “whispering” breezes to “God,” the cosmic parent. A lack of nurturant attention in early childhood impairs personality. At the same time we depersonalize others to establish hierarchy and reinforce self-esteem, construing scapegoats and other creatures as subhuman. Anxiety about agency is at least as acute in Treadwell’s competitive, individualistic United States as it was in the Romantic era, as in the public concern over autism. Like Treadwell among the grizzlies, we fear and love ambiguously human monsters such as the Arnold Schwarzenegger *Terminator* (1984) cyborg.

Like Shelley, Treadwell was an artist. He dramatized his creatures’ inner lives for his audience. As Adam “named” the animals into existence in Eden, Treadwell gave the grizzlies pet monikers such as “Mr. Chocolate” and “Mickey.” In his role-playing with the animals, he was trying to meet the primal need for personal substantiation that Frankenstein’s monster poignantly voices. Shelley, the literate child of intellectual parents dramatized the need for recognition in her account of the creature’s acquisition of language. For his part, in his quest to become a “bear whisperer,” Treadwell claimed to have identified 21 vocalizations and body languages in grizzlies. Like Shelley, he imagined terrific pathos in the inability to speak and be heard. Bear and monster both function as enabling fictions,
allowing their “creators” to find a voice and a corroborating audience. For Treadwell, an innocent model would have been the celebrated work of Jane Goodall, whose observations of chimpanzees made their personalities real for humans around the globe.

Shelley and Treadwell had personal reasons to be concerned with agency. In different ways both were resisting social death. Shelley was writing in what amounted to a rebellious self-exile from respectable England and childhood conflicts, even as Treadwell defiantly abandoned the society in which he had been a drug- and alcohol-fuddled nobody. Both exiles were acutely aware of loneliness, and in conflict about it, feeling imprisoned and yet liberated by their isolation. Just as Frankenstein keeps gesturing unconvincingly toward his love of Elizabeth, and refuses the monster’s pleas for a mate, so Treadwell had Amy Huguenard by his side yet denied her existence, keeping her off screen and rhapsodizing to the camera about his delicious ambivalence at feeling totally alone. At the same time, Victor passionately devotes himself to the creation of “his” creature, and Treadwell keeps trying to get closer to the bears, reciting his formulaic “I love you” as if that can override his conflicted needs.

For both the romantic and natural scientist, their behavior can be understood as a strategy—a technic—to protect and intensify visionary self-intoxication. In this respect the bears and monster are projections of an ambivalent drive toward isolation that promises the “scientists” superhuman insight and mastery, but also has suicidal potential. The fear aroused by the grizzlies and the monster makes sense as a response to destructive motives split off in themselves. Tragically, those who would compromise that visionary ambition, in particular the intimates Amy Huguenard and Victor’s Elizabeth, unwittingly become a threat killed by those split-off monstrous motives.

But loneliness is not the only problem. The ephemeral nature of agency is a painful reminder of mortality: that death is not simply an end to life, but nonbeing, nothingness. Shelley mourned for the mother who had died giving birth to her, even as Victor suffers a grisly nightmare about his dead mother as his own alter ego is coming to life. For the troubled creator, the creature and even her novel represent potential problem-solving fantasies whose failure gives the story its tragic impact. Treadwell, too, had left a dead past behind him. In keeping Amy Huguenard’s camera eye on him, he was tacitly performing heroic deeds for the approval of a lover and mother-figure akin to the woman in Victor’s dream. In the grizzlies Treadwell believed he found the selfhood that the monster pleads for. At one point he tells the camera that the bears enabled him to overcome suicidal alcoholism, failed careers, and social death.
Treadwell’s past as the lost Timothy Dexter registers in his identification with real grizzlies, but also with the childhood teddy bear that he kept with him in the wild. By striving to realize a heroic role in Alaska as creator and vicarious parent to the beasts and to schoolchildren, Treadwell was acting to substantiate an incoherent, fragile self, bringing himself as well as the bears to life through his hero-worshiping audiences.

Like Shelley, Treadwell was conflicted about the alter egos he evoked. Both artists loved, pitied, feared, and hated their creatures. In addition, like Victor, they were bound to be disturbed and disappointed in their creation. Bears and Frankenstein’s monster were enabling fictions, never able to live up to inner needs as conflicted as they were idealized. And so, like Victor, Shelley and Treadwell obsessively pursued their stories to conclusions that project that inner conflict. The suicidal futility of Victor’s and Treadwell’s pursuit acts out feelings of unworthiness and guilt. Despite his insistence that he rehabilitated himself through the bears, Treadwell courted death as blindly as he had in a near-fatal drug overdose in his past. Like Victor in the Arctic, Treadwell went back to Alaska on the edge of winter, unable to resolve or to get over his impossible drive.

This self-intoxication is the fatal paradox in both stories. To escape it, imagination would have to confront the flawed identity masked by the heroic role-playing. Ahead lies futility; behind lies intolerable inner turmoil. Neither story can imagine integrating grizzly bears or a corpse-derived monster into a wholesome life. On the deepest level, as Shelley understood, this is the problem of death. If personal failure is associated with social death, the effort to transcend it opens toward fixation on fantasies of heroic immortality: glory, fame, death-defying visionary exploration. Cultures may thrive on such a fantastic ambition, but belief in symbolic immortality is perilous if disenchantment exposes the reality of the despised and deformed mortal self.

In Shelley’s and Treadwell’s stories protestations of love sustain denial but prove to be compensatory. Despite the protestations, both Elizabeth and Amy Huguenard die as victims of the lovers’ respective monsters. Treadwell has to profess love of the bears or face the reality of deadly violence that cannot be tamed or predictable. At the same time, it is almost impossible not to see the monsters’ aggression as split-off projections of the protagonists’ appetites and anger. Both Victor and Treadwell are contemptuous of the world—and identities—they leave behind. Herzog includes some telling footage of the “loving warrior” throwing a tantrum about Park Service officials and imagined poachers. Pumping up his rage, Treadwell is also pumping up his morale with righteous self-justification,
turning nervous system flight to fight. He seems to understand perfectly well that he is recording a rant that would be devastating to his public identity if it became known. But the rage appears to be self-intoxicating. Not to strain the metaphor: he blindly “hunger” for vengeance against forces that thwart him, even as end-of-season hunger moved the fatal grizzly to attack.

There is another striking resonance at work in this analogy as well. Instinct drives the grizzlies to kill for food but also for access to females. With anguish Shelley’s (1818/2012) monster realizes that “No Eve soothed my sorrow nor shared my thoughts; I was alone” (p. 145). Denied a mate, he runs amok, murdering his creator’s beloved. Victor’s conflicted sexuality is implicated in all his actions, most starkly in his pursuit of the creature instead of Elizabeth. In one sequence of Grizzly Man, consoling a bear bested in a mating clash, talking as if to himself, Treadwell growls at length about his rejection by women. Brooding over his own frustration, he compares himself to creatures who fight to the death over sex.

Mating contests are tests of power and evolutionary fitness. In this sense they are immortality contests, and not only genetically. As the monster’s allusions to Paradise Lost insist, the bond with Eve brings the consolation of symbolic immortality: children, posterity, mutual substantiation of identity, a life of purpose. In this context, ugliness means not only rejection but also annihilation.

To understand this, we need to keep in mind that we are all “creatures” of conventional culture. Until we reach age four or five, we have no memory of the early years in which the world programmed us with values and a sense of what is natural. Deprived of that formative experience and even a name, the monster is an outsider and frightens others. Shelley makes his ugliness ineffable because it stands for all that would violate our accepted sense of “what is right.” That in turns puts the creature outside the magic circle with which culture surrounds and protects its immortality symbolism. In a word, the creature is death-tainted. This explains Victor’s hysterical revulsion when, shocked out of a nightmare vision of his mother’s corpse, he beholds the monster, his death-tainted “ugly” child and surrogate self.

III

Although he is potentially as amiable as “Mr. Chocolate” the bear, when rejected, Shelley’s monster flies into a fury to feed his self-esteem and resist psychic death. If we regard “his” grizzlies as Treadwell’s projection of his inner life, their fearful hunger resembles his dangerous appetite
for success and heroic immortality: his means of feeding self-esteem and avoiding social death. The bears function as enabling fictions. He is using them, thinking through them to think about himself. They are tools enabling him to realize and tame the rage for self-esteem within him.

Tools are prosthetic extensions of us. Among animals, we are virtuoso toolmakers, expanding our selves through prosthetic engagement with the world: through relationships that magnify our adaptive powers and symbolically make up for our creaturely limits. Modernism is a period of radical prosthetic development in human identity. These days we are shod, clothed, housed, and fly faster than birds in sealed metal shells. We blend identities in electronic media such as Facebook, in which individuals share in the idealized qualities of “friends.” In this framework our prosthetic dimension calls into question the kind of animal we are (see Farrell, 1998). What is the ground of our experience? Where does self stop and tool begin? If a house or clothes or a muscle car function as a prosthetic shell, where does self stop and environment begin? And since other people can extend our wills as tools do, in a host of relationships from slavery to parenting, we sometimes need to ask: Where does self leave off and Other begin?

This is what makes possible Treadwell’s conviction that bears have given him new life. Identifying with the grizzlies, the man who nearly died of a drug overdose—or at least wanted to believe that he had—felt reborn. In effect, the failed man perished and came to new life in a self shared with “his” bears. To some extent this can only be a play-death, an enabling fiction, but to the self in crisis, self-esteem and hope are indispensable beliefs. The imaginary, prosthetic quality of this bear identity may have reinforced Treadwell’s exaggerated conviction that the bears needed constant emergency protection from outsiders. In a real way his life with the bears was a struggle against demystification.

With the exhilaration of self-expansion comes anxiety about its artificiality.

Technology makes us aware of mechanisms and the prosthetic nature of our existence. Fields such as cognitive science and robotics call into question the reality of the self. Media open imagination into a boundless virtual world, but at the risk of disembodiment and isolating the self. In this sense the camera both intensifies and consumes identities. Continually filming himself, Treadwell is substantiating his glamorous self yet also reducing self to a facsimile, an illusion. This is the paradox of role-playing, which can liberate but also derealize identity.

It goes without saying that storytelling is one of the most venerable prosthetic behaviors. The creator uses virtual others—“characters”—in
parables that explore problems and enrich experience in the real world. In different ways Shelley, Treadwell, and of course Herzog are storytellers thinking through others. They all dramatize disruptions of ordinary prosthetic relationships that send alienated imagination into the wilderness in search of solace and vindication.

This is an ancient theme. The shaman follows animals into the spirit world. As a swan, Zeus impregnates Leda. A she-wolf suckles early Rome. Mesoamerican warriors dressed as jaguars. In America, from Fenimore Cooper and Twain to Hollywood Westerns, characters impatient for authenticity light out for the wilderness, where technologies such as the bowie knife and the fur coat enable “authentic” frontiersman to emulate the claws and hide of “real” animals. The conviction that life “in nature” is immune to society’s deadly corruption energizes “survivalists.” In children’s stories animals are usually surrogate children, though the bears in “Goldilocks” reject the child’s wish to participate in their parallel family life.

Like Shelley’s novel, the camera provides a play-space in which wilderness and society blend. On the page or the screen, limits dissolve and humdrum character may grow into monstrous or heroic shapes. Both media are also prosthetic tools, since they imply audiences who are virtually watching the creator-actor perform. Imagining those spectators, the performer is ambiguously among them, using their responses to guide her next moves. Herzog proposes that Treadwell was using his role-playing before the camera to explore his inner conflicts, and that makes sense. But just as Shelley is writing for a post-Napoleonic Europe roiled by undigested conservative and revolutionary assumptions, so Treadwell is playing to a stormily complex America.

Although Shelley’s monster suffers some of the stings of a servant-class nonentity and the hostility of his scientist-creator, she has little to say about economic or scientific culture as forces in his destiny. What she does feel acutely is his isolated aspiration, pain, and fury. Similarly, Treadwell’s wilderness is monitored by scientific systems, but though he nods in their direction, his attention is mostly given to personalizing the wild. His prosthetic use of the bears is based on family and media. His use of the camera and audience favors media voices borrowed from children’s television shows and nature documentaries. He can sound like Mr. Rogers or Captain Kangaroo, with bear-monikers to match (“Mr. Chocolate,” “Grinch”). Commenting on a mating contest between males, he adopts the role of ringside sports announcer, even pretending to interview one of the adversaries.

The self-styled “Prince Valiant” also emulated melodramas about gentle warriors with the uncanny courage of the wild. Among fantasies
such as Tarzan, one that strongly resonates with the grizzly project is the Disney *Beauty and the Beast* (1991). Disney’s Belle uses love to turn a lonely beast into a prince, bringing him back to society, out of desolate magical isolation. Like Treadwell, Belle has been scorned for her romantic imagination by insensitive villagers. Like the grizzlies, the beast represents dangerous, uncanny power. Belle is curious about his realm and comes to share his power. The Disney plot concocts a rival to the beast, a vainglorious, predatory, hypermasculine hunter (Gaston) whom Belle rejects. As a result, Gaston turns the villagers into a howling mob that besieges the beast/prince’s castle and is routed by the prince’s loyal servants. In self-defense, the beast/prince kills the malicious hunter as Treadwell imagines routing poachers.

Triangulated with *Frankenstein*, the Disney plot sharpens the grizzly bear fantasies. Where a village mob stones Shelley’s beast/monster when he first approaches them, Hollywood allows the beast/monster to become the prince—Victor—who can then marry Belle/Elizabeth. The monster finally gets his ideal girl. The Disney plot splits the low-status villagers into bad servants who persecute Belle and attack the beast as they do Shelley’s monster, and good servants, who finally emerge as a surrogate family/audience admiring their regal mistress and master as they waltz to the closing credits. In this fantasy the once-ordinary Belle reconciles village and wilderness and attains commanding preeminence. Learning to love, the beast rescues her from wolves, tames the wilderness and village mob, and is revealed as prince. This is the redemptive dream that Treadwell emulated, idealizing Belle, Prince, and beast, rejecting callous society and the spurned, outraged Gaston. Adopting a courageous, sympathetic feminine role like Belle’s, he “brought back” the beast with his fervent cry of “I love you.” For a time. In the end an actual woman, Amy Huguenard, would die fighting for her life, and the feminine courage in Treadwell’s role would take on the hypnotic, fatal coloration associated with the femme fatale.

*IV*

Still, it is telling that Treadwell devoted his energies not to Alaskan foxes, one of whom became a personable, even lovable pet, but to the majestic prince of beasts that would eventually kill him. What are we to make of his monotonous protestations—at times almost a sideshow pitch—that “these bears are dangerous?”

When prosthetic relations—thinking through others—create a healthy matrix for personality, it feels so natural that it usually remains
mostly unconscious. Treadwell kept cutting his ties to others, even to his own birth name. In this way the fabulist who told skeptical friends in California that he was an Australian orphan encountered a dilemma. Self-expansion through fiction paradoxically shrinks the network of prosthetic relationships that supports personality. No matter how rich the fabulist’s imagination, the fictional self can never match the reality of actual development. In a sort of conversion experience, Treadwell tried to build his new personality by shifting the prosthetic ground of his childhood to a mystified bond with the grizzlies. This is what makes it so poignant that he took his childhood teddy bear with him to Alaska, as if to bridge the gap he was creating in his identity. In the real world, with the living companion Amy Huguenard, however, the obsession that was sustaining his emerging identity was also constricting his options and his future.

Self-invention is equivocal. It can foster growth or alienation. Before the camera, as Herzog sees, Treadwell is working out inner turmoil. But by projecting an idealized self on screen, for an audience, he is also diminishing the more realistic awareness of personal limits built up in a lifetime. Nevertheless, the question remains: why should Treadwell’s particular role-playing have led to provocative, risky behavior around man-eating grizzly bears? Why would the reinvented self prefer death-defying recklessness to some form of heroic prudence—and in particular, care for his defenseless companion Amy?

One way of approaching this puzzle, and granted that we can only speculate at this distance, is to explore the role of berserk style in Treadwell’s death-defiance (Farrell, 2011). In conventional wisdom, to go berserk or to run amok is to throw off all controls and plunge into desperate, often violent action. The term derives from the Norse “baresark” or bear-skin shirt, which Viking warriors purportedly stripped off in a frenzied attack. Today the term is associated with rampage killers and soldiers under stress. But the reality is more comprehensive. Berserk behavior may be irrational and have a chaotic quality, but it usually has a purpose such as retaliation, intimidation, self-defense, or escape. Very often it has a copycat element. The rampage killer may be mentally troubled and incoherent, but he may also be aware of headline-grabbing antecedents and the media’s habit of keeping score. In this way he looks to daredevil, superhuman violence as an emergency means to fortify the self.

Not only does berserk behavior usually make some kind of sense: it can also be seen as heroic. The soldier who runs amok under fire and takes the enemy by surprise may survive and be decorated as a hero. Extreme sports such as bungee jumping entail a plunge toward death that brings
with survival a sensation of mastery and exaltation. Early modern Europe thrilled to bear baiting, in which dogs attacked a chained, lethal bear.

The underlying idea is that do-or-die risk can snatch life and extraordinary rewards from the throat of death. The belief is that going to the edge of control can unlock taboo and gain access to uncanny resources that lie beyond everyday inhibitions. When the idea becomes popular, berserk behavior turns into a style. At its most ritualized, berserk style conditions religious experiences from crusades to radical abnegation that open access to the beyond. Berserk style makes daredevil circus acts awe inspiring. The performers dramatize escape from ordinary human limits. They train to master the edge of control, so there is some ambiguous illusionism involved. But danger remains, and the performers may use a safety net or other marker to emphasize the heroic challenge of death.

The grizzly man exploited berserk style. A friend tells Herzog that as a surfer in California, Treadwell appeared fearless. Toward the end Amy Huguenard called him “Hellbent on destruction.” In some of his own footage, he exults that “I run wild, like a child”—a formula that takes for granted the promise of berserk abandon, and children’s magical freedom from adult inhibitions. This is berserk style. It shows up repeatedly in his role playing, as when he rehearses “Wild Timmy Jungle Scenes,” noting that they can be cut into a larger film later.

Herzog’s film opens with Treadwell vowing that he is a warrior, a samurai, he “must be formidable to persuade the bears that I can defeat them, stand up to their challenge, or else they will eat me.” His love for the bears, that is, depends on threat display, and by definition, threat display always entails some bluff, a duel of illusions that can easily escalate toward a trigger for action. The berserker keeps proclaiming that he is “on the edge of death out here and nobody appreciates that I can smell death all over my fingers.” Pumped up, the gentle warrior boasts not about his killing prowess but that “nobody has ever been in as much danger of death as I am.”

Like any other documentary, Herzog’s film is a parable. As storyteller, he takes an equivocal position. He plays to our fascination with the moment of ultimate horror even while withholding the actual recording. To include the moment of death would be to invite comparisons to snuff pornography. Martial describes mimes in the Roman amphitheater that staged the myths of Orpheus and Icarus, casting a condemned criminal as the hero and at the climax actually killing him. The spectacles generated thrilling ambiguity. The actual death of “Orpheus” momentarily fuses imagination and reality. The mimes made familiar stories a passageway into the taboo mysteries of death, and created a thrilling illusion of the beyond.
The filmmaker could be accused of emulating Treadwell by exposing himself to the fascination and horror of the recording, interpreting it to us and appointing himself our heroic guide in the shadow of death. For all his gravity on camera, this is the director of films such as *Aguirre* (1972), *Fitzcarraldo* (1982), and *Little Dieter Needs to Fly* (1998), in which berserk style carries film crews and audiences into uncanny wilderness. This is the personality that cultivated and braved the self-consciously berserk theatricality of Klaus Kinski, making it an important component of his professional publicity suite. There are hints, that is, of the winking come-on that opens James Whale's 1931 *Frankenstein*, enticing the audience to imagine what lies behind the curtain even while cautioning that moviegoers may be overwhelmed: “Don’t say we didn’t warn you.”

It goes without saying that Herzog is using Treadwell to explore aspects of his own character. At the same time the audience also participates in that modeling. Invited to join the film’s vicarious expedition among bears, audiences are implicitly in a childlike relation to the bears as remote yet uncannily intimate parent-figures, furry and lovable but always capable of consuming the child. Like “Grizzly People,” audiences rely on Treadwell and in turn Herzog to mediate their fascination. Amy Huguenard’s fate dramatizes the artist’s responsibility.

Herzog acts as both a critic of, and guide to, abandon. His reportorial tone works to temper the sentimentality and sensationalism his taboo material invites. As critic, he invokes the authority of his personal experience. “What haunts me,” he says, “is that in all the faces of all the bears that Timothy Treadwell ever filmed I discover no kinship, no understanding, no mercy, I see only the overwhelming indifference of nature. To me there is no such thing as a secret world of the bears. The blank stares speak only of a half-bored interest in food. But for Timothy Treadwell this bear was a friend, a savior.”

The problem is not simply that “nature” is overwhelmingly indifferent, but that we are social animals and yet all social behavior is complexly contingent—and grizzly bears and humans are not especially compatible. Although they end in futility, Shelley’s novel and Herzog’s film are haunting in part because indirectly, almost unwittingly, they show how plastic, potential, and insolubly ambivalent human social behavior is. *Grizzly Man* reminds us that we are all embodied, and that creaturely motives such as hunger may trump symbolic identity and social bonds. That said, his folly notwithstanding, there is something poignant in Treadwell’s search for agency that audiences recognize.

The filmmaker sees what modern humans, religious and secular, tragic and comic, struggle to accept: that consciousness is continually creating a
habitable world, and always colored by magical thinking. Treadwell and Amy Huguenard were caught up in their spell as were the professional stage magicians Siegfried and Roy, who produced illusions with a prodigious white tiger at the snap of a finger until the tiger, “intentionally” or not, nearly killed the magician. In Las Vegas and Alaska, with different combinations of naïveté and cunning, the magicians held world attention because they dramatized the will to bend nature to human will, and to shape human behavior to “get inside” nature—just as death calls us back to wholesome reality-testing.

In an age of media self-presentation in which “sharing” is usually colored by competition, risk and even self-injury can be more socially acceptable than aggression. The liability of berserk style, as Americans have witnessed in binge addictions, attack broadcasting, and catastrophic banking recklessness, is that rage insidiously blends with grievance and self-pity. And the lure of the beyond, the ecstasy of the wild, can be innocuous until suddenly a bear mauls you in Alaska or on Wall Street, and death collapses the story.

References
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CHAPTER 7

BLACK SWAN/WHITE SWAN: ON FEMALE OBJECTIFICATION, CREATURELINESS, AND DEATH DENIAL

Jamie L. Goldenberg

At the outset of Darren Aronofsky’s Black Swan (2010), Natalie Portman’s character, Nina Sayers, auditions for the part of the Swan Queen in the ballet Swan Lake. The dancer who plays the lead must dance not only the part of the white swan, but her evil twin, the black swan. “If I was only casting the White Swan, she’d be yours,” Thomas Leroy, the ballet director, played by Vincent Cassel, whispers in Nina’s ear, taunting her, during her audition. “But I’m not… Now show me your Black Swan, Nina!” he commands.

Nina manages to win the lead; but she continues to struggle, and Thomas to prod her, to let go of the inhibitions and perfectionism that make her an ideal white swan, and not a black swan, in dance and in life. The film’s plot surrounds Nina’s efforts to prepare for the role of the black swan, and the consequences that result: Nina’s psychological state suffers, and her physical form alters, in actuality or hallucination, so that she takes on features resembling the creature she is playing.

In this essay, I propose that this conflict between the idealized, perfect white swan and the lustful, creaturely black swan does not just signify Nina’s artistic struggles, but constitutes a basic psychological platform for understanding both this film and women’s experiences more generally.
An analysis informed by terror management theory (TMT) (see chapter 2, this volume) explains why people, and women particularly, are driven not just toward complying with societal standards and expectations, but also why and how women’s bodies are implicated in this striving for perfection. In short, I suggest that the black swan can be understood as representing human creatureliness and mortality, and the white swan as the defensive outcry against this condition. In the film *Black Swan*, the defense is lifted, and what results is threatening, disturbing, and, at times, downright terrifying.

**A Terror Management Perspective**

As described in chapter 2 of this volume, a great deal of human behavior—and film—can be viewed through the existential lens of TMT. Based on the insights of Ernest Becker, particularly *The Denial of Death* (1973), who in turn built on the post-Freudian psychoanalytic perspective of Otto Rank, TMT maintains that people are profoundly haunted by the awareness of their mortality, and much of their behavior can be understood as a defense against this awareness. Primarily, the theory explains people’s efforts to immerse themselves in a meaningful symbolic reality, or cultural worldview, and to feel heroic (i.e., live up to the standards espoused by their meaning system). In Ernest Becker’s (1973, p. 196) words, “Man cannot endure his own littleness unless he can translate it into meaningfulness on the largest possible level.”

Nevertheless, as Becker aptly recognized, humans are not only symbolic beings; they are physical creatures as well. Becker (1973) noted, “[man] is out of nature and hopelessly in it; he is dual, up in the stars and yet housed in a heart-pumping, breath-gasping body…man is a worm and food for worms” (p. 26). Thus, it is not just awareness of mortality with which human beings must contend; people are also threatened by recognition of their sheer physical, mere animal nature. Fears of death are “managed” by clinging to symbolic conceptions of the world and the self within it; but the body, in stark contrast, presents a constant reminder of human limitations, the ultimate being mortality.

In collaboration with my colleagues, I have engaged in a program of research demonstrating that people are threatened by reminders of human physicality, or creatureliness, and that concerns associated with mortality underlie this threat (see Goldenberg, 2012, for a review). For example, prompting people to think about their own mortality leads them to respond more negatively to the assertion that humans and animals are biologically similar, and also promotes disgust in response to natural
bodily products such as feces (Goldenberg et al., 2001). People also report less interest in the physical aspects of sex, but not the romantic, nonphysical, aspects of the sexual experience (Goldenberg, Pyszczynski, McCoy, Greenberg, & Solomon, 1999), and even deny themselves actual physical pleasure, for example, using a foot massager for a shorter duration, in response to mortality priming (Goldenberg et al., 2006). Also, as the theory would predict, thinking about bodily products or the physical aspects of sex makes thoughts of death more prominent in people’s minds (Cox, Goldenberg, Pyszczynski, & Weise, 2007; Goldenberg et al., 1999).

This analysis has been used to explain not just attitudes toward the body, but women’s bodies in particular (e.g., Goldenberg & Roberts, 2010). For although women are not unique in having bodies, their bodies have unique features that render them especially problematic in the context of managing fears associated with mortality. They menstruate, lactate, and carry and bear the labor to deliver children. Though men can also invest a great deal in the caring for offspring, their obligatory, bodily investment is relatively minimal (Trivers, 1972). It is not surprising then that people perceive women to be more associated with biology and nature than men (e.g., Ortner, 1974), and, as TMT would predict, aspects of women’s bodies that are implicated in the perpetuation of the species (e.g., breastfeeding) are viewed as especially threatening when concerns about mortality are salient (e.g., Cox, Goldenberg, Arndt, & Pyszczynski, 2007). Comparable reactions surround women’s sexuality; when mortality concerns are salient, men respond more negatively, and with less self-reported attraction, to women who display their sexuality, or appear promiscuous (Landau et al., 2006).

However, just as the theory suggests that people manage fears associated with mortality through symbolic solutions, the body too is managed in this way. People minimize the threat associated with the creatureliness of the physical body by eating their food with forks or chopsticks, speaking about bathroom behavior in euphemisms, or not at all, and imbuing sex with romantic or alternative meanings. Research demonstrates that imbuing bodily behaviors with a meaningful context reduces their threat; for example, whereas thinking about the physical aspects of sex bring thoughts of death to mind, thinking about love prior to sex takes away this effect (Goldenberg et al., 1999).

Women’s bodies are especially managed with rules and regulations for their behavior, and exceedingly high and unnatural standards for their appearance. Though the specific standards vary—Chinese women are expected to have small feet, the Karen of Upper Burma to have long necks (stretched with stacks of metal rings), and women in Western culture
are expected to be thin—expectations for women’s bodies are extremely restrictive as compared to men’s. Fredrickson and Roberts (1997) developed objectification theory to document the consequences of this focus on women’s appearance, suggesting that women are especially likely to internalize an observer’s perspective on the self, constantly monitoring their body’s behavior and appearance (i.e., women self-objectify), and that this presents risks stemming from behaviors aimed at attaining an ideal appearance (e.g., dieting), psychological consequences associated with not ever being able to attain the ideal (e.g., shame), and experiential deficits associated with focusing on one’s appearance at the expense of everything else.

From the perspective of TMT, these expectations for women to regulate the appearance of their bodies are instigated by psychic pressures to manage the threat associated with mortality, and the potential for women’s natural, “creaturely” bodies to unleash these concerns. In experimental studies, prompting people to think about women’s natural reproductive responsibilities (i.e., menstruation) leads them to place more importance on women’s appearance (Roberts, Goldenberg, Power, & Pyszczynski, 2002). Also, when thoughts of mortality are heightened, women increase their own efforts to adhere to cultural standards of attractiveness (e.g., thinness; Goldenberg, Arndt, Hart, & Brown, 2005) despite risks to their health. Moreover, priming mortality in conjunction with women’s role in reproduction (i.e., menstruation or pregnancy) even leads women to objectify themselves in a quite literal sense; they attribute to themselves less of the qualities that they perceive distinguish humans from objects (Morris, Goldenberg, & Heflick, 2012).

In sum, a perspective on the objectification of women informed by TMT suggests that women’s bodies are subject to rigorous expectations and policing because of an underlying threat associated with human creatureliness and mortality. This existential psychodynamic perspective on objectification differs from more traditional feminist accounts, which view society, specifically patriarchal culture, as thrusting upon women the expectations and regulations for their bodies. From the perspective of TMT, women also are presumed to play an active role in such processes, complying with and enforcing a transformation of the natural body; for women are also motivated to manage the existential threat implied by their own physical bodies. And, moreover, TMT provides an explanation for why the body per se is targeted for restrictions and transformation, for there is a particular threat associated with the creaturely—and hence mortal—nature of the human body, and women’s bodies in particular.
Aronofsky’s Dance with Death

As with Aronofsky’s prior films, *Black Swan* can be understood as reflecting the human struggle to overcome limitations associated with mortal existence. His first film, *Pi* (1998), is about a mathematician who seeks to uncover the fundamental order to the universe, and the various people who pin their hopes on his ability to do so. Instead, he drives himself to physical and psychological collapse. Aronofsky’s second film, *Requiem for a Dream* (2000), is about the hedonistic escape from the pressures of reality, coupled with the dream of transcending human limits through love. Ultimately, these attempts result in death or near-death. His third, *The Fountain* (2006), is about the pursuit of literal immortality, through science and religion. The fight with mortality, and its failure, is Aronofsky’s leitmotif.

*Black Swan* shares this core theme that runs through Aronofsky’s oeuvre but is most closely related to his fourth film, *The Wrestler* (2008), in that both involve immortality projects rooted in heroism, or fame, that require pushing the physical body to the limits of what it can endure. In *The Wrestler*, Mickey Rourke plays Randy “The Ram” Robinson, who, 20 years post-fame, continues to wrestle for small groups of fans in high school gyms and community centers despite his advanced age and failing body. His desperation to recapture his stardom, and his inability to find value and self-worth outside of the ring, lead him to trade his life, literally, for one last chance at symbolic immortality.

*Black Swan* is set amidst the New York City ballet scene, and as a terror management analysis would suggest, just like Randy “The Ram” Robinson, the characters—certainly Nina, her mother (played by Barbara Hershey), and Beth MacIntyre (Winona Ryder)—appear to be obsessed with the pursuit of personal value from within the perimeters of this meaning system, and no other. For Nina, really, there is no indication that she knows any other way of pursuing personal value. She is a ballerina raised by a ballerina. On the one occasion when Nina ventures into the world outside the New York City Ballet Company, she finds herself explaining ballet to a young man in a bar. We witness her consternation when she is confronted with evidence that not everyone shares her view of world. Lily (Mila Kunis) is one of the few characters who seems able to transcend this world. She states about ballet, “It’s not for everyone”; more about Lily later.

In *Black Swan*, Beth, the prima ballerina replaced by Nina, represents a poignant example of a character, again like Randy “The Ram” Robinson, who is left to deal with the aftermath of her own diminished
heroism (and Nina’s mother represents a person who has never attained it in the first place). On one hand, we see the contempt that the other ballerinas feel for Beth (and the viewer, perhaps, for Nina’s mother) for not drawing an audience like she used to, and for being “old,” joking that she’s approaching menopause even though she’s probably still in her 30s. We also see Beth fall to pieces when her “retirement” is announced by Thomas. Beth gets drunk, makes a scene, and then walks in front of a city bus. It appears that Beth would rather die than live without her former pathway to symbolic value. Instead of achieving this morbid finality, her legs are mutilated, assuring that her body will no longer dance, and no longer be beautiful. Beth, who had once represented to Nina everything toward which she was striving (prompting Nina to take a few of her possessions as talismans toward her own success, including a nail file), becomes by the end of the movie somewhat of a horror figure, stabbing herself in the face—with the nail file—presumably in Nina’s imagination, and then showing up in Nina’s home dripping blood, most definitely in Nina’s imagination.

Like The Wrestler, the immortality project in Black Swan is dependent on the physical body—which, from Becker’s perspective, is an especially precarious foundation on which to base one’s symbolic immortality. Whereas The Wrestler strives to overcome physical limitation with brute strength, and subjecting his body to extreme and grotesque abuse, including being mauled by barbed wire and staple guns, and huge men’s punches and body slams, Black Swan’s body project is more subtle, rooted in symbolic, and specifically feminine, meaning. In other words, while wrestling seems more like an attempt to duke it out with death head on (inevitably to lose), ballet, in contrast, consistent with societal expectations for women’s bodies, is rooted in denial of the body’s physicality in celebration of its beauty and grace. Yet, in these two seemingly dissimilar films, Aronofsky depicts two complementary modes of coping with an existential threat rooted in the body: one consistent with expectations for manhood (i.e., to be aggressive; Bosson & Vandello, 2012), and objectification as typically construed with respect to women, requiring absolute sublimation of all that is natural, or creaturely, in the body.

For although ballet is of the body, it involves the body controlled, the body perfected, the body beautiful, and the body as a conduit for meaningfulness. Ballerinas train their bodies extensively, teaching them to move in graceful, and unnatural, ways. They learn to dance on pointe—on the tips of their toes—for example. This is meant to convey an image of weightlessness. Consistent with this, ballerinas are also expected to be excessively thin (indeed they need to be, to minimize the damage to
their feet as a result of dancing on pointe). As a result, their eating is often severely restricted; many do not menstruate as a result (representing perhaps the ultimate success in distancing women from their creaturely nature). In contrast to many other athletic pursuits, achievement in dance is conveyed not by how fast one moves, or how high one jumps, but by how beautiful one looks when performing. And ballerinas practice their sport in front of mirrors, a point not lost in the filming of *Black Swan*. It is not surprising that ballet dancers tend to be especially focused on monitoring their appearance, and are at heightened risk for eating disorders, even once their careers are over (Tiggemann & Slater, 2001). Ballet also is about telling a story with the body; for Nina this is the story of the white and black swan. In all these ways, the physicalness of the dance is secondary, a means to an end, to its symbolic meaning.

Thus, we see in the world of *Black Swan* a symbolic, cultural world with opportunities, albeit very narrowly defined, to obtain heroism within the context of a meaning-conferring, presumably death-denying, worldview. Moreover, although the opportunities for symbolic value are intricately tied to the physical body, they involve controlling the body and imbuing it with meaning, beauty, and youth. Though, like any mode of death denial, it is doomed to fail: the creaturely and mortal body is difficult to repudiate, and Aronofsky is right there to bring it to the forefront. For viewers of *Black Swan*, this is, not surprisingly, difficult and disturbing to watch.

**White Swan/Black Swan**

“We all know the story. Virginal girl, pure and sweet, trapped in the body of a swan.” This is the story of *Swan Lake*, as described by Thomas. Consistent with an existential perspective on the objectification of women, this portrayal of a woman trapped in the body of a swan can arguably be said to represent women and their creaturely nature. On top of this, the personifications of a woman as both a white and black swan reflects this same comparison between a woman who conforms to expectations for perfection, or who self-objectifies, and an uninhibited, lustful creature.

The symbolism of the white swan/black swan dichotomy can be witnessed throughout *Black Swan*: The pinkness of Nina’s room, dolls, and even her “pink” “so pretty” grapefruit seem to represent purity, innocence, perfection, in contrast to the behaviors that follow—drug use, sexual encounters, club dancing instead of ballet. Her beat-up toes, and cracking ankles, dressed in pretty pink ballet shoes, highlight a contrast between the natural body and its depiction in dance. Also, in one of the
initial scenes, Nina is dancing in front of her three-sided mirror and the camera pans into an extreme close-up of her foot holding her whole body up; this seems to suggest the precariousness of human physicality, hanging to life by a thread. Then we hear the crack, Nina breaks her toenail, making explicit her creaturely limitations.

Aronofsky plays with this theme of the body, and its creatureliness, throughout the film. There are, of course, the real physical consequences of dancing, but beyond a broken toenail and jammed ankle, Nina’s body sustains numerous, unexplainable, often most likely imagined, injuries. In a particularly gruesome scene, Nina pulls a bleeding cuticle and it tears down a large chunk of skin, paying homage, perhaps, to a scene in Polanski’s *Repulsion* (1965) also involving a bleeding cuticle. Miraculously, the injury heals in an instant, again conforming to the sometimes-real, sometimes-unreal nature of Nina’s experiences. Nina’s “rash” is real, presumably; its presence is validated by her mother. But, although Nina’s mother (and many a film reviewer) interprets it as a self-harming behavior, we never actually see Nina inflict it with her scratching. When her rash springs little black barbs, and pulling one produces what appears to be a feather, the creaturely connotations are clear. Near the end of the film, when Nina’s legs violently contort backwards conforming to the anatomy of, not a human, but of a bird, it is evident that the brutal injuries Nina sustains are representations of the creature in Nina.

The character of Lily is the most obvious personification of the black swan relative to Nina’s white swan. The black swan is the white swan’s evil “twin” (in this depiction of *Swan Lake*, played by the same dancer) and although the two girls are not really physically all that similar, in many instances we, the viewers, and presumably Nina, cannot tell them apart. Indeed, when Nina first glimpses Lily on the subway, and in a number of other scenes, it is not clear whether the woman she sees is herself or another (but this other is always dressed in black, and Nina in pink). This depiction of the other is rooted in the classic trope of “the double” or *Doppelgänger*. Although originally in human culture the double represented the longing for immortality (e.g., the soul), Otto Rank describes in *Beyond Psychology* (1958) how in nineteenth-century literature it became common for the double to represent the mortality of the protagonist. He points to Dostoyevsky’s *The Double*, as well as Poe’s *William Wilson* and Robert Louis Stevenson’s *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*; Sullivan and Greenberg (2011) recently applied this framework to an analysis of Doris Lessing’s *The Fifth Child*. *Black Swan* follows in this tradition—Lily and the black swan are the sensual, creaturely (mortal) doubles to the perfect, feminine (immortal) white swan.
In every way Lily represents the antithesis of Nina: she is bold, fearless, and sexually suggestive (and even willing to eat a hamburger). As Thomas says when he and Nina are watching Lily dance, “Watch the way she moves. Imprecise but effortless. She’s not faking it.” This is in contrast to the way Nina dances: precise, but with great effort. This observation reflects the terror management interpretation in which it is the white swan that is the façade, the defense, and the black swan is the natural, underlying threat. Lily is a threat to Nina from the very start. When Nina is performing her critical rehearsal for the role of the swan queen, Lily enters with a loud thud of the door, causing Nina to trip. As Lily enters into Nina’s life—coinciding with her efforts to challenge her own white swan-ness—Nina’s mental state begins to unravel. When Nina oversleeps (after her night out with Lily), she finds Lily filling in for her, doing her dance to her music; it is at this point that Nina’s reaction to Lily turns to paranoia (the portrayal of which owes clear cinematic debt, again, to the paranoia depicted in Polanski’s early films, most notably *Repulsion*).

Throughout the film, where Nina ends and Lily begins is ambiguous. After Nina’s night out with Lily the distinction becomes blurred entirely. Upon her return home that night, Nina speaks to her mother with words mouthed by Lily, who it turns out is not really there. They make love, and Nina’s skin ripples with the little bumps that we, and Nina, glimpsed earlier, and which characterize Nina’s rash: the skin looks like the skin of a plucked chicken (or swan). When Nina looks up at Lily during their sexual encounter, she sees Lily turn into herself (Nina). The scene ends with Lily-turned-Nina smothering the real Nina with a pillow. When Nina wakes in the morning, it is clear that Lily could not have actually been there, highlighting both Nina’s descent into madness, and her metamorphosis into the black swan.

Although Lily represents the most obvious personification of the black swan in Nina, throughout the film we witness a fracturing of Nina herself, paralleling this duality. Aronofsky reveals this with his use of mirrors. Mirrors permeate nearly every scene, not just in the dance studio, but in Nina’s home, particularly the room with more than a dozen small mirrors circling a larger one, and in numerous reflective surfaces (see Figure 7.1). The mirrors presumably represent a monitoring of the self (i.e., self-objectification), but in *Black Swan*, they also reveal to the viewer, and Nina, an aspect of herself splitting off from the rest. It is when Nina is being fitted for her *Swan Lake* costume that Nina sees one image of herself, in a row of many reflections, move independently from the others—the black swan. The black swan does not stand in a
line, does not conform to the rules and expectations for perfect, feminine appearance and behavior.

The battle between the white and black swan, between Nina and Lily, between Nina and herself, culminates during Nina’s final performance, the opening night of Swan Lake, both on stage and behind it. After a disastrous first act dancing the white swan, Nina returns to her dressing room to find Lily (who has been cast as Nina’s alternate) dressing to take her place as the black swan. “How about I dance the black swan for you?” says Lily, as her appearance, and voice, morphs into Nina’s. Nina, in a sudden burst of anger, smashes Lily/Nina against the full-length mirror, shattering it. “Leave me alone!” Nina screams. The body on the floor, dressed as the black swan, and alternating between Lily and Nina, reaches from her position and begins to strangle Nina (still dressed as the white swan), saying again and again, “It’s my turn.” Suddenly, Nina’s neck elongates, like a swan’s, we see the bumps ripple in her skin, and her eyes turn blood red. “It’s my turn!” the white-swan-turned-black-swan says, and stabs the person on the floor, who now again appears to be Lily. It is then that Nina gives the ultimate black swan performance. She becomes the black swan—in dance, demeanor, exuding sensuality, and sprouting wings as she dances. The audience, the cast, and Thomas, can

Figure 7.1 Mirrors (and the self-objectification they imply) permeate Aronofsky’s Black Swan (2010).
barely contain themselves; Nina receives a standing ovation (she also passionately kisses Thomas; something Nina, the white swan, never would have done).

Back in her dressing room, in costume again as the white swan for the final act of the production, Nina discovers that she did not kill Lily. The body is gone; the blood is gone. Lily is outside her dressing room door congratulating her on her performance. Upon this realization, Nina finds a gaping wound in the middle of her own stomach; she reaches in and pulls out a shard of mirror glass. Nina dances the last act, as the white swan, knowing that she will die. Nina has relinquished her defenses by becoming the black swan, shed the illusion of the white swan. Thus, Nina can no longer deny her mortality. When the ballet ends with the suicide of the white swan, Nina dies too.

**Another Kind of Death**

Distancing from the natural physical body and striving for bodily perfection (i.e., the white swan) can be understood as a solution to the threat associated with mortality for women, but it can also be understood as representing another kind of death. Ironically, it seems to be Thomas (and Lily) who best understands this. With his references to Nina’s “frigidity,” and, most obviously, during a rehearsal when he yells that she’s literally “stiff like a dead corpse,” it is clear that Thomas associates Nina’s virginal persona with coldness and death. When he is questioning Nina about why she cannot dance the black swan, Nina claims, “I just want to be perfect.” For Nina, perfect is about controlling the body; but Thomas has a different conception of perfection. “Perfection is not just about control. It’s also about letting go.” The homework he assigns to Nina to prepare for the role of the black swan, “touch yourself...live a little,” is consistent with this perspective.

A number of reviewers have picked up on the Freudian influence in *Black Swan*. Indeed, it is almost as if Thomas is playing the psychotherapist, helping his patient break free of her sexual repression (and her superego of a mother). But an alternative interpretation can be garnered from TMT, and by recognizing the pitfalls of cultural attempts at terror management. Becker (1973) claimed, “The irony of man’s condition is that the deepest need is to be free of the anxiety of death and annihilation; but it is life itself which awakens it, and so we must shrink from being fully alive” (p. 66). Women, in objectifying themselves, cut themselves off from fully living. The consequences documented for women who self-objectify are consistent with this position: they suffer health risks, even possible death, as a
result of the behaviors they subject their bodies to (e.g., extreme dieting). Furthermore, the exclusive focus on their appearance interferes with and diminishes women’s lived experiences (see Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). Thus, in objectifying the self, women are able to ward off existential terror associated with mortality, but they suffer another kind of death, the death of a life lived to the fullest.

In a sense then, women are caught in a Catch-22 between the need to defend against the fear of death, and their body’s potential to unleash it, and a mode of defending through objectification, or becoming the white swan, representing another form of death. Nina’s final lines, moments before her death, reflect this enlightened view. She says, “I felt it. I was perfect.” Thus, perfection now encompasses for Nina not just a flawless performance, but a feeling experience. It doesn’t hurt that in finding her black swan (and death), she gave a stellar performance as the swan queen, assuring Nina fame, and thus symbolic immortality, as well.

References


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P. T. Anderson’s film There Will Be Blood (2007) has been praised and awarded for its technical execution, its cinematography, production design, and for the Academy Award-winning performance of its lead actor, Daniel Day-Lewis. While these technical aspects of the film are indeed masterful and worthy of study, the film’s narrative—as rewritten by Anderson from the Upton Sinclair novel Oil! (1927/1997)—is also ingenious and deserving of analysis.

That narrative centers on Daniel Plainview (Day-Lewis), a ruthless capitalist who amasses a fortune through oil-drilling in the early years of the twentieth century. The film is the story of Daniel’s relationships with three individuals who serve, in different ways, as his foils: his son, H. W. Plainview (Dillon Freasier/Russell Harvard); the youthful preacher Eli Sunday (Paul Dano); and the man who impersonates his brother, Henry Plainview (Kevin J. O’Connor). By the end of the film, Daniel’s relentless pursuit of personal gain will have caused the death or physical impairment of each of these characters.

Like the novel on which it is based, There Will Be Blood may be read as a critique of capitalism, with a focus on how this economic system has developed in the United States, and its potentially corrosive effects on social life and individual psychology. I intend to argue that although this is one layer of meaning present in the film, a detailed analysis of the
choices made by Anderson and his collaborators in constructing its narrative (and translating that narrative into film) reveals depth-psychological themes not readily apparent from a superficially critical perspective on capitalism. Specifically, I will try to show that Daniel and the characters around him may be understood as incarnations of the individual’s psychological experience of wealth-pursuit in capitalist modernity, driven as it is by fundamental concerns with guilt and mortality.

Such a perspective on the film stands to illuminate three themes that recur throughout its development: the salience of death established early in the film; a concern with issues of authenticity, deception, and hypocrisy; and the importance of guilt and its repression. These three psychological problems were highlighted by Norman O. Brown in a book entitled *Life against Death* (1959). Brown’s work may be profitably supplemented by the writings of Max Weber and Friedrich Nietzsche, as well as findings derived from terror management theory (TMT), to bring *There Will Be Blood*’s thematic strands of death, authenticity, and guilt together into a coherent analysis. The film is an allegory of how the human motive to deny death undergirds both religion and the pursuit of wealth, and how the related denial of personal guilt in modernity provides the psychological impetus for much of the aggressive strain in capitalism.

**Terror Management Themes in *There Will Be Blood***

*There Will Be Blood* opens with an extreme long shot of desolate desert mountains and an ominous, discordant drone supplied by the film’s composer Johnny Greenwood. Immediately afterwards, we are introduced to the physical presence of Daniel Plainview lodged in a black hole in the earth. The first 15 minutes of the film consist of a series of sequences, set in the late 1800s, depicting Daniel’s early evolution from a lone gold prospector to a wealthy “oil man.”

Much of the action occurring in this short prologue takes place underground, in Daniel’s makeshift mine shaft and first oil well. The opening shot of a bright panoramic Western vista is thus counteracted in the remainder of the prologue by several dark, claustrophobic close-ups and medium shots marked by low-key illumination and toplighting. This underground atmosphere, which suggests the living burial of Daniel and his employees as they toil in pursuit of gold and oil, is augmented by the early narrative presence of death.

Within the first five minutes of the film, Daniel falls from a considerable height into his mine and nearly dies; the first word spoken in the film is the “No!” he exclaims in denial of the possibility that he has
perished. Immediately after regaining consciousness from this fall, Daniel uncovers a loosened nugget of gold, and forgets his pain with the satisfied remark, “There she is!” It is important to note that this early sequence not only informs the viewer that this man will pursue wealth at great personal risk; it also establishes a metaphoric association between money, the fall, and the possibility of death. Death’s prominence is reasserted a few scenes later, when H. B. Ailman (Barry del Sherman)—Daniel’s worker and father of the boy H. W. whom he will adopt—is crushed and killed in the well by a stray piece of rigging fallen from the derrick. Anderson’s choice to make death salient in the beginning of the film suggests the importance of human awareness of death as a motivating force behind the actions of the characters, and their pursuit of wealth in particular.

This depth-psychological interpretation—strange as it may initially seem—is suggested by the writings of Brown (1959), as well as those of Sigmund Freud and Ernest Becker. The ideas of these authors have been synthesized and empirically tested within the framework of TMT (Greenberg, Solomon, & Pyszczynski, 1986; chapter 2, this volume). According to TMT, human culture largely solves the psychological problem of death awareness by providing individuals with a meaningful worldview within which they can pursue a sense of symbolic or literal immortality.

Terror management research demonstrates that the effects of death reminders occur outside of individuals’ conscious awareness (see chapter 2, this volume). In other words, it is the potential for death-related anxiety on the fringes of consciousness that lingers after a death reminder that causes individuals to show more self-esteem striving or worldview defense, rather than a direct focus on the idea of death itself. The research is thus consistent with the Freudian notion that our symbolic defenses against death allow us to repress this problem, such that we see no inherent connection between mortality and, say, patriotism. In a similar manner, Anderson establishes death’s presence early in *There Will Be Blood*, and then lets death and violence temporarily fade from the audience’s immediate awareness as a story about one man’s pursuit of personal immortality unfolds. But physical death hovers constantly at the periphery of the narrative. The film’s title, of course, suggests the constant threat of mortality. About 50 minutes into the film, a worker dies in another derrick accident; and the final act is book-ended by Daniel’s two murders, first of the man impersonating his brother, and finally of Eli Sunday.

The prologue sets mortality as a keynote for the film not only through its underground atmosphere and depiction of an actual death, but also by highlighting the association between oil, mud, and excrement. As
Brown (1959) consistently argues, denial of death amounts to a denial of the limitations of the human body, and there is no more potent reminder of our physical limits than the fact that we are compelled to defecate. The link between death awareness and aversion to “animalistic” bodily functions has been established in TMT research (see chapter 7, this volume).

For the majority of the prologue of *There Will Be Blood*, Daniel and his employees are coated in black mud and oil. In one of the first images of the infant H. W., his face is being smeared with oil by his father, and he looks exactly like a child who has smeared himself with his own feces.

Brown (1959) and others in the psychoanalytic tradition have discussed at length the link between excrement and money, both being physically useless objects that can be “anally” retained but are ultimately spent. By drawing on the visual association between oil, black earth, and dung early in his film, Anderson reinforces the idea that the very wealth Daniel is pursuing is marked by the stain of death. Daniel’s wealth literally comes from the earth, it resembles a fecal reminder of our finitude, and it is obtained at the price of death for some of his workers. These visual and textual associations between death and wealth suggest that for Daniel, the quest for personal gain is a futile attempt to overcome his physical, mortal limits and establish an empire of symbolic immortality. TMT researchers Arndt, Solomon, Kasser and Sheldon (2004) reviewed a substantial body of evidence that reminders of death increase people’s wish to acquire prestigious material objects. In the capitalist era, many like Daniel have sought to establish a sense of personal immortality through the fame and power that accompanies great wealth.

However, Daniel’s immortality project goes beyond the desire for personal gain. He wants to believe that he will one day hand over his oil empire to his son. Especially in modernity, people often pursue the dream of personal immortality through their children, the promise that someone will carry on the family name and values, and live out the unlived lives of the parents (Fritsche et al., 2006; Sullivan & Greenberg, 2011). Throughout the first act of *There Will Be Blood*, Daniel is constantly grooming H. W. to be his successor, as in the scene (following their discovery of oil in Little Boston) when Daniel insists on explaining his complex scheme for transporting the oil via a pipeline to the young boy. Later, when H. W. loses his hearing in the gas explosion on the derrick, Daniel attempts for a time to replace him and makes his ostensible brother Henry his symbolic heir. When Henry turns out to be an impostor, Daniel recalls H. W. from the San Francisco school for the deaf where he was sent and again tries to make him his apprentice. When, in the last act of the film (set in 1927), H. W. decides to finally break away from his father and start his own
company, Daniel tells him, “You're killing us with what you're doing.” The implication is that if H.W. refuses to be an incarnation of Daniel, then Daniel has lost his means of conquering death.

As Brown (1959) notes, capitalists especially require heirs so that their fortunes will be used in accordance with their wishes and their legacies and names will remain intact. The capitalist immortality ideology is a history of “monuments” built in the names of those who would live on through their transgenerational fortunes. Daniel would like to believe that the achievements of capitalism and the interests of the next generation (those of H.W. in particular) move in lockstep. It is not, in my opinion, without sincerity that he tells the people of Little Boston, “These children are the future that we strive for” when advertising the benefits—public education among them—that his decision to drill in the town will bring. Daniel truly believes that he is laying the foundation of a good life for H.W., and that H.W. will carry his legacy and fortune into the future, beyond his own death. Of course, the film’s plot is largely propelled by the actual incompatibility of Daniel’s two strategies for achieving immortality: his zeal for gain results in an accident that leaves H.W. deaf, and therefore unacceptable as an heir in his eyes.

A second major arc of the plot is the ongoing clash between Daniel and Eli Sunday. Eli is driven for fame and success just like Daniel; however, rather than pursuing symbolic immortality through his own offspring, Eli builds his legacy on others’ desire for literal immortality as a preacher in the Church of the Third Revelation. Immediately after Daniel gives his promissory speech about the importance of capitalist advances for the children, a short sequence occurs in which Daniel watches Eli and his followers approaching the derrick and attempting to convert his workers to their faith. The implication of these parallel sequences is that Daniel and Eli are both seeking to establish an empire, for which they will be remembered and glorified.

Daniel and Eli recognize that their twin empires are competing for the hearts and minds of the people of Little Boston. From the moment that Daniel makes it clear to Eli’s father Abel (David Willis) that he would like to purchase his land, Eli seems to detect an opportunity to use Daniel’s immortality project in service of his own. The money for the land will allow Eli to build a new church; the new road Daniel constructs will lead to that church; when the oil well is publicly opened, Eli will be the star of the proceedings and say a blessing over the well. Daniel, however, is unwilling to let Eli parasitize his personal empire. He deals an early blow to Eli’s self-esteem by denying him the opportunity to bless the well.

Generally, their clashes seem less driven by practical concerns than by an irrational desire to expose and undermine the other’s immortality
project, and thereby crush the other’s self-esteem. In the three escalating confrontations between these characters—Daniel’s pushing of Eli into the mud and oil after H.W. goes deaf, Eli’s baptism of Daniel, and Daniel’s ultimate murder of Eli—the physical violence seems less important than the psychological violence involved. Each figure alternately seeks to humiliate the other and force the other to acknowledge the failure of his immortality project: Eli makes Daniel confess that he abandoned the child who was to inherit his empire, while Daniel makes Eli denounce his God.

From a TMT perspective, Daniel and Eli are engaging in extreme forms of worldview defense. Because our worldviews are symbolic constructions, our best proof of their validity lies in the number of people who endorse them (Berger & Luckmann, 1967; see chapter 4, this volume). Therefore, individuals who espouse an alternate worldview threaten our conviction that our own worldview provides a legitimate route to immortality. Eli tells his flock that they will not be saved and that their lives are meaningless unless they are “washed in the blood;” the existence of others who disagree with his doctrine are a threat to the artifact he has constructed to sustain his sense of personal specialness. The fact that Daniel—who is openly critical of religion—achieves outlandish worldly success and essentially takes over the town of Little Boston and the Sunday family (Daniel not only buys their land, but dictates to Abel how to treat his children) poses a serious threat to Eli’s conviction that he is in fact pursuing the true route to immortality. His psychological aggressions against Daniel, and his attempts to expand his church on the back of Daniel’s success, represent attempts to establish the dominance of his religious worldview.

From Daniel’s perspective, doctrines that espouse damnation for sin are a threat to his own immortality project: the burden of potential guilt with which his capitalist excesses have saddled him would be unbearable if he felt bound by a religious moral code. Asserting the validity of an atheistic worldview and crushing Eli is a means for Daniel to relieve himself of any sense that his personal empire is marred by blood and inadequacy, or that he owes anything to a power beyond himself.

Despite the great ideological differences in the immortality ideologies of religion and self-aggrandizement pursued by Eli and Daniel, respectively, There Will Be Blood takes a cue from Sinclair’s novel by highlighting the striking similarities between religion and capitalism, as they are practiced by these two men in particular. In their intense need to establish symbolic dominion over one another, Daniel and Eli fail to observe that there is a great deal of overlap in their attitudes and actions. This observation takes
us beyond the TMT themes of the film to its Weberian critique of capitalist modernity.

**There Will Be Blood and Capitalism: Wealth, Time, and Authenticity**

In all eras of human culture, people have constructed and followed ideologies that offered a sense of immortality and directed their strivings for feelings of self-value. However, the content of those ideologies, and the type of behavior they have tended to evoke, has changed meaningfully over the course of history. Capitalism has both altered the cultural worldviews that existed before it and led to the creation of new worldviews. *There Will Be Blood* is, in many ways, a film about the worldviews that have sustained capitalist expansion in modernity.

*There Will Be Blood* contains many cinematic statements about the more external characteristics of capitalism: the rise of machines, the rape of the land, the excesses of the wealthy, the pulsating tempo of modern life. But through its narrative and characterizations, the film also comments on the more internal aspects of capitalism: the way in which it has reshaped the psychology of the individual.

Brown (1959) and Weber (1904/2009) are among the scholars who have chronicled how capitalism’s emergence as the dominant form of system integration in modernity was both a partial product of and contributor to changing cultural conceptions of time, value, and the self. More specifically, Weber (1904/2009) proposes that an ideological shift brought on by Reformation theology changed the way in which people interpret their personal value and potential threats to that value in the cultural “West.” Protestant theology made the question of personal value (and salvation) a deeply individual one, by way of the doctrine of predestination. Part of a broader process of cultural rationalization that reduced the role of ritual and superstition in Western thought, this doctrine weakened the role of the social group in determining personal value: Church officials were no longer able to help the individual in her quest to find salvation.

Ideas of predestination dovetailed with other Western historical trends—such as the emergence of a bourgeois class and the rise of liberal ideologies—to create what Émile Durkheim called the modern “cult of the individual”: the psychological organization of one’s life and pursuit of immortality on an individualistic and personalized, rather than collective or group-centric basis. This shift towards a focus on one’s life as an autobiographical immortality narrative was instrumental in transforming the individual’s sense of her existence in time. According to Weber,
pre-Calvinist Christianity framed life as a series of repetitive, isolated acts recurring within the life cycle and dictated by a ritualistic, collective consciousness. However, the post-Calvinist understanding of one’s life as a coherent totality encourages a broader perspective on the lifespan, and makes past errors and sins unforgivable—that is, all human actions are seen as occurring within irreversible, progressive time. Weber notes the significance of this transformation by highlighting the Protestant ethic’s contribution to the capitalist understanding of time as money, which frames time as a precious resource and the “wasting” of time as a sin.

Expanding this analysis beyond the Reformation era (as Weber, 1946, did; see also Sullivan, 2013), we see that the historical trend of attributing increased value to the individual life history was accompanied by a corresponding “disenchantment” of the world and a gradual secularization. On this view, Protestantism was one of several currents that laid the ideological groundwork for the spread of capitalism and modern rational thought, trends that in turn would have the ironic effect of secularizing culture. Religious meaning systems, which had guaranteed the individual literal immortality in exchange for personal sacrifice to the collective interest, were dismantled by the advance of rational philosophy and scientific knowledge. In Becker’s (1971) terms, the “invisible world” (the world of the supernatural) that had once guaranteed literal immortality collapsed, and the individual was forced to seek symbolic immortality within her finite lifespan, by establishing a personal legacy through worldly achievements.

As ritual life declined and the individual became separated from the collective—both at first through predestination doctrine and later through secularizing trends—the individual became increasingly plagued by uncertainty about her personal value and qualification for symbolic immortality (Weber, 1904/2009). The decline in collective salvation and the ultimate collapse of the invisible world was anxiety provoking largely because it turned salvation into a finite resource: it was no longer the case that everyone could achieve (literal) immortality by following certain specified practices. Within the worldview of predestination, only those who were successful could feel assured that they were among the chosen; later, in secularized worldviews, only the few who could distinguish themselves through phenomenal achievements during their lifetime could be assured of remembrance after death. Thus this cultural transition had the psychological effect of creating a feeling of intense competition with others for salvation.

Here we find the seeds of capitalist individualism that flower in the character of Daniel Plainview. As Daniel tells the man he believes to be his brother: “I have a competition in me… I want no one else to
succeed.” Daniel’s relentless quest for personal gain represents the ultimate secular outcome of the trend Weber (1904/2009) identified as originating in Protestant ideology: the pursuit of wealth solely as a means of assuring one’s salvation, in the face of fundamental uncertainty about one’s value. As Brown (1959) recognized, wealth itself has become the modern immortality ideology. The capitalist’s net worth is his indicator that he is a person of significance in the only world that matters any more, the visible world of the finite lifespan.

Weber’s (1904/2009) analysis suggests two important aspects of the psychological experience of capitalist modernity: (1) an elevated concern with standardized time and finitude, and (2) the pursuit of immortality through the establishment of a personal, authentic legacy. I will now discuss the treatment of these themes in There Will Be Blood.

The film maintains a subtle but important preoccupation with issues of time. In the first 15 minutes of the film, the year in which the narrative is taking place changes three times, and the viewer is kept aware of the passing of narrative time by numbers displayed in graphic font in the center of the frame. The first line of dialogue spoken by someone other than Daniel is the off-camera statement: “What is your offer? We’re wasting time,” made by a Signal Hill citizen at a meeting to discuss a drilling lease. Just three minutes later, in the scene where Daniel and H.W. meet with the Bankside family to buy their land, Daniel remarks, “I’m not going to waste your time, and I’d certainly appreciate it if you didn’t waste mine.”

Beyond these early explicit remarks establishing the theme of “time as commodity,” There Will Be Blood continues to highlight the importance of standardized time for capitalism through Greenwood’s rhythmic, heavily percussive score. In those sequences where the film meditates visually on capitalism’s external effects, the score often consists of staccato strings of notes emphasizing tempo and sounding like the monotonous clicking of clocks. For example, in the long take where the camera pans to follow Daniel running from the fiery oil derrick carrying the injured H.W. (see Figure 8.1), the minimalist musical accompaniment begins with the steady, quick clicking of wooden blocks. As the scene progresses, more percussive instruments are layered onto the soundtrack, and the chaos of the derrick accident is reinforced for the viewer by what sounds like the mismatching of alternate tempos. Later, in the montage sequence where Daniel and the impostor Henry survey the land for Daniel’s pipeline, the music is again upbeat, steady, and rhythmic, this time consisting of percussive clicks as well as pizzicato strings.

The film’s subtle but sustained awareness of passing time complements its early emphasis on mortality. Together, these atmospheric elements of
There Will Be Blood’s composition suggest a world in which the individual has a limited span of time to forge a lasting personal legacy. As noted in the previous section, Daniel is pursuing immortality through the creation of a personal empire of power and wealth. Having considered Weber’s account of modernity, we are now in a better position to examine some of the more nuanced aspects of Daniel’s motivation, including his quest to find an “authentic” heir—someone who will be true to him and his principles. This aspect of the film’s narrative is related to its broader thematic concern with authenticity and hypocrisy.

For the modern individual, the need for personal immortality and the decline of traditional meaning structures have elevated the importance of fashioning a coherent life narrative out of personal experiences. This sense of one’s “true” identity, which transcends what are typically the variegated experiences and places through which the modern individual moves, has come to be known in both philosophy and lay discourse as the “authentic self.”

Likewise, the possibility of deviation from one’s authentic self is a key aspect of modern experience. With the collapse of the invisible world and the rise of individualism, the once widespread idea that each individual had only one “Calling” in life to which they were born and uniquely
suited also vanished. This not only implies that the modern individual can be anything she aspires to be; it also means she can pretend to be something she is not. For the individual in question, this implies the possibility of felt inauthenticity, a mismatch between the external role she is playing and her core sense of self. For other individuals, it implies the possibility of deception. Nietzsche (1974) referred to this aspect of modernity as the “problem of the actor.”

Prior to the collapse of the invisible world, a man does not question the role to which he is assigned: “His whole performance on stage is a duty, and when his role is played out he exits by the far door and goes back into the invisible world” (Becker, 1971, p. 124). In secularized modernity, by contrast, we often feel uncomfortable with the thought that all the visible world is a play, and because our role is all we have, we want to make sure that it is the part we were born to play. But without the assurance of a divine Director’s hand, we are plagued by uncertainty about our own authenticity, and the authenticity of others.

*There Will Be Blood* highlights this aspect of modern psychology in Daniel’s search for an authentic extension of himself, an heir who will be loyal to him, as well as his consistent mistrust of the intentions of others. Daniel himself builds his fortune partly through systematic deception. He attempts to lie to the Sunday family, for example, about his interest in their land, claiming that he wants a farm where he can hunt quail. To convince the Banksides of his good intentions, he plays up the “family” nature of his business, falsely implying that H.W. is in fact his biological son. When it is necessary to acquire the land he needs to build a pipeline, Daniel goes so far as to fake a religious conversion and be insincerely baptized by his hated adversary Eli. Being versed in the art of deception, Daniel constantly attempts to convince his audiences of his sincerity: in persuading the people of Little Boston, he asks them to “forgive plain speaking” and claims of himself “This is the face, it’s no great mystery.”

It is doubtless Daniel’s competitive nature and awareness of the power of deception that causes him to look for and despise falsehood in others. In his multiple confrontations with Eli, he makes repeated efforts to expose him as a “false prophet,” beginning with his sarcastic assessment of Eli’s sermon as “one god-damn hell of a show.” In the conclusion of the film’s middle act, Daniel is so outraged by the fact that the man he believed to be his brother Henry is an impostor that he promptly murders him. When Daniel believes the adult H.W. is betraying him by starting his own company, he accuses him of “backwards dealings” and disowns him.

Daniel’s preoccupation with the inauthenticity of others is not completely unjustified. In the nihilistic world of the film, most of the characters
betray elements of inauthenticity. “Henry” is a con artist who steals the identity of a friend in order to win a share of Daniel’s wealth. And despite his pretensions to piety, Eli is exposed as a deeply hypocritical character. In the film’s final sequence, when Eli comes to Daniel in 1927 to ask for financial assistance, it becomes evident that Eli, just like Daniel and his brother Paul, is primarily driven by a desire for personal gain. Though Eli may in fact believe in the tenets he espouses—this question is left unresolved in the film—, in this sequence he appears as nothing more than a capitalist who uses religion to win faith from potential investors, just as Daniel uses the promise of improved quality of life to convince people to sell him their land. Daniel and Eli share not only a willingness to deceive others for their benefit: they also share the pessimistic assumption that most people are not worth their honesty. In his fire-and-brimstone sermons, Eli stresses the baseness and fundamental sinfulness of humanity. And as Daniel tells “Henry”: “I hate most people… There are times when I look at people and see nothing worth liking.”

Despite his pessimism, Daniel is obsessed with the possibility of finding someone who can share his personal empire and carry it into the future. He wants this person to be intimately connected to him, to be an authentic extension of himself; he cannot simply hand over his empire to anyone from the common run of “people” whom he hates. In a tellingly Freudian plot element that was ultimately omitted from the film, Anderson (2007) wrote a sequence in which Daniel admits to “Henry” that his “cock doesn’t work,” that he is impotent (p. 80). This suggests that Daniel adopted H.W. and tried to mold him into a copy of himself because he needs an heir who will share his personality, but is incapable of producing his own offspring. But because the uncorrupted, deaf H.W. is perhaps the only truly moral character in the film, he ultimately rejects his father’s ruthless and monomaniacal vision.

**Bastard from a Basket: Guilt in Modernity**

Through Daniel’s antagonistic relationship with Eli, Anderson explores the clash of competing worldviews and the process of secularization in modernity. Daniel’s relationship with “Henry” brings the modern quest for personal authenticity to the fore. Perhaps the central human relationship in *There Will Be Blood* is that between Daniel and his adopted son H.W. Through his version of the story of this father and son, Anderson comments on the problem of guilt in modernity, and its relationship to capitalism as a form of system integration and the principle of the authentic self as a form of personal integration.
As discussed in the first section, Daniel wants to believe that he is not pursuing wealth for its own sake; rather, he rationalizes his quest for gain through the immortality project of bequeathing an empire to his son. Yet like Weber’s (1904/2009) ideal-typical capitalist, Daniel is a product of modernity. He is plagued by dislike and distrust for most people, he sees no invisible world or higher purpose that he should serve, and he trusts no other marker of his personal value than his wealth. For these reasons, he inevitably prioritizes his work above all else. When H.W. is injured during the gas explosion, Daniel leaves his side to revel in the fact that there’s “a whole ocean of oil” under his feet. Daniel chooses his wealth over his son. This is the wellspring of the guilt that he intuits but denies.

That H.W. symbolizes Daniel’s burden of guilt for his capitalist excesses is undeniable. Initially, Daniel only adopts H.W. because Ailman, his father, has died attempting to extract Daniel’s oil from the ground. From the start, the boy is a reminder to Daniel that his fortune has been built on the bones of other men. Even when Daniel tells the adult H.W. that he is not actually his son, he is unable to admit the full story. During Daniel’s false baptism, the clear pain he experiences when forced by Eli to proclaim that he has “abandoned his child” shows that he has repressed a great deal of guilt regarding his treatment of H.W.

Guilt is an unavoidable aspect of human experience, and Daniel is certainly a guilt-worthy man, but he does not acknowledge his guilt. Rather than ask for his son’s forgiveness, Daniel projects his feelings of guilt onto him and accuses him of betrayal. It is as if the uncorrupted H.W. was Daniel’s conscience, and when he goes deaf Daniel loses any capacity to confess his guilt. This interpretation is beautifully suggested by the scene shortly after the derrick accident (accompanied by Pärt’s “Fratre for Cello and Piano”) when we see Daniel speaking solemnly from H.W.’s point of view, and are unable to hear the words he is saying.

Martin Buber (1971) argued that the inability to admit to guilt is a characteristic aspect of modern psychology. Brown and Nietzsche provide an explanation for why this would be the case. Nietzsche (1989) contended that our symbolic self-awareness, our capacity for memory and our ability to make promises ensure that we can always compare our past expectations to our present outcomes and find that we have fallen short, and that the recollection of a prior misdeed will continually haunt us. Brown (1959) recognizes that our desire for immortality compels us to construct rarefied interpretations of our lives’ purpose, yet we recognize our entrapment in animal bodies bound to defecation and decay. The awareness of the contrast between our symbolic and physical selves induces a sense of inadequacy and guilt. At a basic level, we feel a sense
of debt to those forces and entities that sustain us in our powerlessness, whether we understand them as our parents, society, or a God.

Brown (1959) argues that early human cultures understood the inevitability and importance of human guilt, and built their ritualistic and even economic social structures on the basis of this recognition. Brown (1959) writes:

In the archaic consciousness the sense of indebtedness exists together with the illusion that the debt is payable; the gods exist to make the debt payable. Hence the archaic economy is embedded in... the consolations of religion—above all, the removal of indebtedness and guilt... Guilt is mitigated by being shared; man entered social organization in order to share guilt (pp. 269–271).

Brown then traces the origin of practices such as gift-giving, potlatches and sacrifice to the need to socially share guilt through public expenditure. Nietzsche’s (1989) ideas complement this perspective by suggesting that it is the ascetic priest—like Eli Sunday—who first gives people their sense of guilt as a way to understand their suffering, and then provides them with rituals—like Eli’s exorcisms or “baptisms in the Blood”—to rid them of their guilt.

For the modern secularized individual—like Daniel—such rituals are no longer an effective means of coping with guilt. As we have seen, the traditional meaning systems on which they are based have lost their validity, and the individual feels less of a sense of immersion in the collective in modernity. Furthermore, as Brown observes, the modern capitalist economy is built on the acquisition and hoarding of personal wealth, rather than the principles of communal giving and lavish expenditure. Daniel can only derive a sense of value from his wealth and his personal legacy; there is no spiritual creditor to whom he can pay back his debts. Thus, to acknowledge guilt would mean death for Daniel. Instead, he must repress his guilt, and project it onto the hostile world and malicious people he sees around him, in order to preserve his conviction that he has forged a legacy unmarred by any blemish. On this interpretation, the deaf H.W. is not unlike the dwarf on Zarathustra’s back, who (as Barrett, 1962, indicated) represents the reality of guilt, mediocrity, and inadequacy that pulls the egomaniacal Nietzschean Übermensch (Daniel) back down to the earth.

Brown (1959) brilliantly recognized that the capitalist system encourages the transformation of guilt into aggression. The capitalist’s interests are often furthered by the net loss of others, but rather than acknowledge
a sense of debt to those others, the capitalist sees them as competitors with whom he is locked in an individualistic battle for survival. In order to maintain the apparent integrity of his personal legacy, the capitalist objectifies others and projects his guilt feelings onto them. The ideologies that support capitalism—such as the idea of social mobility, and the notion that those who do not succeed are lazy—allow him to do this.

In this connection, it is telling Daniel does not feel beholden to the people whom he exploits and swindles. Instead, he sees in them “nothing worth liking” and convinces himself that they deserve their exploitation. And when H.W., the incarnation of his guilt, decides to make his own way in the world, Daniel decides that he is just one more “little piece of competition.” Daniel completes the displacement of his guilt when he savagely murders Eli, the ascetic priest who made him confess that he had abandoned his son.

There Will Be Blood paints a dark picture of capitalist modernity. The film is a telling meditation on the psychological structures that have abetted the glut of capitalism. As an archetype of modern psychology, Daniel represses his guilt and death anxiety, channeling these emotions into the construction of an empire. He believes in no other indicator of personal value than wealth. Rather than acknowledge the blood that stains his wealth, Daniel accumulates guilt like interest he never intends to pay. The film does not present the viewer with an alternate means of navigating modern existence. Through the character of Eli Sunday, Anderson reinforces Weber’s contention that there is no alternative to the anomic pursuit of self-interest as long as the growth of the capitalist system goes unchecked. Left with no moral ground to stand on, the viewer can only wonder with Weber (1904/2009) whether modern capitalism “determines the style of life of all individuals born into this grinding mechanism...[and] will continue to do so until the last ton of fossil fuel has burnt to ashes” (p. 157).

References


In the late 1970s, when one of the authors of this chapter was at an impressionable age, his parents took him for the first time to a movie theatre. The experience was, in a single word, overwhelming. The epic music, accompanied by dazzling visuals and a delightful story, transported the young boy to a brand-new and brightly colored universe where just about anything seemed possible. When lights switched on and the credits appeared, our boy felt alive and bursting with energy. Indeed, as the movie ads had promised, he found himself believing that a man could fly.

The movie, of course, was Richard Donner’s *Superman* (1978), the first superhero story to come out as a major feature film. Although the movie was critically acclaimed and attracted large numbers of viewers around the world, subsequent superhero films were only marginally successful until the 1990s, when the *Batman* movies achieved a comparable level of acclaim. The true rise of the superhero film, however, was realized in the twenty-first century. Since 2000, more than 40 major feature films with superheroes have been adapted to the silver screen, a number that is steadily growing. Films such as Sam Raimi’s *Spiderman* trilogy (2002–2007), the *Dark Knight* (2008), the *X-Men* (2000 onwards) and *The Avengers* (2012) have attracted hundreds of millions of viewers worldwide, and rank among the highest-grossing movies ever made. With this recent revival, the superhero film has evolved into one of the largest and most commercially successful genres in the cinematic industry.
Why has the superhero film come to enjoy such a large and enduring popular appeal? In the present chapter, we seek to provide some psychologically informed answers to this question. Throughout our discussion, we highlight the significance of the superhero in the superhero film. To be sure, we acknowledge that much of the popularity of the superhero film may be explained by such factors as good storytelling, a strong cast, or effective advertising. However, these factors are common to many other forms of cinema. In this chapter, we focus on what is unique about the superhero film: Characters that use their superhuman (or at least highly extraordinary) powers to promote some greater good, commonly known as superheroes. In what follows, we first take a closer look at the modern superhero and consider its ancient mythological roots. Next, we relate the popular appeal of the superhero film to universal human motivations that stem from people’s confrontation with existential realities. Finally, we discuss the recent trend towards deconstruction of the superhero myth, and consider the possible psychological ramifications of this trend.

The Modern Myth of the Superhero and Its Ancient Roots

I come from a place where magic and science are one.
—Chris Hemsworth in Thor (2011)

Superheroes are undeniably American icons. They were invented during the 1930s by the creators of comic books, a quintessential American art form that began as reprints of newspaper comic strips. Most superheroes are therefore situated in an urban landscape that is based on life in modern American cities. For instance, the web-slinging that is famously Spiderman’s preferred mode of transportation would be hard to imagine in a city without skyscrapers. The Americanism of the superhero extends to the values and ideals that superheroes propagate. Indeed, Superman, the oldest and most famous of superheroes, was heralded in the 1940s and 1950s as fighting for “truth, justice, and the American way.” Likewise, Captain America is a superhero whose costume design is intentionally based on the American flag and who began his career battling the Nazis in the 1940s. Beyond such blatant displays of patriotism, scholars have suggested that the very notion of a superheroic character that can single handedly save humanity is an outgrowth of the American ideology of individualism (Gray & Kaklamanidou, 2011).

Although superheroes are as American as hamburgers and Dutch apple pie, their cultural significance goes far beyond the United States. For one
thing, the superhero film nowadays draws hundreds of millions (perhaps billions) of viewers outside the US. To illustrate this point, consider the highest-grossing superhero film to date, *The Avengers* (2012). This superhero film earned $622,217,210 in North America as of September 16, 2012, and $882,300,000 in other countries, as of August 2, 2012, for a worldwide total of $1,510,617,210 (Source: Wikipedia, September 20, 2012). Notably, *The Avengers* set opening-weekend records in countries with little direct contact with American culture, such as Taiwan, Indonesia, and the United Arab Emirates. These impressive box office results, along with those of other superhero films, suggest that the superhero film has a universal appeal that extends well beyond American pop culture. Indeed, various superhero films have recently been (co-)produced outside the United States, including the American/Spanish production *Faust: Love of the Damned* (2001), Japan’s tokusatsu films *Ultraman* (2004) and *Casshern* (2004), Malaysia’s *Cicak-man* (2006), Bollywood’s *Krrish* (2006) and *Ra. One* (2011), and Thailand’s *Mercury Man* (2006).

In actuality, the superhero is closely connected with older hero mythologies from other cultures. Jerry Siegel, who cocreated Superman with Joe Shuster in 1938, recalls in a 1941 interview that ancient myths were a major source of inspiration:

> I am lying in bed counting sheep when all of a sudden it hits me. I conceive of a character like Samson, Hercules, and all the strong men I have ever heard tell of rolled into one. Only more so. I hop right out of bed and write this down, and then go back and think some more for about two hours and get up again and write that down. This goes on all night at two hour intervals, until in the morning I have a complete script (cited in Fingeroth, 2004, p. 14).

Siegel’s recollection suggests that the invention of the modern American superhero was directly influenced by myths and stories of ancient heroes. This influence is notable, because Superman’s breathtaking commercial success in the 1930s heralded what has become known as the “golden age” of American comics, the era of the Great Depression and World War II, which spawned a host of other superheroes, of which Batman, Wonder Woman, The Flash, The Green Lantern, and Captain America became sufficiently iconic to be adapted to the silver screen during the 1990s and 2000s. Several of the golden age superheroes have explicit mythological references. For instance, Wonder Woman was conceived as a warrior princess of the Amazons of the ancient Greeks, and The Flash wore a stylized metal helmet with wings that were reminiscent of the iconography of the Olympian god Hermes (see Levitz, 2010, for more on the golden age).
Ancient mythology has time and again inspired superhero artists. This is probably nowhere clearer than for Jack Kirby, the ‘King of comics’. As one of the most prolific and admired superhero artists of all time, Kirby cocreated Captain America, and contributed to the rise of Marvel Comics by cocreating, writing, and drawing The Hulk, The Fantastic Four, The Avengers, The Mighty Thor, and The X-Men, which all have recently been turned into blockbuster movies. Kirby’s vision of the superhero was more mythological than that of any previous artist. For instance, The Mighty Thor, one of Kirby’s cocreations in the 1960s, was a god that was directly imported from Norse mythology, along with a supportive cast of gods like Odin, the supreme god of the Normans, and Loki, the god of mischief. In the 1970s, Kirby created an new mythos for DC Comics called the Fourth World, which included a pantheon of the New Gods, a race of divinely superpowered beings who appeared after the death of the Old Gods during the apocalyptic battle of Ragnarök, which is described in the mediaeval Edda Poem of Norse mythology and the central topic of nineteenth-century composer Richard Wagner’s Götterdämmerung (Twilight of the Gods).

In sum, although the modern superhero was first created in the United States during the Great Depression, the superhero figure has deep roots in ancient myths. Joseph Campbell (1968/2008), in his ground-breaking volume The Hero with a Thousand Faces, suggested that all world myths draw from a common archetypical structure, which he called the mono-myth. Campbell (p. 28) described the core of the mono-myth as follows,

A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man.

The notion of a mono-myth remains speculative. Nevertheless, in keeping with this idea, mythologists have noted numerous common elements across different hero mythologies. For instance, Lord Raglan (1936) identified 22 common traits of mythical heroes such as Hercules, Moses, Siegfried, and Robin Hood. Likewise, modern cognitive scientists have suggested that folk ideas about the supernatural have elements that are universally shared across all cultures (Atran & Norenzayan, 2004; Boyer, 2001). These universal cognitions, which likely form the basis of mythological and religious traditions, may originate in evolved, biologically prepared mental templates that allow people to understand the world (see also
Ijzerman & Koole, 2011). Consistent with these ideas, experiments have revealed that intuitions about the supernatural display remarkable parallels across members of Western cultures and members of cultures who have had little or no contact with Western culture (Atran & Norenzayan, 2004). In view of these findings, it is conceivable that hero myths have some universal elements that amount to something akin to Campbell’s monomyth. This universal hero mythology likely contributes to the appeal of the superhero film.

The Existential Significance of the Superhero

Why would hero mythologies have arisen among people from cultures anywhere and at any time in recorded history? This question was central to the work of cultural anthropologist Ernest Becker. Becker was dissatisfied with the fragmented nature of conventional theories in the social sciences. Therefore, Becker set out to develop a general theory of human nature that synthesized central discoveries from the fields of anthropology, sociology, psychology, and psychiatry. He wrote down his insights in *The Birth and Death of Meaning* (1962) and *The Denial of Death* (1973).

According to Becker, heroism is central to the functioning of both individual human beings and their larger cultural world. The human mind has developed a great potential for anxiety, because its intelligence allows people to realize the utter inevitability of their own death. Cultures allow people to manage this existential anxiety by convincing themselves that they can achieve something of lasting worth and meaning, something that will allow themselves to outlive or at least outshine their own death and decay. To this end, cultures provide people with guidelines whereby they can achieve such a heroic status, or “feeling of primary value, of cosmic specialness, of ultimate usefulness to creation, of unshakable meaning” (Becker, 1973, p. 5). Cultural hero systems are based on the hope and belief that one’s cultural achievements are of enduring value. Indeed, heroic achievements often involve a literal or symbolic victory over death, for instance, by the saving the lives of innocent children. Lord Raglan (1936) noted that hero myths have death-denying aspects, by letting the hero die under mysterious circumstances, or failing to bury the hero’s body.

The groundbreaking ideas of Becker (1962, 1973) inspired psychologists to develop terror management theory (TMT) a systematic framework for examining the influence of death concerns on behavior (Solomon, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, 1991). TMT researchers have
put Becker’s notions to the test by examining people’s responses to brief reminders of death. If cultural hero systems protect people psychologically against death concerns, then reminding people of death should lead people to uphold the hero systems of their own culture. Indeed, in line with this, hundreds of TMT experiments have shown that reminders of death lead people to defend their cultural worldviews more vigorously (for a recent review, see Pyszczynski, Greenberg, Solomon, & Koole, 2010; see also chapter 2, this volume). Moreover, reminders of death lead people to strive harder for heroism, or as psychologists prefer to call it, self-esteem.

Given that terror management processes enhance people’s interest in real-life heroism, it stands to reason that these motives can also explain the appeal of fictional heroes such as those depicted in the superhero film. We are aware of no research that has directly examined how terror management influences the appeal of superheroes. Nevertheless, TMT research has examined a number of phenomena that bear on key characteristics of superheroes. By taking a closer look at this research, we believe we can indirectly shed light on the potential terror management functions of superheroes.

The first and arguably most direct way in which superheroes may alleviate death concerns lies in superheroes’ own invulnerability to death and decay. Superheroes are generally young and able-bodied, and, despite their decades-long careers, show virtually no signs of aging. Moreover, superheroes display an uncanny ability to overcome mortal dangers. TMT research has shown that people, when contemplating death concerns, are inclined to deny their personal vulnerability to diseases and accidents (Goldenberg & Arndt, 2008; Greenberg et al., 1993). The striking invulnerability of the superhero may thus be regarded as an outright denial of death. For instance, the otherwise disappointing Superman Returns (2006) has a visually stunning scene in which Superman calmly walks towards a gunman who fires several rounds of heavy ammunition directly onto Superman’s body. When this fails to hurt Superman, the gunman fires a bullet at point blank range at Superman’s eye. In a close-up, however, the viewers can witness how even Superman’s eye is completely bulletproof, and simply causes the bullet to ricochet and fall to the ground. By identifying with invulnerable and eternally young superheroes, people may psychologically reduce their own sense of vulnerability to death and decay.

The invulnerability of several superheroes like Superman is so absolute that it has become challenging for writers to sustain dramatic tension in superhero stories. One solution to this problem has been to let superheroes fight against villains that are similarly superpowered. In other
cases, superheroes have to fight evil versions of themselves. Spiderman, for instance, was set up to fight against Venom in *Spiderman 3* (2007), an enemy that was created from an alien who initially served as Spiderman’s suit, and whose appearance is a blackened version of Spiderman. Another solution is to weaken the superhero. The latter is a somewhat tricky move, given that it undermines the superhero’s invulnerability. As a kind of compromise, many superheroes have at least one critical weakness. The most famous example is probably Superman’s intolerance for kryptonite, which is purportedly the only substance that can kill him. Notably, the theme of a singular weakness causing the hero’s downfall also features in many ancient hero myths, such as the Greek hero Achilles of Homer’s *Iliad*, who was invulnerable in all of his body except for his heel. The proverbial Achilles heel may serve as a warning against arrogance and hubris, because even those with god-like powers will be ultimately overthrown by death.

Most superheroes, however, have decidedly more vulnerabilities than Superman. For instance, Batman is only relatively bulletproof because of his armor and training, and Spiderman has to completely rely on his agility to dodge bullets. Probably the most vulnerable of superheroes is *Daredevil* (2003), a blind superhero with no superpowers except for his heightened remaining senses (including a bat-like radar sense). Despite his notable handicap, however, Daredevil still manages to beat his opponents in direct combat, aided by no other weapon than his famed billy club. Daredevil’s blindness and lack of invulnerability, though they break with the regular superhero scheme, thus serve to enhance the character’s heroic stature as the “man without fear.”

Superheroes may further alleviate death concerns by promoting symbolic forms of death transcendence. A first path towards symbolic death transcendence relates to the superhero’s supernatural abilities. The natural world is strongly associated with death (Koole & Van den Berg, 2005). By putting the superhero above nature, supernatural powers implicitly suggest that there may be an escape from the naturalness of death. By bending steel with their bare hands, superheroes may bend the natural laws that dictate that life must be finite. People are indeed more inclined to believe in supernatural powers, such as the existence of ghosts or foreign deities, after they have been experimentally reminded of death (Norenzayan & Hansen, 2006). In this regard, the supernatural power of flight may have a special existential significance (Cohen, Sullivan, Solomon, Greenberg, & Ogilvie, 2011). Death entails the absolute cessation of movement, whereas unhindered flight signifies the ultimate freedom of movement. Flight is therefore a powerful metaphor for healthy
life (see Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; IJzerman & Koole, 2011). In line with these notions, reminders of death (versus a control topic) lead people to report an increased desire to fly, and, conversely, flight fantasies reduce the accessibility of death thoughts (Cohen et al., 2011). By fostering such flight fantasies, the flying powers of many superheroes may thus help people to ward off existential concerns.¹

A second path towards symbolic death transcendence relates to the superhero’s moral character. All superhero stories are about the fight between the forces of good and evil, which are separated much more clearly in these stories than they can be discerned in everyday life. Indeed, superheroes typically battle others who can be clearly identified as criminals, such as bank robbers or drug dealers, or supervillains with evil plans towards world domination. This exaggerated separation of good and evil, or “moral amplification” (Haidt & Algoe, 2004), has important existential functions. Moral amplification makes people feel like they are part of a highly meaningful cosmic drama, by assuring people that they are part of a team fighting for virtue and against evil. The moral nobility of the superhero is uplifting because it reminds people of humanity’s better nature. Indeed, people who witness someone commit a morally praiseworthy act may experience the emotion of elevation, a sense of awe at a display of moral beauty (Haidt & Algoe, 2004). Those who inspire elevation are often given a special status as moral heroes. In the Catholic Church, for instance, people who commit the highest moral actions are given the formal status of saints, a special class of people who mediate between humanity and the divine.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that superheroes may inspire feelings similar to those inspired by saints. For instance, Christopher Reeve, the actor who starred in the first four Superman films during the 1970s and 1980s, once confided during an interview with Otto Friedrich in 2001:

It’s very hard for me to be silly about Superman...because I’ve seen firsthand how he actually transforms people’s lives. I have seen children dying of brain tumors who wanted as their last request to talk to me, and have gone to their graves with a peace brought on by knowing that their belief in this kind of character is intact. I’ve seen that Superman really matters. It’s not Superman the tongue-in-cheek cartoon character they’re connecting with; they’re connecting with something very basic: the ability to overcome obstacles, the ability to persevere, the ability to understand difficulty and to turn your back on it.

The way Reeve was received by Superman fans seems strikingly similar to the way religious believers treat their holy figures. This near-religious
reverence makes psychological sense in that Reeve was seen as the embodiment of Superman (indeed, Reeve’s performance continues to be regarded by fans as the most convincing interpretation of Superman, and Reeve remained associated with the character until he died in 2004 from the consequences of a horse-riding accident).

The elevated morality of superheroes is accentuated by the baseness of the villains that they battle. Curiously, people may also derive existential comfort from this very baseness. As Becker (1973, p. 144) points out, having villains enhances people’s sense of significance in life:

It helps us to fix ourselves in the world, to create a target for our own feelings even though those feelings are destructive. We can establish our basic organismic footing with hate as well as by submission. In fact, hate enlivens us more, which is why we see more intense hate in the weaker ego states. The only thing is that hate, too, blows the other person up larger than he deserves.

The battle between good and evil that is central to the superhero mythology thus helps people find meaning in a meaningless universe.

Supernatural powers and moral amplification are germane to virtually all superhero narratives. However, superheroes may also offer a third path to symbolic death transcendence, in the form of a cosmic or pseudoreligious mythology. This final type of symbolic death transcendence has become rather tenuous in modern times, in which science has increasingly restricted the realm of religious sense-making. Probably for this reason, cosmic mythology is only faintly present in the more humanistically oriented superheroes, such as Batman, Spiderman, or Daredevil. Nevertheless, cosmic or pseudoreligious themes are clearly present in superheroes like Superman, The Mighty Thor, and the Green Lantern. The latter are endowed with an expansive cosmic awareness, as an alien from a distant galaxy (Superman), a Norse deity (The Mighty Thor), or an agent of an intergalactic police force (the Green Lantern). By their nature, these superheroes refer to a cosmic mythology that imbues all aspects of existence with a deeper symbolic meaning. As such, the narratives of these superheroes inevitably have religious overtones. According to Becker (1973), religious meanings are particularly effective in managing death anxiety because of their universal, all-encompassing nature. In line with this notion, TMT research indicates that religion is an important resource in dealing with death concerns (Koole et al., 2010; Vail et al., 2010). The cosmic and pseudoreligious themes of superheroes may thus contribute to their existential significance.
Twilight of the Gods: Deconstruction of the Modern Superhero

In modern times, the hero seems too big for us, or we too small for it.
—Ernest Becker (1973, p. 4)

The mythological nature of the superhero is problematic in modern times, during which people pride themselves on their rational, enlightened thinking. Scientific advances have undermined all forms of mythology, religious and otherwise. The imperative of logical-analytic thinking has thus become so strong that many people cannot even bring themselves to indulge in fantasies about irrational beings, even when these purport to be no more than fantasies. Indeed, recent studies have shown that subtle manipulations that trigger analytic thinking promote disbelief in supernatural beings (Gervais & Norenzayan, 2012; see also Pennycook, Cheyne, Seli, Koehler, & Fugelsang, 2012). These findings suggest that, as modern living requires more and more people to get scientific training, and hence engage in logical reasoning, people may find it harder to suspend their disbelief to enjoy a fantastical genre such as that of the superhero film.

Luckily, the superhero is endowed with clever defenses against skepticism. One classic trick has been to dress the superhero up in (superficially) believable scientific terms. An all-time favorite is to present superpowers as the unexpected side effects of a scientific experiment. For instance, the bestial strength of the Hulk is attributed to the effects of exposure to gamma radiation, and the powers of the Fantastic Four are explained as the product of exposure to cosmic rays. In a more original vein, the superpowers of the X-men are explained in terms of chance mutations within the human genome. Further lending credibility to superhero narratives, the alter egos of superheroes are often scientists or engineers, like Reed Richards in Fantastic Four, Bruce Banner in Hulk, and Tony Stark in the Iron Man movies.

The flirtations with science and technology are designed to convince the audience to believe in the magic of the superhero. Indeed, a case could be made that, in modern times, science and technology have acquired their own kind of mythology. Most people nowadays have little idea of how personal computers or smart phones work. And so people must rely on faith in operating these devices. Banking on this faith are superheroes like Ironman and scientist Reed Richards, the leader of the Fantastic Four, whose scientific and technological wizardry promises to make anything possible.

Another antidote against skepticism has been to infuse the superhero with visual and psychological realism. Superheroes started their
successful career in comic books, a medium that allowed for spectacular graphic displays of their supernatural abilities. Initially, filmmakers could not match these visuals with special effects, so that they had to resort to caricature-esque portrayals such as the popular Batman TV show of the 1960s. The first script for the first Superman movie was written in the same campy spirit. However, director Richard Donner insisted on what he called “verisimilitude,” the creation of a believable ambiance supporting the notion of a powerful superhero in the modern world (see Christie’s [2010] biography of Donner). To achieve this goal, Donner worked with hundreds of technicians and artists to create the illusion that a man could fly. Ever since, filmmakers have spent countless millions on special effects to enhance realism in the superhero film.

Realism can also be enhanced psychologically by adding complexity and moral ambiguity to the character of the superhero. This strategy was pioneered in the superhero comics of Stan Lee and Jack Kirby in the 1960s. Whereas superheroes previously had uncomplicated personalities, Lee and Kirby’s characters displayed a complex array of emotions and inner conflicts. For instance, Ben Grimm of the Fantastic Four gained superhuman strength, but simultaneously acquired a monstrous appearance as the Thing, and thus was deprived of his humanity. Due to their volatile character, Lee and Kirby’s superheroes spend as much time bickering among themselves as they do fighting villains. Following Lee and Kirby, comic book artists in the 1980s introduced other complexities in superheroes. For instance, Frank Miller’s acclaimed *The Dark Knight Returns* (1986) depicted a middle-aged Batman operating in a landscape of urban decay and political corruption. Around the same time and equally revolutionary, Alan Moore and Davis Gibbons’ *Watchmen* (1986/1987) contained a complex narrative questioning the morality of the superhero, by portraying superheroes as masked vigilantes who are driven by arrogance, greed, or mental illness. At the end of the *Watchmen* story, the superheroes must decide whether they are willing to expose a conspiracy that led to the massacre of half of New York, or cover this conspiracy up to prevent a global nuclear holocaust. Rorschach, a masked crime fighter whose simplistic morality most resembles that of the classic superhero, wants to expose the conspiracy but is vaporized by Dr. Manhattan, the only truly superpowered character in *Watchmen*.

The psychological and moral upheaval of the superhero in comic books has been paralleled by similar developments in the superhero film. The first superhero film *Superman* (1978) was optimistic in tone, and portrayed Superman as a human, but essentially uncomplicated and good-natured character. However, the first superhero film to approach
the commercial success of *Superman* (1978), Tim Burton’s *Batman* (1989), had a much darker and grimmer outlook on the superhero. In interviews, Burton stated that he had never been much of a comic fan but that he was impressed by the dark tone in the Batman comics *The Dark Knight Returns* (by Frank Miller) and *The Killing Joke* (by Alan Moore and Brian Bolland). An important theme in *The Killing Joke* is that Batman and his nemesis, the Joker, are each other’s psychological mirror image. This also became the guiding vision behind *Batman* (1989), because according to Burton, “the whole film and mythology of the character is a complete duel of the freaks. It’s a fight between two disturbed people” (Salisbury, 2006). The darkness of Burton’s *Batman*, however, was softened by the film’s stylized appearance, which referred to 1930s pulp magazines, including the stunning Art Deco designs of Gotham City, Batman’s homeground. Through this hyperstylized aesthetic, Burton’s *Batman* is more an elaborate dark fantasy than a truly dark view of reality.

Sam Raimi’s later *Spiderman* trilogy (2002–2007) struck a more nostalgic note, by embracing much of the humanism and optimism of Donner’s *Superman* (1978). Peter Parker, the secret identity of Spiderman, displays much of the clumsiness and social awkwardness that we know from Clark Kent, the secret identity of Superman. However, Peter Parker/Spiderman is an altogether more vulnerable character than Clark Kent/Superman. Though both characters are orphans, Clark Kent has positive relations with both his adopted father (Jonathan Kent) and his biological father (Jor El, who communicates with his son through crystalline technology). By contrast, Peter Parker is surrounded by highly ambivalent father figures. Peter Parker is (indirectly) responsible for the death of uncle Ben, his main father figure, and suffers from tremendous guilt because of this. Moreover, Jonah Jameson is a newspaper man who employs Peter but at the same time wages a publicity war against Spiderman, and Norman Osborne, the father of Peter’s best friend and fellow scientist who takes kindly to Peter, turns out to be the Green Goblin, Spiderman’s mortal enemy. Raimi’s *Spiderman* trilogy thus adheres to the psychological realism of the Spiderman comics of Stan Lee and Steve Ditko, published during the Lee and Kirby era of the 1960s.

A high point of realism and moral ambiguity in the superhero film has been Christopher Nolan’s trilogy *Batman Begins* (2005), *The Dark Knight* (2008), and *The Dark Knight Rises* (2012). *Batman Begins* examines the relationships between Bruce Wayne’s initial fear of death, the death of his parents, and his journey to become Batman. In the vision of director Nolan, “the world of Batman is that of grounded reality. [It] will be a recognizable, contemporary reality against which an extraordinary
heroic figure arises” (cited in Grazer & Dunkley, 2004). The theme of the film, according to Nolan, is “a person who would confront his innermost fear and then attempt to become it.” The Dark Knight continued the same dark and realistic style. The premise of the movie is that Batman’s presence in Gotham city attracts a terrifying new breed of criminals, who are purely bent on causing chaos and anarchy. This new breed of criminal is personified by the Joker, played by Heath Ledger in an Oscar-winning performance. The Joker continually forces Batman to make impossible ethical choices, for instance, by threatening to kill a new victim each day unless Batman reveals his secret identity (see Ebert, 2008). Evil thus triumphs over good in The Dark Knight, in a startling reversal of the classic superhero mythology.

**Beyond Heroism**

Lesson number one: Heroes—there is no such thing.

—Mandarin, nemesis of Iron Man 3 (2013)

With Nolan’s Dark Knight, the deconstruction of the superhero mythology seems complete. The superhero is left without supernatural powers, his motivations questioned and attributed to mental illness, and his actions only provoke counteractions, so that the superhero ends up doing more harm than good. Thus deconstructed, the superhero is stripped of all its life-affirming and death-denying symbolism. This deconstruction of the superhero is perhaps inevitable in the modern scientific age, about which Becker (1962, p. 128) noted,

> One of the terrifying things about living in [modern times] is that the margin that nature has been giving to cultural fantasy is suddenly being narrowed down drastically. The consequence is that for the first time in history man, if he is to survive, has to bring down to near zero the large fictional element in his hero-systems.

The superhero film increasingly confronts its viewers with the absurdity of existence and the pointlessness of being a hero. In response to these disturbing realities, viewers may strike back, sometimes with tragic consequences. While we were writing this chapter, a horrifying incident occurred during the midnight premiere of The Dark Knight Rises, Christopher Nolan’s third Batman movie, in Aurora, Colorado, on July 20, 2012. During this incident, a disturbed young man set off tear gas grenades and started shooting into the audience, killing 12 people and
injuring 58 others. When the police apprehended the shooter, they found that he had dyed his hair red and called himself “the Joker,” after the principal villain in Nolan’s 2008 Batman movie *The Dark Knight*. Although there have been similar shooting incidents in the United States and elsewhere, the Aurora shooting was directly connected with the *Dark Knight* movies and even to the very act of going to the cinema.

It is tempting to regard the Aurora incident as testimony to the psychological bankruptcy of the superhero myth. When people draw more inspiration from villains than from superheroes, does this not mean that the fundamental notion of a superhero has become meaningless? Perhaps, as Becker’s (1962) analysis of modern heroism suggests, the superhero has at last become too big for modern audiences, so that people can no longer identify with heroes that are larger than life.

However, the need for hero systems is likely to remain undiminished, along with people’s need to envision a higher form of being that transcends death. Presumably because of these deep-seated needs, hero myths display a stubborn persistence, and seem to have a knack for reinventing themselves. The Edda Poem in ancient Norse mythology already described how the death of the old gods leads to the rebirth of a new and fertile world. This cyclical view of hero systems was apparently shared by one of the greatest creators of modern superheroes, Jack “The King” Kirby (1971, pp. 9 & 33), when he wrote:

> There came a time when the old gods died! The brave died with the cunning! The noble perished, locked in battle with unleashed evil! It was the last day for them! ... The holocaust which destroyed the old gods split their ancient world asunder—and created in its place... homes for the new forces to rise and grow and achieve powers to move the universe in new ways.

One interpretation of Kirby’s words is that the deconstruction of one superhero myth will only lead to the birth of another superhero mythology. In an apparent bid to confirm this notion, four years after Nolan’s *The Dark Knight* (2008) and in the same year as *The Dark Knight Rises* (2012), Marvel Studios released the *Avengers*, which delivered the superhero mythology on a grander scale than ever seen before, with a team-up of superheroes Captain America, the Hulk, The Mighty Thor, Ironman, Hawkeye, and the Black Widow. The film received generally favorable reviews, and broke records at the box office, grossing over 1.5 billion dollars worldwide. To some, the *Avengers* may signify the vibrancy of the superhero mythology as a global form of pop culture. To others, the *Avengers* may be little more than the death rattle of a genre that is well beyond its prime. Which of these views will ultimately turn out to be
accurate will depend on whether filmmakers can continue to make us all believe that a man can truly fly.

**Notes**

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1. Superman was even able to fly backwards in time in Donner’s *Superman* (1978) to save the life of Lois Lane, Superman’s main romantic interest. Although time travel does not quite guarantee immortality, we suspect that the imagined ability to rearrange historical events helps to reduce existential anxiety.

**References**


PART III

DIRECTORS ENGAGING WITH DEATH
One of the main reasons for Ingmar Bergman’s immense popularity among art-house enthusiasts during the late 1950s and early 1960s was because a fear of collective death overshadowed society, and Western society in particular. The hydrogen bomb was detonated on Bikini atoll in 1954, and protest marches in the United States and Britain indicated the degree of anxiety felt about the prospect of nuclear annihilation (Bergman [1963] specifically talks about this danger in Winter Light). The Cold War came to a peak in 1962, when the Soviet Union under Nikita Khrushchev dispatched nuclear missile launchers to Cuba.

So Bergman’s continual references to death struck a chord. His work, far from being inaccessible, seemed to welcome audiences to share the director’s anguish as well as his aspirations. Bergman had the courage to air his speculations in public. The Knight in The Seventh Seal asks the figure of Death, “Why can’t I kill God within me? . . . Why, in spite of everything, is He a baffling reality that I can’t shake off? . . . I want knowledge, not faith, not suppositions, but knowledge . . .” These were questions that appealed even to non-believers at the time of the film’s release (1957).

Throughout his voluminous career, Bergman brought Death to life, so to speak, either by giving him a physical presence, as in The Seventh Seal, or by endowing Death with a symbolic presence, as in films like Prison (1949), Summer Interlude (1951), and Wild Strawberries (1957). Some
of Bergman’s most chilling characters serve as manifestations of death, or sterility. Genuine human corpse features in several Bergman movies (from *Persona*, 1966, to *The Touch*, 1971), while those who appear to be dead rise zombielike from their bier or coffin (as in *Wild Strawberries*, *The Magician*, 1958, or *Hour of the Wolf*, 1968). *Cries and Whispers* (1972) is almost entirely dominated by the concept of Death as a mysterious and all-consuming process.

Most people think increasingly about death as they grow older—from once a month, say, in one’s 20s and 30s, to once a week in one’s middle age, and once a day in one’s 70s and 80s. Bergman, one suspects, thought about death just about every hour during those hectic years when he was making one film after another fraught with metaphysical overtones.

At a press conference at the Cannes Festival in 1973, Bergman was asked if he still feared death. He replied that he had come to terms with it, as being the equivalent of a “switching off of lights,” no more, no less. Bergman’s obsession with death and its implications stems, like a majority of the themes in his work, from childhood. His father had been appointed chaplain to the Royal Hospital (*Sofia-hemmet*) in Stockholm, and little Ingmar would often accompany the gardener to a little chapel in the grounds of the hospital, where the corpses of dead patients were laid out prior to burial. “It was my first contact with the human being in death, and the faces looked like those of dolls.” In counterpoint to this gruesome evidence of corporeal decay, the religious precepts of Pastor Erik Bergman were steadily inculcated into the young Ingmar. Each Sunday he and his siblings would join in a prayer before breakfast, and then accompany their father to Hedvig Eleanora Church in Stockholm to attend the Lutheran service.

In his late teens he finally kicked over the traces, and fled the family home, living bohemian-style in the city’s Old Town, and pursuing his passion for theater. He had been hugely impressed by *The Phantom Carriage* (1921), Victor Sjöström’s silent masterpiece and a film that dwelt almost exclusively with the subjects of death and retribution. Sjöström showed the dissolute David Holm dying in a drunken fracas on New Year’s Eve. His soul literally rises from his corpse (thanks to excellent photography and lab work), and decades later in *Cries and Whispers*, Bergman would offer an even more ghoulish variation on this theme, as Agnes comes alive again on her deathbed and clutches at her sister.

Plays that Bergman either wrote or staged during his apprentice years often referred to Death (*The Day Ends Early*, *The Pelican*, *Requiem*, for example). From his earliest film as a director, *Crisis* (1946), Bergman regarded death as something at once mysterious, macabre, and spectacular.
Jack, the antihero and early alter ego of the director himself, shoots himself in the street after telling his girlfriend that “One day I shall step out into the dark, and my clock will stop ticking.” By 1954, when he made A Lesson in Love, his first social comedy, Bergman could make fun of Death. An aged Olof Winnerstrand tells his granddaughter that death is merely a part of life. “Think how dreary it would be,” he says wryly, “if everything were always the same. So we have Death, so that there may come new Life for all eternity. Think how tiresome it would be for me to wear long underdrawers for a hundred thousand years!”

It is all too facile just to enumerate the references to death in Bergman’s work, as it is to describe the rivers in Renoir’s, or the stout females in Fellini’s. Instead, it may be more revealing to consider the pressure that death exerts in Bergman’s pivotal movies. During his youthful Sturm und Drang period, death hovers in the background as a romantic abstraction, either suggestively (as in Waiting Women, 1952, where Märta sees a dark form behind a frosted glass door), or iconically (as in Prison, when Birgitta-Carolina is offered a sparkling jewel by a statuesque girl clothed in black—an envoy of Death who in reality is the landlady’s daughter). Much later in Bergman’s career, such emblematic moments again come to the fore, as in the television series Fanny and Alexander, 1982, where Death is glimpsed in the grandmother’s apartment, complete with skull and scythe.

Death may be overtly personified only in The Seventh Seal, but many a routine personality, wearing nondescript garments, represents Death, or the meaning of death, in Bergman’s work. For example: the doctors in Persona, in Cries and Whispers, in Face to Face (1976), and Brink of Life (1958), all figures who evince an icy objectivity and lack of compassion. As the female doctor in Persona tells Elisabet Vogler: “Your hiding place isn’t tight enough. Life trickles in from outside.” She passes judgment, as Death does in The Seventh Seal, and as the doctor does in Brink of Life when he offers no comfort to Stina after she has lost her baby: “On the threshold, life failed him,” he declares. Or Marie’s aged aunt (played by Mimi Pollak) in Summer Interlude, marching across the heath in black like some memento mori. The local priest observes her with a chilling eye, telling Marie that he feels in the presence of Death.

In Wild Strawberries, three characters embody both the authority and the ignorance of Death. Isak Borg’s ancient mother, at first glance a typical granny figure sifting through the mementoes of her youth, is in fact essentially dead, complaining of the cold, “I’ve always felt chilly as long as I can remember.” Isak recognizes her as a symbol of Death when he catches sight of his grandfather’s gold watch, bereft of hands like the one
in Isak’s nightmare. Isak’s own son, Evald, who refuses to have children of his own, tells his wife: “My need is to be dead. Absolutely, totally dead.” As he utters these words, Bergman’s camera stares at him in exactly the same way as it does at Death in *The Seventh Seal*. And the cynical, henpecked husband Alman (surely a conflation of *alma*—the soul—and *allmän*, everyman in Swedish), who Isak takes into his car after a breakdown, reappears in one of Isak’s dreams, only now a dominant inquisitor who forces Isak to relive his wife’s act of infidelity.

“Perchance to Dream”

Bergman’s obsession with death and the hereafter underpins his richest period, from *The Seventh Seal* in 1956 to *The Silence* in 1963. He turned 38 during the shoot of *The Seventh Seal* in 1956; Shakespeare was around 35 when he wrote *Hamlet*, and Dante around 43 when he began *The Divine Comedy*. All three men were perplexed by the nature of love and death, which is why *The Seventh Seal* exerted such an appeal to viewers in their late teens and early 20s. With its lofty rhetoric and its yearning for answers to the dilemmas of human existence, it affected an entire generation coming of age in the late 1950s. Bergman already had 16 features to his credit and had matured as a filmmaker to the point where he could tackle the most complex of issues on-screen.

The figure of Death inhabits both the film and Bergman’s one-act play, *Wood Painting*, on which it was based. As a child, the director had accompanied his father on preaching assignments, spending hour after hour in rural churches, from Dalarna in central Sweden to Småland in the south. The images of the Black Death brought to the screen in *The Seventh Seal* were inspired by the work of Albertus Pictor, and a 12-foot fresco adorning the vestibule of a church in Småland. The accoutrements of the character came from this and other church murals—the black cloak and cowl, the “skull beneath the skin” as T. S. Eliot wrote, and of course the scythe.

It is a concept of death fraught with dread and physical agony. Religious fervor makes little headway against the relentless march of this whey-faced executioner. The flagellants and the monk who harangue them slowly vanish before our eyes. The lecherous figure of Raval, the “seminarist” is mocked by the Squire as “Dr. Mirabilis, Coelestis et Diabilis,” and later perishes from the plague. The young girl who has been accused of “carnal intercourse with the Evil One” and condemned to burn at the stake serves as a sounding board for the Knight’s and the Squire’s (read Bergman’s) anxieties about Death and what may lie beyond. “What
does she see?” demands the Squire. “Who watches over that child? Is it the angels, or God, or the Devil, or only the emptiness? Emptiness, my lord!” To which the Knight has no answer. The demise of the “witch,” however, while convincing him that nothing ensues after the moment of death, does not assuage his thirst for the meaning of life and death. Soon afterwards, he contrives to distract Death during the chess game, enabling Jof and Mia to escape. This act persuades the Knight that if one can overcome the fear of Death, one may be reconciled with the end of life as such.

In 1961, Bergman confided in Vilgot Sjöman that when he made *The Seventh Seal*, he was “terribly taken up with religion. But having made it, I got rid of two things: my fear of Death—I just didn’t feel it any more. And my brooding about God, which left me for a long, long time” (p. 16). Can one assert that Bergman’s attitude to death and religion evolved steadily throughout his career, arriving at an (almost) serene acceptance of mortality as a logical step in man’s experience? Not entirely, for he returns again and again to a state of spiritual anxiety, just when he seems to have reconciled himself with the ruthless reality of death. Thus the pessimistic trilogy of chamber films he made between 1961 and 1963 (*Through a Glass Darkly*, *Winter Light*, and *The Silence*) seems to question both doctrinal belief and the very insignificance of life on earth. Then came a period of experimentation with both film form and content; one assumed that Bergman had left behind his obsession with metaphysical issues. But all at once, with *Cries and Whispers*, the silence of God in the face of suffering and death surges to the fore with as much anguish and harshness as in Bergman’s work of the 1940s and 1950s. Ten years later, with the triumphant climax of *Fanny and Alexander* (announced as Bergman’s swan-song in the cinema), peace of mind appears to have won the day. Yet in his work for television in subsequent years, Bergman could touch depths of pessimism (*The Blessed Ones*, 1986) and interludes of almost orthodox Christian belief (*Saraband*, 2003).

In his determination to “analyze” the meaning of death, Bergman is best served by the dream sequence. Nothing in dreams or hallucinations can be too flagrant or implausible, whether it be a man walking upside down on the ceiling (*Hour of the Wolf*) or the replaying of scenes hitherto concealed in the folds of memory (*Wild Strawberries*). The dream enables Bergman not just to transcend everyday reality but also to speculate on what might lie just beyond the grave. His Lutheran upbringing colors many of these sequences, dwelling on the guilt for past sins and the punishment that an intransigent “God” will duly mete out. A character like Spigel in *The Magician* tells Vogler that he has always yearned for “a
blade with which to lay bare my bowels. To detach my brain, my heart. To free me from my substance. To cut away my tongue and my manhood... Then the so-called spirit could ascend out of this meaningless carcass.” In *Wild Strawberries*, Isak Borg finds himself obliged to witness, for the second time in his life, the infidelity of his wife in a forest glade. The minatory “examiner” who creates what he terms “a surgical masterpiece” tells Borg that he is condemned to “the usual penalty—loneliness.” During a prolonged scene in *Face to Face*, Jenny Isaksson revisits her vanished childhood, fearful of waking up, for then she would be—irrevocably—dead.

The most celebrated sequence involving death and dreaming in Bergman comes at the outset of *Wild Strawberries*. The aged professor stirs in his sleep as he wanders in confusion through the narrow streets of the Old Town in Stockholm. The sun glares on the buildings, rendering shadows into utter blackness. Isak Borg starts to perspire, and here it may be noted that Bergman always loathed bright sunlight and the sticky heat of the south. White may be the color of death in many cultures, but in Bergman’s world the whiteness has either a faultless purity or a slightly rancid tinge. Borg is perplexed by the clock with no hands that stands above the watchmaker’s shop, which suggests that he is both beyond humanly measured time and in a limbo that may be the equivalent of Death’s “waiting room.” Moments later he addresses a male figure who, when it turns around, has a puffy, doll-like face; this figure collapses on the sidewalk and blood wells out of its fleshless body.

Borg seems not to recognize this part of the city and, as Bergman writes in the screenplay, “Everyone was dead; there was not a sign of a living soul.” Now he must confront the abyss of his own mortality. A horse and carriage trundles down the hill towards him. It is a hearse, and when one of the wheels collides with a lamppost, the coffin slithers out. Borg approaches as in a trance, gazes down into the coffin, and sees that he himself is in it, fully clothed (see Figure 10.1). The “corpse” grips his hand and pulls him down into death, as it were, but Borg resists, and... wakes up. For Freud, death in dreams was allied to the erotic impulse that is normally repressed during our waking day, and the orgasmic rhythm of the final part of Borg’s nightmare seems to chime with this.

Dreams and hallucinations are often indistinguishable in Bergman. When Jof at the close of *The Seventh Seal* witnesses the Dance of Death on the horizon, his wife teases him: “You with your visions and dreams!” When Alexander observes his father’s ghost, playing at a spinet, in a cream-colored suit, in *Fanny and Alexander*, it seems that his sister cannot share this revelation.
As he entered his 50s, however, Bergman seems to have accepted mortality as an integral element in human life, and he presents death in naturalistic terms, often as murder or suicide. The human corpse, that most potent visual emblem of death, figures more frequently in his work. During the fleeting, perplexing prologue to *Persona*, we see a woman lying dead on a gurney. In the opening sequence of *The Touch*, Bibi Andersson’s Karin visits her dead mother in a clinic. In *Cries and Whispers*, Harriet Andersson’s Agnes dies in terrible pain, shrieking for some kind of help beyond the morphine; she is laid out with due ceremony, and then briefly comes to life again. Bergman does not intend his audience to believe in resurrection; as he wrote in the screenplay for *The Touch* apropos the mother’s appearing to breathe again as Karin gazes down at her in the sickroom: “it is an optical illusion—Death’s

![Figure 10.1](image) Borg’s dream of his own corpse staring back at him, in Bergman’s *Wild Strawberries* (1957).
enigmatic game with the senses of the living.” Nonetheless, the director’s œuvre features numerous incidents of individuals who, apparently dead, return to life, to mock those who fear mortality. Spegel, the dying actor in *The Magician* whose corpse serves the magician’s purpose during the finale; Mrs. Alman in *Wild Strawberries*, who is diagnosed as “dead” by a hapless Professor Borg and then opens her eyes and cackles with laughter; as does Veronica Vogler in *Hour of the Wolf* as she lies on a bier and suddenly comes alive and seizes Johan in a lustful embrace.

This derision in the face of death suggests one means of neutralizing our essential mortality. If there is one distinct triumph that belongs to humankind after death, it is survival in the memory of others. For at least a generation a relative or close friend can be remembered, often with such vividness that the boundary between death and life seems to have dissolved. Isak Borg, near the end of his own existence in *Wild Strawberries*, can summon up recollections of childhood, and one might almost infer that the final shots of the film, with Borg’s parents waving serenely to him from their summer yacht, allows the old professor to come to terms with his past, present and future. He falls asleep with a contented smile, as if he were embracing Death. Such affectionate and reassuring memories may also be found in *Cries and Whispers*, when Maria (Liv Ullmann) recalls her mother and father enjoying a magic lantern show with her when she was a child.

 Soon after the release of *Cries and Whispers*, Bergman declared that “My personal view is that when we die, we die, and we go from a state of something to a state of absolute nothingness, and I don’t believe for a second that there’s anything above or beyond, or anything like that, and this makes me enormously secure” (Sundgren, 1973). Even the chaplain who speaks over Agnes’ corpse seems shorn of faith. “If it is so that you have gathered our suffering in your poor body,” he intones, “if it is so that you meet God over there in the other land... If it is so, pray for us who are left here on the dark, dirty earth under an empty and cruel Heaven.” In *Fanny and Alexander*, made a decade later, Oscar Ekdahl, however, departs this life with the optimistic, almost serene words, “Eternity, Emilie. Eternity!” Only after the death of his beloved wife in 1994 did Bergman tell close friends that he felt convinced he would be reunited with Ingrid in the afterlife. The beam of festal light that shafts down into the church as Liv Ullmann turns back to the altar in *Saraband* suggests that he had in some small but significant degree returned to the beliefs of his earliest childhood.

 In *Face to Face* the principal character, Dr. Jenny Isaksson, is asked by her actor friend Mikael if she fears death. “No, I don’t think so,” she
replies. “I’m like most people, I suppose, who regard Death as something that happens to others but never to yourself.” Yet the film is shot through with searing images evocative of death: a weird elderly lady who visits Jenny in her dreams; a dead and naked young woman attended by anxious doctors; Jenny herself lying in an open coffin, with a pastor urging the undertakers to affix the lid because the corpse is starting to smell; and then the vision of an almost exultant Jenny being cremated.

In both the anguished films Bergman made in Munich during his exile there, *The Serpent’s Egg* (1977) and *From the Life of the Marionettes* (1980), human beings are beaten to death and their corpses viewed dispassionately, almost clinically. In Bergman’s final masterpiece, *Fanny and Alexander*, Allan Edwall’s Oskar Ekdahl expires in the family home, attended by his wife and children and muttering phrases that suggest Bergman’s own reconciliation with the inexorability of death.

**Suicide**

Suicide is a form of death that fascinated the youthful Bergman. Many a character tries to take his own life. Some do so when faced with an intolerable future. Captain Blom in *A Ship to India* (1947) hurls himself through a window after failing to accept his encroaching blindness, but he fails.

In *Prison*, the prostitute Birgitta-Carolina takes a knife with which to escape the sadistic attentions of her pimp. *Port of Call* (1948) actually opens with an attempted suicide, as Berit (Nine-Christine Jönsson) leaps into Gothenburg harbor, only to be rescued and to learn to love a merchant seaman. One year later, in *Thirst* (1949), Viola (played by the novelist Birgit Tengroth) succumbs to depression and jumps into another harbor, Stockholm’s.

With the passing years, however, Bergman lost respect for the act of suicide, which would be equated with cowardice in his films. For example, when Albert (Åke Grönberg) flees to his caravan after being humiliated in the circus ring by his mistress’s lover in *Sawdust and Tinsel* (1953), he looks long and hard at the pistol but cannot bring himself to pull the trigger. Bergman turns to comedy in his next film, *A Lesson in Love*, showing the lovelorn David (Gunnar Björnstrand) trying unsuccessfully to hang himself to gain the attention of his free-loving wife.

In *Winter Light*, that bleak meditation on the absence of faith and the temptation to abandon life altogether for an uncertain oblivion, Jonas Persson (Max von Sydow) shoots himself through the head with a shotgun. He commits suicide because he believes that the Chinese will use
the atom bomb to overwhelm and destroy the world (this was in 1962, remember!). In a lengthy passage in the vestry of a small country church, Persson seeks reassurance from the pastor, Tomas Eriksson (Gunnar Björnstrand). “Why must we go on living?” he asks the vicar with unnerving directness. “Because we must. Because we have a responsibility,” comes the standard, dogmatic response.

Eva (Liv Ullmann) in Autumn Sonata (1978) finds herself attracted to suicide after the drowning of her four-year-old son. She must grieve, just as her selfish mother (Ingrid Bergman) must grieve for the death of her lover Leonardo. When she visits the churchyard where her son lies buried, she tells herself: “I can’t die now. I’m afraid to commit suicide, and one day perhaps God will want to use me. And then he’ll set me free of my prison.” Thus, three decades after Prison, Bergman reiterates the concept of Life as a prison, and Death as a form of release.

The most appalling example of suicide in the Bergman canon provides the shocking start to The Serpent’s Egg, a film made when Bergman himself felt, if not suicidal, at least in a state of profound despair after being unjustly accused of tax evasion by the Swedish government. Abel Rosenberg (David Carradine) trudges up the stairs of his boarding house in Berlin, opens the door to his room and is confronted by the sight of his brother Max on a disheveled bed. Max has blown his brains out with an army pistol, and left a note attesting to his depression in the face not just of unemployment but of the rise of National Socialism in the chaotic final days of the Weimar Republic. The Serpent’s Egg is a film drenched in death, with Brown-shirted thugs beating Jews to a pulp in the streets, and Abel being shown at one point a number of corpses in a dingy morgue. Indeed if Bergman was fascinated by anything, it was the odor of death rather than the odor of sanctity.

In 1986 Bergman directed The Blessed Ones for Swedish television. One of the most pessimistic and unrelenting dramas in his entire canon, it suffers from the navel-gazing dialogue by Ulla Isaksson, and concludes with two outsiders deciding to commit suicide by switching on the gas in their huis clos of an apartment. Harriet Andersson as the paranoid wife and Per Myrberg as her insecure partner discuss ways to escape an intolerable existence, with Myrberg at one point jamming himself in the eye with a brush handle to render himself blind.

**Violence**

When death occurs on-screen in Bergman’s work, it can often be rendered in violent terms. The Virgin Spring (1960) remains his most violent
film. Karin, the virginal daughter of Max von Sydow’s Töre, is ambushed, raped, and beaten to death by wandering herdsmen. Töre’s vengeance is meted out with ritualistic and ruthless intent. He stabs one of the rapists through the heart, crushes the second in an open fire, and hurls the third—a mere boy—against the wall of the farmhouse. For all these victims, death arrives swiftly and unexpectedly, as it does to the prostitute in *From the Life of the Marionettes*, when at the very outset of the film Peter Egerman vents his fury and loathing on her rather than on his elegant wife Katarina.

The murder of the young boy, or “Demon” as Bergman called him, in *Hour of the Wolf* occurs in a dream or phantasm, and crystallizes the innate violence of the entire movie. Max von Sydow’s Johan Borg finds himself on a rocky shore, and all at once assaulted by a boy with predatory eyes and a remorseless grip. They struggle and eventually Johan smashes the boy’s head against the rocks, and the body tips into the murky water. Quite apart from the sexual overtones (and Bergman said later that he felt both Max and the boy should have been nude), the scene is invested with savagery, and a painful awareness of how difficult it can be to kill someone.

In one of Bergman’s least-seen films, *The Ritual* (made for television in 1968), death is administered at one remove, as it were, by a trio of cabaret entertainers. Throughout the film they have been interrogated and discomfited by a civil judge, who accuses them of tax evasion. In the final scene, the entertainers perform their ritual in such an ominous and threatening manner that the judge succumbs to heart failure. Death no longer holds dominion over human beings, as he does in *The Seventh Seal*: instead, Death becomes a punishment wreaked by one human being on another.

Although not associated with political commitment, Bergman disapproved of the war in Vietnam, in particular because of the effect it had on human comportment. Already in *Persona*, he included archive footage of a South Vietnamese monk immolating himself in the street, as well as the photo of a young Jewish boy being rounded up by the Nazis in the Warsaw Ghetto. In *Shame* (1968), however, made two years later, he imagined how the life of a young couple would be disrupted and ultimately destroyed by a war that seems to have no winners, no losers, and no moral argument. Death accosts Eva and Jan at every turn, whether it be a pilot shot down in the trees, or corpses of soldiers and civilians drifting through a sluggish sea. Jan is corroded by the mood and pressures of guerrilla war. He finds himself suddenly capable of executing foes and acquaintances alike.
Although Märta in To Joy (1950) dies in a fire caused by a faulty oil stove, she does so offscreen. But in Fanny and Alexander, the malign Bishop Vergérus suffers immolation in his own home, as an oil lamp is tipped over and sets fire to the bedding, a ghastly scene that Bergman presents as a flashback and that communicates forcefully the agony of violent death.

**Death as Loss**

Bergman’s characters suffer not just from a fear of their own demise, but also from the loss of loved ones to the Grim Reaper. To Joy begins with the young violinist Stig (Stig Olin) learning that his wife Märta has been killed in a fire at their summer cottage in the archipelago. The body of the film is in flashback form, showing how much Stig had betrayed his innocent young wife and how, finally, he had come to depend upon her. In the concluding sequence, as Stig sees his young son shyly entering the orchestra rehearsal room, he recognizes that this child is a priceless legacy from his marriage, and a means of cheating Death’s shadow. A similar theme courses through the coda to Fanny and Alexander, as the Ekdahl family celebrate the birth of twins, an occasion as elaborate in its domestic way as the pompous funeral for Oscar Ekdahl that has taken place earlier in the film.

In his screenplay for Cries and Whispers, which contains profuse notes and comments for the benefit of the actors, Bergman wrote, “Death is the extreme of loneliness; that is what is so important.”

As he approached his eightieth birthday, Bergman grew more and more conscious of death’s imminence. His wife Ingrid, with whom he had spent almost quarter of a century, died of cancer in 1994. Three years later, Bergman wrote and directed In the Presence of a Clown for television. Death appears in the form of an androgynous clown called Rigmor (a sardonic reference to rigor mortis). She hovers over the play within a film, as an ailing producer of the early twentieth century who decides to stage the world’s first talking picture, based on an incident in the life of composer Franz Schubert. Bergman uses the opening bars of the final song in Die Winterreise, Schubert’s great song cycle that refers so often to death. When he began writing the screenplay, he recalled, he “had the feeling that Death was looking over my shoulder. As author Göran Tunström puts it, ‘I had a sense of always having a silent man behind me, measuring me for a suit’” (Åhlund, 2008, p. 533).

Saraband proved to be Bergman’s swansong, and its measured melancholy allows the filmmaker to come to terms with his past, with his own flaws, and with his own films. When Johan and Marianne climb into bed
together, naked, in one of the final scenes, all illusions have been shed. Companionship wards off the fear of death more effectively than all the rhetoric and dogma of established religion. After all, *Cries and Whispers*, considered by many as Bergman’s most depressing film, ends on a note of serenity and companionship, as Agnes walks through the parkland with her sisters, and sits with them in a swinging bench. “I closed my eyes tightly,” writs Agnes in her diary, “trying to cling to the moment and thinking: Come what may, this is happiness. I can’t wish for anything better. Now, for a few minutes, I can experience perfection. And I feel a great gratitude for my life, which gives me so much.”

Bergman for most of his life empathized with *Hamlet’s* sentiments about the oblivion of death. He related to what Shakespeare termed

> the dread of something after death,  
> The undiscovered country, from whose bourn  
> No traveler returns.

In the summer of 2007, however, at the age of 89, he seemed reconciled with the fact of death. Shunning the flames of cremation, which he refers to in *Face to Face*, Ingmar Bergman asked to be buried in a simple pine coffin in the tranquility of Fårö parish churchyard.

**References**


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Death is more than a preoccupation in Stanley Kubrick’s films. Periodic and ritualized depictions of death strongly mark the director’s cinematic oeuvre. Death comes in the form of systemic failures. It is evident in the spectacular collapse of rational plans and the machinery of human affairs, from the failed heist in *The Killing* (1956), to the dysfunction in the military hierarchy of *Paths of Glory* (1957), and the only-too-functional doomsday machine in the death comedy, *Dr. Strangelove* (1964), to HAL’s lethal breakdown in *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), and Barry Lyndon’s abrupt fall from the aristocracy after the death of his son.

Brigitte Peucker (2007) suggests that the director’s often-cited preoccupation with the still image “is the natural counterpoint to his fascination with cinematic movement” (p. 106). This uncanny double allegiance to stillness and motion points, paradoxically, to the director’s profound fixation on death. The stunning still images in the painterly *Barry Lyndon* (1975) recreate an era whose “pastness” is solemnly underscored by the film’s scathingly ironic voiceover. Photographs—whose eidos (essence, form) is death, in that their subject seems to have disappeared into time’s passage—haunt *The Shining* (1980), and even *2001*. But while still photographs suggest that their subjects have disappeared, Kubrick’s moving camera, which, one might think, implies that its subjects are animated, in the final analysis also captures a death march, literally expressed in the tracking and zoom shots of troops marching toward the enemy in *Paths of Glory, Barry Lyndon*, and elsewhere.

Stanley Kubrick often spoke admiringly of the films of Max Ophuls, at one point calling Ophuls’s *Le Plaisir* his favorite film. This admiration...
is evident in Kubrick’s frequent homage to Ophuls’s spectacular mobile long takes, which lend the latter’s films a remarkable fluidity, and in their mutual interest in fin de siècle representations of love, disease, and death (both adapted Arthur Schnitzler). But the homage lies, as well, in Ophuls’s allegiance to the still image, and to an eternal return of the past mediated by the moving camera that also mark Kubrick’s films. Ophuls’s films seem to be a kind of material ghost for Kubrick: both locate death and, perhaps, transcendence in fixations on images of the past, and in the tireless circular motion of the camera. In Letter from an Unknown Woman (1948; adapted from Zweig), at the end of a life full of movement and futility, Stefan Brandt peers down at a fading photograph of a woman and child who are “his,” although he never knew them. At the end of Ophuls’s Liebelei (1933; adapted from Schnitzler), the dead lovers’ voices echo over a snowy landscape, on an endlessly gliding sleigh, still vowing eternal love. It is this imagistic “suspension,” something that is both movement and stasis, that both Ophuls and Kubrick sought to represent.

The rhythms of grief and the return of the repressed are expressed formally in Ophuls’s and Kubrick’s films not only by repeated movements but through the representation of ritual, in particular through duels and military rites. Liebelei ends with an offscreen duel, as does Madame de... (1953). Letter from an Unknown Woman ends suspended on the edge of a duel. These duels separate lovers and evoke something of the sublime. Kubrick, however, buries sublimity in irony. Barry Lyndon begins with the death of Barry’s father in a derisory duel over a horse. He is dispatched within the first minute of the film. Barry also is a duelist, first when he challenges his cousin’s intended (Captain John Quin/Leon Rossiter), in a rigged duel that ends in the fake death of Barry’s rival. And he is perhaps worse than killed at the end of the film by Lord Bullingdon (Leon Vitali), his leg amputated, retiring to Ireland from his peripatetic life—and his attempt to storm the aristocracy—with only his mother beside him. Significantly, the film ends with a freeze frame, suspending Barry in time. Killer’s Kiss (1955) reaches its climax in a kind of duel, tragically comically situated in a manikin warehouse. Even Spartacus (1960), which was Kirk Douglas’s and Dalton Trumbo’s project more than Kubrick’s, is saturated with the ethos of the duel in the forced clash of gladiators.

Kubrick’s soundtracks, like Ophuls’s, also reveal a deep concern with death. Often, music signals death’s advent and lingers in ironic commemoration. For the most part, this music does not represent a working through of mourning—rather, it engraves the rhythm of death in the mind of the listener. A Clockwork Orange (1971) begins with Purcell’s majestic Music for the Funeral of Queen Mary, transcribed for Moog synthesizer by
Wendy (Walter) Carlos. This cold and mechanical synthesizer work is both alienating and hypnotic, its funereal beat pulling us toward the brilliant monstrosity of Alex’s (Malcolm McDowall) crimes. *Barry Lyndon*’s obsessively repeated Handel sarabande also beats out the rhythm of death, the dithyrambic move from ecstasy to melancholy playing out and, simultaneously, paralleling the stately and devastating camerawork of the film. Martial music is among the vernaculars Kubrick calls upon to cue the listener into the throb of mortality.

Kubrick’s films’ “ecstatic melancholy,” and the fascination with military rituals find what is for that director their natural home in the themes of war and fascism. The films reveal an inner conflict about how a work of art might be “oppositional” with respect to the death-dealing horror of fascism, and how slippery is the slope of the aestheticization of the tools of war and world-threatening violence. An aficionado of military materiel, Kubrick lovingly and intricately details streamlined bombs, sleek bombers, the uniforms of three centuries, and the military tactics of wars, real and imaginary. In *Dr. Strangelove*, with his cowriter Terry Southern, Kubrick brings the audience to the verge of falling in love with “the bomb” itself. In *Full Metal Jacket* (1987), Animal Mother wears a helmet tagged with the words, “I am become death,” referring to the words from the Bhagavad Gita cited by Robert Oppenheimer after his team at the Manhattan Project successfully detonated the first atomic bomb: “Now, I am become Death, the destroyer of worlds.” Kubrick draws us too close to our urge for self-destruction.

Kubrick, who made genre films but characteristically moved from one genre to another, returned three times to the war film. His first war film, the amateur feature *Fear and Desire* (1953), depicts a war that, despite uniforms and foggy landscape that seem to derive from the World War II European front, takes place between imaginary armies in “no other country but the mind.” A plane crash traps four soldiers in a forest behind enemy lines. As they attempt to rejoin their unit, they see the opportunity to take out a German general, who is housed near a landing strip. The next morning the soldiers encounter a group of three young women, take one of them (“The Girl”/Virginia Leith) prisoner, and tie her to a tree. Three of the four soldiers leave to camouflage a raft for an escape by river, but first kill the general and his aide-de-camp, who take the form of the protagonists’ doubles (they are played by the same actors). Two of the soldiers escape by plane. Meanwhile the soldier who remained behind with The Girl has a mental breakdown. He unties her, attempts to make love to her, and then shoots her. In a gesture to Shakespeare, the two remaining soldiers, one ranting and one dying, float back toward their own line where their comrades await them.
It is not surprising that Kubrick began his feature film career with an earnest, existentialist allegory. In the scene where soldiers kill their doubles, we find Kubrick’s first depiction of war as a form of suicidal self-confrontation. Another uncannily familiar allegorical element is the scene of the young woman’s death. Her killer acts out mutually exclusive emotions upon the enemy woman, moving from fear to desire to murderous wrath. The Girl is not just a murder victim: she is also a scapegoat whose death is propelled by the psychotic need to destroy something that is both enemy and female.

Kubrick’s 1957 Kirk Douglas vehicle *Paths of Glory* emphasizes more the horror than the ecstasy of destruction, but it is Kubrick’s first fully realized vision of the bitter allure of war’s rituals. A general (Mireau, played by George McCready) forces his men to attempt to take the “Ant Hill” from the Germans. Dax (Douglas) leads the impossible assault under protest, suffering beautifully as he watches his men die. The French soldiers are forced to fall back. Nevertheless, Mireau accuses them of cowardice in the face of the enemy. Their punishment is to be symbolic—or, at least, metonymical. Mireau chooses three soldiers to be executed by firing squad for their “cowardice.” An attorney in civilian life, Dax is the defense attorney in their travesty of a trial. The men are condemned to death and led to their execution, in accordance with the rites and traditions of the French army.

By the time he made *Paths of Glory*, Kubrick’s cinematography had achieved much of the power one feels in watching the mature works. His style’s impact is in part a result of the way death dogs both narrative and aesthetic form. The moving camera, adopting several points of view, pulls the spectator along through the French trenches in a circular or oval pattern. The sense of entrapment is annealed in an endless loop, rendered more claustrophobic by the wide-angle lens that marks Dax as especially formidable. A handheld camera tracks with the colonel as he bellies his way along the “path of glory,” a chaotic and annihilating no-man’s-land. This, too, can be seen as a circular trajectory—a sort of bloody “round trip.” Movement forward marks an attempt to unravel a maze that cannot be mastered, and the urge both to follow and resist the terror of linear progression—the kind of straight line that takes the scapegoated men toward the firing squad (see Nelson, 2000). The grand ballroom of the chateau comprising Mireau’s headquarters is the setting for the “trial,” which takes place upon a gleaming chessboard-patterned floor. The scene’s images, static as compared to the camera movements of the rest of the film, are haunted by Enlightenment aesthetics (chateau, period paintings, rococo décor, reiterated in Quilty’s mansion in *Lolita*, 1962,
as well as in the final bedroom suite in *2001*) and ultimately poisonous ideals (cf. White, 2006). In this sequence, the wide-angle lens distills the improvised courtroom into a chilling set of deep-focus tableaux while the death drive manifests itself as movement forward or in circles. The generals’ uniforms are sharp and elegant and military precision wars with Timothy Carey’s weird groans as they walk the path toward their death by firing squad.

Although it is only one of the ways in which death works to shape Kubrick’s films, the slaughter of communal victims is a major organizational device in the films. The Girl in *Fear and Desire* is killed by only one man, but her capture was a moment of communal violence against an individual. *2001: A Space Odyssey* depicts a radical version of all-against-one, murderous violence, what René Girard (1979; 1989) terms foundational violence. In the stunning 18-minute sequence entitled “The Dawn of Man,” Kubrick locates the beginning of properly human culture in what looks very much like a moment of scapegoating or theatricalized murder. The hominids, led by Moonwatcher (Daniel Richter), try and fail to drink at a watering hole controlled by another group. Conflict ensues, and Moonwatcher’s band retreats. The appearance of the towering Monolith, accompanied by the eerie vocals of György Ligeti’s *Requiem* (celebrating a mass for the dead), seems to trigger an evolutionary leap in the creature. The alien-created rectangle brings another sublime shape into a universe of circles, spheres, and jutting irregularities. After his first contact with the Monolith, in an infamous sequence, Moonwatcher’s increasingly violent play with a bone leads to inserted point-of-view visions of killing prey with a weapon. Moonwatcher is indelibly marked by this mental image of death, and it will become the basis of an evolutionary change. Soon thereafter, the hominid leader’s band is eating meat, and ready to confront the enemy at the waterhole. As the two groups clash, Moonwatcher alters the nature of “human” conflict, with his ability and willingness to wield a weapon against his own kind. After his first blow on the chosen victim, the shrieking members of his group gather around and beat the unfortunate hominid to death.

Human violence becomes more subtle in the future depicted in *2001*, but its terms and final ramifications are much the same. Another Monolith has appeared, this time on the moon, and is emitting powerful magnetic rays. Heywood Floyd is charged with heading the scientific mission
investigating the phenomenon, and carries out a propaganda assignment on the side. When, for example, he encounters some Soviet scientists of his acquaintance, Floyd deliberately reinforces the rumor that a deadly contagion has broken out on the Clavius moon base, near that of the Soviets. While they sit drinking cocktails in modernistic fuchsia chairs on the stark white deck of the space station, the conversation goes from friendly to tense, and Floyd (as opposed to Moonwatcher) becomes more quiet and foreboding as the questions intensify. Critics have often noted that this is a futuristic “watering hole,” not unlike the one where the two hominid bands fought, but the threat of death by contagion and the clash of rival armies here make scarcely a sound. Human silence against a background of exalted visuals is an aesthetic wonder of 2001.

In the film, human conflict reaches a stalemate, and death and transfiguration are mediated through technology and superintelligent alien beings. HAL’s murder of the hibernating astronauts is accompanied by startling machine-generated shrieks, and HAL dies as he sings a song imprinted upon his mind during his “childhood.” Evolution, including the jump to the “next stage” of intelligence, involves violent conflict, the elimination of perceived threats to one’s ecological niche. Thus, unlike some critics discussed below, I can regard the fetal Star Child at the end of the film as the bringer of peace and renewal only with difficulty.

*Full Metal Jacket* (1987) reiterates and complicates 2001’s devastating disquisition on the effects of deadly scapegoating (White, 1991). During the Vietnam War, Marine recruits on Parris Island go through the rigors of boot camp. From the opening shots, where fresh-faced youngsters’ heads are shaved, to the final, brutal scenes of the film, the men are taught to become part of one body—the US Marine Corps. As the camera tracks in a wide-angle mobile long take around the shining oval of the barracks floor, Gunnery Sgt. and Drill Instructor (DI) Hartman (Lee Ermey) unleashes racist profanity designed to strip the men of any resistance to his authority. The film’s protagonist, Private J. T. “Joker” Davis (Matthew Modine), attracts punishment for his moxie, but shakes out as a leader in the platoon’s hierarchy. Singled out for punishment from the start is Private Leonard “Gomer Pyle” Lawrence (Vincent D’Onofrio), who repeatedly enragés the DI. The overweight Leonard is inept at everything he tries, from making his bed to tying his shoes. To no avail, Hartman assigns Pyle to the motherly ministrations of Joker, who makes a sincere effort to help.

Pyle keeps “fucking up.” A montage shows that the private is now singled out for various ingenious humiliations, including being ordered to march with his pants around his ankles while sucking his thumb, his
underwear a baggy diaper. The repressed furor of his fellows, who themselves endure collective punishment for Pyle’s ineptitude, finally boils over. Under an eerie blue light, the men visit their wrath upon Pyle, binding his arms under his blanket, raining blows on his body as he cries out piteously behind a gag. Each soldier takes a turn, with Joker lashing out in grotesque rage and delivering six blows. Betrayed by his only friend, Pyle begins to develop the eponymous and weirdly compelling “full metal jacket,” morphing into a psychotic machine with a “major malfunction,” along the lines of HAL.

Just after the men (including Pyle) have completed boot camp and received their assignments, Pyle cracks. Joker, on night watch, finds his former buddy in the “head,” talking to his loaded weapon, “Charlene.” Hartman, in campaign hat and boxer shorts, storms into the head and proceeds to chew out Pyle, who takes him apart with a blast from his M-16. Turning to Joker, who speaks to him softly, Pyle sits on the toilet and turns his rifle on himself, blowing his brains out. The scapegoat has eliminated himself in a place where human functions at their most crude take place. The infantilized warrior destroyed, the solidity of the “corps” is sealed.

Fade to black. The men are now in Vietnam, where the first of only three women in the film makes a beeline toward Joker and his sidekick Rafterman, seated in a café in Da Nang. As the camera tracks behind the sashaying prostitute, Nancy Sinatra’s “These Boots are Made for Walking” ironically emphasizes her single-minded advance. After delivering her famous “me so horny” line, the woman aids a male partner in the theft of Rafterman’s camera before roaring off on the thief’s scooter, to Joker’s amusement.

The aftermath of the Tet Offensive finds Joker and Rafterman, journalists for the military publication “Stars and Stripes,” embedded with a company moving toward Hue City. In this unit are Cowboy (Arliss Howard), Joker’s boot camp pal, Eightball (Dorian Harewood)—who is black—, and a soldier with the moniker “Animal Mother” (Adam Baldwin). The scene’s set décor, meant to be Vietnamese (though filmed in a defunct UK gasworks), features large round stone doorways. If they are lucky, the soldiers will also follow a circular trajectory, “rotating” back to the “world”—that is, the United States. As seems to be the case with Bowman’s odyssey in *2001*, however, the war will be a one-way trip for the many dead.

Before they go into battle, the men in the squad gather outside an abandoned movie theater. A Vietnamese man rides up on a scooter, a curvaceous Vietnamese woman hanging on behind him. Although she
at first rejects Eightball, fearing that a black man’s penis is too large for comfort, the others defend him, and a glimpse of his “Alabama black snake” reassures the prostitute. Difference, with its deadly consequences, is eliminated. Animal Mother brutally insists on first dibs in the controlled gangbang. Although violence is threatened, this is a formulaic scene of scapegoating, where the black man and the prostitute are not, within these rules of engagement, harmed. As he so often does in the film, Kubrick ironizes the conventional World War II film, where the ethnic differences of the soldiers are celebrated (see, for example, Bataan, 1943, or Battleground, 1949). The men figuratively gather around the woman, interested only in rough, but remunerated, sex.

The penultimate scene in the film identifies what at last seems to be a proper scapegoat. After Cowboy is killed by an improvised explosive device, a sniper takes out several of the other men, including Eightball, whom Animal Mother desperately tries to save. When Joker finally makes his way into the sniper’s nest, he is shocked to find that she is a woman. He tries unsuccessfully to shoot her, but his gun jams, and she wheels around to kill him. Rafterman appears and peppers the sniper, a North Vietnamese Army soldier, with bullets. On the ground, encircled by the men, she begs to die. In Full Metal Jacket, as in Paths of Glory, the circle is consistently the setting for a scapegoating scene. As the woman warrior looks them in the face and prays, the soldiers are both hypnotized and conflicted. She is a sniper, but also a woman—the proper sacrificial victim, but also a brother. “No more boom-boom for this Baby-san,” says T. H. E. Rock (Sal Lopez) in a dispassionate monotone, effectively desexualizing his own remark. Going against Animal Mother’s desire to let her “rot,” Joker shoots her—a gesture that speaks of mercy but also recalls his brutalizing of Pyle earlier in the film. Mother, a “hard” woman, takes over the unit. The femininity that the Marine Corps attempted to expel from the soldiers has returned with a vengeance to trouble the ideal of the dead warrior. The film’s last scene shows the platoon marching along against a backdrop of Hue City in flames. They are singing the theme song to The Mickey Mouse Club. But Kubrick permits himself to drop the irony as the end titles come up. The Rolling Stones’ “Paint it Black” spells out the pain, horror, and grief experienced, even by “Jolly Green Giants,” at war. The sniper is a “gook” soldier who is fair game, and, according to the structural logic of the film, must die. But even so, the American men, like the spectator, are left in a state of unease.

Kubrick, so concerned with death, and acutely aware of the role of Jews in world history, never made a film explicitly dealing with the World War II, the Holocaust, or Judaism. This was, however, not for
want of interest. In fact, Kubrick had long planned to make a film about the Holocaust, although, as he told Michael Herr, the idea of trying to represent its events in a two-hour film daunted him. He wrote a script entitled “The Aryan Papers,” an adaptation of the novel Wartime Lies by Louis Begley, but did not film it because he felt that Spielberg’s Schindler’s List (1993) preempted his planned project.

Holocaust images and metaphors abound in Kubrick’s films—treated both satirically and with dirge-like solemnity. The mass murder at the end of The Killing is certainly reminiscent of images of concentration camp victims. The earlier Killer’s Kiss infamously depicts piles of manikins, whose images also evoke the concentration camp photos widely publicized after the war. According to Cocks (2004), Kubrick’s most sustained, though veiled, treatment of the Holocaust is coded into the images, music, and dialogue of The Shining, his 1980 horror film, adapted from the novel by Stephen King. In it, Jack Torrance (Jack Nicholson) plays a writer with a difficult past who takes a job as off-season caretaker at a remote, luxurious Colorado hotel, The Overlook. Accompanying him are his wife Wendy (Shelley Duvall) and his son, Danny, who has the gift of “shining,” that is, he is psychic. Danny immediately comes into contact with the ghosts of the hotel who are, as Mr. Dick Hallorann (Scatman Crothers) tells him, “like pictures in a book,” though more lethal. Jack only demonstrates later in the film that he, too, has some form of extrasensory perception.

The Shining opens with the Gregorian chant “Dies Irae” scored for Moog synthesizer in an ominous arrangement based on Berlioz’s use of the same chant in his Symphonie Fantastique, played on the soundtrack as a helicopter follows Jack’s yellow Volkswagen from high above the mountain road. Cocks (2004) holds that the “eagle-like” view from the helicopter, and the presence of Hitler’s “people’s car,” whose yellow hue matches the armbands Jews wore under Hitler’s reign, provide evidence for reading The Shining as an allegory for the Holocaust. And despite his sometimes outlandish numerology and interpretation of colors, musical motifs, and so forth, Cocks is probably onto something when he claims that the film subtly depicts, or alludes to, both the World War II Holocaust and other genocides. Diane Johnson, who cowrote The Shining’s screenplay, notes that she remarked to Kubrick, as they were adapting King’s novel for the screen, that his idea for the mise-en-scène of the bathroom in the famous Room 237, where tiles covered both the floor and the wall, was too much like a gas chamber (Johnson, 2006). Kubrick had the tiles removed. Rightly or wrongly, Cocks (2004) describes such gestures as evidence of Kubrick’s ambivalence about depicting the Shoah.
The Shining critiques the annihilation of human populations at the hands of privileged males. This topos of The Shining is brilliantly underscored by the conversation between Jack Torrance and the ghost of Delbert Grady, when the former warns the latter that Danny has called on “a nigger cook” (Hallorann) to interfere in Jack’s program of domestic violence. He advises that Jack “correct” his wife (whom Jack has termed “the old sperm bank”) and child, as Grady had “corrected” his two little girls and his wife by chopping them to pieces with an axe.

Jack Torrance, Danny, and even Wendy (who does not “shine”) experience many vivid returns of the dead as material presence, in the form of the two girls dressed in blue dresses (“Come play with us... forever”), the risen dead woman in her bath, the compliant butler, the receptive misogynist bartender (Lloyd the Bartender/Joe Turkel). Amidst these visions, Delbert Grady reminds Jack that he—Jack—is the caretaker of white male domination. Male domination declares itself in a startling shot-reverse shot, high-key lit, blood red and glaring white, art deco men’s room (not unlike the blinding whites and reds of the Jupiter mission’s Discovery One craft in 2001).

After the family is snowed in at the hotel, Jack becomes more and more overwhelmed by the supernatural forces, and ultimately tries to kill his family, as instructed. Like the Donner party, whom the family discusses on their way to the Overlook, and in one of the fairy tales that drive the film, the devolving Jack is driven to attempt to wolf down his family. Not even Moonwatcher’s clan is shown to be consumers of the flesh of their brethren: this is left to more “advanced” humans. The droogs’ joyous rape and murder of women depicted in A Clockwork Orange, Alex’s sentimental self-pity, all are concentrated in the most monstrous being of all, the father of a family. In a triumph for the hysterical Wendy, who pulls a turnabout on the female-directed violence begun in Fear and Desire, she and Danny manage to outwit the madman. The maze, both a formal and metaphorical structure in the film (recreational maze, maze-like hotel), is another of the near insoluble geometrical problems that Kubrick poses in his films. It is the site of a father stalking his son with an axe and that son successfully defying him. Fittingly, Jack freezes to death at the entrance to the maze, which stretches out behind him, an emblem of his distorted mind.

Kubrick again and again stops motion with “freeze frames,” the arrested motion of death, of a man become an ice sculpture, a grotesque, a haunted photograph. In the photograph, labeled “July 4, 1921,” Jack appears as a happy denizen among the rich and privileged who occupy a hotel built above a graveyard. To reiterate: Peucker (2007) notes that
the least we can say about the photo is that it invokes the image of the dead. If, as Jacques Derrida (2006) observed, mourning always involves “identifying the bodily remains and . . . localizing the dead” (p. 9), this film has failed to do so in the specific context of the Holocaust. But I wonder if Kubrick is not performing another work of memorialization by ending The Shining on the frozen image of the white male murderer. Derrida’s specters demand not revenge but social justice. At the end of the film we look into the face not of those we mourn, but of the perpetrator from whom justice is demanded.

Kubrick’s last film, Eyes Wide Shut (1999), may be his most complex depiction of how death, eroticism, and the process of scapegoating can shape narrative. This loose adaptation of Arthur Schnitzler’s 1926 Dream Story (which Kubrick had long wanted to film), shows direct inspiration not only by Max Ophuls’s Schnitzler adaptations (Liebelei, La Ronde [1950]) but also by such films as Letter From an Unknown Woman, and Madame de. . . . Not surprisingly, La Ronde—a “merry-go-round” of love, with all its dangers, excitement, and contagion—anticipates the exploration of sexuality that is Eyes Wide Shut. In the latter film, Bill Harford (Tom Cruise) is a callow physician to wealthy New Yorkers. He experiences an unwelcome sexual awakening when he learns that his wife (Alice/Nicole Kidman) had considered leaving him, on impulse, for a handsome naval officer (Gary Goba). Although the “affair” took place only in Alice’s mind, Bill sets off, in a state of shock (verging on actorly catatonia for Cruise), upon an urban sexual odyssey, ending up at an orgy for the superwealthy in an out-of-town mansion. At the orgy, he is found out and expelled as an intruder, but afterwards continues to investigate what may have been a murder at the orgy.

When the film was released, critics expressed their surprise that Kubrick, a contemporary of Weegee and the director of A Clockwork Orange, would depict such a passive protagonist in a sterilized version of New York. Dr. Bill’s knack for getting what he wants by flashing his medical ID (which Herr, 2000, brilliantly describes as an “amulet”) and proffering an endless stream of cash from his “magic” wallet are plot elements completely absent from Schnitzler’s novella (The first line in the film features Bill asking his wife, Alice [Nicole Kidman], “Where is my wallet?”; see also Kreider, 2006). The dream décor, while beautiful, is weirdly repetitive from scene to scene, featuring many similarly decorated Christmas trees, and identical, draping white lights. Eyes Wide Shut, to its detriment, had been advertised as “the sexiest film ever made,” but despite Kidman’s and the many other nude women’s charms, the bizarre atmosphere of the orgy and Cruise’s passive and strangely flat performance make it clear that
the film is not about sex in the usual sense. As Herr (2000) puts it, “They [critics and audiences] got the sex that’s indivisible from death, and an orgy that was certainly fleshly enough, yet anaphrodisiac, liturgical” (p. 81). During the course of this dream narrative, we come to understand that Bill’s view of female sexuality is a confused projection of desire, and a fear of betrayal, contagion and death. Not sexy.

At a luxurious Christmas party at the home of a rich and powerful Jewish client (Victor Ziegler/Sidney Pollack), Bill and Alice are both approached by attractive and sexually aggressive members of the opposite sex. Neither husband nor wife succumbs to these seductions, but both are titillated. Flirtations are interrupted when Bill is called up to a resplendent bathroom, where a beautiful call girl (Mandy/Julienne Davis) lies naked and unconscious from a drug overdose, a half-dressed Ziegler looking on frantically. A painting (one of many by Christiane Kubrick appearing in the film) depicting a heavily pregnant woman completes the scene’s Eros-Thanatos configuration. Bill cares for the naked woman until she comes around.

At home, Bill and Alice smoke a joint and discuss their erotic encounters at the party. The conversation becomes a near quarrel when Bill is verbally cornered and admits that he believes that women are less likely to have sexual fantasies and urges than are men. Indignant, Alice recounts her elaborate fantasy about the naval officer she had encountered on a family vacation. Bill’s reaction is prudish shock and disbelief. The phone rings. A patient has died and Bill must make an appearance at his bedside. Thus begins his sexual pilgrimage.

Bill is greeted at his dead patient’s bedside by a young woman, Marion Nathanson (Marie Richardson), the dead man’s daughter. As if in response to Bill’s tormented train of thought about female sexuality (illustrated by inserts of his visions of Alice having sex with the officer), Marion breathlessly confesses that, although she is engaged to another man, she is desperately in love with Bill. Marion’s father’s death, and even, perversely, the presence of the corpse in the room, seems to have unleashed a need to abase herself emotionally and sexually before the young doctor. Bill makes his escape, only to stumble upon a lovely young woman (Domino/Vinessa Shaw), who overwhelms his already weakened defenses and picks him up on the street. Their negotiation about the price for her services breaks down when, again, the phone rings. It is Alice, calling to ask when he will return home. Bill takes this as his cue to leave, but pays the prostitute for her brief attentions. Later he finds out that Domino has tested positive for HIV. Bill barely escaped a death sentence. As in Schnitzler’s and Freud’s Vienna, Eros is contagion, pulling the desiring individual toward his demise.
Later, at a secret gathering for the wealthy, Bill Harford almost falls prey outright to the familiar pattern of scapegoating. Surrounded by fucking bodies, CGI monks superimposed after Kubrick’s death over the X-rated body parts and men in eighteenth-century masks, Bill wanders the mansion’s rooms. A woman who resembles the druggie prostitute (but is actually played by another actress, Abigail Good), seeks him out, warning him that he does not know what sinister powers he is up against. Indeed, Bill is called to the ballroom, only to find himself surrounded, against the brilliant reds and dark costumes of the scene, by the inevitable circle of scapegoating. Condemned to who-knows-what fate, he takes off his mask. “Mandy” intervenes, announcing from a balcony above the revelers that she will accept Bill’s punishment. Bill leaves, convinced that the woman has sacrificed her life for the sake of his survival.

A newspaper article convinces Bill that the prostitute is indeed dead. Is she Mandy or the nameless and mysterious woman? Is it in Bill’s perverse dream that women are exchangeable, a product of the corruption of the bourgeois classes? Calling on his status as a medical doctor, Bill visits the morgue to view her perfect corpse (the body of Mandy/Julienne Davis). Touched and horrified, he continues to investigate her death, under the threat of his own and his family’s death by the sinister powers behind the orgy. Finally, his odyssey brings him back to Ziegler’s home. He admits his transgressions to Ziegler, who warns him of the supremacy of those who organized the orgy.

The gorgeous orgy, the dramatic threats, all lead to the final scene, in which Bill and Alice take their daughter Christmas shopping. The child runs excitedly through the toy store, asking for this or that gift for Christmas. Alice looks at the price tags on the goods, even as she and Bill have their most serious conversation. The centrality of sex to the film is implied, when Alice utters the last word in any of Kubrick’s films. She says that the one thing she knows is that the couple must, as soon as possible: “fuck.”

*Eyes Wide Shut* radically revises the critique of scapegoating that structures Kubrick’s earlier works. Slavoj Žižek’s description of what he calls “the obscene shadow of the law” can help us understand how *Eyes Wide Shut* breaks the pattern (White, 2006). Žižek (1994, p. 54) has written that

Superego is the obscene “nightly” law that necessarily redoubles and accompanies, as its shadow, the “public” Law… The field of the law is thus split into Law qua “Ego-ideal,” i.e., a symbolic order which regulates social life and maintains social peace, and into its obscene, superegotistical inverse. As has been shown by numerous analyses from [Mikhail] Bakhtin onwards, periodic transgressions of the public law are inherent to the social order,
they function as a condition of the latter’s stability… What most deeply “holds together” a community is not so much identification with the Law that regulates the community’s “normal” everyday circuit, but rather identification with a specific form of transgression of the Law, of the Law’s suspension (in psychoanalytic terms, with a specific form of enjoyment).

Fraternity hazing, the beating of Pyle, the orgy, and other illegal or unsavory activities become the ground of a legal system’s functioning. _Strangelove_ evokes the history of American rocket science in that a German intellect propels the program. The product is a “Doomsday Machine,” whose obscene presence demonstrates that fascism lies at the heart of US advanced weaponry, and ultimately guarantees nuclear disaster. _Eyes Wide Shut_ turns inside out the earlier films’ relationship to the “obscene shadow” by externalizing the founding horrors of society, located now not in the hidden power of the elite, but in the everyday spending habits and the self-involvement of the bourgeoisie. The circulation of capital, the emphasis on commodity fetishism, draw the “obscene shadow” out into the light. Not even the scapegoating of women trumps the indecency of Bill’s promiscuous wallet. Death is no longer global annihilation but the stupor of consumerism.

Kubrick’s choice to make his protagonist in _Eyes Wide Shut_ a WASP is a strange alteration of the profoundly Jewish milieu of Schnitzler’s novella. The choice is doubly strange in that Kubrick very much identified himself as a Jew. Frederic Raphael (1999) wrote indignantly about “how thoroughly Schnitzler’s story is impregnated with [a] Jewishness” that was just as thoroughly removed from the screenplay by Kubrick (p. 59). He even accused Kubrick of being a “self-hating Jew.” But perhaps, as Peucker (2007) notes, Kubrick’s dream story may also read as a Jewish story, a nightmare replete with Christmas trees and WASPs. Even Sydney Pollack, who plays the only clearly Jewish character in the film, has a home filled with Christmas trees.

Chion (2008) suggests that Alice’s last injunction in the film, for the couple to have sex, may link _Eyes Wide Shut_ to _2001_ in that the couple will surely have a male child, the Space Child who is waiting to be incarnated. While this obviously does not resonate well with my claims about the film, it is worth noting that Kubrick himself, discussing _2001_ in the famous 1968 _Playboy_ interview, speaks eloquently of the fear of death and the need to shape one’s life even in the shadow of mortality:

As a child matures, he sees death and pain everywhere about him, and begins to lose faith in the ultimate goodness of man. But, if he’s reasonably
strong—and lucky—he can emerge from this twilight of the soul into a
rebirth of life’s elan. Both because of and in spite of his awareness of the
meaninglessness of life, he can forge a fresh sense of purpose and affirm-
ation. (Nordern, 2001, p. 73)

I admire this sentiment and hope to emulate it. But Kubrick’s films speak
more strongly of mourning, however suppressed, than of optimism. For
the most part, he permits himself to expose grief only indirectly. When
the sadly absurd Charlotte dies in Lolita, the film itself grieves her loss with
a heavy downpour, as failed wife-murderer Humbert lingers awkwardly
nearby. The cold irony of Grady’s incitement to murder in The Shining
matches the tone of 2001, but a shiver of melancholy for the fate of the
family (“reunited” in Eyes Wide Shut) runs beneath. When HAL murders
Frank Poole, a floating yellow figure against the blackness of space, Dave
has no time to respond with grief. His face remains stoic, with only the
slightest changes of expression troubling his concentration. The quasimil-
itary discipline of the astronauts, which Kubrick clearly relishes, has given
them control over their faces and voices—but not so much that HAL does
not decipher them. Dave must re-enter the spacecraft and confront this
intellect that seeks to displace imperfect humans. But irony recedes when
HAL becomes a doomed child singing “Daisy,” which evokes deep cul-
tural nostalgia. So, too, is irony twisted with agony when Barry Lyndon
grieves for his uncle, Captain Grogan (Godfrey Quigley), whose last words
are beautiful: “Kiss me my boy, for we’ll never meet again!” And Barry’s
grief for his homeland is nothing short of heartrending, if over-the-top,
when he meets the Chevalier Baribari (Patrick Magee), a reminder of dear
Ireland. Weeping at the bedside of his child (Bryan/David Morley), Barry
now understands the finality of his own death in that of his offspring.
Irronomy is a trope used to generate grief at Bryan’s funeral, where the ter-
rible burden of remembrance takes the form of ironic repetition: the sheep
that pulled the cart on his birthday are the sheep that will pull his hearse.
Barry Lyndon’s final moment comes as an epilogue, a title card, with words
lifted from Thackeray (who wrote the source novel), but given peculiar
emphasis in the novel’s adaptation:

It was in the reign of King George III that the aforesaid personages lived
and quarreled; good or bad, handsome or ugly, rich or poor, they are all
equal now.

The Gainsborough stills of manor houses, the quivering candlelight,
Lady Lyndon’s (Marisa Berenson) beauty, Bulingdon’s triumph are gone
forever, marked only on celluloid, ultimately doomed, as well. And so Kubrick’s endings allow the repressed sadness about so much death, pain, and violence to creep in: Even the wry use of the British World War II song, “We’ll Meet Again,” at the end of Dr. Strangelove makes me weep, for the destruction of everything is a one-way trip, and we shall never meet again.

Notes

1. Kubrick himself frequently mentioned Ophuls’s influence: “I did very, very much like Max Ophuls’ work. I loved his extravagant camera moves which seemed to go on and on forever in labyrinthine sets. The staging of these great camera moves appeared more like a beautifully choreographed ballet than anything else… I don’t believe that Ophuls ever received the critical appreciation he deserved.” (quoted in Walker, Taylor, & Ruchti, p. 14). In fact, Kubrick filmed part of Paths of Glory on dilapidated sets from Ophuls’s last film (Lola Montès, 1955), including an Ophulesque ballroom sequence shot on March 25, 1957, the day of Ophuls’s death. For more on the Ophuls-Kubrick connection, see Cocks (2004; pp. 62–63).

2. Kubrick’s bathrooms are often the scene of deaths or the plotting of deaths. In Lolita, for example, Humbert Humbert (James Mason) ponders killing his wife (Shelley Winters) while in the bathroom, and luxuriates in the bathtub, a gun (his intended weapon) nearby, after Charlotte, hit by a car, dies accidentally. Dr. Strangelove’s Jack D. Ripper (Robert Ryan) shoots himself in his office restroom, a scene made fittingly comical by the antics of Peter Sellers as Group Captain Lionel Mandrake. A dead woman rises from the bathtub in Room 237 in The Shining, at one point attacking young Torrance (Danny Lloyd) and later luring his father Jack with a beautiful body that rots under his hands. The close relationship between bathrooms and bodily functions may be what inspires the link between these places and death. Anal and phallic eroticism are linked to death. See Kuberski (2004). A disturbing instance where death is represented as a mere bodily function is when HAL murders the hibernating astronauts. The monitor’s readouts for the various bodily functions of the dying astronauts initially show peaks and valleys. Suddenly, a pulsing red screen appears displaying the words “COMPUTER MALFUNCTION.” One by one, each function flat lines, the changes in status accompanied by an increasingly urgent alarm. Then, in silence: “LIFE FUNCTIONS TERMINATED.” Interestingly, HAL is given a pathos-ridden human song for his death scene, while humans pass away with mere monitors and disturbing mechanical noises.
References

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CHAPTER 12

HANEKE’S AMOUR AND THE ETHICS OF DYING

Ashjørn Grønstad

Since the late 1990s, film as a medium has been enmeshed in routine proclamations of its own imminent end. The cinema, increasingly seen as culturally and technologically moribund, has acquired a certain aura of mortality that perhaps it did not have before.¹ To be sure, the history of the art has produced several indelible scenes and figurations of death—Ingmar Bergman’s The Seventh Seal (1957) and Nicolas Roeg’s Don’t Look Now (1973) come readily to mind—and as early as 1932 Rudolf Arnheim (1997) wrote about the subject. But while the cinema as an art form has seen its fair share of (often violent) deaths, the relation between film and mortality—at least in the field of criticism—has perhaps not been as intimate as that between photography and death (consider, for instance, Roland Barthes’s still critically ubiquitous Camera Lucida [1981] and Philippe Dubois’s [1983] notion of thanatography). This might be due to the strong sense of closure that death inevitably entails, which, in formal terms, seems both conceptually and materially closer to the still, than to the moving image, the latter so suffused with life. Death in cinema often implies the end of narrative and of signification itself, which poses a particular hermeneutic challenge the nature of which is aptly summarized by Garrett Stewart (1999): “[t]he problem of death in representation always leads straight to the question of form” (p. 154).

In this chapter, I explore the idea that in order to understand better the meaning of mortality in cinema, we need to turn away from the narrative moment of death itself and focus instead on the anticipation of death and
how this sense of expectation translates into film form and permeates the work on a global, rather than just a local level. While I will address several films throughout, my main emphasis will be on *Amour* (Michael Haneke, 2012) and, to a lesser extent, *Of Gods and Men* (Xavier Beauvois, 2010).

If in the postcelluloid era a heightened consciousness of death has crept into the frame to stay, this awareness has found its possibly most resolute and poignant expression yet in Austrian director Michael Haneke’s twelfth feature. *Amour*, which won the 2012 Cannes Film Festival Palme d’Or and the Academy Award for Best Foreign Film, depicts with unrelenting determination the gradual and painful corrosion of the health of its female protagonist, the octogenarian Anne (played by Emmanuelle Riva), a former music teacher who, after a debilitating stroke, makes her husband Georges (played by Jean-Louis Trintignant) promise her that hospitalization is not an option. Georges is thus in effect left to care for her, without much assistance from beyond the debonair domesticity of their Parisian apartment. Virtually the entire film is about the process of Anne slowly fading away, no detail of which is spared the viewer. Haneke certainly has a reputation for making self-consciously confrontational films. At various times he has been quoted as saying that he wants to “rape the viewer into independence” and “take away any consolation,” provocative authorial intentions that, not unjustifiably, have pigeonholed his oeuvre as painful and demanding (see Sharrett, 2004; Wray, 2007). The same cluster of descriptive terms tends to reappear in appraisals of Haneke’s cinema; it has been seen as “cold,” “austere,” “rigorous,” and “bleak,” to name some of the most frequently occurring tags. I have elsewhere (Grønstad, 2011) examined his work, *Caché* (2005) in particular, as an intrinsic part of the new extremism trend in recent European art cinema (cf. Horeck & Kendall, 2011). While many critics (e.g., Corliss, 2012) have detected a previously unseen tenderness and humanism in *Amour*, the film also betray a strong sense of continuity, conceptually as well as formally, with the body of work that preceded it. For some, *Amour* is “a deliberately torturous watch” (Young, 2012), for others it offers “an unflinching picture of death” (Brevet, 2012).

Mortality is not a new subject for Haneke. In fact, his filmography abounds with depictions of death, more often than not from violence. In his debut feature *The Seventh Continent* (1989), an ordinary middle-class family around which the narrative revolves commits suicide. In his next film, the notorious *Benny’s Video* (1992), the titular character, an affluent fourteen-year old boy, murders a girl with a slaughter gun while a camcorder captures the whole event. *71 Fragments of a Chronology of Chance* (1994) culminates in a massacre, and in *Funny Games* (1997) two young

For a filmmaker with this particular legacy to name his new feature *Amour* might seem an ironic or even perverse gesture, but the title is in fact sincere and unpretentious. Death and love are indissoluble in Haneke’s film. As one reviewer aptly puts it, *Amour* is “unflinching in the way it examines the effect of love on death, and vice versa” (Calhoun, 2012). From the very beginning of the film, death is inscribed into the image, as firemen, overcome with the stench of the deceased, break into a sealed residence to find the body of the long-dead Anne lying on the bed and surrounded with flowers. Thus, death is the motor of the narrative, the event with which everything both begins and ends. After the first scene, Haneke gives us a shot of the ageing couple attending a concert given by one of Anne’s former students, now a renowned pianist. On their way home they talk about the performance in a way that lets us understand that this is part of their routine and has been for decades. But when they get back to their apartment, there are signs of trespassing; apparently someone has tried to break into their home while they were out. The film does not return to this incident later, but it effectively and subtly introduces a recurring preoccupation of Haneke’s cinema, that of intrusion or invasion (this motif is particularly salient in *Funny Games* and *Caché*; Grønstad, 2008a). Equally conspicuous, however, is the conceptually related trope of seclusion. Early films such as *The Seventh Continent* and *Benny’s Video* are about people who isolate themselves from the world; *Code Unknown* features a terrifying scene of entrapment, and the music professor Erika (Isabelle Huppert) in *The Piano Teacher* (2001) is confined to the apartment she shares with her mother (even sharing a bed with her). In *Amour*, this sense of the twin predicaments of intrusion/seclusion manifests itself on more than one level; for the terminal Anne, the body itself becomes a prison, and as her illness progresses she increasingly insulates herself in the bedroom. As the end nears, her husband Georges even blocks the entrance to her room, trying to prevent their daughter from seeing her. For Georges no less than for Anne, the process of dying involves a slow retreat from the world; the couple withdraws completely into the uninfringeable privacy of their shared life together, their memories, gestures, and habits.
With the prologue revealing the outcome of the film before the title is even shown on screen, Haneke is free to focus fully on life as it is lived with the awareness of death fast approaching. All the unpleasant specificities of this process are rigorously exposed in images that, I would contend, constitute a new visual vocabulary for life’s end. Thus, it could be argued that Haneke with Amour provides an unprecedented instance of what I elsewhere have described as the practice of narrathanatography, the narration of death in and by aesthetic works (Gronstad, 2008b). Violence in fiction can often be conceptualized as a figure for mortality, as a way of making the unrepresentability of death visible and concrete through the figuration of an event that belongs to the same semantic or connotational field. Amour is not without violent episodes, but it does not so much function as a visual substitute for the nonvisuality of dying as an intrinsic part of the complex communication between the dying and the soon-to-be-bereaved.

Throughout the history of artistic expression, the relationship between art and death is marked by a curious disparity. On one hand, delineations of death are everywhere present in the fields of art and fiction. On the other hand, the phenomenon of mortality eludes mimetic efforts. In Simon Critchley’s (1997) words, death is “radically resistant to the order of representation,” and, he adds, attempts at such representations are therefore “misrepresentations, or rather representations of an absence” (p. 26). Others (e.g., Sobchack, 1984) have also noted that death remains “a special problem” (p. 283) for mimetic practice, but, as Townsend (2008) has remarked, this particular problem has been a prolific generator of cultural artifacts. On this view, the fundamental unknowability of death is a compelling catalyst for culture and its multifarious material and aesthetic manifestations (see Dollimore, 1998). A simple insight that has a special purchase on Amour is Townsend’s (2008) observation that death is something that cannot be ours; it belongs rather to those around us. Haneke’s film seems to acknowledge this. Death cannot be captured in any event, and it is possible that the closest one can get might be the attempt to portray cinematically the experience of being immediate witnesses to its inevitable advance. For the husband Georges, this experience also unfolds as a strenuous act of mourning; a grieving for the couple’s long life together that is soon coming to an end. In this, the central drama of Amour illustrates a core component of what Jacques Derrida (1997) has described as the law of friendship, the realization that one must always go before the other and that death bestows the responsibility of legacy upon the one who is left behind.

At one point toward the end of the film, Georges’s daughter asks him about her mother’s condition, to which he replies: “Things will go
downhill, then it’ll all be over.” This chillingly forthright answer could have been an account of the film’s narrative arc as well. *Amour* conveys death through the signs of its imminence. André Bazin (2003) has written that 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 (p. 30).

While undeniably true, there are also cases in which the fact of this abrupt separation of being from nonbeing might be less significant, in both representational and existential terms, than the experience of anticipation and the apprehension of finitude that precede it. At the risk of sounding too speculative, one could perhaps say that, in the context of the aesthetic work, this portentous sensation of death is rendered as film form. How mortality spills over into lived life and impinges on the ethics of love—this appears to be the underlying subject of Haneke’s film. Thus, *Amour* violates not one but in fact two implied cinematic interdictions. Death, as Amos Vogel (1980) once remarked, “remains the one last taboo in cinema” (p. 78), but depictions of mature intimacy have also tended to be out-of-bounds. The subject of love and romance in the movies typically involves young people, whereas what *Amour* offers is a portrait of love at its most unromantic moment. This is in perfect keeping with Haneke’s professed authorial politics, his silent manifesto, which is to create representations of those aspects of reality deliberately elided by mainstream cinema.

Few visual euphemisms are employed when it comes to showing Anne’s rapid deterioration and its toll on the relationship. Early on there is a premonition of things to come, when in the middle of the night Anne wakes up to stare vacuously into space. One morning at the breakfast table she suddenly slips into an immobile, trance-like state. She is gone for several minutes but has no inkling of time missing once she snaps out of it. A stroke lands her in a wheelchair, paralyzed down the right side of her body. Not long after this she makes it clear to Georges that she does not want to continue living. Georges has to feed her but she refuses to eat or drink. She dribbles and makes noises. We see her naked on the toilet. The illness gradually affects her identity and the nature of the husband–wife relationship. More and more she withdraws into herself. She does not want anybody to see her and is reluctant to receive guests (a gloomy awkwardness ensues when a renowned pianist and former student pays her a visit). Then her language begins to fail her. She wets herself. Communication becomes difficult. Frenziedly, she takes to shouting “mal!” over and over. Her syntax dissolves, and by the end her
language is reduced to an incoherent babble. Haneke uncompromisingly shows us all of this, sights and details that have no place in conventional filmmaking. Moreover, his directorial style only accentuates the intensity of Anne’s decline, in that there are never any distractions intervening between the viewers and the film. Photographed by Darius Khondij, *Amour* is composed of long, static shots that are mostly of the apartment’s interior. There are few characters and no musical score. True to his reputation, Haneke grants us no relief; as viewers we have no choice but to be consumed by this claustrophobic and intensely private world for the duration of the couple’s ordeal.

One interpretation of Haneke’s objective with regard to showing us all this has been that he wants to challenge “the idea of death as a communal experience” to concentrate instead on the loneliness of dying (Calhoun, 2012). There are shades here of the well-known observation, associated for instance with the historian Philippe Ariès (1981; 1985), that death has become increasingly invisible in the modern period. Spatially and socially marginalized since the Middle Ages, death has been erased from the realm of visual experience, evidenced by among other things historical changes related to the site of death (from dying at home surrounded by an extended family to dying in an institution) and to burial grounds (from graveyards in the city centre to suburban cemeteries; see also chapter 1, this volume). But it is a simplification to claim that *Amour* is about the solitude of dying. Above all, what the film emphasizes is the relationality of death; the ways in which death—and death in aesthetic works in particular—implicates and affects the network of structures in which the dying is enmeshed. The film is certainly capable of conveying the pain, confusion and isolation that often accompany death, but if this were its only center of attention *Amour* would be just another social realist drama and not a Haneke production. I would suggest that the film invokes different registers of meaning. First of all, *Amour* is at least as much interested in the husband’s response to his wife’s decline as it is in the subjective experience of debilitating illness. For one thing, Georges has to honor the promise he has made not to send his wife back to the hospital, a moral commitment with considerable emotional and practical implications for him. Townsend (2008) mentions the new social communities that developed around AIDS in the 1980s, which, he writes, were “grounded in ethical relationships that are extensions, into life, of the death of others” (p. 13). The bond between Georges and Anne becomes, after her illness sets in, defined by a similar ethical mandate. In Levinasian terms, we might say that this involves ethics not as an individual resolution but as a social negotiation, or practice. Haneke
in *Amour* shows some of the complexities of such a practice, particularly when Anne refuses to eat and resolves to capitulate in the face of impending death. Trapped in an impossible impasse, Georges is reduced to a powerless witness to her agony. Physical pain, as Elaine Scarry (1985) has noted in her landmark study, is essentially unsharable. It has no “referential content”; it is “objectless” and thus “cannot easily be objectified in any form, material or verbal” (p. 162). For this reason, when confronting the subject of pain and death strategies of artistic representation must rely on a kind of transmutational aesthetics, on the force of the oblique (cf. Wolff, 2008). In caring for Anne and in trying to protect her dignity in the face of formidable trials, Georges in a sense becomes part of her death. Over the course of the film, the couple devise a new ethics for what little remains of their life together, and the development of this ethics appears to be Haneke’s central object of scrutiny in *Amour*. Death itself resists representation, but the ways in which it touches us do not. Hence, to approach death on screen obliquely may entail a foregrounding of relationality and affectivity. Again, the idea of a temporal displacement or perhaps contamination alluded to above might be helpful in parsing the grammar of the film’s portrayal of mortality. The reality of death becomes tangible through its remaking of the ethics of a relationship, and through its transformation of the body prior to its actual occurrence. In the world of *Amour*, death arrives by increments.

While I return to this notion of death and oblique representation below, I would first like to dwell a little bit more on the formal features of Haneke’s engagement with the ethics of dying. As previously suggested, death is not a foreign topic for this filmmaker, and *Amour* is not, as many critics have insisted, such a conspicuous departure from his earlier films. Its visual style is unmistakably Haneke’s own, with its concise framings, lengthy takes and restrained, measured pace. As always, the names of the central couple are Anne and Georges. The narrative emphasis on acts of intrusion, isolation and unexpected, eruptive violence is very much in evidence, and the intertextual tapestry of the film is richly evocative. The music of Schubert featured prominently in *The Piano Teacher* (in which Huppert also played the lead role), which borrowed three songs from his hugely influential *Winterreise*, the 1828 song cycle of poems by Wilhelm Müller that explicitly address a longing for death. Furthermore, Haneke’s choice of actors is steeped in cinema history. The role of Georges was written especially for Jean-Louis Trintignant, who starred in the Brigitte Bardot vehicle *And God Created Woman* (Roger Vadim, 1956), *A Man and a Woman* (about the relationship between a widow and a widower, Claude Lelouch, 1966), *The Conformist* (Bernardo Bertolucci, 1970) and *Three Colors: Red* (Krzysztof Kielowski,
1994), to name a few. Anne is played by Emmanuelle Riva, perhaps best known for her role as the unnamed woman in *Hiroshima mon amour* (Alain Resnais, 1959). Her fearless, astounding performance in *Amour* is that of a woman in her mid-80s, Trintignant a few years her junior (the director himself turned 70 before the film premiered in Cannes). *Amour* also recalls elements from *Caché*, particularly the notion of cultured domesticity under attack. That film’s Georges and Anne, a literary television critic and book publisher respectively (Daniel Auteuil and Juliette Binoche), live like the old couple in *Amour* in a Parisian home adorned by bookshelves and fine art objects. Coming under surveillance by unknown and possibly ill-disposed forces, the façade of their urbane, civilized existence starts to unravel. In the later film, the life of music and art retreats as the illness takes over. While the threat comes from outside in *Caché*, both films in deeply uncomfortable ways draw attention to the inadequacies of the world of culture when confronted with the cruelties of our corporeal existence. Those who live the most sheltered lives imaginable are equally exposed to sickness and death, Haneke appears to be saying.

As I mentioned earlier, the film seems at least as interested in exploring the nuances of Georges’s reaction to losing his wife and how this in turn forges a new ethical bond between them, as in the subjective experience of the dying. In fact, the few subjective scenes in the film belong to Georges, among them a nightmare sequence. There is also a strange interlude toward the end in which he tries to catch a stray pigeon that has come into the apartment, and at one point he recounts a childhood memory of his unhappy days at a summer camp. These episodes seem peripheral to the main narrative, but their ostensible randomness deepens the mystery of death, the incommunicability of grief. As the main character, Georges also represents a source of identification for the viewers, who may more easily imagine themselves in his place than in Anne’s. Ultimately, of course, *Amour* is about us, the viewers, as it always is in Haneke’s cinema. When Georges’s daughter objects to the way in which he has acquiesced to Anne’s request not to be seen in her worsening condition, she exclaims “You can’t stop me from seeing her!” Her outburst almost has the force of an ironic metacomment on Haneke’s proclivity for the exact opposite, making us see what we would rather not look at. Beautiful and courageous as it is, *Amour* is an unsettling and difficult film to take in. How might we then best describe the particular moral optics deployed by the filmmaker in his “phenomenology of death,” to use Vivian Sobchack’s phrase?

At the beginning of this chapter, I alluded to the idea of an anticipatory aesthetic at work in certain semiotic engagements with the subject
of death. Another eloquent case would be Xavier Beauvois’s *Of Gods and Men* (2010), a serenely paced adaptation of a true story in which eight Trappist monks were taken hostage by a group of terrorists in Algeria in 1996. The monks could have escaped but decided to remain, and much of the film is concerned with the ways in which they prepared for their uncertain, precarious future. Those familiar with the real incident know that they will be executed eventually, a prospect of which the characters in Beauvois’s film are very much aware. Despite the looming peril they go on about their daily business, praying, singing, helping the sick, keeping bees, or tending crops. This “almost abstract parable of faith,” to use the words of one critic (O’Hehir, 2011), is in a sense about how to prepare for one’s own demise, and it displays the same concern with the preservation of dignity that also characterizes *Amour*. These are films overcome by a sense of advancing death.

Such an anticipatory aesthetic extends beyond the world of film. Consider, for instance, the cover of singer-songwriter Warren Zevon’s final album *The Wind* (2003), a stark close-up, set against an empty, brown and khaki-colored background, of the artist as a terminal cancer patient. The album was recorded when the artist was in the final stages of the disease and released just weeks before his death. In the image Zevon looks frail and vulnerable, yet his gaze is strangely serene. At the same time he seems to be staring into the future, at death, and at us the viewers. The graphic simplicity of the composition is somehow at odds with the inscrutability of the gaze and its harsh circumstances. It reminds me of Ariès’s (1985) statement that the image represents “the richest and most direct means that man has of expressing himself, faced with the mystery of the end of life. The image can retain some of the obscure, repressed meanings that the written word filters out: hence its power to move us so deeply” (p. 1). Yet another example (but this time from literature) of this anticipatory poetics is famed polemicist Christopher Hitchens’s *Mortality* (2012), in which he chronicles his final year of “living dyingly.” Although quite diverse, these works share a common orientation: the attempt to capture in images or words the ways in which an awareness of death comes to shape how life is lived toward the end. In this respect, *Amour, Of Gods and Men, The Wind* and *Mortality* are manifestly different from works that contemplate death after it has occurred, like Joan Didion’s *The Year of Magical Thinking* (2005) and *Blue Nights* (2012), or films like *In the Bedroom* (Todd Fields, 2001) and *The Son’s Room* (Nanni Moretti, 2001), which are all mainly concerned with the grieving process.

In grappling with the ethical encoding of death in documentary cinema, Sobchack (1984) comes up with ten propositions and five forms of what she
refers to as “visual activity” (p. 294). Her basic premise is that documentaries purposefully and for a number of different reasons sidestep the representation of death, which, she observes, “confounds all codes” (p. 287). Violent action, however, may provide death with “a perceptible form” (p. 289), which is also part of my own argument in Transfigurations (2008). When violence functions as a trope of death it may become susceptible to the economy of the spectacle, to gratuitousness, which evidently tends to impair its ethical quality. When violence erupts in Amour—Georges eventually suffocates his wife—it is not at all sensational but in a horrendous way integral to the taxing ethics that has come to redefine their relationship.

How, in critical terms, might one distinguish the gaze in Haneke’s film from, say, the sensational gaze or all those gazes identified by Sobchack as forms of visual activity in the documentary film? The “accidental gaze” occurs when the filmmaker happens to catch a death on camera when filming something else (the Zapruder film). The “helpless gaze” is when the camera operates from a distance, either spatial or legal (an execution), whereas the “endangered gaze” denotes a situation in which the filmmaker is too close to the action (war journalism). The “interventional gaze” is similar but more extreme in that the photographer becomes embroiled in the events filmed, sometimes at the expense of his or her own life. Finally, the “humane stare” describes a reaction of disbelief or shock in witnessing an unexpected death (Sobchack, 1984, pp. 294–297). These permutations of the gaze all pertain to the documentary film and articulate different ethical positions in the relation between death and the image. In the fiction film these gazes might not apply at all. Yet, the notion of “ethical space” that Sobchack takes from Roger Poole is certainly relevant to feature films as well, in as much as this space is understood as the “visible representation or sign of the viewer’s subjective, lived, and moral relationship with the viewed” (p. 292; see also Poole, 1972). This relationship is clearly to a large extent determined by aesthetic form, which the spectators may inhabit in their own idiosyncratic ways.

Haneke’s unbending gaze is neither sensational nor anesthetic but refuses the audience any escape. Perhaps we could call such a gaze conflictual or contraventional, in that it intentionally seeks discomfort and opposes any form of analgesic vision. In her book about love and mortality, Emma Wilson (2012) notes that “[a]rtworks offer the occasion for pushing experience to the extreme, for laying bare, making vivid, some of the most ungraspable feelings... contemporary moving image artworks are seen to extend our repertoire of experiences of dying and, through their imaginative, immersive properties, to enrich our responses to mortality in both
intimate and public contexts” (p. 155). This is exactly what Haneke does with Amour; the film offers a new and more insightful picture of mortality in the movies and shows how the approaching death of others may fundamentally transform the way we inhabit the present moment.

**Note**

1. Consider for example some of the numerous writings and movies that engage with this topic, such as Keathley (2006), Lewis (2001), Matthews (2007), Paglia (2007), Rosenbaum and Martin (2003), and Usai (2001). In films, see for instance Tsai Ming-liang’s *Goodbye Dragon Inn* (2003) and Federico Veiroj’s *A Useful Life* (2010).

**References**


PART IV

THE PROSPECT OF TRANSCENDENCE
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In his seminal work, *The Denial of Death* (1973), Ernest Becker asserts that human activity is “designed largely to avoid the fatality of death and…den[y] it…[as the] destiny of man” (p. ix). As Becker explains, humans push death out of their lives and out of their minds through various means. While Becker’s claims regarding the denial of death were meant to apply to all cultures, not all communities are dismissive of death.

This chapter will examine the role dead or dying characters play in films that feature Native American individuals and cultures, namely, *Dead Man* (1995), *Smoke Signals* (1998), and *Four Sheets to the Wind* (2007). In each of these films, the main character is shown either grappling with his own mortality or the recent death of a loved one. Though important differences between these films exist, all three depict characters that engage mortality rather than push it under the rug. Rather than deny death, these films show viewers that the admission of human mortality is not necessarily debilitating. Their characters demonstrate that acceptance of death, though difficult, can facilitate psychological maturation, help liberate us from the impulse to conform, foster greater social and moral responsibility, and engender a closer relationship to others and the world. Thus, rather than eliminate possibility, they show that death transforms our understanding of it and thereby opens our horizons.
Death Anxiety and Terror Management

As Becker (1973) states, “fear of death [is] a prominent part of our psychological make-up” (p. ix). It is innate and universal; and it serves an adaptive function, aiding the organism in its preservation by making it aware of its vulnerability and focusing its attention to entities or circumstances that threaten it. Though death anxiety is not unique to humans, Becker maintains that humans experience a level of anxiety beyond that of other animals by virtue of their increased intellectual abilities, namely, their capacity for conceptual and reflective thought that make formal knowledge of their own death possible.

In order to avoid being overwhelmed by death anxiety humans suppress thoughts about death. Indeed, Becker (1973) states, “everything man does...is an attempt to deny and overcome his grotesque fate. He literally drives himself into...obliviousness [of death] with social games, psychological tricks [and] personal preoccupations” (p. 26). Thus humans repress death anxiety by telling themselves “vital lie[s]” (p. 51) that deny their vulnerability and grant literal or symbolic immortality. Lies include religious ideologies and other “life enhancing illusions” (p. 202) that suppress death-related thought and the terror it creates. Becker recognizes both “the falseness...and necessity of [these] illusions” (p. 18). He says we cannot live without them; however, he also suggests we need to find a balance between truth and lies because repression can become our “enemy” (p. 261), deadening us to our possibilities as well as the plight of others and the environment (p. 211).

Though published 40 years ago, Becker’s work continues to influence theorists today. Indeed, it has been reinterpreted through the lens of terror management theory (TMT) (see chapter 2, this volume). TMT continues the work initiated by figures such as Becker by providing empirical evidence for hypotheses regarding the prevalence and effects of death anxiety and outlining the standard mechanisms for its management. Proponents of TMT maintain that cultural belief systems provide effective means of anxiety management by creating the illusion of “symbolic...or literal immortality” (Goldenberg et al., 2000, p. 201). They mitigate death anxiety either through the establishment of enduring value structures that provide the individual with a means of gaining a sense of lasting significance or through concepts that deny death. These mechanisms function as “anxiety buffers” (Solomon et al., 1991, p. 122). Since most individuals are indoctrinated to the prevailing cultural belief system in early childhood, most existential terror remains subconscious and most people are unaware of the defensive function of their cultural belief system.
Despite the fact that humans are socialized within the context of cultural belief systems that repress death anxiety, proponents of TMT recognize that “people are constantly confronted with reminders of death” (Rosenblatt et al., 1989, p. 682) which can trigger a “leakage” (Solomon et al., 1991, p. 133) or upsurge of death anxiety. Loved ones die. We get sick. We hear the death count in a current military conflict or disease outbreak reported on the news. We see dead animals on the side of the road. Such events can trigger death-related thoughts and engender what proponents of TMT call mortality salience, or a state in which death registers at a higher level of significance in the psyche, anxiety spikes, and the need for psychological defenses is heightened (Ferraro et al., 2005, p. 66).

According to TMT, mortality salience threatens the efficacy of the cultural belief systems that individuals use to manage death anxiety. Because these coping mechanisms are human constructs they require validation. The sort of validation needed depends upon whether death-related thoughts are predominantly conscious or subconscious. In the former case, mechanisms labeled as proximal defenses dominate, whereas in the latter case, distal defenses take precedence (Pyszczynski et al., 1997, p. 4). Proximal defenses are those that allay death anxiety directly though rational means (e.g., an individual consoling herself with the statistical unlikeliness of a healthy person dying at age 27) or through “cognitive distraction” (e.g., activities that redirect consciousness away from death-related thoughts; Solomon et al., 1991, p. 139). In contrast, distal defenses ameliorate death anxiety by bolstering self-esteem. Advocates of TMT are clear that cultural belief systems utilize both distal and proximal defense mechanisms as anxiety buffers.

Like Becker, advocates of TMT maintain that death anxiety is universal, as is the use of cultural belief systems as anxiety buffers. Advocates of TMT also claim that there is “cross-cultural variation” (Solomon et al., 1991, p. 141) in worldviews, and that cultural anxiety-buffers “vary in their effectiveness” (Solomon et al., 1991, p. 139). One of the most intriguing aspects of TMT is its examination of how the disproportionate use of distal defenses in response to mortality salience engenders interesting (and troubling) sociological effects when different cultural worldviews come in contact with one another, particularly heightened intergroup bias. As advocates of TMT explain, those who subscribe to divergent beliefs are threatening under heightened conditions of mortality salience because they “provide a reminder that one’s worldview may not be valid in any absolute sense, highlighting the tenuous nature of [one’s] cultural anxiety-buffer” (Greenberg et al., 1990, p. 309). Thus, TMT not only explains a motive for the formation of culture, but also the predisposition “toward
uniformity, [and] conformity” within a given culture, and the tendency for virulent ideological conflicts between them. Here, of course, is where one can begin to see how TMT relates not only to the films mentioned above, but also to the treatment of Native Americans generally.

**TMT and Native American Worldviews**

Clearly, the claims that TMT makes regarding the way in which mortality salience fosters intergroup bias have interesting ramifications relative to the historical treatment of Native Americans as well as the “racism against America’s indigenous peoples [that] remains real and pervasive” (Kidwell et al., 2001, p. 167) in the United States today. Also interesting is the fact that TMT literature mentions Native Americans specifically. According to the developers of TMT, there is a fundamental difference between the cultural worldview that dominates modern “corporate America . . . [and those which dominate] Native American communities” (Solomon et al., 1991, p. 103). Presumably in anticipation of the objection that many Native American cultures do not exhibit the obvious death-denying features of their Western counterparts, proponents of TMT assert that aboriginal cultures, including those “in the Americas” (Goldenberg et al., 2000, p. 214), “do other things to minimize the threat . . . of death” (p. 215). In particular, they hypothesize that Native American cultures tend to solve the problem of death by “imbu[ing] all of Nature with supernatural power and significance” (p. 215) and through the promotion of belief in a hereafter. Thus, while “American Indians” (Solomon et al., 1991, p. 135) are identified by TMT as endorsing legitimate alternatives to the mainstream US worldview, advocates of TMT assert that these cultures “must ultimately solve the same existential problems” (Goldenberg et al., 2000, p. 210), primarily the problem of death, and that they do so through the same basic means: outright denial, repression, and redirection.

This chapter proposes to look at cinematic works that feature Native American individuals and culture to see, among other things, if there is evidence to support the claim that these aboriginal subcultures engage in death-denying activities as advocates of TMT intimate they must. On the surface, their explicit focus on mortality would seem to suggest that they do not. However, various factors complicate this enterprise. The first is that the loss of indigenous culture and the pervasive influence of Western ideology make it “difficult if not impossible to discern [a] traditional indigenous perspective” (Kidwell et al., 2001, p. 2). Given this, the objective here is not to try and discern some original viewpoint, but merely
the perspective of certain contemporary Native Americans, perspectives that may differ quite considerably from one another by virtue of the fact that Native American culture is not “monolithic” (Krupat, 1996, p. 10), but about which we may be able to make some general comments given the fact that “Native peoples have a variety of experiences that differ from (many of) those of non-Native[s]” (Krupat, 1996, p. 10). Second is the fact that only two of the films mentioned were actually written and produced by Native Americans. Whereas *Dead Man* was written and directed by non-Native Jim Jarmusch, *Smoke Signals* and *Four Sheets to the Wind* were written and directed by indigenous Americans, namely Sterlin Harjo, in the case of *Four Sheets to the Wind,* and Sherman Alexie (writer) and Chris Eyre (director) in the case of *Smoke Signals.*1 In light of this fact, it might seem appropriate to exclude *Dead Man* from consideration; however, to the extent it focuses on death and serves to illustrate common stereotypes regarding Native Americans, stereotypes that might even find expression in TMT, it warrants consideration. Finally, there is the fact that the works under consideration here are fictive representations of Native American culture and debate persists regarding the heuristic ability of fiction.2

Jim Jarmusch’s *Dead Man* is an unusual Western that recounts the story of an unassuming accountant with an illustrious name, William Blake (Johnny Depp). Less than 15 minutes into the film Blake becomes a dead man walking after he shoots and kills a man and is likewise shot. Mortally wounded and in trouble with the law, Blake steals a horse and flees town only to fall off the horse and into a state of unconsciousness. Blake wakes to find himself being cared for by a lone Native American man named Nobody (Gary Farmer). The film then follows the two men as Nobody leads Blake on a literal and spiritual quest, one which, as a result of Nobody’s guidance, allows Blake to accept his mortality with equanimity and grace.

Without doubt, *Dead Man* is a powerful film; and its power stems largely from what it tells audiences about death. It demonstrates that the encounter with mortality can literally change a man, as Blake changes from a menial figure to a “poet with a gun.” It also shows, through the character of Nobody, that other people can help us embrace death as an inevitable part of life. What *Dead Man* also does, however, is offer a critique of modern industrialized society. It does so primarily by juxtaposing the cut-throat scorch-and-burn practices of white venture capitalists to the more humane behavior of indigenous Americans.

To be sure, Jarmusch should be applauded for offering a more sympathetic portrayal of Native American life than that conveyed in many Westerns, as well as for casting Native Americans and for making a
concerted effort to depict different tribal traditions and languages; however, this film nonetheless employs familiar, reductive stereotypes of Native American people. For example, though Nobody is an essential figure in the narrative, Blake, the white man, is its focus. Nobody takes on a predictable native role relative to Blake as his healer and guide. He dons what mainstream viewers have come to regard as native dress and tends to embody, rather than subvert, the long-standing stereotype of the noble savage. Indeed, Jarmusch employs this Western idea and the pristine natural environment in which Nobody is found to critique the ills of modern society, ills that are made patently evident in and through the monstrous inhabitants and town of Machine. By using Nobody in this fashion, Jarmusch demonstrates allegiance to the Western genre’s formulaic use of Native Americans as instruments, namely, “as oppositional figures” (P. Deloria, 1998, p. 3) against which the white hero’s plight is defined. Interestingly, though many works use Native Americans as figures “against whom [the mainstream audience] imagines a civilized self” (P. Deloria, 1998, p. 3), in the case of Dead Man, Native Americans serve as those through whom the viewer imagines it. This makes Dead Man what Deloria calls an “anomalous” work (P. Deloria, 2004, p. 11).

Anyone who has watched Dead Man knows that it is anomalous, in (among other things) the amount of attention and authority it gives to Nobody and in its explicit and emphatic focus on death, a subject mainstream American audiences prefer to ignore. However, as P. Deloria (2004) points out, while anomalous works diverge from certain established standards, they do not necessarily subvert them. Instead, they usually “reinforc[e] expectations” (p. 11), and this is the case with Dead Man. While it diverges in some respects from standard portrayals of Native Americans and utilizes some unique techniques to undercut the stereotypes it employs, it does employ traditional stereotypes (McMahon, 2012). It makes its case against modern society by setting it in opposition to the native alternative. The problem is that this alternative is largely a Western construct.

Unfortunately, if you asked most people what their idea of a Native American is and where they got it, they “would respond with a variety of pictures from pulp novels, movies, or television. [And] almost all these representations have been produced by non-Natives” (Kidwell et al., 2001, p. 171). The representations of Native Americans that most Americans take as accurate are instead “homogenized or wholly fictive accounts…[produced by non-Natives that] have [little or] nothing to do with authentic Indians and their practices” (Kidwell et al., 2001, p. 174). As Kidwell et al. note, and many Native Americans would likely attest,
the “reality for most Native Americans stands in stark contrast to the romantic notions of Indians held by many in dominant culture” (Kidwell et al., 2001, p. 178). In a sense, *Dead Man*, like many other works by non-Natives that represent Native American life, demonstrates that the American fascination with Native Americans, particularly nineteenth-century Indians, expresses “not so much a desire to [know Indians] or become Indian…[as] a longing for utopian existence” (P. Deloria, 1998, p. 185), namely, a prelapsarian fantasy born of disaffection with the status quo. Renato Rosaldo (1989) coins the phrase “imperialist nostalgia” to refer to this ironic fascination that “agents of colonialism [have] for the very forms of life they…altered or destroyed” (p. 107). This nostalgia is certainly evident in many mainstream representations of Native American life. Today, the nostalgic portrayal of Native Americans is so pervasive in mainstream culture that it not only fails to convey anything especially authentic about Native Americans, but it also “works to produce—and sometimes comprise—racism” (P. Deloria, 2004, p. 11).

To be sure, *Dead Man* is a film that is unabashedly sympathetic to Native American culture; however, as Vine Deloria Jr. (E. Deloria, 1998) notes, even those who are sympathetic to and interested in Native Americans likely “h[o]ld determined stereotypes about Indian life” (p. ix), and are therefore limited in their capacity to convey accurate information about it. In fact, as intimated, rather than tell us much about Native Americans and what they think about death, *Dead Man* actually tells us more about what some members of the white mainstream feel about their worldview, what they want to think about Native Americans, and what they think Native Americans think about death. *Dead Man* evidences the “desire to preserve images and fantasies of the…Indian” (Grande, 2004, p. 11), specifically an image of Native American culture that, for all intents and purposes, has been dead for over a hundred years. Of course, keeping the image of the noble savage alive serves various purposes. Obviously, it assuages guilt over the wholesale decimation of the indigenous peoples of the Americas and their ongoing “alienation and exploitation” (Grande, 2004, p. 146). After all, if Indians can really go stoically into oblivion, then their genocide is not as painful to bear. More specific to the focus of this essay, romantic images of Native Americans who are in tune with the cycles of nature also nurture the general hope that there are forms of existence that are not simply more in touch with life, but are also more comfortable with death.

In fact, *Dead Man*’s disaffected portrait of modern civil society, its nostalgia for a more natural native state, and it cynical conclusion may actually be subtle indicators of a state alluded to in the literature on
TMT, namely where a community is ripe for “conversion” (Solomon et al., 1991, p. 133) by virtue of the fact that its worldview is losing its “effective[ness] as an anxiety-buffer” (p. 134). Indeed, the pervasive images of death\(^3\) that populate the film suggest a rather obvious leakage of death anxiety, leakage that normally compels redoubled compliance, but which if left unmanaged can eventually cause erosion in support for the dominant worldview and captivation with an alternative one, in this case the native view.

Michael Salzman’s (2001b) examination of the implications of “market fundamentalism” (p. 338) lends support to this possibility. A TMT theorist, Salzman asserts that commitment to the free market has not only become the prevailing cultural belief system in the United States, it is increasingly a global ideology. Like other cultural belief systems, this system establishes a means through which individuals can buffer existential anxiety and secure a sense of lasting significance: the acquisition of capital. The problem is that this ideology is “relatively miserly” (p. 347) in making this resource available to all members. Rather than making an anxiety buffer available to everyone, the free market system makes individuals compete for it and presumes the exclusion of a sizeable percentage of the population. In fact, in the wake of increased wealth concentration and expanding income inequities, this system is marginalizing millions of individuals annually, creating an “untenable situation where existential terror is unbuffered” (p. 339) in more and more of the general population. Though much of Salzman’s work concentrates on how minorities such as Native Americans are marginalized at a disproportionate rate to their white counterparts, he notes that current market trends are driving an increased number of whites into a situation where they find themselves unable to secure enough capital to bolster their self-esteem and are therefore prey to heightened ontological insecurity. This upsurge in anxiety leads not only to increased intergroup bias, it also contributes to heightened disaffection with the status quo.

### Unexpected Indians

In *Indians in Unexpected Places* (1998), Phillip Deloria acknowledges the resilience of a “broad set of cultural expectations about Indian peoples” (p. 3) and their roles relative to whites. He laments that these stereotypes are our “familiar currency” (p. 4), rather than a more accurate understanding of Native American life and experience anchored in perception, not projection. Because of the pervasive influence of popular stereotypes, Deloria (2004) notes that it is often only when non-Natives
see Indians in unexpected places that their unconscious prejudices get confounded and the possibility for “stereo-type busting” (p. 3) emerges. It is for this reason that he juxtaposes anomalous portrayals of Native Americans to unexpected ones. Although the former reinforce existing stereotypes, the latter serves to subvert them. Whereas *Dead Man* is an example of an anomalous text, *Smoke Signals* and *Four Sheets to the Wind* are unexpected ones. Written and produced by Native Americans, these works depict Indians in an unexpected place, at least from the perspective of “whitestream” (Grande, 2004, p. 4) popular culture, namely, living and working in contemporary America. Given their native source, these works may have the potential to tell us more about life as a modern Native American than *Dead Man*, and quite a lot, too, about the Native American view of death.

Rather than being set at the beginning of the twentieth century, *Smoke Signals* is set near its end in 1998. *Smoke Signals* is a poignant yet comic film that tells the story of two young Native American men, Victor Joseph (Adam Beach) and Thomas-Builds-the-Fire (Evan Adams), as they journey from their home on the Coeur d’Alene Reservation in Idaho to Phoenix, Arizona, in order to obtain the remains and personal effects of Victor’s estranged and now deceased father, Arnold Joseph (Gary Farmer). As the audience learns at the opening of the film, Victor and Thomas are bound not just by their shared heritage and common experience on the reservation, but also by a traumatic event from their infancy that neither individual remembers but nonetheless shapes both their experience: the death of both of Thomas’s parents in a house fire subsequent to a Fourth of July party, a house fire from which Arnold saves Thomas, but for which he is also responsible.

Though Victor and Thomas are united by trauma, it has affected them differently, and the differential effect is due in part to their differential treatment by Arnold Joseph, treatment illustrated through the film’s frequent flashbacks. Arnold treats Thomas with the kindness of a surrogate father, taking him to Denny’s for breakfast and challenging him to fry-bread-eating contests. In contrast, he mistreats his own son, Victor, and ultimately abandons both his son and his wife, Arlene (Tantoo Cardinal), 12 years after the fire that killed Thomas’s parents. As the narrator states and the flashbacks show, Arnold Joseph was never the same after the fire. After Thomas’s parents died, he cut his hair, an indication of mourning in Couer d’Alene culture, and never grew it long again. When Suzy Song (Irene Bedard), Arnold’s friend and neighbor in Phoenix, reveals to Victor that Arnold, drunk and playing with fireworks, had accidently started the fire that killed Thomas’s parents, Victor and the audience
immediately understand why Arnold was especially kind to Thomas in the years after his parent’s death, why he drank so heavily and mistreated Victor, why he never regrew his hair, and why he ultimately left the reservation. Arnold had never forgiven himself. He unconsciously destroyed his family because he could not let himself have what he knew he took from Thomas; he could not let himself have a home, knowing he had destroyed another. Through Arnold’s example, we see how the encounter with mortality is complex, that it can be crippling, and that being a Native American does not guarantee one will be able to manage it more effectively than anyone else will. It shows that Arnold only got relief, and was able to quit drinking, after he communicated his “secret” to Suzy, namely, about the death of Thomas’s parents, his role in it, and how it affected him.

Importantly, Suzy’s revelation of Arnold’s involvement in the fire is what helps Victor make peace with his father’s death and move forward productively with his life. It does so by disclosing the real reason for his father’s attentive treatment of Thomas and departure from the reservation. Whereas Victor previously envied Thomas’s closeness to Arnold and attributed his father’s departure to some failing in himself, Suzy helps him realize that his father’s anger and despair had nothing to do with him. This helps Victor let go of his own anger and develop confidence. Near the end of the film, after Victor finds a family picture marked “Home” in his father’s wallet, Victor cuts his hair in mourning, like his father did years before. However, unlike his father, Victor makes it home. In fact, on his way home while driving his dad’s truck Victor saves lives rather than takes them, running 20 miles to get medical help after he and Thomas come across people injured in a car crash. Later, when they arrive back on the reservation Victor apologizes to Thomas for being so hard on him for so long. He gives Thomas half of his father’s ashes, literally sharing his father with the boy who had lost his. Finally, Victor goes to Spokane to spread the remaining ashes in the river, releasing them with a resounding cry that simultaneously expresses the pain he feels at his father’s loss and the joy found in the discovery of his love.

Like Smoke Signals, Four Sheets to the Wind opens with a scene that foregrounds death. Rather than open with figures bathed in flame, it opens more quietly, but no less provocatively, with a young man dragging a body down a dirt road. Moments later the same figure is seen submerging the body in a farm pond then spreading tobacco on the water. While the opening scene raises audience suspicion, suspicion transforms to sympathy when viewers discover that the opening scene depicts the young man, Cufe Smallhill (Cody Lightning), fulfilling the final wishes of his father,
Frank Smallhill, who committed suicide. The film then follows Cufe as he grapples with his father’s death and how to move forward in the wake of this unexpected loss.

As *Smoke Signals* has already shown, the death of a parent is a particularly difficult loss to bear. As psychological research shows, not only does a parent’s death mark the loss of one of the more salient relationships in a person’s life, the death of a parent often marks the first occasion “adult children think seriously about their mortality” (Umberson & Chen, 1994, p. 167). For Cufe, his father’s loss is made even more painful by the fact that his father’s death is a suicide. Cufe has to manage his feelings, help his mother, Cora (Jerri Arredondo), worry about his sister, Miri (Tamara Podemski), and arrange a proper funeral in the absence of a corpse. Cufe’s cousin, Jim (Jon Proudstar), who happens to work at the local funeral home, assists Cufe with this enterprise, and the scenes that document their effort to create a convincing casket by weighting it with watermelons serve as some of the best comic relief in the film.

Despite its incorporation of comic elements, *Four Sheets to the Wind* is a poignant film about how the loss of a father affects a whole family, in this case a Seminole family. Like *Smoke Signals*, it reveals a family struggling to handle the “hurt” associated with loss and to find direction now that “everything is different.” Various scenes show members of the Smallhill family reminiscing about Frank even though these conversations are “depressing” and they’d prefer to talk about something else. It also shows how various family members try, at times, to ease their pain using proximal defenses such as drink, drugs, and sex. For example, after the funeral, Cufe goes to the local bar to have a few drinks. Approached by an attractive white woman, it looks like he might find additional solace; however, a white male sees what is going on and forestalls that possibility by punching Cufe in the face.

Later, Cufe decides to go see his sister, Miri, in Tulsa. There he finds her trying to drown her sorrows too. After Cufe returns home from his visit, Miri slips further into her self-destructive behavior. She realizes that the binge drinking and anonymous sex she uses to anesthetize herself have only left her feeling worse. She is fired for stealing from the till at her job and receives an eviction notice. Staring at a picture of her father, it is clear that she misses her dad. Overwrought with loneliness and grief she overdoses on sleeping pills, an action parallel to that taken by her father. Fortunately, Miri’s next-door neighbor, and Cufe’s girlfriend, Francie (Laura Bailey), get Miri to the hospital and Miri survives. Cufe and his mother bring Miri back home. The film closes positively with Miri in the arms of her mother, suggestive of their reconciliation, and
Cufe setting off on a trip to California with Francie. As Cufe explains, the trip is not motivated by a desire to escape thought of his father’s passing, but to help him fulfill a dream he shared with his father as well as to give design and direction his own life, neither of which were of concern to him before his father’s death.

**Competing Visions**

So what do these visions tell us about the encounter with death? Do they suggest that Native Americans manage death differently? Anthropologists generally maintain that they do (Gill, 2002, p. 104). Whereas *Dead Man* offers a portrait of a Native American who teaches a white man to accept death and who greets death courageously as a warrior, we must recall that a non-Native crafted this vision. While Jarmusch’s vision may not be wholly false, it does not provide any real insight about contemporary Native Americans and their relation to death. Instead, it likely trades in the latent anxiety of the mainstream audience and their desire for a more fulfilling cultural narrative. *Smoke Signals* and *Four Sheets to the Wind* offer an interesting “counternarrative” (Warrior, 1995, p. xvii) to the one that circulates among non-Natives and resurfaces in works such as *Dead Man*. Rather than suggest that Native Americans have some natural equanimity toward death, they illustrate that they struggle with it, and like other people, use various mechanisms to help manage the pain and fear that thought of death can initiate. In this way they show the use of anxiety buffers by Native American characters.

What is interesting, however, is that neither *Smoke Signals* nor *Four Sheets to the Wind* offers much evidence for TMT’s hypothesis that Native Americans ameliorate death anxiety by spiritualizing Nature or clinging fervently to belief in an afterlife. This suggests that TMT’s hypothesis, while perhaps historically accurate, does not accurately describe the means utilized by most contemporary Native Americans to manage death anxiety and fails to fully appreciate the situation so many Native Americans face, namely, alienation from traditional worldviews due to the ongoing pressure to assimilate and the efforts to eliminate native cultures. While some cultural revitalization programs are flourishing and some Native Americans may use the anxiety-buffering techniques of their tribal ancestors, many Native American cultures and languages are near extinction. Consequently, rather than carrying their cultures forward, many Native Americans have limited knowledge of their indigenous language and culture. Victor and Thomas make light of this fact in *Smoke Signals* when Victor chastises Thomas for repeatedly watching
Dances with Wolves (1990; directed by Kevin Costner) in order to figure out how to be an Indian, and admits to adopting the buffalo warrior stereotype even though he knows that his ancestors were fishermen.

A question emerges here: if the characters depicted in Smoke Signals and Four Sheets to the Wind do not utilize a traditional Native American worldview to buffer their anxiety about death, how do they manage it? In particular, what, if anything, do Eyre and Harjo suggest Native Americans do in order to avoid being overwhelmed by existential terror, and do these techniques align with any of the mechanisms outlined by TMT? Interestingly, they do. In particular, the films seem to suggest that the Native Americans they depict engage more frequently in proximal defenses than distal ones, namely, they engage in more direct means of anxiety suppression. Moreover, when distal defenses are used, they seem to be local, and related to their family identity and obligations, such as Cufe’s decision to fulfill his father’s wish to be put in the pond and his decision to go to California to make good on their dream to make that trip.

Most importantly, the characters do not appear to engage in obvious death-denying ideologies. TMT can be used to explain this too. As mentioned previously, advocates of TMT maintain that distal means of defense are successful only when death-related thoughts are at the “fringes of consciousness” (Pyszczynski et al., 1997, p. 4); however, when death-related thoughts are in current attention, the use of distal defenses is minimized, and proximal means of anxiety management predominate (Pyszczynski et al., 1998, p. 9).

There are various socioeconomic reasons why death-related thoughts may be more of a focal point for some Native Americans and why proximal defenses may therefore be used more frequently as a means of anxiety management. First, the destruction of indigenous cultures and the effects of ongoing racism may limit the opportunity that many Native Americans have to buy into the sort of durable cultural belief system that provides the mainstream population with a (distal) means of anxiety management (Salzman, 2001a, p. 178). Moreover, as US Census data indicates, disproportionate rates of illness, poverty, and mortality affect the Native American population in America (Salzman, 2001a p. 173; Grande, 2004, p. 162). These factors, particularly if pervasive in a particular community, contribute to making the members of this community more susceptible to mortality salience, as death-related thoughts are more likely to occur when socioeconomic factors make life more tenuous and death literally more present.

In the literature on TMT, certain theorists express skepticism regarding the use of proximal defenses and speculate that “only distal terror management defenses [will] enable the individual to conceive of him or
herself as a person of value” (Pyszczynski et al., 1997, p. 5) and thereby provide sufficient terror management to avoid “maladaptive behavior” (Solomon et al., 1991, p. 118) and sustain long-term social functioning as well as physical and psychological health. However, the films we have considered suggest that consciousness of death is not necessarily debilitating. Though they suffer the loss of their fathers, Victor and Cufe seem quite conscious that their father’s deaths are permanent and that no less final a fate awaits them; they move forward in consciousness of death, not brooding over it, but not blind to it. In fact, it seems that lucid recognition of the reality of death is what assists Victor and Cufe in finding direction in their own lives. It helps them take responsibility for themselves, take more control over the course of their lives, and demonstrate greater responsibility in their communities. Though pained by death, each character is ultimately positively transformed by his encounter with it. Both Victor and Cufe come of age through their encounter with death, and their transformation highlights what we can learn from these characters and the worldviews they represent.

As most advocates of TMT admit, while individuals do need to manage their death anxiety, cultural anxiety buffers differ and a particular one “is not necessarily the only or most adaptive means” (Pyszczynski et al., 1997, p. 13). Though some cultural worldviews are more dismissive of death, the fact is that death is inevitable and the world provides reminders of our finitude every day. While some of the advocates of TMT seem to think that keeping death-related thoughts out of consciousness through distal defenses is necessary to manage death anxiety, if we return to Becker we find that this was not what he thought. Becker (1973) admits that we cannot be constantly conscious of death without adverse repercussions; however, he also argues we should transcend the “death-grip” (p. 263) of worldviews that demand its wholesale denial or suppression, calling them “cheap” forms of heroism (p. 139), which can have “damaging effects” (p. 179) not just on the individual psyche, but also socially. Ultimately, Becker calls for us to develop the requisite “maturity” (p. 266) to deal consciously and constructively with death anxiety because this anxiety reveals the “truth of one’s condition” (p. 87), “concentrates the mind” (p. ix), discloses one’s dependence upon the environment, and reveals one’s solidarity with other people, regardless of their worldview. In short, he seems to be calling for a cultural revolution, particularly the evolution of a worldview that helps individuals manage death anxiety without denying death so vehemently.

By contrasting Dead Man to Smoke Signals and Four Sheets to the Wind, we can see that a culture whose anxiety buffer denies death as a reality
and encourages its members to bury their fear of death early and deep leaves them vulnerable to the return of the repressed; predisposed to and unprepared for upsurges in death anxiety; susceptible to reactive, irrational, and disproportionate responses to anxiety; and without the opportunity to let forthright consideration of mortality positively affect their lives. Blake’s life is transformed, to be sure, but not by his design. He was lucky Nobody saved him and helped him embrace life and death because he was not going to save himself, and his culture, a culture aimed at the commoditization of life, was not going to help him either; it had already put a price on his head. For modern viewers, Blake’s plight alludes to the bankruptcy of a worldview that directs individuals away from matters of life and turns them into machines geared for profit. The film suggests this view deadens all who subscribe to it, making them less prepared for death and less fit for life.

Ultimately, all the films we have discussed suggest that death needs to be given more conscious attention in our experience. In effect, they offer a positive response to Sigmund Freud’s (1959) rhetorical question, “Would it not be better to give death a place in actuality and in our thoughts which properly belongs to it, and to yield a little more prominence to that unconscious attitude toward death which we have hitherto so carefully repressed?” (p. 316). Eyre and Harjo offer portraits of characters who accept the reality of death and embody a mature relationship to it. They do not romanticize death; they do not suggest that it is a punitive measure in a metaphysical calculus. It is simply a part of life, one that brings pain that we often try to avoid, but that also brings wisdom and growth.

More people would do well to heed the lessons these films share. As Hans-Georg Gadamer (1960/1993) asserts, every individual and every culture have a limited perspective on the world and this is what gives rise to “prejudice[s]” (p. 265). Prejudices are often destructive, but they are not designed to be so. For him, a prejudice is simply a judgment made on the basis of one’s inevitably restricted experience as well as the “habits of thought” (p. 267) promoted by one’s cultural viewpoint. We need preliminary judgments in order to function; however, they are not necessarily accurate. In fact, we only develop understanding if we revise our prejudices in response to experience. In Gadamer’s view, the process of understanding is circular (or spiral): it moves forward through the projection of an initial judgment, turns back in response to experience to revise the judgment, and then moves forward again to meet experience. In order to keep expanding our understanding we need new experiences. This includes encounters with individuals who hold different views. Every
individual and culture comes at the world from its own perspective; we cannot take on other people’s worldviews in the way we change clothes. However, we do share this world, and if we consciously resist the temptation to view other people and the perspectives they endorse as threats, then exposure to them can positively affect our understanding, our ability to coexist peacefully, and our joint capacity to live (and die) well.

Notes

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1. Sterlin Harjo is a member of the Seminole and Creek nations. Chris Eyre is a member of the Cheyenne and Arapaho nations. Sherman Alexie traces his ancestry to the Coeur d’Alene as well as the Spokane and Flathead.

2. It is beyond the scope of this essay to offer an exhaustive defense of representational capacity of fiction. For this reason, I shall simply refer readers to some of the more convincing arguments to that effect, for example, Nussbaum (1996). I shall proceed on the assumption that realistic works such as those discussed here can and do offer viewers insight into the sorts of lives that they portray.

3. From the bones that comprise the words of the film title, to the skulls strewn throughout the town of Machine, and the superimposition of a skull on Blake’s face during Nobody’s vision, *Dead Man* bursts with images and symbols of death.


5. Indeed, in *Four Sheets to the Wind*, it is a white character, Sonny, who talks about Frank making his “final journey,” not his family. Likewise,
while Thomas likens throwing Arnold’s ashes in the river to returning a salmon to water, Victor laughs and says he sees letting them go as more like “cleaning the attic.”

6. It is beyond the scope of this essay to try and substantiate these claims. This essay merely suggests that mortality salience and terror management mechanisms in certain communities may be influenced as much by specific socioeconomic conditions as embedded cultural anxiety buffers and that this suggests a worthwhile area for exploration.

References


Some fears run deeper than threats to life, limb, or property (although I do not make light of these). Some fears (or technically anxieties) are cosmic in nature and appear to underlie and yet elude our day-to-day realities.

The films I am about to discuss elucidate what H. P. Lovecraft (1973) terms cosmic fear, and I term the groundlessness of being. By “groundlessness of being,” I mean the radically unknown or in Rudolf Otto’s (1923/1958) terms, “tremendous mystery” of creation. Groundlessness of being encompasses, but also, in my view, exceeds death anxiety. While death anxiety is conventionally associated with the demise of a living organism, groundlessness is associated with the underlying oblivion or shattering of identity that accompanies such demise (e.g., see Kohut, 1977 on “disintegration anxiety”). While we “know” something about how an organism dies (e.g., the physical processes of deterioration), we know virtually nothing about the postdeath identity of that organism. It is this dissolution of identity into the void of space-time, or the threat of that dissolution, that I call “groundlessness.”

In Horror and the Holy: Wisdom-teachings of the Monster Tale (1993), I showed how this groundlessness or infinity of being infuses some of the
most compelling horror classics ever created, and is precisely the basis for their captivation. I also showed how this groundlessness is associated with constrictive or expansive endlessness or the uncontained. Allusion to these phenomena are vividly animated in such classics as *Frankenstein* (1931), *Dracula* (1931), *Phantom of the Opera* (1925), *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1931), *Vertigo* (1958), and *Alien* (1979); but such allusions can also be seen throughout the horror genre as a whole (as illustrated, for example, by the occultism in *The Exorcist* [1973], or the explosiveness in *Halloween* [1978]).

That said, the most striking feature of the groundlessness theme in these films was not just its horror but its wonder. By wonder, I mean the curiosity, fascination, and even amazement evoked by the groundlessness of being. For example, consider the implication of death transcendence in *Frankenstein*, or mind reading in *Dracula*, or contagion in *Alien*. Each of these are exhilarating as much as they are hair-raising, and present opportunities to radically transform lives. And yet there is a problem in each of these (cautionary) tales; they do not highlight the exhilarating! Indeed they highlight the monstrous, which requires some reflection.

In my own study of the structure of classic horror, I found that a very intriguing pattern emerges that emulates real-life dilemmas on many levels. This pattern is what I call the “traumatic cycle” of classic horror, and it proceeds as follows: An innocent protagonist, such as a Dr. Frankenstein or Count Dracula, encounters an agonizing tragedy, such as the death of Dr. Frankenstein’s mother in childbirth, or the slaughter of a tribe, as in the case of Count Dracula. This traumatic shock or jolt then catapults the protagonist into a dark despair, which renders him/her feeling both hopeless and helpless. But this despair is not just ordinary disconsolation; it is screaming, foundation-shaking disconsolation, or what I call *cosmic* in scope. Consider, for example, the experience of pain in the lives of Victor Frankenstein and Count Dracula, or for that matter, Erik the Phantom (who was burned as a youth), or Dr. Jekyll (who was crushed by Victorian values), or Scottie, the detective in *Vertigo*, who lost his partner to a fatal fall, or just about any of the other protagonists in classic horror—these are dysphorias of a monumental nature, because, if one really dwells upon it, all great losses are of a monumental nature. All great losses shake us, pulverize us, and make us realize the fragility of our position—and not just as individuals in a body and culture, but as creatures in a cosmos and void. They make us realize that we are all in suspense on this tiny orb of life, and that the “base” or “ground” that holds us in this suspense is no base or ground at all; it is a vacuum (Schneider, 2009; 2013).
Hence the sense of cosmic helplessness is a real and pervasive substrate of virtually any human suffering, and classic horror illuminates this problem with profoundity. But classic horror does something else; it wakes us up to the potential consequences of such helplessness, which can be equally devastating. These consequences ensue when unprocessed trauma (despair) leads to unprocessed defense, and this defense takes the form of rage, fanaticism, and ultimately monstrosity. Hence, monstrosity (or fanaticism) is the second part of the traumatic cycle of horror. The fury of Dr. Frankenstein’s grim efforts to extend life; or Count Dracula’s drive to overtake life; or Mr. Hyde’s striving to absorb life, are all examples of this fanatical stage of reaction.

Now in the third and final stage of the traumatic cycle, there is a glimmer of what I formerly called wonder and I now term awe in the trajectory of monstrous protagonists. This wonder or awe is more often implied than explicit in classic horror—consider for example the physiological complexity of the Frankenstein monster, or the emotional intricacy of Count Dracula—but nevertheless it is palpable, accessible, and even inspirational. I now use the term “awe” rather than “wonder” for this third stage of the traumatic cycle because I have come to believe in its superior accuracy, depth, and relevance to actual experience (Schneider, 2004; 2009). By “awe” I mean the comingling of wonder and anxiety, admiration and vulnerability. I also mean the sense of adventure associated with the extraordinary, and even the monstrous. In short, I define this third stage of awe as the humility and wonder—or sense of adventure—within horrific imagery. Now note that I am not equating awe with the horrific but in keeping with the tone of classic films, I am citing the potential for an awesome experience within and perhaps even as a result of the original horrific calamity.

From a psychological standpoint, this third stage could also be viewed as a stage of posttraumatic growth (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1995). This stage refers to the potential for a deepening and enlargement of consciousness in the aftermath of trauma (or horror). This potential for growth, moreover, is in my view integral to the structure of classic horror. Such horror, in other words, operates not only at the level of scaring and titillating viewers, but also at the level of alerting them to alternative universes, remarkable states of mind, and astounding conditions of embodiment. The caveat here however is that such illumination can only proceed if the traumatic basis for the horror can be faced, deliberated upon, and in some viable sense “worked through”—which is precisely what the protagonists in classic horror rarely do! The onus for such a working-through then must of necessity fall to us, the horror viewership. While the writer of the
screenplay may provide us hints, it is up to us to reconceive these hints and indeed to reconceive of the trajectory of classic horror itself. What this trajectory will ultimately look like is anyone’s guess, but it will likely encompass the awe that is implicit in the monstrosity, or to put it more plainly the awe dimension between fanaticism and despair. Consider for example, if Victor Frankenstein, or Scottie (the protagonist in Vertigo) for that matter, had perceived their disabilities as a chance for new and vibrant lives rather than desperate lunges for the unattainable.

In the balance of this chapter, I will show how two contemporary films elucidate the traumatic cycle discussed above. I will show further how these films elucidate major challenges in the real contemporary world and the prospects for a redress to these challenges.

The two films I illustrate presently are Lars von Trier’s Antichrist (2009) and Melancholia (2011)—films that in my estimation, epitomize the despair, fanaticism, and awe of our contemporary world. Like Hitchcock before him, von Trier is a master at cutting through life’s surfaces and exposing the abysses below; but he is also a master at depicting people’s relationships to those abysses in the contemporary world, and this is where his work bears relevance to the present discussion.

**Antichrist**

*Antichrist* is a merciless film. By that I mean that it does not merely critique but “sledgehammers” contemporary Western values. The film opens with “Lasca ch’io pianga,” the music from Handel’s *Rinaldo*, and from there marches straight into our solar plexus. The opening scene is a tone poem of operatic sublimity and domestic serenity, as a young couple gracefully eases into lovemaking while their toddler, Nic, playfully climbs up toward the windowsill in an adjacent room. By depicting the events in slow motion, the scene achieves an eeriness that matches its intensity. As the couple deepens their passionate conjugation, the camera quickly pans over to Nic. Nic hesitates at first but innocently edges toward the open window to improve his view of the beckoning outdoors (where it is both snowing and radiant). Just as the couple achieves climactic bliss, von Trier guides the viewer’s eye once again to Nic. But this time Nic is not climbing, he is spiraling, wide-eyed and obliviously to his grizzly death.

When the couple discovers this abomination, they are racked by self-incrimination and guilt. The presumed mother (played by Charlotte Gainsbourg) expresses this guilt by psychically imploding, and the presumed father (played by Willem Defoe; neither party is named in the
film or credits) deals with it by quickly and vehemently occupying his professional role as a therapist. That he is concertedly a cognitive-behavioral therapist is made conspicuously evident in the succeeding scenes.

The mother’s internal shattering begins with a primeval withdrawal that becomes the center of her husband’s rescue-obsessed world. It should be said at the outset that as a viewer, one cannot help but empathize with these people. Their son was killed by a seemingly random accident. On the other hand, the situation, like so many in von Trier’s vision, is riddled with ambiguity. The couple could have prevented the calamity—they could have secured the window that ushered the boy’s death, they could have kept a closer eye on him as parents are wont to do with toddlers and so on. But still, there is nothing that exceeds comprehension in the evolution of this scenario, and at this point in the film there is no one who is unequivocally responsible. Add that to the juxtaposition of the boy’s demise with the couple’s ecstatic lovemaking, and you have one of the most harrowing and heart-rending episodes in cinematic history.

The father tries virtually everything from his cognitive-behavioral toolbox to calm, cajole, and contain his partner’s darkening despair—and virtually nothing works (including a surfeit of psychiatric drugs). The mother, meanwhile, spirals ever deeper into grief, guilt, and agitation. The father is also clearly impacted, but he is much more adept than the mother at curtailing himself, and, to the outside observer at least, appears much the healthier of the pair. But appearances are deceiving in this enigmatic work and tables begin to turn.

In time, the mother’s cascade into helplessness acquires an angry, rageful quality that is both confusing and disturbing to the father. After a particularly futile period, the father decides to help the mother by employing exposure therapy, to recondition her associations to the calamity. Ground zero for this exposure experiment is a country retreat they have shared through the years ironically called “Eden.” The father hoped that by pairing relaxation responses with the scene of his partner’s most dreaded nightmare—the cabin retreat where she and Nic spent some of their most intimate moments—she would begin to form new and more stable cognitive associations. But strange things begin to happen when they arrive at the place. The father, for example, is confronted by a bizarre deer; as the deer turns to leave, a bloodied fawn hangs from its womb.

More puzzlements follow: As the mother heads further into her terror, acorns start pelting the cabin windows, ticks start to invade the father’s hand, and a bizarre self-mutilating fox utters the words “chaos reigns.” And indeed, chaos is the watchword for the evolving scenario, as the couple further immerses in their bewilderment. This state of affairs is
especially devastating to the father—guardian of order and reason—and von Trier pulls no punches in depicting this.

In a subsequent scene, the father discovers his wife’s doctoral thesis on witch hunts of the seventeenth century buried in the basement shelves. To his chagrin, this thesis reveals not only her fascination with these campaigns but the conclusion that they were justified. So here we have an intelligent, thoroughly contemporary woman who methodically arrives at the conclusion that women are indeed evil. How can that happen, von Trier seems to query. Further, the mother begs her husband to hit her during sex. He reluctantly agrees in an outdoor scene underneath a large tree. As the couple makes love a multitude of hands emerges from the roots of the tree.

Later, the father discovers that Nic’s feet were deformed in his autopsy photo—this deformation apparently had no relation to his fatal fall and had almost the quality of something unworldly. The deformation takes an even more perverted turn, as the mother, upon discovering it, turns wild, and realizes further that she was the only one with Nic at the time the deformation apparently first became evident. Inexplicably, she loses all inhibition at this point and begins to attack the husband. At first this attack takes a sexual form but shockingly, in one of the most agonizing moments on film, she grabs a block of wood and smashes it into her husband’s groin. This precipitates a frantic and blood-spewing fight for survival in which both perpetrator and victim, predator and prey alternate in a maddening spin into anarchy. The husband is now about as far away from psychological professionalism as one can get, and the wife has completely shattered the traditional role of femininity (including committing gynocide, or the mutilation of female genitalia, on herself!). No convention is safe at this point, and the primal terrors of nature abound. But it is more than primal terror, as that term is typically understood—it is also otherworldly terror, and it upends every “law” in its path.

In the penultimate scene, the father frees himself from a horrific grindstone that his wife has somehow drilled into his leg. Yes, drilled. In his scramble for survival, the father ends up strangling the mother and escapes into the woods. The final scene, which is perhaps the most enigmatic, shows the father, staggering through the woods. As he reaches a hillside he is swarmed by legions of ghostly women who “dance” with him into a valley below.

Analysis

There is no definitive analysis of Antichrist, and it is one of the most enigmatic films of the last 20 years. However, from the standpoint of this
chapter, several aspects of the film strike clear. First, the film unquestionably anatomizes despair. From the opening scene of annihilation, despair is imbued in the faces and mannerisms of the protagonist parents. Although the mother’s behavior is most explicitly despairing, it is clear (at least to this observer) that the father is equally distraught but quickly finds a diversionary strategy. This strategy, which is almost ingrained in his character, is cognitive-behavioral psychology, science, and ultimately the supremacy of reason. Another way to look at this supremacy of reason is in accord with the masculine principle of Jungian psychology. This principle emphasizes order, containment, and control (Jung, 1966). Further, it is clear that in Antichrist, the masculine principle is concertedly set against the equally tenacious female principle, symbolized by the more than passing reference to chaos amid various scenes: “chaos reigns,” as the fox betokens. In Babylonian lore, it will be recalled, chaos is represented by the Goddess Tiamat, the source of all being.

Beyond these Jungian associations, however, the upshot of the film is conspicuously existential: there is no supremacy, there are no simple answers, and there is no unequivocal truth—at least among sentient beings. Von Trier characterized Antichrist as a “scream” (quoted in Schwarzbaum, 2009) and that is precisely what it is, on multiple levels. It is a scream at the randomness of fate; a scream at the frailty of youth; a scream at the betrayal of life; and a scream at those who deny the scream. The father, like so much of contemporary society, denied the scream itself and in so doing turned his back on life. Life cannot be powerful if it is unworthy of a scream; and when life ceases to have power it becomes a vacuum.

The vacuum in the father’s case led to a kind of crazed rationality, a monstrosity of formulation—that oppressed every fiber of his own and his wife’s need to grieve. While he could tolerate this stultification of natural life processes, at least for a time, his wife could not. Her pain was a whirlwind, and like the shadows and inexplicabilities of her son’s death, it could not be brooked. To that extent it cracked and then shattered the pretensions of order as offered by her husband, and opened wildly to the frontier. The more she denied that frontier, the more vigorously a part of herself rebelled and yielded to it.

In the latter half of the film, the frontier becomes all-consuming; as the father’s artifice could hold for only so long. Soon, his oppression of her breaks out into her oppression of him and the monstrosities of them both break out in all directions. Thus it is here that we arrive at the nub of the film. The “antichrist,” in my view, stands for all positions that polarize, that demonize, and that privilege a single vantage point to the utter exclusion of competing vantage points. The antichrist is the
fanatical rationality and reductionism of the demoralized father; it is the volcanic backlash and sadism of the mother; and it is the unchecked fury and shadow side of nature when debased.

The point here is that the father and by implication Western society “manages” reality at their peril. No one is clean and neat and no historical period can be summarily dismissed. For example, while we expected that the mother’s doctoral thesis would excoriate the hateful torturers of witches, the opposite occurred. When a cabin in the woods looked tame and undefiled, it turned out to be anything but; and when the father’s studied and professional manner appeared constructive, it got turned on its head. What this amounts to is that no professional, no doctor, no feminist, and no contemporary pundit can arrogantly place themselves above the complexities of the world, and simply declare their truth as the truth.

So what is the concluding message of the film? I think it is something like this: the best we human beings can offer is a heartfelt and mindful response to, rather than reaction against, our tragic condition. For example, if the father had engaged his own grief, acknowledged its power, and gradually discovered its capacity to transform, he may have enabled his wife to grieve in kind. Through this, the couple may still have experienced nightmares (indeed, they probably would experience nightmares), but they would be woven into a tapestry of possibilities rather than a monolithic extreme; they would be more nuanced fears rather than black and white terrors.

The dance with the ghostly women at the end of the film may well have represented the dance the father—as well as mother—rarely permitted themselves: that is, a dance with being—in all its stark reality; all its radiance and renewal. “You must have chaos within you,” observed Nietzsche (1960), “in order to give birth to a dancing star” (p. 9). The “antichrist” of the film, I contend, was precisely this inability to dance; precisely the destruction wrought by the fixed positions of the protagonists.

Melancholia

The pretensions to modernity, to fashion, and to our technocratic age are no less in focus in von Trier’s latest meditation on mortality—Melancholia. From the outset, Melancholia is bathed in foreboding. Yet one can hardly overestimate the mixtures of pain and beauty in this opening sequence, pathos, and elegance. With the exception of one wonder-struck woman, faces are tortured, bodies are scurrying, and a slow motion haze is cast over a lavish, disintegrating order. The disintegration on the ground is
juxtaposed to an eerily graceful sky. Slowly a glowing orb emerges into this sky and by the end of this deranged yet fascinating sequence the orb plunges into the planet on which the mayhem has broken out. That planet is Earth.

In the next scene, we wind the reel back and a couple, looking like they just leaped out of the pages of *Vanity Fair*, become stranded on the way to their wedding. The woman, Justine (played by Kirsten Dunst), is dressed like an angel, and the man, Michael, is tellingly nondescript. When their cab gets stuck in the mud, it is Justine, not Michael, who maneuvers their way out.

When the couple arrives at their party (an enormous estate filled with anxiously awaiting guests) they are greeted by Justine’s sister, Claire (Charlotte Gainsbourg), along with her husband, John (Kiefer Sutherland). Claire appears rather “buttoned down” compared with her freewheeling and volatile sister, and John is every bit the contemporary aristocrat, gracious yet arrogant behind the benign veneer.

Following some tense and awkward toasts from the attendees, particularly those of the sisters’ parents, Justine begins to unravel. First this unraveling shows up in her indifference toward her betrothed, but then it becomes more encompassing, as if the whole ill-fated celebration was her adversary. John’s arrogance, her father’s infantilism, her mother’s embitterment, her boss’s narrow and petty entitlement, and her sister’s rigidity, all begin driving Justine deeper into her despair, and resultantly, her authentic life. Following her vacant sexual responses to Michael, Justine communes naked with the moonlight. She finds a lover on one of these escapades and communes equivalently with him. Increasingly, she grows alienated. The world of phony talk, cardboard personalities, and pedantic aspirations no longer sustains her.

In a word Justine goes mad. But this madness, as we soon grasp, is not simple chemical imbalance or emotional derangement. It is the madness of insight and widening view. It is the madness commemorated in *Hamlet* and *King Lear*, and that inquirers such as R. D. Laing (1967) have touted as “potential breakthroughs” as well as breakdowns. The emerging fact is that Justine can see more of what’s going on than virtually anyone else in her environment, and this drives her into paralytic depression, but it also correspondingly spawns penetrating visions about the conditions of humanity.

It is useful again at this point to show how trenchant von Trier can be in his metaphorical critique of contemporary culture. John and the partygoers can be seen as the “cheerful robots” of the happiness age (see also Becker, 1974). These denizens are all reflexive and driven, the unwitting
victims of Madison Avenue manipulators and Establishment hacks. The only clear thinker is the madwoman who cuts through the glitter; the woman who in professional parlance is a “depressive realist” and who “ranges over the wider scale of experience” than her supposedly adjusted contemporaries (Alloy & Abramson, 1988; James, 1902/1936, p. 160).

Just what Justine perceives in this world is telling. It is a world that is on a crash course, a world that is about to collide with another world—the planet Melancholia—that is in its path. But she sees much more, she sees that the world has always been wobbly, and yet blind often to its predicament. She sees a world that has hunkered down into fiefdoms, treated them as universes, and denied the majesty of its bearing.

John, her sister’s impeccably dressed husband, has all the latest gadgetry, all the best cars, and all the latest furnishings. He is an amateur astronomer and makes it a point to teach his young son Leo all about the latest findings of astronomical import. But the main finding he focuses on is Melancholia, and with the assurance of so many today, he conveys with great confidence the “facts” his scientific brethren share. These facts are as follows: Melancholia is a fluke planet—it took our detection devices by surprise; but it is not a threat to our planet. John absorbs this claptrap like gospel and cheerily goes about spreading it to whomever is within earshot.

Justine, on the other hand, is the artist-seer who does not simply accept the received word. She looks mad to a madly ordered world because she is in touch with the actual madness that the world denies—life’s fragility. She’s also in touch with what she calls the “evil” of this world, but it is not evil in some moralizing sense. In my view it is the evil of not recognizing the groundlessness of our condition, and the cover-ups—wars, fanaticisms, and fantasy systems—that are its consequences (Schneider, 2013). Yet as much as the groundlessness of our condition can be a terrifying problem, it can also be a freeing and ennobling problem—particularly if it moves us to appreciate here-now life. And this is precisely what Justine seeks, or attempts to seek when she’s not thwarted by personal or cultural fetters.

As the planets come closer and Claire’s anxiety rises, Justine interestingly becomes calm. This shift makes much sense in a world where denial begins to give way to consciousness, and the “sane” become more discomfited. Justine and Claire in fact begin to switch roles with one another, with Justine assuming caretaking responsibilities and Claire beginning to fray. As John becomes aware that his calculations are bogus, as with much upon which he has staked his life, he too begins to break apart. This disintegration culminates in his suicide, which is conspicuously situated in the stall of one of his horses. It is as if the message is that the fanatical human is more perishable than the horse, for the horse, much like the
evolving Justine, has become calm by this point in the film, attuned to and accepting of his fate.

Following John’s death, Justine takes an increasingly maternal role with both Claire and Leo. The question now becomes **how will they respond to the oncoming disaster?**

Claire conjures up a half-baked plan for the three of them to share a drink at the moment of collision, but Justine rejects this plan in seeming deference to the needs of Leo. In the next scene, Justine is seen embracing Leo as they peer out into the menacing world. The boy understandably is in terror, and invokes his dad’s “worst-case” calculations. My dad says that if the planets collide there will be nothing left, he states in effect. Then Justine calmly turns to him and says, “Well if your dad says that, then he didn’t know about the *magic cave.*”

In the final scene Justine, Claire, and Leo are seen constructing the magic cave. This “cave,” which is a tent-like structure made of sticks and twine is designed to shelter them from the oncoming chaos. Whether it does or not is beside the point; the closing scene portrays Justine and Leo calmly huddling, and Claire wincing as the apocalypse strikes (see Figure 14.1).

**Analysis**

Kierkegaard once said that the “best an individual can attain” is “objective uncertainty, held fast, in the most personal passionate experience” (cited in Tillich, 1963). This is another way of saying that we cannot
know anything for certain, but we can choose our response to events, and that response can be personal, passionate, and far-ranging. In *Melancholia*, Justine chose a Kierkegaardian response to her and the world’s fate. She chose to opt out of the petty games and artificial ploys of conventional society to embrace a world of depth, enigma, and wonder. She chose a response to the demise of that world (our world) that draws on the greatest freedom we possess—our imagination. No one is to say whether such imagination is ultimately “real” or “valid,” but what one can say is that like Sisyphus with his rock, Justine engaged the best and last freedom with which a human is endowed, and she shared it with a child.

Claire and the rest of the wedding guests could do none of the above. Imagination had long ago been boxed out of their world, and as a result they exhibited one of two basic reactions—either abject despair, as when Claire and John recognized the undeniability of the oncoming *Melancholia*, or fanaticism, as when Claire and John fostered the pretense of their “higher” nature either through propriety, fashion, or technology. Whereas Justine also had her desperate and fanatical reactions they were not primarily to *Melancholia*, they were to the pretenses that so much of the world had erected to deny *Melancholia*, and by implication, all the lesser melancholias that contemporary culture strives to cordon off. As a result, she became an incorrigible depressive or provocateur to preserve herself and break free. But she did not become stuck in these polarities, and this is what distinguished her from her more entrenched peers. She somehow found the courage to battle with herself, to battle with the seduction of the quick fix or simple answer, and through that find a middle, deliberative path. While this path did not “solve” anything ultimately, it did enable her to wonder, to marvel, and to share her “inner-sight” with those whom she loved.

### Summary and Conclusion

This chapter anatomized despair, fanaticism, and awe in two classics of contemporary cinema. Like Hitchcock and Tarkovsky before him, von Trier has pointed to a new mythos for the emerging age. This mythos embraces neither rigid timorousness nor explosive grandiosity in the face of cosmic bewilderment. By contrast, it offers an awe-based medicament that is both humbling and wondrous—savoring and adventurous—in the moment-to-moment exercise of living. Short of that, the filmmakers imply, life devolves into monstrosity, or worse, no life at all.
References


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CHAPTER 15

CONCLUSION: CINEMATIC DEATH BENEFITS

Daniel Sullivan and Jeff Greenberg

The foregoing chapters have covered a wide range of films, genres, and oeuvres, and presented a variety of approaches to death in film. We applaud the efforts of the authors, as there is quite a bit of stimulating material in their pieces. It is clear from their contributions alone that the role of death in cinema is an underappreciated but exciting subject for psychologists, philosophers, film scholars, and filmmakers alike.

Acknowledging the many insights offered by these authors, as we noted in the Introduction, it nevertheless remains the case that the present volume provides only a selective sampling of issues connected to the vast topic of death and film. In this concluding chapter, we will reflect on the foregoing pieces and also look forward to future scholarship in this area. More specifically, we will begin by culling certain prominent themes that emerged across the otherwise rather diverse chapters of *Fade to Black*. We will then identify and elaborate on some potentially important themes that were not addressed in the other chapters. Finally, we will reflect briefly on how this volume illuminates the influence of death and death anxiety on cinema as an industry and art form, and the relevance films have for the audience members who must cope with these realities “when the lights go down.”

Themes Addressed across the Chapters

One theme that clearly emerges when considering this book’s chapters as a whole is the sheer diversity of ways in which death and humanity’s fear
of it can be represented onscreen. In some rare and shocking instances, filmed death can be excruciatingly real (e.g., the recording of Timothy Treadwell’s death, strategically withheld by Werner Herzog in *Grizzly Man*; see Kirby Farrell’s analysis, chapter 6), while depicted death can also take on fantastic and stylized dimensions (e.g., the climax of *Black Swan*; see Jamie Goldenberg, chapter 7). Across films and artists, death is variously associated with loneliness (Peter Cowie, chapter 10), a lack of esteem and acceptance from society-at-large (Farrell, chapter 6), lack of emotion (Jennifer L. McMahon, chapter 5), creatureliness (Goldenberg, chapter 7), the social act of scapegoating (Susan White, chapter 11), the end of all human presence on Earth (Joel D. Lieberman and Mark Fergus, chapter 3), and even the possibility of transcendence and personal growth (McMahon, chapter 13). Even across the span of a single director’s career, death can be portrayed in a variety of distinct ways, as Cowie aptly shows in the case of Ingmar Bergman.

These wide-ranging cinematic associations and portrayals of death demonstrate that film captures the diversity of human perspectives on this crucial aspect of our experience. This diversity is also quite significant in relation to the narrower domain of film scholarship, because it shows that there has been a somewhat disproportionate focus in past scholarship on specifically *violent* portrayals of death in film. We neither dispute the fact that many films portray death violently, nor that some of the films discussed in this volume do so, nor that death is, in fact, often quite violent in reality. However, the large amount of literature on the issue of film violence (reviewed briefly in the Introduction), whatever its social importance, should at least be complemented by considerations of the central place of death in many nonviolent films. This volume seems to be a first step in this direction.

We will mention another theme that is shared by several chapters. As terror management theory (TMT) (Jeff Greenberg and Alisabeth Ayars, chapter 2) suggests, people rely on cultural belief systems that promise immortality to maintain psychological equanimity despite their awareness of death. Many of the films discussed in this book depict how different worldviews and immortality strategies serve this function. But additionally, several authors independently converged on a related common subject in films, namely, the discrediting or loss of particular belief systems in modern society, and the rising anxiety that results. For example, Sheldon Solomon and Mark Landau (chapter 4) analyzed Arkin and Feiffer’s *Little Murders* from a Nietzschean perspective; both the film and their analysis highlight the dysfunctional ideologies and complexes to which people cling when they have lost faith in broader religious or societal institutions.
Sullivan (chapter 8) uses Anderson’s *There Will Be Blood* as a demonstration of how the unmitigated pursuit of wealth replaces other, more meaning-laden life goals in contemporary society, and McMahon (chapter 13) similarly notes that films dealing with Native American culture sometimes romanticize it as an alternative to the bleakness of global capitalism. It is worth noting that film itself, as an important cultural medium, is not only a reflective outlet for capturing such processes of societal meaning loss, but also occasionally an active contributor to this state of affairs. In this connection, Sander Koole and colleagues (chapter 9) observe that superhero films, to which people once looked for assurance of meaning in an increasingly rationalized society, have grown markedly more cynical and ambiguous in recent years.

**Themes Not Addressed in Chapters**

Beyond these common themes, the individual chapters speak for themselves when it comes to a remarkable array of issues relevant to the general topic of death in film. In this section we will explore more deeply a few additional topics that, for various reasons, were only briefly touched on in the foregoing analyses.

One generally important issue that prior film scholarship has addressed is the relationship between cinema, time, and mortality. Whether or not they deal explicitly with human finiteness, films unfold in time, and they often free us from the burdens of everyday temporal understandings, which can bog us down with a sense of life’s fleetingness. In this connection, Grudin (1982) refers to the “psychological transtemporality” of art. He argues that people’s common understanding of the “rules” of time ceases to hold sway when they are engrossed in a film. This is critical, because it is the highly developed temporal consciousness of humans that allows us to perceive our encroaching demise and worry about the slipping away of time.

Grudin (1982, pp. 138–140) identified several categories of artistic transtemporality. A film may require only two hours of a viewer’s *physical* time, yet the actions depicted may unfold over a century or more of the *hypothetical* time of the film’s plot. There is also *dynamic* time in a film, the pace at which the action proceeds. As Kracauer (1960) argued, film is a superb medium for controlling and inducing a sense of dynamic time: movies offer an impressive range of dynamic experiences, from the thrill of the *chase* to photography’s ability to linger on the *transient*, subtle moments that would go missed if unrecorded. Psychological transtemporality also occurs whenever a film prompts us to experience several
cognitive-emotional states simultaneously, states that in our own lives are typically temporally separated. Consider the masterful climax of Curtiz’s *Angels with Dirty Faces* (1938; see Figure 15.1). We are awed by the stoic defiance of Rocky Sullivan (James Cagney) as he is marched to his execution, but when death suddenly presents itself in its full inexorability this stoicism disintegrates into fear and anguish. Yet even as we lament the hero’s apparent fall from grace, we are simultaneously aware that his display serves a higher purpose—discouraging children from a life of crime. We are torn between the horror of death and the prospect of redemptive transcendence. Rarely in the pragmatic rush of our own lives do we experience such a complex range of emotions compressed into a relatively short unit of physical time.

Andrei Tarkovsky (1982) argued that the filmmaker’s work consists almost entirely in manipulating audience perceptions of passing time by creating dynamic pacing through the editing of recordings of past events. He wrote: “Just as a sculptor takes a lump of marble, and, inwardly conscious of the features of his finished piece, removes everything that is not part of it—so the filmmaker, from a ‘lump of time’ made up of an enormous, solid cluster of living facts, cuts off and discards whatever he

Figure 15.1 Rocky Sullivan (James Cagney) faces death by execution in *Angels with Dirty Faces* (1938).
does not need, leaving only what is to be an element of the finished film” (pp. 63–64). Tarkovsky noted the importance of psychological time, and believed it to be one of the higher aims of cinema to give people a deeper experience of time as something more than a succession of fleeting moments: “What a person goes to the cinema for is time: for time lost or spent or not yet had…[Cinema] widens, enhances and concentrates a person’s experience—and not only enhances it but makes it longer, significantly longer” (1982; p. 63). On this view, films free people from the physical limitations of selves bounded in time; they can psychologically experience what seems like days, weeks, months, or years in the course of a few hours.

Following Dewey (1934), we suggest that films provide people with those rare experiences when they are relatively at peace with their temporally conscious nature:

Most mortals are conscious that a split often occurs between their present living and their past and future. Then the past hangs upon them as a burden; it invades the present with a sense of regret, of opportunities not used, and of consequences we wish undone…[And] all too often we exist in apprehensions of what the future may bring…Only when the past ceases to trouble and anticipations of the future are not perturbing is a being wholly united with his environment and therefore fully alive. Art celebrates with peculiar intensity the moments in which the past re-enforces the present and in which the future is a quickening of what now is (p. 18).

As Rodowick (2007) and others suggest, films present entire worlds. Artists working in other media (music, painting) may have difficulty achieving this quality, but it is almost endemic to the nature of film and its basis in photography and the succession of events. Films stretch across expanses of space and time in a way that is difficult to achieve in other art forms. This is perhaps no clearer than in the films of Gaspar Noé. In *Irreversible* (2002) time moves relentlessly backwards from the conclusion of the narrative and the camera (completely unrestricted through the use of digital editing) fluidly investigates all corners of the setting. *Enter the Void* (2009) compresses the first-person experience of an entire life and even reincarnation into its running time.

The recognition that films construct entire worlds—of which temporality is only one dimension—brings us to another important theme, namely, the place of film genre in understanding cinematic death. Genre films seek to embody “mythopoetic landscapes” (Slotkin, 1992), worlds different from our own (often with different sets of norms and even different physical laws) that nevertheless resonate as familiar. In this sense,
genres are miniature cultural worldviews, providing viewers with entertaining reinforcement of particular value systems and perspectives on reality. This topic was broached in the chapters of Lieberman and Fergus, as well as Koole and colleagues, but we would like to explore additional aspects of it here.

Historically, genre films have helped audiences manage death anxiety in two ways: (1) insofar as genre films are reflexively understood by viewers to be bounded microcosms governed by convention, they can present death and violence “safely” and “at a distance”; (2) when genre films are nonreflexively entered into by the viewer as legitimate and emotionally engaging, they typically reinforce the symbolic structures—such as mainstream cultural values—that defend viewers against death awareness in their daily lives. But when we contextualize generic depictions of death historically—as we recommended in our Introduction—another sense of genre’s importance emerges. Death is portrayed differently across genres, and most major genres have undergone a particular historical evolution in their portrayal of death, responding to changes in broader social concerns with and interpretations of death that have taken place since roughly the 1960s (discussed in the Introduction).

Specifically, the horror, war, and Western genres have characteristically provided stylized answers to different questions about the nature of death, and their characteristic answers have changed over the course of the first century of cinema. The horror genre, which depicts both the suffering preceding and the forms of existence following death, answers the question of “what” death is. The war film, which revolves around the sacrifice of certain individuals (and not others) for the ostensible preservation of a society, answers the question of “who” dies. The Western, instrumental in sustaining a myth of US hegemony throughout the first two-thirds of the twentieth century and defined by a view of violence as necessary to uphold civilization, answers the question of “why” we die.

*The transformation of the horror film: From told to shown death.* Death has clearly played a pivotal role in the horror genre since its inception. As Williams (2004) suggested, horror films are particularly concerned with the presentation of deaths that are “too early”: deaths that come swiftly in a manner for which the victim is unprepared. Because these films are so preoccupied with “untame” deaths, they present death anxiety in its rawest form (Ariès, 1981; although admittedly this anxiety is often undercut by generic conventions). More so than other genres, the horror film is also largely concerned with the fate of humans after death.

Much has been written about the transition in death portrayals in horror films since the 1960s. Pinedo (1997) describes the classical horror film
(pre-1960s) as “modern,” and the horror film since that time as “post-
modern.” A major difference between the modern and postmodern horror
film is the tendency of the former to “tell,” and the latter to “show” death.
What this implies is that although death plays an important part in earlier
horror narratives, it is often depicted at a certain remove: the monster
closes in on its victim, but the moment of death is not seen. By contrast,
the postmodern horror film (and the slasher subgenre above all) is obsessed
with the graphic rendering of victims’ deaths in exquisite detail.

Early horror directors had to work within the limitations of produc-
tion codes and, perhaps more significantly, regional censorship boards that
might cut objectionable material from their films to the point of jeopardy.
As a result, pre-1960s filmmakers working in the genre
developed an elaborate aesthetic system for suggesting rather than directly
showing the violence and death endemic to their storylines (Prince, 2003).
One of the more prominent techniques, for example, was to show the
silhouettes of a murderer and victim while the action occurs offscreen
(as in the skinning sequence of The Black Cat, 1934). Since the decline
of censorship in the 1960s and the concurrent improvements in special
effects, horror films have engaged in an ongoing escalation of imaged
death, emphasizing more than any other genre the connection between
human embodiment and mortality (Pinedo, 1997). The prolonged torture
and mutilation of suffering victims in contemporary horror films conveys
the entrapment of human psyches in physical bodies even more than their
actual moments of death. While the modern horror film told us that the
“what” of death is the sudden snuffing out of the psyche’s candle, the
postmodern horror film tells us that death is the prolonged destruction of
the body.

The transformation of the war film: From collective to individual death. As a
genre concerned with portraying humanity’s organized efforts to bring
about death, the war film is perennially concerned with answering many
questions about the nature and potential purpose of mortality. Not unlike
actual wars, war films have evinced a unique potential to use the fact of
defeat for political purposes, either to support or critique certain nations,
organizations, and worldviews. Whereas most genres, like horror, can
be characterized as following a relatively straightforward evolutionary
trajectory from classical (i.e., unambiguous and upholding of main-
stream values/institutions) to postclassical (i.e., ambiguous and poten-
tially subverting mainstream values/institutions), the war genre is more
complicated, with the waxing and waning of socially critical tendencies
following changes in social attitudes towards particular historic conflicts
(Langford, 2005).
Naturally, like the horror film and the Western, the war film has become increasingly violent since the 1960s, with *Saving Private Ryan* (1997) being commonly highlighted as the apex of contemporary realistic violence in the genre (Eberwein, 2010). It is more illuminating to consider the evolution of death depictions in the war film, however, as a change in the answer to the question of “who” dies. Particularly in the United States, the war film served a major role in the mobilization effort of World War II. At this time, films in the genre were an ideological antidote to the individualist and even countercultural ethos that had dominated the Western and gangster films of the 1920s and 1930s (Slotkin, 1992). In order to provide an inspiring message regarding the necessity of self-sacrifice, the World War II films of the 1940s and 1950s developed an “embattled platoon” aesthetic that portrayed the collective death of a small group of combatants (Langford, 2005; see also chapter 11, present volume). In films like *Sahara* (1943), soldiers in a melting pot military community, representing diverse backgrounds and often initially reluctant or skeptical, bond in their struggle against the enemy and finally make a last stand during which the majority is killed. Thus, in the classic World War II film, confronting mortality is a group effort. Individuals die side-by-side, typically confident in the knowledge that their deaths will help preserve an abstract “home front,” a place and normative way of life that is remote from the exotic setting where death occurs. In this sense, death in the early war film resonates with more historic understandings of mortality, which portrayed sacrifice as a means of regenerating the community and its moral order (see the Introduction).

In the many critical war films produced in the aftermath of the unpopular US–Vietnam conflict, there is a clear transition from death as collective to death as an individual, lonely affair. Consider, for example, the death of Sgt. Elias (played by Willem Dafoe) in *Platoon* (1986). Betrayed by a member of his platoon, Elias is shot to death by enemy forces as he is left behind by US soldiers levitating away in helicopters. Soldiers in many contemporary war films have little sense that their death will serve a broader communal purpose; rather, they fight for individual survival and die without a sense of solidarity (as in *The Dirty Dozen*, 1967; see Langford, 2005). Although there have been war films in recent years that have returned to an earlier, more communal and patriotic model, overall the genre—and the Vietnam subgenre in particular—has transformed to answer the question of “who” dies with the image of the solitary individual, cut off from social contact and meaning. This evolution parallels the change in social attitudes towards death discussed in the Introduction. Death in the war film has been increasingly portrayed as a private affair.
that is “institutionalized” and kept away from the sight, and even the caring or awareness, of individuals in mainstream society.

*The transformation of the Western: From progressive to selectionist death.* Primarily on the basis of Peckinpah’s *The Wild Bunch* (1969), the Western is often cited as the originary source of the transition in film from violence to ultraviolence beginning in the 1960s (Prince, 1998). However, in contrast to the war film—in which the solidarity of the collective death was gradually broken down as a result of changing attitudes towards war—the Western always involved a focus on the rugged individual and his (potential) lonely death. The primary difference between the classical and the postclassical Western lies not in the issue of “who” dies or what their deaths are like, but rather in the answer to the question of *why* the hero dies. In other words, the relationship of the Western hero to the civilization he stood beyond changed, and with this change came an alteration in the meaning of his death. In the earliest decades of film, and later in the 1950s and 1960s, Westerns epitomized the ideal of US hegemony and the myth of “progressive” expansion of civilization into uncivilized terrain (Slotkin, 1992). But as the myth of the “just war” began to dissolve during the Vietnam conflict, so also did the unquestioned legitimacy of the growth imperative of Western myth.

The “new world” of the frontier in the classic Western, which was “rich in potential or mystery, liberating and full of opportunity” (Slotkin, 1992, p. 351) becomes—in the contemporary Western, such as *The Proposition* (2005) or *No Country for Old Men* (2007)—the “postmodern world,” where ethical relativism and the law of violence reign. In the classic Western, the killings carried out by (and sometimes even the death of) the hero were considered necessary: on the frontier of myth, violence had to be met with violence to pave the way for expanding civilization. Of course, it is not the case that the hero of the contemporary Western is incapable of achieving “regeneration through violence” (Slotkin, 1992). However, the deaths doled out in these films tend to be devoid of any allegedly civilizing purpose. In the contemporary, revisionist Western, death occurs simply because the frontier is a Darwinian landscape where only the strong survive. People die in these films not because they are impediments to or saviors of civilization, but simply because they are weak. This is patently clear in *The Proposition*, in which Captain Stanley’s (Ray Winstone) efforts to “civilize this land” are continually undermined by outbursts of uncontrollable violence, and antihero Charlie Burns (Guy Pearce) outlives the rest of his family only because of his superior inner strength.

Genre films provide prototypic symbolic ways of envisioning death, and in the second half of the history of cinema, we have increasingly
been shown images of death as embodied, lonely, and senseless. Echoing a common theme from the foregoing chapters, as cinema has become increasingly self-reflexive and self-critical, standard modes of making sense of death within genre have been undermined or transformed to a significant degree.

Having elaborated on relevant themes that were either salient or missing from the previous chapters, we will now consider some of the implications of the present volume for cinema as a medium, and for the viewers who look to it for escape from or answers to mortal questions.

Implications for Cinema

It is worth at least briefly broaching the issue of what implications the foregoing analyses have for film and filmmakers. What are some of the more important ways in which the fact of death has made an imprint on this art form, and are there more or less socially healthy approaches to this topic that filmmakers might consider in the future?

It is clear from the analyses of Cowie (chapter 10), White (chapter 11), and Asbjørn Grønstad (chapter 12) that mortality has been a perennial concern (if not obsession) in the works of particular directors. Whether using film as a medium to grapple with expected personal death and the loss of others was cathartic or healthy for these directors is an open question. Bergman, for example, seemed to fluctuate throughout his life between attitudes of fear, resignation, and serenity in respect to death, as Cowie indicates. White points out that, despite the pessimistic quality of many of his films, Kubrick personally expressed optimism that even in contemporary society mature humans can create sustainable meaning systems that make life worth living. Whatever role the cinematic confrontation with death played in the personal lives of these and other great filmmakers, it is clear enough that their treatments of this issue have offered a reassuring sense of meaning and shared experience to generations of viewers.

We have noted that the present work is unique partly in considering the diversity of filmic portrayals of death beyond the impact of the violence inherent in many such portrayals. Nevertheless, given the ongoing social conversation about violence in film, a book on death and cinema would be remiss not to comment on this issue. In the wake of tragedies like the Aurora, Colorado movie theater shooting of 2012, does cinema have a responsibility not to emphasize or celebrate violent death? Or will this particular approach to death always be a part of art, worthy of its own place?
Members of various organizations inside and outside the film industry certainly have mixed reactions to incidents like the Aurora shooting. The media often responds with self-censoring in the wake of such tragedies (Barnes & Carter, 2012). And yet some major representatives of the film industry, like Quentin Tarantino, become noticeably perturbed when suggestions are made connecting violence in films to these incidents (NPR.org, 2013).

Ultimately, the idea that there is a causal influence of violent death in films and death in the real world is a legitimate concern, but a complex issue. There are always multiple factors that contribute to any specific act of violence, just as there are multiple factors that contribute to any specific act of kindness or any specific occurrence of a heart attack or lung cancer. Some have noted social and psychological reasons why political groups and even members of the film industry have rhetorically stressed the connection between violent art and incidences of public violence (Trend, 2007). For example, the National Rifle Association (NRA) is prone to shift blame away from the gun lobby onto the entertainment industry (Rottenberg, Rice, & Frahisich, 2013). Furthermore, it is very clear that art has contained graphic violence for most of human history (e.g., Groebner, 2004; Schechter, 2005). And while film may be unique in its capacity to show violent death in realistic detail, historically people in many societies have watched public executions as a form of entertainment, which are clearly more real than the most ultraviolent film.

These facts should not be used as excuses if it is indeed the case that there is a demonstrable connection between violent art and criminal acts. Instead, they should help situate the issue in a historical context. The other side of the coin is that depicting violence is big business. The majority of the most popular films, television shows, and video games of all-time are littered with violent death. The same businesses that profit from this simulated carnage also own many popular media outlets, which may help explain why the evidence of a link between media violence and real violence is often framed by the mass media as inconclusive. For example, in the wake of the lethal shooting of 28 people at Sandy Hook Elementary school, Entertainment Weekly published an article on the possible role of rampant violence in entertainment in inspiring real violence. The article is full of denials of such a link by various media sources. The article notes that “Those in Hollywood who will speak out frequently argue that no clear causal link between violence in entertainment and real life violence has ever been established” (Rottenberg et al., 2103, p. 37).

Such claims are patently false. A large body of evidence supports just such a link. This link is not at all surprising to sociologists and psychologists
because humans have a tremendous propensity to learn from and imitate what they observe, whether what they are observing is real or simulated (see e.g., Bandura, 1973). One form of evidence is when very specific acts of fictional violence are clearly then imitated by impressionable or troubled individuals in the real world. Just to provide three examples of many: *Magnum Force* (1973) inspired killings using a drain cleaner; *A Clockwork Orange* inspired a gang rape accompanied by “Singing in the Rain”; *Taxi Driver* (1976) inspired an attempted assassination of President Reagan. Another body of evidence shows that the amount of violence an individual watches as a child on television predicts how prone to real-world aggression that individual is likely to be up to 22 years later (e.g., Huesmann et al., 2003; Lefkowitz et al., 1977). And finally, a large body of experimental evidence shows that when people who are angry, frustrated, or generally aggressive are shown excerpts from violent films and television shows, or asked to play a violent video game, they are more likely to commit acts of aggression such as blasting another study participant with electric shocks or loud white noise, and real world acts of aggression as well (e.g., Berkowitz, 1965; Bushman & Huesmann, 2010; Geen, 2001; Konijn et al., 2007; Leyens et al., 1975).

A further way in which filmed depictions of death could contribute to violence—a more insidious way than is typically acknowledged—is suggested by the chapters of the present anthology. We have observed that many contemporary films comment on the perceived bankruptcy of cultural routes to immortality striving in modern society. Although violence has always had a place in art, in the past it was typically presented in the context of a strongly endorsed (often religious) worldview. In other words, violence was historically given a clear meaning in most artworks—for example, it served as righteous punishment for sinners (Gurevich, 1992). As the foregoing review of changes in death portrayal across genres suggests, however, many contemporary films portray radical violence within the context of a critique of the overarching social system (e.g., postmodern Westerns). When violent deaths are depicted in film narratives without redemption or meaning, they may be more likely to contribute to senseless acts of nihilistic violence. The Aurora movie theater killer may be one example. This possibility notwithstanding, it is also plausible that meaningless violence in both films and reality are twin symptoms of modern cultural malaise, rather than the former causing the latter.

**Implications for Cinemagoers**

Finally, what ultimate role do films play in the lives of individual cinemagoers, who all must face the promise of their own deaths? While violent
or cynical films may occasionally depress some members of society and even, perhaps, drive some to violence, these are doubtless the statistical exceptions. It is unlikely that any of the contributors to this volume would not agree that films have provided them with an endless source of meaning and inspiration, a temporary escape from life’s travails as well as an outlet for seriously contemplating the same, including the ultimate problem of oblivion.

Nevertheless, the question can be raised—do films have the potential to seriously equip us with psychological resources for coping with death? Many of the analyses in this book suggest that most films either reinforce the cultural strategies of death denial that function largely on the basis of repression, or (increasingly since the 1960s) they expose and tear down these structures, confronting the audience with images of raw, unredeemed death. At first glance, neither of these approaches seems particularly well-suited to aiding the viewer in a serious engagement with the problem of mortality. And yet, some of the present analyses suggest that film does indeed have the capacity to aid us in our struggle with this problem. In the confines of a film we can safely contemplate death, the ultimate tragedy, and feel our way through both familiar and foreign systems of meaning as we try to come to grips with it. To uncover these potentialities, however, it seems that viewers cannot be passive participants in the act of viewing. Rather, they must actively engage with films on a psychological level, as in the posttraumatic growth approach to horror suggested by Schneider (chapter 14). Alternatively, they may need to seek out unusual films—possibly representing a different cultural perspective—that encourage critical engagement with conventional meaning systems (see McMahon, chapter 13).

**The Credits**

This edited volume is only as good as the efforts of the contributing authors have made it. We are indebted to these authors and hope you agree with us that they have indeed made it very good. Similarly, we have all greatly benefitted from those who created all of those films that we have been writing about, along with the works of many prior writers that helped us in our analyses of these films. We authors have ourselves learned a great deal about film and death from concentrated consideration of these many fascinating works of cinematic art.

Finally, this book is only as valuable as you the readers have found it to be. We hope by actively engaging with some if not all of the chapters, you have developed new insights into both particular films, genres of films and directors, and ideally into the nature of mortal life itself. Our
inspiration for this book on death in film really stems from our love of the cinema and our love of life. Our fondest hope is that you share these loves and they have been enriched by the time you have taken to peruse these pages.

**The Stinger**

Finally, we also like to think that while this is an ending it is also a beginning. In the death-transcending tradition of modern Hollywood filmmaking, we hope this book inspires even better sequels—more penetrating analyses of the many ways in which mortality and the cinema are inextricably intertwined. In this sense, we can approach embracing Fellini’s (Keel & Strich, 1976) hopeful sentiment: “There is no end. There is no beginning. There is only the infinite passion of life.”

**References**


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And God Created Woman (1956). Lévy, R. J. (Producer), & Vadim, R. (Director). France: Cocinor, 191


Citizen Kane (1941). Welles, O. (Producer & Director). USA: RKO Radio Pictures/Mercury Productions, 10


The Day the Earth Stood Still (1951). Blaustein, J. (Producer), & Wise, R. (Director). USA: 20th Century Fox, 40


The Dirty Dozen (1967). Hyman, K. (Producer), & Aldrich, R. (Director). USA: MGM, 9, 238


Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde (1931). Zukor, A. (Producer), & Mamoulian, R. (Director). USA: Paramount Pictures, 218


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Film Title</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Producers</th>
<th>Director</th>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Companies</th>
<th>Pages</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Face to Face</td>
<td>1976</td>
<td>Carlberg, L. (Producer), &amp; Bergman, I. (Director)</td>
<td>Sweden: Cinematograph AB</td>
<td>155, 158, 160–1, 165</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fail-Safe</td>
<td>1964</td>
<td>Lumet, S., Maguire, C. H., &amp; Youngstein, M. E. (Producers), &amp; Lumet, S. (Director)</td>
<td>USA: Columbia Pictures</td>
<td>40</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fantastic Four</td>
<td>2005</td>
<td>Arad, A., Eichinger, B., &amp; Winter, R. (Producers), &amp; Story, T. (Director)</td>
<td>USA: 20th Century Fox</td>
<td>144</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fear and Desire</td>
<td>1953</td>
<td>Kubrick, S. (Producer &amp; Director)</td>
<td>USA: Kubrick</td>
<td>169–71, 176</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fitzcarraldo</td>
<td>1982</td>
<td>Herzog, W., Segler, W., &amp; Stipetic, L. (Producers), &amp; Herzog, W. (Director)</td>
<td>Germany: Werner Herzog Filmproduktion</td>
<td>102</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Four Sheets to the Wind</td>
<td>2007</td>
<td>Burris, C., &amp; Kroeber, T. (Producers), &amp; Harjo, S. (Director)</td>
<td>USA: Kish Productions</td>
<td>199, 203, 207–15</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frankenstein</td>
<td>1931</td>
<td>Laemmle, C. (Producer), &amp; Whale, J. (Director)</td>
<td>USA: Universal Pictures</td>
<td>102, 218</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>From the Life of the Marionettes</td>
<td>1980</td>
<td>Bergman, I., &amp; Wendlandt, H. (Producers), &amp; Bergman, I. (Director)</td>
<td>Germany: Bavaria Film</td>
<td>161, 163</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Funny Games</td>
<td>1997</td>
<td>Heiduschka, V. (Producer), &amp; Haneke, M. (Director)</td>
<td>Austria: Filmfonds Wien</td>
<td>186–7</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goodbye Dragon Inn</td>
<td>2003</td>
<td>Liang, H., &amp; Wang, V. (Producers), &amp; Tsai, M. (Director)</td>
<td>Taiwan: Homegreen Films</td>
<td>195</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Halloween</td>
<td>1978</td>
<td>Hill, D. (Producer), &amp; Carpenter, J. (Director)</td>
<td>USA: Compass International Pictures</td>
<td>218</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


FILM TITLE INDEX


M. (Director). USA: Columbia Pictures, 242


SUBJECT INDEX

animality, see creatureliness
Ariès, Philippe, 8–9, 190, 236
Aronofsky, Darren, 109–10, 112–13
awe, 4, 142, 219–20, 224–5, 228

Bergman, Ingmar, 1, 5, 11, 153–65, 186, 232, 240
berserk style, see fanaticism
Brown, Norman O., 120–3, 125, 127, 131–3
Buber, Martin, 131

Calvinism, 125–7
capitalism, 8–9, 59–60, 64, 92, 103, 119–33, 177–80, 203, 205–6, 213, 225–6, 233
catharsis, 3–7
censorship, 9–10, 237, 241

collective death, see apocalyptic films
colonialism, 47, 173–4, 203–6, 210–11
communication, see language
creatureliness, 12, 23–4, 31, 73–4, 89, 91, 96–8, 102, 105–16, 121–2, 131, 140, 182, 187, 189, 218–19, 237
cultural artifacts, 48–9, 188

Deloria, Phillip, 204–7
Dewey, John, 235
dreams, 7, 83, 94, 156–9, 161, 163, 177–8, 180

embodiment, see creatureliness
emotion, 4, 58, 66–7, 70, 73–89, 115–16, 142, 145, 170, 219, 233–4
evil, 39, 43, 50, 112–15, 141–3, 147, 156–7, 222–4, 226

fanaticism, 25–7, 41, 47–8, 63–5, 67–8, 100–103, 169, 180, 219, 220–24, 226, 228
fantasy, 3–6, 31, 34–5, 73, 81–8, 92, 98–9, 147–9, 177–9, 204–5
Feiffer, Jules, 56, 232
Fellini, Frederico, 155, 244
film noir, see gangster films
Frankenstein (novel), 93–6, 98–9, 102
Freud, Sigmund, 4, 38, 61, 115, 121, 130, 158, 178, 213
gangster films, 9, 10, 234, 238
genres (film), 9, 27–8, 38–40, 49, 50, 73, 88–9, 135–49, 169, 204–5, 217–20, 235–40
grief, see mourning
growth (post-traumatic), 5–6, 68–70, 86–8, 180–1, 211–14, 219–20, 227–8, 242–3
guilt, 31–2, 69–70, 95, 124, 130–3, 146, 157–8, 205, 220–1

Haneke, Michael, 186–92, 194–5
Herzog, Werner, 91–2, 95, 98, 100–103, 232
Heidegger, Martin, 74–6, 81–2, 85, 88
horror films, 1, 4–5, 7–8, 81–5, 87–8, 109–16, 175–7, 217–24, 236–7

illness, 31–2, 155, 159, 168, 186–93, 201, 211
images, still, 57, 66–9, 167–8, 176–7, 185, 193
immortality,
  literal, 7, 20, 31, 44–6, 55, 82–8, 109, 112, 121, 123, 126, 200
  symbolic, 7, 20, 27, 29, 30–6, 38, 42–5, 49, 55, 92, 95–7, 109–11, 116, 121–8, 131, 200
imperialism, see colonialism
industrialization, see capitalism

Jarmusch, Jim, 203–4, 210

Kristeva, Julia, 5
Kubrick, Stanley, 167–82, 240

language, 25–6, 66, 89, 93–4, 131, 188–90, 203–4, 210
loneliness, 94, 96–8, 158, 164, 187, 190–1, 232, 238–9, 240

love, 23, 26–7, 62–3, 70, 94–5, 99, 107, 109, 156, 168, 187, 189, 194–5, 228
Lovecraft, H. P., 4, 217–19

materialism, 66–7, 122, 127, 177–80, 192, 213
morality, 57, 130–3, 142–3, 145–7, 163, 190–2, 194, 199
mortality salience, 20–3, 27–8, 30–1, 35–6, 43–50, 68, 106–7, 121–2, 139–40, 142, 201–2, 209, 211–12, 215
mourning, 5–6, 10, 93, 164, 176–7, 181–2, 188, 190–3, 195, 207–10, 212, 218, 220–4
music (in films), 127–8, 131, 164, 168–9, 171–2, 174–5, 182, 190–1, 220
mythology, 1, 20, 35, 91–2, 101, 136–9, 141, 143–4, 147–9, 223, 228, 235–6

Native American culture, 199, 202–12, 214, 233
Nietzsche, Friedrich, 55, 60, 64, 70, 129, 131–2, 224, 232
nihilism, see postmodern condition
Noé, Gaspar, 235
objectification, 66–9, 93, 107–8, 110–11, 113–16
Ophuls, Max, 167–8, 177, 182

Peckinpah, Sam, 4, 239
personification of death, 24, 85–7, 106, 112, 155–6
photography, see images, still
postmodern condition, 8–10, 35–6, 38–9, 55, 59–60, 64, 93, 97–8, 100–101, 103, 125–33, 144–9, 177–80, 190, 203–6, 224–8, 232–3, 242
postmodernism, 185–6, 224, 236–7, 239, 242
Protestantism, see Calvinism
psychoanalytic theory, 5, 61, 106, 122, 179–80
see also Freud, Sigmund
scapegoating, 24, 93, 170–4, 177, 179–80
science fiction, 1, 21–4, 77–81, 168–9, 171–2, 180–2
sexuality, 62, 96, 107, 111–15, 163, 174, 177–80, 209, 220–1, 222, 225
Shakespeare, William, 156, 165, 169
Shelley, Mary, 93–6, 98–9, 102
Sobchack, Vivian, 8, 9, 188, 192–4
social learning, 6, 241–2
suicide, 94–5, 115, 159, 161–2, 169, 170, 186, 187, 208–9, 226
superheroes, see heroism
Tarkovsky, Andrei, 3, 4, 228, 234–5
technology, 8–9, 21–2, 29–30, 34–5, 39–40, 48–9, 77–8, 97–8, 144–5, 172, 185, 228
time, 2, 10, 44–5, 63, 74, 83, 88, 125–8, 149, 158, 167–8, 189, 191, 233–5
trauma, 27, 35, 58–9, 68, 207, 218–19, 220–4
vampires, 5, 40, 81–4, 87–8
violent films, effects of, 6–7, 194, 240–2
von Trier, Lars, 220–3, 225–6, 228
Weber, Max, 125–8, 131, 133
Westerns, 9, 10, 92, 98, 203–6, 238, 239
worldview, 7, 20–1, 22–8, 34, 37–8, 44–9, 56, 60, 62, 65, 70, 106, 111, 121, 124–6, 140, 201–6, 210–14, 232, 235–6
Zevon, Warren, 193
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