

THE MEANINGS OF DEATH IN (MY) FILM¹

Dago Schelin²

ABSTRACT

Through the making of a short film, entitled *The First Job*, this project attempts to investigate the issue of death and dying in the context of other films and writings. The way in which Western society has portrayed Death as a character and death as a fact is a reflection of how the issue is understood. If film narratives have changed their approach to the Grim Reaper, does it have any bearing on this often-mentionable taboo? Filmmakers such as Ingmar Bergman and writers such as Susan Sontag have taken the questions some steps further. It is the intention of this essay to try, through reflective practice, to follow these steps.

Keywords: Short film; Death; Taboo

INTRODUCTION: THE SHORT FILM IN QUESTION

Making a film begins with that spark of an idea, a mere thought after noticing a person stepping out of the bus, or a word picked up from a song heard on the radio, or simply the absence of ideas can be the trigger to what will months or years later become a film. Most of these sparks die out even before getting a chance of becoming a first draft. Given the sea of good ideas, perhaps making a film is not so much about the initial sparks, but about persistence. It's about letting go of those precious mental images so that they can be developed into something concrete, something filmic. In order for this solidity to take place, there is usually a lot of planning, arrangements, rearrangements, agreements, disagreements, heavy lifting, working with human beings and machines.

The description above, if not for every movie, fits the making of the short film discussed in this paper: *The First Job*. There are many aspects that could be analyzed in this project, from narrative to technicalities, though I would like to focus on one core theme of this film, from project to product: death.

Thus goes the story: Patricia, a recent graduate in media production, sets out for her first job which is to produce a video for a client she is about to meet. Little does she know that the client is none other than Death himself who would like her to

¹ Recebido em 30/05/2016

² Philipps University Marburg and Hochschule Ostwestfalen-Lippe, University of Applied Sciences, Germany. dago@dagoschelin.com

make an image-film about his enterprise. The twist lies in the fact that she had to die in order to go through Death's plans. The story unfolds as Death feels pity for Patricia and ends up canceling his deed. She resurrects³.

The plot in *The First Job* contains Death as *character* and death as *occurrence*. Death as *character* is the personified Grim Reaper, though not as stereotypical as when he's wearing a hood and holding a scythe. Death as *occurrence* is shown in Patricia's being killed in a car accident. Despite the subject, the story is light in humor and has a comical ending⁴.

QUESTIONS AND PROBLEMS

The First Job could be seen as another film that happens to illustrate the anthropomorphism of Death and the banalization of a car-accident scene as a shock-inducing dramaturgical device. A second glance could raise questions about precisely these very aspects usually taken for granted. What specific roles has Death, the Grim Reaper, played in film history? Has Death's image, his personality and his looks, changed in the brief history of moving pictures?⁵ If so, does this change reflect a transformation beyond cinema? In other words, has the western world changed its relation to Death? In order to address these and other related questions I intend to examine films and other visual media in which Death plays a role and analyze them in a historical-critical approach.

Concerning dying as an occurrence, there are several questions pertaining to a filmic understanding of representation. What are the differences between fictional and non-fictional death, especially when represented visually? What are the relations between images and the representation of death?

The conjunction of these analyses, I believe, will contribute to the advancement of creativity and knowledge in the realm of filmmaking, particularly in narratives dealing with the subject of death.

³ This ending was later removed in the Director's Cut.

⁴ Watch the film here: www.dagoschelin.com

⁵ I am referring to Death as a "he" since *The First Job* follows the Anglo-American mythologies. There is also the personification of Death as female. The gender depends on the culture and/or language.

TRYING TO FIND A SUITABLE METHODOLOGY

Taking into consideration the fact that this project is an attempt to join practice and theory, I have chosen a practice-based research method as the main approach to the discussion of the theme and the making of a film. In a practice-based project, creative output can be produced, or practice undertaken, as an integral part of the research process accompanied by some form of textual analysis or explanation to support its position and to demonstrate critical reflection. In order to accommodate the important aspects of such analysis, I have chosen to use a critical-historical approach to the research (Marx) in a subarea of the practice-based research known as reflective practice. Moon defines reflective practice as “a set of abilities and skills, to indicate the taking of a critical stance, an orientation to problem solving or state of mind” (Moon, 2006, p. 63). It is a valuable form of undertaking research especially in the arts in which rather than seeing the relationship between practice and theory as a dichotomy, the researcher accepts both as a dynamic singleness.

The outcome of reflective practice is usually a much deeper understanding of the work at hand. The final product is a range of discoveries from concept to procedure. Biggs points out that “a reflection in a mirror is an exact replica of what is in front of it. Reflection in professional practice, however, gives back not what it is, but what *might* be, an improvement on the original” (Biggs and Tang, 2011, p. 6).

Especially since this is a case based on a short film I myself wrote and directed, it would be a contradiction in terms to adopt so-called academic neutrality. It is not my intention to even attempt to write a paper void of *personalness*. On the contrary, since the whole process of making a film, from the first idea to the rendering out of the final cut, is very personal, I will take it at hand to express my involvement in its development. I say this under the humble awareness of my limitations in experience and scholarliness. My eventual flaws will be an opportunity from which to learn, the gaps will be there to be criticized and filled in.

By mentioning the word *personal*, I do not mean *individual* as in something done alone. Quite the opposite is the case. Every line in the short film, every picture,

every word written in this text, none of it was done alone. Every step of the process is filled with other people's fingerprints, be they personal acquaintances or distant authors.

Physical chemist and philosopher Michael Polanyi argues in favor of what he calls "personal knowledge" (Polanyi, 1958) in which he criticizes and puts into question the tendency to try to make knowledge impersonal. For him, "knowing" is an art which necessarily involves personal commitment.

DEATH AS OCCURRENCE: A BEAUTIFUL HORROR

What might at first seem as bad taste, like passive enjoyment of violence, has actually become a common place in the arts. Film is able to transform a gruesome accident into something that entices the viewer to perceive it as pleasurable to watch. Scenes of suffering can become esthetical masterpieces. As Walter Benjamin (1983) put in an address delivered in Paris at the Institute for the Study of Fascism, the camera "has succeeded in turning abject poverty itself, by handling it in a modish, technically perfect way, into an object of enjoyment." (Benjamin 1973, p. 95). People enjoy going to movies which they know will show scenes of pain, death and misery. It is not so much that they go *because* of these scenes, but perhaps because the grammar of this media, film, so plausibly represents a reality⁶ that it just took its natural course and now has come to show these tabooed events without any culpability.

Looking at fictional death and real death has its similarities. Looking at a painting of someone dying can arouse feelings of horror just as would a film of actual footage of a dying moment. Either kind of image can cause disgust, the fictional one even more at times. However, one of the main differences is intrinsic to the manner and place of the actual making of such images. A painting, for instance, displays the artist's skilled hands in his artistry, while a documentary film, even if it is filled with art, still is a display of an actuality of fact, beyond mere representation. Take the example Susan Sontag (2003) gives of *The Disasters of War* by Goya (see Figure 02) in contrast with *The Falling Soldier* by Capa (see Figure 03).

⁶ Here I refer to Bill Nichol's *Representing Reality* (Nichols, 1991).
Revista Livre de Cinema

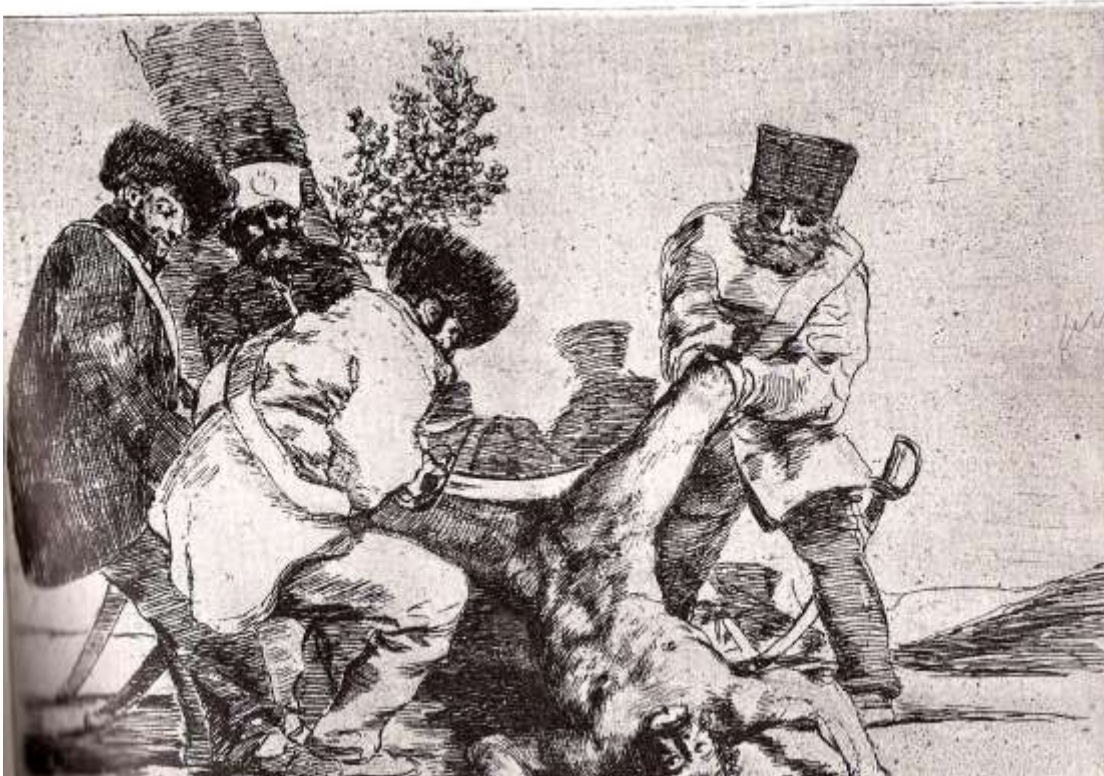


Figure 02

Goya's images represent atrocities in Spain perpetrated by French soldiers. Perhaps to call this fiction would be an error. As Sontag puts it, the events "didn't happen exactly as pictured. They claim: things *like* this happened" (Sontag, 2003, p. 42). Still, they do arouse a feeling of horror for the common viewer.

In contrast to the drawing or painting, a documenting filmstrip "claims to represent exactly what was before the camera's lens" (Sontag, 2003, p. 42).



Figure 03

The common manner in which the occurrence of death is visually represented in fiction takes the viewer close to the moment, so close that in many such instances we can see the character breathing his/her last breath, or his/her hand lightly falling down on the bedside, or someone being shot and collapsing on the street. The apparent irony is that fictional films attempt to show these scenes as vividly and real as possible. The more real it looks, the better the fiction. When actual documented death is recorded on film, the event still veils what cannot be seen, namely, the moment one ceases to be alive. Many a times the scene will not be available in several interesting angles and speeds. As Sobchack argues,

Fictive death primarily represented by iconic and symbolic signs does not move us to inspect it, to seek out a visibility we feel – in seeing it – it lacks. Even without the slow motion ballet of death made paradigmatic by Sam Peckinpah in *The Wild Bunch*, fictive death is experienced as visible. Referring significantly only to themselves, representations of death in fiction film tend to satisfy us – indeed, in some films, to sate us, or to overwhelm us so that we cover our eyes rather than strain to see. Thus, while death is generally experienced in fiction films as representable and often excessively visible, in documentary films it is experienced as confounding representation, as exceeding visibility (Sobchack, 1984, p. 287).

FIRST JOB'S DEATH

In *The First Job*, the scene of Patricia being hit by a car is very visual. Nadine Petry, in the role of Patricia, a good-looking young woman, crosses what should be a calm street and is killed by a fast oncoming old Mercedes Bens. There are many car accident scenes in fictional movies. One of the main references for our short film was Martin Brest's *Meet Joe Black* (1998) in which Brad Pitt plays the role of a nice young man on his way out of a café who, distracted while crossing the street, gets violently hit by a car. He dies and Death inhabits his body in order to get to know more about human beings.

What a waste it is to see Brad Pitt and Nadine Petry getting run over, is it not? Perhaps not. Sontag argues,

all images that display the violation of an attractive body are, to a certain degree, pornographic. But the images of the repulsive can also allure. Everyone knows that what slows down highway traffic going past a horrendous car crash is not only curiosity. It is also, for many, the wish to see something gruesome (Sontag, 2003, p. 85).

A human appetite for the repulsive was noted by Plato when he has Socrates in *The Republic* cite “a story I once heard about Leontius, son of Aglaion”:

On his way up from the Piraeus outside the north wall, he noticed the bodies of some criminals lying on the ground, with the executioner standing by them. He wanted to go and look at them, but at the same time he was disgusted and tried to turn away. He struggled for some time and covered his eyes, but at last the desire was too much for him. Opening his eyes wide, he ran up to the bodies and cried, ‘There you are, curse you; feast yourselves on this lovely sight!’ (Plato, 1991).

Edward Burke stated that he is convinced that “we have a degree of delight, and that no small one, in the real misfortunes and pains of others” (Burke 1767, p. 118).

This despised impulse, the desire to see something morbid, becomes an acceptable and enjoyable story when in the right context. In *The First Job*, the moment Patricia starts remembering her accident, as we see it, is a tragic one, yet at the same time comic. It makes light of the matter without reducing the gruesomeness of the action. The scene itself required several takes of the same camera position. It

is a composition of scenes: one without action (a clean plate), one with the oncoming car, one with a flying shoe and one just with the actress. The building of the whole was done with special effects specific software. It was one of the most time-consuming scenes to produce, mainly in postproduction. The sight should look as real as possible.

It is taken for granted that such a sight is present in every other movie. The film industry has gotten good at this kind of scene. These days, a time of visual stimuli overload, a fictitious car accident is just another image. The same image, say fifty years ago, would probably cause another impact. It is the same taken-for-grantedness of people's reaction today to the Lumière brother's *L'arrivée d'un train en gare de La Ciotat*⁷ in contrast to its premiere.

Susan Sontag links this media tolerance for brutality to the mounting level of acceptable violence and sadism in mass culture, saying "imagery that would have had an audience cringing and recoiling in disgust forty years ago is watched without so much as a blink by every teenager in the multiplex" (Sontag, 2003, p. 90). One of her conclusions is that violence is entertaining. Nevertheless, she goes on to argue that an inability to see such imagery, in other words, to be innocent or ignorant of the world's cruel reality, means not having reached moral or psychological adulthood. Simply said: there is too much injustice in the world. Patricia's story, her death and resurrection, Death's apparent kindness, all in all, is an attempt to make peace with the issue at hand and "reveal the goodness of Death", as in the script.

DEATH AS CHARACTER: THE RESURRECTION OF DEATH

Antonius Block: Who are you?

Death: I am Death.

Antonius Block: Have you come for me?

Death: I have long walked by your side.

Antonius Block: So I have noticed.

Death: Are you ready?

⁷ The film is associated with an urban legend well-known in the world of cinema. The story goes that when the film was first shown, the audience was so overwhelmed by the moving image of a life-sized train coming directly at them that people screamed and ran to the back of the room. Hellmuth Karasek in the German magazine *Der Spiegel* wrote that the film "had a particularly lasting impact; yes, it caused fear, terror, even panic" (Karasek, 1994).

Antonius Block: My body is ready, but I am not.⁸

In his book *When Death Goes Pop*, Charlton Mcllwain (2005) argues that the topic of death has been going through a period of transformation, from taboo to “pop.” His thesis is that whilst the business of death and dying has been perpetuated as a myth by scholars, death-care professionals, government bureaucrats and religious institutions, mass media in general, from comic books to television series, has addressed the issue most open-mindedly. Shows such as *Six Feet Under*, *Family Plots*, *Dead Like Me* and *Crossing Jordan*, according to Mcllwain, demystify the matter by bringing it back to popular discourse. He distinctively writes, “I offer the explanation that this curiosity about death is, to some degree, a manifestation of the desire and need to belong, to feel connected to a community of others” (Mcllwain, 2005, p. 13). This sense of community is gained through an organic relationship in every aspect of life, in other words, by the presence of every aspect, a presence not noted in the event of death in modern Western society. Death is a secret, unmentionable, separated from homes and everyday lives.

Through time, the character Death has been known for having distinctive characteristics. These characteristics are intrinsic to the way society deals with questions of life and death. The entity Death has existed in many societies since the beginning of history. Sometimes portrayed as male, other times as female, the Grim Reaper, as he is called in English, came to be shown as a skeletal figure carrying a large scythe and clothed in a black cloak with a hood, mainly from the fifteenth century onwards. Though many times interchanged with the figure of the Devil, Death is usually a more neutral being, even if mostly seen as having a negative affect. Stemming from the Bible, Death is also given the name Angel of Death. Apparently it is difficult to speak of Death without referring to theological and philosophical writings or beliefs since the most frequent themes intersected are meaning, life, God, good and evil.

Acclaimed researchers on the Grim Reaper have described Death as evil and mysterious. American philosopher Fred Feldman describes the character

⁸ from *The Seventh Seal*, trans. L. Malmström and D. Kushner, Lorrimer Publishing, London, pp. 27-28. (Bergman, 1984)

throughout history in his *Confrontations with the Reaper: A Philosophical Study of the Nature and Value of Death*:

In art and mythology, ...the most compelling image of death is provided by the Reaper—the hooded skeleton bearing the huge curved scythe. The Reaper is ugly and menacing... Two aspects of the Reaper are especially noteworthy. He is *mysterious*. This is illustrated by the fact that the Reaper's face is often hidden in the shadows of his hood. Death is taken to be weird or uncanny... Death is also taken to be *evil*. This is illustrated by the Reaper's malevolent glare. A visit from the Reaper is to be feared beyond comparison. (Feldman 1994, p. 3, Feldman's emphasis).

Nonetheless, it seems that this portrayal of Death has been going through steady change to a less tabooed subject, especially when depicted in films such as Ingmar Bergman's *Seventh Seal*, and in more comical experiments such as my *First Job*, with Death as a more human character, more accessible, even loving. McIlwain maintains that by bringing Death back to everyday life, it becomes more natural to deal with it (or him). Death's average-joeness is one of the main characteristics in *The First Job*. He is like any average person, refined in taste and manners, but still more human than not, to a point that it is possible to notice his weaknesses and flaws. In *The First Job*, when he realizes that he has hurt Patricia's feelings, he feels pity, asks for forgiveness and eventually wants to undo his deed. His mercy is greater than his role. Love conquered Death.

Kristen Moore, in her dissertation entitled *The Grim Reaper, Working Stiff: the man, the myth, the everyday*, concludes her analysis saying that:

by making Death a person we can relate to, we remove him from the shadows of mystery and evil to which he was banished by scholars such as Fred Feldman. In appearing as a person motivated by the same desires as the living, Death is pulled from behind the closed doors of funeral parlors and morgues and placed alongside the matters of everyday life (Moore, 2006, p. 45).

Ingmar Bergman captured the essence of Death's personification in his famed film *The Seventh Seal* (1957). A fourteenth century knight named Antonius Block, is wearily heading home after ten years' worth of combat. Disillusioned by unending war, plague, and misery Block has come to believe that perhaps God does not exist. As he trudges across the wilderness, Block is visited by Death (Bengt Ekerot), garbed in the traditional black robe. Unwilling to give up the ghost, Block

challenges Death to a game of chess. If he wins, he lives -- if not, Death claims him. As they play, the knight and the Grim Reaper get into a spirited discussion over whether or not God exists. The silence of God in the world is Bergman's ambitious theme, along with mortality and death, existential dread, and apocalyptic fears. The character Death is enigmatic in his conversations, though open for challenge.

In terms of film aesthetics, *The Seventh Seal* has a most emblematic cinematography; the most remembered of all is that of Death and the knight starting a chess game by the seashore (see Figure 04).



Figure 04

In the book, *God, Death, Art & Love*, Robert Lauder cites the symbolism of 'the shot composed of the knight's face and the face of Death through the grill suggesting the barrier to understanding that the knight experiences as he grapples with Death' (Lauder, 1989, p. 51). Curiously in this scene, Death pretends to be a priest listening to the knight's confessions. The entire film deals with questions of doubt, cynicism and love, at times more plainly than others. It is not always deemed

to somberness since there are moments of joy and discovery, as in when the knight joyfully speaks, “This is my hand. I can move it, feel the blood pulsing through it. The sun is still high in the sky and I, Antonius Bloch, am playing chess with Death” (Bergman, 1984). The knight’s encounter with Death has made him more alive.

In *The Influence of Existentialism on Ingmar Bergman*, Charles Ketcham cites Brigitta Steene’s analysis that “man cannot seek full intellectual cognizance of God without disobeying Him; the more he tries to understand the nature of God the further he removes himself from God” (Ketcham, 1986, p. 63).

There is a family depicted in *The Seventh Seal* that shows intrinsic purity. They are the ones who end up finding meaning, or living meaningfully, though they were not searching for answers. The matters of existence were not an issue for them. In *God, Death, Love and Art*, Lauder cites St. John the Cross: “In the evening of our lives we shall be judged on how we have loved” (Lauder, 1989, p. 27), precisely there is the aftermath of the film: the knight doing his last good deed by saving this family, mother, father and child, from Death.

Speaking of existentialism, in his book *The Creation of Value*, Irving Singer notes that

Sartre concludes that death never defines human existence. An individual’s being consists in what is possible to him. Sartre insists that death cannot give meaning to life. ‘Thus death is never that which gives life its meanings; it is, on the contrary, that which on principle removes all meaning from life. If we must die, then our life has no meaning because its problems receive no solution and because the very meaning of the problem remains undetermined’ (Singer, 1996, p. 54).

Leaving the philosophical realm, and going back to film, it is McIlwain’s claim that popular fiction, especially film, has made the matter of death more accessible. Perhaps not as philosophical as Bergman’s depiction, Death still carries an ever-growing humanness in aforementioned shows such as *Six Feet Under*, *Family Plots*, *Dead Like Me*, *Crossing Jordan*, and *Meet Joe Black*. In this last film, we see how Death and human beings grapple with questions of meaning. Joe Black – Death in person, played by Brad Pitt – and William Parish – played by Anthony Hopkins – engage in conversations about love, since Death seems to have fallen in love with Parish’s daughter, Susan:

Parrish: How perfect for you—to take whatever you want because it pleases you. That’s not love.

Joe: Then what is it?

Parrish: Some aimless infatuation which, for the moment, you feel like indulging. It’s missing everything that matters.

Joe: Which is what?

Parrish: Trust, responsibility, taking the weight for your choices and feelings, and spending the rest of your life living up to them. And above all, not hurting the object of your love.

Joe: So that’s what love is according to William Parrish?

Parrish: Multiply it by infinity, and take it to the depth of forever, and you will still have barely a glimpse of what I’m talking about.

Joe: Those were my words [about death].

Parrish: They’re mine now⁹.

According to McIlwain, the way we deal with the matter of death and the way we represent the entity in art indicate “the longing to know death” (McIlwain, 2005, p. 14). This desire, to some extent, serves as “an expression of our will to conquer [death]. But beyond this, it is an expression, a longing, a crying out for and seeking connection and community” (McIlwain, 2005, p. 14). McIlwain implies that this sense of community will arise naturally once we “resurrect death from the sphere of privacy it has long occupied” (McIlwain, 2005, p. 15).

MEDIA AS DEATH

The medium is the message. Or, as Marshall McLuhan (1967) also coined it in the title of his famous book: the medium is the *massage*¹⁰. That is to say, it is not that society is influenced by media, it is more like media *is* society. What counts as collective memory is that which can be recorded visually. Visuality *is* memory in a screen-based civilization. The form of the medium embeds itself in the message. The medium is not neutral. In other words, the medium influences the way the message is perceived. As McLuhan put it,

all media work us over completely. They are so pervasive in their personal, political, economic, aesthetic, psychological, moral, ethical, and social consequences that they leave no part of us untouched, unaffected, unaltered” (McLuhan, Fiore, & Agel, 1967, p. 26).

⁹ Film: Meet Joe Black (Brest, 1998).

¹⁰ Legend has it that *The Medium is the Massage* by McLuhan and Quentin Fiore, was originally to be titled *The Medium is the Message*, but McLuhan preferred the new title which is said to have been a printing error.

Three decades ago, Neil Postman (1985) wrote about television and the way it had changed in the twenty years before that. In *Amusing Ourselves to Death* he states,

Twenty years ago, the question: 'Does television shape our culture or merely reflect it?' held considerable interest for many scholars and social critics. The questions have largely disappeared as television has gradually *become* our culture (Postman, 2005, p. 79).

In historical terms this is translated in our perception of truth and knowledge from orality, to text, to pictures, to the overlapping of mediums where the spoken word added to the written, henceforth added to the image changes the meaning of message.

The fact that we live in an image-overloaded world heavily shapes the way we perceive the world itself. What is this craving for images? Susan Sontag supposes it is “the urge to appropriate an alien reality” (Sontag, 1977, p. 63). Somehow, by seeing an image, we feel we have taken possession of the event in our memory, retaining it as part of our being even though we may have never actually been there.

Sontag explains how our photographic mindset has a bearing on what we choose to consider notable. “Our very sense of situation is now articulated by the camera’s interventions. The omnipresence of cameras persuasively suggests that time consists of interesting events, events worth photographing” (Sontag, 1977, p. 154). This worth, translated in esthetics, is further taken on by the understanding of what has meaning in life itself. What is worth remembering is captured by the camera, and what is not captured by the camera is deemed to being forgotten. As John Berger suggests in *About Looking*, “What is remembered has been saved from nothingness. What is forgotten has been abandoned” (Berger, 2009, p. 58). This applies even to a basic fiction film production such as the one in question in this thesis. In *The First Job*, out of two hours of material, only five minutes were chosen. The rest was discarded. The unneeded footage consisted of unfit takes, either because of undesirable framing, technical flaws, or simply because one take was preferred to another, all owing to the visual value of each piece.

In the earlier part of this essay I wrote about how death is represented in the media, specifically in film. There is a further step in this assessment in relation to art that deals with reality-like visuals, namely, photography and film. There is an epistemological value to these camera-dependent media unlike any other that is correlated to death. A photo, or a photoplay, is a timely evidence of a person's (or thing's) being there at the moment the filmstrip was marked. It is a documentation of a moment. As soon as it is captured, the event is rendered as being in an elapsed past. Sontag makes it clear by augmenting that

photography actively promotes nostalgia... To take a photograph is to participate in another person's (or thing's) mortality, vulnerability, mutability" and that "this very passivity — and ubiquity — of the photographic record is photography's 'message,' its aggression. ... There is an aggression implicit in every use of the camera (Sontag, 1977, p. 15 and 17).

Sontag maintains that through the realism of images it is assumed that we can know the world if we accept it as the camera records it. What we see is what matters. However, if understanding begins from *not* accepting the world as it looks, then the rationale, says Sontag, should be the opposite. In other words, to take the image as the standard to comprehend the world impoverishes and can even revert understanding.

The camera produces past-tense*ness* in that it freezes a moment in time, be it in fiction or documentary. An image of Bibi Andersson¹¹, the actress playing the role of Mia in *The Seventh Seal*, can be taken as an example of Sontag's understanding of participating in someone's mortality. An image of her in 1957 (see Figure 05) and a recent one (Figure 06) might promote this nostalgia due to their noticeable mutability.

¹¹ Bibi Andersson and Ingmar Bergman made 13 movies together.
Revista Livre de Cinema



Figure 05: Scene from *The Seventh Seal*.



Figure 06

The capturing of the moment encapsulates time, showing how life is fleetingly temporary. “In the real world, something *is* happening and no one knows what is *going* to happen. In the image-world, it *has* happened, and it *will* forever happen in that way” (Sontag, 1977, p. 168). If visibility is memory, then in that way, we are reminded of death. Sontag underscores, “Memory is, achingly, the only relation we can have with the dead” (Sontag, 1977, p. 103)

Conclusion: Is there life before death?

Contrasting the modern approach towards death with that of previous times in history, the prominent scholar Philippe Ariès, author of the seminal *Western Attitudes toward Death: From the Middle Ages to the Present*, writes: “The old attitude in which death was both familiar and near, evoking no great fear or awe, offers too marked a contrast to ours, where death is so frightful that we dare not utter its name” (Ariès, 1974, p. 13).

Indeed, nowadays, death is perceived as something foreign to our current affairs, a taboo greater than any other. This foreignness, Ariès explains, came to be the norm of modern practice because of the geographical separation of dying within society, with cemeteries located somewhere distant, with hospitals as the official place for one to die. Other scholars such as Ivan Illich¹² (1976) have also thoroughly hammered the evidence of hospitals losing their identity with hospitality to becoming a place where people become patients treated with professional diagnoses and medicated with painkillers. The event of death has been dis-membered, as Gustavo Esteva¹³ (1998) would put it, from community. It needs to be re-membered. It is worth citing McIlwain as his words echo with the abovementioned authors: “Through our years of fear and denial of death we have erected an almost impenetrable wall of privacy around the issue of death.” (McIlwain, 2005, p. 18)

If it is true that Death is going pop through current film production, it might well be that the issue will be more naturally embraced in the times to come. Nonetheless, Susan Sontag’s claims are that the camera promotes this inkling to mortality, deeming neutral all efforts. Indeed, visuality has a special power over us. On the other hand, it could be contended that we are not the images of ourselves. A person is not what we can see with our eyes, even if we are free from the media of film or picture. Maurice Nicoll elucidates this notion most brilliantly:

We can all see another person's body directly. We see the lips moving, the eyes opening and shutting, the lines of the mouth and face changing, and the body expressing itself as a whole in action. The person *himself* is invisible... If the invisible side of people were

¹² Just to mention a few related works: *Medical Nemesis* (1976), *Hospitality and Pain* (1986), *Death Undefeated - From medicine to medicalization to systematization* (1995).

¹³ Friend of Ivan Illich, Gustavo Esteva, an independent writer, a grassroots activist and a deprofessionalized intellectual, has written plenty on the subject of community.

discerned as easily as the visible side, we would live in a *new humanity*. As we are we live in visible humanity, a humanity of appearances...All our thoughts, emotions, feelings, imagination, reveries, dreams, fantasies are *invisible*. All that belongs to our scheming, planning, secrets, ambitions, all our hopes, fears, doubts, perplexities, all our affections, speculations, ponderings, vacuities, uncertainties, all our desires, longings, appetites, sensations, our likes, dislikes, aversions, attractions, loves and hates - all are themselves invisible. They constitute "one's self." As E. F. Schumacher puts it, "There is the external world, in which things are visible, i.e., directly accessible to our senses; and there is 'inner space,' where things are invisible, i.e., not directly accessible to us, except in the case of ourselves (Nicoll, 1952, p. 33, 34).

The First Job, its subject on Death and death, should promote curiosity over issues of life. The ending of the film was supposed to pose the question in the ending credits: *is there life before death?* But the idea was left aside and will remain a more embedded question. Some believe that life is being lived to its fullest specifically when art is being made. By bringing death into our everyday lives, perhaps by making (usually useless) Art, such as films, we make justice to existence, perhaps we join Bergman's search for meaning, having ourselves been created as an image and resemblance.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Bijoy George, Jan Pieniak and Urs Krüger for sacrificing their time and brain cells to make this project what it is. Thank you also to Cíntia, my wife, for giving me the freedom to work while taking care of Anabella for the both of us. Thanks to all my friends *do Caminho* who have helped me ask and wrestle through questions while walking the path alongside. Thanks to Bruno, Marcia and Julia for letting us stay over for a week so I could lock myself in a room and finish my work. And a special thank you to DAAD (Deutscher Akademischer Austausch Dienst) for the support in Germany.

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AFTERWORD

This is just for those who were curious enough to read the references and who now bump into this epilog. If I may, I would like to break academicism for a moment to make a brief and humble parallel between Bergman's issues in *The Seventh Seal* and my own, it suddenly struck me, while reading *Ananya Ghoshal's* essay entitled *The World Within: The World Without* (2008), that the same questions raised by Antonius Block in his conversations with Death I myself have confronted in my life and cathartically expressed in my own attempts of art. The questions of reason for human existence, meaning of life, God, nothingness, faith and hope are all intrinsic to Bergman's search, especially revealed in his films from the 1950s. I might also say I have felt the "silence of heaven" and realized emptiness as "a mirror turned towards my own face. I can see myself in it, and I am filled with fear and disgust."

I have also, as *Ananya Ghoshal* describes Block's character, been "Torn

between [my] inability to believe and [my] dissatisfaction with unbelief"¹⁴. The very poignant conversation between the knight and Death which deal with such doubts is as follows:

The knight is kneeling before a small altar. It is dark and quiet around him. The air is cool and musty. Pictures of saints look down on him with stony eyes. Christ's face is turned upwards, His mouth open as if in a cry of anguish. On the ceiling beam there is a representation of a hideous devil spying on a miserable human being. The knight hears a sound from the confession booth and approaches it. The face of Death appears behind the grille for an instant, but the knight doesn't see him. Here is an excerpt of the dialog:

KNIGHT

I want to talk to you as openly as I can, but my heart is empty.

DEATH doesn't answer.

KNIGHT

The emptiness is a mirror turned towards my own face. I see myself in it, and I am filled with fear and disgust.

DEATH doesn't answer.

KNIGHT

Through my indifference to my fellow men, I have isolated myself from their company. Now I live in a world of phantoms. I am imprisoned in my dreams and fantasies.

DEATH

And yet you don't want to die.

KNIGHT

Yes, I do.

DEATH

What are you waiting for?

KNIGHT

I want knowledge.

¹⁴ Ghoshal, Ananya. "Not a day has gone by in my life when I haven't thought about death" - Ingmar Bergman, chapter of Volume 53, A volume in the Probing the Boundaries project 'Making Sense Of: Dying and Death' Edited by T. Chandler Haliburton and Caroline Edwards, Published by the Inter-Disciplinary Press, Oxford, United Kingdom, First Edition 2008.

DEATH

You want guarantees?

KNIGHT

Call it whatever you like. Is it so cruelly inconceivable to grasp God with the senses? Why should He hide himself in a mist of half-spoken promises and unseen miracles?

DEATH doesn't answer.

KNIGHT

How can we have faith in those who believe when we can't have faith in ourselves? What is going to happen to those of us who want to believe but aren't able to? And what is to become of those who neither want to nor are capable of believing?

(The knight stops and waits for a reply, but no one speaks or answers him. There is complete silence).

KNIGHT

Why can't I kill God within me? Why does He live on in this painful and humiliating way even though I curse Him and want to tear Him out of my heart? Why, in spite of everything, is He a baffling reality that I can't shake off? Do you hear me?

DEATH

Yes, I hear you.

KNIGHT

I want knowledge, not faith, not suppositions, but knowledge. I want God to stretch out His hand towards me, reveal Himself and speak to me.

DEATH

But He remains silent.

KNIGHT

I call out to Him in the dark but no one seems to be there.

DEATH

Perhaps no one is there.

KNIGHT

Then life is an outrageous horror. No one can live in the face of death, knowing that all is nothingness.

DEATH

Most people never reflect about either death or the futility of life.

KNIGHT

But one day they will have to stand at that last moment of life and look towards the darkness.

DEATH

When that day comes ...

KNIGHT

In our fear, we make an image, and that image we call God.¹⁵

¹⁵ I. Bergman, *The Seventh Seal*, trans. L. Malmström and D. Kushner, Lorrimer Publishing, London, 1984, pp.27-28.