

# Thanatology from a cinematographic point of view. *Death of a Salesman* (1985) and *L'Amour à mort* (1984)

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## Summary

It is easy to check the knowledge and advances that thanatology has contributed to society. The cinema, as an art form focused on human beings, provides its own analysis of death. The present article explores human responses to situations deriving from end-of-life issues, the loss of loved ones, types of death, individual-family grieving and other aspects in two representative films: *Death of a Salesman* (1985) by Volker Schlöndorff and *L'Amour à mort* (1984) by Michel Choquet.

*Keywords:* Thanatology, Death, Agony, Attitudes About Death, Suicide, Kleptomania.

*Caminar a la muerte no es tan fácil y si es duro vivir, morir tampoco es menos [Walking towards death is not so easy and if life is hard to live, dying is no less hard...]*  
Luis Cernuda, from "Como quien espera el alba"

## Introduction

The chief aims of thanatology are to understand the loss of human life in its different dimensions and its socio-individual implications, which are partly natural and partly constructed human experiences.

The main features of the response to death reflect the evolutionary inheritance of human beings, as social and biological entities, and are manifested in the process of the interruption of the bonds of fondness and love necessary for survival.

Death comes in many guises and in the cinema these are dealt with from different perspectives. There are deaths with a strong element of drama, natural deaths, accidental demise, deaths caused by other situations - violent or not, deaths deriving from murder, euthanasia, suicides, sudden deaths, artificial lives... Among other aspects related to death, the cinema reflects individual and/or social grieving and the consequences, at symbolic and biological level, of such losses.

Study of the field of thanatology is extremely complex because human beings are analysed in terms of "unknown death" from a psychosocial perspective.

The films *Death of a Salesman* and *L'Amour à mort* (*Love unto Death*) merit an analysis owing to their thanatological elements.

## DEATH OF A SALESMAN

### Technical details

**Title:** *Death Of a Salesman*

**Country:** USA

**Year:** 1985

**Director:** Volker Schlöndorff

**Music:** Alex North

**Screenwriter:** Arthur Miller

**Cast:** Dustin Hoffman, Kate Reid, John Malkovich, Stephen Lang, Charles Durning, Louis Zorich, John Polito and David Chandles.

**Color:** Color

**Runtime:** 135 minutes

**Genre:** Drama

**Production Companies:** Bioskop Film, Punch Productions Inc. and Roxbury Productions.

**Synopsis:** William Loman always dreamed of

success for himself and his family., but when he reaches his years of maturity he sees that his hopes have not been fulfilled; quite the contrary: he is an utter failure, he loses his job as a salesman and his two sons are a complete disaster. The older one is a kleptomaniac who cannot stand his father owing to his past infidelities and the younger son is a fantasizing womanizer. Thought of suicide begin to flutter through Loma's mind. The film was made for television, and was shown commercially in Spain. It is based on the homonymous famous play by Arthur Miller, who was awarded the Pulitzer prize in 1949. Its first adaptation for the cinema was in 1951 and it was directed by Lázlo Benedek.

### The Plot

William Loman (Dustin Hoffman) sees his failed existence through retrospective images. He relates his family, employment and social life to the idea that success- as a constant- can impinge upon and change this, even the negative aspects. He lives among dreams of grandeur and success in a society undergoing constant transition and change, both technical and moral. To feed his dreams he receives continuous support from his wife Linda (Kate Reid) (figure 1), but he has to fight hard as a salesman, not only to meet his family's needs but also to gain recognition and renown; to be loved and be well thought of by all.



Figure 1: William and Linda Loman

His circumstances as portrayed are not good and lead him to lose his sense of reality, as he begins mixing the events of his present and his past. His dreams vanish when his present reality, partly derived from his age, passes before his eyes: poor job results, loneliness and fatigue. However, although they sometimes dampen his desire of success, these circum-

stances do not lead him to renounce his wish to succeed since, idyllically, he continues to project a future for himself in which there is room for a triumphant Loman family. He continues to feed this possibility because his brother Ben (Charles Durning), who died years previously, continues to live on in his mind and continually appears to him in his emotional and existential crises (figure 2).



Figure 2: Ben Loman

The rawness of Loman's reality is also seen in the characters of his two sons. Biff (John Malkovich), the older one, has just arrived back home. He is a kleptomaniac and owing to his personality type is unable to find a job or a wife (figure 3). William has realised that the passage of time has left a profound impact on his son; he realises that he failed to underscore the importance of effort to his children and that he had only conveyed the idea of easy success and appearances. To cap it all, the relationship with his son has deteriorated since the latter discovered that he had a mistress (figure 4). Regarding his younger son, Happy



Figure 3: Biff Loman

(Stephen Lang) has never been interested in putting his back into anything or the values of study. He holds a modest sort of job and prefers to spend his time womanizing (figure 5).

Meanwhile, Loman's wife suffers; the dream-home she had always wanted is going under and she realises that her husband is in a depressive with clear suicidal tendencies and that her children's behaviour is difficult to accept. They are what they are and what their father wanted them to be.



Figure 4: Will and his lover

The end of the story again passes through William's past. His dead brother appears in his mind and talks about his past successes and about how he can achieve future "glories" in his life. One of them -suicide- is what is chosen by William in order to finally "live" and experience the best wishes he has had over the years and leave his family an optimum bonus of \$20,000 from an insurance policy. Sadly, his funeral is only attended by his family and Charley



Figure 5: Happy Loman

(Louis Zorich), an unconditional friend and accompanied by his son, who recently has lent Loman money (figure 6).

Thus, William is unable to fulfil one of his dreams, which however is realized by his wife on the morning of the funeral by paying off the mortgage on their house. The grief of the family is therefore now focused on the impossibility of sharing this event with William, a dream he had struggled so long to achieve. Thus, even after the death of the salesman the frustration in some and the expectations of others bring repercussions to each of the members of the Loman family.



Figure 6: Charley

## Thanatology

In *Death of a Salesman*, different thanatological issues are addressed. Thus, we see social death, psychological death, suicidal behaviour, loss, pre-grief, and grieving. Social death is seen in the gradual loss of professional prestige undergone by William from the point of view of the company he works for; a company that finally fires him. And to further fuel the fire, his economic situation is disastrous. His job loss throws him into a deep depression. This is just a beginning to the destruction of his castles in the air that finally leads him to consummate his own biological death.

The different conceptions of life and death to a large extent depend on the historical and cultural context of those experiencing them, on the possibilities of solving their own needs in their physical surroundings, on the degree of social development and on the various versions of daily experience<sup>1</sup>. In the film, we see that the present world of the character is formed of fragments from earlier parts of his life that form a palimpsest with more recent events. Of

course, all societies derive the new from the old and are more or less able to incorporate contributions from other societies. In this sense, the company for which William has worked for years and decides to fire causes him huge doubts as to his possibilities of being able to continue to exist or not.

Psychological death is the subjectively certain knowledge that arises at a given moment of our lives when we realise that *"I will eventually die"*. Accordingly, psychological death may precede biological death by some years and is the perception of future events that threaten our existence.

After losing his job, William begins to look at his own life and that of his family; he feels threatened and to solve this he falls back on a tragic mode of thought: *"I'm going to die"*.

This type of death is also present through the character of Biff, who rejects the future and wellbeing and even his father, after discovering his infidelity, since he considers such behaviour an insult to his mother and the rest of the family alike. In the son, this death materialises as his leaving his studies and his dreams to become a great football player. Thus, he now lives in a world that he does not understand and one in which he is completely adrift as regards any future prospects.

Suicidal behaviours are those directed at achieving, consciously or unconsciously, that end<sup>3</sup>. Our character (Loman) tries to take his own life in many ways and even leaves messages and clues about his intentions to his family and friends. Thus, for example, he has several traffic accidents that he himself is responsible for and even leaves a noose in the basement in full sight of his family as a sign of his intentions.

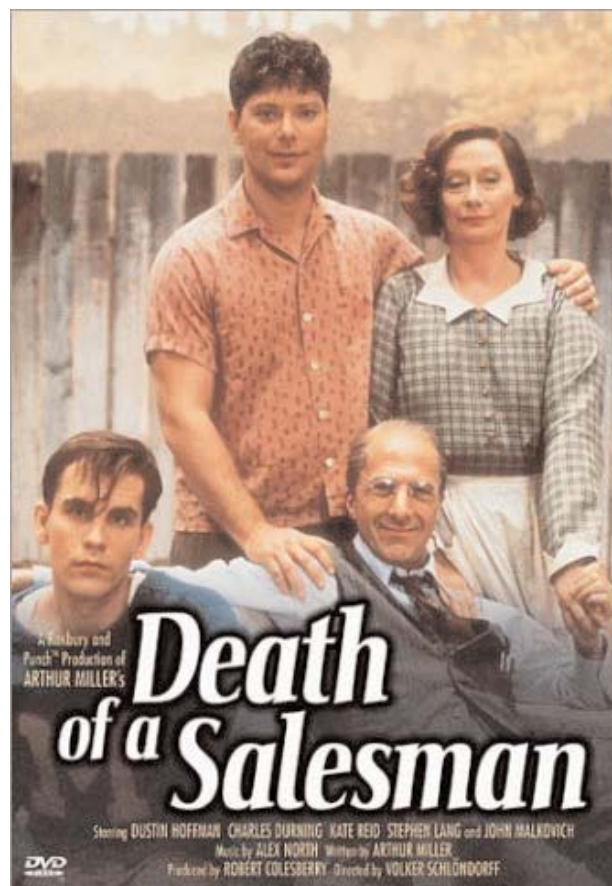
Among the many definitions of suicide, that proposed by Durkheim<sup>4</sup>, as any death resulting directly or indirectly from a positive or negative gesture by the victim hem/herself and conscious of the desire to arrive at such a state, allows us to analyse why William chooses this path and the final exit from his failures, the loss of his job and all his dreams. This is also a typical case of the conflict between the value of life and of freedom and that between faith, bodily integrity and honour. Following the suggestions of his brother, often perceived as hallucinations and illusions, he decides to commit suicide so that his family can benefit from his insurance policy and thereby gain a better life.

Within the suicidal types described by Durkheim -egoistic, altruistic, fatalistic and anomic- our character falls in the category of anomic, since his suicide occurs as the result of an economic and social crisis that elicits in him an imbalance between his aspirations and his achievements; he no longer knows what he can aspire to or which limits must be kept.

The death of William -husband, father and friend- causes not a little upheaval in his social surroundings, especially within the context of a suicide.

Pre-grief, defined as a figuration, a living preview and a brief and painful intuition of death, but with no real close anticipation of it<sup>5</sup>, is also apparent in William's family, Owing to the different sentiments he transmit to them, they develop painful intuitions about his possible suicide.

Grief is an emotional reaction that arises when people are faced with the death of someone or something that has had great importance in their lives<sup>6</sup>. In the film, we see that after the death of their loved one the family attends his funeral, although reaffirming their dreams and hopes. Linda is hit hard by the death of her husband; not only does she dress in mourning



but is strongly affected in her soul: she can no longer share the dreams of the man she loved and continues to love, even though they were built of sand. Her grief is moral since she suffers it in relation to situations, circumstances and conflicts typical of her own human existence<sup>6</sup>. Separation from William leads her to personal distress and loneliness. She realises she does not know what to do with the house that had taken them so long to pay for and that is now almost empty.

In turn, Biff tries to change his life. He seeks help for his kleptomania and impulsiveness in an attempt to discover who he really is. In contrast, Happy continues to live in a phantasmagorical world of success and riches. Charley, William's friend, accompanies the family in their grief and more than ever feels it his duty to support and cherish them.

Owing to the type of death undergone by William –suicide– the grief of his family can be classified within the category of *sudden appearance*<sup>5</sup>.

## L'AMOUR À MORT

### Technical details

**Title:** *Love Unto Death*

**Original title:** *L'Amour à Mort*

**Country:** France

**Year:** 1984

**Director:** Alain Resnais

**Music:** Hans Werner Henze

**Screenwriter:** Jean Gruault

**Cast:** Sabine Azéma, Fanny Ardant, Pierre Arditi, André Dussollier, Jean Dasté, Geneviève Mnich, Jean-Claude Weibel, Louis Castel, Françoise Rigal and Françoise Morhange.

**Color:** Color

**Runtime:** 92 minutes

**Genre:** Drama, Romance

**Production Companies:** Philippe Dussart S.a.r.l., Les Films Ariane and Films A2.

**Synopsis:** After several months of an intense relationship, Simon dies, leaving Elizabeth deeply racked with grief, although this all changes when Simon appears again.

### The Plot

The plot is complex and offers a highly psychological philosophical slant to thanatology. The action begins when Simon (Pierre Arditi) dies (figure 7). His loss causes intense grief to Elizabeth (Sabine Azéma), his partner (figure 8) and Rozier (Jean Dasté),

his physician. It thus appears that the love between the couple is over, but just when Elizabeth is about to tell some friends -Judith (Fanny Ardant) and Jérôme (André Dussollier) Martingnac (figure 9)- about the event, Simon reappears. This elicits train of issues about life and death. After this transcendental occurrence, which marks him for life, Simon's life revolves around his resurrection, and he is desperate to discover whether what he experienced was his actual death or merely an augury of it.



Figure 7: The first death of Simon Roche

When Simon, accompanied by Elizabeth, attends the funeral of a friend who has committed suicide, he focuses on the landscape of the resurrection of Lazarus in the Gospel of St. John. After the burial, which is overseen by Judith, a protestant minister like her husband Jérôme (figure 10), the four of them meet up. Jérôme reproaches the behaviour of the deceased because he believes that he will never receive God's grace for having taken his own life. Simon and Elizabeth analyse the meaning of the life they defend; losing someone is always painful, not only for those who remain but also for those departed.

As time passes, Simon feels that death is awaiting him. He grows melancholy, but must still weave this into his professional activities as an archaeologist. The situation also gets to Elizabeth, who worries about him constantly. As much as she tries to rouse him from his despair, she is unable to dispel the images, sounds and melodies of death that beset him. One day, on arriving home Elizabeth finds Simon in



Figure 8: Elisabeth Sutter



Figure 9: Judith and Jérôme Martignac

the throes of death and he finally dies in her arms. At that moment, she promises *to accompany him even unto death*. She attends his funeral services, accompanied by her friends, who try to help her through this difficult time (figure 11). From this moment onwards, she is unyielding in her attempt to fulfil her promise to Simon, even if this means her own death (figure 12). Her suicidal thoughts lead her to question herself and the meaning of life without Simon



Figure 10: Judith officiates at the funeral of a friend who committed suicide

She then begins to explore ways of taking her own life amidst a profound sense of grief. This affects not only her physical appearance -she eventually ends up attired completely in black- but also her soul. She consults her friends. Jérôme reminds her that suicide is a sin and that it is anathema in God's eyes, but Judith opens another window for her when she tells Elisabeth that she had formerly been Simon's lover and that both of them had attempted to commit suicide by cutting their wrists. Since the attempt failed, they decided to end their relationship since their love had become transformed into guilt. Judith recommends that Elisabeth



Figure 11: At Simon's burial



Figure 12: Elisabeth's promise

should follow the dictates of her heart and her soul, but for what she herself feels and not what Simon would have wanted. Acts of love may be so extreme that they are accompanied by the death of the person left behind.

### Thanatology

In *Love unto Death*, different thanatological issues are addressed, such as psychological death, escaped death, sought death, physical pain, psychological and moral pain, total pain, agony, the risk of suicide, suicidal behaviour, foiled suicide, loss, anticipated grief, self-grief and grieving.

*Psychological death*. Simon displays this type of death because (as defined by Epicurus<sup>2</sup>, the worst of all ills -death- is nothing for us because when we have died death is not present and when death is present then we are not dead) due to the fact that the strange events that happen to him are fully encompassed within this position. Additionally, he thinks that perhaps God has forgotten him or that maybe he has been chosen to be the recipient of some mysterious miracle, such as the one Jesus performed when he brought Lazarus back to the world of the living. Elisabeth also undergoes a psychological death. When she loses Simon she has no other goal than to fulfil her promise to be with him, because her love has not died not die. Apart from causing her suffering, this death also triggers an acceptance and an adaptation to death in the tranquil soul that has arisen in her.

*Escaped death* is the type that persists in the penumbra of semi-consciousness, buried and semi-ignored. In Simon it determined the underlying conviction that death is the opposite of life, and he believed that death would steal all his energy, feelings, and emotions.

According to Aranguren, *sought death* is based on the Freudian idea of the impetus of death or fanatic impulse<sup>7</sup>. In agreement with this concept, Simon applies his death to his life, because the experience of

his escaped death and the expectation of a true death dissolve away, reflected in music, penumbras and melancholy.

After his death and return to life Simon feels enormous suffering because he knows that he will eventually have to die again. His state of malaise is due to the threat of the loss of his integrity or the sensation that his being will disintegrate when he loses not only life but also Elizabeth.

Physical, psychological and moral pain –total pain– is another constant in the film. Simon's suffering is sometimes accompanied by physical pain, especially before his death. The physical pain enhances his suffering, accompanied by a large measure of despair.

In turn, Elizabeth also suffers intensely for the loss of her lover. This suffering, with the moral and psychological (impotence and rancour) pain it brings, strengthens her desire to keep her promise as soon as possible.

The term agony is a word that comes from the Greek *αγών*, which means battle, struggle fight, the anxiousness of the dying. Simon feels this on two occasions: at the start and at almost the end of the film. We are given the impression that it is the same agony in both cases. The film serves the spectator with a subjective sensation that there is physical pain and that we are witnessing an agony, although without knowing how long it will last. It is clear in these two senses that Simon is faced with a crucial moment and that he dies; he shows a disquiet characterised by a strange restlessness<sup>5</sup>.

There are different types of agony. On one hand, there is that of the state of physical exhaustion, leading to a decrease in consciousness of different degrees, and on the other there is completely conscious agony, in which those suffering it are aware that they are dying<sup>5</sup>. Simon undergoes this latter type (conscious) permitting him to have *vaticinationes morientium*. He has an ecstasy-like experience; he listens to music, the sound of water from the river near his house and he sees a very intense light that absorbs and embraces him.

The agony is witnessed by Elizabeth and leaves deep scars in her soul. The worry she sees in her partner leads her to promise to accompany him even in death.

The risk of suicide is the possibility that a person will deliberately make an attempt to end his or her life. This is present in Elizabeth and is exacerbated by her wish to die, since she considers death as a bridge separating her from the pain of having to live without Simon and being with him in his unknown reality.

The suicidal behaviour present in the film is a logical consequence of the promise Elizabeth has made to Simon. As the film progresses, it becomes ever more consolidated and she begins to mention it to her friends and even her doctor. This latter, to prevent a suicide, tells her about some ways it might be done and the disagreeable consequences. He tells her of the disfiguration to the face that remains after someone has failed to commit suicide with a firearm.

As in many other films, we see how potential suicides fall back on doctors when asking for help to die. Elizabeth does so because she does not want to live with the loneliness she has been condemned to and believes that suicide is a way out with dignity. According to Frey, requests to die involve huge moral responsibility on the part of physicians; they are fully integrated in issues of bioethics and are increasingly worrisome in public opinion<sup>2</sup>.

Elizabeth, saddened, seeks to commit suicide but the film does not show the act and hence the fact that she has kept her promise, although it does insinuate it. As spectators, we have an open door to imagine different possibilities and endings.

Elizabeth's journey to suicide is a long chain of events, accompanied by many messages, both verbal and non-verbal, and different types of behaviour, clear and direct as regards her position as regards death.

Human beings are generally convinced that life is the best of gifts available. However, on many occasions some people seem to be prepared to forsake this gift when they perceive it as being incompatible with other values<sup>4</sup>. Thus, Elizabeth feels an intense need to forsake her life because she feels she cannot go on living without Simon.

Jerôme Martignac condemns suicide as being offensive in the eyes of God, since only He can give life and only He can take it away. Countering this argument, Elizabeth reflects on the Passion of Christ. She believes that knowing the suffering He was to receive

on the Cross He accepted it. For her, His decision was similar to that of suicide, since the Son of Man, knowing that the result of the events to take place in Jerusalem would cost Him His life, continued to participate in them.

The Judeo-Christian scriptures consider suicide a grave sin and hence a moral error and social shame. In many texts, suicide is depicted as a gesture of arrogance against the Lord of Life: "The life of every living creature and the spirit in every human body are in his hands" (Job 12,10) or "He brings down to the grave and raises up", 1Sm 2,3/ Dt, 32,39). In Mt, 27,5 (So Judas threw the money into the temple and left. Then he went away and hanged himself.) Judas' suicide is situated between regret and challenge. In some cases, such as the episode of Samson, suicide is not seen as a challenge to the Lord. The death of this character can be considered an indirect suicide; it is a result of his faith and his love for his people (Jue 16,28-31)<sup>4</sup>.

In the Gospels, we read the words of Jesus about life and death "For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and that of the gospel will save it" (Mk, 8,35), "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends" (Jn 15,13), "This is why the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again" (Jn 10,17). According to Ravasi, Christ's attitude towards giving and sacrificing Himself explains why many believers wish to die and why they understand death as a personal meeting with the Resurrected Lord (quoted by Flecha)<sup>4</sup>. This can be seen in many films about saintly persons, such as *Marcelino Pan y Vino* (1955), by Ladislao Vajda; *Don Bosco* (1988), by Leandro Castellani; *The Passion of Joan of Arc*, by Carl Theodore Dreyer, etc. It is clear that it is also present in the very broad cinematographic treatment of Jesus, from *Golgotha* (1935), by Julien Duvivier to *The Passion of the Christ*, by Mel Gibson.

Frustrated suicide is one that is unsuccessful even though the person has had true intentions to carry it out<sup>3</sup>. This is seen in Judith and Simon when they were lovers, because they (unsuccessfully) slit their wrists. The crude reality -seeing themselves bathed in blood- led them away from the idea and their love turned to shame.

The film shows us how loss is not only relat-

ed to death. Judith loses her love for Simon, even though he is still alive. However, after his death Elizabeth also loses him and his love; if she wants to preserve both, she must die.

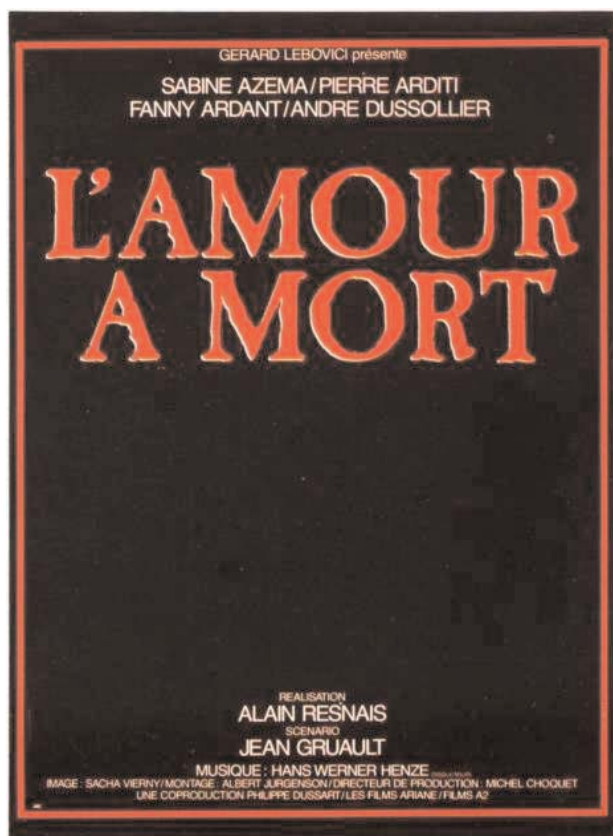
Anticipated, or expected grief -defined by Cobo as the process of the life experiences, emotions, psychological reactions and defences felt by a person when faced with the knowledge of the eminent death of a loved one (a lover or someone significant)...<sup>5</sup>, is when, unlike pre-grief, there is a well founded and immediate belief in eminent separation. In a strict sense, it is a true feeling of grief that emerges before the death of someone loved; when people realise that death is inevitable and that it will occur in a given period of time. It often replaces grief in the proper sense, which arises after the death of the loved one. Psychologically, Elizabeth goes through a period of anticipated grief; she realises that after his mysterious death and return to life she is going to lose Simon in the near future. The ambiguity and uncertainty of her doubts - *he'll die/he won't die*- are huge psychological burdens for her. Thus, she takes her leave with three basic confessions: *I love you - forgive me/I forgive you and goodbye*.

Self-grief is a variety, and a dramatic one, of anticipated grief. It is grief about oneself, suffered by oneself, who is aware of eminent death<sup>5</sup>. Simon feels it; he knows he is going to die and has the time necessary to prepare himself for that eventuality. He perceives it with a special mysticism because he had *died before*, allowing him to *prepare himself for death*, a death that is not only personal but also the death of his link with Elizabeth.

Regarding grief, the emotional reaction caused by Simon's death is felt by many, especially Elizabeth, who cared for him, helped him and loved him. This affective bond means that she experiences his death as a very important loss, which explains why she accompanies her grief with rigorous mourning attire and with the thought that she will soon be with him again, perhaps fulfilling her promise with suicide (we do not know), which she considers to be a huge act of love.

Elizabeth's grief and that of her friends can be placed among those of progressive installation<sup>5</sup>, since Simon, although he does not have a fatal disease, lived worriedly because he "had already died" once and is waiting to die yet again.





## Conclusions

In these and other films addressing the issue of thanatology, it is clear and even evident that before death appears on the scene life has a purely provisional nature; it is susceptible to revision; it is still possible to give it shape. The issue thus remains open. Only in death does the totality of life become definitive. In death life fulfils itself; death includes and summarises the whole of life, and this is why life only receives its definitive character from death.

The different kinds of reaction of human beings to nature and transcendence along their history determine their self-understanding, which they reflect as a permanent disquiet about the meaning of life, the orientation of their lives, the beyond...., death, life.

Words such as agony, pre-grief, anticipated grief, self-mourning, pain, total pain (integrated by bodily, psychological and moral pain), suffering and others are very important within the different issues of thanatology and must be known by health personnel, because current medicine not only has the aim of *curing* diseases, using its array of human and technical resources, but also of having to seek ways in which

patients can die in peace. This is because despite the resources deployed, people's lives must go on and death forms part of life in all human beings<sup>2</sup>.

*The meaning of death* cannot be found in an abstract consideration of *life* and *death*, but in the multiplicity of the relationships and projections of those processes and of *health* and *disease*. Thus, processes such as living, and even dying, are complex and are determined from a set of coordinates that must be valued, in the right proportion, by a social system that attempts to respect the meaning of life and death and that is able to orchestrate each person, with the only constraint that such a person must respect the lives of others.

According to Seneca in his letters to Lucilio, it is necessary to consider that good is not found in merely in living but in living well... the wise person will always gauge life as regards its quality, never in terms of its length<sup>8</sup>, and this is something that has been addressed by many audiovisual media, including the cinema. Thus, the human scientific knowledge that helps us to be born, procreate and alleviate illness must seek a good type of death, respecting the *characteristics of people* in the moral and juridical sense specified in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights<sup>9</sup>.

Many human professions, among them those in the health field, aim to maintain life and it would be contrary to their principles to facilitate the death of their patients. However, sometimes, allowing a human being to suffer, adding further indignity to the tragedy of illness, suffering or loss, confronts just morality against unjust morality, reciprocal love against the absence of love. To what extent does charity have meaning in light of such cruelty against life -and why not- against death?. Health professionals, and indeed the population at large, need to meditate on the morality of this charge<sup>2, 3, 8</sup>.

At no time should the integral support –psychological affective, moral and spiritual – towards families be overlooked by the health personnel when a loved one is dying or has already died. However, it is also important to strengthen the bonds between family members because often the best accompaniment in death is truth, friendship and solidarity among the various family members.

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