

Medical Humanities Introductory Course

Film, Theatre, and Concert Experience: Death and Dying In the Context of the Medical Humanities

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The Aim of this Session

- Our focus in this session is on death and dying. The aim is twofold:
- (1) To show how the performance arts of music, theater and cinema present death in a variety of perspectives; and
- (2) To show how awareness of such perspectives can aid those who contemplate imminent death, as well as health specialists and care-givers attending on terminal-illness cases.

- Death can be sudden, as the result of some unexpected accident or infection or organ failure; or it can creep upon us as part of the natural process of aging. In either case, the prospect of dying creates enormous internal disturbances, and dealing with them becomes a necessary part of whatever medical, psychological, psychic, or spiritual treatment is to be adopted to alleviate tension and suffering.

Topic Outline

1. Classical theatre and film
2. Classical music and ballet
3. Contemporary cinema and music

1. Classical Theatre & Film

The Fear of Dying

- The strategy recommended for all such cases is to embrace the fear rather than suppress it or deny it, by familiarizing oneself with the variety of ways in which humanity has refracted the fear of dying through art, as one mode of alleviation, complementary to what may be found in spirituality, religion, and meditation.
- We begin by acknowledging that death is a constant companion to the living. If we teach ourselves to recognize that, without finding the thought morbid, then we might be able to treat the prospect of death with less fear, shock, horror, terror, or grief. A film by the Swedish director Ingmar Bergman (1918-2007), *The Seventh Seal* (1957), allows us to imagine this vividly and memorably: one person waiting to greet another, in a scene which we can all recognize as a classic memento mori.

Meeting Death: (from) Ingmar Bergman, *The Seventh Seal* (1957)



Death in the form of contemplated suicide

- Accidental death or natural aging are not all there is death. There is also that which we might recognize as seemingly enforced death, as when death comes as a punishment, or when life seems unbearable, and someone suffering intensely contemplates death as unavoidable or tempting.
- Two plays by William Shakespeare capture the fear of what death might bring to body, mind, and soul. Here is a character from *Measure for Measure*, Claudio (who is condemned to death for fornication) trying to imagine what it feels like to be dead and buried in the cold hard earth: he can only refuse to contemplate suicide, because living, however wretchedly, is preferable to being dead.

Shakespeare, *Measure for Measure* (Act 1, Scene 3)



Death in the form of contemplated suicide - *Hamlet*

theguardian

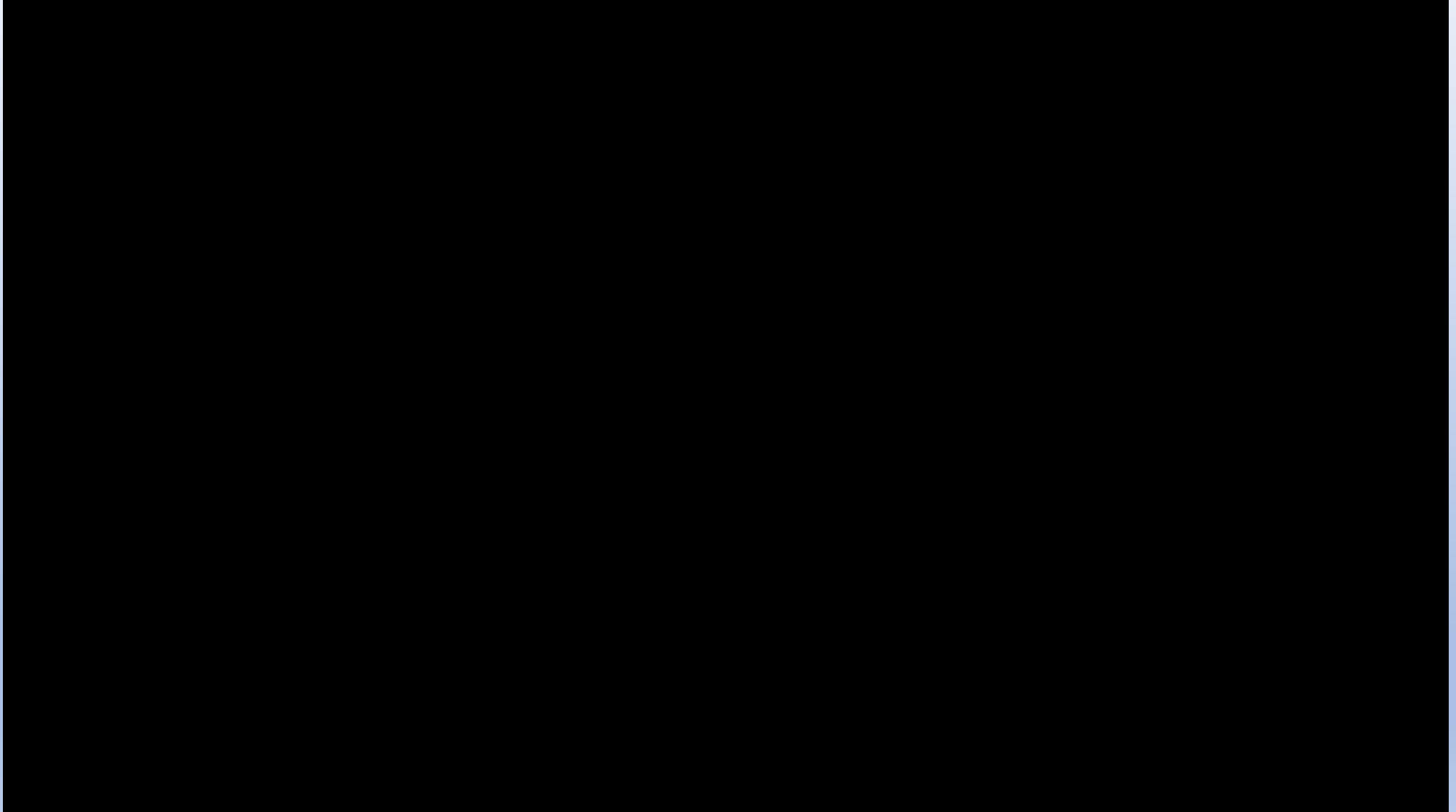
Shakespeare solos

2. Classical Music and Ballet

Death as a lover not to be denied: Franz Schubert's music

- From the perspective of medical humanities, the key challenge in this context is that of making the prospect of death seem less fearful. Fear of death is natural to all human being, and how that is made bearable depends on several types of what I might call cultural conditioning.
- For example, a medieval European fantasy developed a curious narrative surrounding the likelihood of an early death for a young girl. She is to be imagined walking over, as part of a regular habit, to a tree near her village home where she is used to meeting her boyfriend. One day, instead of her boyfriend waiting behind the tree, she encounters a skeleton, which starts wooing her, playing strange music on two bones (one serving as a violin, the other as the bow).
- This macabre encounter drives home the point that the young girl is more truly betrothed to Death than to her boyfriend. The composer Franz Schubert evokes this fabled narrative through the medium of instrumental music: a string quartet (which uses 2 violins, one viola and a cello) to dramatize the voices of the frightened girl and her deathly lover. Of course, responding to such music requires a degree of familiarity with the idiom of western classical music and the manner in which instruments like the violin, viola and cello are used to voice human feelings, but at a degree of abstraction that bypasses the use of words and natural language.

Schubert, *Death & the Maiden* (String Quartet 14, Movement 1)



Death as ritual sacrifice - Igor Stravinsky, *The Rite of Spring*

- The most powerful evocation of death as a form of ritual sacrifice can be found in the culmination of Stravinsky's ballet, *Rite of Spring* (1917), in which a young maiden accepts death as a propitiation of nature, restoring Spring to a land frozen by Winter.
- The dance form provides a powerful opportunity for a modern culture to remember its ancient roots in primitive society. In that context, the life of the individual is intimately linked to the life of the community and both to the life of nature and planet earth. Death for the one is a symbolic enactment of life for the other.
- Or as that enigmatic prayer has it: In my death is my beginning.

Death as ritual sacrifice - Igor Stravinsky, *The Rite of Spring*



3. Contemporary Cinema and Music

Cinemeducation

- “The use of movies on videos, particularly clips from such videos, to educate residents and medical students in the psychosocial aspect of medicine” (Alexander et al. 1994).
- Cinema + Medicine + Education (Lumlertgal et al., 2009).
- Fritz & Poe (1979). The role of cinema in psychiatric education.
 - First publication on the use of movies for teaching medicine.

Ways of using movies in teaching

1. Screening the entire movie
 - Advantage of understanding the changes with the passage of time, especially if involving disease progression, impact of illness on relationship and spheres in life
2. Using selected clips or a single clip from one movie to illustrate a theme, issue, etc.

Ways of using movies in teaching

3. Using multiple clips from different movies and screening them in rapid succession with facilitator's comments

- Works better than watching an entire film to illustrate a particular point (Blasco et al. 2006)
- Facilitator's comments can help the students focus on particular aspects
- Example: This is the start of the film Wit where the protagonist Dr Vivian Bearing deals with her diagnosis of and treatment for stage 4 ovarian cancer. Notice how Dr Kelekian is very clear in his explanation of the technical facts but did not check in on the patient's feelings other than asking if she was okay. Did you notice that he was standing when he first informed her of her diagnosis?

Reel Lessons

1. Movie selection

- Those that compelled you, touched you, taught you, and made you reflect.
- Movies/clips should match the students' level of clinical experience in order for them to understand the complexities of the issues.
- Avoid:
 - Box office hits as students might have watched it already (Banos & Bosch, 2015).
 - Movies with complex plot
- Consider foreign films, not just those in English:
 - The Sea Inside (Spanish)
 - The Diving Bell and the Butterfly (French)
 - Departures (Japanese)

2. Previewing

- Watch the movie a few times before screening it to the students.
- Consider which scenes to use and the discussion points that can emerge from these scenes that will generate good discourse.
- Take note of the screen duration, the screen time.
- Ensure there is adequate time for the movie/clip screening and discussion

2. Previewing

- Where possible, make video clips for the movie scenes
 - Add subtitles, where possible (some accent can be difficult to grasped)
- Prepare questions to generate discussions
 - Students may be quiet after the movie/clip screening or be affected by the movie/clips
- Ensure sound system is audible for actual screening day

3. Screening the movie

- Remind students:
 - This is not a movie time but an educational session
 - Their expected tasks after watching the movie/clip
- Provide an introduction to the story and the context of a particular scene
- Display the subtitles mode, where available

3. Screening the movie

- If students are to watch the movie beforehand, ensure that the movie can be easily accessed.
 - Challenges:
 - ensuring that students will really watch in advance of class
 - Students may multi-task instead of paying attention to the movie
- If watching multiple clips from a movie or from various movies, provide a viewing guide (Banos & Bosch, 2015).

4. Post-screening discussions

- Very important
- Dialogues allow students to express their views and allow perspectives and input from others
 - Expose blind spots, prejudices and biases, widen one's perspectives etc.
- Movie clips act as “an alarm” for students, enhancing their self-awareness (Blasco & Moreto, 2012).
- Avoid introducing too many themes

5. Reflections

- Movies are not just for evoking emotions
- Learning is incomplete without reflections
 - Incorporated in the discussions
 - Reflection essay
- Increases awareness of one's values, attitudes and views regarding a subject matter; prejudices and biases, fears, discomfort/unease
- “A bridge to move from emotions to behaviour” (Blasco & Moreto, 2012).

6. Evaluation

i. 1. Pre & post

- Pre-screening: students to write about their understanding or views about a pre-determined topic or theme selected by the instructor.
- Post-screening students to write about:
 - the impact of movie/movie clips on their views of the topic or theme. Example: how they did not consider a particular perspective or did not have knowledge about a certain aspect.
 - How they can transfer the learning to future clinical encounters

ii. Reflection paper with guided questions.

Death in Cinematic Treatments - *Whose Life Is It Anyway?* 1981

Sculptor Ken Harrison is paralyzed from the waist down after a car accident. He petitions for his discharge from the hospital to cease treatment.



Mar Adentro (The Sea Inside), 2004

- If music articulates the complex emotions that death evokes in us, cinema gives those emotions a specific context in real-life situations: Ramon Sampedro fought a legal battle for 30 years to be given the right to end his own life. This award-winning Spanish film captures the crux of the debate in this dialogue.
- For terminal patients with no prospect of a cure, physician-assisted suicide and euthanasia have become tempting options, and legal in some societies. In this scene, a Catholic priest who is a quadraplegic like the patient Ramon Sampedro visits the latter after watching him on television filing for euthanasia. What we watch in this clip is their perspective on euthanasia.

Mar Adentro (The Sea Inside), 2004



Death and Dying in Popular Songs

- So far, we have provided glimpses of how theatre and classical music and cinema treat the theme of mortality: both the fear it evinces, and the acceptance it commands. The theme also finds expression in all forms of popular music, & here are some examples:
- (1) *Into the West*, by David Arkenstone (from *The Lord of the Rings*) – start till 2m 25s
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2ejQPRa_dHI



(1) Into the West (Enya)

Lay down
Your sweet and weary head
The night is falling
You have come to journey's end
Sleep now
And dream of the ones who came before
They are calling
From across the distant shore

Why do you weep?
What are these tears upon your face?
Soon you will see
All of your fears will pass away
Safe in my arms
You're only sleeping

What can you see
On the horizon?
Why do the white gulls call?
Across the sea
A pale moon rises
The ships have come to carry you home

And all will turn
To silver glass
A light on the water
All Souls pass

Hope fades
Into the world of night
Through shadows falling
Out of memory and time
Don't say
We have come now to the end
White shores are calling
You and I will meet again
And you'll be here in my arms
Just sleeping

And all will turn
To silver glass
A light on the water
Grey ships pass
Into the West

Death and Dying in Popular Songs

- (2) *Going Home*, by Mary Fahl



(2) Going Home (Annie Haslam)

Going home, going home
I'm just going home
Quiet light, some still day
I'm just going home

It's not far, just close by
Through an open door
Work all done, care laid by
Going to fear no more

Mother's there expecting me
Father's waiting, too
Lots of folk gathered there
All the friends I knew

All the friends I knew
I'm going home

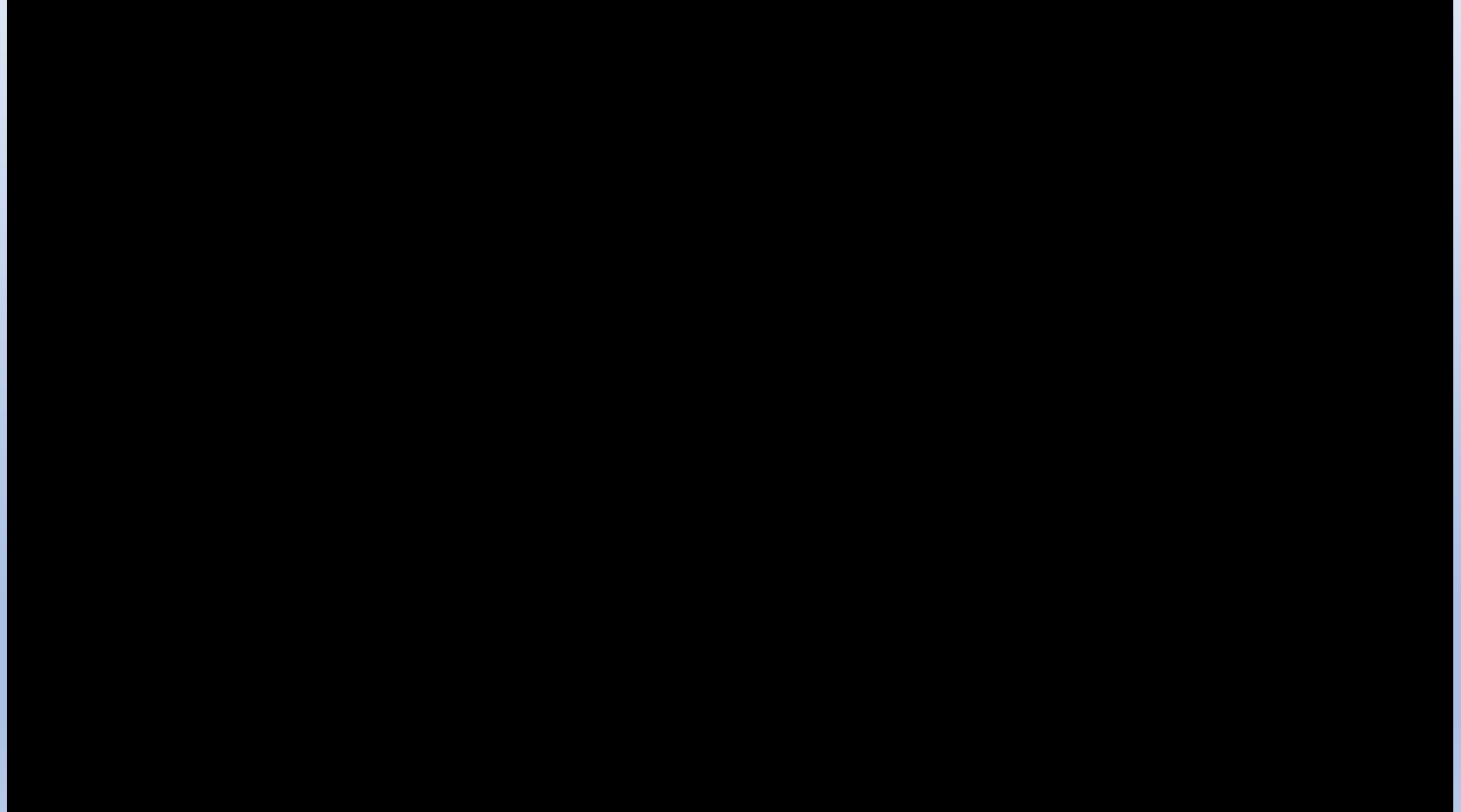
Morning star lights the way
Restless dream all done
Shadows gone, break of day
Real life begun

There's no break, there's no end
Just a living on
Wide awake with a smile
Going on and on

Going home, going home
I'm just going home
It's not far, just close by
Through an open door
I am going home
I'm just going home

Death and Dying in Popular Songs

- (3) *Evening Falls*, by Enya



(3) Evening Falls (Enya)

When the evening falls and the daylight is fading,
From within me calls - could it be I am sleeping?
For a moment I stray, then it holds me completely.
Close to home - I cannot say.
Close to home feeling so far away.

As I walk the road, there before me a shadow
From another world, where no other can follow.
Carry me to my own, to where I can cross over...
Close to home - I cannot say.
Close to home feeling so far away.

Forever searching; never right, I am lost
In oceans of night. Forever
Hoping I can find memories.
Those memories I left behind.

Even though I leave will I go on believing
That this time is real - am I lost in this feeling?
Like a child passing through, never
knowing the reason.
I am home - I know the way.
I am home - feeling oh, so far away.

References (Cinemeducation)

1. Alexander, Hall & Pettice. (1994). Cinemeducation: An innovative approach to teaching the psychosocial medical care. *Family Med* 26(7): 430-433
2. Deeny et al. (2001). Drama as an experiential technique in learning how to cope with dying patients and their families. *Teaching in Higher Education*. 6:99–112.
3. Deloney LA & Graham CJ. (2003). Wit: Using drama to teach first year medical students about empathy and compassion. *Teaching & Learning in Medicine*, 15(4): 247-251
4. Lumlertgul et al. (2009). Cinemeducation: A pilot student project using movies to help students learn medical professionalism.
5. Self et al. (1993). Teaching medical ethics to first-year medical students by using films discussions to develop their moral reasoning. *Acad med* 68(5):383-385

Death and defiance – The poet sings – Dylan Thomas

- No presentation such as this would be complete without an acknowledgment that the desire to live and continue living is always strong in each of us, and death is not simply to be accepted. It can also be met with defiance and dignity. Here are two poems by Dylan Thomas that we should all remember:

