Top 10 Favourite Films Portraying Death

National Palliative Care Week
21-28 May 2017
Why look at how films portray death?

• Perhaps more accessible and tangible for many of us is the way death and dying is depicted on screen.
• Film representation is a powerful medium.
• Films of different genres and from different eras can all reflect how society views and assimilates death and dying.
• Films can be conversation starters, even for difficult topics like death.
• Is there value in film for shaping how society views death and dying? Or is film a medium of enjoyment only and not a reflection on how society portrays life and death?
The Activity: Two Films Depicting Death

• *Share two of your favourite films that depict death and dying*, preferably films that are at least 20 to 30 years apart in release date. Alternatively you might want to look at different genres.

• The idea is to compare and contrast what different films tell us about how death and dying is dealt with.

• Do different film genres or films from different decades depict death and dying differently? Do they speak to a particular generation or audience?
Activity Responses

- 539 people participated in the activity
- A total of 1039 movies titles were provided by these participants
- All together, 338 different movie titles were provided
- Film eras ranged from a silent 1928 film (‘The Passion of Joan Arc’) to the 2017 Tropfest short film winner (‘The Mother Situation’).
- Film genres varied from drama to horror, war/action, comedy, sci-fi, and children’s films.
- Most commonly mentioned genre were romantic drama films or ‘chick flicks’, indicative of the large percentage of female respondents to the activity.
338 Movies Were Nominated
And the Top 10 Favourite Films were…
No. 10

Death at a Funeral

Released: 2007
Genre: Black Comedy

Participant Plot Summary: “Death at a Funeral is about a dysfunctional family coming together to bury the patriarch of the family”

Participant Review: “It meshes death and funerals, family dysfunction and secrets with humour in that masterful British way. It is so wrong and just so right. I cried laughing and lost count of the times I hid behind my fingers.”

https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/death_at_a_funeral/
No. 9 ★ ★

Up

Released: 2009

Genre: Children’s Animated Film

Participant Plot Summary: “Old Carl Fredricksen wants to escape his grief and embarks on an extraordinary journey as he tries to fulfill the dreams of his dead wife.”

Participant Review: “It really captured what life and death was all about and only at the end do you realise that life is just an adventure no matter where it is played out.” “A beautiful kids movie that is not so much about death but the impact that death has on people.”

https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/up/
No. 8 ★★
The Notebook

*Released:* 2004
*Genre:* Romantic Drama

*Participant Plot Summary:* “The Notebook deals with a wife who is living with dementia, now in a facility. Her husband comes to remind her of their love story each day. The film looks at dementia, dying and keeping love alive.”

*Participant Review:* “a true testament to love… how amazing to spend the remainder of ones life reading your love story to her to get that little glimpse in time where she remembers you.”

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Notebook
https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/notebook/

No. 7
Love Story

Released: 1970
Genre: Romantic Drama

Participant Plot Summary: “Leukemia destroys a young couple's hopes for the future.”

Participant Review: “Love Story depicts a romance where emotional dedication for a loved one over rides life. It shows death and dying as a dual journey where anything that can be done to cure or fix the situation is taken.”

https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/love_story/
Me Before You

Released: 2016

Genre: Romantic Drama

Participant Plot Summary: “Me before you is about a previously very active young man living with quadriplegia after an accident. He knew he was not able to gain any further function and was in constant pain. He made a pact with his parents that he be allowed to die if he gave them 6 months.”

Participant Review: “Me Before You shows how much emphasis is placed on quantity of life rather than quality and how much the emotions of family and friends around that person play a role.” “It was a thought provoking movie in that euthanasia is presented as an alternative to life, that life can be so unbearable that death is the only escape.”

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Me_Before_You_(film)
https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/me_before_you/
No. 5 ★ My Sister’s Keeper

Released: 2009
Genre: Drama

Participant Plot Summary: “My Sisters Keeper is about a family's struggle with the concept that one of their member's was going to die of a terminal illness.” It’s “the story of a girl who was born with the purpose to save her older sister's life” then “showing compassion in aiding her sister on her journey towards death”.

Participant Review: “A heart wrenching story that ultimately brings meaning and hope to life, the family's suffering and ending with some semblance of acceptable and peace.”

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/My_Sister%27s_Keeper_(film)
https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/10010662_my_sisters_keeper
★ No. 4 ★
The Fault in Our Stars

Released: 2014
Genre: Romantic Drama

Participant Plot Summary: “In the Fault in Our Stars, the focus is on two teenagers who are dying of cancer and how they manage to live with that reality in modern times.”

Participant Review: “This movie is about getting the most out of life while you have it, even taking the chance to love someone knowing that you will lose them eventually.” “It’s about finding friendships making peace with and finishing the things you want to do before leaving this world.”

https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/the_fault_in_our_stars/
The Bucket List

Released: 2007

Genre: Comedy Drama

Participant Plot Summary: “The main plot follows two terminally ill men on their road trip with a wish list of things to do before they "kick the bucket", from which the movie's title gets its name.”

Participant Review: “The Bucket List movie really affected me in that I started to think about all that I wish to see and do before my health and ultimately my death means that I never fulfilled my heart's desires, therefore dying with regrets.” “It highlighted interpersonal relationships, how people view and react to life and death differently and the many emotions experienced by those who live with a diagnosis”.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Bucket_List
https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/bucket_list/
No. 2
Beaches

*Released*: 1988

*Genre*: Drama

*Participant Plot Summary*: “Beaches is a film that followed the lives of two women from childhood until the death of one of them.”

*Participant Review*: “Portrays that despite differences in life the bond between childhood friends will win through in times of adversity. Also depicts that not everyone needing a transplant will be a donor recipient although this is not a central theme.”

https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/beaches/
No. 1

Ghost

Released: 1990

Genre: Romantic Drama/Fantasy

Participant Plot Summary: “The plot centres on a young woman in jeopardy, the ghost of her murdered lover and a reluctant psychic who assists him in saving her although the psychic had previously been faking her powers.”

Participant Review: “The pain of losing someone you love can be tempered by believing you still have contact with them. Ultimately though the person left behind comes to terms with the person not being present.”

https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/1031086_ghost
# Top 10 Favourite Films

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<th>Film Name</th>
<th>No. of Nominations</th>
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<td>Death at a Funeral</td>
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Participant Reflections

“The use of humour and laughter is a strong reminder of the connections we have in life even when a loved one dies”.

“A lot of movies show death as violent, almost acceptable in the way they are portrayed. I think the subtle can often deliver a much more meaningful message.”

“Horror films depict death as something to run away from, it may reflect the modern thinking of death which is I will worry about it later”.

“Movies can reflect some of what society believes and how death and dying are portrayed but they don't reflect everyone's idea. We all have our own interpretation based on religion, upbringing and how we live our lives.”

“Film is a powerful medium, but I'm not sure what comes first - the chicken or the egg! Do films portray society's beliefs on death and dying, or do films shape how society views death and dying?”
Participant Reflections

“I believe that films, even works of fiction, can be so educational and can definitely influence the way we think about death and dying if done in a thoughtful way, not just for sensationalism. They can also lead us to question our values and open a discussion that we might not otherwise have.”

“I do believe the films are reflections of how society feels or at least that is the intention.”

“Film is definitely a medium of enjoyment but has a great capacity to reflect the views of society at any particular time.”

“Films help make death and dying less scary and help people talk about it. I welcome any movies that are honest and make people engage with this topic.”

“Films are for entertainment but can shape how we view death and dying particularly if people have limited or no experience with death.”
Participant Reflections

“Movies have the capacity to influence society and society has the capacity to influence movies. Film has the capacity to create social awareness and can be used to create interest in societal issues on a mass scale.”

“Death from illness seems, to me, to be more 'socially acceptable' than death by euthanasia. For many people this remains a bit of a taboo; death by illness is 'tragic' and 'so sad' whereas death by euthanasia is 'selfish' and 'unnecessary'.”

“Some people see all movies as enjoyment and put themselves into the movie and "feel" the pain, pleasure and other emotions while others are more removed from the emotional side of the movie. I think it depends on the personality and vulnerability of the person watching and don't believe it shapes how society portrays death.”
What can we take away from this?

- Many of the films chosen in Dying2Learn 2017 reflected issues raised in the course, e.g.,
  - The importance of humour in coping with death and dying (e.g., ‘The Bucket List’, ‘Death at a Funeral’)
  - The sanitised version of death and dying and romantic death scenes (e.g., ‘Beaches’, ‘The Notebook’)
- Some films reflecting contemporary social issues featured, e.g.,
  - Voluntary euthanasia (‘Me Before You’)
  - Living life to the fullest (‘The Bucket List’, ‘The Fault in our Stars’)
  - The impact of death on those left behind (‘Up’)
  - Medical futility (‘Love Story’)

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THE END