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Ladies’ Choice? Requested Death in Film
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Introduction

While dramatic representations of death abound in the media (McIlwain, 2005), more mundane, ‘natural’ deaths are not commonplace, reflecting the media’s preoccupation with events of which people have little to no experience (Chapman and Lupton, 1994), such as violent death (Durkin, 2003). A particular type of ‘unusual’ dying depicted in film has not previously been studied. Despite being one of the most debated practices around contemporary dying, filmic representations of ‘requested death’ (McInerney, 2000), that being the physician-assisted suicide (PAS), euthanasia, or mercy killing of individuals, has not been explored.

This chapter considers constructions around requested death as articulated in popular film. Film is a noteworthy vehicle for depictions of dying and death, with portrayals of requested death featuring from the middle- to late-twentieth century and persisting into the twenty-first, coinciding with requested death’s international socio-legal prominence over that time. As an influential medium that simultaneously reflects and constructs social meanings around mortality, the dominant messages conveyed in film are worthy of exploration. Concretely, an analysis of film portrayals of requested death may offer insights into contemporary constructions of dying and death and the way they shape the social identities of those involved in requested death practices.

In this chapter, a series of dominant representations of requested death are identified via a discourse analysis of 20 English-speaking films with a storyline involving requested death: narrative positions of hero and victim; sanitised constructions of death; and individualised constructions of death. Additionally, there is a strongly gendered construction underpinning these. Specifically, female passivity and male
agency are powerfully present in the narrative structures of the films analysed, reflecting surprisingly resilient traditional gender role stereotypes (effectively mired in mid-twentieth century constructions). The gendered discourse identified reflects perhaps both cinematic imperatives and more active filmmaker constructions; it is beyond this chapter to determine this. Cultural scripts via which meaning is constructed are influenced by multiple circumstances. Tensions in such scripts, particularly in relation to the competing constructions of euthanasia as an autonomous act and seekers of death being reliant on the aid of others, reflect an uncertain ontology in respect of requested death and perhaps mortality more generally.

Talking pictures

Gamson and Modigliani (1989) note that film is but one repository of public discourse. Further, it is not necessarily the most important source available for individuals in making sense of their worlds, compared with, for example, ‘their own experience and that of significant others in their lives...’ (Gamson, 1995, p. 85). Fairclough (1992, p. 123) argues that the relationship between discourse and subjectivity is a dialectical one; ‘subjects are in part positioned and constituted in discourse, but they also engage in practice which contests and restructures the discursive structures which position them’. Mass media are one of society’s key repositories of meaning providing subjects with a variety of discursive alternatives to identify with; hence functioning as specific machineries that produce, reproduce and transform social phenomena and identities (Carpentier and De Cleen, 2007, p. 274). Within this framework, media audiences are then not defined as uniform and passive absorbers of media messages (Chapman and Lupton, 1994); rather than see discourse as an irresistible force beyond human agency, it is important to note that selection takes place from within a variety of discursive possibilities, both within and across sites of discourse, to construct ‘reality’ (Jacobs, 1996).

Notwithstanding the above however, ‘there are limits to the different ways in which media texts can be “read”’ (Lupton, 1994, p. 52), owing to the media’s being encoded with ‘preferred readings which the majority of readers will decode and absorb’ (Karpf, 1988, p. 229). From a Foucauldian perspective, film contains discursive constructions that ‘combine not only to structure what it is possible for us to think or do, but also to limit our potential for thinking and acting differently’. (Street, 1998, p. 68). As media discourse ‘privileges certain reading