

KNOWING DEATH: ANALYSIS AND CRITIQUE

by

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ABSTRACT

Knowing Death is an essay film exploring thanatophobia or the fear of being dead.. There are difficulties in creating a film (a visual medium) about an abstract subject such as death anxiety as there are no tangible actions to show. I surmounted this issue by using images and sound as metaphors meant to elicit specific emotional responses in the audience rather than literal representations of the subject. The emotional responses mirror my personal journey through the subject of death anxiety while the subject itself is discussed through interviews.

INTRODUCTION: KNOWING DEATH AND KNOWING FEAR

Knowing Death: The Film

Knowing Death is an essay film that follows my journey as I explore the different strategies for coping with fear and phobias through the lens of *thanatophobia*, the fear of being dead. The film is broken into four “vignettes.” The first defines thanatophobia and how it affects the life of one who suffers it. The subsequent chapters represent the three main strategies used for dealing with phobias. A mortician who deals with death and mortality every day represents exposure. A religious leader who believes in an afterlife represents life philosophy. An elderly woman who has had to come to terms with her own mortality through necessity represents ego integrity or the realization of how one’s death fits within the greater framework of life (Mason 51). By the end of the film I realize that the only viable coping strategy for myself is to come to terms with my own mortality through life experience, thus mirroring the strategy of the elderly woman.

Knowing Fear

The fear of death, known as death anxiety, is a persistent fear of one’s own death or the process of dying to such a degree that it interferes with normal life (Feifel 538). Death anxiety is often confused with *necrophobia*, which is the fear of death and dead things. Necrophobia is the fear of anything associated with death; those who suffer it fear things like corpses, dead animals, funerals, and cemeteries. Death anxiety sufferers, specifically, fear one’s own personal mortality (Lang 220). Death anxiety has been further divided into countless subcategories, but only one is truly relevant to this thesis: thanatophobia (or existential death anxiety in philosophy literature)

is the fear of the nonexistence that comes with death, the fear that we will not be able to experience the world around us through our senses or thoughts (Feifel 540). Thanatophobia is quite a bit different from the other forms of death anxiety which all deal with the act of dying rather than the act, or the lack thereof, of being dead.

Thanatophobia is a difficult phobia to treat because it is such an internal fear (Feifel 538). There are, in the broadest terms, three methods used to deal with the object of their phobias. The first, and, until recently most common, is exposure therapy. Exposure therapy slowly introduces a phobic to his/her phobia with the end goal of allowing the phobic to see that their fears are unfounded (Feifel 539). For example, a phobic who is afraid of snakes may be first introduced to stuffed snakes, then toy snakes, then snakes across the room, until finally he/she is handling live snakes. This technique is obviously not applicable to existential death phobias as there is no way to expose oneself to nonexistence.

The second method is for a phobic to change philosophical beliefs toward their phobias (Abramowitz 441). This method is best used to treat phobias that are not based on physical things, for example emotional deprivation disorder (the fear of hurting other people's feelings) or certain types of social obsessive compulsive disorder (Abramowitz 441). By changing a patient's greater understanding of how the world works, you can remove the need for their fear.

The third method is an all encompassing one, which includes small amounts of the previous two as well as ego integrity (Feifel 541). Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) is a technique used to cure a number of cognitive and emotional dysfunctions including phobias. The main idea is that cognitive dysfunction's cannot be cured with logic (Abramowitz 435). Most phobia patients realize that their fears are not logical, but understanding this disconnect does little to dull the physiological and psychological responses evoked by their fear. CBT focuses on taking steps to being

cognizant of their responses to particular stimuli (Abramowitz 440). For example, through training, a patient may become aware of why he/she is beginning to have a panic attack. Knowing that an attack is imminent he/she can take specific steps to keep it from spiraling out of control. In terms of a phobia, CBT helps patients understand their phobia and how their phobia triggers within them; through understanding, they can control their fear (Feifel 540). In a sense, a phobic comes to terms with his/her own phobia while also coming to terms with the object of their fear. Like most psychological treatments, CBT is not something requiring a clinical process. Many of us face our fears daily. Through our own experiences and internal dialogue, we come to terms with any number of things in our lives, overcoming them. CBT notwithstanding, age and experience are often the best treatments.

DEATH FROM EPICURUS TO MODERN MEDIA AND LITERATURE

“Where Death is, I am not. If Death is, then I am not. Why should I fear that which can only exist when I do not?” (quoted in Hospers 310) Epicurus used these simple sentences to springboard his argument on the fear of death. He argued that when we are dead, we no longer have faculties such as sight, touch, or thought, to experience it. Because we can never experience death, we cannot and should not fear it. This idea seems simple enough, but it is precisely the unknown that we fear. Human fears tend to center around those things that we have no power to control (Mathews 460). Because death is not part of life, we often fear what will happen to ourselves after we die, and further, we fear that the world will go on after we are not there to experience it.

We can never experience our own death. Others will experience our death, or at least the results of our death. This is an important dichotomy that must be remembered in any discussion of Death (Mason 84). On one hand, we have our own death and our own passage away from this world, a passage that cannot be experienced. On the other hand, we have death from the perspective of the living. This perspective can be our experiences with other people’s deaths or even thoughts about our own death framed within the world of the living. When we talk about death in this sense, we are actually talking about a process of life.

Though it is not generally discussed openly, death weighs on our collective minds. By some estimations, 68% of Americans have a form of death phobia to some degree (Mason 67). When we do discuss death, our thoughts are constructed from the prospective of the living rather than from the perspective of our own passage into death (Mason 45). This could be partially due to a deficit in our lexicon, as we simply do not have the vocabulary to talk about a literal nothingness. It could also

be because we tend to focus on the living aspects of death such as the process of dying and how we see our family members and loved ones moving on. Even the idea of “coming to terms with our own death” can be translated into “coming to terms with the end of our lives.” The difference here is subtle, but quite important. It is the difference between death as an intangible concept outside of life (hereafter death outside of life) and death as a tangible and active process within life (death within life).

Most literature and media dealing with death focuses on the living aspect of death. The bulk of exceptions to this rule lie within the annals of philosophy. Plato even stated that “Philosophy is a preparation for death” in his introduction to his metaphysics (Plato 136). Quite a few other fields of philosophical study have been created from the foundation or postulating death as an endpoint such as existentialism, theology, and to some degree ethics (Mason 32). Despite the central role of death in philosophical thought, Jeff Mason points out that, ironically, there are no real experts in death, either within philosophy or outside of it because we cannot know anything of what the nothingness of death is. Any thought on the subject is merely speculation (Mason 122).

Death has been a major theme in film, both fiction and nonfiction, ranging from G.A. Smith’s *The Death of Poor Joe* (1901) to Rob Reiner’s *The Bucket List* (2007). The ways in which film has approached death is as varied as are the movies that explore it. Some take a humorous approach *Weekend at Bernie’s* (1989). Others take a more sympathetic approach *Silverlake Life* (1993). Some consider the prospective of the dying, while others are about the survivors. Some consider death an end, while others consider what comes next. No matter what the approach previous films have taken to explore the death trope, each deals with death as a process of life rather than considering the nature of death or what it is to be dead from a personal perspective.

It doesn't take very much imagination to see why films have limited their approach to the death front the prospective of the living. The process of dying and moving past death has specific actions associated with them that lend well to the nature of film. On the other hand, making a film about death outside of life proves more difficult because of the intangible nature of the subject.

Showtime's *Time of Death* documentary series serves as an archetype of how films deal with death. The *Time of Death* series follows the struggles faced by the terminally ill and their families through their final days. It touches on everything from the emotional toll of death, physical pain, leaving loved ones behind, and making sure that families are left secure. Shot mostly verité with scattered interviews, the series offers a surprising intimacy into the connections between the dying and their loved ones. By including interviews, the participants are given the opportunity to discuss deeper thoughts about dying and death, although the latter is almost all but ignored save a few scattered comments on the afterlife. Almost everything in the show is wrapped around family connections.

Season 1, episode 2 (2013) follows seventy-four year old Lenore who has inoperable pancreatic cancer. The bulk of the episode centers on the relationship between Lenore and her husband. It covers how they met, their struggles, and how they have grown into one soul. In Lenore's last interview she discusses leaving her husband and family behind when she says, "Goodbye, goodbye, goodbye, very hard, so hard." Her final words before passing further press death as a part of life.. She tells her husband, "It's been wonderful with you. It's been fun." After her death, as with almost every death in the series, the first shot is of something living, a flower blowing in the breeze. The episode then turns to those Lenore left behind in their struggles to continue their lives without her. In the final interview with her husband, he gives what could be the through line of the entire series, "Life is stripped down when we're faced with

death.” While the show is about dying to some degree, the *Time of Death* series is more about life and how we live in the face of death, about the end of relationships, the end of experiences, and about moving on, all of which are tangible and filmable subjects.

Knowing Death takes a slightly different approach to death than other films (see above). The two themes around which *Knowing Death* revolves are both intangible concepts rather than filmable actions. Neither death outside of life nor coping with death have obvious specific actions associated with them. Because film is, by its very nature, a visual action-based medium, *Knowing Death* requires different editorial approaches than other films. In the case of *Knowing Death*, I made most editorial decisions in order to create specific feelings or moods around the subject. The structure, visuals, sound design, and music decisions are intended pull the viewer along my exploration of the fear of death.

CREATIVE DECISIONS IN *KNOWING DEATH*Overall Format

Knowing Death is divided into four separate vignettes. The first is an interview with a sufferer from thanatophobia, who happens to be the maker of the film. My interview describes what thanatophobia is and how it effects my life on a regular basis. Each of the subsequent sections offers different methods for coping with thanatophobia. These sections are each comprised of interviews with people who exhibit different methods of coping: exposure, philosophical change, and simple acceptance. Each of the four interviewees is offered as almost an everyman of the approaches they respectively represent (with a slight exception of the last vignette).

When beginning the film I had a difficult choice whether to include each section as separate vignettes or weave each voice in and out throughout. I feel that the interwoven approach is best suited for films in which different interviewees cover similar topics. The extreme case is when each interviewee answers the same set of questions. This lets the interviews support or contrast each other. Agnes Varda's *The Gleaners and I* (2000) offers a perfect example of the interwoven approach. Varda uses multiple perspectives to show that gleaning should be a more socially-acceptable practice. A notable scene revolves around a group of young people who were gleaning discarded food from a grocery store dumpster. The store owner, tired of cleaning the mess they left behind, poured bleach onto the discarded food. Varda interviews each of the people involved in the incident, the gleaners, the store owner, and a lawyer who issued a ruling on the case. Each interviewee offered a different perspective to the incident. If only one of the stories had been told, we would have missed the complicated situation at hand. Varda even explains in the film that, "...they all played their part, applying their own logic," and that "each experiences it differently."

Vignettes offer a different approach. Vignettes are best suited for situations in which each of the interviewees (or stories) offer a mutually exclusive angle to a greater theme. Radio shows like NPR's *This American Life* are some of the best examples of the vignette approach. Each episode of *This American Life* is about a broad theme which is explored through three or more "chapters." The chapters have very little in common except that they approach the main theme from different angles. Episode 60 is called "The Business of Death" (1997). This episode focuses on people whose livelihoods deal with death in some way or another. Each chapter focuses on a completely different person with completely different professions, and consequently, completely differing views on death. Chapter One is about a mortician who performs the funeral rights for his father. Chapter Two is about a pathologist who muses about what it means to deal with death. Chapter Three is about a firefighter and how to cope with the pain of those who he cannot save. Chapter Four is about a doctor who splices eyes from deceased organ donors. There is not much of a common thread found among the different chapters other than the fact that each person's career deals with the dead or dying. The full story only emerges when all of the chapters are taken together as a whole. The characters in each of the vignettes take differing views on how their careers allow them to deal with death, so all the chapters are required to ask the important questions of the listeners. If only one or two views were presented, the listener is only given those options to choose from. It is the variety that challenges the audience.

Early in the creation of *Knowing Death*, I noticed that each person has a very separate story that does not easily overlap with the others. That is not to say that each story is deeply personal, but that each person approaches death through a different set of experiences and beliefs. Because the approach that each interviewee takes is mutually exclusive, I structured the film as separate vignettes. In choosing the vi-

gnette approach I was also able to develop each interviewee on a personal level while also letting them tell how their experiences or beliefs allow them to approach death without fear. When taking the interwoven approach, we often only “meet” characters through their recounting of specific stories. By taking the vignette approach each character shares stories in their own way.

Using interviews with actual people who, in a sense, represent a concept creates a difficult balance for a film. On one hand the interviewees must be generic enough that we see them as Everymen; on the other hand they need to be individual enough to keep the audience vested. In order to strike this tenuous balance I include both personal stories and stories that develop their Everyman messages. These stories have to be human enough that any audience member can relate to them while specific enough to that character that audience members probably have not actually had that experience (unless they themselves also represent one of the themes). The first story in each vignette promotes audience empathy with the interviewee while simultaneously showing the audience that the he/she uncommon experiences specifically related to his/her theme. My vignette begins as I describe a panic attack; Chris Remley, the mortician, begins by describing his first experience caring for a dead body; Stephanie Sorge-Wing, the preacher, begins by relating an experience she had advising a nearly deceased woman; and Janice Suarez, the elderly woman (and the filmmaker’s grandmother), explains that she has survived most of her loved ones. In each case, we are able to empathize with the characters. We can see ourselves in similar situations and can imagine how we would act and feel. At the same time, most of us have never embalmed a body, sat with someone on their deathbed, or outlived our family. After establishing the simultaneous connection and distance between the audience and the interviewees, I tried to include stories about the characters’ positions, told from a personal point of view. Both the mortician and the preacher discuss their professions

and beliefs in a personal way, even mentioning their children. My grandmother talks about her personal struggles with aging. In all cases the characters speak in the first person, frequently using the word “I,” as opposed to speaking as omniscient voices of God or expert witnesses who are far removed from their subject. By keeping the interviews personal, I tried to keep each as an Everyman who represents their approach to dealing with death. The final statement in each case is a summation that explicitly shows that the interviewees’ experiences or beliefs help them cope with death, pulling the viewer back from the individuals on screen and back to the broader theme.

Visuals: from Axiographics to Montage

Axiographics are an important consideration in any documentary film analysis. In *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary*, Bill Nichols defines axiographics as how films “...address the question of how values, particularly an ethics of representation, comes to be known and experienced in relation to space” (Nichols 77). Audiences of fiction films assume that reality in a film is created by the filmmakers and writers; in doing so they assume a certain amount of subjectivity and manipulation. On the other hand, audiences of documentaries assume an objective representation of the reality that we all inhabit (Nichols 85). This assumption is of course not true. Any film, even a documentary, is a summation of choices made by the filmmaker and is subject to his/her ideological beliefs and social-historical context. These choices can be both purposeful or inadvertent. In most of his own documentary modes Nichols views this uncommunicated subjectivity as a negative, stating “These subjectivities thwart or obstruct the implantation of an idealized ethical standard” (Nichols 83). He argues that only two of his modes, the interactive and reflexive modes, are truly ethical because these two modes put the filmmaker’s own opinions

in the foreground of the film without hiding behind a tenuous shroud of objectivity (Nichols 92) .

I agree with Nichols' assessment to some degree, although I feel that there is another mode of filmmaking not included among his documentary modes that puts author-subjectivity to the forefront of the film. Timothy Corrigan's defines the essay film as one that is "...a search to find out what one thinks about something" (Corrigan 33). The goal of an essay film is not to make an argument, but rather to explore a topic. An essay film, therefore, "lies at the crossroads between subjectivity and objectivity" (Rascaroli 43). The standard documentary looks outward at a topic, attempting to show or persuade the audience. An essay film turns its gaze inward, toward the feelings of the filmmaker.

While the essay film follows the filmmaker's personal and subjective intellectual journey in understanding a specific subject, the stages of the journey itself imply a certain amount of reality and objectivity (Corrigan 35). In the essay film *The Gleaner's and I* 2000, Agnes Varda explores the behavior and art of gleaning. Rather than just giving her own musings on an abstract subject, Varda uses real-life examples of different gleaners to illustrate rather than tell. The situations in which the gleaners find themselves, and their own opinions towards those situations are objective. They ground the filmmaker's exploration of gleaning in reality. Without the element of objectivity throughout the journey, the essay filmmaker's exploration loses validity. A subjective search for a subjective truth is little more than chasing smoke. The filmmaker's journey is subjective while the information within the journey must be objective.

Knowing Death is an essay film. It does not attempt to convince the audience that any form of understanding and coping with death is intrinsically better than another. It simply outlines my exploration of the subject. This puts me, as an

essay filmmaker, in a precarious position. It is important that I balance the sense of subjectivity and objectivity without compromising my ethical values. It is also somewhat freeing. Because the audience knows that it is my personal journey, I am afforded a certain amount of control over the text and its presentation. I did my best to translate the interviewee's messages as they intended in order to keep some semblance of objectivity. Here I define objectivity to mean my personal objectivity as a filmmaker as the interviewees give their feelings toward death and therefore give subjective feelings. I do, though, manipulate the visual and aural experience to create an emotional response in the audience that mirrors my own throughout my journey. The result is that the audience is goaded into following my journey rather than taking their own trip through the topic.

The Visuals of Death

Because coping with death is not a tangible concept associated with obvious and specific actions (see above), the visuals for *Knowing Death* are more conceptual, intended to elicit an intellectual and emotional response to the viewer. Each was shot and edited with a different look and feel resulting in a specific emotional response intended to connect the viewer with each interviewee while simultaneously offering my feelings, as the filmmaker, through my exploration of death.

In creating *Knowing Death* I was presented with a dilemma—how do I build a movie on a topic with no literal visual action? In turn, what is the best way to create an emotional response through conceptual visuals? The Russian montage theorist Sergei Eisenstein argues that film can manipulate the human emotional experience through the synthesis of the individual shots in juxtaposition with each other, creating a whole with a meaning greater than the sum of the individual elements (Eisenstein

305). He continues to argue that human emotional response is far greater through montage than through literal editing because it “involves the spectator’s emotion and reason.” The spectator is forced to follow the same creative path that the authors followed in creating the image” (Eisenstein 309). Eisenstein was most interested in how images create meaning through their subsequent order. He defined five methods of montage editing. The most basic method for manipulating emotion through editing is the metric montage. The metric montage creates emotional effect through the length of individual shots. Simply put, shorter editing creates tension, longer shots in succession create a fluidity resulting in a calming effect, while holding on a single shot, particularly an emotional one, causes discomfort in the audience, forcing them to want to look away and escape the moment. The success behind metric montage editing is not found in the single shot, but rather how the length of multiple shots fit together. The second method for montage editing is tonal editing. The length and order of the individual shots is based on the mood found in the scene. In the “Fog in Odessa Port” sequence in *Battleship Potemkin* (1925), long shots sit on scenes of the foggy port, creating the effect of a languid and chill morning before the workers arrive: the calm before the storm. Eisenstein felt that the ultimate expression of his montage techniques was the intellectual montage (also called the over tonal montage). The Intellectual montage is developed in order to illicit an intellectual response, as well as an emotional response, by positing contradictory elements against one another (Eisenstein and Leyda 72). In what he termed *terbium quid* (third thing) he argued that two or more images can have an impact beyond the individual images (Eisenstein 300). A perfect example of intellectual montage is from Eisenstein’s *October and Strike* (1928). In the film, a shot of striking workers being attacked is intercut with a shot of a bull being slaughtered creating a metaphor suggesting that the workers are being treated like nothing more than cattle. The slaughter in and of itself shows the

brutality of the Russian government, but loses the more important effect of showing how the bourgeoisie treated the working class, which is the main Marxist theme of many of Eisenstein's films.

Eisenstein's montage techniques were generally confined to the edit of single shot sequences (Vertov and Michelson 85). Another Russian montage theorist, Dziga Vertov, felt that Eisenstein's montage philosophy was constricting (Vertov and Michelson 85-87). He considered the montage to encompass the entire filmmaking process. To Vertov, the montage was not merely how individual shots fit together, but rather a holistic approach to the entire film and filmmaking process (Vertov and Michelson 90). Rather than focusing on the juxtaposition of contradicting shots to make greater meaning, Vertov focused on correlations among shots and among scenes within the entire film. To him, "All links of meaning coincide with visual linkage" (Vertov 92). Vertov and the Kino-Pravda movement focused their montage theories on nonfiction filmmaking (generally the newsreel). Documentaries create a different set of difficulties in the editing and filmmaking process. Without full control over a film's reality, one has to create that control through editing. To him, the final result of the editing process is more of a visual language rather than a linear movement from point a to point b. "The task before you is quite another when the subject is complex and uneventful, and you have, at your disposal, only individual, disparate shots, with no more interconnection than the letters of the alphabet" (Vertov 272). With these individual "letters" a filmmaker can form the visual language of Horse, Man, or even Death by placing the shots together like letters, and then words, and ultimately sentences.

Montage theory did not stop with the early filmmakers. Chris Marker is perhaps the most influential theorist/filmmaker for my editorial decisions in *Knowing Death*. Not only do Marker's films exemplify the essay film, but he developed a slightly

different method of creating montage (Bazin 44). Marker felt that confining film to standard moving stock limited the emotional and intellectual influence that the medium could have over audiences (Corrigan 45). His work included still images, moving stock, and more unusual things such as typewriters and ink. Several of his most influential works consisted almost entirely of still images, creating a new subgenera called the photo-essay with the landmark films *Letters from Siberia* (1957) and *Koreans* (1959: Corrigan 42). The strength of Marker's photo-essays lies in the limitations of the photograph itself. Photographs only allow a glance at a specific moment with little to no greater context to add to them. Greater context, then, is filled by the aural commentary (Bazin 153). Bazin considered the relationship between the text and the images in Marker's films to be a new form of montage that he called horizontal montage. In horizontal montage, "The image does not refer back to the image that precedes it or to the one that follows but laterally, to what is said about it. Montage is made from the ear to eye" (Bazin 154). By combining different texts to similar images, Marker created greater summed images. For example, one scene in *Letters from Siberia* shows three successive shots of the same street in the Siberian city of Yalusk with three different aural commentaries. The first is a standard communist era message, the second is a "Voice of America-style misinformation" message, and the third is a neutral and as-a-matter-of-fact description of the city (Bazin 150). This scene reveals that the interplay between the image and the text can form completely different meanings; meanings and emotions that would not be created if either the text or the images stood on their own. In his own words, "The text doesn't comment on the images any more than the images illustrate the text. They are two sequences that clearly cross and signal to each other, but which it would be pointlessly exhausting to collate" (quoted in Lupton 62).

Knowing Death certainly fits within Vertov's description of a film in which the

subject is “complex and uneventful” with “individual, disparate shots” (Vertov 272). Without literal “events” to shoot, I chose to build the film as a montage. The main thread of the film is grounded within the interviews. All content gleaned through my exploration of death are found within the words of the three main subjects of exposure, personal philosophy, and forced coping. Because of this, I chose to keep these intact as the main text for film. The other elements, visuals and sound design, are built on top of the interviews, not to support the interviews themselves, but to help bring the audience along my personal journey through the subject of death. Because the film elements are a subtext to the interviews, I felt that the most useful montage style is Marker’s parallel editing. Vertov’s view of montage as a holistic approach was also important in my decision-making. The film itself is a montage, with each vignette correlating with each other. I do not mean this in terms of the content within the physical frame as Eisenstein suggested, but rather the essence of what each vignette implies and the style in which each is shot. I also saw the text better served by Vertov’s montage with the subtext correlating-to rather than juxtaposing-against the interviews. To juxtapose the subtext with the interviews would remove the credibility of the interviewees and transform the film into an argument of my beliefs rather than an essay of my journey. Further, I did not want to overtly disrespect the interviewees.

Forming Letters into Death Through Visuals

To most, death is a macabre subject. While I cannot say that making the *Knowing Death* relinquished my fear of being dead, I can say that it undoubtedly diminished the macabre taboo I attribute to it. When I began to envision the film as a whole unit, it was important that the audience follows me through this change.

The beginning of the film conveys death as macabre and frightening. The opening sequence is a fast-cut series of people telling what they fear. Some of these are fairly

generic fears, ranging from fear of deep water to small spaces to snakes. Others are a little off the wall: a fear of teeth falling out, vomiting, and clowns. Everyone is afraid of something. The sequence invests the viewer right away. The generic fears make the film more pertinent to everyone, while the more esoteric fears draw viewers with less common fears. The series is shot with a white background and soft light across their faces and with a wide lens (50mm). The look has two main functions. First, it sets the stage for the rest of the film by relaxing the audience and reinforcing fear as a ubiquitous feeling. Second, the clean white background contrasts with the last shot of the sequence. In the last shot of the series I introduce the fear of death to the audience. My interview is set on a black background with more contrast across my face. It is shot with a longer lens to create more distance between me and the audience. The stark change from light to dark is both literal and metaphorical. The literal change from light to dark sets the tone for death as macabre, a darker subject. Metaphorically, the change moves the viewer from the light and the safety to darkness and vulnerability. It removes the viewer from the safety of the understanding that everyone has fears towards despair of isolation. That one cut, from light to dark, sets the tone for the beginning of the film and conversely, the beginning of my journey. My interview, with black background, continues through the first vignette.

Visualizing Death: Mike

The first vignette, my vignette, continues to push the notion of death as macabre: death as something to fear. The interview begins with a description of a panic attack. A panic attack is the ultimate physical incarnation of the psyche, the most extreme manifestation of fear. The text is supported on screen by a series of black and white shots constructed of found footage. I chose found footage for the entire vignette

because it lacks the polish and comfort of the modern digital image. We have grown accustomed to seeing highly polished and saturated images. The bulk of what we see on television, streaming, or in the theater is shot cleanly, void of the imperfections found in aged video footage. The very essence of digital sensors strips us from the physical real-life relationship between light and physical film. By using found footage, digitized with scratches, jitter, and dust, I create a primal and realistic feel not found in digital footage. Color is associated with safety of daylight, black and white with the fear of night.

The first shots are of working body parts that have been separated from the body. In some cases they are separated from the body only by the frame while others are physically severed from the living body around them. Rather than showing living people out of breath or panicking, I chose to characterize panic attacks through separated body parts for three reasons. First, lone body parts form a subtext of death while the text describes a part of life. An entire system must be present in order to support life. Severed body parts do not live without the body. Even if they are numbly carrying on the task they performed during life, single parts of the whole are not living. The sequence concludes with a severed heart valve in its last effort to continue working. The heart, the organ most associated with life, dies on the table. Second, the lone body parts support the notion of death as macabre. We are comfortable with things that fit nicely with our expectations. Working body parts are not at all part of our daily lives. They are not what we expect. They make us uncomfortable. Finally, the working, severed body parts introduce a common thread found throughout the vignette, the Russian revitalization experiments.

The Experiments in Revival of Organisms was shot in 1940 by Russian scientist Sergei Brukhonenko and British scientist John Haldane. The film depicts Brukhonenko's experiments in organ and full organism reanimation. Brukhonenko's research

focused mainly on extracorporeal circulation (Konstantinov 962). He was interested in pumping oxygenated blood through organs, keeping them functional. The film starts with Brukhonenko's early experiments on excised lungs and hearts. We see Brukhonenko's apparatus, the autojector, bringing both a lung and a heart back into full function. The autojector pumps air into the lungs, the lungs absorb oxygen, and the autojector pulls the oxygen back out. Similarly, the autojector pumps both oxygenated and deoxygenated blood into a heart, allowing it to fully restart, pumping on its own. After the film demonstrates that revitalization is possible with individual organisms, it moves to a decapitated dog head. The head is attached to the autojector and lives on its own for several days. It reacts to light, noises, and tactile stimuli. Although it is not shown in the film, Brukhonenko's research article reports that the severed head even swallowed cheese placed in its mouth (Konstantinov 963). The film ends with the revitalization of an entire dog. The dog was put to sleep through deep hypothermia (Konstantinov 963-64). By dropping the dog's body temperature low enough, it goes through hypothermic cardiac arrest. The body is then brought back to the correct temperature, attached to the autojector, and is brought back to life. After several days, the dog is able to move, eat, and react as if it had never died. While the experiments, and the film, are somewhat disturbing and raise quite a few ethical questions, Brukhonenko's experiments paved the way for modern organ transplants and open heart surgery (Konstantinov 964).

The Russian experiments continue to appear throughout the entire vignette. Toward the end of the vignette we see the decapitated dog head attached to the autojector pumping oxygenated blood through it. A single shot of a doctor prodding the eye establishes that the head is not alive. After the autojector runs, the severed head reacts to an eye prodding and even moves itself. The head has been reanimated. The final shots of the vignette show the next stage in the experiments. We see an

entire dog brought back to life. The revitalization is so complete that after several days the dog moves and reacts on its own.

While the interview discusses the finality of death, the inclusion of the experiments forces us to ask ourselves about the nature of death. Is immortality possible? Do we even need to fear death if it can be avoided? More importantly though, is whether the search for immortality is a moral decision. Even though many of us who fear death would rather avoid its inevitability, if the entire world lived forever, overpopulation would further strain our resources and political systems.

Beyond the philosophical questions the experiments pose, they were included to further darken the feeling of macabre and fear of death. Throughout the vignette we see a severed head, working body parts, and medical devices resembling devices of torture. All of these images further fetishize and morbidize death.

Visualizing Death: Chris

The second vignette begins where the first leaves off. At the beginning of my journey I view death as morbid and fearful. Throughout the vignette, though, the macabre nature of death diminishes as we begin to see Chris's life as a mortician as a human one.

The vignette begins with Chris describing his first interaction with a corpse. To him, as it would be to most of us, the dead body is foreign and cold, almost eerie. A human body is a container that holds life which is manifest in warmth. To see, and even more so, to feel an empty container creates a dichotomy within us. Is a dead body a person or does the person leave with their warmth? Over his interview we see images of the instruments used for preparing corpses for burial. These instruments carry a stigma to them. Each one has been used to embalm and prepare corpses in

the past. They are shot in close-up on a white table. They are shot in color, but the surgical steel and the white background make the images feel almost black and white, likening them to the torture-like images of the autojector in the previous vignette.

Chris's vignette shows the most style change within a vignette of the film. The interview and the first images are desaturated and blue with crushed blacks. As Chris shares more and more of himself in his interview, we begin to see him less as a mortician and more as a human. He is a caring father and husband. He is not an estranged man who fetishes working with dead bodies; rather he does his job because he cares about the living who survive the deceased. As the film progresses, the blacks become less crushed and the images become more saturated. Toward the end of the vignette we return to his tools, the very same ones found in the opening sequence. This time they are laid concentrically over a green towel resembling surgical tools rather than arcane methods of torture. The final shot is of Chris looking directly into the camera with a happy grin on his face. This is the first time that his gaze turns directly toward the camera and therefore the audience. This shot finalizes the transformation from morbid to human by establishing a relationship, almost a friendship, between Chris and the audience.

The visuals during Chris's vignette are more literal than those of the first vignette. We see Chris performing many of the duties of his job, moving a casket for viewing and preparing for post-mortem surgery. While the shots do portray Chris, they are not entirely literal as they do not directly correlate to his interview. During the b-roll, Chris interacts with many of the icons associated with death and mourning. He moves a casket, prepares flowers, and prepares a guest book. We also see other icons such as pamphlets, tissues, and a small chapel. Throughout his interactions with these icons, we lose some of the taboo that surrounds them. Both he and the icons become less estranged. The order of his interactions help facilitate our comfort.

We first see him wheeling a casket out of a display room into a visitation room. The focus then turns from items directly associated with the corpse to those associated with mourning: flowers, the guest book, and a box of tissues. By the time we return to the surgical instruments and the preparation room, the taboo is diminished enough to feel comfortable with him in the most macabre of rooms.

Visualizing Death: Stephanie

The visuals of the third vignette, of the Protestant preacher, contrast heavily with what we have seen previously. The colors in the visuals, both b-roll and in Stephanie's interview, are extremely saturated and stark. Because the philosophical nature of this vignette, the b-roll has no action at all. Instead, the images focus on Christian icons, particularly stained glass windows.

The icons, shot in the Cathedral of St. Helena, in Helena, Montana, serve three main functions. First, they support the interviews. As Stephanie describes her interaction with a dying woman, the woman says, "I'm ready to die. I'm ready to go home." During this description we see an elderly man looking up toward heaven followed by several angels, representing the woman's ascension into heaven. Later, when Stephanie describes how working as a pastor during times of grief cuts to the heart of what she believes as a Christian, a shot holds on an anguished man praying to God. Finally, Stephanie claims that because of her faith, she is not worried about what is going to happen when she dies. The visuals almost describe what will happen as we see the words "taken up into heaven."

Second, the images drive the emotional center of the vignette. All of what Stephanie says can be reduced to hope and faith. The beautiful stained glass windows of the Cathedral of St. Helena and the stark colors they utilize present a feeling of

awe and wonder. They suggest something greater than what we have in this world. The windows are often cut with other, more worldly, images within the church. While these are also icons, the transition between the windows and the other icons help set up the notion of transition from life on this earth to something greater, whatever that may be.

Finally, the stained-glass windows to represent my own personal opinion on using religion as a coping mechanism. Stained-glass windows are translucent two-dimensional representations of reality. They can be beautiful and elegant, but that is as far as they go. They are not reality and they are not permanent. The windows most certainly contrast with the style used in the other two coping vignettes which serve as solid realities. The windows represent how I see religion: they are beautiful but are little more than thin barriers that protect us from the real-world elements outside.

Visualizing Death: Janice

The final vignette completes death's transformation from something macabre to something almost comfortable. This vignette is shot and edited differently than any of the other vignettes. The visuals preceding Janice's vignette are stylized, carefully lit, and follow a standard talking head with b-roll structure. Janice's vignette is much less so. The interview is shot in her family room with minimal lighting. It is also the only vignette in which we see and hear the interviewee address the camera in diegetic dialogue. The look is raw and realistic with a nod to reality television or cinema verité.

I chose a realistic look for this vignette because it represents my reality. It represents my only option for coping with death anxiety. Because I am not surrounded

with death every day and I am not religious, I simply have to deal with my fears on my own as I glean information through age, and through my own ego integrity. I, like Janice, will have to come to terms with my Death simply because I cannot otherwise avoid it.

This vignette also sings a more personal note than what we've seen previously in the film. This is the only coping vignette in which we see my face or hear my voice. Through Janice's words and the name on the gravestone, it becomes apparent that she is my own grandmother. Her death becomes more personal. For the first time the audience feels the tinge of sadness inherent in death rather than just its morbidity. The visual style of the vignette supports its personal theme. By shooting more realistically, we enhance our personal connection with Janice.

Even though I approach my grandmother's vignette with a reality or verité palette, I do keep the idea of the photomontage going, almost quite literally. The vignette is bookended with montages of shots of photographs. Photographs capture moments in time and keep them locked into place. A series of photographs can move us through time or through someone's life. These photos represent Janice's life and her progression from the time she was young with her family till the present day. The last shot in the vignette is the last photograph taken of her up until that moment. The montage builds a subtext of aging. Janice talks about her life in the present at 89 years of age. She talks about how she deals with being that age, only taking brief forays into the past or future and those are mostly to speculate. Age is not a solid thing. Age is a process. To say that Janice is 89 years old is to say that she has lived for 89 years. The inclusion of the photo montage reminds the viewer that life is a process and that she came to her conclusions, her comfort with her own mortality, through that process.

The text of *Knowing Death* discusses death simply, directly, and often without

my voice as a filmmaker (not counting my voice as an interviewee) because an essay film must have a sense of objectivity throughout the filmmakers journey. Even so, the film represents my personal subjective journey. The audience is taken through that journey through the subtext written in the visuals. The visual subtext and main interview text interweave to give greater meaning inspired by Chris Marker and Dziga Vertov's versions of montage theory.

The Sounds of Death

Bazin suggested that the strength of Marker's montage lies in the relationship between the aural text and the visual sub-text (Bazin 45). Without either of the two elements, we lose the greater story and greater meaning. I agree with Bazin's analysis, but feel that it does not go far enough. It forgets a central pillar to the modern film: sound design. Sound design has incredible power to create a subtext that interacts with the main text and visuals. If given the proper care, it can better interact with the aural text than visuals because it can directly influence and change how that text is presented.

Although film theory focuses on different elements of film, it can be reduced to how filmmakers tell stories. Given the thousands upon thousands of pages on which ink has been spilled discussing film theory, the number of words dedicated to sound is extremely underwhelming (Chion et al. 141). For example, Robert Stam's seminal book *Film Theory* only devotes 12 of its 330 pages to sound. Dudley Andrew does mention sound, but only in terms of semiotics (Dudley 67-70) Most film theory has centered around the image, the edit, and the frame. This void in film-theory literature is appalling given that sound is half of what makes a modern film. Excuses are given. Film (I include video as a technological change in film rather

than a separate genre) is the only artistic medium that uses sets of moving images in succession to create a whole work, so it would make sense to emphasize the theory of image (Stam 214). Also, the early days of film were without sound, so the medium, by its very nature, does not require it (Chion 24). Given the importance of sound in modern-film storytelling and the eighty-eight years since talkies were introduced, these excuses have little merit. Even though extensive sound theory is lacking, it is a slowly growing field. Film theorists like Michel Chion and Walter Murch have made headways into how sound can and should be used in film to aid the storytelling process.

Michel Chion is the premier writer in film-sound theory. His 1994 book *Audio-Vision: sound on screen* changed the way that we think about sound in film and created a lexicon to help facilitate further discussions (Walter Murch in introduction to Chion *iv*). Chion centered his discussions around what he termed the synchronosis between the aural and the image. Synchronosis is the marriage of the words synchronism and synthesis and focuses on how sound and image affect one another. His central premise is that “Sound shows us the image differently than what the image shows alone, and the image likewise makes us hear sound differently than if it were ringing in the dark” (Chion 21). Through a carefully chosen and constructed sound design, a filmmaker can manipulate the emotions of the audience through gestalt principles. While Chion’s insights have contributed a great deal to how we talk about sound in film, it is still quite limited. Chion’s theories, and most film-sound theories, are limited to the manipulation of diegetic sounds and how they interact with the image. Film-sound theory does break away from the diegesis/image interaction, making brief forays into dialogue theory and music theory, but this is quite limited (Stam 212). In fact, Stam divides film-sound into three categories; diegesis, music, and dialogue (214), a division which leaves out an important sound-design element.

While diegesis, music, and dialogue are important to the story-telling process, so are non-diegetic non-musical sounds. Non-diegetic sounds are those that are not caused by an action within the world of the film, either on or off screen. They are very much like music in that they create an emotional response in the audience, driving the mood or feeling that the filmmaker wants the spectator to have at any point of the film. While Chion does not delve in depth into non-diegetic non-musical sounds, he does give mention. He makes brief comment that sounds can often take the place of music in films, eliciting similar emotional responses (Chion et al. 83). This is an important idea; sound design and music are intrinsically tied together and are best used in tandem, as two montage elements, separate but in unison, like a dance.

Non-diegetic non-musical sounds are frequently used in high-tension scenes or films to elicit fear in the audience, foreshadowing what is to come next. A classic example in non-horror films is the beginning sequence of Cameron Crowe's adaptation *Vanilla Sky* (2001). The scene begins in silence with aerial views of New York City. Music takes over as the main character, David Aames, gets out of bed and readies himself for work. As he drives to work, the sound design leaves the music behind, replacing it with extremely present diegetic sounds, the keys of the car, the car engine humming, his watch ticking. As he drives down the city streets he notices that the city is eerily empty, void of cars or people. There is not a single soul but him. The diegesis gives way to eerie sounds of air funneling through a phazer along with electronic beeps and whizzes and eventually a low-frequency beat mimicking a heartbeat. The sound design suggests a sense of confusion in the character, but, more importantly, it evokes feelings of fear and chaos in the audience, setting us up for what is to come in the rest of the film.

Different types of sounds evoke specific responses in audiences (Sonnenschen 177). Some of these may be cultural while others may be evolutionary (Sonnenschen 179).

In the opening sequence of *Knowing Death* we hear a faint high-pitched ringing, slowly crescendoing as people tell their fears. As the short scene develops we hear the high-frequency tone is joined by a low-frequency rumble and metal scrapes. Continuous high-frequency tones agitate audiences, increasing heart rates. Low-frequency tones elicit the fear of what is about to come next, probably because we evolved to fear large things like large animals, rock slides, etc. By using these tones I created a disconnect between the comforting style of the visuals along with the text and the fear evoking sounds of the non-diegetic sound design that culminate with me saying that I am afraid of being dead. This sets the macabre tone for the first vignette.

As the first vignette begins, the non-diegetic tones begin where they left off in the previous section. A low frequency rumble lays a bed for the rest of the design. We hear high-frequency whines and soft rattles as the images shift through detached body parts. Here the non-diegetic sound supports what we see on screen, furthering the dark mood created by the subtext.

On top of the non-diegesis we hear our first synchronous sounds, although they are more suggestive than literal synch sound. At the opening of the vignette, we hear a heartbeat. As the scene continues, the heartbeat steadily speeds up. When an audience hears a heartbeat or a broken $3/4$ beat, their hearts will begin to match the rate of what they hear (Sonnenschen 115). The heartbeat is joined by the sounds of labored breathing which transforms into the mechanical sounds of a lung breathing machine in one shot. The diegetic sound design in the beginning of the vignette acts as a literal sound to what we see on screen, and emotional signifier, and serves to take the audience through a panic attack.

Human voice is generally the most important sound in a film mix. Sound designers mix the dialogue first, shaping all other sounds around it. Often times, the dialogue recordings are the only sounds used from the film set (Chion et al. 20).

In fact, a sound recordist's merit is generally based on his/her ability to separate the voice from other sounds or noises. It is not only in films that human language takes a front stage. We can also, while sitting in a crowded restaurant or on a noisy street, separate voices and words from outside noise with incredible efficiency. We are better able to separate language than any other sounds. Dialogue carries the most explicit meaning than any other sound we hear. Humans can differentiate language from other sounds, even if it is a foreign language, or a nonsense language (like those created in many science fiction films). Chion called the importance that we imbue on human words vococentrism (Chion 06-25).

Spoken words are not always part of the main text or even categorized as dialogue. Throughout *Knowing Death* we hear spoken words as part of the sound design. In the first vignette, as well as the beginning of the second vignette, we hear the words of Dr. Haldine's voice-over from *Experiments in the Revival of Organisms* (1940). The purpose of the voice-over is two fold. First, it helps explain what is happening in the visuals (which I consider subtext), and it adds to the dark and macabre timbre of the entire section. Dr. Haldine's voice is not always perfectly audible. Even though when Dr. Haldine's is not perfectly audible, we recognize it as language. I removed presence from the voice and added quite a bit of reverberation, which coupled with its already poor quality, give the feeling of a voice separated from its source and meaning, much like the heart and lungs separated from their bodies seen in the visuals. The effect is to add to the separation of life from its source, exactly as I see death. Soon, though, as the experiments start playing a more important roll in the subtext of the vignette, the voice gains volume, presence, and loses some of the reverberation. It begins to take shape, adding context to what we see in the visuals, explaining what the experiments are all about.

We hear the voice again at the beginning of the second vignette. Here, I wanted

reinforce the connection between the mortician's macabre tools and the machines used in the revitalization experiments. It is important to the arc of the film and of the second vignette that the tools of death are seen as dark and macabre early on. Without that, we do not get a complete picture of my journey through death and the subtext is not as strong.

After the beginning of the second vignette, we no longer hear non-diegetic non-musical sounds. Because I established this class of sounds as dark early on, I wanted to avoid this association as the vignettes transform the notion that death is macabre. I do continue using spoken words as dialogue. The third vignette begins and ends with the repetition of the words "It's a long road but there's no turning back." These words repeat over and over as a mantra, continuing straight through the epilogue and are the last sound heard in the film. These words are the sum of both my grandmother's outlook on death and on what mine will have to be. Death is unavoidable. As I say in the first vignette, "Every day we get older, every day we get closer to that final moment." There is no turning back, but, we have to deal with it anyway. We force ourselves to accept it through time and through experience. It is almost ironic that life is what will force me to accept death. The mantra is repeated in the film in the same way that it repeats in my own life.

We subconsciously glean incredible amounts of information through our hearing. We can localize a sound source, we can tell how close or how far a sound event is from us, we can tell in what sort of space the sound was created, and we can tell the general size of the sound source (Sonnenschen 74). This extra information is determined by the physical characteristics of sound as it reaches our ears. For example, as sound travels from its source, the waves begin to break down. Higher frequency waves break down more quickly than lower frequency waves, so we subconsciously register the distance of a sound source by the relative breakdown of high to low frequency

waves. The larger the sound source, the larger the waves it creates. Sounds that have lower fundamental frequencies, or the frequency of the main wave, come from larger sources. We are better at determining size, location, and distance of the human voice than we are of any other sound.

By manipulating these characteristics of sound, we can make a voice appear to come from a larger source, or bring it closer or further from us. This is a technique used in fiction films. For example, if two characters are in a close space, but are emotionally separated, a sound designer or dialogue editor can drop and muddle the higher frequencies of the voices, creating space between the characters. Voice of God narrations in documentaries often have the lower frequencies increased, resulting in a larger, more powerful sound making the voice sound more authoritative.

It is rare that this type of purposeful manipulation is used in non-fiction interviews. Generally, we try to make the voices sound as clean and clear as possible, adding little to no subtext into the voices. I took a step outside of this norm for the interviews in *Knowing Death*. The beginning of the first vignette needed to be personal, but not strong. While I am describing what it feels like to go through a panic attack I am bringing the audience into my world and into my space. In doing so, I am vulnerable. The dialogue during this time is extremely present (increasing the high frequencies so that I appear physically closer), but I lower the volume of the fundamental frequency of my voice. As the interview progresses and I am explaining what it means to fear death, the discussion becomes less personal and more informative. So, my voice has a stronger fundamental frequency and I lower and muddle the higher frequencies. I continue this in the second and third and fourth vignettes, starting in a more personal way and ending in a more informative one. The film finishes with my final thoughts. Again, I am opening myself up with more personal thoughts. I once again drop the lower frequencies and add presence. The results are

subtle, and hardly noticeable for those without a trained ear, but this information is still gleaned subconsciously.

Music is communication (Sonnenschen 105). Australian Aboriginals use music to record their history, Hindus use musical chants called mantras to reach a higher emotional and philosophical state, and music has been used to persuade the masses to revolt or fight; a tool used by to an extreme by Nazi Germany (Sonnenschen 10). Music can calm the senses or stir powerful emotions. Too often non-fiction filmmakers relegate music to little more than an afterthought, something to make the film a little less boring, rather than considering how music plays a roll in storytelling.

Music plays an important role in the sound design of *Knowing Death*. When I started imagining the film I was concerned that the audience would get mired in such a macabre and heady subject. Dark and heavy subjects can be exhausting, both emotionally and mentally, resulting in a short film that feels like it lasts a lifetime. To keep the audience from getting bogged down, I chose driving electronic music composed in major keys.

It is important that the film keeps a fast and rhythmic pace to ensure that the audience does not turn themselves off. The music in *Knowing Death* is relatively fast-paced, creating a dissonance between it and the dark text and subtexts. Music has a particularly strong power to create movement in a listener (Sonnenschen 107). Movement in this sense can be both physical and emotional. Sound-designer and theorist David Sonneneschein defines two types of music depending on how they relate to the characters in the story (p.156). Empathetic music reflects the emotions of the characters on screen. If a character is sad, slow minor-key music plays to create similar emotions in the audience, making us empathetic to the character. Anempathetic music creates a different mood to that of the character. This style is not as common, but just as powerful. A disjuncture between the character's emotions and

the audience's can heighten or dull a specific emotion. A powerful example is the use of lighthearted music during some of the more brutal scenes in *A Clockwork Orange* (1971). The disconnect between the images and the music creates an irony that heightens the brutality of the scenes. The music in *Knowing Death* is an empathetic music that counters the emotions found in the text and visual subtext of the film. It helps take a step back from my story as an essay filmmaker and main character to show a bigger picture. It offers a safe haven into which the audience can escape. Thanatophobia is nothing more than a fear. Fear in and of itself is not dangerous. The music serves as a reminder to the audience that fear of something so natural and unavoidable as being dead is not the norm.

It was a conscious choice to use electronic music. Death is by its very nature an organic and natural subject. Using electronic, and therefore unnatural, music, I allow the musical subtext to once again separate itself from the dark, natural, and macabre text. Once again, the purpose is to keep the audience from becoming mired in the subject.

My first thought was to use music written in minor keys at the beginning and then shift to major keys. Minor keys elicit feelings of unbalance, eerie moods, sadness, and fear while Major keys elicit more comforting and uplifting moods (Sonnenschen 104-8). The effect was a first vignette that dripped with melodrama. My interview seemed way over the top which lessened the validity and importance of my message. When I switched the music to a song written in a major key, it muted the overzealous drama of my performance allowing for a more cohesive film as a whole.

CONCLUSION

When I set out to make *Knowing Death* I was worried that the subject matter would stifle any chances of making a successful film. It is not particularly easy to create an essay film about an intangible subject. In order to overcome the hurdle, I tried to create a film in which the main text was driven by the interviews of the Everymen who helped me through my journey. Along side that text, I created subtexts through the visuals and sound design that represent my journey through the subject of death and being dead. In the same vain as Chris Marker's parallel montage, I intended the texts and subtexts to play off each other to allow the audience to simultaneously take their own journey through death (via the text) as well as travel along with me through mine (via the subtext). I wanted them to follow my journey, but take away any message that they themselves see fit.

A filmmaker's intentions are well and good, but the most important question to ask is whether or not they worked. I feel that *Knowing Death* has some success and failures.

At its core, film is about entertainment. No matter how much we theorize about a film, the heart of any analysis should be whether or not an audience is entertained. This is, in my opinion, the biggest issue with *Knowing Death*. The film has an engaging topic and characters, but the story arc is not as strong as I would have liked. Corrigan argues that the strongest essays are both personal and autobiographical while also objective and factual (14). While *Knowing Death* contains both of these elements, the personal and autobiographical subtext is overpowered by the objective and factual text. Because of the imbalance, we lose some of the important arc that is my journey resulting in a somewhat flat film.

The final message in the film does create an *ad hoc* arc by giving an account of my journey. I explain here that I will never be able to use the coping mechanisms of

Chris or Stephanie. In stead, I will need to take the more difficult road taken by my grandmother. While the explanation does tie the text and subtext together into one nice package, it may prove too little too late.

I chose to place my journey as the subtext because I feel that the alternative, to take the audience along my journey explicitly, feels overly contrived. To me, one of the most important elements of an essay film is the audience's ability to come to their own conclusions. In early permutations of the film I attempted to use voice-over narration in a similar fashion as the narrators in NPR's *This American Life*. In doing so, my personal and subjective dialogue took control of the text, forcing the objective and factual content to the back. The film became about me and not about death, which should remain the main character of the film. The film left little room for the audience to take their own message from the film.

I feel that it is the right decision to place my journey as the subtext. I may have created a better balance by pushing the subtext to the fore through a more aggressive edit and sound design. The three montage theorists discussed in this essay were all quite aggressive in the way they designed montage. Their main goal was to create a *terbium quid* through their edits. Eisenstein created his by pitting images against each other, Vertov by correlation, and Marker through parallel montage. I chose to use similar techniques, but to use them much less aggressively. I feared that by being aggressive I would undermine the objective and factual element of the film. For example, I could have countered Stephanie's words of hope with images of war, famine, and suffering. While this would have offered my personal feelings toward religion and therefore my use of religion to counter my death anxiety, it would have both undermined the subjective message of Stephanie's interview while also disrespecting her and her opinions. I attempted to strike a balance between being aggressive enough to reveal my own journey and opinions, while being gentle enough

not undermine the interviewees. I feel that I came close to striking a correct balance, but the film may have been better served through a slightly more overt and aggressive approach.

Knowing Death is an essay film about an intangible subject. There are difficulties in creating a film (a visual medium) with no tangible actions to show. I surmounted this issue by using images and sound as metaphors meant to elicit specific emotional responses in the audience rather than literal representations of the subject. The emotional responses mirror my personal journey through the subject of death anxiety while the subject itself is discussed through interviews.

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