

## Death and Narratives of Freedom

Anticipating a prevalent argument among literary critics, Frank Kermode explained that we provide meaning to our lives by creating narratives with origin and end. (7) According to this view, narrative endings function as figures for our own mortality, which we cannot access directly. What happens, then, when narratives end with death itself? Although such collapse of ending and death may still render death meaningful, it inevitably imperils the semantic function of narrative.

Inherently devoid of meaning, death threatens narrative's thrust of integrating events into a coherent whole. As any other kind of narrative effect, death may follow any number of causes. However, death differs from any other effect: its senselessness jeopardizes the meaning of the causal chain leading to it. We can formulate this problem in the following way: narrative must insist on the meaning of life despite the meaninglessness of its ultimate result.

Narrative approaches this problem by endowing death itself with meaning. To ascribe meaning to death, narratives localize a secondary kind of death within life itself, thereby associating actual death with the liberation from such death-within-life. Within a worldview that identifies humanity with freedom, bondage becomes the essential characteristic of this death-within-life. By posing as a solution to death-within-life, actual death miraculously acquires a meaning: freedom itself.

In *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel argues that the fear of death results in bondage (111-119). Consequently, freedom entails the liberation from such fear. By remaining close to death, by "tarrying with the negative," one frees oneself from earthly bondage

(Hegel 19). In this essay I am concerned with narratives of freedom (specifically, cinematic narratives) that draw their rhetorical force from the defiance of death. These films equate death with freedom, thereby integrating futility into a coherent and meaningful whole.

To achieve such integration, narratives of freedom do not rely on a single strategy. I distinguish three different strategies that assign meaning and purpose to death: Stoicism, Skepticism, and Deism. As Hegel suggests, these strategies offer solutions to the problem of bondage, which constitutes the matrix of these narratives of freedom. (119-138) Heidegger explains that the master and slave figures arise from a paradoxical struggle resolved neither by victory nor death, but rather by their mere possibility: the possibility of victory for the master and the possibility of death for the slave (*Tarrying with the Negative* 160). In other words, the master comes into being when, fearing death, his/her opponent decides to obey and work, thereby becoming a slave. For the slave, obedience and labor are means of avoiding death. Although the slave successfully thwarts death, fear of death survives precisely through the practices of obedience and labor. Once the slave has secured life, the conflict shifts from avoiding death to overcoming servitude and, therefore, the fear of death. Of course, one demonstrates the conquest of such fear more radically by confronting death directly, rather than by merely refusing obedience or labor. Nevertheless, each of these strategies ultimately fails to ascribe a stable meaning to death, as follows.

I. As the first of these strategies, Stoicism searches for independence and tranquility in the realm of thought because in thought one does not depend upon the master but only

upon oneself. The realm of thought constitutes a resting place where one is free “whether on the throne or in chains” (Hegel 121). This withdrawal into thought sunders the world into two realms: an outer world ruled by the threat of force and its inverted image (an inner world ruled by rationality). The Stoic overcomes the empirical world through rational practices, such as indifference to suffering, pride in virtue, suppression of emotion, and self-reliance. Despite the effectiveness of these strategies, only by confronting death the Stoic supersedes the empirical world and achieves complete independence of mind.

*Dancer in the Dark* (Lars von Triers, 2000) exemplifies how the Stoic attains perfection through death. An immigrant from Czechoslovakia, Selma (Björk) comes to the United States to repair a fault. Aware that any child of hers would inherit the disease that will eventually blind her, she decides to have a child. She dedicates her life to raising money for a costly operation for her son Gene (Vladica Kostic), who ignores both that Selma is going blind and that he suffers from the same disease.

Selma endures the hardships of labor by devising musical scenarios. Despite their imaginary quality, these musical scenarios fulfill a rational need to invest the hardships of life with order, fantasy, and purpose. Selma transforms a hostile environment into an orderly one that accords with her logic and vision of the world. Her Stoicism acquires more somber undertones when Bill (David Morse), her neighbor and landlord, steals the money for Gene’s operation. Bill won’t return the money to Selma unless she kills him, which she does. From this point on, Selma will resort to musical scenarios to justify the murder, to bear the judicial process that condemns her to death, and to endure death itself.

Throughout the film, Selma confronts adversity with Stoic dignity. However, the

prospect of death challenges her Stoicism. Selma can only initiate her becoming-music by transforming worldly sounds, such as those produced by trains or machines. Isolated in prison, she can only hear church hymns through the ventilation shaft; after struggling, she successfully transforms these faint sounds into a song from *The Sound of Music*, “My Favorite Things.” Before she is hung, her Stoicism collapses: she makes a spectacle of her suffering as she desperately howls for Gene, whom she had resisted to see since she was imprisoned. When Cathy gives Gene’s glasses to her (as evidence that her sacrifice has been worthwhile), Selma becomes-music without any aural cues for the first time, successfully turning a spectacle of pain into one of self-control.

It is not her love for Gene that Selma demonstrates by dying, as if his sight were more important than her own life. What she demonstrates by dying stoically is that her principles (repaying a debt) are more important than her attachment to the world (her love for Gene). Instead of understanding death as the negation of life, the film makes life and moral principles incompatible. As a signifier of a principled life, death becomes a way of reconciling them.

If Stoicism overtly aims at distancing itself from the empirical world, why would Stoic narratives stage death as public spectacles? Undoubtedly, the Stoic’s masked aim at demonstrating detachment explains the public nature of these spectacles. Stoicism's reliance on spectacle offers a means to decipher the perplexing death of Jef Costello (Alain Delon), a solitary hit man enamored with his own image, in *Le Samouraï* (Jean Pierre-Melville, 1967). Like Selma, Jef performs his death ritual in public, at a nightclub. The police shoot him when he points his gun at Valérie (Cathy Rosier), a pianist at the nightclub. When the police inspect his revolver, they discover that the chambers are

empty. In a previous shot, after arriving at the nightclub, Jef takes out his revolver and opens the cylinder. At this point, the chambers are full. Melville immediately cuts to an interior shot of the cabaret. The essential point is not that the chambers were empty when Jef points his gun at Valérie, but rather that he has taken the trouble of unloading them. Jef wants the police (and Valérie) to acknowledge both that he did not intend to kill her and that he has staged his own death. Jef's death ritual exemplifies what Nietzsche has called an imaginary suicide, which the suicide calculates by the effect it will have "on its witnesses, on the public, on those who will learn about it" (*The Fragile Absolute* 28). Rather than seeking to preserve physical life, the Stoic aims to attain eternal life in the master's imagination.

*The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (John Ford, 1962), another Stoic film, illustrates the lure of such eternal life. The film begins with the return of Senator Ransom Stoddard (James Stewart) -famous for having killed the outlaw Liberty Valance (Lee Marvin)- and his wife Hallie (Vera Miles) to Shinbone. They have returned to attend the funeral of an anonymous man, Tom Doniphon (John Wayne). Asked about him by the local press, Stoddard relates how, when he first arrived at Shinbone, Doniphon protected him from Valance. Doniphon and Stoddard are doubles representing two different ages: Stoddard, a lawyer from the East who believes in literacy, democracy and equality, represents the coming age of law and progress; Doniphon, who, like Liberty Valance, believes that every man is by himself, stands for the dying West and the way of the gun. They are also rivals since they both love Hallie, who is first Doniphon's "girl" but eventually marries Stoddard.

When the townspeople elect Stoddard as their delegate for the territorial

convention over Liberty Valance, Valance challenges Stoddard to a duel. Stoddard faces Valance and, apparently, kills him. The killing symbolizes the substitution of civilization for the law of the West although, ironically, Stoddard must resort to the way of the gun to liquidate it. Filled with guilt, Stoddard renounces his nomination as the territory representative in Washington. Stoddard's renunciation triggers Doniphon's confession that he (and not Stoddard) killed Valance, thereby liberating Stoddard from his guilt. Stoddard's success is now tainted not by a crime, but by Doniphon's heroic act of substitution.

In another sense, Valance and Doniphon are also doubles representing the opposite poles of the dying Wild West: Valance represents its violence and Doniphon its heroism. As Roche and Hösle point out in their analysis of the film, "the fact that in the night after the duel both the corpse of Liberty Valance and the body of Tom Doniphon are thrown on a buckboard expresses in a symbolic way the link between the two" (137). The visual analogy also signals that, after killing Valance, Doniphon dies as well, by destroying the world in which he is a hero.

Precisely in this manner the film constructs the tragic stature of Doniphon. By cold-bloodedly murdering Valance, Doniphon sacrifices public heroism, assumes his guilt, and excludes himself from the social order he enables. However, Doniphon's social death not only eliminates the old order; by inflicting guilt upon Stoddard, he remains alive in the master's memory as an indication of a kind of heroism that the new social order disables but shamelessly plunders. *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* shows Stoicism at its most arrogant, not only signaling a rational and principled realm, but also making such realm unattainable for others. By sacrificing the empirical world,

the Stoic successfully demonstrates the existence of an invisible, rational realm. Those who survive Stoicism, like Ransom Stoddard, will inherit this dual world and, therefore, must face oppression through different means.

II. Skepticism transposes the Stoic's external division of the world into an internal division of the soul. By focusing on internal conflict and wavering between two opposite poles, Skepticism disavows its own relation to the world. Accordingly, doubt, self-division and doubles plagues Skeptic dramas.

Freedom takes on a different significance in Skepticism, signaling no longer an interior realm where external bondage appears as inconsequential (as in Stoicism), but rather a choice between these opposite poles. Freedom becomes a way of establishing identity. In these films, the question "What should I do?" always implies an answer to the question "Who am I?" Death, too, acquires a different role in Skeptic dramas: whereas in Stoicism, death constitutes the ultimate proof of self-reliance, in Skepticism it eliminates Skeptic doubt altogether. The willing embrace of death (the ultimate act of renunciation) establishes the Skeptic's identity beyond any doubt. In Stoicism, death becomes meaningful by indicating the existence of a rational realm; in Skepticism, it attains meaning by inscribing itself into a narrative of self-doubt and identity.

If Tom Doniphon acts as a Stoic, the other hero of *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*, Ransom Stoddard, acts as a Skeptic. Threatened by Liberty Valance, Stoddard oscillates between the law of civilization and the way of the gun. When Valance presents Stoddard with the alternative of leaving town or facing him in a duel, Stoddard decides to stay and confront Valance despite all odds. Valance successfully displaces Stoddard's

dilemma between law and crime as one between bravery and cowardice. When Stoddard finally takes the gun, he has accepted Valance's terms. Through Doniphon's intervention, Stoddard appears successful both in Valance's terms –the law of the West- and in his own –the law of civilization: on the one hand, by accepting Valance's challenge he has proved to be a brave man; on the other, by not having killed Valance he has abided by the law. However, even after Doniphon explains what actually happened, Stoddard takes credit for the killing and reaps personal benefits from it by marrying Doniphon's girl and substituting him as the community leader. In other words, Doniphon's revelation presents Stoddard with another Skeptic dilemma: either to sacrifice Doniphon, or to acknowledge Doniphon's sacrifice and refuse to benefit from it. Stoddard proves incapable of repeating his heroic act and remains haunted by duplicity. Publicly, he is hailed as a hero while, privately, his heroism is tainted by Doniphon's sacrifice.

The choice of death plays a very similar role in *Jezebel* (William Wyler, 1938), a melodrama concerned with New Orleans ante-bellum society. After Julie (Bette Davis) insists on wearing a red dress at the Olympus Ball, a major social event in which all unmarried women are supposed to wear white dresses, Preston (Henry Fonda) breaks his engagement with her. Preston leaves to the North and comes back a year later with his Northern wife Amy (Margaret Lindsay), who will function as Julie's double: submissive but straightforward, Amy contrasts Julie, who is capricious, rebellious, and cunning. Julie schemes to win Preston back, but her plan misfires as she indirectly provokes the death of her suitor, Buck (George Brent), who challenges Preston's brother Ted (Richard Cromwell) to a duel. When the yellow fever spreads throughout New Orleans, Preston falls ill. Julie begs Amy to let her accompany him to the secluded island for the diseased,

where she will surely catch the yellow fever and die. According to Julie, her willingness to die will cleanse her from her arrogance, her strong will, and her defiance of social conventions. "Let me make myself clean again as you're clean," she tells Amy. Despite that *Jezebel* focuses on a private aspect of Skeptic doubt while *Liberty Valance* emphasizes its public consequences, the conflicts afflicting Stoddard and Julie are formally identical.

In *Sinbad, Legend of the Seven Seas* (Patrick Gilmore and Tim Johnson, 2003), the hero's willingness to die also erases any sign of duplicity. The main conflict circles around the moral character of Sinbad (Brad Pitt): Is he an unprincipled thief or a self-sacrificing hero? Three different characters function as Sinbad's doubles. I will distinguish the function of these three doubles following Keppler's classification of second selves. Proteus (Joseph Fiennes), heir to the throne of Syracuse, functions as Sinbad's double as savior, offering him an image of self-sacrifice and heroism to emulate (99-129). Despite that Sinbad has become a thief, Proteus (Sinbad's childhood friend) believes that Sinbad remains good at heart. When Sinbad is condemned to death for stealing the *Book of Peace*, Proteus substitutes Sinbad, allowing the latter to recuperate it and to prove his innocence. However, if Sinbad does not return, Proteus will be executed.

Eris (Michelle Pfeiffer), the goddess of chaos, also functions as Sinbad's double, but rather as the vision of horror, that is, a double of his evil nature (78-98). She offers him the *Book of Peace* if he answers to a single question truthfully: Would he return to Syracuse without the book to save Proteus and face death? When he replies that he would, Eris claims that Sinbad lies and, therefore, she refuses to return the book.

Marina (Catherine Zeta-Jones), Proteus' fiancée, is Sinbad's double as beloved (130-160). Also torn between two poles -either becoming a queen or a sailor-, she discovers her identity in search for the *Book of Peace*. When Marina confesses her love to Sinbad and asks him to escape, he replies that she would not love a man that runs away. In other words, he must return and face death to become worthy of her love. By willingly facing death, Sinbad resolves his identity conflict: he matches Proteus' sacrifice, becomes worthy of Marina, and proves Eris wrong. Eris must stop the execution and return the *Book of Peace* because his deed proves that he is in fact a hero and not a lying, selfish thief. As the Existential commonplace would have it, existence precedes essence: Sinbad does not embrace death because he is at heart a hero, but rather becomes a hero because he willingly faces death. Instead of revealing the Skeptic's hidden nature, the Skeptic's willingness to die generates the Skeptic's identity.

Although death may firmly establish the Skeptic's identity, it may also serve to stray the Skeptic from identity altogether. In this second kind of Skeptic drama, the Skeptic does not waver between two antipodal identities, but rather between identity and becoming. In this scenario, death signifies the Skeptic's failure to attain identity. *The Seventh Victim* (Mark Robson, 1943) literalizes becoming as an irresistible attraction to death. The heroine, Jacqueline (Jean Brooks), oscillates between identity (as a wife, a successful businesswoman and a mother figure to her younger sister) and becoming-death. She keeps a hanging rope in her bedroom because she believes life is only worth living if one can end it. After she mysteriously disappears, Gregory (Hugh Beaumont), her husband, and Mary (Kim Hunter), her sister, fall in love while jointly looking for her. Jacqueline's psychiatrist, Dr. Judd (Tom Conway), keeps Jacqueline hidden from them.

Dr. Judd is trying to protect Jacqueline from a satanist group that Jacqueline has joined and whose members, having pledged to no violence, are pushing Jacqueline to commit suicide. The satanists feel betrayed by Jacqueline because she has informed Dr. Judd of their existence. The film ends when Jacqueline finally succumbs to the satanists' command and kills herself. *The Seventh Victim* reinscribes death as social exclusion: Catherine proves unfit for marriage (Mary is Gregory's ideal spouse), business (she has inexplicably given away her business to another satanist), and society at large (she has killed a private detective out of fright).

In *Willard* (Daniel Mann, 1971), death signifies the hero's failure to complete the Oedipal trajectory. The beginning of the film shows Willard's (Bruce Davison's) oppressive situation. At twenty-seven, Willard still lives with his domineering mother (Elsa Lancaster) at the family house and works as a clerk at the company that his father started along with Martin (Ernest Borgnine), who has taken over the business and continuously humiliates Willard. Willard considers two lines of escape: on the one hand, Joan (Sondra Locke), an attractive temporary worker at the office, flirts with Willard; on the other, Willard takes refuge among a litter of rats that appears at his house and that his mother has ordered him to destroy. The former line of escape, a typical Oedipal trajectory, offers Willard a repetition of his oppressive situation in which he would merely switch roles while retaining an identity; the latter offers him the possibility of becoming-rat, thereby disturbing the Oedipal structure altogether. However, his becoming-rat already includes this divergence: Socrates, a white and obedient rat, functions as an Oedipal animal, that is, a pet with whom Willard can "play family"; Ben, a dark and disobedient rat, seems to draw Willard into a becoming-rat that would lead

him beyond human life.

At two different moments in the film, Willard faces the possibility of fully embracing his becoming-rat. When Willard brings Socrates and Ben to the office, a fellow worker discovers Socrates. While Martin kills Socrates, Willard cowardly remains impassive. In other words, Willard refuses to acknowledge his becoming-rat. After accepting Willard's apology, Ben consents to avenge Socrates' death by killing Martin. Nevertheless, after Ben leads a pack of rats to kill Martin, Willard abandons Ben in the office and kills the rats left in his house.

Willard himself re-inscribes his becoming-rat as an aberrant refuge from his oppressive situation. After the death of his mother (due to natural causes) and his revenge upon Martin, Willard considers his becoming-rat as superfluous. Becoming-rat appears to him as a means to do away with his specific situation and not with the Oedipal structure as a whole. Once liberated from his Oedipal nightmare, Willard invites Joan to his house, apparently to complete the Oedipal trajectory. However, Ben returns with a pack of rats that tear Willard to shreds. Ben seems to resent Willard's betrayal, that is, his retreat from becoming-rat. Therefore, in *Willard*, death signifies both the hero's inability to become and to establish a firm identity. In both types of Skeptic drama, the elimination of duality relies on steadfast identification with one of the two poles, which expels the rejected pole outwardly and enables Deism.

III. By means of death, Skepticism expunges the duality that Stoicism spawns. Deism gives this negative act a positive connotation by understanding death as communion. Deism substitutes separation for duality as its main source of conflict. Therefore, through

death, the deist will try to leave separation behind. In his study on eroticism, George Bataille already understands the lure of death as the desire for continuity. He explains that, in destroying individual (discontinuous) beings, death “leaves intact the general continuity of existence outside ourselves” (21). By embracing death, the deist renounces to discontinuous life altogether, hoping for the communion of which anguish provides a mere glimpse within the realm of discontinuity. The ending of Stephan Zweig's *Letter from an Unknown Woman* points toward this continuity that death provides: "He shuddered, feeling as if an invisible door had been suddenly opened, a door through which a chill breeze from another world was blowing into his sheltered room. An intimation of death came to him, and an intimation of deathless love" (111). Ophuls' film adaptation conveys this deathless presence through flashbacks of Lisa's different incarnations assaulting Stephan's memory. If, as Stanley Cavell notes in his analysis of the film, these images are death-dealing, it is because the letter reverses the roles of Lisa and Stephan: unattainable, Lisa becomes the deity that Stephan has failed to recognize. Within the confines of life, continuity is only possible through yearning, either as a perpetually postponed event (as in Lisa's case) or as a failed and irretrievable opportunity (as in Stephan's case). Death, on the other hand, enables continuity: when Lisa dies, she becomes an ethereal and overwhelming presence for Stephan, while he recognizes her as his goddess by embracing death.

In *Wings of the Dove* (Ian Softley, 1997), adapted from Henry James' homonymous novel, death enables continuity by different means. Depending economically on her wealthy aunt Maude (Charlotte Rampling), Kate (Helena Bonham-Carter) is in danger of repeating her late mother's "mistake." Kate's mother opposed her

parents' wishes and married a poor man, ending both in misery and divorce. Similarly, Kate has fallen in love with Merton (Linus Roache), an ill-paid journalist. Since Aunt Maude supports not only Kate but also Kate's father (Michael Gambon), Kate refuses Merton's marriage proposal. However, when Kate meets Millie (Allison Elliot), a wealthy but fatally ill American, she finds a way of renouncing neither love nor money: Merton must seduce Millie, who has fallen in love with Merton, and inherit her money.

Throughout the story, Kate struggles to become a subject and overcome her role as an object. Inadvertently, she has been an object of exchange between her father and her aunt, who gives him "a few shillings each week" in exchange for becoming Kate's guardian. For Kate, money is a means for leaving behind her role as object. However, she may only become a subject at the expense of turning both Merton and Millie into objects: Merton as the object of exchange between Kate and Millie, and Millie as the vanishing mediator that would enable Kate and Merton's union. Paradoxically, to avoid repeating her mother's mistake, Kate repeats her father's act of sacrificing others to achieve his own ends. As her father tells her, "You and I are the same."

Supplementing this repetition, the film proposes a striking asymmetry between Kate and Millie. At some point, both of them realize they are playing the role of object in someone else's scheme. Kate reacts by confronting her aunt, giving her father the expensive bracelet that her aunt offered to her, and plotting to keep both Millie's money and Merton. In other words, she tries to change her situation and become a subject. On the other hand, Millie reacts by embracing her role as an object. Instead of confronting Merton and Millie, she forgives them and leaves all her money to Merton. Through such majestic act of self-sacrifice and forgiveness, she secures Merton's guilt and love. As a

result, when she dies, Merton falls in love with her memory. The money that was supposed to secure Kate and Merton's union is now tainted by guilt and the memory of Millie, making their union impossible. As in *Letter from an Unknown Woman*, unrequited love is finally reciprocated in death. Spectrally, Millie's image assaults Merton's memory while her words guide his life. He moves to Venice trying to become the man that Millie thought he was. Death has finally united them.

In both *Letter from an Unknown Woman* and *Wings of the Dove*, the heroines attain the status of deity through their sacrificial death. *The Blue Light* (Leni Riefenstahl, 1932) provides another example of such deist-turned-into-deity. A blue light emanates from a grotto on every full-moon night. The mysterious light lures the young men from a nearby village: like somnambulists, they are drawn to the source of such beauty. The mountain invariably defeats them, as they fall to their death among the treacherous rocks. Only Junta (Leni Riefenstahl), a mountain girl and an outcast, can safely reach the luminous peak, which she worships as a divinity. Therefore, the superstitious villagers treat Junta as a witch. Impressed by Junta's beauty, Vigo (Mathias Wiemann), a Viennese painter visiting the village, follows her to the mountains. Although they are unable to communicate, he falls in love with her. On a full-moon night Junta heads toward the blue light. Vigo follows her and discovers that what produces the mysterious glow is precious crystals. The following day, Vigo goes back to the village and leads the villagers to the grotto. They successfully remove the crystals, freeing themselves from the uncanny blue light while bringing wealth to the community. However, the village's gain is Junta's loss: deprived from her unearthly relationship with the blue light, she plunges into her death. The enriched villagers subsequently honor Junta, turning her

story into a tourist attraction.

In these three films, the deist is finally vindicated as some form of deity. Although such vindication functions as a form of containment and only comes at the price of death, the deist ultimately triumphs because such vindication takes place within the framework of Deism. Once unable to attain communion in life, the deist is now revered as the enabler of communion. Whereas *Letter from an Unknown Woman* and *Wings of the Dove* register this movement strictly within the personal realm, *The Blue Light* exemplifies how a community coheres by sacrificing and deifying a scapegoat, a process that René Girard discusses in *Violence and the Sacred*. For Girard, the ambivalence of the scapegoat follows from its double role: after attributing its own internal violence to the scapegoat, the community ascribes the happy outcome of violent unanimity to the victim (68-88). Ultimately, through death the deist triumphs over the community because they no longer relate as master and slave, but rather as deity and worshipers, that is, their relation takes place within the realm of Deism. By means of death the deist finds liberation from bondage and overturns the relationship with the earthly master, who finally accepts the deist's outlook by worshiping the former slave.

The three strategies I have discussed suggest that the relationship between narrative and death is not unidirectional. While narrative helps us to make sense of our lives and to figure death (which we may never experience directly), death returns the favor to narrative generously. After destabilizing narrative and threatening its semantic function, death becomes the best means of cohering disconnected situations and rambling actions. Only when one experiences these living conditions as a form of death and one confronts one's fear of death to change such conditions, do these situations and actions

cohere into narratives of freedom.

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