The Iconographies of Death in Cinema (L'Aquila, 24–25 Jun 27)

University of L’Aquila (Università degli Studi dell’Aquila), Italy, Jun 24–25, 2027
Deadline: Nov 30, 2026

FILM AND DEATH

Death in the Eyes 3

The Iconographies of Death in Cinema: Personae, Representations, and Imaginaries

Few cinematic images have entered the collective imagination as profoundly as Death in Ingmar Bergman’s The Seventh Seal (Det sjunde inseglet, 1957). A pale-faced man cloaked in a long black mantle, challenging the knight Antonius Block to a game of chess against the backdrop of the fourteenth-century Black Death, this celebrated personification draws upon a rich medieval iconographic tradition, embodying the inevitability of death, the crisis of faith, and the equality of all human beings before their ultimate fate. Bergman’s Death evokes the numerous allegories of mortality developed between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, demonstrating cinema’s extraordinary capacity to reactivate, reinterpret, and transform visual traditions that have endured across centuries.

Cinema thus emerges as an iconological apparatus capable of bringing different historical temporalities into dialogue and may be understood as a privileged site for the Nachleben of images, in the Aby Warburg sense subsequently extensively explored by, among others, Georges Didi-Huberman. Iconographies of death are not merely inherited; they migrate across media, are continually reassembled, reconfigured, and reinscribed within new cultural imaginaries. Ancient archetypes coexist with contemporary sensibilities. André Bazin understood photography and cinema as forms of the “mummification of time”, preserving reality beyond its disappearance. Edgar Morin interpreted the moving image as an anthropological response to humanity’s enduring desire for survival and immortality. Moving images’ spectral dimension has eventually been elaborated upon in Jacques Derrida’s highly influential (including for film-, media- and visual culture scholarship) hauntology.

Cinema has developed an extensive repertoire of visual forms and aesthetic strategies whereby the inevitable, the invisible, and the unrepresentable acquire shape and visibility. Death has assumed an extraordinary variety of forms and representations: skeleton, Grim Reaper, psychopomp, ghost, invisible presence, and cosmic force. At times, it appears as a fully embodied character endowed with agency, speech, and intention; at others, it remains an abstract principle, perceptible only through its effects, rendering visible that which, by definition, escapes representation. It is a spectral figure rooted in Swedish folklore in The Phantom Carriage (1921). It erupts as a medieval Totentanz within the dystopian future of Metropolis (1927); it takes the form of the

seductive young man in Death Takes a Holiday (1934), of the celestial official administering the afterlife in A Matter of Life and Death (1946), of the sardonic visitor concluding The Meaning of Life (1983), of the enigmatic Joe Black in Meet Joe Black (1998), of the ironic yet melancholic figure traversing The Book of Life (2014) and Coco (2017), and of the unsettling Shinigami of the anime adaptation of the manga Death Note (2006-2007). Horror cinema has transformed death into monstrous corporeality through zombies, vampires, revenants, ghosts, and supernatural beings that dissolve the boundaries between life and death. Fantasy has imagined death as guide, companion, or mediator between worlds. Modern cinema has elevated it into a philosophical allegory of human existence, while animation has frequently offered ironic, pedagogical, or deeply melancholic incarnations of mortality.

To investigate the iconographies of death in cinema means to confront one of the fundamental questions of visual culture: how can images represent what stands for the ultimate limit of representation itself? From Philippe Ariès's cultural history of death to Hans Belting's anthropology of images; from the iconological studies of Warburg and Didi-Huberman to Laura Mulvey's reflections on cinematic temporality and Elisabeth Bronfen's analyses of the aestheticization of death, scholarship has consistently demonstrated that cinema does not merely stage death as a narrative event but continuously generates new forms of visibility, new personifications, and new visual imaginaries. Cinematic images thus become the site where memory, absence, corporeality, trauma, and survival converge, transforming one of humanity's most universal experiences into an inexhaustible laboratory of forms, figures, and visions.

The ERC Project FILM AND DEATH is organizing with the University of L'Aquila a two-day conference exploring the multiple ways in which cinema has represented, embodied, personified, and visualized death. It invites contributions that investigate the figurative forms, aesthetic strategies, iconographic genealogies, and audiovisual dispositifs through which the cinematic medium renders death visible, thinkable, and culturally meaningful.

Keynote Speakers: Stacey Abbott (Northumbria University, UK) and Katarzyna Ancuta (Chulalongkorn University, Thailand)

In parallel with the conference programme, the Necropoli Film Festival 2027 will organize film screenings (more details to be announced).

We particularly welcome interdisciplinary contributions from film and media studies, philosophy, art history, visual culture, media archaeology, death studies, religious studies, anthropology, comparative literature, and cultural studies.

Possible topics include, but are not limited to:

- personifications of Death in cinema;
- iconographic genealogies and the survival (Nachleben) of death imagery;
- the aesthetics of dying, the corpse, decomposition, and mourning;
- zombies, revenants, vampires, ghosts, and other liminal figures between life and death;
- incarnations of death across cinematic genres (horror, fantasy, melodrama, the western, animation, science fiction, mondo and snuff movies);
- hauntology, spectrality, and ghostly images;

- digital death, technological immortality, artificial intelligence, and posthumanism;
- intercultural and intermedial perspectives on the representation of death;
- archives, images of the dead, photography, and audiovisual memory;
- death, ecology, the Anthropocene, and planetary extinction.

Please submit a title, an abstract of 300-words, and short biographical note to deathintheeyes3@gmail.com by 30 November 2026. Accepted speakers will be notified before December 18. A registration fee of 80 euros (which includes lunches and coffee breaks) will be due in early 2027. A selection of papers presented in the conference will be part of an edited collection planned for 2028.

Organizing Committee: Mirko Lino (University of L'Aquila); Lucas Ferraço Nassif, Marco Grosoli, Susana Viegas, and Vasco Baptista Marques (NOVA University Lisbon)

Reference:

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