Alone in a Crowd: *High Noon* as Equipment for Coping with Death and Dying

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"This part … you do alone" (Berman, 2003). These are the final words spoken to Dave Boyle before he is executed in the film *Mystic River* (Berman & Eastwood, 2003). This chilling line is a reminder that death, more than any other life experience, is a journey that will be taken alone. Preceding death, our lives are filled with a series of experiences that help us prepare for the end. Whether it's moving to a new town, a career change, social abandonment, or the death of a loved one, we are often introduced to challenges that mirror death's solitude, because they are experienced without the safety net of friends and family. This is the reality thrust upon Marshal Will Kane when he is socially rejected by an entire town in the 1952 Western *High Noon* (Kramer & Zinnemann, 1952). Rather than run from death or deny its existence, *High Noon* promotes the acceptance of one's own demise—in the physical and social sense—as the supreme path toward bravery in life and in death.

As society grows increasingly smaller with each new piece of technology, it would appear that our emotional support structure is strengthening. Text messages allow us to immediately exchange important information—unlike the telegraph message that informed Kane about a criminal's pardon a week after it occurred—and reinforce relationships with light, witty banner. E-mail allows us to communicate a message or photo to every business and personal contact we know. Social media allows us to enjoy the first photos of a friend's new baby. But how do we truly experience these moments? Are we a participant in the greater social community, or are we alone and staring into a screen as the world goes on around us? As recipients of these messages we are still connected to a greater community in some sense; however, the true nature or our relationships should not be measured in virtual or implied

support, but with physical action that is directly targeted at reducing personal pain. This is certainly true in death. People look to their loved ones and religion for comfort in the final moments of their lives. This is where electronic media becomes a limited, false sense of support. Another harsh reality exists, in that people who physically sit by us on our deathbed will also become disconnected from our realities about death, and, in turn, leave us to mentally face death alone. In the end, we must rely on the individualistic character of people like Marshal Kane to remind us that some battles must be fought alone and cannot be shared.

Literature Review and Terminology

When individuals are expected to face great obstacles on their own, either by choice or by forces beyond their control, it would be rare for an individual to watch a movie and immediately discover a definite action or solution (Young, 2000). Film is merely the medium that transports a narrative to the viewer, creating a framework of new information that hypothetically impacts future decisions. If we conclude that the latter is true, then the ethical implications of narratives as source material for life decisions must also be analyzed. Adams (2007) notes that ethical demands that have been placed on an author can shape the narrative, and that these underlying ideas should always be examined. Ott (2010), in contrast, makes the narrative's strength seem less ominous by explaining that a movie does not uncover textual truths, but rather, presents "prompts for appreciating cinematic rhetoric" (p. 43).

The literature also presents an ethical uncertainty that lies in the filmmaker never definitively knowing how people will benefit or be harmed by the end product (Adams, 2007). To better understand these consequences, the literature examines diverse relationships that exist

between the medium of film and its viewers. Audiences, as Young (2000) explains, can be separated into three categories: (1) *undifferentiated*, a viewer with no distinction between self and film; (2) *differentiated*, viewers that are completely separated from self and film; and (3) *integrated*, a viewer that possesses a clear differentiation from the film, but also has the ability to rotate his or her interpretation of a film. Lair (2011) recognizes viewers as being "surface" or "savvy." The surface viewer merely observes and accepts the narrative as is, while the savvy viewer recognizes artifice and multilayered content. A surface viewer may watch *High Noon* (Kramer & Zinnemann, 1952) and see the classic tale of a lone lawman facing a band of outlaws, but a savvy viewer recognizes the subject, as well as the underlying symbolism (e.g., ticking clocks) and themes about death. The integrated viewer is less cynical than Lair's savvy viewers of *The Apprentice* (Burnett, 2004); however, they are both examples of viewers that are ideal for viewing film as "equipment for living" (Burke, 1973, p. 293). It is also important to note that most viewers do not watch films with a critical eye. Rather than gather information from the film as equipment for living, the viewer is simply in the moment. Ott (2010) describes this viewer as one who connects with the process of viewing through the immediacy of the senses, such as walking into a room. The viewer then combines that sensory information with previous experiences to connect with the film.

With the importance of audience perspective revealed by these scholars, it appears the responsibility of utilizing film as equipment for living lies just as much with the viewer as the filmmaker. An individual carries this responsibility alone as the viewer, but is also immersed in a film that was built out of a community of people, each contributing to the medium through writing, cinematography, sound, and lighting. The literature is capable of identifying the various

types of film viewers, but falls short of identifying the audience's responsibility to view film with a more critical eye.

The moral responsibility of filmmakers to create narratives that are socially significant and accessible to surface viewers is discussed in a general sense, but it appears to be the critical viewer's responsibility to uncover deeper truths. Costello (2003) discusses this concept by referencing the political statement *High Noon* (Kramer & Zinnemann, 1952) intended to make about McCarthyism and Cold War politics. This introduces social death as a variance on physical death, and how *High Noon* can be used as a coping mechanism to deal with abandonment; particularly when it's the result of an individual who is challenging oppression or socially-accepted ideals. Still, there is no clearly defined connection between Kane's individual journey toward death and how his actions can be used as a coping mechanism for our own deaths.

Just as watching a film on the surface offers the easiest way to digest the material without a need for complexity, the denial of death can be approached in the same way. The authors offer ways of identifying different types of film viewers and each filmmaker's moral obligations, but no information seems to exist for those who might use *High Noon* (Kramer & Zinnemann, 1952) as a method for coping with death. By identifying the viewer's connection to the film and to Kane's mortality, we move closer to identifying the connections between our hero's acceptance of death and our fears of death. If we learn to embrace the reality of death, just as Kane does, can we use that acceptance as equipment for living without fear of death.

Counting the Minutes until *High Noon*

High Noon (Kramer & Zinnemann, 1952) introduces its reluctant hero, Marshal Will Kane, during his wedding to Amy Fowler, a young, peace-loving Quaker who has convinced him to retire from law enforcement and settle down in another town. Kane hangs up his gun and badge just moments after the wedding, but his retirement is short-lived as he learns that death is coming for him on the noon train. Kane's certain demise is arriving in the form of Frank Miller, a recently pardoned outlaw who was arrested by Kane five years earlier and was sentenced to hang. Rather than flee, leaving the town to face Miller's dangerous gang without a marshal, Kane decides to stay and fight. With the train set to arrive in just over an hour, Kane frantically searches the town for men who are willing to join him. One by one, the townspeople who helped Kane arrest Miller a few years earlier are now turning their backs on him. Even Amy, whom he married just a few minutes earlier, is leaving him to stand by her religious principles toward nonviolence.

As the train whistle blows, Kane knows that the time for his death has arrived. He walks toward the train station to face his fears alone; the town, which bustled with horses and shopkeepers throughout the film, now appears to be a ghost town. Miller and his gang arrive as expected, and a classic Western gunfight ensues. During the fight, Kane manages to kill everyone but Miller, the one man who symbolizes his impending death. In the final moments, Amy, steps in to save Kane. She has had a change of heart, but is soon taken hostage. However, she frees herself, leaving Miller vulnerable long enough to give Kane a clean shot. Miller falls dead and the townspeople slowly pour back into the streets. Looking at them all with disgust, Kane tosses his badge into the street and leaves town with Amy.

Analyzing the Many Deaths of Marshal Kane

Throughout the film, Kane is reminded that he will soon die, and as his time draws closer, he searches for people who are willing to help him fight off the inevitable. The common duality of being aware of death, while also denying its presence, could also be viewed as the reasoning behind the town's eagerness to distance themselves from the reminder of their own eventual deaths. This phenomenon causes Kane to experience a social death that prepares him for the solitude of his own death; the one unknown journey that he, and all human beings, are destined to take alone.

High Noon's (Kramer & Zinnemann, 1952) common thread of death and dying is introduced and perpetuated in two forms: (1) a *social death*, such as the town's refusal to help Kane; (2) an expected *physical death* for Kane at the hands of Miller's gang. This inevitability of physical death offers equipment for living as a source of comfort and acceptance of one's death, while concepts of social death create a window toward coping with alienation, bullying, and abandonment.

Social Death

High Noon (Kramer & Zinnemann, 1952) is told from the perspective of one man, yet the realities of death and dying are not limited to the individual. When a person dies, the people who cared for and interacted with that person are affected as well. Funerals, for example, are just as much about providing comfort to a group as they are about celebrating the life of an individual. As we grow older, the cybernetic relationship an individual has with the increasing realities of death—as seen through funerals of friends, celebrities, even history—teaches us how to distance

ourselves from death. We can do so by living every moment to the fullest, or by simply denying the one reality that we know is true for all humankind. Understanding the impact of this social death and its relation to *High Noon* requires an examination of two perspectives: one from the people who will go on living (e.g., the people in Hadleyville), and another from the dying (e.g., Marshal Kane).

Physical death, discussed later in this article, tends to bring friends and family closer to the dying. They offer comfort and support in hopes of sending a person into death with the feeling that they are loved. In polar opposition to physical death, social death is a time when people go to great lengths to make an individual feel alone and unwanted. According to Costellow (2003), this feeling of abandonment was the impetus for Carl Foreman to write the screenplay for *High Noon* (Kramer & Zinnemann, 1952). Filmed in 1952 at a time when many of Foreman's fellow writers were being accused of being communists by the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC), *High Noon* as an allegory for the artists who were being shunned, blacklisted, and even forced out of the country. Viewers of *High Noon* who grew up after the 1950s might not recognize the citizens of Hadleyville as proponents of McCarthyism, but the realities of Kane's bravery and willingness to oppose the status quo are accessible to most viewers, including Lair's (2011) surface viewer. A viewer doesn't need to understand McCarthyism to be able to use *High Noon* as equipment for learning to be brave in the general sense, but a more integrated viewer would allow the film "to run through them and influence them, while still maintaining a distinct sense of who they are and how they will act in the world" (Young, 2000, p. 454).

John Wayne, one of America's most famous actors in the Western genre, would certainly be considered an integrated viewer of *High Noon* (Kramer & Zinnemann, 1952). A public supporter of the HUAC hearings, Wayne considered *High Noon* to be un-American and is said to have starred in *Rio Bravo* (Hawks, 1959) as an answer to *High Noon*'s portrayal of McCarthyism (Costello, 2003). This willingness to perpetuate a social death for the writers being accused of communist activities further illustrates that narrative ethics are not necessarily aligned with honorable causes; they can be felt on both sides of an argument (Young, 2007). No matter where the viewer stands with either argument, *Rio Bravo* and *High Noon* are both legitimate because they say something new about a life situation by introducing opposition to culturally dominant narratives (Adams, 2007).

Realizing the opportunity that film provided, Foreman made the ethical choice to use that medium as a spotlight pointed toward the social injustices of McCarthyism (Costello, 2003). Fearful of being named communists themselves, many people appeared to exhibit indifference toward McCarthyism. The same was true for the people of Hadleyville, who would rather wait for potential troubles from the Miller gang to blow over, than stand up and face their fears. Having already been asked to identify fellow writers as communists, Foreman made the ethical choice to create a narrative that showed it was noble to stand up against bullying; that it was better to suffer a social death than to sacrifice one's morals. By doing so, *High Noon* (Kramer & Zinnemann, 1952) provides equipment for living, by identifying the status quo as safe, yet shallow, and that the solitary path is more difficult, but also far more rewarding.

High Noon (Kramer & Zinnemann, 1952) demonstrates the loneliness of fighting against social norms and indifference by telling the story from Kane's point of view. As a result, we

experience Kane's slow social death alongside him in real time. Before anyone knows about Miller's gang, we hear Mayor Jonas Henderson tell Kane that he has friends in town, but the mayor later withdraws his support by saying, "We would all be better off if you left." Another character, who vows early in the film to help Kane fight the Miller gang, changes his mind later in the film when he learns that nobody else in the town is willing to be deputized for the fight. The only other people who haven't completely written Kane off are people who are socially dead as well—a town drunk, who is old and wears an eye patch, and a 14-year-old boy who is too young to be influenced by the town's cowardice.

As Kane is pushed further outside the social circle, the audience is asked to participate in the journey with him. This first-person perspective of Kane's social death opens up *High Noon* (Kramer & Zinnemann, 1952) to differentiated and integrated audiences (Young, 2000). The differentiated viewer recognizes his or her separation from the fictional character, but an emotional connection is still a possibility because of the nature of the first-person narrative. This perspective also challenges integrated viewers to examine connections between Kane's abandonment and their own life experiences. For example, Kane is one of the few characters in *High Noon* who controls his own destiny. Even when Amy is pleading with Kane to leave with her, Kane replies, "I'm the same man, with or without this badge." What can we learn from Kane's realization that he doesn't need the town, or his career, to know himself? Perhaps this type of individualism reaches beyond Western genres, and offers a reminder that Kane was the only person in town willing to accept a social death, or to physically die with purpose, rather than live in denial. *High Noon* offers this final insight as equipment for coping with the realities of physical death.

Physical Death

For Western lawmen, the defense of justice is almost always a solitary endeavor paired with the threat of death. *High Noon* (Kramer & Zinnemann, 1952) makes the realities of Kane's impending death available to Lair's (2011) surface viewers in the traditional sense of a Western film. Surface and differentiated viewers, as defined by Young (2000), can easily recognize that as the clock draws closer to noon, Kane's chances of survival become less likely. As the viewer sees this progression unfold from Kane's perspective of the town, such as overhearing the hammering sound of caskets being built, the audience sees Kane slowly accept his own death. But to fully understand Kane's journey as equipment for living, the savvy viewer is asked to engage with the film on a deeper level (Lair, 2011).

Throughout the narrative, Kane's journey is filled with symbolism that plays a key role in introducing the certainty of death for all men, and the futility of trying to stop death from occurring. Young (2000) describes this relationship between symbolism and the connections that people are able to make in their own lives as a process toward narrative truth. This truth is revealed in the film's opening scene as a man from Miller's gang, who represents Kane's imminent death, sits alone on a hill, peering off in the distance as he waits for his moment to act. Death is indeed imminent from the opening scene, but *High Noon's* (Kramer & Zinnemann, 1952) most prevalent and symbolic reminder of death's continuing inevitability is the presence of a clock in nearly every scene. Each home, hotel, and business that Kane visits has a clock in the background, slowly ticking away the final minutes of his life. Even the marshal's office is located next door to a watch repair shop.

High Noon (Kramer & Zinnemann, 1952) recognizes that some conversations about death are incomplete without addressing religion, but approaches the subject with great subtlety. The viewer never sees Kane pray for help or approach the minister for last rites, but an underlying religious theme is introduced within the film's first minute. Before any words of dialogue are spoken, the "Ballad of High Noon" begins with the desperate verse, "Do not forsake me, oh, my darlin'… On this our wedding day." The "darlin'" in the song represents the pure, innocent, and religious Amy Fowler, who does forsake Kane by promising to leave town if he stays to fight Miller's gang. Kane is forsaken again when he walks into a church to ask members of the congregation for help against Miller's gang. After a few cries from the crowd that Miller's gang is not their problem, and suggestions that the problem would go away if Kane went away, Hadleyville's lone lawman drops his head in defeat and walks out the door. Ott's (2010) multi-modal approach of connecting film rhetoric to film technology (e.g., camera angles, editing, color processing) illuminates the final moment in which Kane is abandoned by religion and hope. Just as the clock strikes noon, we see the camera zoom out to a crane shot that gives the viewer an omnipotent perspective of Kane standing in the middle of an empty town.

In the end, we learn that Amy (i.e., religion) was the only person who did not forsake him when it was time to face death. By standing by him during and after the gunfight, she gave Kane the comfort he needed to finally let go of the life he knew. This prompts him to throw his badge onto the ground and leave town in a symbolic acceptance of his death and the unknown journey that will follow.

The futility of fighting death is demonstrated repeatedly by the citizens of Hadleyville, but is best represented when Kane visits Martin Howe, a former lawman and his personal friend.

Sitting in his home, with a clock ticking away on the wall behind them, Howe says, “In the end, you end up dying all alone on some dirty street. For what? For nothing. For a tin star” (Kramer & Zinnemann, 1952). Howe no longer covets the tin star that represents his life’s work, but rather, has accepted the reality that he will die one day, alone. Howe also recognizes that the people of the town don’t share his acceptance, and would rather deny death than recognize it as a reality. Howe continues: “People gotta talk themselves into law and order before they do anything about it. Maybe, because down deep, they don’t care. They just don’t care.” Alternatively, Kane’s willingness to care about the people of Hadleyville makes him an archetype lawman in the Western genre, but it also frees him to live his life to the fullest. By recognizing the certainty of death, Kane is able to live on his own terms. He is the only man in the town who would rather stand up for what he believes in, than wander through life in the same fog of denial that has blanketed the town.

Conclusions

Religion and loved ones may provide comfort, but the acceptance and reality of death are progressions that occur internally, and in solitude. *High Noon* (Kramer & Zinnemann, 1952) demonstrates this progression through Kane’s eyes, which offer representations of death in a social sense, and in a physical sense. By viewing his bravery in the face of certain death, and his resolve to protect the town even after it has abandoned him, *High Noon* offers equipment for copying with the loneliness associated with varying degrees of death.

Generally, the realities of death are often pushed into the background, or drowned out by the noise of work, family, and play. *High Noon* (Kramer & Zinnemann, 1952) challenges the

viewer to bring the inevitability of death into the foreground by recognizing that denial of death is not a solution, but a method of living a life that is unfulfilling, an absent of risk. Interwoven with this morbid reminder of death, Kane provides comfort that the most difficult situations can be overcome without support or loved ones. In fact, morality sometimes demands that we take on larger challenges alone—just as *High Noon* did with McCarthyism—so that others might use our bravery as inspiration to act as well.

Rather than viewing *High Noon* (Kramer & Zinnemann, 1952) as a film that simply offers an escape from the moment, as described by Young, (2000), or a distraction from the certainty of death, the viewer can use Kane's story as a roadmap toward embracing the solitary nature of death. This also requires a dual participation from the viewer, both as an integrated viewer that is willing to interact with the film, and as a human being who is willing to interact with the realities of life through the acceptance of death.

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