

**DYING WITH CANCER:  
HOLLYWOOD LESSONS**Fernanda NIEMEYER<sup>a</sup>, Maria Henriqueta Luce KRUSE<sup>b</sup>**ABSTRACT**

The study attempts to understand how dying from cancer is portrayed by five movies produced in Hollywood between 1993 and 2006. Based on the cultural studies and their post-structuralism version and supported by the notions of discourse and subjectivity, as proposed by philosopher Michel Foucault, we suggest one of the possible readings of the movie picture corpus. We assess how the movie picture discourse acts as a cultural pedagogy that produces ways of seeing dying with cancer: immortalizing the healthy body image, silencing death, taking care of the dead body and, finally, accepting death. Our proposal is intended to stimulate reflections that may contribute to care and education in nursing.

**Descriptors:** Nursing. Education. Culture. Death.

**RESUMO**

*O estudo busca conhecer o modo pelo qual a morte de pessoas com câncer é apresentada por cinco filmes produzidos em Hollywood entre 1993 e 2006. Com base nos estudos culturais, na vertente pós-estruturalista e com o apoio das noções de discurso e subjetividade propostas pelo filósofo Michel Foucault, articulamos uma das possíveis leituras do corpus fílmico. Avaliamos como o discurso cinematográfico atua como uma pedagogia cultural que produz modos de ver o morrer com câncer: imortalizando a imagem do corpo saudável, silenciando a morte, cuidando do corpo morto e, por fim, aceitando a morte. Nossa proposta é suscitar reflexões que possam contribuir para a assistência e para a docência em enfermagem.*

**Descritores:** Enfermagem. Educação. Cultura. Morte. Doente terminal. Cinema como assunto.

**Título:** Sobre morrer com câncer: as lições de Hollywood.

**RESUMEN**

*El estudio busca conocer el modo cómo la muerte de personas con cáncer es presentada por cinco películas producidas en Hollywood, entre 1993 y 2006. Con base en los estudios culturales y su versión posestructuralista y sostenidas por las nociones de discurso y subjetividad, propuestas por el filósofo Michel Foucault, articulamos una de las posibles lecturas del corpus cinematográfico. Evaluamos que el discurso cinematográfico actúa como una pedagogía cultural que produce maneras de ver el morir con cáncer: inmortalizando la imagen del cuerpo saludable, silenciando la muerte, cuidando del cuerpo muerto y, por fin, aceptando la muerte. Nuestra propuesta es suscitar reflexiones que puedan contribuir para la asistencia y la enseñanza en enfermería.*

**Descritores:** Enfermería. Educación. Cultura. Muerte. Enfermo terminal. Cine como asunto.

**Título:** Morir con cáncer: las lecciones de Hollywood.

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## INTRODUCTION

In scientific language, cancer is the name of a group of disorders characterized by uncontrolled growth of cells that spread to and disrupt body tissues and organs. According to some studies, cancer is currently the second leading cause of death in Brazil, responsible for about 13% of deaths in the world<sup>(1)</sup>. This gives cancer the status of a disease closely linked to death.

The cancer-death connection can also be perceived in the popular discourse according to which the disease is considered untreatable, cruel, slow “at a time that the central premise of medicine is that all diseases can be cured”<sup>(2)</sup>. Despite the technological advances, the connection with death persists: “Among all the theories about cancer [...], only one survived the passage of time, namely that cancer goes through certain stages towards death. Therefore, [...] what is not fatal is not cancer”<sup>(2)</sup>. This connection between the disease and death makes cancer a dreaded disease. On the other hand, scientific literature classifies cancer as a public health problem<sup>(1)</sup>, giving some veracity to this discourse through epidemiological data.

Throughout history, many investments have been made aimed to preserve life and fight death. Thus, a considerable part of the efforts of society and science have been made with the purpose of devising ways to extend life and escape death. Thanks to the advances in cancer treatment and knowledge about the disease, there was an increase in the production and dissemination of techniques to extend patients' lives/survival. Such advances that were more significant from the mid-twentieth century, produced some ways of care, with the purpose of curing and controlling cancer, delaying the much feared death.

The phenomenon of death is associated to the modification of the power technologies that involve this phenomenon<sup>(3)</sup>. Formerly, a sovereign power governed the people, because there was a king who exercised authority over a territory within whose limits he could “cause people to die” and “let people live”. The focus of this power was not in the fact that people could live in that place, but rather that at any moment they could die, since the sovereign could order to kill them, at his discretion. When the social organization

began to admit the operation of other power technologies, other governance practices were established in society. Thus, there was a reversal in the logic, aimed at “living” and “letting die”, i.e., the center of power was shifted to life, in making people live, and no longer based on the fact that they could be killed at any time. Then, dying began to be regarded as a defeat, since the goals of preservation of life would not have been achieved, and which turned death into something to be banned, an undesirable and distressing event to be avoided<sup>(4)</sup>.

Despite the theme of death being discussed in nursing profession, the debate about the dying process has had little emphasis in nursing curricula. The care of dying patients is little explored during graduation, although it is inherent to the nursing profession, since we relieve discomforts, control symptoms and minimize suffering in our daily practice. Because we live in a society governed by life and its control, little is said about death. We realize, then, that the way we deal with death is as follows: prolonging lives and denying their end<sup>(5)</sup>.

If we understand death not only as a biological process, but rather a historical and cultural process, we will realize that the way we experience this moment is related to the ways some discourses emerge and subjectify us. Therefore, death is produced by our experiences and, consequently, in certain historical and cultural moments. Or else, we regard dying from cancer as a cultural production and not merely as an event inherent in life. Thus, we believe that the way to confront death has been changing over time, according to the different cultural discourses.

In the Early Middle Ages, death was a family and community event, which involved rituals and should be faced with dignity and endurance, because the dangers were less controllable and, thus, life was shorter<sup>(6-7)</sup>. Death did not have a dramatic character. However, at the end of the Middle Ages, it appears that there was an individualization of death. The dying person has a greater perception of death and experiences a sense of attachment to life. What was regarded as natural assumed a dramatic character, because the survivors began to express regret due to intolerance to separation, turning death into something socially forbidden<sup>(6)</sup>. Thus, between

the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries death becomes an insufferable event, causing the social isolation of the dying person. On the other hand, in the twentieth century, death is concealed, so that life can be protected<sup>(6)</sup>, possibly because of the biopolitical logic of “making live”. So, death that was once considered a natural, ordinary fact began to be associated with disgust and nonconformity to its arrival.

Facing death as a historical and cultural production, we see the movies as a powerful artifact that by means of dialogues and images changes the contemporary civilization. Thinking about the things said about dying from cancer in the media, and about their pedagogical function, we analyzed Hollywood films about people who die from cancer. We chose these movies because Hollywood produces lots of films that projected on the big screens reach a large part of the world population. These films can be considered universal, for their stories create “realities” and establish “truths”. Wondering about the way in which contemporary society looks at dying from cancer, we attempt to understand how dying from cancer is portrayed by five movies produced in Hollywood between 1993 and 2006.

## METHODS

The present research is poststructuralist based on cultural studies. This paradigm is characterized by questioning the modern “truths”<sup>(8)</sup>. Thus, the poststructuralist reference questions the patterns of knowledge, scientific knowledge and truths, as it regards all knowledge as a “concerned and politically targeted human construction”<sup>(9)</sup>. This reference sees language in a different light: instead of being conceived as a representation of “reality”, language becomes a way of creating subjects and also reality. Thus, linked to the Cultural Studies, the poststructuralist paradigm sees the cultural artifacts as discourse practices that produce the subjects of which they speak, and not merely as manifestations of the current society. Therefore, the poststructuralist cultural analysis involves the observation of meanings whether they are present or not, in order to understand how a subject is constituted in a given culture<sup>(10)</sup>. Such studies are interesting because they allow for a better understanding of our society<sup>(11)</sup>.

The intellectual project of cultural analysis is always characterized by a discourse with impact upon social life. Thus, it is possible to regard as culture certain elements of a lifestyle, such as texts, images and narrative structures, which, according to other boundaries would never be regarding as culture, and help shaping social life<sup>(11-12)</sup>. This way of seeing things does not intend to destroy what is brought by new technologies, but rather to give new meaning to what is shown by these technologies.

Our analysis involves five films produced by the American film industry between 1993 and 2006, whose central point of the narrative comprises the character diagnosed with late-stage cancer. We chose films with larger circulation in Brazil, namely: *My Life*, of 1993, directed by Bruce Joel Rubin; *One True Thing*, 1998, directed by Carl Franklin; *Wit*, 2001, directed by Mike Nichols; *Sweet November*, 2001, directed by Pat O'Connor and *Griffin & Phoenix*, 2006, directed by Ed Stone.

We made a careful reading to find out “what we can use and discard, overlook or put aside”<sup>(13)</sup>. So, we selected scenes related to the death of the character with cancer, for decoupage. In movie research, the decoupage technique is used as part of the discourse analysis, as it makes it possible to separate cinematic elements to have a better visualization of the scene. It aims to generate a set of information from the visual material, a sort of “translation” of the scenes. Thus, visibilities or things to be seen (scenarios, plans, angles, costumes, actions and facial expressions of the character) and things to be said (lines, soundtrack) of the scenes were transcribed. Our analysis was based on studies of some authors involved with Cultural Studies and media studies, such as Fabris<sup>(14)</sup>, Fischer<sup>(15)</sup> and Rose<sup>(16)</sup>. We asked how the discourses were built, mapped the things to be said and the things to be seen on the death of people with cancer, in the different scenes, multiplying the suggested relations, situating things “said” and “seen” in discourse fields. This way of analyzing culture intends to show the different meanings associated to the production of subjects, through this media universe of Hollywood movies.

We used the concepts of discourse and subjectivity proposed by philosopher Michel Foucault. Rather than a set of words that represent and

name the world, discourse is understood here as a practice that produces the objects addressed by the discourse<sup>(17)</sup>. Therefore, social, economic, cultural and political practices do not emanate from the subject. Instead, the subject derives from discourse practices. In this context, we may think that the media operates through a process of subjectivation, forming identities and producing concepts and behaviors. Subjectivity involves ways through which we become subjects. Therefore, the films have a discursive materiality that constitutes subjectivities and subject positions based on dialogues, sounds and images in cinematic discourse.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In our culture, cancer is intrinsically linked to death. The disease often appears in films as related to malignity, fatality, a death sentence. The cancer is considered much more than a disease, which is often fatal. Cancer is regarded as a death sentence<sup>(2)</sup>. The characters with cancer die in almost all films, and in those films that they don't die, it is understood that they will die soon, which is often seen in goodbye scenes between the sick character and his/her friends and family members, as in the parting of the couple Sara and Nelson, in "Sweet November":

*All we have are our memories. I want these memories to be strong and beautiful. If I know that I will be remembered that way, I can face anything. Nelson, you are my immortality (Sara, in "Sweet November").*

Based on this perception of the cancer-death connection in the cinematic discourse, we analyze some things said and some things seen that express the death of people in the movies.

### The immortal image of the healthy body

The discourse of the memory of the dying, or already dead, person is recurrent, in an attempt to "immortalize" that person". Interestingly, in films where sick characters die, the character's final scene is usually that of a healthy body, that will be remembered as someone "energetic, lively" by those who are alive. The way in which the sick character that dies is remembered is clear in the final scenes of "Wit". After the death of Vivian, a high angle shot is taken from her face, through a zoom-in, causing an optical effect of sudden closeness of the character, in order to dramatize the narrative. During this movement, there is an overlap of images that merges the picture of the face of Vivian dead with the picture of the face of this character when she was alive, before getting sick, as we can see in figure 1. Finally, the first image disappears, and the film ends with a picture of the character alive, with a faint smile, in black and white, an effect that reinforces the idea that this is a past memory:

One narrative that refers to the wish of the sick character to remain "immortal" is the one in "My Life". During the film, Bob records videos to be watched by his son, who is about to be born, after his death, which is announced throughout the



Figure 1 – Death of Vivian.



**Figure 2** –Bob’s video.

narrative. In the videos, Bob leaves messages, gives advice, tells stories, in an attempt to be a father for his son (supported by modern discourses of paternity) despite the absence of his body. In the final scene, after Bob’s death, the camera captures the television screen where one of the videos recorded by Bob is being reproduced, while his son looks attentively at the images, recognizing this father, as shown in Figure 2. On the television set several recordings made by Bob can be seen amidst the toys of his son, showing that that father, who has no physical body, is present in the daily life of that family, through the videos that seem to fulfill the function of making him “immortal”:

The way the dead person is “immortalized” in the memory of the living refers to the idea that the body is not the end of the body does not imply the end of feelings. Thus, we believe that this discourse of the memory of the dead body points to a pedagogy that teaches that people who die should be “immortalized” in the memory of the living,

and that this memory should retain the image of a healthy body. This happens perhaps because the death of the others makes us think about our own death, i.e. the vision of the dying characters undermines the defensive ideas that we build to protect us against our death. Thus, the image of the dead person in our memory is very close to the image we have of ourselves<sup>(7)</sup>.

### **Silencing of death**

The moment of death of the character with cancer, when shown, is characterized by a peaceful death, despite the fact that death from cancer is considered a stunningly miserable death<sup>(2)</sup>. We know, for example, that Freud, affected by laryngeal cancer, died a slow death, permeated by a bad smell that kept even his dog away from him<sup>(7)</sup>. However, death from cancer is shown in the movies in a very different way. In “One True Thing”, Kate spends her final moments of life in



**Figure 3** – Death of Kate.

her house, with her daughter, as it can be seen in Figure 3:

A peaceful death is shown, without pain or major bodily changes, and perhaps no bad smell: there is no room for agony or suffering. Interestingly, death in those films whose theme is cancer, is shown in a subtle way, while in war, horror or police movies every single detail of the dead body is captured, emphasizing violent death, with dismembered, disfigured and blood-stained bodies. Should death from cancer be eased according to the discursive logic of Hollywood? We believe that this silencing of death is mainly due to the finitude of the body and the marks of its transformation during life, which is inconceivable in Western society where death is seen as decay and loss, and, therefore should be avoided at any cost<sup>(5)</sup>. So, these films tend to silence the act of dying from cancer in the same way as in our daily lives when we “refuse to think or try to forget that [death] walks alongside with life”<sup>(6)</sup>. In our society governed by life, death should disappear by regulatory techniques, such as Hollywood productions, to “make live”. Thus, these productions exercise a pedagogy that teaches ways of dying with cancer. The experience of death “is

variable and specific according to the groups; no matter how natural and immutable it may seem to the members of each particular society: it has been learned”<sup>(7)</sup>.

### **The care of the body after death**

Especially in films produced in the twenty first century, we see that the dead body is manipulated. In “Wit”, when Dr. Jason realizes that Vivian no longer has a pulse, he calls the medical team and tries to revive her, even though he was aware that the patient had signed a document where she agreed that no attempts should be made to revive her in the event of cardiorespiratory arrest. The lesson is taught by the nurse who prevents the team to continue the procedure. Then, there is a scene of the dead body cared by the nurse, as shown in Figure 4:

In that scene, the camera focuses on Vivian and the nurse, and the latter seems to be highlighted because she has respected the “will” of Vivian. Meanwhile, the doctor, who moves away is “neglected” by the camera. We can think of an economic motivation in this film, i.e.: a story



**Figure 4** – Dead body manipulated.

where it is suggested that one should avoid medical expenditures on a dying patient, according to the logic of “letting die”, and no more “letting live”. Thus, viewers are subjectified by the economic investment ways, according to the logic of “letting die”, because the sick persons cannot be cured. However, we may think that, by producing scenes that emphasize respect for the patients’ wishes not to receive technology care aimed to prolong their lives, the movies teach us to accept the death of patients with late-stage cancer.

### Acceptance of death

The production of discourse is always controlled and selected to ensure its mastery<sup>(18)</sup>. Thus, interdiction procedures are necessary: “It is well known that no one has the right to say everything, and that one cannot speak of anything at any time”<sup>(18)</sup>. Death from cancer can be considered in the Western culture as a taboo

that is the object of discursive procedures of ban. However, with the increasing production of films that show death from cancer, the following question can be posed: is it no longer necessary to socially ban this death? One line in the film “Griffin and Phoenix” summarizes, in our opinion, the way Hollywood intends to address death from cancer. Griffin and Phoenix, aware of the impossibility of curing their diseases, attend a lecture at the auditorium of a university. The professor says:

*Frustration and fear are based on the society’s tradition to attempt to understand everything, control everything, conquer everything. We learn to fly, to travel in space, to Bend the atoms... but we did not conquer death. [...] we are all dying a little bit each day... [...] Because when we realize that our life is finite... Well, class, it is finite, since the day we were born. [...] Yet, remember, death is part of life (Professor, in Griffin and Phoenix”).*

Although the process of dying is the target of multiple studies aimed to better understand it, this stage of life is regarded as a failure<sup>(19)</sup>. However, it seems that little by little Hollywood movies are trying to produce the “acceptance” of death. Perhaps our society is “increasingly considering positive talking about what we thought should not be mentioned”<sup>(2)</sup>, in this case, dying from cancer.

## FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

This article does not have an end, because we think that our studies bring more questions than answers, such as the masters dissertation titled “Cancer, Body and Cinema: Hollywood lessons on getting sick and dying”<sup>(20)</sup>, from which this article originated. We believe there are not ultimate answers to the questions that we posed, but rather many possible ways of thinking. This study does not intend to determine what is right or wrong, to criticize or judge, when it comes to issues related to dying from cancer. Our intention was only to question the discourses conveyed by Hollywood, considering that this cultural artifact constitutes subjects and practices by introducing knowledge that produce regimes of truth.

We think that the way we see death from cancer is discursively constructed. There is a “right” way to die, and one way that is not in this discursive order. Such discourses are so powerful that they become natural, trivial and unquestionable. These productions about dying with cancer give us clues about how we learn to relate with death. These are texts that involve us with their plots, movements, colors and music, and challenge us to know what is dying with cancer.

We intend to arouse reflections that might contribute to care and teaching in Nursing. We wish that this study could provide another way to regard these patients: not merely as bodies dying, but also as bodies whose meanings are discursively constructed. Nursing, which is traditionally permeated by dogmatic discourses, with ingrained knowledge, should be attentive to the discursive changes around. Not for the mere purpose of accepting these discourses, but to question them and to allow for more room for reflection on its practices. And understand that we can learn how to see death from cancer in

different ways, in different educational settings, cinema being one of them.

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