

2.3 Dead in *Absentia*: the lack of a female Hollywood character

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A b s e n t i a c t

Dead in *Absentia* is a Latin expression that dates from the nineteenth century and it is nowadays used by lawyers and judges to pronounce a person's death even if a body hasn't been found. *In absentia* (2000), *Absentia* (2011) and *Absentia* (2017) are three types of independent cinematographic experiences where you can find something, or someone, *in absentia*. The Brothers Quay were the first filmmakers using this concept by making a short movie. Later in 2011, it was the time of Mike Flanagan filming a horror movie named *Absentia*, and then in 2017, the creator Matthew Cirulnick and Gaia Violo decided to produce a TV Show, also called *Absentia*, but filmed like a movie. Exploring the different ways used by the filmmakers to create such strong characters in such different styles of production is the foundation for this article that wants to explore, in the essence, the concept of 'absentia'.

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Let us speak of death and its absence. Of the fear it provokes, of the theories concerning life after death and, in particular, of the strength of the woman when she faces death. Philosophy, since the dawn of its inception, has concerned itself with the end of Man; and from this enquiry sprang two noteworthy sources to understand the thoughts of the most renowned philosophers: death as the human being's complete oblivion – both in physical and spiritual senses –, and the death of the physical body, one which is survived by the deceased's soul.

Arthur Schopenhauer, the seventeenth century German philosopher has a very concrete idea of what the end of life means. Death is “a harrowing solution of the bond formed by the procreation with lust, it is the violent obliteration of the fundamental error of our being; the great disillusion” (Schopenhauer, 1995, p. 86). But just when readers find themselves utterly distressed by the previous sentence, the philosopher adds: “So miserable and so insignificant is the individuality of the majority of men that they lose nothing upon their deaths: in them, that which yet capable of possessing some value, that is, the general traits of humanity – lives on in the remaining men” (ibidem). And if we read on this small text titled “Death” we will come to the realisation that the German philosopher does not make all these affirmations with a basis for them in mind. To Schopenhauer, death brings fulfilment to Man when the latter intends to live in a better world because, for that to happen, to merely place Man in a better world would not suffice; it would also be necessary to transform Man in such a manner that He would no longer recognise Himself. And such feat is only attainable by death: to be placed in another world and to completely change one's being is, in essence, one and the same thing” (Schopenhauer, 1995, p. 86). But what is particularly worthy of note for the purpose of the present paper in Schopenhauer's interpretation of death is his opinion of immortality and, even here, the author is quite forthright with his readers: “To demand the immortality of the individual is to desire to prolong the error *ad aeternum*. Because every individuality is, in essence, a singular error, a mistake, something that should not be; and the true end to one's life is to rid oneself of it” (Schopenhauer, 1995, p. 86). Hence, we can surmise that, for this forerunner of Nietzsche, not even the individual conscience⁷⁴ lives on after the death of the physical body.

In contrast, in Montaigne's philosophy, we find a scepticism that disregards the ideas of the nihilists and believes that to learn to die is to learn to live, that the inevitability of death must be faced in a natural and accepting manner and that philosophy plays a key role in aiding us to prepare for the unescapable. In other words, to meditate on death puts the thoughts of the Great Unknown out of one's mind precisely because one becomes acquainted with this Unknown – and that which one finds familiar holds no fears to them. On another, yet still very much pertinent and related, topic – what if death ceased to exist? How would humanity react to it? And better – and more importantly – yet: what would be the consequences to mankind? It was with this idea in mind – which many would regard as utterly absurd – that José Saramago built the narrative that he dubbed *As Intermitências da Morte* (*Death at Intervals*). “In that day nobody died” (Saramago, 2005, p. 13): these are the first words of a story that has every element to be an absurd one and, yet, it is not.

Death⁷⁵, the novel's main character, decides to take a holiday and, as consequence of said decision – one to which every single individual is entitled to –, chaos ensues: funeral agencies and the undertakers are left without jobs; florists suffer large losses of revenue because, bluntly put, death is the most

74 On the subject of individual conscience, Schopenhauer continues further with his discourse regarding finitude: “from the moment that death brings an end to an individual conscience, should we really wish that this very same conscience is revived to last an eternity? What does it contain, in the majority of times? Nothing more than a torrent of insignificant, embarrassed and earthly thoughts, cares without end. Let us, then, let it rest in peace once and for all.” (Schopenhauer, 1995, p. 86 and p. 87).

75 The name is written by the author in lowercase letters to distinguish death the character from Death the natural, physical phenomenon.

lucrative side of their business; hospitals are overcrowded with patients and, consequently, are in infernal disarray; and the deathly ill are left in to wallow in everlasting pain while they continuously eye the clock and watch time go by without being delivered from their atrocious suffering by death. The desperation of those who seek to die with their remaining shreds of dignity intact is so extreme that they conceive absurdly fantastical and inventive, yet ultimately unfruitful, ways to take their lives. And what of the suicides? Those attempted to end their lives by leaping from the highest bridge of the city, by ingesting a poison more effective than that given to Socrates, by blowing their brains out with guns of the largest calibre available to them – all to no avail. Nothing. There was no way, fashion or form to die.

We could present more examples of lives ruined by Death's holiday, the consequences are quite countless, but we already have enough material to realise that a break from one's job is not always possible nor advisable. In the Law of Portugal, according to Article 66.º of the Decree-Law n.º. 47 344 from the 25th of November, 1966, "personality is acquired at the moment of one's full and living birth". And, as every individual that is born must perforce die one day, Article 68.º was created and which states the following: "Personality ceases to exist upon death [...] One is presumed deceased when their body is not found or identified, when one's disappearance occurs under circumstances that leave no doubt as to one's death." Here we find the definition of presumed death.

The short film titled *in Absentia* (2000), from the Brothers Quay; Mike Flanagan's horror film *Absentia* (2011); and the television series created by the young Italian scriptwriter Gaia Violo, also named *Absentia* (2017), aside from sharing the same title, these three Independent Cinematographic Records have a female character that faces death as their main focus. There was not, to the Romans, a single specific and coherent doctrine concerning the enduring of the soul beyond death, in the sense that the soul had its very own fate one completely independent from its body. The soul was viewed as a spectre, a ghost that harassed the living, especially when the latter did not supply the former's mortal remains with an appropriate resting place or did not observe the necessary funerary rites.

In the abovementioned short film by the Brothers Quay we find a young woman alone in an asylum compulsively writing amidst the surrounding phantasmagorical environs. For a brief moment, the woman transfigures herself into a Kafkian mannikin and a third male figure appears, caressing the woman's dirty hands. After these episodes, we can surmise that, as was the case with the Kafkian visions before, this man was an hallucination: that of her own husband. Nothing is said of this man's fate, but we do know that he is absent. The letters that the woman systematically writes to this man, whom she swore to be faithful until death parted them, end up at the bottom of a broken clock which is strikingly similar to a mailbox. And there they remain, the dust of time stratifying upon them and piling upon this woman, a being that has but become stagnant since ever since she was no longer able to ascertain if her husband was alive or dead. All these elements seem to denote that the cause for her to be confined to those four walls in a psychiatric ward somewhere was this limbo in which the young woman was left in the wake of her husband's disappearance.

The filmmaker Mike Flanagan builds his narrative of terror by having as its core the visions that a woman has of her partner, who has been missing for seven years now, and is on the brink of having him "declared dead *in absentia*"

before the state of California. The man appears before her for the first time when the document that declares him as officially dead is likely to be signed soon. Her subconscious led her to see something that is not real because of the guilt she felt at confirming the death of her husband without first finding his pale, motionless body. To bury an empty coffin because the body was never found always leaves a small ray of hope in the hearts and minds of the presumed deceased's friends and family. It was for this reason that Tricia feared signing the declaration of "death *in absentia*". On the one hand, she believed that, by signed the aforementioned declaration, she would close a chapter of her life but, on the other, she felt that such act would mean that she had given up hope of finding her husband alive one day. And it is this very feeling that, albeit seemingly positive, proceeds to destroy little by little the lives of those who hold on to that hope because they find themselves incapable of "moving on with their lives". They remain attached to their pasts as if it were stones in the river of time, frozen in the exact moment they accepted their loved ones' death *in absentia*.

Hence, it is not only those who, allegedly, died that are absent. The lives of those that are left to mourn that can also be considered as absent. To Sigmund Freud there is a difference between mourning and melancholy. In mourning, one lives the pain that afflicts them through stages. Melancholy, on the other hand, assails us in such overwhelming manner that it gives us no quarter, no chance to refute its existence and, while it is possible to overcome the feeling of melancholy, it is far easier to accept the mourning.

Flynn was only three years old when her biological mother disappeared. For this reason, she had learnt to call "mother" the only woman she knew as such: her stepmother Alice. This is the backstory that the viewer is privy to in the first episode of the 2017 television series, *Absentia*. Stana Katic is the American actress that lends voice, body and soul to Emily Byrne, a female character that is at once wife, mother, and daughter and still has a career as an FBI agent, one tasked with finding the killer responsible for the gruesome deaths of several women. Over the course of the case Emily disappeared without any semblance of a trace nor lead, which drove her family and colleagues to infer that the agent was the latest victim of the murderer she was chasing and, after a long and unfruitful search, they hold an empty casket funeral for her.

And here I must briefly stop and provide a spoiler warning to those who have yet to watch the series, but in the interest of the present paper and to provide a more detailed analysis of the subject matter at hand, I must discuss a pivotal event of the plot. It turns out that Emily Byrne was not really dead. And to those viewers who thought that they were before a story detailing a family's efforts to deal with the loss of one of its members, it should be noted that in the very first episode this preconceived notion is addressed; what Gaia Violo intended when she penned the script was the viewpoint of someone who, in the eyes of society at large, had been dead for six years and, seemingly out of nowhere, reappeared in the lives of her loved ones and friends, destabilising the false harmony that crept up on the lives of those people after a symbolic funeral that was merely held to help them *move on*. The surprise factor only materialises when the viewer understands that Emily has no recollections of what has transpired in the last six years of her life.

She does not know how she came to disappear, what happened to her during that six-year-long period, and why she was only now found. The plot develops around this amnesia to which there is no apparent plausible reason;

however what interests me is not so much the mystery fiction component of the plot but instead the manner in which Emily will interact with and relate to her family and friends, especially her (now ex) husband, son, father and brother. In Agent Byrne's perspective, "yesterday" she was investigating a serial murder case and "today" she is waking up in her hospital bed; but to her loved ones, between "yesterday" and "today" stands a long six-year gap.

In order to face death, be it the death of a loved one or one's own (alleged) death, strength is a necessary asset. And by strength I do not mean that which is gained by lifting dumbbells in a gym, but instead to the mindset of being able to survive events as utterly crippling as the death of those we love. Judith Butler writes in first person to define what she deems the "feminist impulse" that "frequently stems from the recognition of my pain, or of my silence, or of my fury, or of my perception, which are eventually not solely mine, restricting myself in a shared cultural situation, which in turn enables and empowers me in unexpected ways" (Butler, 2011, p. 74-75). It is this impulse that the female characters from the three cinematographic expressions I analysed in the present paper illustrate in the small and in the big screens, for the "acts through which gender is constituted shares similarities with the performative acts in theatrical contexts" (Butler, 2011, p. 72).

In today's cinematographic expressions "man controls the fantasy of the film and also appears as the representative of power in a supplementary sense: he is as such in his quality of holder of the spectator's gaze, transferring it to behind the screen to neutralise the extradiegetic tendencies represented by the woman as spectacle" (Mulvey, 2011, p. 126). One could say that Hitchcock is a master of voyeurism because he elevates the visual pleasure that cinema provides. One of the biggest examples of this disturbing gaze is portrayed in *Vertigo*, where Laura Mulvey writes that the

Deft use (...) of the processes of identification and liberal use of the subjective camera from the point of view of the male protagonist profoundly attracts the viewers towards his position, forcing them to share in on his uncomfortable gaze. The scene on screen and its diegesis absorb the viewer in a voyeuristic situation that parodies in cinema their own situation. (Mulvey, 2011, p. 129).

The works of the Brothers Quay, Mike Flanagan and, especially, of Gaia Viola attempt to deconstruct this idea that the male hero of the narrative is always the active element and the heroine the passive element of the action. If the female character ceases to be considered as the image and the male character as the holder of the gaze, it begins to be possible to demonstrate the importance of the role of the woman in the plot, and do away with the female's side role as inspiring muse to the hero (Guerra et al., 2018, 2019).

To the nineteenth century French poet and critic, Charles Baudelaire, the woman is "a scintillation of all of Nature's graces condensed in a single creature; she is the object of admiration and the liveliest of curiosities that the painting that is life can offer to those who contemplate it" (Baudelaire, 2006, p. 307). However, I must note that Baudelaire is renowned for his use of irony in his texts; hence we cannot forget that, in one of his most famous opuses, *Le peintre de la vie Moderne* (*The Painter of Modern Life*), the idea

of beauty is described as an inseparable duality: “beauty is made up of an eternal, unchanging, element the quantity of which is very much difficult to determine, and of an element that is relative, circumstantial, which will be, if we so wish, alternately or together, the times, trends, morals, the passion” (idem, p. 281). Both the “eternal” element and the “ephemeral” element are needed to the equilibrium of human nature.

The possibility of reversing the roles is, largely, in the hands of feminist artists and influential persons with ties to culture that have a voice within the artistic community and are able to defy identities, calling into question their origins and ideological functions, and “working in defence of a non-patriarchal expression of gender and of body” (Wolff, 2011, p. 120). The question is made: what do these totally different cinematographic experiences have in common? The answer is clear: three female characters that broke the stereotype of the perfect female Hollywood characters by showing their imperfections and at the same time, their perseverance, by living their story to the end as they want.

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