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The Effect of Animation Versus Live Action and Animal Versus Human Film Depictions on Terror Management Processes

Alyse N. Dunn

Union College - Schenectady, NY

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Running Head: Death in Film Depictions

The Effect of Animation Versus Live Action and Animal Versus Human Film Depictions on
Terror Management Processes

By

Alyse Dunn

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Abstract

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In an effort to expand the scope of Terror Management Theory (TMT), the author proposed that viewing film clips involving death of non-animated and animated humans and animals would lead to an increase in worldview defense. Although worldview defense means were not statistically significantly different between conditions, there was a clear linear trend of increasing worldview defense from commercials to non-animated animals, suggesting that animation had less of an effect than live action and that individuals who watched clips of non-animated animals were most likely to exhibit an increase in worldview defense. The author's findings broaden TMT research by suggesting that worldview defense could potentially be affected by watching death clips of non-animated and animated fictional characters.

The Effect of Animation Versus Live Action and Animal Versus Human Film Depictions on Terror Management Processes

Research on terror management theory (TMT; Rosenblatt, Greenberg, Solomon, Pyszczynski, & Lyon, 1989) has found that there are many ways in which thoughts of personal death elicit defensive psychological processes. Such defensive processes include elevated striving to preserve or augment self-esteem and defense of worldviews and close relationships, and they are most strongly activated when death-related thoughts are cognitively accessible but not currently conscious (Pyszczynski, Greenberg, & Solomon, 1999). Some research also suggests that the defenses are only elicited by thoughts of one's own death, and not other aversive topics (Greenberg, Solomon, & Pyszczynski, 1997). Thus, the effects of death-thought accessibility (DTA) are most prevalent when individuals are reminded of the inevitability of their *own* mortality. Other research, however, suggests that other threatening thoughts manipulated in experimental studies can cause the same effects. Hart, Shaver, and Goldenberg (2005) found that when individuals' close relationships are (imagined to be) threatened they become more defensive of their worldviews and self-esteem, and when their worldviews or self-esteem are threatened they have a more defensive attachment style. This suggests that terror management is actually a broad process elicited by a range of psychological threats.

With this in mind it seems relevant to ask if terror management processes might be elicited by some of the death-related stimuli to which people are exposed during the course of daily life. For instance, is terror management elicited by observing the death of fictional characters in a movie? Does it matter if the character is animated or not? Human or animal? The present paper reports a study designed to answer these questions. The answer is important, because if movies that depict death can cause terror management defenses, it would greatly

expand the practical scope and implications of the theory, as well as (perhaps) the way people think about death scenes in childrens' (or even adults') movies.

Terror Management Theory and Supporting Research

TMT is based on the theorizing of the late anthropologist Ernest Becker, who believed that individuals form their identity by denying the idea that they will eventually die (Becker, 1973). Becker argued that individuals' conscious awareness and the acknowledgment of the inevitability of death could lead to crippling anxiety. Becker realized, however, that individuals did not normally exhibit debilitating death anxiety, and as a result believed that there were specific defenses set in place to alleviate the fear of death related thoughts (Becker, 1973; Hayes, Schimel, Arndt, & Faucher, 2010). TMT posits that both cultural worldviews and self-esteem are psychological defenses against the fear of death.

Worldviews are palliative because they provide the idea that the world is orderly and that death is not necessarily immediate, or even lasting (Hayes et al., 2010). Therefore, a cultural worldview helps quell the fear of death symbolically by providing individuals a sense of structure and predictability and a purpose in life and by suggesting that each individual's life is significant (as reflected in high self-esteem). Some, such as religious worldviews, provide a feeling of literal immortality in terms of the afterlife (Jonas & Fischer, 2006). Close relationships have also been found to be a protective buffer against individuals' thoughts of their own death (Mikulincer, Florian, & Hirschberger, 2003), both directly and because they are a source of worldview validation and self-esteem.

Regarding these theorized defenses, two main hypotheses have emerged: The mortality salience hypothesis and the anxiety-buffer hypothesis. The mortality salience hypothesis suggests that since worldview defense and self-esteem and close relationships are protective

defenses against the fear of death, reminding individuals about the inevitability of their own death will lead them to value and defend their self-esteem, cultural worldviews and close relationships (Burke, Martens, & Faucher, 2010). The anxiety-buffer hypothesis, on the other hand, suggests that threatening buffers against existential anxiety should increase the likelihood of experienced anxiety, whereas bolstering anxiety buffers allows individuals to bypass the fear of the inevitability of death (Greenberg, Solomon, & Pyszczynski, 1997).

Worldview Defense. Research into TMT has supported both mortality salience and anxiety buffer hypotheses. The findings suggest that worldview defense is pivotal in terror management. Individuals go to great lengths to protect their worldviews and research has found that individuals who are exposed to mortality salience are more likely to derogate people with different value systems (Kasser & Sheldon, 2000). Individuals have even been found to go so far as to punish individuals with a different view point after being exposed to mortality salience. For instance, a study by McGregor et al. (1998) found that participants who were exposed to mortality salience, and then were told that they could choose the amount of hot sauce another individual had to consume, were more likely to give more hot sauce to a person who disagreed with their political views and less hot sauce to someone who was in accordance with their political views.

Research on worldview defense has found that individuals who have been exposed to mortality salience may hold stronger political opinions than when they are exposed to a control topic, as a way to defend their worldviews (Pyszczynski et al., 2008). The researchers found that Iranian students who had been exposed to thoughts of their own death were more likely to favor and consider engaging in martyrdom and that American students who were exposed to the mortality condition were more likely to support the strong military intervention in the Middle

East. These findings suggest that when thoughts of one's own death are accessible individuals tend to defend their worldviews and are more inclined to violently attack foreign others.

Worldview defense is also evident in the domains of gender and religious identity. In two studies by Fritsche and Jonas (2005, 2006) the researchers discovered that mortality salience can lead to gender discrimination and that the strength of religion can moderate the extent of worldview defense (individuals who are intrinsically religious are less likely to engage in worldview defense than those who are not intrinsically religious, presumably because their religiosity already protected them from death fears). Further research on religion found that when a foreign other died, individuals who were exposed to mortality salience were less likely to exhibit worldview defense, presumably because the death of the worldview-challenging others had already served a palliative function (Hayes, Schimel, Arndt, & Williams, 2008).

In terms of gender, men and women were told to evaluate courses in which the subject centered on women (Fritsche & Jonas, 2005). The researcher's findings show that whereas women rated the courses more highly following the mortality salience manipulation, men rated the courses more negatively. The researchers' findings demonstrate how mortality salience can lead to gender discrimination in an effort to protect worldviews and self-esteem derived from social identity.

These findings suggest that worldview defense is an important mechanism in alleviating the fear of death and that worldview defense is in general a broad concept.

Self-esteem. Research on self-esteem has shown that it is an important defense against death related thoughts. Self-esteem seems to be higher in certain individuals than others and some research has found that low self-esteem individuals may have a greater predisposition to death related thoughts due to the ineffectiveness of their self-esteem buffer (Schmeichel et al.,

2009). To test this, Schmeichel et al. examined whether participants had high or low explicit or implicit self-esteem. The researchers found that individuals with high implicit self-esteem were less likely to engage in worldview defense due to their self-esteem buffer. This buffer diminished the accessibility of death related thoughts thereby allowing individuals to protect themselves from the fear of death without engaging in worldview defense. Thus, self-esteem can be just as effective as worldview defense in diminishing the fear of death.

Close Relationships. Like self-esteem and worldview defense, close relationships can also work to limit the fear of death. Love can be partially explained by terror management theory, and is often described as a lasting experience of high self-esteem as well as a feeling of invincibility (Greenberg, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 1986; Solomon, Greenberg, Pyszczynski, 1991). Research has found a connection between love and the fear of death, and certain studies have found a connection between attachment theory and mortality salience, suggesting that close relationships serve as a buffer against death-related thoughts (Mikulincer et al., 2003). The research on love and death has found that close relationships supersede the activation of other defenses and the termination of close relationships leads to an increase of death awareness.

In summary, TMT suggests that the awareness of death can lead individuals to experience a crippling terror. This terror, however, is kept out of conscious awareness by certain defense mechanisms. These mechanisms include defense of worldviews, self-esteem, and close relationships. These mechanisms defend individuals from thoughts of their own death when mortality is made salient.

Death-thought Accessibility and the Specificity of TMT Effects

When individuals are confronted with thoughts of death, they initially attempt to suppress those thoughts either through distraction or by trying to believe that death is not important or is

not an immediate concern. This active suppression, though it provides temporary relief, leads death thoughts to be more accessible after a delay or distraction, when suppression attempts have become compromised (Hayes et al., 2010). For instance, death related thoughts are found to be the most accessible when an individual is first exposed to mortality salience and then immediately distracted, and the death related defenses mentioned earlier occur when death thoughts are highly accessible, but the individual is not consciously aware of these thoughts (Greenberg, Pyszczynski, Solomon, Simon, & Breus, 1994).

This research suggests that initially death thought accessibility and worldview defense are not heightened, perhaps due to an individual's ability to consciously suppress thoughts of their own death, but that these defenses increase after a delay period (Arndt, Greenberg, Solomon, Pyszczynski, & Simon, 1997). Research on DTA found that when individuals were exposed to a mortality salience manipulation they were more likely to complete word fragments with words involving death (Hayes et al., 2010). This is due to the fact that death thoughts are more accessible following a mortality salience manipulation. This effect works best, however, if thoughts about death are presented subtly (receiving a mammogram) rather than bluntly (thinking about cancer) (Hayes et al.)

Specificity to One's Own Death. It is important to determine whether the effects of mortality salience on defensiveness are specific to one's own death or if similar effects can be caused by other threats other than mortality. Research has found that worldview defense in response to mortality salience is specific to thoughts of one's own death as opposed to the death of another (Greenberg et al., 1994). Greenberg et al. found that when participants were exposed to either the death of a loved one or their own death worldview defense increased, however, this increase was significantly larger for participants who were subtly reminded of their own death.

The researchers concluded that prompting people with thoughts of a loved one dying may remind them of their own mortality and as a result makes the increase in worldview defense specific to thoughts of their own death.

Further research conducted by Greenberg et al. (1995) has attempted to evaluate alternative explanations for mortality salience effects. Greenberg et al found that when individuals are exposed to thoughts other than mortality, such as worrisome thoughts associated with the future, defensiveness does not occur. Thus, the researchers concluded that mortality salience effects are specific to thoughts of death, and specifically an individual's own death.

These studies demonstrate how mortality salience may lead to defensive behavior when individuals are exposed to thoughts of their own death. Other research, however, has shown that the effects of mortality salience on defensiveness are not necessarily specific to one's own death, and similar effects may even be elicited by threats other than death.

Effects of Other Threats on Defensiveness. Despite the evidence mentioned above that mortality salience effects are specific to thoughts of death and particularly one's own death, recent research has found similar effects of other kinds of psychological threats on worldview and other defenses. The meaning maintenance model (MMM) contradicts research on TMT by stating that mortality salience is actually a threat to an individual's sense of meaning (Proulx, & Heine, 2006). Proulx and Heine argue that humans establish a sense of 'expected relations' and that when these relations are disturbed, humans are left with a sense of meaninglessness. As a result, the researchers claim that individuals engage in meaning maintenance in order to regain a sense of unity and meaning, and that self-esteem and feelings of immortality are examples of equanimity-providing meaning. Thus, this research suggests that the effects of mortality salience

on defensiveness are not specific to one's own death, but extend to one's sense of existential meaning.

Similarly, research conducted by Ian McGregor (2006) has found that individuals rely on zealous ideals to reestablish a sense of certainty when certainty has been threatened. The research suggests that these zealous ideals could include many different things such as conviction, commitment, or even extremism and that the importance of the zeal was to keep an individual's mind distracted and not focused on the threat. This research demonstrates further evidence that the effects of mortality salience on defensiveness are not specific to thoughts of one's own death.

Other research conducted by Hart et al. (2005) has found that defense mechanisms are part of an interrelated security system devoted to maintaining equanimity and that threats to one defense mechanism leads to compensatory activation of others. The researchers conducted four studies and in Studies 1 and 2 they found that threats on an individual's attachment relationships motivate worldview defense and self-esteem striving in a similar way as mortality salience. Studies 3 and 4 demonstrated that threats against an individual's worldviews and self-esteem activated attachment defenses. Thus, threats to attachment, self-esteem and worldviews are sufficient to cause similar effects as mortality salience.

Finally, research conducted by Chatard, Arndt, and Pyszczynski (2010), discovered that the political ideologies of individuals' can defensively change in the long-term when a close other (friend or family member) has died. The researchers looked at longitudinal data and found that conservative individuals became significantly more conservative after a close other had died, suggesting yet again that threats other than one's own death can elicit defensive reactions.

Movies and TMT Effects

Since research on DTA has found that mortality salience effects are not necessarily specific to thoughts of one's own death, it is possible that death scenes in movies could cause defensive effects. There has been no past research on the psychological effects of death in movies; however, other studies involving films have shown that there can be other (potentially negative) effects. For instance, research has found that films can have an effect on racial relations. In a study by Eno and Ewoldsen (2010) the researchers measured implicit and explicit attitudes towards blacks and then had participants watch either *Remember the Titans* or *Rosewood*. The plot of *Rosewood* focused on a community of African Americans escaping their prejudicial Florida town following a lynch mob attack in the early nineteen-twenties. *Remember the Titans*, on the other hand, was set during the period of integration and focused around a football team trying to unite through the leadership of a black coach and the black and white players. The researchers found that implicitly measured attitudes towards blacks were affected by the content of the films. For instance, those who watched *Rosewood* exhibited less implicit prejudice and demonstrated more pro-black attitudes than those who watched *Remember the Titans*. This is perhaps due to the fact that in *Rosewood* black people were shown to be more powerful leading to the drop in explicit prejudice.

Research also suggests that film has an effect on suicidal thoughts and anxious behavior. A study conducted by Till, Niederkrotenthaler, Herberth, Vitouch, and Sonneck (2010) found that when non-suicidal individuals watched films containing either censored or uncensored suicide they were more likely to exhibit sadder moods and higher depression. (These participants, however, were also more likely to exhibit an increase in self-esteem and were less likely to report suicidal thoughts.) Research on anxious behavior found that certain clips lead to an increase in heart rate, distress, and recollection of the events of the film more than others

(Weidmann, Conradi, Groger, Fehm, & Fydrich, 2009). In particular, films depicting rape led to the highest level of anxiety. This research suggests that certain clips can elicit stronger emotions and that individuals may experience a physiological reaction to these clips.

Clearly, then, it is possible for film content to exert meaningful effects on viewers' psychological processes. It therefore seems possible that clips involving death scenes may lead individuals to protect their worldviews by derogating foreign others due to an increase in death thought accessibility.

The Effects of Creatureliness. The extent of these effects, however, may depend on who is dying. There could be differences in the effect of death in movies depending on whether humans or animals as well as animated versus non-animated characters die. Though there has been no research on the effects of watching humans or animals die in movies, studies have shown that when humans are reminded of their own mortality they tend to devalue those animals, because animality, or "creatureliness," is a reminder of mortality (Beatson & Halloran, 2007). For instance, a study by Goldenberg et al. (2001) examined how individuals tend to distance themselves from animals especially when reminded of their own death, because animals remind people of their own vulnerability. In Study 1, the researchers found that when individuals were reminded of their own death there was an increase in their disgust towards animals. The researchers found in Study 2, that an individual who was reminded of their death was more likely to prefer essays that described the differences between humans and animals and dislike essays that described the similarities. This study demonstrates that individuals tend to distance themselves from animalistic behavior, especially following mortality salience.

Further research on animals has shown that this effect is directed to both wild animals and companion animals. Research by Beatson, Loughnan, and Halloran (2009) investigated

whether or not humans would derogate their pets when the individuals were exposed to mortality salience and reminded of their creatureliness. The researchers found that when pet owners were exposed to mortality salience they rated their pets more negatively. Thus, the effect of making creatureliness salient while exposing individuals to thoughts of their own deaths can extend to both pets and individuals who normally see animals in a positive way. This research suggests that if humans were to see an animal die the effect (e.g., on worldview defense) may be less than when they saw a human die.

Though research has found that people devalue their pets when exposed to mortality salience, other research has found that humans tend to experience vast grief when they lose a pet (Noonan, 2008). The research conducted found that individuals look to their pets as counselors and as a result form a strong attachment to their pet. Thus, when the pet dies the human experiences extreme sadness. This suggests that when a person sees a pet die it may pose a psychological threat strong enough to motivate worldview defense.

Animation Versus Non-Animation. It also seems possible that the effect of death in movies would depend on whether the movie is animated. Research into death and animation is nonexistent; however, research on the effects of animated films has been conducted. Some research has found that animated movies may lead individuals to devalue the animated characters due to the fact that they are not realistic enough (Hodgins, Jorg, O'Sullivan, Park, & Mahler, 2010). To examine this, Hodgins et al. created three different animated scenes which included a couple in an argument. These animated characters had detailed motion in their body, face, hair and eyes in order to resemble real people. The researchers then showed individuals the animated clips with and without movement and sound in order to determine what a person's emotional response would be. The researchers found that facial movement is an important indicator of a

participant's emotional involvement, suggesting that facial expression may lead to a more realistic and emotionally engaging animated character. Thus, it is possible that movies with detailed animation may lead individuals to derogate foreign others, but since the character is still animated and distanced from reality the individual's emotional attachment may not be as strong as it would be for a non-animated film.

The research on movies and TMT has led to the creation of the current study in which the effects of watching death scenes in movies will be measured in terms of human versus animal and non-animated versus animated characters.

The Current Study

The current study was designed to examine whether watching death scenes in movies would lead to worldview defense in order to determine whether death scenes of fictional others can lead to TMT effects. In the current study participants were randomly assigned to one of five film conditions. The film conditions were: animated animals, animated humans, non-animated animals, non-animated humans, or commercials – where animals and humans are depicted dying in all conditions except the commercials condition. Later, in each of the studies, participants were asked to fill out surveys that had to do with both military intervention in the Middle East and immigration in the United States. Based on the findings from Pyszczynski, Abdollahi, Solomon, Greenberg, Cohen and Weise (2008) that individuals who are exposed to mortality salience are more in favor of violent military intervention, and findings from Vail and Motyl (2007) on the effect of mortality salience on attitudes towards immigration, two hypotheses were tested regarding whether or not participants exposed to mortality salience through different forms of film depictions would defend their worldviews.

The first hypothesis predicted that participants exposed to the non-animated human film condition would be more likely to defend their (American) worldview by supporting harsh anti-immigration policies and preemptive foreign military intervention. The second hypothesis predicted that individuals who were exposed to both the animated animal and human conditions would not express as much worldview defense, but would still exhibit higher worldview defense than individuals who watched (non-threatening and non-mortality related) commercials. This hypothesis derives from the studies conducted by Beatson et al. (2009) and Goldenberg, et al. (2001), which have shown that individuals tend to distance themselves from violent activities when compared with animals due to effects of creatureliness; and Hodgins et al. (2010) who found that animation may reduce the mortality salience effects because the clips are viewed as less realistic than the non-animated clips. It was unclear, however, if the non-animated animal condition would elicit effects. Due to research on creatureliness it is possible that individuals would not defend their worldviews when exposed to an animal's death, however, other research has found that people value their pets and as a result watching an animal die may trigger a defensive response (Noonan, 2008).

Method

Participants

The participants, 183 union college students (46 men and 137 women) served in this study for either four dollars or psychology course credit. Thirty-seven participants were tested in the commercials, animated animals, and non-animated animals condition and 36 participants were tested in the non-animated and animated human conditions. The participants were randomly assigned and tested individually.

Materials and Procedure

When the participants entered the study they were first told to fill out an informed consent form, which explained that they may or may not be exposed to death scenes in a series of movie clips. The participants were then randomly assigned to one of the five movie conditions and placed in separate rooms. The movie condition was used as the independent variable. Each of the five movie conditions contained three clips that were approximately three minutes in length each and were presented to participants on three computers programmed with VLC Media Player which presented the different movie clips via a DVD. The movie conditions contained the following clips: animated human (*UP*, *Tarzan*, and *Hercules*); animated animal (*Bambi*, *the Lion King*, and *the Land Before Time*); non-animated human (*the Lord of the Rings*, *Robin Hood*, and *Gladiator*); non-animated animals (*I am Legend*, *the Never-Ending Story*, and *Hachiko*); commercials (*Apple*, *Reynolds Wrap*, and *Honda*).

When the participant entered their movie room they were told, as a cover story, that they would be taking two different studies and that the first was a “pilot test” to see how well certain movie clips flowed together. Participants in the death conditions were given short paragraph descriptions of each of the movies they were about to see so that the participant knew what the movie was about (see Appendix). After the participants read these descriptions they were told to watch the movies on the computer screen. The DVD was already set up so all the participant had to do was press play. Participants were told that after they finished viewing the clips they should fill out the “pilot test” survey. This survey asked specific questions about the clips that acted as both a delay/distraction and an independent measure. These questions asked the participants whether they had seen the movies before, how exciting and interesting they were on a scale from 1 (*not at all*) to 10 (*extremely*), and how emotional they were on a scale from 1 (*very slightly or not at all*) to 5 (*very emotional*). Participants were also asked to rate how sad, angry, disgusted,

happy, or surprised they were by the clips on a scale from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*extremely*). The participants were told that they would have as much time as they needed to finish this section of the study. When the participants finished filling out the “pilot test” survey they were told to knock on the door so that the researcher could give them the next study.

Two surveys measuring attitudes toward immigration and military intervention were given to the participants following the presentation of the movie clips (Motyl, Rothschild, Vail, Weise, & Pyszczynski, in preparation; Vail & Motyl, 2010). The order of the two surveys was counterbalanced and distributed randomly to the participants. When the experimenter gave the second study to the participants she turned off the computer monitor so that the participant would not be distracted by the screen when taking the surveys. These surveys were used as the dependent variable. In order to prevent participants from linking the surveys to the movie clips, participants were told the surveys were unrelated to the pilot study. Participants completed the surveys in separate rooms. They were each given a survey relating to immigration and one relating to military intervention. Participants were told that they had as much time as they needed to complete these surveys. The surveys asked questions that had the participant rate on a scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 11 (*strongly agree*) how they felt about certain issues pertaining to immigration and military intervention. For instance, the immigration survey included items such as: “*Legislation should be enacted that puts restrictions on all types of immigration into this country;*” and “*Today’s immigrants have a lot to offer America.*” (reverse coded). Likewise, the military intervention survey asked: “*To address the problem of terrorism, the United States’ best choice is to use military intervention;*” and “*The only chance we have to stop international terrorism is if the United States follows a strict warlike and uncompromising approach to this problem.*” After the participants completed these surveys they filled out a sheet

that asked to supply information such as their gender, age, race, and what they believed the purpose of the study to be. When participants finished this form they were told that they could leave their rooms and come out into the main room. Participants were then fully debriefed as a group and any questions they had about the study were answered.

Results

In order to test the hypotheses that participants exposed to the non-animated human film condition would be most likely to defend their worldviews and that individuals who were exposed to both the animated animal and human conditions would not express as much worldview defense, but would still exhibit higher worldview defense than individuals who watched (non-threatening and non-mortality related) commercials -- an analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted to determine any differences between conditions. Based on a factor analysis, which suggested that the defense measures reflected a common factor, a single measure of worldview defense was computed by taking the mean of the immigration and military intervention scales.

The results are as follows. Two participants were eliminated when examining the results¹. A one-way between subjects analysis of variance (ANOVA) performed on the independent variable of film condition and the dependent variable of worldview defense did not reach significance, $F(4, 176) = 1.33, p > .05$. The ANOVA, though not significant, revealed a clear trend. As a result, a follow-up regression analysis was performed on worldview defense and revealed a linear relationship, $t(180) = 2.25, \beta = .17, p < .05$, with increasing levels of defensiveness progressing as follows from least to most: commercials condition ($M = 4.18, SD = .21$); animated animals condition, ($M = 4.30, SD = .21$); animated humans condition, ($M = 4.55,$

$SD = .21$); non-animated humans condition, ($M = 4.54$, $SD = .21$); to the non-animated animals condition ($M = 4.79$, $SD = .20$). Figure 1 shows this linear relationship.

A 5 way between subjects multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was conducted on emotion to confirm that dependent affect variables did not play a role in the results (Pyszczynski et al., 1999). Tukey's post-hoc tests were conducted due to the ANOVA. On the basis of a factor analysis, the negative emotional variables of angry, sad, afraid, and disgusted were combined into a negative affect score and revealed significant differences between participants in the conditions, $F(4, 146) = 30.65$, $p < .05$. The positive emotional variables of happy and surprised were also combined into a positive affect score and revealed significant differences between participants in the conditions, $F(4, 146) = 10.98$, $p < .05$. The arousal variables of interesting and exciting were combined into a general arousal score and revealed no significant differences between participants in each condition, $F(4, 146) = 4.16$, $p > .05$. Table 1 lists the means and standard deviations of the affect variables for each film condition. The subscript in Table 1 demonstrates the differences between participants in each of the conditions. Figure 2 reveals that the mood results do not map on to the defensiveness trend which indicates that the emotional effects are not the same as the trend found for worldview defense. An additional analysis of covariance revealed that the defense trend remained the same while controlling for affect, suggesting that affect and defensiveness are independent processes.

Discussion

The present experiment was designed to test whether viewing death scenes of humans and animals in non-animated and animated movie clips would affect participants' political attitudes (i.e., worldview defense). The ANOVA did not reveal any significant effects; however, there was a linear trend that progressed from commercials to non-animated animals, with

animated conditions falling in between. In other words, participants who viewed clips involving non-animated animals exhibited more worldview defense than participants who viewed commercials, though the trend was not statistically reliable.

Importantly, there was no similar linear relationship among movie clips and self-reported negative or positive emotion or arousal. In fact, statistically controlling for these variables made the observed worldview defense trend slightly stronger, suggesting that affect and defensiveness work independently of each other (Pyszczynski, Greenberg, & Solomon, 1999). Thus, the trend found in this study is not due to emotion per se, but rather the effect likely has to do with defense against the negative affect potentially elicited by death reminders presented in movie clips..

It seems likely that the lack of significant differences between movie clip conditions (despite the presence of a clear trend) was due to the fact that there was insufficient statistical power. Discrepancies between the perceived themes or other differences between the films could have also introduced error variance. As participants were asked to evaluate the clips in terms of quality, it may be that they were not sufficiently focused on the death theme in some clips, and/or they could have been in a “rational” (analytical) as opposed to “experiential” mode of processing, which is known to reduce or eliminate defensive effects (Hodgins et al., 2010).

Additionally, ad hoc casual analysis was conducted on the theme and relative flow of the clips, since participants’ responses on these factors were open-ended and non-numerical. Participants claimed that the flow of the clips was not very good in some conditions, which may have caused additional error variance. If the film clips did not flow well together, it is possible that the participants did not view the films as consistent and as a result may have evaluated them separately and not as one unit reflective of death.

Animation

Though there were no significant effects, the linear trend suggests that in this study the animated films were less compelling (in terms of their ability to elicit defensiveness) than the non-animated films, which is consistent with previous research from Hodgins et al. (2010). This suggests that the participants who viewed animated films may not have found the animation close enough to reality and as a result did not need to engage in as much worldview defense.

Animated Animals. Ad hoc analyses of participants' comments on the perceived theme of the films suggest that a common response for the animated animals condition was losing a parent, and more particularly, leaving a child alone. Thus, since the participants did not directly mention the death and focused more on abandonment, it is possible that the death in the clips were less potent than the non-animated animals condition. As a result, participants may not have experienced as much existential threat, leading to weaker worldview defense. What is interesting is that the animated animals condition elicited significantly more negative emotion than the non-animated humans condition, but the linear trend suggests that animated animals led to less defensiveness than non-animated humans, suggesting even further that the negative responses did not affect the linear trend.

Animated Humans. Ad hoc analyses also showed that participants who viewed the clips involving animated humans were given clips that (they claimed) did not flow well together. For instance, participants claimed that *UP* and *Hercules* fit well, but *Tarzan* did not. This could be due to the fact that *UP* and *Hercules* displayed men losing women they loved, and *Tarzan* showed a man with no personal connections dying. Thus, in general *Tarzan* did not fit well in the group and could have affected the participants' responses. In terms of theme, the most common response was love and heroism. This is possibly due to the fact that the relationship between the character who died and their significant other was emphasized more than the death

itself (although the characters who survived did emphasize their grief). Though since the characters were animated it is possible that this grief was not perceived as realistic and that is why participants focused on a different theme, which once again minimized their worldview defense.

Non-Animation

The linear trend suggests that non-animated films, particularly non-animated animals, were more threatening than the animated films, which is consistent with previous research (Hodgins et al., 2010). These findings suggest that individuals who view non-animated films found the clips to be more realistic than the animated movies and as a result had higher worldview defense. What is interesting is that the non-animated animals lead to the greatest response, suggesting that participants views on losing a pet were more potent than any effects of creatureliness, which is consistent with findings from Noonan (2008).

Non-Animated Animals. Participants who viewed the clips involving non-animated animals had the highest defensiveness, but the participants' responses to negative, positive, and arousal variables were not significantly different from the other conditions. This is interesting because the group with the highest defensiveness did not vary their responses to the political questionnaires due to their emotion, but perhaps due to the fact that the clips included more potent death scenes. It is possible that the clips in this condition were viewed as more threatening because participants were watching another person's pet die, which in accordance with findings from Noonan (2008) can lead to extreme grief. Furthermore, participants most commonly mentioned the theme of death in this condition. Most participants were tuned in to the death of the animals and, more specifically, the death of a pet. Since participants noted that

they were aware of the death, it is likely that their political attitudes would have changed due to protection of worldviews – not emotion -- in conjunction with the research on TMT.

Non-Animated Humans. Similar to non-animated animals, the participants who viewed non-animated humans had relatively high worldview defense. The findings also showed that participants in this condition had the highest sadness ratings out of the four other conditions. Unfortunately, there was a discrepancy in the theme of the clips, where most participants noticed that the theme was love, honor, and courage. Due to the fact that the most common responses did not involve death, it is likely that participants were not focused on the death and that is why the results were not significant. It is also possible that participants considered love and heroism as uplifting which may have buffered them from the threat of death. The results from the positive affect words support this idea. Also, in terms of flow, participants stated that the clips involving *Robin Hood* and *Gladiator* flowed much more nicely than the *Lord of the Rings* and *Robin Hood*. Once again, this could have led participants to downplay the importance of the death and focus more on how the clips flowed together, as opposed to the actual content of the scene.

Control

The findings from the commercials condition suggest that participants who viewed the commercials were happy, which could be due to the fact that since they knew they could have seen death they were happy when it turned out to be commercials. Furthermore, it was indicated that most of the participants had not seen the commercials and as a result were not desensitized to the information. Thus, the commercials used may not have been an effective control since they were foreign to most viewers (whereas the movies were not). The commercials were significantly different from all other conditions in terms of the negative, positive and arousal

variables, suggesting once again that these variables had no effect on the linear trend produced by the regression analysis.

Limitations

The current experiment is suggestive that exposure to death scenes in movies can affect individuals' responses towards immigrants and military intervention, although the lack of statistical significance precludes confident conclusions about this. There were some limitations that could have affected the results. In the current experiment the participants were only exposed to fictional animated and non-animated death scenes. For ethical reasons, the participants could not be shown real death scenes (e.g., the JFK assassination). Furthermore, the study did not have a mortality salience condition in which participants were exposed to thoughts of their own death, so it is unclear if the basic mortality salience effect would have been replicated.

Another limitation was that the extent to which these films elicit death thought accessibility is unknown. As a result, it is unclear if the movies were actually all effective in this regard. For instance, since the non-animated animals condition was at the top of the linear trend it is possible that the clips in that condition elicited higher death thought accessibility than the clips in the other three death conditions. Along with this limitation, the films were not rated for banality. As a result, it may be possible that certain movies were considered to be more banal than others and as a result were not as emotionally provoking. There was also a movie selection limitation in the sense that the movies were chosen so that they were well known (feasibly) to all participants, however, in some instances the participants indicated that they had not seen the clips, or if they had seen them, it was only one or two times. As a result, it is unclear whether or not viewing the clips previously had an effect on how participants reacted to the death of the character. It is possible that in a familiar movie the death would be less potent due to the fact

that participant had seen it before, and as a result the responses to the questionnaires could have been affected. Future research could control for this by having people rate the popularity of a movie before it is selected for the experiment. Thus, the movies could then be selected from either a popular or un-popular category. A similar limitation is that the movies selected were either from popular American production companies, such as Disney, or English companies such as the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC). Movies were selected from a variety of production companies due to the fact that finding death scenes in movies for the four death conditions was difficult and required a wider range of film options. As a result, there were certain film clips that participants indicated they had never seen which could have affected the overall results. Future research may be able to address these limitations in order to make the effect of death in movies on responses to immigration and military intervention more prevalent.

Future Research

Future research could expand the current study in order to control for a number of limitations. It would be important that all future research assess the death thought accessibility of the films to make sure they are equivalent in each condition. Also, future research could try and find a variety of films that were either well-known or not-well known in order to control for an effect related to familiarity. By doing so, it could be determined whether participants exhibit defensiveness due to a familiar film or a foreign film, which may lead to an interesting new aspect of the effects of mortality salience on movie-goers. What is particularly important, however, is that there is sufficient power by increasing the number of participants. In accordance with this, research could also examine what the precise effects of these movies are on viewers and determine how individuals would react following a potent death scene. Thus, producers could learn how to create death scenes that would either elicit strong worldview

defense in their favor – for consumption purposes, or could discover ways to remove the ‘banal’ factor from their movies.

Further future research on the effect of another’s death, could take the findings even further and attempt to expand the current study’s findings and make them more generalizable. Future research may look at how the perceived death of another effects an individual’s views. Researchers could show participants sad animal clips from PETA and sad clips of children starving from the Christian donation organizations in order to see if the idea that death may occur without immediate intervention may lead to a change in political attitudes. This research could broaden the findings of TMT research to include perceived death of another as well as actual death of another.

Other research could use similar methodology as the current study, but rather than examining the attitudes of college students, one could examine the attitudes of children. Past research on children and movies has shown that children tend to rate movies based on the attractiveness or heroism of a character, thus it would be interesting to determine how children react when exposed to the death of a beloved character. Rather than exposing the children to the political attitudes questionnaires, however, they could be exposed to instances surrounding bullying and school violence. There has been some past research on bullying habits and how it relates to bullying in films, however, this research may demonstrate that bullying may be affected by death scenes in movies. Once again, this future research could broaden the effects of TMT to include the more specific nature of bullying or school violence.

Future research in the field of TMT and movies could lead to important findings that would broaden the TMT paradigm and lead to a better understanding of how movies may affect

our more general viewpoints, however all future research needs to focus on the death thought accessibility of the clips in order to produce significant results.

Conclusions

In the United States, it seems as if people engage in worldview consistent behavior, when exposed to death related thoughts – perhaps even in film depictions. This worldview defense can lead to serious attitude changes such as being against immigration and believing strongly in military intervention. For instance, if individuals are exposed to mortality salience they will be more likely to derogate a foreign other in order to support their worldviews. This form of worldview defense is not surprising; however, because it is an effective way of relieving individuals who have been exposed to mortality salience. The implications of the current study are that exposure to death in everyday contexts – like film clips – may have similar effects and that perhaps viewers and producers should be aware of the possibility of the effects and make strong efforts to mitigate the effects. It is possible that future research may find alternative ways for individuals to relieve their anxiety, but currently worldview defense seems to prevail – especially since it is unconsciously done. Furthermore, perhaps future studies will find ways to encourage individuals to appreciate their relationships and not fear death that way awareness of mortality will not lead to strong disgust of foreign others, but rather will lead to better relationships and healthy lifestyle choices.

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Footnotes

¹ The participants who were eliminated were more than half of a standard deviation away from the next person. These participants were very high in defensiveness and removing them did not substantively affect the results.

Table 1

Mean Positive and Negative Affect and Arousal Scores as a Function of Film Clip Condition

	Non-Animation		Animation		Commercials
Mean Affect	Animals	Humans	Animals	Humans	
Negative	3.16 _a	2.47 _{ac}	3.55 _{ad}	2.89 _a	1.19 _b
	(.17)	(.18)	(.16)	(.17)	(.16)
Positive	1.89 _a	1.98 _a	1.60 _a	1.91 _a	3.18 _b
	(.20)	(.20)	(.19)	(.20)	(.18)
Arousal	6.00 _a	6.09 _a	6.06 _a	7.25 _a	5.58 _a
	(.30)	(.32)	(.29)	(.31)	(.28)

Note. Numbers in parentheses are standard deviations.

Figure Caption

Figure 1. Mean differences demonstrating the linear trend of the five film conditions where the dependent variable is worldview defense.

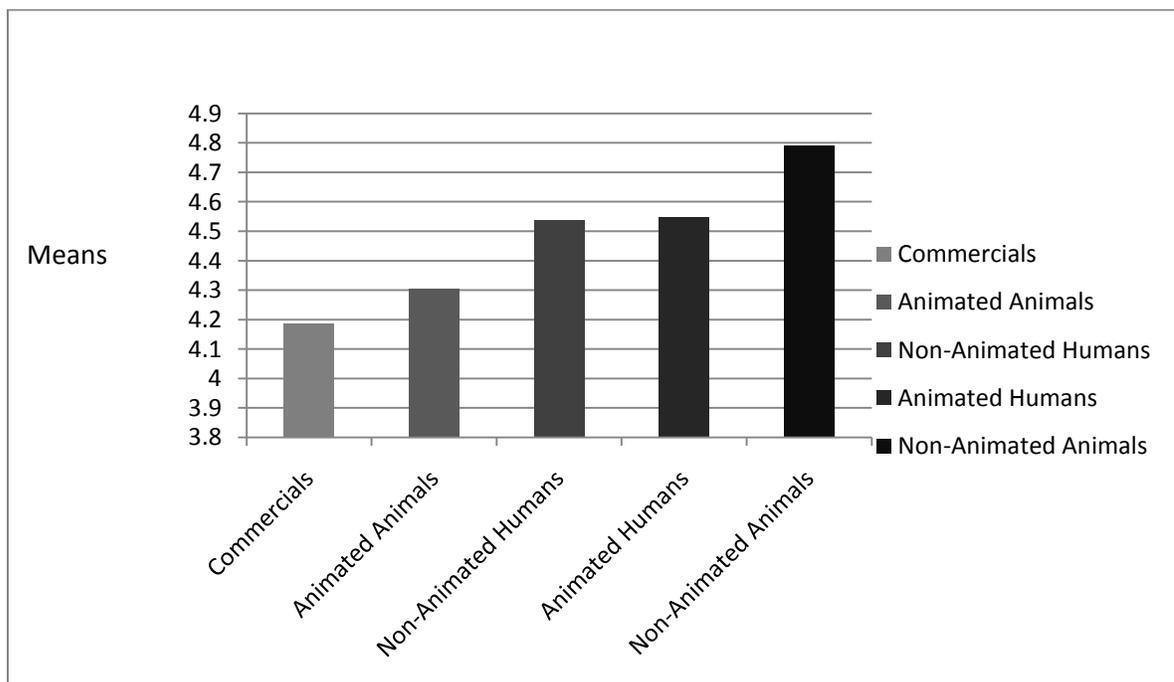
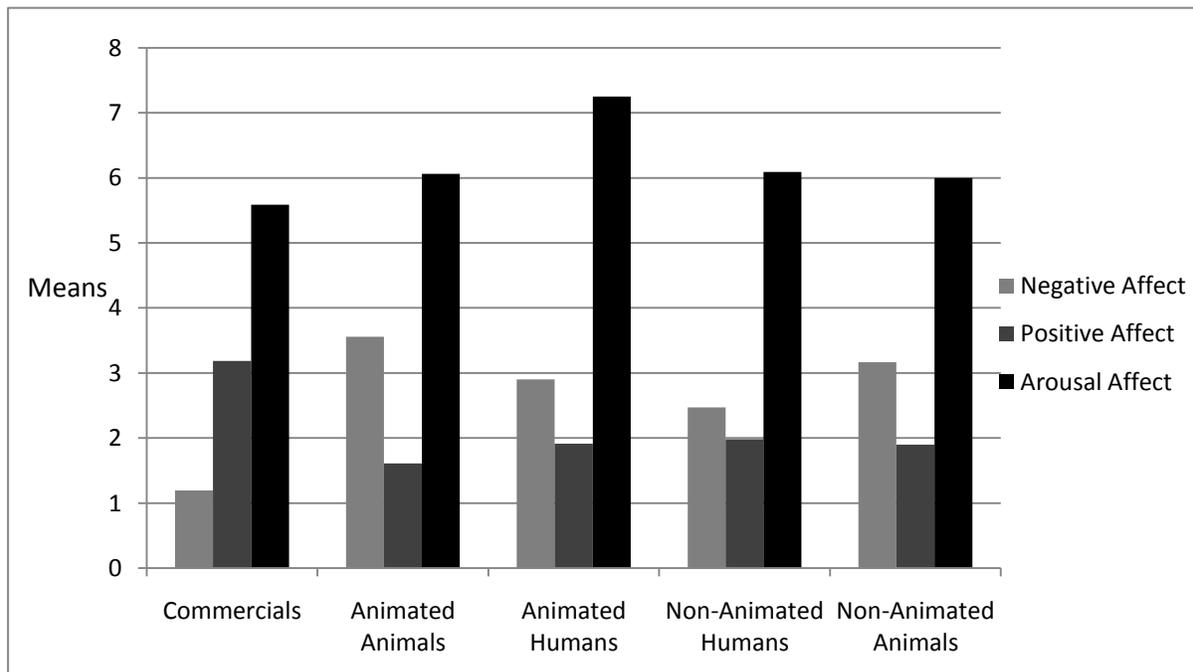


Figure Caption

Figure 2. Mean difference of negative, positive, and arousal affect variables.



Appendix

Descriptions of the Death Scene in the Animated and Non-Animated Human and Animal Death

Conditions

*The Lord of the Rings: Fellowship of the Ring:

Young Frodo was expected to encounter many troubles on his journey to destroy the ring; however the one thing that was forged to protect him, the fellowship, was supposed to repel that impending threat. Boromir as part of that fellowship was also meant to protect him, however his greed overcame him. In the upcoming scene Boromir will prove his allegiance to the fellowship by protecting the hobbits despite the unfortunate consequence.

*Disclaimer: All rights to this film are owned by New Line
Cinema

*Robin Hood:

On this T.V. version of the great legend, Robin finds himself lost in a home he once knew. He has his band of friends and works to save the English people from an impending threat. His hardest feat however was winning the heart of Maid Marian. In the scene you are about to see, Marian and Robin are newly engaged; however Robin is too late in saving his beloved's life.

*Disclaimer: All rights to this are owned by the British
Broadcasting Corporation

*Gladiator:

Maximus was the general of the Roman army, but the death of the Ceaser, Marcus Aurelius, left him at the mercy of the Ceaser's ill-minded son Commodus. Maximus returned home to find his wife and son slain and himself a prisoner. Maximus became a beloved Gladiator working his way up to revealing himself to Commodus. In the scene you are about to see an epic battle ensues that leaves the treacherous Commodus death and Maximus wandering into new terrain.

*Disclaimer: All rights to this film are owned by Dreamworks

**UP:

In this Disney-Pixar film, Carl Fredricksen is an awkward little boy who finds a friend in a goofy little girl named Ellie who has the same love for a renowned traveler named Charles Muntz. As Carl and Ellie get older they fall in love and get married. In the scene you are about to see, the relationship between Carl and Ellie is represented ending in an unfortunate event that will set up the plot for the rest of the movie.

*Disclaimer: All rights to this movie are owned by Walt Disney
Animation Studios and PIXAR

****Tarzan:**

In the struggle to teach Tarzan to speak, both Clayton and Jane revealed the true reason for journeying to Africa. Whereas Jane truly cared for Tarzan, Clayton was more concerned with wealth. In the following scene Clayton is trapped by vines and though Tarzan tries to save him, Clayton meets a fateful end.

*Disclaimer: All rights to this movie are owned by Walt Disney Animation Studios

****Hercules:**

Zeus told Hercules that he needed to become a true hero in order to join the Gods in Olympus. Thus, Hercules battled many creatures from Zeus in order to achieve that status. The one demon he could not feat, however, was Megara the woman who enthralled him. In the next scene, you will see that despite her deceit, Megara loved Hercules and gave everything to keep him safe.

*Disclaimer: All rights to this movie are owned by Walt Disney Animation Studios

*****I am Legend:**

The end of the world is bleak, however, the last man on earth finds a best friend in his dog Sam. Though he has no interaction with any other humans, this man and his dog manage to survive and even thrive in a world that has been desecrated. In the scene you are about to see Sam has been injured and finds herself in the arms of her best friend.

*Disclaimer: All rights to this film are owned by Warner Brothers

*****The Never-Ending Story:**

In this world a young boy named Atreyu and his horse are on a journey to find a princess in order to save their home. Atreyu's only friend is his horse, Artax, and together they venture through a dreary swamp whilst on their journey. While going through the swamp Artax becomes stuck in the mud and Atreyu tries desperately to save his beloved horse.

*Disclaimer: All rights to this film are owned by Warner Brothers

*****Hachiko:**

In this endearing film, Parker Wilson finds an Akita puppy lost in a train station. Mr. Wilson takes the puppy home and raises him with love. Every day the dog, Hachi, went to the train station with Mr. Wilson and then waited until he came home. When Hachi was five, Mr. Wilson died unexpectedly. Regardless, Hachi still went to the train station everyday and waited

for him to come home despite the fact that he never did. In the upcoming scene, Hachi is twelve years old and waits as his master greets him once again.

*Disclaimer: All rights to this film are owned by Stage 6 films

****Bambi:

In this classic movie, young Bambi and his mother are walking through the forest for the first time. His mother hesitated taking Bambi out for grazing sooner because she feared that hunters were out. In the next scene, Bambi and his mother are in the plain and Bambi's mother meets an unfortunate fate trying to escape into the woods.

*Disclaimer: All rights to this movie are owned by Walt Disney Animation Studios

****The Lion King:

Young Simba is a curious lion cub who wants to explore the pride lands. His father, Mufasa, is too protective of Simba and restricts where he can go. After getting in trouble for going to the forbidden elephant graveyard, Simba finds himself in a valley running for his life from stampeding antelope. In an effort to save his son Mufasa leaps into the stampede and pulls Simba to safety. In the following scene, Mufasa tries to climb to safety and meets an untimely end when he appeals to his brother for help.

*Disclaimer: All rights to this movie are owned by Walt Disney Animation Studios

****The Land Before Time:

In this prehistoric tale the dinosaurs that survived the meteor shower are looking for a haven known as the green valley. A young Brontosaurus named little foot and his mother are on their way to join their herd despite their lack of food and water. Little foot's mother is the only family he has. In the scene you are about to see, little foot's mother has done everything she can to protect him from a tyrannosaurus-rex.

*Disclaimer: All rights to this movie are owned by Universal Studios and Amblin Entertainment

*Non-Animated Human Descriptions

**Animated Human Descriptions

***Non-Animated Animal Descriptions

****Animated Animal Descriptions

