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Landscapes of care and the enchantment of dying in Edwin Beeler's *Die weisse Arche* (2016)

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ABSTRACT

This article examines representations of nature and dying in the Swiss documentary *Die weisse Arche* (2016) through the lens of Jane Bennett's critique of Max Weber's concept of disenchantment. I establish a specific relationship between Edwin Beeler's film and Bennett's claim that enchantment is foundational to the ethical life, stressing that *Die weisse Arche* posits an ethics of end-of-life care motivated by moments of enchantment that emanate from the mythical, religious, and local belief systems of the characters Beeler portrays. The film is situated within the recent proliferation of documentaries on dying, marked as they are by a focus upon a single terminal patient and a refusal to film the actual moment of death. Close analysis brings to the fore the film's distinctive poetic style and narrative structure, highlighting in particular how Beeler juxtaposes natural and religious imagery alongside images of dying and care. Drawing upon a methodological framework that brings together philosophy and film studies, this article claims that *Die weisse Arche*, through its marked absence of medical images in a twenty-first century film about dying, allows us to question the role and place of medicine in contemporary end-of-life care.

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Over the last few days, I have been able to see my life as from a great altitude, as a sort of landscape, and with a deepening sense of the connection of all its parts.

Oliver Sacks (2015, 18)

Introduction

Die weisse Arche [*The white Arc*] (2016) is the final film in a trilogy devoted to exploring the ethnic, regional, and religious customs of Switzerland. In this film, as in its precursors, *Arme Seelen* [*The Souls – Tales of Ghostly Encounters*] (2011) – a documentary about sagas, folk mythology, and enigmatic encounters with the dead, and *Bruder Klaus* [*Brother Klaus*] – about the Swiss patron saint and the history of his vocation (1991), the Swiss documentary filmmaker Edwin Beeler assesses questions of transcendence, death, dying, and the afterlife in rural areas of central Switzerland. Ethnologist Grit

Lemke has poignantly remarked that Beeler's cinematic work, and *Arme Seelen* in particular, can be described as a cinematic 'oral-history project', carefully constructed as a counter-manifesto to Max Weber's assertion that modernity is defined by a 'disenchantment of the world' (Lemke 2011).

What Weber famously attempts to capture is the general sense of disillusionment brought about by secularization, the vision of endless progress permeating science, and the destruction of social and local communities. This, according to Weber, leads to an overwhelming sense of alienation from others and the natural world. As a result, nature is rendered understandable, thereby losing its mystery; any transcendent meaning it may have has been reduced to a set of comprehensible mechanisms. To be sure, Weber's diagnosis of modernity does not ultimately mean that this 'intellectualization and rationalization [...] indicate an increased and general knowledge of the conditions under which one lives'. On the contrary:

It means something else, namely, the knowledge or belief that if one but wished one *could* learn it at any time. Hence, it means that principally there are no mysterious incalculable forces that come into play, but rather that one can, in principle, master all things by calculation. (Weber 1946, 139).

Beeler's trilogy is marked by an engagement with the persistence of the 'mysterious incalculable forces'. The three documentaries pay a powerful tribute to the idea that not everything can be mastered by 'calculation'. More specifically, the experience of dying and our relationship with the dead are shown to keep a sense of enchantment alive in Beeler's *Arme Seelen* and *Die weisse Arche*. These films make palpable – against the Weberian tale of modernity – not only that the 'mysterious incalculable forces' have not vanished, but that they remain intact even among a rich, secularized, and modern society.

Unlike *Arme Seelen*, however, *Die weisse Arche* is not predominantly concerned with folk beliefs about the survival of the dead, even if Beeler also seeks to capture the blend of religious tradition, local beliefs, and natural images that erect a firm bastion against a scientific and biomedical understanding of death and dying. While this, and a renewed focus upon one of the characters already appearing in its precursor, connects *Die weisse Arche* to *Arme Seelen*, the theme that becomes more pronounced in *Die weisse Arche* is that the process of dying – either one's own or that of others – is inseparable from the question of how we care for the dying. Presenting a mixture of Nichols's poetic and observational modes (2010, 142; 172), the film investigates the transition zone between experiences of dying – and attendant beliefs – and how these, in turn, affect the ways in which the dying are accompanied. At the heart of the film is the search for the personal, religious, natural, mythical, and local roots of an ethics of end-of-life care. Hence Beeler's film bears resemblance to the work of the philosopher Jane Bennett, who argues against Weber's 'disenchantment' as the programmatic tale of modernity, because she regards 'the mood of enchantment' as integral to ethics (2001, 3). This mood brings to the fore the 'affective dimensions' of ethics rather than the focus on principles and obligations, and Bennett regards these dimensions as foundational for a practice of ethics aiming 'to be responsive to the surprises that regularly punctuate life' (2001, 3).

In *The Enchantment of Modern Life: Attachments, Crossings, and Ethics* Bennett explores a range of these moments of enchantment in an attempt to illustrate the limitations which a purely rational engagement with the world and a denial of any magical

aspects of human existence bring with them. As Bennett puts it, we find ourselves in a narrative of Weberian disenchantment, when the: 'depiction of nature and culture as orders no longer capable of inspiring deep attachment inflects the self as a creature of loss and thus discourages discernment of the marvellous vitality of bodies human and nonhuman, natural and artifactual' (2001, 4). Against such a disenchanted view, Bennett sets up moments of enchantment which emanate from an active and full engagement – with an object, a situation, or an experience. This article makes the claim that Beeler's film through its images of nature and its depiction of dying as a natural and cultural process elaborates on Bennett's argument by composing an ethics of end-of-life care motivated by moments of enchantment that stem from the attachment to the mythical, religious, and local belief systems of the characters Beeler portrays.

Focusing on the stories of two of the film's five main protagonists, I propose that Beeler's film makes clear that an awareness of loss must not be synonymous with disenchantment. Beeler's protagonists are 'creatures of loss'. Their loss, however, is not grounded in the Weberian impoverishment brought about by a purely rational and scientific understanding of life. Loss has become a part of them, because they are intimately aware of the transience inscribed in the landscapes and bodies they inhabit. This awareness is intertwined with the possibility of transcendence and therefore uncontainable in a scientific paradigm. Within their homeland, the dying human – as an extension of that homeland – is experienced as containing the possibility for something akin to Bennett's 'mood of enchantment'. The personal origins of the protagonists' views on dying, but also the cultural and local contexts in which they develop, trigger an ethical duty to care for the dying that is linked to the idea of transcendence grounded in the film's natural and religious imagery. In exploring these images of nature and the role dying and care play in this context, my goal is not to claim that Beeler's specific grounding of an ethics of care is exhaustive or itself justified. Rather, I propose that the film's nature images as well as its articulating of the idea of transcendence is presented as constituting one valuable motivation for an ethics of end-of-life care as practiced in the local communities of central Switzerland.

Methodologically, this article is framed by the study of the history of death and dying, the philosophy of end-of-life care, the criticism of contemporary documentaries about dying, as well as the study of landscape in the context of moving image media. Against this background, this article seeks to analyse *Die weisse Arche* as a film in which Beeler views the cultural, local and religious practices that inform dying in central Switzerland through an ethnographic lens. Through the film's marked absence of medical images in a twenty-first century film about dying, Beeler may also slip into the register of advocacy. Concomitantly, the film indirectly challenges contemporary medicine's struggle to accept dying as opposed to regarding it as medical failure. This turns *Die weisse Arche* into an important document for thinking about the role and place of medicine in contemporary end-of-life care.

Images of nature

In *Die weisse Arche* Beeler focuses upon five characters, whose professional and personal lives are touched by either the experience of dying, caring for the dying, or a combination of both: Monika, a caretaker and nurse at a dementia care home whose own near-death

experience has transformed her fear of death into a need to accompany the dying; the Capuchin friar Martin, who is shown to accompany his dying brother Fromund; the Benedictine monk and artist Eugen, whose visual work engages with his experience of having accompanied dying brethren in the monastery-led care home facility; the forest ranger and healer Sam, who can perceive the dead and believes in the subsistence of the soul, and who played a central role in *Arme Seelen*, and Alfons, an Alpine shepherd determined to escape a materialistic society and live in harmony with nature.

This range of characters creates a kaleidoscope of a rural Swiss society in which the inevitability of dying becomes a lived reality. The focus upon several characters sets Beeler's film apart from other Swiss and European documentaries of recent years on the topic of dying and end-of-life care such as, for example, Max Kronawitter's *Sommer für Wenke* (2011), Res Balzli's *Bouton* (2012), David Sieveking's *Vergiss Mein Nicht* (2015), and Rowan Deacon's *Simon's Choice* (2017). These films constitute a small European sample in the international proliferation of what Jennifer Malkowski has called the genre of the 'deathbed documentary' (2017). These films, which have multiplied since the 1980s, breach the taboo of a death-denying culture and bring spectators to the bedside of the dying in an attempt: 'to bring the physical and emotional realities of actual, natural dying back into the public eye' (2017, 13).¹ According to Malkowski, the emergence of this genre can be explained via both technological developments but also cultural factors, such as the AIDS epidemic and its accompanying 'trends towards subjectivity, psychological intimacy, and autobiography in documentary' (2017, 73). Consonant with this is the rise of the 'first person documentary' (Lebow 2012), one of the genre's distinctive features being a focus upon the singular fate of a patient diagnosed with a terminal condition and an exploration of how their illness shapes the remainder of their life, including their relationships with others and their navigation through an often complex and unsympathetic healthcare system.² While sharing many features with Malkowski's observations on the deathbed documentary, Beeler's film also reinvents it by following not one but a range of characters, bound by geography and a distinct blend of Catholicism and folk mythology.

Another distinctive feature setting *Die weisse Arche* apart from other deathbed documentaries is its use of landscape imagery. Beeler's aesthetic treatment of landscapes conjoins his protagonists intimately with nature, as each tells of a specific relationship with a particular mountain pass or region in central Switzerland. While his characters speak, or when the camera accompanies them as they work – in the dementia care home, the monastery or on the Alps – Beeler frequently cuts to drifting clouds, trees and, in particular, the often ominous and snow-covered Alps of central Switzerland. This aesthetic choice enables Beeler not only to highlight the role these landscapes play in the imagination of his protagonists, but they also take on a striking role of their own.

Beeler's landscapes are carefully constructed images from which all manifestations of modernity have been erased – freed from human figures and all forms of human representation, there are no houses, gondolas, or mountain railways visible when the camera switches to these mountain views. Bordering on the sublime, they seek to outgrow any man-made narrative, their unconditional presence ultimately remaining incomprehensible even to those who are deeply connected to them. This is further accentuated by Beeler's use of sound and music. Aural landscapes are outlined alongside the film's images of nature and are used to reinforce the sense of indomitability suggested by his

cinematic landscapes. Indeed, they do more than merely accompany the images; they add 'a mimetic depth' to the frame (Harper and Rayner 2010, 19) by inviting the abandonment of a human-centric worldview. As a result, dying is no longer posited as an extraordinary event, but is part of the natural order just like the change of seasons. In his work on cinema and landscape, Martin Lefebvre has defined the pictorial economy of the cinematic landscape image as either a still-life or a setting for narrative space if, for example, the use of a natural space is subservient to depicting the inner world of characters (2006, 26).³ Part of what makes Beeler's landscape images such prominent elements of his films is that, while intimately connected with Beeler's characters, they also punctuate the film as reminders that, ultimately, the landscape remains independent and indifferent to them. This is particularly apparent in several shots that zoom out from the protagonists, thereby revealing that, within the wider context of the presence of the landscape, the person disappears.

With regard to cinematic landscape imagery, Maurizia Natali has remarked that they urge the spectator to: 'appreciate the never-ending prismatic effects of the landscape dream-work, its brilliant façade of lost conflicts, condensations and displacements' (2001, 108). This sense of the excess of the image is already highlighted in the opening sequence of *Die weisse Arche*, in which images of Monika traveling up a mountainous road by train are interspersed with shots of the snow-covered peaks around Andermatt. These shots repeatedly take over the entire screen, covering it completely in white, anticipating what Monika is about to relate when she gets off the train, namely that she is taking the spectator to the exact location where she and her family were hit by an avalanche during a ski hike in 2006. Monika's revisiting of the scene functions like an entrée to the very heart of the film, as by referring to this landscape in which she came closest to death Monika explores the ways in which the images of that near-death experience have caused her to rethink her relationship to dying, and how this in turn has motivated her current work in dementia care. Monika recounts the moments prior to the mass of snow hitting her, the panic she felt when realizing that she was unable to advance fast enough to escape the avalanche.⁴ Yet once the initial panic subsided and, much to her surprise, she found herself suddenly without fear.

In order to make sense of Beeler's use of landscape and the defining role it plays in *Die weisse Arche*, Lefebvre's reference to Sergei Eisenstein's concept of 'emotional landscape' is useful (Eisenstein 1987, 355). Lefebvre reminds us that Eisenstein posits nature as non-indifferent, as: 'a dialectical way of insuring the communion of man and nature through an affect characterized as the subjective experience of the laws of nature' (2006, 29 fn2). Eisenstein singles landscape out as 'a complex bearer of the possibilities of a plastic interpretation of emotions', highlighting that landscape thereby becomes: 'the freest element of film, the least burdened with servile, narrative tasks, and the most flexible in conveying moods, emotional states, and spiritual experiences' (Eisenstein 1987, 217). As Lefebvre highlights: 'part of the value of this definition lies in how it throws into relief landscape's conflictual or tense relationship with narrative' (2006, xii).⁵ Beeler's protagonists live in and with the undomesticated and hard landscapes that intersect *Die weisse Arche* but, despite their inherent unruliness, these mountains are also lived-in spaces as the protagonists are emotionally intertwined with them yet accept their uncontrollability.

Like the other characters upon which Beeler focuses, Monika explores her relationship with a particular mountain or mountain pass – in Monika's case the 'Oberalppass', the

high mountain pass that connects the Swiss cantons of Graubünden and Uri. This pass, where Monika's accident occurred, is shown in different seasons and meteorological conditions. These scenes prompt emotions in Monika and, within this dynamic of an unspoken dialogue between Beeler's characters and their natural counterparts, the landscapes are never indifferent, but speak to these protagonists and in turn the protagonists often speak through images of them. Monika relates that, after her near-death experience, she spent a year in hospital and suffered from severe depression until deciding to care for her own mother who had been diagnosed with cancer. This ultimately reconnected her with the sense of tranquillity and peace she experienced when caught in the avalanche and which she had lost in the event's aftermath. Monika describes this in sparse language, limiting herself to outlining the main contours of the events that followed the accident, but highlights that after the accident she felt drawn to visit and revisit the Oberalppass. The film returns to images of this mountain pass, awakening the memory of Monika's accident but also leaving unanswered what it is that prompted such fundamental emotional changes in Monika's life. Monika explores how, specifically, a set of trees became particularly significant to her after the accident. During her physical visiting and emotional revisiting of this scene, she realized that not only did she no longer fear illness and death but she was drawn to this particular landscape which encapsulated her experience of facing death without fearing it. She thereby presents her processing of the near-death experience as intimately connected to the landscape in which it took place. It is this landscape, which allowed her, as she expresses it when she discusses this experience in her office in the dementia care home later in the film: to 'view dying itself as the most beautiful and transformative physical process and metamorphosis in human life.'

Imaginary or visionary experiences, dreams, and visions, amongst them landscapes, are images often associated with the end of life, and yet, as medical sociologist Alan Kellehear has put it:

those in palliative care [...] seldom research the paranormal, while researchers of NDEs or deathbed visions seldom interest themselves in other social, psychological or medical aspects of dying more broadly. These divisive politics and practices deprive us all of a more unified understanding of the relationships between decline and transcendence and between carers' views of the 'journey' of dying and the dying person's view of their 'journey'. (2009, 19)⁶

Kellehear's observation points out the importance of paying attention to images of near-death experiences. Collecting and recognizing these images, which are seemingly opposed to a rational and scientific understanding of death and dying, may have the potential to ameliorate end-of-life care since they offer intimate perspectives into the process of dying. In Beeler's film Kellehear's observation becomes even more relevant as all of his protagonists testify to the fact that their personal experience of dying – be it in the form of Monika's near-death experience, or Martin's and Eugen's recalling images connected to their accompaniment of their dying brethren – has changed their perspective on their own deaths. It has opened their horizon to the realities of suffering and the uncontrollability of life, as a result of which they have come to view their work in care as an ethical responsibility growing out of these experiences.

While Monika previously associated dying with decay, she is now drawn to it, as she has come to see the process as a spiritual and physical metamorphosis inspiring her with awe.

Monika's testimony about how her near-death experience instigated her work in care and the transition from personal experience to ethical responsibility it describes, illustrates why Beeler's film can be seen to pay tribute to Weber's 'mysterious incalculable forces'. Bennett's thought helps to excavate what is at stake, as she proposes that, despite 'plenty of aspects of contemporary life that fit the disenchantment story', contemporary life remains accentuated by 'moments of enchantment' and: 'the affective force of those moments might be deployed to propel ethical generosity' (2001, 3).

For Bennett, not only ethical responsibility, but also ethical *generosity* emanates from these moments (2001, 3). Beeler's film captures this generosity in its various guises such as, for example, when Monika is shown working in the dementia care home. The camera follows her as she speaks to her patients, washes, and feeds them, dresses and carresses them. The way in which Monika engages with the people in her care highlights that, against the background of her own experience, her understanding and practice of care can no longer be contained in the concept of 'work'. Indeed, Beeler's presentation of Monika in the dementia care home seemingly constructs highly idealized images of care, particularly if these images are compared to the portrayal of other dementia care homes in contemporary documentaries such as in *Vergiss mein nicht*. But, again, Beeler's use of landscapes and the way in which they widen the horizon and intersect with these images of ideal care subvert the easy production of meaning. Beeler thereby highlights that ethical generosity remains a complex and personal process – one that always resists idealization. Maurizia Natali has observed that landscape images are always: 'a residue of silent cinema resisting mainstream logocentric narrativity' (2001, 107). This is powerfully illustrated when Beeler's camera pans out of the care home and onto the mountains opposite. The camera movement is accompanied by the monotonous, guttural noises of one of Monika's patients. As the camera comes to rest on the landscapes opposite the care home, it becomes unclear whether these noises are to be understood as remnants of language or testimonies to pain. This destabilizes the image of the care-home as a haven – a 'white arc' – by illustrating that suffering may always transcend care, but that it is also inscribed and part of a natural order which cannot be controlled.

A good death

The film's ambiguous title emphasizes the dual subject of the film and the Janus-like relationship between nature and religion in *Die weisse Arche*. The film's opening sequence, with its snow-covered peaks of the mountains around Andermatt, seemingly suggests that these may be the 'white arcs' Beeler has in mind. But the title of the film is also a direct reference to a short autobiographical text by the Swiss author and journalist Niklaus Meienberg, entitled 'Oh Du weisse Arche am Rande des Gebirges' (1991, 62–78). In this text, Meienberg, who is known for his critical attitude towards Swiss history and society and who committed suicide in 1993, describes the mixed emotions he experienced when attending a class reunion at the monastery of Disentis, where he went to school. Meienberg calls the monastery the 'white arc at the edge of the mountain', but the metaphor is itself already citation, as it was originally used by Hauser von Sisikon, a little known poet and priest, who at the beginning of the twentieth century used the term to describe the same monastery. However, in comparison to von Sisikon's devout poetry constructing sublime imagery of the monastery amongst the Alps, the image takes on significantly

darker tones in Meienberg. His experience at the monastery school and at the school reunion is marked by his questioning of religious values as much as by the general search for meaning that informs his writing.

The multi-layered genealogy of the title's image is significant because, in conjunction with images of nature, Beeler's film is also marked by recurrent images of the monasteries of Disentis and Engelberg, where Martin and Eugen live. In an interview, Beeler has stated that *Die weisse Arche* is a film about spirituality and human limitations, motivated by his belief that: 'perhaps man is not just a biochemical, brain-controlled machine being' (Biasio 2017). If Beeler's use of mountain images already highlights a resistance to scientific and disenchanting images, his investment in religious or spiritual imagery – the distinct blend of a traditional Swiss Catholicism mixed with folk mythology – pushes this even further. Just as in the mountain shots, Beeler erases all human representation from these images and instead renders static photograph-like shots that focus upon the materiality and physicality of the buildings, thereby emphasizing that, despite their man-made nature, they have seamlessly grown together with the natural world around them. But like their natural counterparts, these monasteries are not empty locations but spaces that have shaped the lives of the protagonists appearing in *Die weisse Arche*. They are the spaces in which they act and think. Yet Beeler's decision to feature images that erase the link between the protagonists and these spaces also points to the fact that these institutions, just like their natural counterparts, testify to the limitations of human knowledge.

The dichotomy of the title image comes together in the character Fromund Balmer, who is a blend of both the natural and religious 'situatedness' the film seeks to engage with. Fromund is an elderly and frail Capuchin monk formerly in charge of a small chapel on top of Mt. Rigi – 'his' mountain, as Martin calls it in a conversation with Fromund. He first appears after having moved into a religious care-home facility, as his ill health has rendered it impossible for him to live without assistance. Just as the film returns frequently to Monika's near-death experience, exploring how it has shaped her vocation to work in dementia care, Fromund's continuing physical deterioration and death provide a sense of foreboding throughout the film. Even if Martin is the only protagonist directly in touch with Fromund, Fromund's death ultimately connects all of Beeler's protagonists, as it embodies an alternative to the over-medicalization of dying and the re-appropriation of death by the familiar, private, religious, and natural realms.

In making *Die weisse Arche*, Beeler's aim was to find images that come as close to death as possible (2017a). But despite being given full access to film Fromund's death, Beeler decided against it. What he included instead are several long takes prior to his death, a sequence framed by two shots of Mt. Rigi in the snow. As Fromund's heavy breathing is heard, the camera first rests on two of his fellow brethren holding his hand and sitting at his bedside before it comes to rest on a side view of Fromund himself. The scene is marked by a paucity of action, a stillness focusing upon their being with Fromund and interrupted merely by the tender caresses of the brother sitting at the bedside, already elderly, frail, and in a wheelchair himself. And while this shot's resemblance to post-mortem photography clearly indicates that Fromund is nearing death, Fromund is still alive in this shot, breathing heavily, possibly trying to utter some words or expressing pain. It is the last shot of Fromund – the camera then moves to an image of Mt. Rigi and Jesus on the cross with a prominent crown of thorns under the falling snow.

By turning away from the actual moment of death, *Die weisse Arche* seemingly reproduces a common trend in contemporary deathbed documentaries. Malkowski has observed that, in our era of maximum public visibility, with its proliferation of recent documentaries focusing upon natural death – even those that promise direct access to death such as the documentary series *Time of Death* (2013), the actual moment of death has paradoxically become ‘intensely private and invisible’, even a ‘taboo sight’ (2017, 72). To be sure, Malkowski may be overstating her case, as this does not hold true for all subjects of *Time of Death*, and successes such as that of the Dutch reality-TV series *Over Mijn Lijk* (2006–), in which terminal patients often die in front of the camera, provide further evidence of a contrary trend. Yet, it has been argued that even if there may be a greater media presence of death (Green 2008), ‘the taboo against looking at the end of life largely continues’ (West 2018, 1482–1483). Malkowski therefore proposes that many contemporary deathbed documentaries continue to shy away from capturing death ‘live’, which is why the ‘full detail of death escapes them, even if the portable digital technology to do so would be available. She rightly links this to a long cinematic tradition upholding the ethical need to turn away before the moment of death. Death, as André Bazin argues is ‘the unique moment par excellence’, which is why any representation of real death would be an ‘obscenity’ (2003, 30). This was further confirmed by Sobchack in 1984, when she commented on the fact that Bazin’s dictum was still observed: ‘our documentary films [...] avoid the representation of death. [...] they observe the social taboos surrounding “real” death’ (1984, 286).

However, according to Malkowski this is less explained by our denial-of-death culture (and according to her, Bazin wrote at the height of that culture), but rather because our image of the ‘good death’ has departed from: ‘the step-by-step instructions for dying that the medieval *Ars Moriendi* provided and from the universal stages of confronting mortality that Elisabeth Kübler-Ross introduced in 1969’ (2017, 73). Whereas the late medieval genre of the *Ars Moriendi* texts, which attempted to establish general guidelines of how to die well, were structured by a firm religious belief system based on an afterlife, our contemporary notion of the ‘good death’ is ‘rooted in individuality, each dying person laboring to design and achieve his or her own unique good death’ (2017, 73). Malkowski posits that this explains the reluctance to include an actual ‘moment of death’, because these moments are – unlike what Bazin seems to suggest – in fact ‘terribly conventional’, to the extent that they erase: ‘individuality as unconscious and often emaciated bodies labor to breathe and then stop breathing’ (2017, 73). The fact that we resemble each other in dying ‘becomes a homogenous obstacle’ to dying’s cinematic representation (2017, 73). By choosing not to include the actual moment of death, documentaries can sustain the idea that dying is an individualized and customized event. But, as Malkowski poignantly writes, given that we know that the digital technologies to film the moment of death are available, the fact that documentarians turn away from it also exposes the fantasy: ‘that death is a sharp moment of transition that cameras can make transparently visible, rather than a prolonged process resistant to cinematic representation’ (2017, 73).

Beeler’s film fits, but also resists some of Malkowski’s observations. The uneventful, perhaps even tedious, long takes of the suffering Fromund during his last moments of life expose the processual, drawn-out quality of dying. As Malkowski writes, ‘the absence of the “moment” of death redirects attention toward dying as a process’, which is why, according to her: ‘duration becomes central in these works’ attempts to fully

represent death' (2017, 72). Indeed, the sense of process, as Malkowski sees it, is emphasized by the use of advanced technologies in medicine to prolong life: 'The stretching out of time, then, characterizes two histories of developing technology in the twentieth century that meet in the deathbed documentary: the histories of medicine and of moving images' (2017, 72).

In this observation, however, it also becomes clear why *Die weisse Arche* challenges Malkowski's reading of contemporary deathbed documentaries' exclusion of the moment of death. Beeler's is not a film about how advancements in modern medicine have reshaped the end of life; Fromund's death is not drawn-out because medical life-sustaining measures prolong his dying process. On the contrary, Beeler constructed the film so that medicine only figures on the margins, playing a merely indirect, at most indicative role. Fromund's death is not representative of the average modern death in a rich Western country. In her study of death in mainstream Western culture and cinema, Michele Aaron has highlighted the need to 'contest the universality, and apolitics, of cultural interpretations of death and dying', as every aspect of dying is mediated by its very own contexts of 'geography, race, class, gender, age' (Aaron 2014, 7). Beeler's film aligns with this as it provocatively highlights that even the Western experience cannot be generalized and is permeated by its own categories. Removed from a hospital environment, Fromund dies surrounded by basic medical equipment and uses minimal pain management. And even if professional care workers sometimes appear on screen, Fromund is primarily cared for by his fellow brethren, who themselves are elderly and frail. Emphasized here then is not an individualized rejection of medicine or a refusal to try further treatments to extend Fromund's life. Rather, the film focuses upon the cultural heritage and wider natural and religious histories that enable Fromund to die in this way.

Due to this marked absence of medicine, the twenty-first-century unrepresentativeness of Fromund's dying could be mistakenly thought to align with Malkowski's position on modern dying as an individualized and customized event. Malkowski, however, argues that the modern ideal of the good death – which may often include an over-medicalization – is ultimately a form of resistance to the 'step-by-step' approach of the *Ars Moriendi* tradition.⁷ Beeler, on the contrary, is careful to highlight that Fromund's dying in fact reconnects with this tradition. His refusal to capture Fromund's actual death is not driven by the need to uphold the 'recent fantasy of dying as a fully individualized affair' (2017, 74). Rather, the decision to not show Fromund's death stems precisely from the full recognition of the homogeneity of dying that inspired the *Art Moriendi* tradition. By intersecting shots of the dying Fromund with short sequences of the Good Friday mass at the monastery of Engelberg and Martin's exploration of the sacrament of the anointment of the sick, Beeler situates the prostrate Fromund in a much older tradition. This tradition relies upon centuries-old rites and unchanged litanies to accompany the process, protocols set up against the very notion of an individualized and customized death. Both dying and tending to the dying are thereby cast as central to Christianity, but the images of religious rituals, like Beeler's landscape images, do not seem to restrict the depiction of dying to a closed Catholic world or argue against a medicalization of dying. Rather, they widen the perspective, showing that the form of spiritual and physical accompaniment Fromund receives at the end of his life grows out of the personal experiences shaping the community he lives in.

It is through the juxtaposition of images of Fromund's dying and images of a traditional and religious acceptance of mortality that Beeler repositions the banality of dying as universal human experience. The religious responses to this experience thereby become, in Bennett's words, a way 'to transcend the finitude of a disenchanted world' (2001, 165). In her reading of discourses on finitude, Bennett is clear that the Christian model constitutes but one way to resist disenchantment, but she argues more broadly that the incorporation of the possibility of any afterlife, is ultimately a way 'to dislodge the fact of finitude a few degrees from the central position that it tends to acquire' (2001, 165–166). Because ritual, community and tradition come to play central roles in the project of resisting disenchantment, Fromund's dying, as well as Beeler's refusal to show the moment of death, partake in this project. By exposing an interconnectedness of human beings among themselves and with nature, the film questions the very culture of autonomy which fuels the idea of an individualized death.

Martin illustrates this when reflecting on what a good death means. He emphatically states that it is no longer death, but suffering itself which has become the taboo of our time. Referring to the death of Jesus, he highlights that what is essential in the image of Jesus nailed to the cross is that suffering is fully exposed and that this image of suffering conflates the forlornness of the self and its proximity to others. Martin's remarks do not directly engage with the medicalization of dying, and yet they strongly recall Ivan Illich's famous critique of it and how this might impact our perception of suffering. Illich warned that when we let medicine 'turn pain into a technical matter', we would thereby deprive 'suffering of its inherent personal meaning', as a consequence of which we would ultimately also devalue personal and familial tenderness (Illich 1974, 46). In a similar vein, the physician writer Seamus O'Mahony recently argued in *The Way We Die Now* that modern medicine – including palliative care – has taken away the 'creatureliness' of dying, providing us instead with a sanitized image of a hospital death in which pain and suffering no longer have a place (O'Mahony, 2016, 254). Like Martin and Illich, O'Mahony regards the fact that the sanitized image casts pain, and suffering, and dying as 'manageable' to be one of the key problems associated with it. This puts autonomy on a pedestal and renders accompaniment and reliance upon others valueless.

Martin claims that today's idealization of a quick and sudden death cannot be a 'good death' for those left behind. Relativizing the extent to which the idea of a 'good death' is culturally conditioned, Martin relates that during the Middle Ages such a death was indeed termed a 'mala mors', as it made it impossible to spiritually prepare for dying or be accompanied into death. Arguing instead for an ethics of accompaniment, care, and vulnerability, Martin's theoretical elaborations confirm that such an ethics is opposed to the culture of autonomy which has shaped the idea of an individualized death. Rather, dying, according to Martin, and to borrow the title of anthropologist and philosopher Annemarie Mol's book, should be situated not within 'a logic of cure', but a 'logic of care' (2009). What this means is illustrated in a conversation between Martin and Fromund early in the film, in which Fromund acknowledges that he has left his post on the mountain chapel in order to die. His fellow brethren, his caretakers, and Fromund himself never question whether taking further medical measures could extend his life; instead they all accept that he has embarked upon the process of dying. This sense of active dispossession resonates with Mol's concept of 'active patienthood'. 'Active

patienthood', according to Mol, is 'learning to combine being active with being receptive', because it is 'the ability to let go actively', which, she claims, not only makes suffering easier to bear but it is also a precondition for experiencing pleasure (2009, 83).

The idea of 'actively letting go' is the physical acceptance that as humans we are not autonomous, and this acceptance rather than resignation to suffering frames images of the dying Fromund who, no longer able to speak, actively seeks out Martin's hand which he takes and holds. Fromund's frailty, his horizontal positioning, emaciated look, and vulnerability encapsulate his deterioration, and yet he remains not only receptive to touch but actively seeks communion with others through it. Fromund's sensory receptiveness, his withered hand seeking the warmth of Martin's touch transmits the 'affective force' that, as Bennett claims, propels 'acts of ethical generosity'. Ethical generosity, for Beeler, is not one-sided because Fromund's willingness to accept care is what allows Martin to accompany him. And, in turn, this accompaniment also enables both Monika and Martin, as they relate, to ask themselves how they will face their own death. This may ultimately be one of the most powerful ideas that the film touches upon – the attempt to capture the dynamic reciprocity of care and to emphasize the cultural and local grounding as well as the personal origins of these dynamics. Such dynamics – like the surfaces of Beeler's impermeable landscapes – resist narrativity, thereby unsettling the central role played by the personal narratives in the film itself.

Conclusion

Biblically speaking, the Ark is a symbol of God saving the people who are faithful to Him – by sparing them from death. Beeler's film destabilizes this image. As his subjects' experiences and belief-systems undo the clear separation between life and death, the film questions whether dying itself might not be understood as a form of natural salvation – at least if it is lived as a process that inspires wonder, relies on accompaniment, and creates community. Beeler's intertwining images of landscapes with images of care and dying blend central Switzerland's deeply rooted Catholicism with a religion of nature, thereby situating his protagonists' responses to dying firmly within Weber's 'mysterious incalculable forces'.

In this sense, Beeler's film is fundamentally untimely and stands in stark contrast to some of the current challenges facing palliative care, the paradigmatic end-of-life care modality in Western societies, which grapples with fighting off bureaucracy, institutionalization, and resisting mainstream medicine's default position on postponing death. It is perhaps even provocatively untimely in the Swiss political context, where the majority of deaths occur in hospitals and where it has been legal to practice suicide assistance since 1942. But while this certainly plays into the background context in which *Die weisse Arche* was made, Beeler's use of natural imagery and reliance upon sparse language allows his film to continuously highlight the fragmentary or partial character of what it represents.

The film sensitizes us to the local origins of care, constructing a kaleidoscopic social history of dying in central Switzerland, but it also attempts to capture the sense in which these local origins are constructed around a globally shared concern: that dying marks the end of human life, that we have no scientific knowledge of what and if something comes after death, and that, despite our best efforts, it is a process that remains out of our control. The idea of control is, according to Malkowski, intimately intertwined with

contemporary documentarians' search for images to represent death (2017, 203). Beeler's landscapes might just capture what is at stake because, despite his protagonist's deep familiarity with them, they ultimately remain inaccessible to them and aesthetic surfaces to the spectator.

Notes

1. The recent interest among documentarians in dying on camera is also echoed by the proliferation of the autobiographical end-of-life memoir. See Kalanithi 2016; Diski 2016; Hitchens 2012; and Taylor 2016.
2. In Res Balzli's *Bouton* (2012) the main protagonist herself asked Balzli to make the film about her. She also recorded supplementary footage, which is included in the final film.
3. This has a long tradition in American cinema, see, for example, the western or the road movie.
4. She has since explored her near-death experience in two books (Leuthold Dreier 2008, 2012).
5. Richard Armstrong has further emphasized that the mourning film is particularly prone to the display of natural imagery – either the picturesque divine or the abject, and that often, the 'interior journey is interwoven with a geographical journey' (2012, 79).
6. Kellehear's criticism is no longer fully justified, as there has been research within spiritual care concerning the language and images used by dying patients and how this can further doctor-patient communication. See Bühler and Peng-Keller 2014.
7. Malkowski's assertion is somewhat misleading, because the notion of dying as an entirely individualized and customized process certainly finds its fullest expression in assisted suicide. Modern palliative care, however, which is an important modality of how dying and end-of-life care is practiced in Western countries, often presents itself as drawing and building on on the *Ars Moriendi* tradition rather than going against it (Leget 2007).

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