

Afterlife, Death Rituals, and (Male) Meaning-Making: Life, Death and Beyond in Three Scandinavian Comedies

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Abstract

Death is a common theme in films, but films about death generally do not focus on death, but on life. Films can thus capture contemporary notions about death, but they also highlight thoughts about the meaning of life. This article explores three Nordic comedies that all allow the audience a glimpse of an afterlife. The analysis focuses on what is suggested about an afterlife, the religious rituals and acts in the stories and the meaning of life that the focus on death highlights. The representations are discussed in relation to ideas about a detraditionalization of religion, contemporary meaning-making, relational individualism and gender.

Keywords

Death, Nordic films, meaning-making, relational individualism, gender

Introduction

Dying, death and dealing with loss are common themes in films. In Nordic dramas, narratives about individuals dying of, for example, cancer are recurring. In the Finnish film *One-Way Ticket to Mombasa* (Hanna Tuomainen 2002), two young men suffering from cancer head out on an adventure through Finland. Death is also very much on the agenda in Nordic noir productions. In, for example, the Swedish film *Sunstorm* (Leif Lindblad 2007), the main character Rebecca Martinsson is called back home to Northern Sweden when an old acquaintance is murdered. Martinsson is forced to not only try to solve the murder, but also deal with events in her past. Death is likewise a theme in some Nordic fantasy films focusing on among other things vampires, such as *Let the Right One In* (2008), in which the living dead is a scrawny child trying to survive in a gloomy Swedish suburb.

While death is a common topic in films, beliefs about life after death are less often a key focus. This is not surprising. In secular contexts such as the Nordic countries, traditional religious and very specific beliefs about life after death are declining (Bondeson 2003), even though most people are still buried in accordance to Christian or other religious traditions (e.g. Church of Sweden 2018; Harri et al. 2013). While many believe that death is something final, beliefs that are more abstract are also prevalent. In a recent Finnish study, 71 percent agreed with the notion that nobody knows what happens after death and 49 percent with the idea that there is something after death, but it is unclear what this is. The study also argued that the lack of specific beliefs means that the impact of beliefs about an

afterlife on how one lives one's life declines (Ketola 2016, 67-69). Previous studies have also illustrated the lack of both traditional religious and scientific grounding in beliefs about an afterlife in the Nordic countries and the presence of less traditional beliefs. Compared to other European countries, experiences of having felt that one was in touch with someone who has died is low in the Nordic countries, with the exception of Iceland, but around 10 percent do report experiences of this kind (Haraldsson 2006).

When exploring death on film it also becomes obvious that films about death are generally not focused on death, but on life. The films might be challenging and sad, but often also hopeful and encouraging, celebrating life rather than mourning death. This is, for example, the case with the Norwegian youth film *Through a Glass, Darkly* (Jesper W. Nielsen 2008), where an adolescent young woman, Cecilie, encounters an angel during her last days struggling with cancer. The angel does not have any answers regarding life after death, but he does inspire Cecilie to appreciate life. The lack of clear beliefs in a life after death in contemporary Nordic society and the focus on life not death in films about dying makes it far from surprising that life after death, when it is dealt with and represented on screen, is often a theme in comedies. The portrayals are consequently not meant to be taken too seriously, but to ignore the representations because they are a part of comedies is to misunderstand the potential of the comedy genre. Comedies often allow for serious topics and taboos to be explored and for areas of struggle and uncertainty to be worked through (Kuipers 2006; 2008). This too can be the case with the topic of death.

Death on the screen has interested a number of scholars. The starting point for research on film is generally that we can learn something essential about contemporary society through popular culture such as film. In line with Andrew Nestingen, many argue that "[p]opular texts continually mediate socially significant conflicts through narration, music, and image" (2008, 9). Studies of death on film have for example explored how portrayals of death can help individuals deal with death and grief (Niemiec and Schulenberg 2011). Theological and philosophical arguments have also been brought up and scholars have discussed portrayals of death and an afterlife from the perspectives of, among other things, meaning-making (Sullivan 2017), cultural and religious appropriation (Schwartz 2000), and notions of atonement in contemporary society (Stucky 2006).

In this article, I build on previous research exploring religion and beliefs in Nordic films and analyze portrayals of life, death and afterlife in three Nordic comedies: *In China They Eat Dogs* (Lasse Spang Olsen 1999), *One Foot Under* (Johanna Vuoksenmaa 2009) and *A Man Called Ove* (Hannes Holm 2015). Specifically, I shall 1) discuss the glimpses of an afterlife in the films, 2) explore the death rituals or acts presented in the films and their religious connections and 3) reflect on what the meaning of life or a meaningful life is according to the films. This setup means that I will present the films the wrong way round, starting with the end

and relating this to other parts of the films. In the final section, I connect the analysis to contemporary research on worldviews, religious change and culture in a Nordic context relating specifically to discussions of contemporary meaning-making, detraditionalization, relational individualism and questions of gender.

Glimpsing a life hereafter

In all the three films, I discuss in this article, the main protagonist dies at the end of the film. The final scenes is then also where the audience is offered a glimpse of an afterlife. In *In China They Eat Dogs*, the main character, the lost but well-meaning Arvid, dies in a shootout in a bar. The film belongs to the Danish gangster genre, a genre that became known around the turn of the millennium and is still popular today (Moffat 2018). This genre focuses on violent gangs and often deals with questions of belonging and ethnicity. The films are a part of the so-called New Danish Cinema, a cinema brought on and inspired by technological changes and processes of globalization. The stories are clearly inspired by Hollywood-productions but tie into cultural transformations in contemporary Danish and Nordic society (Hjort 2005).

While *In China They Eat Dogs* is a gangster film, it is also a dark comedy and the comedic elements are brought out towards the end. The shootout has left a number of individuals dead. Two that are un-harmed are the bartender and an American tourist. That they have survived turns out to be because they are not human. The bartender's eyes start to glow and his voice becomes dark and ominous as his demonic character appears. The American tourist represents the forces of heaven and suddenly has a halo over his head. The two divide the souls of some of the dead. Some are sent to hell, for more or less clear reasons. A group of foreign gangsters are left to wait. The angel does not know what will happen to them, but thinks they might belong to a different apartment and be picked up by "the strange men in funny pants" who apparently always arrive late. The audience never gets to see these men, but the statement has a humorous tone. In the end, the only one that ends up going to heaven is Arvid. He is himself surprised about this, as he has killed many people, but the angel assures him that his intentions were always good. In addition, the angel says he knows Arvid's father. Together Arvid and the angel ascend a staircase with a light shining down and are heard entering a bus that will take them on to what comes next.

Death in this comedic scene is thus not the end, but followed by a trip to heaven or hell and wherever the guys in the funny pants take you. The way into heaven seems narrow though. A gambler who has cheated the demon when they were playing cards earlier is sent to hell in flames, as is a gay man. A woman is also sent down by mistake, as the angel could not read his own handwriting. Only Arvid, who has always tried to do the right thing, but failed, and often with deadly consequences, is saved. A comical belief in heaven and hell is introduced in the film together with ideas about sin and punishment. However, the angel and the demon

are not really typical supernatural religious beings, as known from religious traditions or different cultural products. The angel does towards the end of the film sport a halo, but otherwise he looks like a stereotypical American tourist, while the devil, when his true identity is revealed, gets a hoarse voice and glowing eyes, but is otherwise dressed like a typical bartender. This illustrates a humorous reuse and reshaping of traditional beliefs in and notions about angels and devils in the film.

In the Finnish film *One Foot Under*, the main character, the city gardener Visa, dies due to a disease that breaks down his brain. During the last months of his life, he is interviewed about what he wishes to do before he dies, and subsequently granted many of his wishes. He has, among other things, created an illegal garden. After his death, a sign commemorating him is put up in the garden. Visa has also fallen in love during his final time alive. His love interest is the journalist Hanna. In the final scene, Hanna is shown visiting the garden area that Visa has created. Visa is also there and approaches her. He touches her shoulder, and she seems to react to his touch, but then she walks right through him, leaving him standing confused looking after her.

The ending is in the case of *One Foot Under* very open. What life after death entails stays somewhat unclear, apart from the fact that it does seem to continue. Love seems to play a role here though, as it is the new love of his life that Visa sees, but whether his continuous existence is meant to be seen as a blessing, a punishment, a time to wait or something else is not clarified. Visa is early in the film shown having a nightmare about the moment of death being something that lasts forever, but it is not clear if this is what is happening either or if he has simply become a part of the garden he adores. The third film that I wish to discuss is more direct regarding what happens after death. In *A Man Called Ove*, two lovers also meet after death, but here the encounter is more hopeful.

While Arvid and Visa are both relatively young men, Ove is at the end of his working career. Ove has experienced a fair amount of struggles in his life. The viewer is allowed to experience these struggles through flashbacks. The film is based on a popular–Swedish novel by Fredrik Backman (2012), and has among other things been discussed as an example of a currently growing and potentially healthy focus on aging in films (Koskinen 2019). This is not to say that Ove takes his aging, and the losses and changes that come with age, very well. Throughout a lot of the film, Ove tries to commit suicide in order to join his dead wife. He continuously visits her grave, telling her he is on his way. Things do not go as planned though. Against his will, Ove is forced back into society and in contact with the people around him. In the end, he dies not by his own hand, but due to a heart problem. After death, Ove wakes up in the train cart in which he first met his future wife. She is there greeting him with a smile. As Anders Marklund points out, Ove is here in one take “moving beyond existence (i.e. dying) and back in time to a past moment of happiness”. The train, as the bus that is heard at the end of *In China They Eat Dogs*, suggests that a new journey, perhaps to heaven, has begun.

Private rituals and a 'proper' funeral

Religious rituals, such as weddings and funerals, are fairly common in Nordic films, though not always treated as a key to the stories (Sjö and Daníelsson 2013). In the case of the three films discussed here the representations vary somewhat. Official rituals regarding death, in the sense of funerals or other organized acts of remembrance or rites of passage, are not present in *In China They Eat Dogs*. Some of the many characters that are accidentally killed are buried, but this is primarily done to hide their bodies, not for religious reasons or due to a respect for the dead. Still, the film does illustrate that death is a serious matter and touches upon private death rituals or acts of reverence; acts that illustrate connections to certain religious traditions or specific ways to react to death. It is because the Danish gangsters have accidentally caused the death of a foreign man that the final shootout happens. Death thus has serious consequences. Furthermore, when one of the foreign gang members is killed, the leader kisses the man's forehead and crosses himself, suggesting both a close relationship between the men and a Christian faith. Though the exact background of the gang is not clarified, a t-shirt with a Serbian flag suggests a Serbian connection and a possible Orthodox Christian faith. When Arvid is killed, his brother Harald also takes him in his arms, but no direct traditional religious acts are performed. It is nonetheless clear that the loss of the brother is painful and that the Arvid has meant a lot to Harald. Harald kills the leader of the other gang to revenge his brother's death and then, still looking very sad, leaves with the surviving members of his gang.

In turn, *One Foot Under* begins by connecting to official or common death rituals. The opening scene shows Visa is in a funeral home looking at coffins together with his partner. While his partner finds the whole thing morbid, Visa tries to stay positive. Clearly, the fact that they know Visa is dying is hard for both of them and the scene is the first of many suggesting the two are drifting apart. The coffins in the funeral home are decorated with crosses, but apart from that, religion and religious beliefs in an afterlife are not given center stage in this scene. We also do not get to participate in Visa's funeral, but his death does take place in a church. Hanna is about to marry her old boyfriend and they are already in front of the pastor, when a very sick Visa arrives and asks her to spend the short time he has left with him. Hanna kisses him and Visa then falls down and dies on the church floor. The camera at this point pans up towards the stars painted on the church ceiling and then moves through grass, through a tree top and down into Visa's garden. This excursion through nature seems also to be an excursion through time as the audience next sees the memorial for Visa being constructed, Hanna visiting the garden and the dead Visa trying to get her attention. Via the funeral preparations and the death in a church, Christianity is touched upon in the film and suggested to be a part of the cultural setting of the film, but again, how to interpret

this connection and whether it entails any deeper relation to religion is very much left up to the viewer to decide upon.

Of the three films, only *A Man Named Ove* includes an official funeral scene and more detailed death and mourning rituals. Ove has throughout the film visited his wife's grave on a very traditional Lutheran graveyard, leaving flowers and attending to the grave, as is custom in Scandinavia. His own funeral, towards the end of the film, is in accordance with Ove's dying wish, held in a church "as it should be", according to Ove. He clearly states in the letter he has left behind that he does not want his ashes to be spread in the wind or "any other stupid invention". In addition, the funeral should be private with only his closest acquaintances and those that feel that Ove has done what was expected of him. The actual funeral is a very short scene with the camera panning over the church with a coffin decorated with flowers, a pastor leading the service and a crowded church hall with all the people Ove's life has had an impact on and who one can assume feel that Ove has done the right thing. This scene is followed by Ove waking up in the train cart with his beloved Sonja.

There is, via Ove's funeral, a link to traditional Christian death rituals in *A Man Named Ove*, but the link is discrete and only illustrated visually. However, these are visual representations that most who are acquainted with Nordic church funerals, are likely to comprehend. There is also an obvious suggestion that Ove is a very traditional man and this is why he wants a very traditional funeral. Even though the films studied here indicate that traditional death rituals are prevalent, none of the films present a clear link to traditional Christian beliefs about death or afterlife. Nonetheless, all films have something to say about what a meaningful or a righteous life is and all of them in one way or another also link this to the question of death. As neither the afterlife nor rituals relating to death are in the films very clearly linked to religion, here too we can find an outlook without an obvious religious connection. What then is a meaningful or righteous life according to the films?

Doing (the right) things

With their comedic undertones, the ideas about how to live one's life are to varying degrees presented seriously in *In China They Eat Dogs*, *One Foot Under* and *A Man Named Ove*. As the main characters are all male, the films can also be argued to highlight more or less serious ideas about how to lead a meaningful life as a man or how to be a decent man. Some recent Nordic films (Donner 2015), as well as films from other parts of the world (Bainbridge and Yates 2005), have been argued to illustrate and explore ideas about gender, transformations of masculinity and the so-called 'crisis of masculinity'. The male leads that we meet in the films discussed here would also, to some extent, seem to struggle with how to be men. Via their life choices, and as these relate to their deaths, they both challenge and uphold some traditional notions of being a man.

As already noted regarding *In China They Eat Dogs*, wanting to do the right thing, if not always succeeding, would seem to represent a righteous life. That is, if one with a righteous life means getting into heaven. This film thus has a comedic philosophical undertone that emphasizes one's good intentions and not the results of one's actions. You can get into heaven as long as you mean well and then it does not matter how many you have killed on the way. However, the main character in *In China They Eat Dogs*, Arvid, is not represented as the typical male hero, in the sense of a man of action with a clear goal for his life. In the beginning of the film, his girlfriend leaves him because she finds him boring. When he stops a robbery at the bank where he works, he is attacked by the robber's girlfriend who says he had no right to interfere, as the money would be used to help the couple get a baby. Worried about what he has done, Arvid turns to his brother Harald for help, knowing well that his brother has connections to the criminal world. Harald represents a very different masculinity compared to Arvid. He is tough and always ready for action. However, just as his brother, he too is inclined to help, or at least he is willing to help his brother.

Throughout the film, Arvid is brought deeper and deeper into Harald's violent world. When first robbing a money transport to give the robber's girlfriend the money, Arvid is chocked at the violence that takes place. Slowly, however, Arvid changes and becomes more active and willing to stand up for himself and take part in the proceedings. Inspired by his brother, Arvid decides to get revenge on a rock band that has beat him up earlier, punishing them in kind. However, since he does not know how to handle the semi-automatic weapon he is holding he ends up shooting the whole band instead, but is comforted by his brother: "They weren't any good". When trying to get the bank robber Arvid stopped out of prison, things also do not go as planned. They get the robber out, almost killing him in the process, but it turns out that the robber's girlfriend lied. She is not the man's girlfriend but his deceiving sister. More accidental killings transpire. In the end, Arvid also kills his ex-girlfriend when she comes to take the last of their previously common property, the TV.

Despite all of the violence and deaths, Arvid gets into heaven. As the angel explains, his intentions were good, but also, it would seem, he has learned to be a more active and assertive man in the process. This has of course left him dead, but he has by now at least achieved something in his life. And no one is likely to call him boring.

That a meaningful (male) life would seem to entail doing things, can also be argued to be at least part of the message of *One Foot Under*. In this film too, the main character aims to do what is right and to make people happy. Visa succeeds somewhat better than Arvid, but in *One Foot Under* too there are ethical issues to deal with. Similarly, as is the case with *In China They Eat Dogs*, *One Feet Under* includes a partner who is unhappy with the man with whom she shares her

life. Visa's common-law wife Riia is struggling with the fact that her partner is about to die, but she also seems dissatisfied with their relationship more generally and the way Visa has changed as a person. She is secretly seeing Visa's best friend and complains to him about the lack of communication with Visa. When Visa falls in love with Hanna he feels bad about what this will do to Riia, but as she is also moving on, this becomes less of an issue. However, what does end up causing problems is that Visa finds out that the hospital has made a mistake: he is not dying. He now makes the choice to go after the one he loves, which is Hanna, knowing at this point that his best friend is in love with his current partner.

When he still believes he is dying, Visa also does things to leave a mark and a legacy. He has previously worked on a community garden, a project that has lost funding. Against the decisions of the city and with the help of his colleagues and Hanna, he finishes the garden secretly during the night. He is consequently fired, but having been encouraged to keep lying about the fact that he is not dying by his friend, the media interest in his situation and his garden, seems to force the city to let the garden be and reconsider his determination. Everything thus seems possible for Visa. He has broken the law, but has the city on his side, he has survived a death sentence and found the love of his life. The future consequently looks bright. The only problem is that it is all partly a delusion. Slowly for both the viewer and for Visa it is made clear that he is in fact still dying. His belief that the hospital has made a mistake and his experience of being told this is a part of his disease, which at a progressed stage leads to delusions.

Realizing that his memories are wrong, Visa does not give up, but heads out to find Hanna. He is thus again represented as active and as a doer, but also as focused on love and being with the one he loves. Love thus comes across as the real meaning of life in *One Foot Under*. When the workers finishing the memorial for Visa talk about him and his early departure, one of them says that hopefully Visa had a life before he died. Though the ending is open, the film does suggest that he did so and that his love for Hanna was a key part of his life having a greater meaning. This is also the case with *A Man Called Ove* and in this story too, doing things and doing the right things seem essential.

The present in *A Man Called Ove* focuses on Ove's lonely life as an angry widower living in a Swedish suburb and on his determination to end his life. Through flashbacks that generally happen when Ove is about to die, his life is played up for him and the audience and explained in a voice over by Ove himself. In many ways, it has been a tough and unfair life. Ove lost his mother when he was but a boy and his father in his teens. A fire, and the decisions of 'the men in white shirts', also lost him his childhood home. The men in white shirts are the powerful officials that Ove has battled with throughout his life, men with no care for regular people and their needs. Anders Marklund (2018) argues that *A Man Called Ove* is partly about the shortcoming of the Swedish well-fare society, a society where the institutions developed to protect citizens have become heartless and focused on money and

progress. These shortcomings are part of Ove's struggles, but so represent a wish for an order and a structure that has perhaps never existed.

Throughout his life, Ove has been a doer. When he finds out that his house is considered for demolition because, the white shirt claims, it is so run down, he immediately attends to the condition of the building. His wife's love of books is solved with more and more bookcases. He also deals with the couples' greatest struggles by doing things. When his wife ends up in a wheelchair after a bad traffic accident that also causes the death of their unborn child and leads to them never being able to become parents, Ove reconstructs the kitchen to fit his wife's needs. When she cannot get a job as a teacher because there is no wheelchair ramp in the school building, he constructs one for her. He is thus a doer and a fixer, but as society changes he feels more and more lost and lacking control, making him mean and aggressive.

What seems to have kept Ove calm and sane through the years is his wife. They meet when Ove has fairly recently lost his father and his home and is sleeping in a train. He has no money and very few prospects, but is encouraged by Sonja to believe in himself and get an education and they quickly start building a life together. Without Sonja though, Ove is lost, at least until he gets a new neighbor, Parvaneh and her family. Parvaneh's Swedish husband is not a doer, giving Ove a reason to step in and fix things. However, Parvaneh also forces Ove to become a part of their family by using him as a babysitter, convincing him to teach her how to drive, making him share things about his life and challenging him about how he sees his late wife. According to Parvaneh, Sonja was no doubt a fine person, but she does not fit on the pedestal where Ove has placed her. Ove does not want to listen to this, but he does slowly open up and realizing that the white shirts are after his old friend Rune, who is paralyzed after a stroke, he steps into action.

When Ove passes away, he leaves behind a small caring community that together seems strong enough to take on at least some of the challenges of a heartless and declining welfare state. This is furthermore a varied community with migrants, members of sexual minorities and individuals of different ages. As Marklund argues, the film does not "envision an invigorated welfare state", but it does suggest "that there is a fair chance of finding good people around you [...] who can help resolve your problems and be there for you in meaningful relationships and supportive communities" (2018, 53-54). This is furthermore achieved via the agency of an elderly male protagonist. A meaningful life before death thus, according to *A Man Called Ove*, seems to entail love and relationships but also actively having done things.

Conclusion: Secular meaning-making and relational individualism in a gendered frame

Considering the secular nature of the Nordic countries, films imagining life after death that either jokingly connect to a Christian tradition or leave the interpretation

of what comes after death open are to be expected. In many ways these films fit with other Nordic film productions that do give religious characters, rituals and settings a place, but where not a great deal of focus on the sacred is presented. Though there are exceptions to this (Sjö and Daniélsson 2013), the prevalence of religiously doubting characters and the largely empty religious spaces they are a part of cannot be ignored (Johansson 2005; Sjö 2012). They highlight a secular context and processes of detraditionalization, according to which traditions are weakened and challenged and beliefs individualized (Woodhead and Heelas 2000; Heelas, Lash and Morris 1996). Traditions might not completely disappear, but they are given personal meanings while communal meanings are played down. The films also illustrate ideas about the prevalence of cultural religion today (Kasselstrand 2015), which highlights how religious institutions can provide some kind of frameworks, rituals and loose identifications, but not the answers to questions about, for example, the meaning of life (and death) or what constitutes a meaningful life. Religious institutions thus continue to play a role also in Nordic secular settings, but it is a largely loose role that does not require a great deal of commitment. However, that traditional religious institutions cannot provide answers does not mean that the questions disappear. It just means that the answers are understood and constructed using different resources.

Exploring films about death and dying can give us some understanding of contemporary meaning-making (Marsh 2007), though the films of course do not provide any decisive and final answers. Though the films are very different, despite all being comedies, they do all highlight the notion that life should have a meaning and be lived and the need for the individual to be allowed to express himself. For Arvid, it is important to correct the wrongs he feels he has committed, but during the course of the film, he becomes more inclined to correct the wrongs done to him. At the same time though, Arvid's relationship to his brother is also important, and he is very upset towards the end when he does not know where his brother is. When his brother arrives to the shootout, Arvid is relieved, but ends up exposing his position and getting shot. For Visa, what gives his life meaning is partly to finish his communal garden, against the decisions of the city and together with his co-workers, but also to spend his final time with someone he truly loves. He does not hesitate much regarding leaving his common-law wife, particularly not when he realizes she too seems ready to move on. In a similar manner, Ove finds strength and meaning in doing and supporting what he feels is right and finally winning against the men in white shirts. Still, love is what keeps him going through much of his life and being a part of a community and a family is what gives his life meaning towards the end.

Death thus becomes acceptable to the extent that it is preceded by a life where the individual has both been allowed to fulfill and express himself and have experienced love and a sense of community. This is hardly a very original idea, but it is worth noting that this has been argued to be a rather Nordic view on

individualization. Religion and western societies more broadly are often argued to have become more and more individualized. In the case of religion, individualization entails, among other things, that the individual constructs his or her own beliefs according to personal interests and views (e.g. Beck 2010). In society more broadly, individualization highlights that “the individual is becoming the basic unit of social reproduction” (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002: xxii). Though very strict versions of individualization that ignores the embeddedness of the individual have been broadly criticized (Dawson 2012), research has particularly highlighted the relational (Furseth 2006) or collectively-oriented (Gundelach, Iversen and Warburg 2008) nature of individualism in Nordic settings. In different but similar ways, all the films discussed here would seem to support this notion; it is important to get to be whom you are, but to succeed in this and truly be happy you need a community around you.

What is the role of gender in these representations? As already highlighted, the main characters in all three films are male and one could thus argue that the meaning of life presented is particularly understood as what is meaningful for men. This perspective becomes clearer when the focus is moved to the role of the women in the stories. As mostly supportive characters, the female characters must be understood in relation to the male main characters and as helping to define these. They thus clearly fill a role in relation to the main male characters, but it is worth highlighting what this role is. Though several of the female characters are represented as individuals with their own interests and abilities – Arvid’s girlfriend is making a life without him, Hanna has a life that is not related to Visa and Parvaneh is a very active and involved woman – they also to an extent bring emotions and relations into the stories and to the lives of the men. They do thus work as rather traditional female characters and point to the critique that the individualization of society is not gender neutral (Delhaye 2006). Being an active individual is in these films the role of the male lead, while women make sure the men remember to relate to others. Still, the fact that the male characters do relate and that several of the women are represented as rather complex characters do challenge any critique of the films presenting very traditionally gendered characters.

Three comedies that allow us to glimpse an afterlife cannot say everything there is to say about contemporary beliefs in a life after death, the role of traditional religious notions and rituals in relation to death today or contemporary ideas about the meaning of life or a meaningful life. Nonetheless, they open up for a conversation worthy of more focus. What does contemporary meaning-making entail and how does it relate to ideas of life and death? As indicated in the introduction (Ketola 2016), when religious beliefs about an afterlife decline so do their effects on how we live our lives, but what does matter in this regard? An analysis of popular cultural discourses can help us explore some of these questions, but they also bring forth others. Popular culture never just reflect us, it also affects

us. What we get out of popular culture such as film is thus always a topic worthy of more exploration, also in regards to life, death and beliefs about a life hereafter.

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