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# LAUREN BERTSCH (Animal Science)

## "Mortality's Wilting Flower:" Terror Management Theory and Music in Animated Films

Sponsor: LuAnne Roth (Writing and Rhetoric)

There's something about animated films - so full of light and wonder - that invokes this "warm and fuzzy" feeling when you sit down to watch it. Yet an entire spectrum of human emotion is demanded from us as an audience. Buried in the heart of animated films are these dark themes, problems that lie in the bedrock of humanity. And it leaves us pondering: why? The answer may actually stretch back to when our species developed thought and reason. In 1973, American anthropologist Ernest Becker uncovered the mental foundation that allows us to live, function, and thrive in a world where we know that we will die.

Terror Management Theory refers to a type of psychological defensive mechanism that stems from an awareness and fear of death. This evolutionary byproduct serves as a proverbial shield between humans and their realities, enabling a consistent (and largely subconscious) denial of death. Animated films differ from each other culturally and ideologically, and therefore, vary in their response to tragedy. Due to the immersive nature of film narratives, individuals connect with characters and observe experiences that otherwise may be difficult to comprehend. Cinematic narratives force the primacy of emotional response without the first-hand experience of responsibility within the real world, creating a cathartic-but-safe encounter with difficult realities. Music aids in this experience through the metaphysical dimension of sound, providing sensations that are pleasurable and allowing humans to live within a symbolic world. By combining these elements, animated films provide a safe window frame through which viewers may examine death and mortality.

After conducting a literature review of scholarly sources related to Terror Management Theory (TMT), film analysis, and music theory, I carefully screened and analyzed eleven animated films and created a 10-part mini-series of video essays published on YouTube for public viewing. The first half of the series builds a detailed understanding of how humans fight (subconsciously or not) to maintain a successful denial of death by embracing cultural worldviews, symbolic immortality, child-like wonder, and heroism. The second half investigates "death-reminiscent" events: how we use terror management to cope with situations that do not threaten our mortality directly, including female oppression in patriarchal societies, fears and anxieties, and mental conditions threatening the ability to maintain control of one's terror, such as PTSD. Through the practice and utilization of terror management, we placate our mortal terror, and soothe this fear back into its slumber.