

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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## ***Death in Venice*** (*Morte a Venezia*) 1971

Luchino Visconti

### OVERVIEW

*Death in Venice* was adapted from a novel by Thomas Mann (*Der Tod in Venedig*) published in 1912, itself inspired by a young boy whom Mann had seen in that city in 1911. Visconti kept the main elements of Mann's story, except that he made the main character a composer (rather than a writer), allowing the film to suggest parallels between his character and real-life composer Gustav Mahler. The story, which concerns the composer's infatuation with the young boy and little else, is enhanced by a musical score that includes Mahler symphonies, as well as piano pieces by Beethoven and Chopin. The film came seven years after *The Leopard*, another Visconti production concerning an old man contemplating death in a bygone era, and only three years before *Conversation Piece*, with the same theme. As with both those other films, *Death in Venice* combines sumptuous visual scenes with the tumultuous inner lives of its characters. The film won several prizes, including a special Palme d'Or at Cannes, Best Director at the David di Donatello Awards and Best Foreign Film from the French Syndicate of Film Critics

### SYNOPSIS

There are few events in the film, which moves at a slow pace, beginning with Auschenbach's arrival in Venice, where he has gone to recover from ill health. Soon, he sees a young and beautiful young Polish boy, Tadzio, who is staying in the same hotel with his mother and siblings. The two exchange glances, but soon Auschenbach decides to leave Venice. Fortunately, a mix-up with his luggage means he misses his train and returns to the hotel, where he has more visual encounters with Tadzio and learns that the city is in the grip of a cholera epidemic. His health steadily deteriorates and he dies in a lounge chair on the beach, while stretching out a hand to touch Tadzio, who is far away, at the water's edge.

### MAIN CHARACTERS

Auschenbach Gustav von Auschenbach is a German composer.  
Alfred Alfred is his German friend.  
Tadzio Tadzio is a young Polish boy whom he sees in Venice.

### STORY

*Venice, early 1900s* Gustav von Auschenbach, a composer of classical music, travels to Venice in order to recover from a serious illness. He gets in an argument with the man rowing his gondola to the Lido, where his luggage is loaded on a cart and pushed to a luxury hotel. From his room, he has a direct view of the beach, with huts and lounge chairs. He arranges his things, including a photograph of his dead wife.

*The young boy* Sitting in the hotel lounge, where guests take refreshments and listen to an orchestra, he notices a young, blonde-haired boy in a sailor suit. He is sitting with his mother, governess and siblings, all of whom speak Polish. The hotel guests move into the dining room, where Auschenbach sits alone and catches the eye of the boy eating with his family. Spooning his soup, he recalls discussions with his friend, Alfred about the relationship between art and reality, beauty and the senses.

*Tadzio* At breakfast in the morning, he again observes the young boy with his family. The weather continues to be cool and windy, but he joins other guests on the beach. Sitting in a chair in front of his hut, he watches the boy, now accompanied by a slightly older Polish boy. Around him, people chatter in English, French, German and Italian. Some go into the water, some build sand castles, some laze in the hazy sun. When the young boy is addressed by his governess, Auschenbach hears that his name is Tadzio. In the hotel, Tadzio holds his gaze for a long moment before turning and going down

a corridor.

*Farewell and return* Disturbed and unable to work on his music, Auschenbach decides to leave the hotel (and Tadzio) and return to Munich. After an irritable exchange with the manager, he has his luggage sent on ahead while he eats his breakfast. When he leaves the room and crosses paths with Tadzio, he whispers to himself, 'Farewell, it was all too brief.' At the train station, his luggage is put on the wrong train, and by the time it is retrieved, he has missed his train. He returns to the hotel, happier than when he left. Back in his room, he opens the window and spots Tadzio on the beach.

*Epidemic?* He goes to the beach and takes up his vantage point outside his beach hut, where, apparently inspired by Tadzio, he works on his composition. The following day, Tadzio exchanges glances with him, while gracefully moving under a canopy. Inside the hotel, he hears a Beethoven piano piece and imagines that Tadzio is playing. When he asks the manager why the newspapers do not carry information about the cholera epidemic in Venice, he is assured that there are only 'rumours' and there is 'no need for concern.'

*Love* Agitated, he goes for an evening stroll and receives a tiny smile from Tadzio when passing him and his family. 'You must never smile like that at anyone,' he says to himself, almost in tears. 'I love you.'

*Disinfectant* The next day, he follows Tadzio and his family to a church in town, where he reads public notices about the cholera epidemic and sees disinfectant being poured on the streets. Again, he and Tadzio exchange glances but no words. Back at the hotel, strolling minstrels entertain the guests sitting on the veranda, including Tadzio, who looks straight at Auschenbach. Before dropping coins into the performers' collection hat, Auschenbach asks about the disease and is told that the disinfectant is just a 'precaution.' The minstrels' singing is maniacal and raucous, in sharp contrast to the classical pieces heard previously in the hotel.

*The truth* The following afternoon, he walks to Cook's travel agency and exchanges German marks for Italian lira. Again, he asks about the disinfectant and is again told it's a 'mere formality.' Then, the manager takes him aside and confides that the plague has reached Venice, but people keep silent in order not to scare off the tourists. He is advised to leave as soon as possible and imagines warning Tadzio's mother to take her family away, too.

*Restoration* A barber examines his greying hair and says he will 'restore' him. After a little dye is put on his hair and rouge on his lips, he looks years younger. Placing a carnation in his lapel, he again follows Tadzio's family through the streets, where fires are burning to drive away the disease. He begins to perspire and feel ill. He sits down to rest but laughs and then cries.

*Departure* On the day of departure, a Polish woman sings an elegy while we watch Auschenbach come out of the hotel and under the covered walkway to the beach. He is frail and ill-looking, despite the flower in his lapel. He sits in a lounge chair in the middle of the beach and watches Tadzio and another boy play-fight, with sexual undertones. He tries to rise but sinks back, trembling with sweat, still with Tadzio in sight. Now alone, the boy walks slowly into the water. Auschenbach reaches out a hand, as if to touch the distant figure, collapses and dies.

*Flashbacks scattered through the story:*

1. After a heart attack, Auschenbach thinks about an hourglass in his parents' house that measured the passage of time.
2. He remembers playing with his little daughter and kissing his wife on beautiful spring day in the Alps.
3. A woman plays Beethoven on the piano as a prelude to love-making. He leaves cash on the table and leaves, loosening his hand from her firm grip.
4. He and his wife grieve at their daughter's funeral.
5. He is booed after he conducts his own music, but a group of admirers seek his attention. Alfred says the he's created 'perfection without the senses.' Alfred also says that since he has achieved perfection, he can now 'go to the grave'.

## THEMES

**1. Mortality** As the title itself suggests, this is a story about death. It begins (through a flashback) with Auschenbach's illness in Munich and ends with him dying on the beach. This theme is introduced by Auschenbach himself when he remembers an hourglass in his parents' house: 'It seems that the sand only runs out at the last moment. Till then it's not worth thinking about. Until the end, when there's no more time left.' His illness and death is the emotional core of the film, but it is accompanied by the deaths caused by a cholera epidemic that sweeps through Venice. These two strands of mortality emerge slowly and overlap as the story unfolds. Auschenbach is in the city to recover from an illness, but he does not seem unwell in the opening sequences. Unhappy and alone, yes, but not ill. Then, signs of the epidemic appear in the form of public notices on city walls. Auschenbach wants to know more but is told that such notices are a 'mere formality' and that there is nothing to worry about. The same might be said about his own condition, until it worsens. Finally, the two strands come together in a brilliant scene when he becomes feverish and collapses on the street, surrounded by fires lit to drive off the pestilence. He never fully recovers from that collapse, suggesting that both his deterioration and the epidemic mirror a wider decay in society. The pestilence is a form of impurity that destroys both his physical life and aesthetic ideals.

**2. Desire** A second theme is desire or, more accurately, the pursuit of impossible desire. Again, this theme exists on two levels: the aesthetic and the physical. Auschenbach's desire to achieve purity in art is paired with his desire to experience perfection in the world of the senses. The conflict between these two objectives is the subject of the heated discussions (shown in flashbacks) between the composer and his friend, Alfred. Auschenbach believes that beauty is achieved through the spirit and not the senses. However, he struggles to realise that ideal, and, in one flashback, his 'beautiful' music is booed by the audience. His pursuit of Tadzio is another struggle. The boy is clearly flesh, as revealed by his bathing suit, but Auschenbach never has any direct physical contact with him. Instead, he contemplates the boy, as he might contemplate a painting. Perhaps there is a balance to be had between the spirit and the flesh, as Alfred once suggests. But Auschenbach's pursuit of perfection, whether spiritual or physical, fails every time. That is clearly the message of the final shot, when he stretches out a hand toward Tadzio, who remains distant and unobtainable.

**3. Loneliness** That final scene of a man stretching out in vain to touch another person also emphasises the theme of isolation. The film opens with a scene of loneliness, showing Auschenbach in a chair all alone on the deck of the steamer, and it ends with another such scene, showing him slumped in a chair on the beach. In between, he barely communicates with his fellow guests at the hotel, except to ask about the cholera in the city. Although he sometimes is physically close to Tadzio and his family, he never speaks a word to them, only whispering in imagined conversations. Their frequent use of Polish remains untranslated, which symbolises the distance between him and them. The repeated and false assurances given to Auschenbach about the cholera is another example of speech that separates rather than brings people together. There is also a brief scene in a brothel, in which a young Auschenbach might have found some kind of bond, but even here he wrenches his hand free from the young woman's grasp. Similarly, in the scenes where he debates art and life, he rarely comes close to his friend, Alfred. In one of those scenes, Alfred describes him as 'a keeper of distances. Afraid to have direct honest contact with anything.' It is only in the flashback with his wife and daughter, frolicking on a grass hill in the Alps, that he is happy in the company of others.

## CHARACTER ANALYSIS

**Auschenbach** Gustav von Auschenbach is a German composer of classical music, or at least he was one. Through flashbacks, we know that he was married and had a daughter who died. We also see that he is an intense man, dedicated to his ideals of purity and beauty. In the present, he is ill and lonely, but derives pleasure by watching a beautiful young boy, who returns his glances.

**Lonely** From the opening sequence, when we see Auschenbach on a steamer, we know he is not a happy man. He sits on the deck all alone, without another person in sight. Wrapped in a heavy blanket, he tries to read but cannot. It is a beautiful sunrise over the water, but his face is weary, the edges of his mouth turned down, and he sighs heavily. Then, he gets into an argument with his gondolier, and later he has a brief exchange with a man at the boat landing, to whom he grudgingly gives a few coins. He sets off to walk to his hotel and uses his umbrella to shoo away a little boy, as if the child were a dog. Much later, we learn that he has suffered a heart attack, but even so, this is a

man who has a sour disposition, locked within himself and barely willing to acknowledge his fellow human beings.

*Voyeuristic* Auschenbach's character is more firmly established once he has settled in the hotel and has his first sighting of Tadzio. He is sitting, alone, of course, in the crowded and luxurious lounge, with bright orange lamps, enormous flower vases, plumed hats and glittering necklaces. He is reading a newspaper, almost as a cover to allow him to look around without being seen to look. The camera lingers over several faces and then stops. Auschenbach also stares, wide-eyed and then hides behind his paper. But only for a moment. He lowers the paper and looks again at the young boy in the sailor suit. He taps his fingers nervously on the arm of his chair, puts his finger to a cheek and cocks his head to one side. He is a voyeur, watching while trying not to be seen. He remains alone and lonely, but now he has an interest in someone, whom he will follow for the rest of the story.

*Intellectual* Through the flashbacks, we see that Auschenbach is not just a composer of classical music but also an intellectual. In the second of those flashback scenes, he is discussing the nature of art with a friend. Auschenbach argues passionately that life is a distraction from art. 'The creation of beauty and purity,' he says with force, 'is a spiritual act.' His friend disagrees, which only prompts Auschenbach to become more adamant that beauty is not sensual and can only be achieved when the senses are conquered. As the discussion proceeds, he gets more and more excited, rejecting this and asserting that. His eyes blaze with passion and his lips tremble as he articulates his aesthetic theory. He is a man of the mind, who lives with ideas and has dedicated his life to demonstrating them through his music.

*Sensitive* Another revealing flashback occurs at the end of the story, when Auschenbach has collapsed on the street, and is close to death. His agony seems to recall another moment of misery when his performance as conductor was greeted with boos and jeers by the audience. Humiliated in the earlier scene, he staggers off stage and finds refuge in a back room, where his wife comforts him while his friend berates him for achieving his ideal of perfection, which has left the audience dissatisfied. Suddenly a group of excited women burst in and ask for his autograph. But he is too disturbed to meet them. 'Send them away!' he cries. 'Please send them away.' This scene illustrates Auschenbach's extreme sensitivity. As a conductor, he is a performer who is judged by the public, who care little for his precious concept of perfection and purity. He is at their mercy, and he suffers.

*Tadzio* Tadzio is almost as enigmatic as Auschenbach, especially as he is given no backstory at all. He is a young boy, one of four children brought to the seaside by their mother and governess. The family are Polish but speak French, and perhaps English, too. But Tadzio says little beyond a few words to his young friends. He is a mute character, who communicates through looks and actions.

*Boyish* During the first third of the film, we (and Auschenbach) see Tadzio only inside the hotel, in the lounge and in the dining area. Because he sits immobile, it is difficult to gauge him as a character. When the story moves outside, however, to the wide beach, we get a better idea. Now, we see him in a swimming suit walking on the sand. He is tallish and thin, but not skinny. Perhaps fourteen or fifteen, he has an ease about him, at home in his body. Suddenly, when a friend calls to him and puts an arm around him, he goes racing toward the water like the boy he is. Whatever ideas might be forming in Auschenbach's head, and whatever feelings might be swirling through Tadzio, he is a young boy, jumping and leaping around like a sprite.

*Coy* Although he never speaks to him, Tadzio is not immune to Auschenbach's attentions. As the story develops, he acknowledges and then reacts to the older man's stalking. He smiles knowingly across the dining room, in the lounge and in the elevator. But the most flirtatious moment comes outside, on a typically overcast grey day. Standing on a wooden walkway with an overhead awning, Tadzio is looking out to sea. He senses, rather than sees, that Auschenbach is behind him. Slowly, deliberately, he swings around the poles that hold up the awning, giving the older man an ambiguous look but beckoning him unmistakably with the provocative motion of his body. Reaching the end of the walkway, he darts off to the beach. In this scene of less than a minute, Tadzio seduces Auschenbach with coy silence.



(Tadzio swings around for Auschenbach's gaze)



(Tadzio)



(Auschenbach on the beach)



(Dick Bogarde, as Auschenbach, and Visconti on the set)