**AN EXISTENTIAL JOURNEY WITH VENICE AS BOTH STARTING POINT AND DESTINATION**

As we saw in the previous exercise, Thomas Mann's novella Death in Venice is considered a small masterpiece. Written in 1912, it is an extraordinarily skillful chronicle of decline in all its forms. Mann precisely records the tendencies of his age, the anxieties of maturity, and the abyss of death, experienced and sensed more intensely than anyone by the artist and creator.

Before proceeding, let us recall the story. Its central figure is Gustav von Aschenbach, an acclaimed writer in middle age who, exhausted and suffering a creative crisis, is suddenly seized by a powerful desire to travel. He leaves Munich, where he lives and works, seeking rest and renewal in southern Europe. He arrives in Venice and stays at a luxurious, cosmopolitan hotel on the Lido. On his first evening he notices Tadzio, a young man of noble Polish origin, whose "absolute beauty" recalls the perfection of ancient Greek sculpture. The ageing writer believes visible beauty can lead him to the realm of the spirit. Admiration gradually becomes obsession. In the fourth week of his stay, signs multiply that a serious epidemic is threatening the city, though the authorities conceal it. Visitors leave, but Aschenbach refuses to go: his only fear is losing sight of Tadzio, whom he follows through Venice's labyrinthine alleys, the hotel and the beach. He has surrendered completely to the pleasure of chaos. Even when he learns that the epidemic is Asiatic cholera, he does not return to bourgeois morality. He descends further from dignity until he too contracts the disease and dies on the Lido beach, in a kind of release.



A beach scene from Luchino Visconti's 1971 screen adaptation of Mann's book, Death in Venice.

Mann's turn toward antiquity, visible in several parts of the novella, was not unique in early twentieth-century literature; it reflected the anxious searching of writers of his generation, including Hofmannsthal, Rilke and Hauptmann. They experienced their age as unstable and insecure, and turned to myth as an ancient, recurring framework for interpreting human existence. In the celebrated, Greek-inspired fourth chapter, Aschenbach sits on the beach, enjoying the moment and admiring the young man's godlike beauty, and suddenly feels compelled to write. He produces pages of exceptionally pure prose. Here he is not an Apollonian artist driven by self-imposed discipline: writing springs from Dionysian pleasure. "Never before had he felt the delight of words so sweetly; never had he been so certain that Eros resides in the word." Language and erotic love briefly become one. But these precious hours are dangerous: from this point Aschenbach increasingly surrenders to Dionysus, until the surrender becomes absolute. He casts aside the moral principles that had shaped him, disregards his dignity and pursues Dionysian intoxication. The prospect of returning to reason and sobriety repels him; he is captivated by the sensation of the abyss and the fall. Tadzio introduces him to the realm of beauty and draws him into dreams and the depths of his inner world, bringing forgotten images and desires to the surface. Tadzio becomes the final image before Aschenbach's death, beckoning him toward it as a psychopomp, a guide of souls: "It seemed to him that he was smiling at him, beckoning him—the pale and gracious psychopomp—and pointing out toward the open sea, toward the immensity of a rich promise."





Photographs from the filming of Visconti's movie on the Venice beach, showing the director and his discovery for the role of Tadzio, the young Björn Andrésen.

Tadzio, like Hermes, is repeatedly linked with the sea, a central symbol of death and eternity in the novella. The sea is described as an "empty, unstructured space" where time loses its sharpness and one disappears into the immeasurable. Aschenbach longs to be near it: deep within him lies an attraction to the unstructured, the boundless, the eternal, Nothingness. "And is not Nothingness a form of perfection?" Tadzio and the sea belong together, embodying Aschenbach's unconscious death wish. As in Mann's work generally, death is ambiguous: it signifies both an ending and destruction, and—under the influence of German Romanticism and Schopenhauer's philosophy—release from the bonds of existence and the promise of eternity.

From Benjamin Britten's final opera, Death in Venice, Op. 88 (1973), we first hear Aschenbach looking at the sea in an excerpt from Act I, Scene 4, followed by the haunting pentatonic percussion music accompanying Tadzio's appearance on the beach in Scene 5, strongly suggestive of the Dionysian. Tenor Philip Langridge gives an insightful performance as Aschenbach, while Richard Hickox conducts the City of London Sinfonia with often incisive energy.

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A beach scene from the film, with Björn Andrésen as Tadzio and Dirk Bogarde as Aschenbach. In his 1971 adaptation, Visconti created a portrait of a world sinking into decline and clinging to ideal beauty as its last escape.

On the beach, absorbed in the young man's appearance, Aschenbach feels more than admiration: he believes he understands the very essence of beauty, form as divine thought, unique and pure perfection existing in the spirit. The ideal human image appears here, graceful and light, to be worshipped; through the body, the soul may rise to the contemplation of higher things. The novella now clearly follows Platonic ideas found in the dialogues and in Plutarch's Erotic Dialogue, which also explores Platonic thought about love. For Aschenbach, Tadzio embodies the Idea of Beauty: he makes the divine Idea visible and accessible to the senses and seems able to lead him to the highest level of human awareness. Aschenbach suddenly sees himself as Plato's Socrates and the young Pole as Phaedrus, as in our previous exercise. Drawing on Plato's Symposium, Mann suggested that there is no "good" and "bad" love: love is one, inseparable from youth and beauty as expressed in the classical Greek ideal of sculpture.



The Diadoumenos by Polykleitos, the great sculptor of the Argive school, celebrated for proportion and symmetry. The name means “the one who wears a diadem.” This statue type, attributed to Polykleitos, is among the best-known models of ancient Greek sculpture, depicting young male athletes in idealized yet convincingly naturalistic form.

Mann wrote the book soon after his own visit to Venice in 1911, when the composer Gustav Mahler was dying. This helps explain why Aschenbach resembles Mahler in the story, while Visconti’s film makes him an ageing composer rather than a writer. Mahler’s ravishing Adagietto from his Fifth Symphony provides the film’s musical foundation. Elements of Mahler’s life and art—he had been psychoanalysed by Freud and was admired by Mann—are scattered throughout Aschenbach’s character, which also contains traits of Mann himself. Freud’s observation that repressed sexuality leads directly into the arms of art seems relevant to Mann’s case.

Visconti's 1971 film was a shock at the time. Although I respond to its aesthetic, I find its storytelling slow, cumbersome and ominous, so I will not include excerpts here. Filmed on location, Death in Venice is not merely an illustration of the novella but an attempt to recreate it in depth. We will now examine particular aspects of Mann's book, including its sociopolitical dimensions, through Visconti's perspective.

Before arriving by ship in Venice, Gustav von Aschenbach—whose name suggests a river of ashes—was at the height of his literary fame. He had lived for his life and his art as an idealist with classical references, committed to "art for art's sake." He devoted himself more to art than to life, because "art is the last lie left to us." When he steps onto the landing stage, the setting brightens, but his world begins to sink into the city's dirty canals. His decline is gradual, not a sudden cinematic cut: a descent into the abyss of passion. His morality, aesthetics, balance, superego and very existence are shaken when the adolescent Tadzio enters his field of vision. Everything turns to ashes, as his name suggests.

The next theme—always present before death—is love, sexuality, the drive preceding the death instinct, and guilt. The cholera epidemic drives the plot. Contagious disease was a pressing concern when Mann visited Venice before writing the novella. His wife developed tuberculosis in 1911 and entered a sanatorium; Mann then completed the novella alone with their children.

Aschenbach cannot run away, leave, or return to what he left behind. The bitter beauty that Rimbaud cursed takes the form of the adolescent Tadzio in Aschenbach's mind; in the mirror of the boy's beautiful face he sees the futility of his own life. In an almost Cavafian gesture, he tries to leave behind his work, his wife, his former life and his entire self, passing through a "narrow gate" into an open, sensual, orgiastic and bodily state.

*"The atmosphere in the square was oppressive and sunless. Unsuspecting foreigners sat in cafés or stood outside the church watching the pigeons flutter and crowd around the corn scattered by generous handfuls. Agitated, triumphantly aware of the truth yet with disgust in his mouth and unspeakable horror in his heart, Aschenbach paced the stones of the grand courtyard. He considered a dignified act of salvation. After dinner he might approach the pearl-adorned lady and say: 'Permit a stranger to give you advice and information that others withhold out of self-interest. Leave at once, with Tadzio and your daughters! Venice has been struck by cholera!' He could then touch the beautiful boy's head in farewell, turn away and escape the mire. Yet he felt infinitely far from seriously wanting to do this. Such an act would return him to himself; but a person who has lost himself dreads nothing more than finding himself again. He remembered a white building with inscriptions shining in the dusk, and the strange traveller who had awakened*

*in his mature years a youthful longing for distant lands. Returning home to calm, prudence, hard work and writing seemed so repellent that his face twisted in disgust. 'I must be silent!' he whispered. 'I will not speak!' His guilt made him dizzy. The image of the cholera-stricken city awakened hopes beyond reason, indescribably sweet. What was the delicate happiness he had once dreamed of compared with these expectations? What did art and virtue mean beside the promise of chaos? So he remained silent, determined not to speak."*

The novella describes not only Aschenbach's descent into the hell of passion, but also the end of a way of life, the death of a world and the decline of the bourgeoisie. Lukács, an admirer and scholar of Mann, speaks of the "wild and sterile suffering" of a life destroyed and reduced to nothing. Visconti, as an artist re-creating an existing work, exposes the rigour of artistic creation while revealing a bourgeois morality dominated by bad taste, indifference and excessive consumerism. This world leads Aschenbach, before he becomes a river of ashes, into a mystical love for Tadzio, tinged with sarcasm and immersed in a grotesque atmosphere.

Visconti vividly portrays the death throes of the bourgeoisie, alongside the loss of art's purity and innocence and of artistic dignity. His approach owes more to Proust than to Mann. Using Marxism as a tool, Visconti also examines Italian history, condemning the dying bourgeoisie while idealizing a supposedly progressive aristocracy. The tragedy of the Italian bourgeoisie, whose decline followed that of the aristocracy and feudalism, is that it led inexorably to fascism.

Rooted in neorealism, of which he is considered a founder, Visconti was steeped in literature and developed an aesthetic blending aestheticism and decadence with Marxist socialism. Oscar Wilde had done something similar without the Marxist dimension. It is no coincidence that Visconti's swan song was also based on a novel: The Innocent by Gabriele D'Annunzio, the quintessential aesthete who was also seriously involved with fascism.

*"Relaxed in his armchair, unable to resist and filled instead with agitation and hope, Aschenbach watched in the mirror as his eyebrows became more arched and symmetrical, his eyes larger and brighter through a little shading of the lids. His formerly brown, earthy skin grew smooth and faintly rosy; his pale lips became fuller and pink; the wrinkles on his cheeks and around his mouth, and the lines at the corners of his eyes, disappeared beneath cream and moist compresses... With his heart pounding, he saw before him a young man in full bloom. Now he could fall in love without fear."*

Aschenbach left as if in a dream, enchanted, confused and shy. He wore a red tie and a colourful ribbon on his broad-brimmed straw hat. The oppressive air killed the appetite; imagination suggested that food was poisoned by the germs of

disease. Following the beautiful boy deep into the cholera-stricken city, Aschenbach nearly lost his way among similar alleys, canals, bridges and little squares. He cared only not to lose sight of the figure he followed. Tadzio walked behind his family and usually did not let his governess and sisters turn corners first. Walking alone, he occasionally turned his strange grey-blue eyes to see whether his admirer was following. He saw him and did not betray him. Drunk on this discovery and magnetized by those eyes, Aschenbach pursued his improper hope—until, at last, he lost sight of the boy.





Björn Andrésen as Tadzio and Dirk Bogarde as Aschenbach in scenes from Visconti's film. Despite their prolonged exchanged glances, Visconti publicly rejected suggestions of anything sexual between them: "It is a love story, a pure love. It is neither sexual nor erotic."

Björn Andrésen was the strikingly beautiful boy in the film. In 1970, the celebrated director Luchino Visconti travelled around Europe in search of "perfect beauty," the most beautiful boy's face in the world, for his forthcoming film Death in Venice. The role required an adolescent who could embody Mann's description: pale, sweetly reserved, with rich honey-coloured curls and a face expressing pure, divine serenity. Andrésen was only 15 when cast as Tadzio, and before adulthood became synonymous with absolute beauty and the desire it arouses. Visconti reportedly exclaimed, "Beautiful boy! Ask him to undress!" Within minutes, Andrésen stood painfully uncomfortable in his underwear while a roomful of adults scrutinized him for the role. The film, about the Platonic love of a mature British composer for the beautiful Polish boy Tadzio, is regarded as a classic of Italian cinema. When it premiered in 1971, Andrésen became an international star and a symbol of youthful beauty, compared with Michelangelo's David.

Fifty years later, the 2021 documentary about Andrésen revealed that the exploitation he endured continued to haunt him long after filming. The powerful film attempts to tell his story and restore his voice. Half a century after Death in Venice premiered, Visconti's label "the most beautiful boy in the world" weighs heavily on its Tadzio. The fame became a living nightmare that marked Andrésen

for life. Now approaching 70, he looks nothing like the celebrated young man of the 1970s. Asked by a Guardian journalist what he would say to Visconti today, he replies, “Fuck off.” If beauty can be a curse, Andrésen is living proof: his adolescence was stolen by a director skilled in manipulation. He believes he would have been happier never to have met Visconti, whom he calls a “cultured predator” who cynically exploited his youth and appearance to promote the film.

Throughout his life, Andrésen carried the label “the most beautiful boy in the world,” a Visconti marketing phrase adopted by the international press after the 15-year-old was selected in 1970. He achieved cinematic immortality as the unattainable object of Aschenbach’s desire, but after the film’s triumphant Cannes premiere his career dwindled to occasional roles in minor films and television, with a later appearance in Ari Aster’s Midsommar (2019).

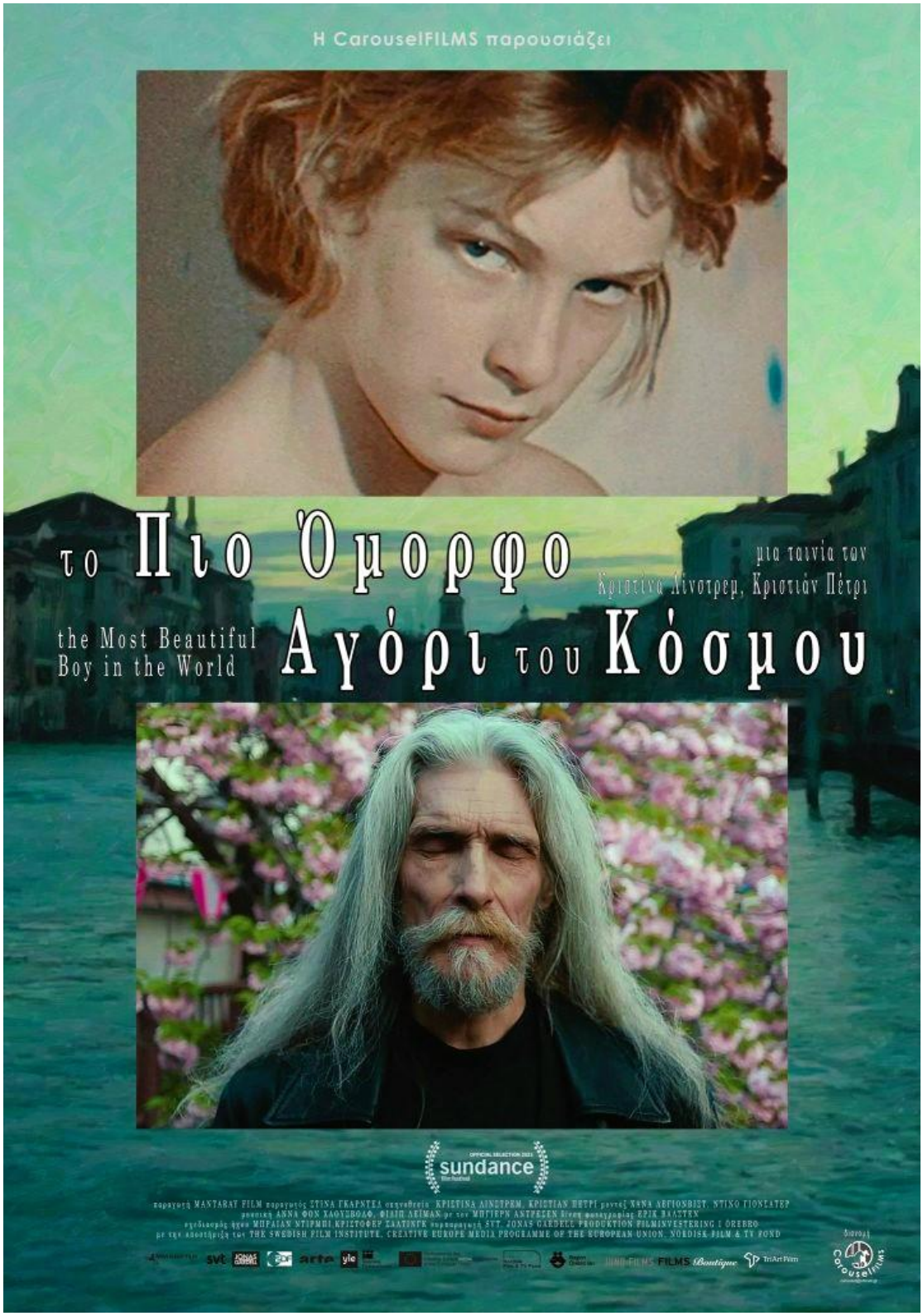
**Andrésen married the poet Susanna Roman, and they had two children. Their nine-month-old son died suddenly in his sleep. His wife left, taking their daughter Robin, and Andrésen blamed himself for the baby’s death. Alcohol became his refuge, and he attempted suicide several times. The medical diagnosis was sudden infant death syndrome; Andrésen’s own explanation was “a lack of love.” The family collapsed, he says, and he fell into depression, alcoholism and self-destruction.**

**Today he lives alone, struggles with alcohol addiction, and his relationship with his daughter Robin is breaking down. He says Death in Venice destroyed his life: “Everything I do is connected to this film. We are still talking about it half a century later,” he told the Guardian.**

His bohemian mother, Barbro, never revealed the identity of his father, and made no secret of wanting a life beyond motherhood. As a child, Andrésen remembers standing behind her as she silently looked out of a window, thinking, “When I grow up, I’ll save Mum.” He never had the chance: when he was ten, she disappeared, and six months later police found her in a forest, apparently dead by suicide. The children were separated and sent to grandparents in Stockholm; the family never spoke of their mother again. His grandmother, obsessed with celebrity, pushed him to audition for Death in Venice. Visconti’s hawk-like instinct saw not only the teenager’s Scandinavian beauty but also a difficult-to-define melancholy, awkwardness and suggestion of deep emotional waters that film could magnify. “He was different from the other boys. There was sadness around him, a vulnerability.” The documentary-makers believe Visconti chose him because his childhood experiences were etched in his eyes.

Andrésen’s true love, however, was music. He never wanted to act; he wanted to become a pianist. To his great disappointment, he became a sex symbol. He

describes the fame and attention for which he was unprepared as “a living nightmare,” saying he felt like a sexual object. He was too young to be taken by Visconti to gay nightclubs and, later, in 1976, became a trophy for wealthy Parisians who showered him with gifts and meals so they could show him off. He went to Paris for a film and stayed a year despite having no money. Wealthy men paid his expenses, gave him gifts, an apartment and 500 francs a week. “I must have been incredibly naïve: I told myself, ‘Wow, everyone is so kind.’ I don’t think they did it out of kindness. I felt like a travelling trophy.” The documentary does not say whether he ever complied with any man’s demands. He was a shy orphan whose grandmother’s fatal addiction to fame made her the last person who should have been entrusted with his protection.




Documentary director Kristina Lindström says of this photograph of young Björn: “We chose a picture for the documentary poster. It was taken at the end of Visconti’s audition, when he was asked to take off his shirt. I asked Björn what he was thinking then. He said, ‘I felt so angry.’”

In the documentary The Most Beautiful Boy in the World, Kristina Lindström and Kristian Petri filmed Andrésen's daily life for five years, beginning in 2016. They sought to trace a life that began before the filming of Death in Venice and led to a lonely 65-year-old in 2021 still trying to escape a troubled past: orphaned childhood, sudden global attention, an unwilling pop career in Japan as a film, television and music star, fans chasing him with scissors to cut his curls, managers giving him unknown pills to help him face relentless public appearances, marriage, the tragic collapse of his family, drinking, isolation and depression. The painful coming-of-age story is told with narrative restraint and genuine feeling, revealing the quiet sorrow behind glamorous film sets, the harsh price of success and a dramatic story of exploitation, adulation, downfall and a hard-won form of release. It is a deeply sad, courageous and ultimately redemptive account of the "most beautiful boy in the world."

At the beginning of the film, 65-year-old Andrésen faces eviction. His apartment is a time bomb, with the gas constantly on and piles of rubbish and useless objects everywhere. The symbolism is striking: he has spent his life belonging nowhere, in a state of perpetual eviction, forced to share the "homes" offered to him with "things" he never chose and never dared throw away. His patient current partner, Jessica, helps save the apartment, clearing the rubbish and reminding him what it means to live safely in one's own home with people one loves, protected from the outside world, fate and its games. Andrésen then faces the camera as a captivating yet cursed figure, both witness and saint, to tell his story. It did not begin when Visconti cast him at 15 as the iconic Tadzio, but much earlier, when his mother's suicide left him alone, separated from his half-sister and without family, home or purpose. His life is pieced together not strictly chronologically but in the order memory brings it back. The most tragic events remain unspoken until the end; others are never revealed. One of the documentary's greatest achievements is that Andrésen trusted the directors, and they cared for him enough to build a relationship without which the film might never have existed.

Starting from Visconti's casting of Andrésen and the worldwide impact of both film and actor, the documentary makes a seemingly arbitrary but revealing claim: Andrésen became an idol, a gay icon and perhaps the most famous actor of his time, winning cinematic immortality without feeling he gained anything beyond exploitation. First came Visconti, who no longer needed him after Cannes; then patrons of a gay bar who seemed to devour him with their eyes; and later a Japanese manager who paraded him like a puppet for fans. By his own account, Andrésen never reconciled himself to his fame or to becoming an actor without knowing whether he wanted it. He could not come to terms with being received as an erotic object, like Tadzio himself: an angel, a ghost, a fantasy, desire embodied. He felt equally out of place in Paris, where he arrived for a film but felt neither

illuminated nor able to illuminate anyone—a permanently melancholy figure who seemed to fit the margins of fame but not his own reflection.

Andrésen's present-day confession is bold, with many of his former defences now weakened. With the years gone by, Tadzio can sit on the Lido beach opposite the Hotel des Bains while Björn searches for the source of a loneliness that hangs over his slow movements like a protective veil. Deeply sad and still haunted by memories of his mother, he is not here to accuse others, demand accountability or condemn himself, although the documentary directs viewers toward possible abuse by the Death in Venice production and aspects of gay culture without fully establishing the claims. Haunted by many demons, Andrésen prefers to speak about the traumas that made him feel he failed as husband, father and star, and to let time do its work. His compelling presence, together with archival material that brings the great book of his life to life, allows him to be seen as far more complex than an image in a film or in collective memory.

As the documentary unfolds, its title, initially seeming ironic, comes to be used tenderly—not only for the boy with the irresistible smile at his Death in Venice audition, but for the man in his seventh decade who may now be able to admit that he feels he belongs somewhere. We watch the documentary's finale.

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