

## Parabolic Fear Appeals, Culturally Responsible Messaging about HIV/AIDS, and the Metaphor of the Grim Reaper

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The Grim Reaper, the ominous, cloak-adorning, scythe-wielding figure has a long history beginning in the Hebrew Bible (Guthke, 1999, p. 11) and consistently appears in religious and philosophical texts. This association of the figure of the Grim Reaper with religious discourses can be found in more recent historical texts as well. *The Circle of Human Life*, for instance, first published in 1841, is a theological treatise that mentions the Reaper. From this writing, the reader learns that the Grim Reaper appears at the moment of death, although not to judge one's soul. It does not decide whether that soul goes to heaven or hell; its presence merely designates that one's soul is bound for judgment by God (Tholuck, 1841, p. 11). The Grim Reaper, then, is inherently a theological figure, entwined with the notion of religious judgment.

Fast forward almost two hundred years to 1987, when the familiar skeletal figure bowled its way onto Australian television screens in the now infamous Grim Reaper AIDS PSA. The ad depicts the Reaper (a metaphorical representation of the AIDS virus) throwing giant bowling balls at innocent Australian children and adults, effectively using them as bowling pins. While the PSA was effective in getting Australians to get tested for HIV (Stylianou, 2010, pp. 11-12), the metaphor was not without its problems. For example, as David Menadue, an author that tested positive for HIV in 1984, has said with respect to the ad: "At the time, it was incredibly scary, particularly for positive people. Like, we felt we were the Grim Reaper bowling the balls and that poor little girl in the pigtails, in many ways, was not the real target of the campaign" (Cited in Padula, 2006, p. 4). Though the PSA did not intend to invoke this meaning, the metaphor of the Reaper came loaded with religious associations that nonetheless enabled otherizing discourses.

Here, I argue that the Grim Reaper PSA uses a parabolic fear appeal, a fear appeal that plays off a specific parable, or a story that includes an extended metaphor (Coats, 1981, p. 370). Parables use "the moral of the fable as a point of provoking judgement [sic] ... The point of the storytelling process is to elicit judgment from the audience" (p. 377). In this essay, I will briefly review the literature on metaphor, distinguishing parabolic fear appeal from other sorts of metaphors in the context of public health and HIV/AIDS in the 1980s. Following this, I will carry out an analysis informed by parabolic fear appeals that demonstrates how the ad worked to frighten people, but not simply by expressing the threat of HIV as a pathogen. By applying a theological figure to HIV/AIDS, the ad also resonated with conservative discourses, encouraging the conflation of homophobic sentiments with evaluations of public health risk.

## The Grim Reaper Campaign and its Unruly Metaphor

The entirety of the Grim Reaper Campaign is a layered metaphor. The ad begins amidst darkness and fog; men, women, and children descend from the ceiling in neat rows (NACAIDS, 00:02-00:07, 1987). These people are playing the roles of both the general public of Australia, as well as bowling pins in the Grim Reaper's game. The Reaper tosses huge bowling balls at the groups of people, sending them flying towards the ground as the narrator discusses the impact AIDS has had on Australia. Throughout, the audience can see shots of dead bodies strewn about on the ground. By the end, multiple Grim Reapers can be seen throwing bowling balls (NACAIDS 00:14-00:19, 1987). In the metaphor, the Reapers are supposed to represent the AIDS virus, violently devastating the innocent and defenseless Australian children and adults.

Metaphor is a figurative language tool, used prominently in the ad, that is used to compare two things by referring to one as something else. For example, "AIDS is the Grim Reaper of diseases." The tenor is the object of discussion, while the vehicle is the figurative representation of the object (Foss, 2018). In the PSA, the AIDS virus is the tenor that is being represented by the vehicle of the Grim Reaper.

The use of metaphor has shown to be effective in grabbing the attention of the audience because, as research has shown, metaphorical language can be understood quite quickly (Thibodeau, 2017, p. 854). However, as Ceccarelli points out, metaphor can also constitute the ways in which we know a given phenomenon; consequently, they are not trivial. Specifically, she discusses the implications of comparing scientific advancement (the tenor) with the "frontier" (the vehicle). Ceccarelli describes this specific comparison as "flypaper of our mental world" because it has become so common in the American consciousness (2013, p. 3). This also proves that metaphor can provide a "terministic screen" that narrows our perception of a given subject (Ceccarelli, 2013, p. 3).

Metaphors can be sticky in this way, shaping all kinds of thought processes. This type of language is powerful, but it is also unpredictable. Metaphors are "capable of sudden twists and shifts of meaning, meanings considerably more interesting than the conventional" (p. 4). This also raises concern regarding specific audiences becoming attached to different—and sometimes unintentional—meanings. Metaphors become more influential when they are left up for interpretation, making them extremely volatile (Thibodeau, 2017, p. 857). Certain groups may be searching for a specific meaning, so to obtain it, will only acknowledge aspects of the metaphor that suit their narrative (Ceccarelli, 2013, p. 12).

Throughout history, certain diseases have been conceived as punishment for sin (Brandt, 1988, p. 416). Looking at any disease as a metaphor, then, would be inherently problematic, because it leads to the inevitable stigmatization of a specific group (p. 415). The person with the disease becomes a pariah because the disease itself has been culturally imbued with negative meaning. In the case of HIV/AIDS, "homosexuality—not a virus—causes AIDS. Therefore, homosexuality itself is feared as if it were a communicable, lethal disease" (p. 429). When audiences watched the Grim Reaper PSA, they interpreted the character as a representation for the gay community.

“Rather than ‘de-gaying’ AIDS, the monstrous figure of the ‘Grim Reaper’ may be understood as representing a story of ‘unacceptable sexualities’ and in particular ‘male homosexuality’.... the disassociation of homosexuality with AIDS in the Grim Reaper TV campaign may be understood as a process which figures ‘homosexuality’ as dangerous and diseased” (Vitellone, 2001, pp. 36-37). This is an example of the potentially negative, and perhaps dangerous implications of metaphor choice, especially when made by the government. “There is danger in allowing governments the power to publicize health risks. Knowledge and risk factors may be misinterpreted; interventions may be ineffective or counterproductive” (Cited in Lupton, 1993, p. 431). Despite the deep implications of metaphor in the Grim Reaper ad, it has almost exclusively been studied by social scientists (Stylianou, 2010, p. 2), leaving the rhetorical implications of the campaign uninterrogated. As such, the importance of vehicle choice must be analyzed from a rhetorical perspective as it regards the cultural situation of public health campaigns.

### **HIV/AIDS: Perceptions and Policy in the 1980s**

Although this time period is already well documented, it is useful to look back at specific milestones that illustrate the care and sympathy shown for the “innocent” victims, as well as the neglect and disdain shown for the “non-innocent” victims as a means of understanding the social stigma of HIV/AIDS. Many countries’ responses to HIV were to shove it under the rug. In the beginning of the epidemic, public health officials had dubbed AIDS, “gay cancer,” and later, “Gay Related Immune Disorder” (Donovan, 1997, p. 120). This associated HIV/AIDS and sexual orientation within the public mind. During Ronald Reagan’s US presidency, “the epidemic is viewed through central concerns of the political Right: trimming government-funded social programs, emphasizing personal responsibility and protecting citizens and society from the negative impacts of behaviors coded as immoral” (Padamsee, 2020, p. 1027). And, four years later, although President Clinton made promises about helping the gay community, some argue that his administration was just as neglectful as the ones before and not enough progress was made (Mckinney & Pepper, 1999, p. 75). Clinton’s “strategic silence” included not speaking on World AIDS day in 1994 and asking his Surgeon General to resign after speaking publicly about masturbation at a United Nations AIDS conference (McKinney et al., 1999, p. 82).

The Australian government knew that action needed to be taken and started work on the Grim Reaper PSA. By the 1980s, Australian public health communicators knew that fear appeals were effective, and, in fact, most PSAs used them, including commercials and print ads by the Australian Department of Transport (Stylianou, 2010, p. 11). No different, the Grim Reaper Campaign leveraged fear to engage public health. The campaign was able to convince thousands of Australians to get tested and opened the door for public discussion and funding for the AIDS crisis that was still being ignored around the world (Stylianou, 2010, pp. 12-13).

Follow-up interviews conducted by NACAIDS of 610 adults in Sydney and Melbourne eight weeks after the Grim Reaper campaign aired found that... 70

per cent thought that it had changed people's behavior... 44 per cent said that they had personally changed their own behavior. (Stylianou, 2010, pp. 11-12)

New infections peaked in 1987, the year the Grim Reaper ad aired. Between 1987 and 1999, reported cases steadily dropped to its lowest point (McKenzie-Murray, 2012). Although the ad appears to have been effective, it has also been critiqued for confusing "memorability" for "efficacy" (Stylianou, 2010, p. 14). Other scholars have argued that, while unforgettable, the ad was still not informative enough and did not raise the viewers' knowledge of AIDS (Rigby, Brown, Anagnostou, Ross, & Rosser, 1989, p. 158). Glowacki coins the term "health hyperbole," which is helpful for conceptualizing the Grim Reaper ad in this regard. That is, the PSA encouraged panicking about an event with great confidence, vigor, and sincerity, which can be quite contagious. This hyperbolic rhetoric "can be baiting and evoke/embolden irrational or fallacious reasoning... is used to convey any combination of anger, distrust, skepticism, blame, conspiracy, nationalism, and misinformation" (Glowacki, 2020, p. 1960). While the ad effectively appealed to the fears of those watching, it can also be said that the PSA could have done so while serving public health better, and in ways more culturally responsible.

### Interpreting Fear

Fear appeals are ubiquitous in public health messaging and have shown to be effective time and time again. In fact, studies have shown that the stronger the fear invoked, the more persuasive the message (Witte & Allen, 2000, p. 601). With particular concern for the Grim Reaper ad, the power of its fear appeal can be explained by deterrence theory. This theory posits that people will act a certain way as long as the benefits outweigh the risks. That is, undesirable behaviors can be halted if the person is made aware of the severe consequences of those behaviors (Johnston, Warkentin, & Siponen, 2015, pp. 118-119). In the ad, the audience is warned that if they practice unhealthy habits and avoid getting tested, they will be visited by the Grim Reaper, or worse, prostrated by a giant bowling ball. Lupton, in explaining communication of health risk, states that, "approaches to health risk focus upon risk as a consequence of the 'lifestyle' choices made by individuals, and thus place the emphasis upon self-control" (Lupton, 1993, p. 427). External risk has been used by public health communicators to place certain people in the categories of "those at risk" or "those posing a risk." In doing this, risk can be used similarly to "sin" as a way to "moralize and politicize dangers" (p. 428). Therefore, risk is a "hegemonic conceptual tool" that is capable of reinforcing problems already plaguing marginalized groups (p. 432). It is for this reason that communicators must be responsible with their use of fear.

Further, when used in media, ideas are often "collapsed," meaning that when one idea is being presented on screen, there are still many other ideas being referenced simultaneously. This is how cultural meaning are shared with the audience (Altheide, 1997, p. 661). By utilizing media, a message will be spread far and wide, placing itself at the mercy of interpretation: "With dissemination, meaning explodes" (Ceccarelli, 2009, p. 398). From this idea, we gain the term polysemy, which is defined as "the existence of

determinate but nonsingular denotational meanings” (p. 399). One type of polysemy, called resistive reading, gives power to an audience when they “develop a contrary understanding of the text’s meaning... In these cases, the producer no longer has control over the denotational meaning of the message” (p. 400). While able to give power to viewers by making them more informed on how to protect themselves from the AIDS virus, the Grim Reaper stripped power from others by being too ambiguous, and thus allowing viewers to draw the wrong conclusion from it. The Grim Reaper is a visual metaphor, which allows for a collapsing of the idea of HIV, risk, and moral assessment into a single metaphor. While this was not the intention of the creators, the over-the-top imagery morphed the fear appeal of the PSA into a parabolic (morally narrativized) fear appeal, which amplified responses of blame, distrust, and misinformation in HIV/AIDS discourses. All of this, coupled with the features of the Grim Reaper PSA, comes together to create an extended metaphor that unlocks parable(s) that undermine public health in culturally problematic ways.

### **Defining Hidden Public Health Risk in the Grim Reaper PSA**

By way of its open-ended metaphor, the Grim Reaper ad teaches a simple lesson to its audience. The narrator of the PSA says: “At first, only gays and IV drug users were being killed by AIDS, but now we know every one of us can be devastated by it” (NACAIDS, 00:11-00:20, 1987), just before a massive bowling ball thrown by the Grim Reaper pummels a group containing women and children. In this moment, the narrator distinguishes between the “innocent” victims of AIDS and the “non-innocent” victims. As seen in the direct quote above, the language being used divides the people of Australia into groups; one group of gay men and IV drug users, and now the group of “us” (00:19)—everyone else. The audience is led to understand that the cluster of people being targeted by the Reaper and the bowling ball is “us.” The first group, then, can easily be placed into the vehicle of the murderous Grim Reaper by a misguided audience. In doing this, the ad inadvertently teaches a moral. Although the original intention was just to play off of moral panic to motivate public health arguments, a different discourse was created. If you participate in “immoral” activities (such as unprotected sex or drug use), you are a threat to the innocent people around you. This moral is aided by the religious connotations of the Reaper.

According to Jakobsen and Pellegrini, this was not an uncommon theme in early AIDS reporting. The main question being asked was: “Is AIDS a threat to the general public?” In this context, who is the general public? This remains a meaningful question because the general public does not include everyone (Jakobsen & Pellegrini, 2003, p. 51). By making this distinction, those not included in the general public become the other, the monster (Lupton, 1993, p. 324). A story that set out to vilify a pathogen actually emerges as a story that disparages the lifestyle choices of groups mentioned by name within the first ten seconds of the ad. Naturally, this othering also further strengthens hegemony by making heterosexuality out to be the acceptable norm when the public is still trying to unlearn GRID (Gay Related Immune Disease) and understand AIDS

(Vitellone, 2001, p. 38). The way metaphor is used in the video also affects the tone, which in turn affects the onlooking public.

The metaphor of the Grim Reaper is muddled and permeated with the cultural values of the viewer. Before the ad aired, there were many misconceptions floating around the public consciousness about what AIDS was, who was at risk, (as well as who posed the risk), and why those specific groups were being affected (Stylianou, 2010, p. 11). The problem with risk, as Lupton describes it, is that too much emphasis is placed on personal responsibility. A person's risk level, if high, is due to their own moral failings and weaknesses (Lupton, 1993, p. 429). The ad shows the Reapers actively and offensively attacking the heterosexual adults and children. Not only are homosexuals being punished, but they are now also distributing punishment on the unsuspecting public. It is here that the non-heteronormative person is "virologized." The message being sent is that their "immoral" lifestyles and actions now have external consequences that can be willfully exacted on everyone else. This metaphor turns the gay man into "an impossible object, a monster" (Watney, 1987, p. 77). That fear, in a tumultuous time like the 1980s, can be misguided when unchecked. Into the early 1990s, homophobia and HIV-related discrimination had been "pervasive and extensive" in Australia (Van de Ven et al., 1997, p.143). A problematic story emerges here: An attempt to keep people informed about a deadly virus inadvertently made gay persons out to be living instantiations of death. Due to an extant fear of homosexuals, the Reaper became the new face of that panic and, for the viewers, served as a metaphoric representation of their confusion and angst, which created a new parable.

When a parable teaches a lesson to an audience, it also forces that audience to make a judgment about the players in the story. Take for example, the werewolf. This creature has been a staple of twentieth century horror films as well as early European literature; these examples can also be viewed as parables. Stories about this monster capitalize on an audience's fear of a wolf in sheep's clothing and teach a lesson about trust. The werewolf looks just like everyone else in its human form but holds a hidden secret underneath. This is why the werewolf can be more deeply analyzed through the lens of queer allegory (Bernhardt-House, 2016, p. 159). Similar to the Grim Reaper from the ad, there is one creature that is different from all of the other characters in the story. This character that is different is also the one causing harm. An initial assessment of this would be that differences—those that need to be hidden—cause harm. In the context of the ad, viewers already primed to view homosexual men as different, but they are also further encouraged to see a figure that is different from everyone else. This view makes that figure frightening and violent. The gay man transforms into the Grim Reaper, just as a villager transforms into a werewolf under the full moon. The ad fictively attaches the feelings people associate with death to homosexuals, therefore teaching the audience to be afraid of the gay community.

With the Grim Reaper comes the dark and smoky background seen throughout the video. It paints a very frightening and exaggerated picture of what was happening at that time in Australia. By using this specific metaphor and imagery, it not only reminds viewers of the problem, but forces this image into the memories of every audience

member. The black and smokey atmosphere also sends a message to the audience. Light and dark have always been juxtaposed as good and evil, respectively. In fact, in many media portrayals, heaven is sunny and bright, while darkness is reserved for guilt and malevolence (Banerjee et al., 2011, p. 407). It seems as if this is the home of the Grim Reapers, and they have dragged their victims down to be killed. The audience is shown that this is where Australia is heading, and exactly who is bringing them there. One of the final shots features many Grim Reapers throwing bowling balls down many lanes. This was done to show just how many people are dying of AIDS in the country, but something else is happening in the mind of the viewer. Not only does this go against the traditional presentation of the Grim Reaper in most cultures as a solitary figure, but this also makes it easier for an audience to place a specific group of people in the tenor of the metaphor. The audience gets the idea that the moral degeneracy associated with homosexuality is spreading, not the disease.

The Grim Reaper, being one of the most widely recognized symbols of death, proves to be a good metaphor for AIDS because the disease was considered a death sentence at the time. By comparing AIDS to the Grim Reaper, the deadliness of the disease is brought to the public's attention. This is one of the ad's strengths, but there are also weaknesses that take away from its effectiveness. The interactions of the multifaceted array of metaphors in the PSA, not only perpetuated, but also reified homophobic sentiments. Ceccarelli discusses the problems that arise when audiences interact with mixed metaphors:

The entailments of metaphors often differ from what we explicitly claim that we are trying to convey, reflecting instead the language that has been used most frequently in the past or a cultural perception of the science and of our proper relationship to it. (Ceccarelli, 2004, p. 104)

Interpretation can be a strong tool for allowing an audience to connect with an idea, but that connection will not always align with the creator's intentions. This is especially true in cases of resistive reading. A resistive read of the Reaper helped to maintain problematic ideologies that oppressed an already marginalized group (Ceccarelli, 2009, p. 409). In this case, polysemy does not always give power to the audience. Along with what seems to be the intentional meaning of the campaign are other meanings, especially the stereotyping of the homosexual man as a danger to Australian society. Certain aspects of the metaphor are what allowed for this kind of interpretation to run rampant with viewers.

The Grim Reaper is a human-shaped, living being. When audiences watched the beings directly murder innocent Australians in the ad, it brought about a need for interpretation. The Reaper, then, is a hollow shell that encourages a sort of aimless fear, inviting the audience to insert their own fears. Also hidden in that hollow shell is many different collapsed meanings. Within the ad's depiction of the Reaper is not only what the creators wanted the audience to see, but also what the audience themselves were predisposed to see based on their prior understandings of AIDS. In addition, this version of the Grim Reaper strays away from what the symbolic figure has represented for most

of history. The skeletal figure has been portrayed thousands of different ways by hundreds of different cultures. In the Christian Bible, the Grim Reaper—or the Angel of Death—is God’s messenger, merely reaping souls and passing no judgment upon them. However, it has also appeared as a dancer, a judge, a bailiff, a grave digger, a gardener, and other depictions across diverse cultural texts (Guthke, 1999, p. 11). In the ad, the many Grim Reapers stray away from the Biblical vision of the Angel of Death. They do no reaping, but instead do the killing themselves. This strips them of the “Reaper” title, completely changing the meaning of the symbolism. In the ad, it seems like they are the ones making the judgment of who lives and who dies. This makes for a confusing metaphor that a Western audience can misinterpret. They see a malicious enemy acting as the judge, jury, and executioner, when in reality a virus cannot act maliciously or with calculation. Therefore, a human entity needs to be attached for the idea to click in the viewers’ mind.

### **Moving Forward: More Conscious Health Messaging**

Today, these same kinds of errors are still occurring in the field of health communication. During the COVID-19 pandemic, President Trump’s use of terms like “Kung-Flu” and “the Chinese Virus” led to an anti-Chinese sentiment among his followers (Santis, 2020, p. 6). In doing this, the president also created a familiar narrative that positioned China and its people as the enemy instead of the virus itself, leading his followers down a hole of violent Sinophobia. It appears that similar problems of cultural responsibility persist into contemporary health discourse. By personifying a virus and creating an anthropomorphic villain, be it COVID-19 or AIDS, an audience is prone to fill the role of the villain with another human group. As a counter, Semino (2021) discusses the implications of using fire as a metaphor for the novel coronavirus. This metaphor proves to be a versatile and effective use of symbolism to convey the importance of wearing masks and following health guidelines. Most importantly, though: “Fire metaphors convey the dangers posed by people being in close proximity to one another, but without directly attributing blame: People are described as inanimate entities (trees, kindling, fuel) that are consumed by the fire they contribute to spread” (Semino, 2021, p. 55). By using a metaphor where the enemy is inanimate, audiences are unable to place a person or group in that role, but they can still understand how the specific virus travels and spread. In the same vein, communicators can look at HIV/AIDS as a fire. While HIV and COVID-19 are very different, much of the metaphor still applies. If embers are used to represent the germs that are spread when a person infected with COVID-19 coughs (p. 55), they could also be used to represent the bodily fluids that can spread HIV. Instead of inspiring audiences to wear masks, this could inspire them to use condoms. Therefore, communicators can more effectively and responsibly use fear appeals and metaphor when viewers are unable to make a connection between the vehicle and a group of people. This also eliminates the possibility of any moral judgments being made, eliminating the possibility for parable, and still providing important information. The possibilities are endless, especially when there is so much more to be taught. However, caution must always be invoked when dealing in metaphor and fear appeal, whether parabolic in nature or not.



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