



Addicted to Life

Written and directed by Pola Rapaport (2022)

Reviewed by David Newman



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Defiance

In the opening scene of the 2022 documentary *Addicted to Life*, about the Belgian athlete Marieke Vervoort, diagnosed with a painful degenerative spinal disease, we hear powerful defiance. Over an internet call, Vervoort, who has obtained papers to end her life via euthanasia, says to the filmmaker Pola Rapaport:

Everyone is pushing me and asking me, “When are you going to die? Do you know already the date that you’re going to die?” I said, “Fuck you. ... You don’t know when you want to die. When the time comes, when I feel it’s enough, then I will decide”.

Defiance perhaps towards others pushes and intrusions; defiance perhaps towards certainty around death and life decisions; defiance perhaps towards isolation with this experience in general and more specifically being positioned to make decisions on her own; and perhaps even defiance towards the notion that the quality or hardship of life can be measured precisely. In saying “when I feel it’s enough”, Vervoort seems to defy the notion of precision in relation to death and life decisions.

It is a powerful start to a tender and at times harrowing story of the last three years of a life and the intricate weaving of pain, extraordinary athletic accomplishment, determination, relationships and euthanasia. It’s a story that carefully explores the idea that “not only life but also death is political” (Özpolat, 2017, p. 28).

... And more defiance

It would be hard to overstate the ethical, spiritual, religious and legislative complexity and contentiousness of euthanasia. Three realms of this contention include:

- **Losing the will to go on:** (voluntary) euthanasia is neither really voluntary nor a choice in many instances, but may be more like a way to respond to losing the will to go on as a result of perceiving oneself to be a burden on others, especially if one has a disability: “This is not to say families will necessarily pressure their loved ones to choose euthanasia or assisted suicide, but more that people with a disability will sense the burden and lose the will to go on” (Pike, 2020, p. 39).

- **Cutting short potential autonomy:** euthanasia can be seen as cutting short potential autonomy or hastening death when it is chosen by persons experiencing an escalating lack of autonomy as a result of pain or illness (Dickson, 2022).
- **Cultivating a view of lives as worthless:** laws legalising euthanasia can be seen as creating a society in which those who are terminally ill or disabled understand they have no value: “In a society where euthanasia is widely practiced, as in Holland now, the terminally ill and disabled have learned that the public at large finds no significant value in their lives” (Chevlen, 1997).

Although there are many more themes, concerns and profound considerations with euthanasia, when we join Vervoort for her final years, we are immersed in a considerably different picture to these three contentions.

Firstly, Rapaport’s documentary largely chronicles how being granted the right to a medically assisted death helps Vervoort reclaim life rather than turn from it. Vervoort says at one point, “If I didn’t have the papers, I think I would have already committed suicide”. Here, euthanasia is understood as an antidote to suicidal experience or of losing the will to go on.

At another point Vervoort comments, “When I got those [euthanasia] papers ... You are always doing more and more because you’ve got your own life in your hands”. We see delightful images of Vervoort organising and then participating in activities such as speeding around a Formula One track in a Ferrari, even at the cost of physical pain and a hospital admission. Rather than stepping away from her life – “cutting it short” or “hastening death” – we witness Vervoort stepping further towards the deliberate shaping of her life. Euthanasia can then be understood as an antidote to a sense of loss of autonomy and self-determination.

The valuing of Vervoort’s life illuminates almost every scene in this film. From the willingness of many people to help her live out the dreams she holds for her life, to the loving and subdued gathering on the eve of her death, we see rich, sensitive valuing.

So Vervoort’s story defies three key criticisms of euthanasia: that it amounts to the legitimising of suicide as a result of losing the will to go on in the context of feeling burdensome, that it eradicates potential autonomy by hastening death, and legalising euthanasia creates a society where those who are

disabled or who have life threatening illnesses know they are not valued.

Vervoort's is one story, and one story cannot claim to bring a settled certainty to enormous complexity, but I found the claims and defiance lighting up this film to be powerful and compelling.

Dignity and privacy, with one exception

Given the theme and intimacy of this film, I watched it with an acute sensitivity to the dignity and privacy offered to Vervoort and the precious relationships braided around her life.

While watching, I had the experience of standing close, but not too close, as heartbreaking decisions were made, complexity in family relationships circled, physical health problems and pain were made transparent, Vervoort's dog became a key character, and friendship joys and solidarity offered sustenance.

When we see for the first time one of the seizures that Vervoort is experiencing, the camera retreats to the edge of the room. When Jan, Vervoort's friend whom she would have married were it not that he likes men and she likes women, hugs her for a final agonising time, the camera lens becomes unfocused. And at one point, Rapaport asks Vervoort on camera whether she would like her to be present at the time of her death, thereby enacting transparency. Such scenes and editorial decisions seemed to offer some dignity and privacy. As a viewer I was relieved.

I think dignity and privacy drifted, however, in a scene that included one particular doctor. The doctor looks at his notes when speaking with Vervoort, speaks somewhat informally to her in front of the camera while her pants are lowered for a leg examination, and at one point turns to the camera and speaks about Vervoort in the third person, using a tone of pronouncing psychological truths. He asserts, "She has changed. She must think about what she wants to do."

It may have been an editing choice rather than chronology, but in the next few scenes we witness Vervoort be unable to sleep, speak of how scared she is, have a seizure, and then ask her friend to reassure her that she will indeed be there when she ends her life. This seemed to be one of the key turning points in the story.

I responded with disappointment. I had hoped that rather than suggesting turning points marked by a medical professional's actions and meanings, the filmmaker would privilege turning points cultivated from Vervoort's own actions and meanings. Such an approach would have returned the story to Vervoort and avoided inadvertently siding with medical power.

Keeping the conversation going

In an article in CNN sport (Woodyatt, 2023), Rapaport said she hoped the film would foster ongoing conversations about death. I hope so too. The film, and Vervoort's life and determination, visited so very many powerful and intricate themes, adding richly to a conversation that is well underway. Below I will cover some of the themes I noticed, in this spirit of continuing the conversation.

The first story to tell

One scene includes Vervoort and her parents having a conversation that tenderly reaches back into the past when they were noting the first signs of the disease. As Vervoort speaks, her parents' faces wear shocked sadness, like masks they can't take off, but I noticed they didn't interrupt Vervoort's telling. This scene made me think of the artfulness around whose story gets privileged when someone is intending to undertake euthanasia. Vervoort's story seemed to be privileged even when her parents were experiencing piercing anguish.

I wondered just what it can take for those in the networks around a person to gently place their anguish to one side at times, so the first story told is that of the person who is going to proceed with euthanasia. I suspect it is quite an achievement to do this, but that people can be supported to find ways to settle their anguish so they might be better placed to step slightly to one side. Clarity around such steps and ways to stand with Vervoort drifted into the film at key moments.

Ways to stand with the person

When reflecting on her relationships towards the end of the film, Vervoort says, "I have friends and family – they are there in good times, but most of all they are there in the bad times". She clearly states the significance of people being with her during bad times. There is such a diverse array of ways people can stand with those who are proceeding with euthanasia.

I wondered how people might be assisted to express their vision for how they want those who love them to stand by their side during this period, and of course during their final moments. I imagine this clarification to have urgency, complexity and tenderness.

A life that is more than euthanasia

I think there was an attempt in the storytelling to show that Vervoort was more than just her illness and her decision to undertake euthanasia. However, at one point there was a danger of such overshadowing. When the media made more of Vervoort's decision to go through with euthanasia than of the third medal she had won at the 2016 Paralympics in Rio de Janeiro, Vervoort's athletic accomplishments were relegated to the shadows.

Yet Vervoort was shown in the film as a person with profound friendships, powerful determination, extraordinary athletic ability and cheeky humour. When her dog, Zenn, is wildly licking her face in one scene, Vervoort says, "don't lick me like that, people will think it's a sex movie!" She also sees more than one story in her predicament. In one scene, Vervoort says, "looking at the future scares me". And in the next moment, "but hope springs eternal".

This made me wonder how we can make sure that people's lives aren't reduced to their final acts when it comes to euthanasia. I am thinking of all the colours, shades and textures in the fashioning of a life, and the varied ways lives can be remembered. Whether it is a conversation with another, some kind of activity or time alone, or whatever it takes, remembering and evoking all the different textures of a life can involve skill and deliberate action.

Meandering decisions

Around half way through the film, Vervoort expresses that she has changed her mind about having her parents' presence in the room as she dies. She tells her parents she wants them with her during her last moments. I noticed this as it made me think about how such big decisions can meander. I wondered how there might be meaningful consultations with those undertaking euthanasia and room made for meandering decisions. Making room for such decisions, especially if those decisions are difficult or complex for those standing with the person proceeding with euthanasia, is another area requiring great care.

Mutual contributions

During a party in Vervoort's honour, her friend Jan says, "When she drank kava, always in company, it would help her ease the pain". And there are many instances in the film where Vervoort is with loving and at times teary friends, presumably as Jan says, easing her pain. Her friends offer precious contributions.

This story is not straightforward, and a scene of great anguish is when Vervoort's mother and father lament that there is nothing they can do to help. I wondered about ways to reflect back to friends and family members just what they are contributing to the person who is going to proceed with euthanasia: small gestures and large. It may be kind smiles, lifts to appointments, tears shed, speaking with health care workers, organising a gathering, or forecasting and expressing legacies.

I was also reminded in the film of how contributions can go both ways. At one point, Vervoort invites Rapaport to consider that she, "might die tomorrow because of heart problems or a car that hits you". Although perhaps a little disconcerting, this appears to me to be a contribution from Vervoort to Rapaport, inviting her to consider the potential fragility of life and the unpredictability of death. To be reminded of this fragility and unpredictability might be one of the gifts of death.

I wonder how we can always be on the lookout for mutual contributions in such relationships: contributions by those who stand beside a person undertaking euthanasia, especially if those contributions are hard to locate, perhaps because the distress "tells" people that the only contribution worth anything is physical and mental health recovery; contributions made across power relations, such as the power relation between a person who is dying and another who is standing beside that person. The contributions made from those who are dying towards those around them can be hard to locate under the sway of such power. These contributions can include the gifts of death.

The gifts of death

I want to add a little more about the "gifts of death". Just the other night I was watching a television program titled "Let's Talk About Death" (Taguchi, 2023). I heard many people speaking of something like the gifts that death, or impending death, can offer. It is not the only story of course, but death can offer a strange invigoration; it can offer a "live for the moment", "treating dreams seriously" or "treasuring richness" orientation to life.

I read a poem the other day I thought eloquently evoked something like this sentiment. Andrea Gibson (2023) wrote the poem after they were diagnosed with ovarian cancer, and in it described measuring a lifespan by width rather than length. I wonder if, among the indescribable outrage that death can be, there might be ways to more richly name its potential gifts – perhaps the width, not length of life being one of them. What else can we say and have we known about this potential gift, even if this knowledge is inchoate?

Final resting places

I thought that the most beautiful images in the film were those shot in the Canary Islands, the place where Vervoort wanted her ashes scattered. While side by side on the cliffs overlooking the ocean, Vervoort tells her friend her wishes. Later, her friend speaks to the camera with tears streaming down her face: “I accept what she wants to do, but I don’t actually like it.”

Perhaps the pain of euthanasia and death plans shape a maze that is too hard to find a way out of. Yet the theme of a final “resting place”, or a place to scatter ashes, offered a soothing ambiance in this film. I wonder about the possibilities of artful discussions and decisions about final resting places, or places to scatter ashes, and how it could bring something like a hush.

Preparations for after

The storyline was edited for a chronological telling. This meant that the film was close to finishing at the point Vervoort died. I missed Vervoort in the final scenes and felt their bleakness.

This had me wondering about all that we can do to prepare for the times when a person is no longer materially with us. What difference might it make to plan for just after, and then further along again? Or is leaving aside such planning, and the imagination required to do this, more helpful in enduring it all? And I wonder, are there conversations to be had that can help us clarify if we have a preference for either?

In concluding, I wish to make a few comments about euthanasia, power, overlaps between suicide and euthanasia, and finally, to return to the theme of defiance or refusal – euthanasia as a realm that is defiant or a refusal of a particular form of power that Foucault called biopower.

Before I turn to this, I want to acknowledge that I do not work with people around end-of-life decisions, euthanasia or palliative care. This means that I may miss some of the nuance of the practices.

Euthanasia, attitudes to suicide and questioning “compulsory aliveness”

At one point during a Belgian writers festival where Vervoort is speaking, she says to the assembled audience, “I’ve spoken my mind without holding back ... the Flemish public should understand that”. Vervoort emphasises that the territory of euthanasia, and in particular the possibility of speaking more openly about it, is cultural.

Conceptions of euthanasia, its practice and attitudes towards it have a long cultural history. Gürhan Özpolat summarised just one aspect of this history as the interrelationship between attitudes to suicide and euthanasia:

In ancient times, euthanasia was defined as a form of suicide in which a physician allows [a] patient to die due to their suffering from an incurable, painful disease or medical condition. It is important to say that in the ancient sense of euthanasia the main emphasis was not on the act of killing but dying. Similar to the modern form of assisted suicide, the physician did not kill the patient but prepared the conditions in which [they] can commit suicide ... Therefore, the history of euthanasia is also a part of the history of the attitudes toward suicide in Western tradition. (Özpolat, 2017, pp. 17–18)

There is so much that has been written about attitudes towards suicide. Although it can’t be the full picture, Özpolat’s analysis suggests that if we look carefully at attitudes to suicide, and perhaps foster easier relationships with suicide in the different cultural contexts where euthanasia is grappled with, this could lead to some easier relationships with euthanasia.

I am drawn to Alexandre Baril, an associate professor of social work at the University of Ottawa and his term “compulsory aliveness” as a way to describe a contemporary norm. He argued that a “movement” that might be helpful in challenging “suicidism” (the marginalisation and violence that people who have suicidal experience are subjected to) would involve questioning “compulsory aliveness” and the “injunction to live and to futurity” (Baril, 2023, p. 7). I appreciate the

sentiment of collectively questioning such norms and injunctions, and imagine it could go some way towards cultivating easier relationships with suicide and perhaps therefore euthanasia. He wrote:

This movement could also be a venue to question what I call “compulsory aliveness” (Baril 2020c), inspired by the notion of compulsory able-bodiedness or able-mindedness in an ableist and sanist system (Kafer 2013; McRuer 2006). As the normative component of suicidism, compulsory aliveness comprises various injunctions (or imperatives), including ... “the injunction to live and to futurity”. (Baril, 2023, p. 11)

I would suggest that relationships with suicide would be easier if room were left open for the diverse meanings that surround contemplating dying and suicide. Just some I have been introduced to in my work as a therapist include:

- not existing as often the only place of rest when climbing a mountain that seems to have no summit
- not existing as often the only place of rest when experiencing a world that doesn't include you, or doesn't include you on your terms
- contemplating dying as a response to the isolation one can experience when it's not possible to speak of wanting to die as a result of suicidism, or other power relations, including the power relations of age where children can find it so very hard to locate a listener, or ongoing colonisation where services are of white culture
- contemplating dying as offering a place of freedom or escape from imperatives or norms that produce too much pressure or erasure
- contemplating dying as offering a place of freedom or escape from traumas that can continue to haunt people
- contemplating dying as a protest – a refusal to let go of precious hopes and dreams that appear continually out of reach, including hopes about how one should be treated or how the world should treat people
- an acknowledgment of just what it takes to end one's life, and the unspeakable courage that could be acknowledged.

Such meanings I think foster an easier relationship with contemplating dying and suicide, and therefore perhaps with euthanasia.

Defiance and biopower

Apart from my opening comments about Vervoort's defiance, there is another way this film could be considered defiant. And that is in relationship to “biopower”, a particular form of power that Foucault, the French philosopher and historian of ideas, considered to have emerged in the late eighteenth century. This new form of power moved away from death and the achievement of political power via the threat or action of taking life, and became concerned with “making live” (Özpolat, 2017, p. 20). “It was the taking charge of life, more than the threat of death, that gave power its access even to the body” (Foucault, 2003, p. 265). Foucault suggested that biopower is concerned with “living beings, and the mastery it would be able to exercise over them” (2003, p. 265). Death, on the other hand, “is power's limit, the moment that escapes it; death becomes the most secret aspect of existence, the most private” (Foucault, 1984, p. 261). According to Foucault, biopower is therefore concerned with *making live* because death is beyond its power (Özpolat, 2017, p. 21).

By these descriptions, it seems that euthanasia could be considered a defiance or perhaps a refusal. It is refusing biopower's imperative to live and to remain under its domination, and it is refusing biopower's attempts to control through the mastery of life. Death may be a moment of escape from power (Foucault, 2003, p. 248). If we are drawn to Foucault's formulation of power, perhaps we can consider further what it offers to link euthanasia to a form of refusal or defiance of biopower. And if that is the case, it is a powerful realm of refusal, and in the general cultural uncertainty and mess that comes with euthanasia, it makes much sense.

What might it offer to see euthanasia as a refusal? I suspect we will find ways to more effectively honour the individual or collective intention or fight for euthanasia. We might place these intentions and fight in the context of a form of power that makes such intentions and fight more remarkable.

And Vervoort's defiance will burn even brighter.

Addicted to Life, and Vervoort's extraordinary generosity in offering to be the subject of this most intimate film, has certainly moved the conversation along.

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