Tina Weber

Drop Dead Gorgeous

Representations of Corpses in American TV Shows

campus

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Part I–Introduction

Preface

Death is a sore subject, difficult to discuss. It concerns every one of us, though approaching it often brings conversations to a halt. Yet, the bodies of the dead remain a simultaneous source of fascination and disgust. This interest is especially palpable in television programs. Soon after the TV show *Six Feet Under* aired, I applied for a position at the biggest funeral parlour company in Germany. I witnessed an increasing interest in death amongst the public but also the company's increasing efforts to be more visible in public. I also detected the same interest in art and media. Antje Kahl, Dr. Rolf Peter Lange, Prof. Dr. Thomas Macho and I organised the conference: "The New Visibility of Death" in Berlin in 2005. By then undertakers, pathologists and "death artists" had already shot to fame amongst a growing curiosity driven fan community. I wondered about the reasons for this and started to focus on the increasing amount of new TV shows which were concerned with representations of dead bodies. When I received a Ph.D. scholarship to explore this phenomenon, I had the chance to conduct field research in Los Angeles. L. A. hosts not only the production of most of these new TV shows about the dead; it also has the biggest Coroner's Office in the USA. I visited original film locations; observed filming on set and interviewed people involved in the filmmaking process. At the same time, I undertook an internship at the Coroner's Office, observing closely the work of investigators at the Coroners' Office and medical examiners. Often in the evening I would watch the news and see a coroner investigating a crime scene. Then following this there would be TV shows like CSI, in which their media doubles took over. What I found most interesting about these incidents was the fact that the corpses at the crime scene were covered on the news but the corpses in the TV shows were shown. Moreover, new narratives, settings and roles allowed the fictional dead to be represented in a different, more complex way than ever. The more complex the role on screen became, the less the dead resembled

the corpses I had seen at crime scenes or in the pathology department at the Coroner's Office. These new media representations, which shape societies' ideas about the corpse, are the subject of this research.

Acknowledgements

Introduction[1]

I am a social scientist writing about the representation of corpses in new TV shows of the 21st century. This work is divided into four sections: firstly Theory and Methods, secondly Pictorial and Film Analysis (subtitled: What is shown and how?), thirdly Statistical Research and Interviews (subtitled: What is not shown and why?) and fourthly the Conclusion.

In 2005, a colleague and I in cooperation with Humboldt University Berlin and the funeral parlour company Ahorn Grieneisen AG, organised a conference on the topic "The New Visibility of Death". Papers were given about the developments taking place in economics, art and the media. In 2006, Thomas Macho argued that death, once invisible, has become recently more visible, referring amongst other things to numerous TV shows. Hans Belting, however, argues against a new visibility of death, pointing instead towards an accomplishment of the invisibility of death. He argues that these images do not represent the dead but hide them with substitutes, since there is no real reference point and no dead person being represented, a replacement of death is instead put forth. Belting, explains that humans have produced media masks of those things that they refuse to see since time immemorial. We hide those things that are unwanted and replace them with something more desirable but we are nonetheless aware that this representation of death is fake. Elizabeth Hallam et al., argues in quite the same fashion about sophisticated systems concerning the representation of death with functions that mask its reality. In my work, I aim to analyse the systems of representation in contemporary TV shows and question the validity of the arguments of Thomas Macho and Hans Belting concerning "The New Visibility of Death". I want to combine both approaches of the "New Visibility of Death" and the new sophisticated representation systems of death. My hypothesis is this: when a distinctive

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1 In my dissertation I will translate German literature which is not published in English. The original quotes can be found in the footnotes.

large number of new and consistent images of corpses appear in new TV shows, one can then deduce codes of representation, which constitute a new system of corpse presentation. The codes of representation define a rigid field of visibility. My research is therefore concerned with analysing the visibility of certain codes of contemporary representation of corpses in a certain place (daily TV shows), dissociated from paintings and photographs of the dead in past centuries. The analysis of corpse representation in 21st century media will shed light on the contemporary media's ideals of beauty and the conveyed body knowledge about the dead body. Section 1: Theory and Methodology

In the first chapter, I will introduce the theoretical background for the following chapters. I will start with the exploration of (1) the connection between image and death. When writing about death and the representation of death, one has to refer to Maurice Blanchot, Hans Belting and Thomas Macho. Not only because they claim that the dead were the first pictures created by prehistoric man, but also because they state that the experience of death and loss made way for these images. These images changed as the shapes of the bodies of the living changed. Thus the bodies of the living, altered and manipulated by social conventions are the bodies then altered again in death. They change shape over time. The body has become more prominent in sociology due to the attention it has gained in society. Norbert Elias, Michel Foucault and their followers stressed the important role of the body and its transformation from a historic perspective.

I will exemplify the connection of death and images by presenting (2) a historical survey of depictions of corpses. I will highlight the research on the history of changing attitudes toward death and the depiction of death in different centuries. Moreover, I will point to new forms of representation in art, such as death photography or installations and then continue by examining how death is portrayed in audio-visual media. I will contrast this historic pictorial discourse with the (3) first media representation of corpses in TV shows from 1950 until 2000. Before the 21st century, crime shows have always shown the victims at the crime scene. With the turn of the century and the rise of TV shows like *CSI* or *Six Feet Under*, the dead became a constant player in the plot, not only at the crime scene but also in the morgue, in the embalming room or in pathology. Before the turn of the century, there was only one show on TV (*Quincy, M.E.*) that presented a pathologist and corpses. I want to explore whether there are any dif-

ferences between these recent TV programs and previous ones and if so, how these differences can be characterised. In the following, I would like to outline (4) the new representations of corpses in TV shows from 2000–2010. I will argue that (5) a new sophisticated system of death representations has emerged since the turn of the 21st Century and depict where this description originates from. Subsequently, I will expand on (6) the characteristics of this new representational system.

In the second chapter, I will talk about the methods used for analysis. The research material consists of the shows *Six Feet Under, CSI Las Vegas, Crossing Jordan, Bones, Castle, NCIS, Dead like me, Pushing Daisies, Heroes, Dexter, Tru Calling, Dr. G, Autopsy, North Mission Road* and *Family Plots.* These fifteen new shows were all produced in the 21st Century. Additionally, *Quincy, M.E.* as a forerunner show model and the documentary *Autopsy* have been selected. The common criterion for my selection is that the dead figure remains in the centre of the story and turns into an object of interest. I will introduce pictorial analysis followed by film analysis and proceed to expert interviews and finish with statistical research.

For the majority of pictures, I will use a pictorial analysis, which consists of a pre-level, the preparation of prototypes, and actual single case analysis.

For an analysis of the specific representations of the moving dead, I will choose sequence analysis. I will also present interviews with producers, make-up artists and prop makers from *CSI* and *Dexter*. In order to validate my assumptions, I will additionally provide statistical research on the TV shows and disclose general representation restrictions regarding age, gender and race proportions as well as the specific representation taboos regarding the dead body.

Section 2: Pictorial and Film Analysis

What is shown and how?

Chapter 3 (Pictorial Analysis) is concerned with the representation of "pretty corpses in pathology". TV Genres have various possibilities to represent a corpse. Some genres have more possibilities to represent the dead than others, but altogether they represent a current media discourse. The analysis of the discourse will not only provide an overview about all

new TV shows but will also reveal what kind of corpse can be shown, when and where. I will introduce and analyse *Six Feet Under* (drama/black comedy), *CSI, Crossing Jordan, Bones, Castle* and *NCIS* (crime series), *Dead like me, Pushing Daisies* (fantasy/comedy), *Heroes, Dexter, Tru Calling* (fantasy/drama) and *North Mission Road, Family Plots* (documentary series). With the help of the presentation of categories and trends of new corpse representations, I will argue that there is a new system of death representations.

Chapter 4 (Film Analysis) will be concerned with "disgusting autopsies in pathology". I aim to analyse the most obvious representational trend, the aesthetic corpse, and will introduce theories about aesthetics. Thereafter, I will apply the theory in the film analysis of *Autopsy–Through the eyes of death's detectives* (documentary) and in the film analysis of *CSI–Down the Drain* (crime). I will argue that there is a massive use of aesthetic media techniques representing the dead in fictional TV shows by comparing and evaluating the representation codes.

Section 3: Statistical Research and Interviews

What is not shown and why?

In chapter 5 (New representations and new taboos), I want to specify what is not shown and why. I will introduce socio-cultural theories on taboos regarding representation of the dead in media. Thereafter, I will contrast the new representations of the dead in a documentary soap with the representation of the dead in a drama/black comedy show. I will distinguish between general representation restrictions and specific representation taboos regarding the dead body. I will argue that there are specific constraints, which can be distinguished from general taboos in television.

In chapter 6 (Field research: The representation of corpses under constraints) I want to reveal the broader context of the production and effects, which generate and shape restrictions on the pictorial discourse of dead bodies in contemporary television. I will ask how the context of the pictorial discourse is organised and argue that officials, producers and recipients alike influence the shape of media representation of the dead body.

Section 4: Conclusion

In chapter 7 (Conclusion) I will summarize my research results and explain my hypothesis in connection with my findings. I will then explore why the new systems of death representation occurred with the turn of the 21st century and why the representation codes are shaped the way they are. I will argue that changing genres and changing body images might contribute to the emergence of these new representations. As a suggestion for future research, I will highlight representations of death in other audio-visual media such as YouTube.

1. Theory

In this chapter I want to introduce the theoretical background for the following chapters. I will start with the introduction of (1) the connection between images, death and the pictorial discourse. I will then exemplify the discourse with (2) a historical survey of the depiction of corpses. Afterwards I will contrast this historic pictorial discourse with (3) the first media representation of corpses in TV shows from 1950 until the year 2000 and then sketch out the actual research subject, (4) the new representation of corpses in TV shows from 2000–2010. I will argue that (5) a new sophisticated system of death representations has emerged since the turn of the 21st century, I will show where this description originates from and amplify on (6) the characteristics of this new representation system.

1.1. Image, death and discourse

What is an image? Hans Belting (2001) answers this question with the help of visual anthropology. He argues that images are not disembodied, rather they rest upon a medium, a picture carrier. He states that the connection between images and death is an essential characteristic of representativeness. According to Belting, images are the outcome of personal and collective symbolism. Everything that we see is an image or can be transformed into an image. He further states that we are surrounded by images in our daily lives, and that we understand the world through them. (Belting, 2001, p. 11) He concludes that the cultural history of pictures reflects the cultural history of the body because transformations in bodily experience are reflected in changing pictorial representations. (Belting, 2001, p. 23) Like Jean Baudrillard, Belting interprets a symbolic exchange where the deceased person exchanges their lost body with an image thereby remaining

among the living.[1] Yet, unlike Baudrillard he does not refer to the symbolic exchange as a crisis of representation but as a crisis of reference. He expresses a profound doubt about references. He claims that the reality of bodies is no longer visible. The symbolic exchange of the dead body for an image has changed. The image replaces a body with a hyperreal and virtual figure. (Belting, 2001, p. 108) The concept that images need a medium is based on the idea that people use their own bodies as a means to create internal images (like the imagination) or receive external images (like visual experiences). (Belting, 2001, p. 29) Like Thomas Macho, Belting describes the enigma of an image as an inextricable connection of a paradoxical presence and absence[2]: We see the medium, but we cannot see the absence of the original. In the dead, we see the biological material of an absent person.[3]

This is how depiction started, he argues. The experience of death and loss made way for depiction. (Belting, 2000, p. 10) People wanted to replace this unbearable absence of a loved one with an image, which holds a place for the dead person amongst the living. When a person dies and is no longer a physical actor in social interaction, there is a need to give the dead a place to keep them in society–a symbolic place and a symbolic body to maintain social connections. (Belting, 2000, p. 144) People stand up against the loss of personhood. (Belting, 2000, p. 145) Belting argues that death urged people to set up depictions (Belting, 2000, p. 134). Referring to

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1 "Das Medium besitzt im Totenkult ein uraltes Paradigma. Der Tote tauschte seinen verlorenen Körper gegen ein Bild ein, mit dem er unter den Lebenden verblieb. Nur im Bild ließ sich der Tausch mit der Präsenz des Toten einlösen. Sein Medium vertrat den Körper der Toten ebenso, wie es für die Körper der Lebenden existierte, die den symbolischen Tausch von Bild und Tod vollzogen. So war es in diesem Falle nicht nur Medium zwischen Bild und Betrachter, sondern ein solches zwischen Tod und Leben" (Belting, 2001, p. 29).

2 "Das Rätsel, das schon die Leiche umgibt, ist folgerichtig auch zum Rätsel des Bildes geworden; es liegt in einer paradoxen Abwesenheit, die ebenso aus der Anwesenheit der Leiche wie aus dem anwesenden Bild spricht. Damit eröffnet sich das Rätsel von Sein und Schein, das nie aufgehört hat, die Menschen zu erregen. Solche Gedanken mögen den Menschen erst gekommen sein, wenn sie entdeckten, dass sie im Bild nur ein neues Rätsel erfanden, als sie mit dem Bild auf das Rätsel des Todes antworten wollten. Das Bildermachen war dabei wohl wichtiger als das Bilderhaben, weil man damit aktiv auf eine Störung in der Lebensgemeinschaft reagierte und gleichsam die Naturordnung wiederherstellte: man gab toten Mitgliedern einer Gemeinschaft einen Status zurück, den sie für die Präsenz in einem Sozialverband brauchten" (Belting, 2001, p. 145).

3 "Der Leichnam ist ein Bild seiner selbst, ein unsicheres Bild, das stets schon verloren ist, und sich schließlich dem wahrnehmenden Begreifen entzieht" (Belting, 2000, p. 145).

Maurice Blanchot (2007) Macho argues that death is the generative impulse of the first images. (Macho 2008, p. 11) At the beginning the dead person was the first pictorial counterpart of a person. According to Thomas Macho (1987, p. 188), death can only be described with metaphors, since one cannot "experience" death.[4]

We cannot experience our own death. Therefore we are limited to the death of others. Following Macho (1987, p. 195), the confrontation with the pure presence of death allows the experience of unique resistance.[5] However, since contemporary society rarely provides possibilities for the individual to materially experience the presence of dead bodies, television fills the void with visual confrontations. Nowadays the TV screen is the dominant medium where visualisations of the dead can be found. (Belting, 2001, p. 30) We can watch actors, who died a long time ago, claiming their vivid presence amongst the living through the medium of moving pictures. Movies can create the impression that pictures are internal images. The viewers imagine themselves in an imaginary situation, as if they were there in the picture. (Belting, 2001, p. 75) At the same time, Belting asks about the meaning of the picture. All pictures are made at a certain time, but timing can change the effect of a picture. Pictures can also carry timeless

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[4] This is why Thomas Macho transfers Hans Blumenbergs concept of the "absolute metaphor", which is not connected to experiences. (Macho, 1987, 185) "Grenzerfahrung und Tod. In dieser Spannung sprechen wir auch über den Tod. Wir verwenden Bild und Symbole, 'absolute Metaphern', um die Unsagbarkeit dieses leeren Begriffs, dem keine Anschauung korrespondiert, auszufüllen" (Macho, 1987, p. 187). The term death is an absolute metaphor for inexpressible experiences. (Macho, 1987, p. 188) "Der Todesbegriff ist eigentlich ein leerer Begriff, ein Begriff, dem keine Anschauung korrespondiert; ein 'flatus vocis' für ein Ereignis, das wir nicht verstehen und niemals werden verstehen können. Nach der Bedeutung des Todesbegriffs gefragt, müssen wir schweigen. 'Tod' heißt alles und nichts; es bleibt nämlich offen, was alles gemeint sein kann, wenn vom Tod gesprochen wird" (Macho, 1987, p. 181).

[5] "Was wir nämlich an Leichen erfahren, ist ihre nachdrückliche Resistenz gegen jede soziale Verbindlichkeit. Die Leiche sieht uns nicht an, ihr Blick ist von merkwürdiger und strenger Distanz, ein 'böser Blick', der gefürchtet wird, weil er uns 'durchschaut', als wären wir gar nicht anwesend. Die Leiche spricht nicht mit uns, und ihre Miene bleibt verschlossen. Sie bewegt keinen Arm und kein Bein. Dennoch haben die Leichen Augen; dennoch haben sie Münder und Zungen; dennoch haben sie Gesichter, Muskeln, Arme und Beine. Die Leiche ist ohne Zweifel ein Mensch; aber sie verhält sich ganz und gar nicht wie ein Mensch. Sie ist menschlich und unmenschlich zugleich: ein Wesen, das eigentlich im Universum sozialer Existenz nicht erscheinen darf" (Macho, 1987, p. 198). The paradox of the corpse, a person's absence and presence at the same time, generates another paradox: the media representation of the dead by a living person. The living 'imagine' themselves as dead and 'perform' the dead.

questions. According to Belting people have made pictures of themselves long before they started writing about themselves. Today people film and photograph themselves throughout all different stages of their life. These depictions show bodies, but actually mean to show individuals. (Belting, 2001, p. 87) The natural sciences depict bodies as well. In both cases, depictions either correspond to the current discourse or become obsolete. Belting describes how bodies, in particular, the superhuman beautiful and virtual body in the media, manipulate the viewers and how this has occurred through time. Historical pictures disciplined the respective viewers. Different eras represent the same body differently and present different ideas about bodies. That is why Belting claims that the history of depiction mirrors a history of the body. (Belting, 2001, p. 89) Furthermore, the history of depicting human beings is a history of the depiction of bodies, yet the bodies are carriers of social beings. (Belting, 2001, p. 89) The history of depiction shows historic dynamics and the inherent instability of bodily depictions across time. Referring to Günther Anders (1956), Belting defines an addiction to pictures as a new climax of pseudo communication.[6] The simultaneous consumption of pictures and the satisfaction on the consumers' side convey the idea of a common and shared world. All Live- and Reality TV shows compensate for the loss of experiences in the real world. (Belting, 2000, p. 237) Anders (1956) invented the term "Ikonomanie", the human addiction to images which causes people to feel shame about their own lives by watching television. When humans try to duplicate themselves in pictures through technical productions, the perfection of technical producers creates a shame in their viewer since the viewer is not able to be as perfect and diverse as what is presented to them on TV. Witnessing the post-industrial transformation, Belting goes further and stresses that now society produces fewer things but more information. This development causes a shift from "the thing" to the picture and so the production of pictures becomes the most important social good. This process results in events becoming socially important only once captured in pictures. This spares the viewer from reading about the event. Belting

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6 "Die 'Bildsucht', von der Günther Anders einmal sprach, ist der bisherige Höhepunkt einer Pseudokommunikation in der neuen Masse, die alle direkten Formen der Kommunikation verliert. Der simultane Konsum derselben Bilder vermittelt das Gefühl, in einer gemeinsamen Welt ohne soziale und kulturelle Schranken zu leben. Das Zusammenspiel von Produzenten und Konsumenten ist schwer durchschaubar, weil die Produzenten nur die Wünsche der Konsumenten befriedigen, die die bei diesen vorher selber erzeugt haben" (Belting, 2000, p. 273).

writes that if an event becomes socially significant as a picture, then not only the difference between reality and appearance is lost[7], but the depiction becomes more relevant than the content of the pictures. At this point, Baudrillard's term simulacrum can also be applied.[8]

In "Symbolic Exchange and Death" (1976)[9] Baudrillard defines Western civilisation as a system of simulation, and predicts the death of reality. The central thesis refers to signs and their missing reference points. Without reference, signs replace reality instead of depicting reality, which is most obvious when it comes to depictions in the mass media. Baudrillard claims a rupture in the political economy as the signs start to augment and lose their reference points in reality, but produce at the same time a new hyperreality. Baudrillard, however, sees death as the last veritable occurrence in a senseless world destroyed by capitalism. Consequently, he argues for a "symbolic exchange" which is supposed to resist the capitalist logic. The "symbolic exchange" stands for an alternative to capitalist production and exchange. He assumes an incompatible relation between capitalism and human nature, claiming capitalist thinking, such as monetary profit and capitalist values of utility, is against human nature. Baudrillard applies the capitalist exchange and the system of values to death and society. He concludes that the human body in this new relationship of "political economy and death" turns into biological capital. The aging human body loses its value when it turns into a deficient and ineffective body. While in other societies the elderly might be the most respected, the appreciation of experiences of life does not take place within the capitalist system. Death has

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7 "Wenn ein Ereignis erst 'als Bild sozial wichtig wird, ist der Unterschied zwischen Sein und Schein aufgehoben.' Dann muss 'das Original sich nach seiner Reproduktion richten', für die es nur noch die Matritze liefert. Wo wir 'die Welt in effigie' erfahren, dort ist das Ereignis das Bild selber. Die Zweideutigkeit dessen, was sie übertragen, macht die Bilder zu Phantomen, deren Natur wir nicht mehr durchschauen" (Belting, 2000, p. 276).

8 Elisabeth Klaver refers to Baudrillard's "[…] notion of hyperreality where the real disappear completely under the image. Watching an autopsy on television or in the movies, then, would better be described as watching the substitution of the image for the real, the scene of an autopsy whereby an actor or dummy stands in for the dead body. Indeed, even when a real dead body is used, […], the mediating apparatus of television works to sanitize the event. This may once have been a real cadaver and a real autopsy, but now it is a video, iterable only as long as the videotape lasts. In fact, I honestly did not realize how much the substitution effect of mediation sanitizes an autopsy until I attended the real thing" (Klaver, 2006, p. 134).

9 First translated in English in 1993.

lost its symbolic value of exchange value, was denied in modern society and finally expulsed. The economy and the urge for cleanliness overtakes the traditional idea of death and mourning.

"Our whole culture is hygienic, and aims to expurgate life from death. The detergents in the weakest washing powder are intended for death. To sterilise death at all costs, to vanish it, cryogenically freeze it, air-condition it, put make up on it, 'design' it, to pursue it with the same relentlessness as grime, sex, bacteriological or radioactive waste" (Baudrillard, 1993, p. 180).

According to Baudrillard death became embarrassing.

"It is not so worrying that the dead man is made beautiful and given the appearance of a representation. Every society has always done this. They have always staved off the abjection of natural death, the social abjection of decomposition which voids the corpse of it signs and its social force of signification, leaving it as nothing more than a substance, and by the same token, precipitating the group into the terror of its own symbolic decomposition. It is necessary to ward off death, to smother it in artificiality in order to evade the unbearable moment when flesh becomes nothing but flesh, and ceases to be a sign" (Baudrillard, 1993, p. 180).

Just like Tony Walter (1991), Baudrillard claims death to be the new taboo after sexuality.[10] The denial of death leads to a taboo, the anonymity of the dying, and increasingly artificial funerals.[11]

In general, it can be stated that Baudrillard describes in "Symbolic Exchange and Death" and in his subsequent work "Simulation and

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10 "Speaking of death makes us laugh in a strained and obscene manner. Speaking of sex no longer provokes the same reaction: sex is legal, only death is pornographic. Society, having 'liberated' sexuality, progressively replaces it with death which functions as a secret rite and fundamental prohibition. Today the opposite is true. But all 'historical' societies are arranged so as to dissociate sex and death in every possible way, and play the liberation of one off against the other/which is a way of neutralising them both" (Baudrillard, 1993, p. 184).

11 "Here, it becomes a question of the dead retaining the appearance of life, the naturalness of life: he still smiles at you, the same colours, the same skin, he seems himself even after death, he is even a little fresher than when he was alive, and lacks only speech (but we can still hear this in stereo). A faked death, idealised in the colours of life: the secret idea is that life is natural and death is against nature. Death must therefore be naturalised in a stuffed simulacrum of life. In all of this there is on the one hand a refusal to let death signify, take on the force of a sign, and, behind this sentimental nature-fetishism on the other, a great ferocity as regards the dead himself: rotting and change are forbidden, and instead of being carried over to death and thus the symbolic recognition of the living, he is maintained as a puppet within the orbit of the living in order to serve as an alibi and a simulacrum of their own lives" (Baudrillard, 1993, p.181).