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# **DROP DEAD GORGEOUS**

*Representations of Corpses in American TV Shows*

**campus**



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# Introduction<sup>1</sup>

I am a social scientist writing about the representation of corpses in new TV shows of the 21<sup>st</sup> 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 21<sup>st</sup> 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 21<sup>st</sup> 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 21<sup>st</sup> 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 21<sup>st</sup> 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 21<sup>st</sup> 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.