

DEATH, THE DEAD
AND POPULAR CULTURE

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DEATH, THE DEAD AND POPULAR CULTURE

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PREFACE

My fascination with death and the dead goes back to my doctoral studies (2001–2005) when I came across tales of doctors keeping body parts taken from famous dead criminals whom they had autopsied. Combining this macabre souvenir trade in the dead with popular culture was a remarkably easy step considering my wider interest in celebrity and popular culture. I have come to embrace the quote by JM Barrie's well-loved character Peter Pan (*Peter Pan*, 1911) who said that to die would be an awfully big adventure. Pan got it almost right but failed to mention that to research death is a big adventure, too, and this book is proof of that.

Death, The Dead and Popular Culture is part of the first wave of publications under the Emerald Series in Death and Culture which was inspired by the first biennial Death and Culture Conference held at the University of York, UK, in 2016. The book series is driven by the intention of providing an outlet for cross-disciplinary exploration of aspects of mortality. It seeks to provide a forum for research that approaches death from a cultural perspective and is fully supportive of new ideas and subjects, new theoretical applications, and new explorations of less conventional engagements with death and the dead. The *Emerald Series in Death and Culture* is run by myself, Dr Julie Rugg (University of York, UK), and Dr Jack Denham (York St John University, UK), and we

put out a call for book proposals in January 2017. So far, in these early stages, we have been successful to recruit passionate researchers working in fascinating fields of death research and we look forward to publishing many books in the future.

My contribution to death studies research extends beyond the book series and conference and has branched out to include the establishment of the Death and Culture Network (DaCNet) at the University of York, UK. This interdisciplinary network brings together scholars with an interest in death, provides support and training for doctoral researchers rooted in death studies, and actively pursues public engagement. The hope for DaCNet in the future is to provide leadership and a sense of unity to the international community of death scholars who examine the vibrant and diverse relationship between death and culture in all its varied forms.

Much gratitude goes to Philippa Grand and Emerald Publishing for not just being willing to publish this book but to support the Emerald Series on Death and Culture.

I presented versions of chapter two at the Centre for Death and Society Conference (CDAS) in 2016 and as a Keynote Speaker at Death and the Maiden Conference in Lodz, Poland, in 2017. Both of these conferences were crucial in refining my ideas, so thank you CDAS and Kasia Malecka for persuading me to renew my passport and visit her fabulous homeland.

Thanks are also due to Dave Beer for his support, endless encouragement and much-needed lunch breaks. This book has benefitted hugely from his insight and prevented chapter three from being scrapped in its entirety in a fit of pique and self-doubt as well as rescuing chapter four with an improved framework.

My love and thanks as ever go to Daniel for good-humouredly putting up with my macabre enthusiasm for death and corpses ('There's a mummified arm in Wiltshire!') and to Abi and Sam who know far more about death and the dead than the average children under eight.

Dr Ruth Penfold-Mounce
University of York

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INTRODUCTION: THE AGENCY OF THE DEAD

The dead are inanimate body remains and for all intents and purposes, they lack power, control, or a voice. They are a life that has ended. They have shifted from one state of being to another. But death is not that simple. The dead can, and do, have agency; in this context agency refers to a mode of action whereby the dead are considered able to influence and alter the world despite death. In 1988, Bob Dylan wrote *Death Is Not the End* and he was right. This book is not about dying or grieving, and it is not about the practicalities of death and the death industry or even rituals of death-although these are vital lines of research. Instead, this book is about how death is not the end but a beginning, albeit a posthumous one. It considers how death and the dead possess value and the ability to entertain making them into a central, commonplace phenomenon consumed by a plethora of international individuals from around the globe. Remarkably, few sociologists and even fewer death studies scholars have devoted their research energy toward an in-depth examination of the relationship among death, the dead and popular culture. This is despite popular

culture being central to shaping everyday lives and practices as well as the ordering of routine experiences as part of an emerging commodified global society. Instead, scholars have chosen to focus on a wide variety of death, dying and disposal issues, including but not limited to the following: bereavement and memorialisation (Woodthorpe, 2011a); the history and policy surrounding cemetery space (Rugg, 2000; 2006; Woodthorpe, 2011b); the work of funeral directors (Howarth, 2016); consuming dark tourism sites (Stone & Sharp-ley, 2008; Sharp-ley & Stone, 2009); and even the complexity surrounding talking about death in relation to disorders of consciousness (Kitzinger & Kitzinger, 2014). In contrast to death scholarship focusing on the practicalities and industry around death, Bronfen (1992) conducted some initial work on death and its portrayal in the print media. Others also addressed death in the media but not the dead body (McIl-wain, 2005; Akass & McCabe, 2005; Klaver, 2006; Kellehear, 2007). It was Foltyn, in 2008, who led the way by focusing explicitly on depictions of the dead in contemporary television shows. This was ultimately followed by a comprehensive engagement with the dead in television by Weber (2014). This book intends to rectify the gap in considering representations of death and the dead within popular culture (and not just television) and in arguing that, in a global consumer culture, corpses are gaining unprecedented agency.

As visions of the dead appear everywhere in popular culture, death and the dead are being widely consumed, demonstrating an allure that is hard to resist and stretches from literature and television to film and fashion. Death and the dead appear in stories and images from different storytelling genres, all of which embrace them at the heart of their narrative, including comedies focused on death (*Monty Python's The Meaning of Life*, 1983; *Beetlejuice*, 1988; and *Death Becomes Her*, 1992) to dramas based in the death industry

(*Six Feet Under*, 2001–2005). Even new genres have developed to represent death and the dead, such as forensic fairy tales (*Pushing Daisies*, 2007–2009) appearing alongside traditional crime television dramas (*Silent Witness*, 1996–present; *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation*, 2000–2015; and *Bones*, 2005–2017) and internationally renowned crime novels by writers such as Val McDermid, Karin Slaughter and Patricia Cornwell. Popular culture centralises the dead in the public mind. Death has acquired such prominence, particularly on television in relation to crime, that it has become a mediated public spectacle suggesting that death has arguably become ‘a popular culture commodity and an acceptable form of entertainment’ (Khapeava, 2017: 182). Popular culture due to its populist nature has laid the foundations for the easy appeal and consumption of death and the dead; they are ever-present and far from being denied, repressed or a societal taboo. Openly consumed images of death and corpses in multiple entertainment formats make them a banal part of everyday life that has infiltrated mass consumption.

This book engages with popular culture as the consumable mediated goods or services that ordinary people consume rather than just an educated elite. Popular culture is easily accessible, a pleasure to consume, hard to avoid in a mediated world, and a medium through which people tell and access stories. It may be an apparently frivolous and glossy topic, but popular culture has an innate value and hidden depths as a data source, especially within academic scholarship (Beer & Penfold-Mounce, 2010; Penfold-Mounce, 2015). It is where a ‘creative and complex cultural conversation’ creates and perpetuates rich narratives that allow an engagement with what it means to die and what it takes to matter in the world (Jones & Jensen, 2005: xxii). So, although much of popular culture is by nature ‘populist’, ‘entertaining’ and even ‘fun’, it provides an insight into subjects and issues traditionally consid-

ered worthy of wider academic consideration, such as class, consumption, religion, and crime (Penfold-Mounce, 2015: 257). Furthermore, by drawing on popular culture as data, it enables the researcher to tap into societal and cultural trends that cross generations, regions, and time on a mass basis. As a result, popular culture focused on death has a great deal to reveal about mass cultural perceptions and acceptance of death and the dead themselves. Importantly, it also provides a lens through which the gaze can penetrate and consume the dead and death whilst at a safe distance (Penfold-Mounce, 2015). Consequently, popular culture provides crucial and valuable insights into perceptions of mortality.

Popular culture portrayals of death grant the dead agency as a universal connection with the living. This can be taken further according to Foltyn (2008a: 103) who asserts ‘the living hover around the dead, demand that they entertain them, and [try to make] the corpse into manageable, useful entities’. The dead are useful and influential through their agency and the capacity to act in a given environment even though they are deceased. This agency is exerted in diverse ways including the living enacting the dead person’s wishes after death or acting on their behalf with permission from the deceased’s family or through the dead’s ability to stimulate a response from the individual consumer as an entity of entertainment. The active role of the dead in popular culture articulates their ability to exert influence on consumers at a symbolic, economic, or entertainment level. The dead have power over and upon the living consumer.

The pervasive ordinariness of death and the dead in popular culture highlights a normalisation of the presence of death outside personal experience or the death industry. It is not questioned but accepted and consumed. This reflects Baudrillard’s now classic argument in *Symbolic Exchange and Death* (1993) that asserts capitalist society has made life and death

exchangeable, rather than mutually exclusive. In this context, meaning is mortal whilst images and seduction (or consumption) of these images are immortal. This is pertinent for this book's focus on death and the dead within popular culture. For the dead are these immortal images seducing the consumer and blurring the boundary between death and life, thereby complicating understandings of mortality. This book, by focusing on popular culture, seeks to expand and unify the cacophony of voices that have debated representations of death and the dead (Foltyn, 2008b; 2011; Walter, 2009; Woodthorpe, 2010). Death and the dead occupy a prominent place in popular culture (Durkin, 2003) and, as such, are considered here to present interesting insights into understandings of death. This research will add its own distinctive and original contribution to the debate focusing on the agency of death and the dead as they are represented within a globally consumed popular culture. The concept of the dead possessing agency provides a vital arena for safely exploring cultural fears, norms, traditions, and perceptions about mortality. Popular culture will be used to emphasise that it is far from just being frivolous and superficial but is actually a central arena for 'symbolically negotiating authenticity, ownership, memory, and identity, all within the institutional processes of mass mediation' (Jones & Jenson, 2005: xvi). Consequently, popular culture is a vehicle that grants and mobilises the agency of the dead.

THE STRUCTURE AND CONTENT OF THE BOOK

The argument that the dead within popular culture have agency challenges the understanding that the dead are simply the inanimate remains of a person. It also expands death scholarship, which is dominated by research on the death

industry and the process of corpse disposal as well as grieving. Published research combining popular culture and death is limited. There is some insightful work on death, fashion, and celebrity by Foltyn (2008b; 2011) and most recently a focus on the cult of death and popular culture from a humanities perspective by Khapaeva (2017). This book seeks to develop research that has been conducted into the representation of the dead in popular culture and asserts the dead as possessing significant agency. This agency is evident through the value it generates and wields amongst the living and the multiple representations of the dead in popular culture, making them an everyday and banal form of entertainment. Death itself may mark the end of an individual, but it creates new agency for the dead. It is this agency that lies at the heart of this book.

In the opening analysis chapter, the symbolic and commercial value of the dead as a form of agency will be considered through the posthumous careers of the celebrity dead (Chapter 2). The value of death is deliberated as a successful career move for many well-known individuals. Being dead can rejuvenate, reinvent, and protect the celebrities from their (often) destructive live selves and lead to a thriving celebrity career. Even though the celebrities' physical bodies are gone, their image survives and is perpetuated in disconcertingly vivid and life-like ways. As such, the celebrity dead do not leave us. A range of celebrity posthumous careers including Michael Jackson, Elizabeth Taylor, Marilyn Monroe, and Robin Williams are used to illuminate the agency of the dead through the symbolic and economic value they engender.

Moving on from the value and influence of dead celebrities the argument will examine the agency of the dead body in pieces via the mythology portrayed in popular culture surrounding organ transplantation (Chapter 3). This chapter examines the enduring Western popular culture mythology

surrounding organ transplantation and its representation within popular culture. The value of the corpse is explored through transplantation where the dead bridge death by entering another person's body and life. This posthumous second life in transplantation mythology reveals significant agency possessed by the dead via conflict between donated organ and recipient. Agency is also conveyed by organ transplantation mythology as a valuable symbolic tool that encapsulates cultural and societal beliefs about identity, control, inequality, and trust. Particular attention is paid to the crossover of myth and science through cellular memory.

Chapter 4 explores the agency wielded by popular culture representations of the reanimated corpse in the form of the Undead. The Undead (limited here to refer to zombies and vampires) are a tool through which to introduce the new concept of morbid sensibility, which illustrates how individuals and society become open to deliberating mortality within popular culture. They also expand the concept of morbid space (Penfold-Mounce, 2015) which conceptualises spaces defined by death and the dead and how these spaces are moved through, lived within, and consumed. 'Safe' and 'provocative' morbid spaces are introduced through the agency of the Undead to create a sanctuary for morbid sensibilities to be mobilised.

In Chapter 5, the focus is upon the agency of the authentic dead (fictional but realistic dead) in popular culture. The authentic dead are used to illustrate a challenge to public wisdom that contemporary Western society is in death denial and that death is taboo. By becoming anything but extraordinary, or repellent and unusual, the authentic dead annul controversy about gazing upon the dead. They form a palatable and normative bridge between viewers and the dead, particularly through channelling the gaze of the viewer through the lens of the scientific expert.

The book concludes in Chapter 6 with a sequence of reflections on encountering the agency of the dead in popular culture. An explicit version of the central arguments relating to agency is outlined along with thoughts on the original contribution made by the book to death studies and sociology scholarship through its focus on popular culture in relation to death and the dead.

The book is driven by the argument that the dead possess agency within popular culture with the intention to provoke and open further. The chapters seek to develop a sense of the intersectionality among death, the dead, and popular culture whilst suggesting various concepts as a framework to enable engagement with the relationship they share. We begin by examining the agency of the dead through the value they engender via posthumous celebrity careers.