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THEME ISSUE
Media and Death: Representation and performance of dying and mourning in a mediatized age

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The Finnish Death Studies Association

The Finnish Death Studies Association (FDSA) *was founded March 28th 2011 in Helsinki by scholars interested in the field of thanatological research. The aim was to create an organization that could create a more public interdisciplinary dialogue about death and dying in Finnish society.*

The purpose of the association is also to advance the domestic death studies and professional education, create synergy between Finnish and international professionals and researchers, and last but not least, to promote discussion about researching, studying and working in the field of death and bereavement research. With the website (www.kuolemantutkimus.com) and open access online journal (www.thanatos.-journal.com) the association wishes to provide information about future events both in Finland and abroad, publish articles, book reviews, research reports and other texts concerning the vast and colorful field of death. More about membership from our website.

Thanatos *is a peer-reviewed, multi-disciplinary and a scientific web-journal published by the Finnish Death Studies Association. We publish twice a year a journal that consists of articles, short and long research reports, book reviews, columns and seminar reports. The primary publication language is Finnish, but we do accept manuscripts in English and Swedish as well, however, the costs of proofreading are the responsibility of the author. The journal is peer-reviewed, which means we use fellow scholars in determing the potentiality of the manuscript for publication.*

Thanatos aspires to advance dialogue between interdisciplinary scholars and professionals working in the field of death and dying. The association welcomes all ideas for publications and for future theme issues. We are aiming for more broader discussions over the traditional scientific boundaries and to enhance a more holistic way of dealing subjects such as hospice care, suicide, bereavement, materiality around death and dying, aging, (im)mortality and so forth.

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Introduction: Media and Death

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Many scholars today agree that modern society has recognised the return of death to the public sphere. The role of mass media, journalism, entertainment media and the so-called social media has been crucial in this movement (see e.g. Hanusch 2010; Seaton 2005; Walter 2011, 1999; Zelizer 2010). The media broadcast news, crime stories, action and horror movies, and disseminate computer games, reality TV and YouTube videos, all of which depict death from various perspectives. We argue that the media affect our understanding of death, shape how we perceive and manage death, both individually and collectively, affect the formation of social relations established and maintained around death, influence the construction of individual and collective identities in the face of death, and affect how organisations and institutions dealing with death function on private, public, political and economic levels (cf. Krotz 2009, 24).

A short history of the media and death helps to contextualise this contemporary development of the mediatization of death. Ariès (1974) observes that, beginning in the late nineteenth century, people began to have less personal, first-hand experience with death, as death was transferred from private homes to nursing homes. At the same time, there was a surge in the emergence of mass media (first print media and then electronic media), with the result that people began to be exposed to death to a greater and greater extent through and via the media.

Vicky Goldberg (1998) has compared the disappearance of physical death from the public sphere at the same time as its entry into the realm of the private (e.g. nursing homes) to the vivid appearance of death in the media; she argues that as fewer people have actual experiences with death, they look for new ways to manage their fears and thoughts related to dying. The illustration of death has gained new significance as it has become more distant from people's real-life worlds (Goldberg 1998, 29).

The arrival of mass-produced newspapers, called the penny press in the United States, provided readers with an increasing number of images and stories about death and destruction (Stephens 2007; Thompson 2004). Hanusch (2010) explains this historical development as a result of technological advances in printing, the arrival of machine-manufactured paper and the invention of the steam engine, all of which allowed newspapers to be produced much more cheaply and with much better quality. Moreover, literacy rates improved in the general public. These factors enabled newspapers to develop rapidly from providing (mostly political) information to the privileged few to reaching mass audiences. (Hanusch 2010, 25.)

In addition to the development of the penny press, the rise of illustrated magazines and later photojournalism in Europe and the United States played a key role in making death visible to the public eye. In her study of the French news weekly L'Illustration, Christina Staudt (2001) points out that images of death were very common in publications of the nineteenth century. Obituaries, typically those of famous people, often had an explicit emphasis on the actual death, and it was

common practice to publish close-up photographs of the deceased on the deathbed. Images of death were also used to endorse certain political goals, such as patriotism and the idea of the Republic. From the mid-nineteenth century onwards in the Anglo-American world, weeklies such as Harper's Weekly and the Illustrated London News reported extensively on deaths resulting from murders and other violent crimes. However, scholars like Goldberg (1998) note that by the end of the century those gory images seemed to disappear almost entirely. One explanation is that the penny press (i.e. the cheap tabloids in the United States) began covering death in increasingly graphic detail, thus wresting the market from the weeklies (Hanusch 2010, 28).

Another key aspect in the rise of representations of death in the news media was the development of photography and photojournalism as a profession. After the American Civil War (1861–1865), photographs of death appeared in newspapers and weeklies with some regularity (Hanusch 2010, 31). Their significance has been explained by the so-called reality affect, the idea that the camera does not lie. Photographs claim to depict reality as it truly is; hence, their power as the vivid visual evidence of reality (see e.g. Zelizer 1995, 2010). According to Zelizer (1995, 136), photojournalism has claimed to legitimise its position by offering 'a visual expansion' of journalistic practice, thus enforcing journalistic authority over 'telling the truth' about the world. However, as also pointed out by Zelizer (1995, 2010), Sontag (2003) and others, photos in newspapers are always framed in certain ways and typically supported by the written word.

Since the mid-twentieth century, the emergence of television and live images has only intensified the vivid representation of death accessible to large audiences in the news media. In the words of Hanusch (2010):

> …indeed, we can all easily recall seminal events in terms of the photographs which went around the world, from Capa's image of the Falling Soldier, the photos of the corpses in the Nazi concentration camps, Eddie Adams' iconic image of General Loan's execution of a Vietcong suspect, to footage of the assassination of John F. Kennedy and the subsequent shooting of Lee Harvey Oswald. (Hanusch 2010, 32)

Another landmark in the recent history of the visual representation of death in the news is 9/11 and the numerous studies related to it (see e.g. Altheide 2003; Liebes and Blondheim 2005; Kitch 2003). To continue the list of seminal events marking the history of present-day visual representations of death in the news, the images and videos of the hanging of Saddam Hussein in 2006 and the deceased Muammar Gaddafi in 2011 have become displays of death with enormous, and controversial, iconic value (Sumiala 2012).

The management of death has also changed in the 'entertaining' or 'fictitious' media, such as cinema and television shows. Based on his work on American television programmes, Charlton McIlwain argues that death has been given more discursive space both on magazine (talk) shows and television dramas as well as in the fan communities and web discussion pages of these shows, such as Six Feet Under (2001–2005) or Crossing over with John Edward (1999–2004). The increasingly open relationship with death and mourning on television has reframed the 'privacy of death' as 'death as a public spectacle' (McIlwain 2005).

Indeed, fantasised images can address death differently, even more freely, than news or factual programmes. In such imagining death has become increasingly spectacular. As Vivian Sobchack observes, since the birth of cinematic expression, death has been part of film narration. From the beginning death has been meaningful, but since the 1960s death events have become more graphic and detailed. The violent approach has given death an anesthetised form, and through these constructed and artificial images, death has become a spectacle and performance, both at the level of visual expression and the level of storytelling. (Sobchack 2000). These fantasised images do not reflect deaths in real life, but through their repetitious nature in fictional audiovisual media, including games, these spectacular and detailed deaths have become naturalised, and the media audiences have become accustomed to encountering death through these mediated images.

The latest developments in media history, including the twentieth-century globalisation of communication through digitalisation and the internet, and the emergence of social media in the twenty-first century, have contributed to the public display of death in the media in several ways. We now live in a world in which anyone with an internet connection can publish news about death, and consequently, the traditional mainstream mass media outlets are no longer the only actors to make death public. As a result, Hanusch (2010) notes that:

> *…old barriers to publishing graphic imagery are being eroded by a medium that allows users, on the one hand, to publish all kinds of photos without the media's usual checks and balances. On the other hand, audiences are empowered to make a conscious decision about whether they want to see a certain image, and should therefore have less reason to complain.*
> (Hanusch 2010, 145)

Hence, many agree that now as never before in human history we are saturated with news and images of death and horror, with images and news travelling rapidly from one media and context to another – locally, nationally and globally (Sumiala 2012). In the lexicon of Walter and his colleagues (1995, 582, cited in Hanusch 2010, 19), 'a smaller proportion of the population of contemporary Western societies dies in any one day than in any society at any time in the history of humankind, yet through the news media death is now extremely visible'.

The idea to publish this special issue on Media and Death originated in a one-day workshop organized by a group of Finnish and international scholars specialized in the study of media and death. The workshop was held on June 6th, 2013 at the Helsinki Collegium for Advanced Studies in collaboration with Human Mortality project. In analysing media and death and the related mediatized practices of death in different media contexts several questions were raised by the participants during that day. Whose death matters in today's public culture? To whom does it matter? Under what conditions does death matter? What is at the centre of the contemporary ritualisation of public death? From what source do these mediatized practices of death draw their power?

This special issue takes up the challenge of examining the contemporary interplay between media and death from a variety of angles. Amanda Lagerkvist's article on new digital memory culture opens the volume. She discusses how new digital practices and online spaces not only create alternative commemorative communities of grief and remembrance, but also, by constructing a digital afterlife, renew our existential understandings of death and life. New digital forms can give social existence new possibilities.

Mareike Meis also discusses digital and social media, but she approaches the topic from the political perspective. She studies videos of Iranian and Syrian protest movements distributed through the social media, particularly YouTube. She argues that deaths of civilians captured on video and distributed through unofficial channels (outside the mainstream media) are intended to stir emotional reactions in the international audience. Through these reactions, political participation can be created, or at least, the movements and their goals acquire international visibility.

Whereas Meis discusses the political uses of (emotional) civilian deaths, Outi Hakola focuses on the emotional aspects of ordinary death on Finnish television. She discusses the reality-based television series My Last Words (2013), which narrates the real-life stories of the dying. Before the episodes were broadcast, the series concept generated public concern about mediatised voyeurism, but after the broadcast the audiences agreed that the programmes were actually tactful and emotionally touching. In her article, Hakola analyses the narrative strategies used in the series to create socially acceptable images of mediated death for television audiences.

In the fourth article in this volume, Tina Weber continues the discussion of televised images of death. Television audiences constantly see various corpses on different television shows, not only in the news. Thus, Weber argues that it is important to study the representations of corpses in these shows. She concentrates on contemporary American television shows and analyses how dead bodies are utilised, pointing out that most television programmes seem to portray the dead as sleeping beauties rather than grotesque corpses.

Last, but certainly not least, we have included an interview by Anna Haverinen with Professor Tony Walter from the University of Bath, in the United Kingdom. Professor Walter is one of the most prominent figures in the field of the sociology of death. In this interview he discusses the occurrence of mediated communication about the dead in the history of modern society.

By exploring and analysing the topic of media and death from different theoretical perspectives and empirical angles, the authors in this special issue attempt to arrive at an understanding of the complex interplay between media and death. Furthermore, we would like to argue that these articles contribute to an awareness of the practices of the good life proffered by today's public culture of mediatized death. Consequently, they help us to comprehend the notions of social community and human relations which such a culture supports and in which it invites us to participate.

1. This short historical overview of the mediatization of death draws partly on Sumiala, Johanna. 2014. Mediatization of Death. In Knut Lundby (ed.), The handbook of mediatization of communication vol. 21. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter. (forthcoming).

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New Memory Cultures and Death: Existential Security in the Digital Memory Ecology

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Abstract

It is often claimed that modern media massively return the repressed yet unavoidable fact of death, which modernity had institutionalised and placed out of sight. Death is everywhere in the media age: in news, in fiction, and not least in the budding practices of sociality and memory on the internet. This article will revolve around what we may learn about media and death from the vantage point of how memory cultures are currently being transformed. Spanning a heterogeneous terrain, the 'digital memory ecology' comprises among other things the construction of a digital afterlife, commemorative communities of grief and remembrance, interaction in guest books, digital candles and commentary fields on digital memorials. This article argues that today death is far from the hidden supplement to culture as Zygmunt Bauman contends or that it is even making a mediated return to us, but is rather ubiquitous in the digital age. As such it is both de-sequestered and deferred. By launching the deliberately ambiguous concept of *existential security*, the article outlines a research agenda for how we may approach these tendencies.

Introduction

> The two key existential facts about modern media are these: the ease with which the living may mingle with the communicable traces of the dead, and the difficulty of distinguishing communication at a distance from communication with the dead.
>
> > John Durham Peters, *Speaking into the Air: A History of the Idea of Communication* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999, 149).

One common account of the relationship between media and death is that the modern media return to us the repressed yet unavoidable fact of death, which modernity has institutionalised and placed out of sight. To quote a recent Swedish anthology of media and film scholars at Stockholm University entitled *Döden i medierna: Våld, tröst, fascination* (*Death in the Media: Violence, Comfort, Fascination*):

> To claim that death has become taboo in public life, however, ignores the steadily growing presence of death in the media. The connection between the two is in fact quite strong. In

tandem with the removal of death from our public sphere, from streets, squares and the home, death is becoming more and more showcased in the media. The media have thereby become the new space where death is harboured (or contained?). This applies particularly to fiction – on American television the number of visible deaths has increased by more than one hundred percent since the 1980s. (Hirdman 2012, 11, my translation)

Hidden away and sequestered, removed from everyday experience, death has made a mediated return to the public sphere. The argument draws on Anthony Giddens (1991), and the claim is that the abundance of death in the media has to do precisely with the fact that the everyday has become completely dissociated with any connections to, or even notion of, death. The media provide *the* domain where existential themes of loss and grief may be addressed or worked through. At the same time television's serial format – cyclical, repetitive crime fiction serials – presents and contains death in a soothing and predictable form (Hirdman 2012, 73–75). We might thus conclude that in news, anniversary journalism, and fiction (crime novels, television serials, and fictional film) death is a haunting disposition in our modern media age. Death is, as it were, what is present in the absent, and absent in the present (Degen & Hetherington 2001). This corroborates John Durham Peters's even wider claim for pairing death with communication. He posits that '[i]ndeed, all mediated communication is in a sense communication with the dead, insofar as media can store "phantasms of the living" for playback after bodily death' (Durham Peters 1999, 142). The dead are thus all around us, thanks to their ghostly traces in the media. And the media and modern forms of communication are around because we have routinely sought communication with the dead in modernity: 'What sex was to the Victorians, death is for us, the ultimate but inescapable taboo' (ibid., 147).

This article argues that today death is far from hidden away, and it is simultaneously more than the tabooed making a scandalous and profuse mediated reappearance. In the budding practices of both sociality and memory on the internet, death has become ubiquitous, and this phenomenon – in particular how people commemorate the dead – is one crucial example of the fact that digital media increasingly saturate all spheres of our contemporary existence. Paying attention to memory constitutes one piece of the puzzle. Yet the connections among death, mediation, and the mnemonic obviously prefigure both the era of modern media and the digital age. The memorial quality of media is a general aspect of human history and of the history of communication. The Egyptian pyramids for instance, which Harold Innis conceived of as *time-biased media*, are both sanctuaries for the prominent dead and technologies of memory that sustain culture and society over time (Innis 1951). Similarly, in many ancient cultures tombstones exemplify how since the dawn of historical time media have been storage devices for memories of the dead. In addition the tomb-like quality of the written *word* has often been remarked upon in a variety of cultures.[1]

Today our tombs are also digital, and our memories of the dead sometimes viral. What can we learn about death and the media today through the vantage point of how memory cultures are currently being transformed, owing to mediatisation and digitalisation? In line with recent findings and theoretical discourses on virtual mourning and digital memory, I propose here that, in the digital age, death is both de-sequestered and deferred – perhaps even to some extent redefined – in and through these digital memory practices. Below, I will expound on the value of such an ambivalent position.

Existential terrains

Increasingly, digital memory cultures pervade our contemporary everyday and life world. These include, for instance, the mundane activities of storing images, video clips, and texts on SNSs; our personal portable archives of images, photographs, music; databases of all kinds; photographs taken by digital cameras; text messages, digital television news casts, blogs, digital storytelling, and computer games (see Garde-Hansen et al. 2009). They also relate to the extraordinary – in services to manage the digital afterlife, digital shrines, web memorials, and communities of the bereaved. Despite their pervasive

presence in the life world, we have scant understanding in media studies of what these new cultures of memory mean for people *existentially*. In our age of digitalisation – and with the advent of new memory forms and practices such as YouTube memorials, digital shrines, web communities of grief and remembrance, identity work in profiles on social networking sites, and personal portable archives – fundamental existential issues have new, critical, and as yet largely unresearched implications in people's lives.[2] These implications are not inconsequential, since they involve our fundamental sense of time, space, identity, and community (McIlwain 2005). They also impend the ultimate abyss before our finitude. The line between life and death – the mystery of the finite and the infinite – is accentuated as people deal with their own illnesses or imminent deaths in digital storytelling about terminal illness, and as they construct living memories online of their departed friends and relatives. Death is dealt with on the internet, and our online environment is simultaneously increasingly mobile and increasingly imbricated in the life world.

In the aftermath of the tragic death of a young woman killed by her peers in the Stockholm suburb of Stureby in 2009, whose death triggered enormous public expressions of online grief and remembrance, a debate ensued that stressed the urgency of addressing and analysing these existential terrains emerging in our societies. It was argued that website owners and parents, as well as society at large, have a responsibility to address how young people work through and encounter death in their digital lives (Ahlinder & Agebäck, *DN Debatt*, 9 Sep. 2009). Another poignant example of the urgency with which we need to engage in these matters is the alarming case of a young boy who in 2010 committed suicide online on the Swedish online forum Flashback (www.flashback.org/t1322408) (Westerlund 2013). The incomparably most important matter of all – *the question of his very existence* – was on display and subject to the influence of others, onlookers, and those who were virtually present and active in the commentary field. The role of technological affordances, and new patterns of sociality, publicness, commemoration, ritualisation, and communication, and their clout in such tragedies, as well as the situation of a heightened sense of evaporation between the public and the private are currently debated both in media and in bereavement studies.

From a media studies perspective the question of the consequences and implications of the internet was initially polarised between utopian versus dystopian camps (Rheingold 1993; Kraut et al. 1998). While many more nuances have been added to the discussion over the years, to this day the established traditions in media studies (cultural studies versus political economy, for instance) tend to reproduce this binary division. In order to be able to interrogate the fast and furious technological developments that render abundant phenomena such as bereavement by suicide online, blogging about terminal illness, and online communities of grief and commemoration, we need to ask questions about the roaring *human* consequences of digitalisation. We need to embrace these emergent existential terrains of our society as inherently ambivalent and as affording tremendous challenges as well as new conditions and possibilities. Hence, I suggest that a different angle is of the essence.

This article sets out to provide a theoretical framework for this approach, by outlining some of the most important challenges, predicaments, and possibilities for studying digital memory cultures and for examining their role in the changing relationship to dying, mourning, and commemorating the dead. In assessing these emergent tendencies, I argue that we need to approach them existentially and allow ourselves to be inspired by existentialist philosophy.[3] Moreover, we are also in need of a transdisciplinary and trans-sectorial approach in which media studies engage in new dialogues, for example, with death studies, bereavement studies, sociologists and psychologists of religion, anthropologists, philosophers, theologians, and the field of social medicine. Such an approach is needed not only to grasp public and mediatised rituals of dying, mourning, commemoration, and so on, but also to understand the internet or digital cultures more broadly.

The rapidly changing realm of digital media occupies centre stage in contemporary media and communication studies across its broad research framework. With varying degrees of optimism and pessimism, digital media have been studied as enabling a play with identity, as making possible the emergence and strengthening of new communities and social activism, as enabling new forms of participatory cultures, as setting off new forms of citizenship and diasporic communities. Social media have been explored in terms of how they affect everyday life and create new forms of sociality and networked publics, enabling self-expression among the youth. Political economy scholars have critiqued powerful corporations and shown how these organisations contribute to systems of surveillance. Others have looked into the corporate role both in political control and in the potential democratisation of authoritarian states. Within the digital humanities scholars have explored, among other things, the changing cultural and philosophical meanings of archiving and storing heritage, thanks to the ever-increasing accessibility and mobility of memory in the digital age.

To a far lesser degree, researchers have focused on how users experience the internet and digital media *existentially*. When scholars have sought to generalise the uses of the internet from an audience perspective, for instance, they have generally identified two main uses: information gain and the quest for 'virtual togetherness' (Bakardjieva 2005, 169–80). While questions of *community* and *meaning* were key in early ethnographies in networked cultures (Baym 1995), their full existential implications have not always been elaborated on. Anette Markham details the lived and embodied experience of online community memberships in *Life Online*. She concludes that the online experience is both a tool and a place, and a 'way of being' in phenomenological terms (Markham 1998). There are both theoretical and empirical reasons to push this focus on *being* one step further. Firstly, in general, in the footsteps of Raymond Williams, cultural studies approaches conceive of culture as 'ordinary' and people as being involved in meaning making practices within the this worldly or secular everyday. As is common – and *comme il faut* – in cultural studies, questions of meaning and community are drained of any connection to the human experience of or quest for spirituality or transcendence in any form (cf. Cvetkovich 2012). With important exceptions (e.g. Durham Peters 1999; Rothenbuhler 1998; Axelson 2006; Pinchevski 2011; Sumiala 2013), in mainstream media studies existential issues have not been given due attention.

Secondly, while it should be noted that death is a topic that interested scholars in the early days of internet studies (Hutchings 2012), today these musings are in need of a different contextualisation and concomitant theorisation, due to the Web 2.0 environment. Existential issues have been touched upon in research on online memorials and digital remnants (Roberts 2004; Hess 2007; Wahlberg 2009; Haverinen 2011; Walter & Hourizi 2011/2012; Hutchings 2012; Refslund Christensen & Sandvik 2013; Moncur forthcoming), in work on the internet and suicide (Ozawa-de Silva 2008; Westerlund 2010), and in studies on blogging about lethal disease (Andersson 2012). From a psychological viewpoint, critical reassessments of patterns of behaviour in our cultures of connectivity have stressed the loneliness and a-sociality implied by digital media use and thereby address existential issues indirectly (Hodkinsson 2007; Miller 2008; Johansson 2011). According to the psychoanalyst Sherry Turkle (2011), we now inhabit a world where the *self itself* is tied to, and emerges through, constant connectivity and instant validation, while leaving individuals emotionally deprived and ultimately alone. Furthermore, to *exist* as an individual and a social being through digital media forms seems to be a normal state of affairs for many younger people in our media age ('If you're not on MySpace, *you don't exist*', argued an informant quoted in boyd 2007, italics added).

Approaching these matters from an existentialist perspective will complement the psychological approach in this burgeoning debate and bring out other crucial facets of the analytical object. This will push us to raise questions about how users explicitly or implicitly inhabit these media cultures as existential terrains: firstly, as private and/or public spaces for individual and collective commemoration and grief, and secondly, for creating and archiving the networked self. The theoretical framework is inspired by the basic themes in classic existentialist thought (see Hong & Hong eds. 2000; Dreyfuss

& Wrathall eds. 2012), which highlight the fundamental anxiety and dread of nothingness that we are faced with in existence, the absurdity of life as a contingency, and the pervasive alienation of our modern world, societies, and lives. As a point of departure, humans are conceived of as existential beings, torn between freedom and necessity, who constructively and actively seek meaning in the face of these conditions. The objective is to identify both the exigencies and the potential for pursuing existential issues through memory practices among media users of the digital age. The point is that while digital memories may serve existentially to secure continuity, to pursue meaning and value, and to enable profundity (in terms of human growth or transcendence), they may also, existentially speaking, potentially bolster the sense of a void – a loss of meaning.

Existential security and ambiguity

The important question is to what extent digital memories may bring about a sense of cohesion, meaning, continuity, or profundity – what I call, highly aware of the ambiguity of the term, *existential security*. This oxymoron acknowledges that human existence is in fact uncertain and that existential security is never unconditionally realised. The concept thus focuses on the quest for it, rather than on its actuality. Existential security differs slightly from Anthony Giddens's (1992, 92) *ontological security*, which has to do with the phenomenological and emotional sense of 'being-in-the-world', trusting through routine and habit that people and things will remain roughly the same, and relying on the continuity of one's own self-identity. Set within a liquid modern frame of the digital age, where constant flux is the norm, existential security adds to this emphasis on the social, individual, and material the prospects for individuals to integrate their being-in-the-world into a meaningful unity, involving a sense of purpose or direction in life or a sense of cohesion and dignity. In other words, existential security involves the extent to which experiences can be integrated into a functional meaning-making system, which can involve both this-worldly and other-worldly experiences of profundity *or* spirituality (cf. Melder 2011).[4] In addition, existential security is not solely an individual quest (although it can be), but also a matter of seeking meaning and continuity through/as inspired fellowship – that is, through *communitas* (Turner 1969).

This approach also relates to important debates within the science of religion and the subfield that studies religion and the media, where such issues have been approached through the culturalist emphasis on the need for a broader understanding of the meaning-making and mediated qualities of religion and the religious qualities of the media (Sumiala-Seppänen et al. eds. 2006; Morgan ed. 2008; Lynch, Mitchell, & Strahn eds. 2012). This debate has emphasised the need in an ostensibly 'secularised' Western society for a new understanding of people's changing relationship to transcendent and existential dimensions in life (cf. Woodhead & Heelas 2000). Sharing this point of departure, the existential approach to digital media cultures acknowledges that the exploration of existential themes takes place within the structures and through the rituals of institutionalised religions, but more importantly, it occurs also in other more uncharted contexts (cf. Hoover & Lundby eds. 1997). Here it is conceived of as occurring vividly and ubiquitously within the realm of digital media (cf. Lövheim 2004), and within digital memory cultures in particular.

Instead of seeing the internet as inherently positive or negative, liberating or controlling, democratic or undemocratic, meaningful or trivial, I conceive of it as an existential and ambiguous terrain. This terrain provides avenues for exploring the fundamental human condition of being faced with the contingency and absurdity of our lives, and the issues of meaning and meaninglessness, remembering and forgetting, individuality and collectivity, loneliness and sociality, the finite and the infinite. Digital memory cultures, I argue, reside exactly at this point of tension: while they may serve existentially to secure a sense of cohesion, continuity, and profundity, they may also bring about an enhanced sense of dis-connection or lack of meaning. In this way they may even call for alternate approaches, rooted in existentialist thought, to communication altogether. For instance, emphasising the breakdown of communication, the impossibility of dialogue, John Durham Peters (1999, 127–135) argues that Søren Kierkegaard saw 'communication as a mode of revealing and concealing, not of

information exchange', since human life is an unresolvable paradox involving both accident and necessity and containing inescapable tragedy. Durham Peters stresses the sense in which communication must be conceived 'never as the touching of consciousness, only as the interpretation of traces' (ibid., 153).

In light of the contemporary rhetoric of sharing and connecting, such a stress on the difficulties and intrinsic quandaries to communicate fully (whilst acknowledging the human longing for connection), or even the value of alterity and interruptions themselves (Silverstone 2003; Pinchevski, forthcoming), seems especially pertinent and may hold the potential for providing a timely and seemly optics for media studies. Furthermore Amit Pinchevski stresses that in the material traces of mediation, we will find the residues of meaning making as well as unintentional meanings, and we may discern how the production of meaning is often interrupted by inevitable non-meaning (ibid). Through this lens we may be able to appreciate and describe important aspects of what digital memory cultures afford, but even more importantly, how they may fail to deliver meaning or produce cohesion. That is how they may obstruct or suspend any resolution or intervene in short cuts to a desired equilibrium of incontestable unanimity of meaning – the Rheingoldian utopia of community – in relation to death, loss, and mourning.

Memory, mediatised death, and the temporality of instantaneity

My point of departure is the premise that when we think about death and the media, new memory cultures are an intriguing place to begin. As Johanna Sumiala discusses in *Media and Ritual: Death, Community and Everyday Life* (2013), studying how mediatised death rituals are employed in our media-saturated society as a means of coping with death, creating community, and restoring order is of primary importance, both for understanding the shape of rituals in our age and, in turn, for understanding the role of the media and the mediatisation of our societies. These rituals also create moments of ultimate meaning in relation to loss – often but not solely through collective acts of remembrance (Sumiala 2013, 91–92).[5] And yet mediated or mediatised death is much more than a question of memorialisation or the urge to remember someone. The online suicide mentioned above, for example, demonstrates that death rituals are not confined to the commemorative aspect, but also include rituals of dying.[6] But most important, the suicide occurs in the present tense and alerts us to the question of real-time death and the way our digital culture operates through a temporality of instantaneity, as death is, as in this case, instantly communicated (cf. McIlwain 2005). As our life world seems to have been highjacked by the 'absolute present' (Allon 2004) the suicide can be described as a rampant and highly disturbing example of what we might call in the tradition of critical phenomenological approaches to technology, the 'tyranny of connectivity'. This may provoke an analysis of *existential suffering* (Ozawa-de Silva 2008), as arguably co-constituted by public and instant mediation and interaction. And yet such phenomena have something to do with mediated memory, since as has been recently acknowledged, they simultaneously point to the changing nature of memory itself (cf. Garde-Hansen et al. eds. 2009). Hence, beginning with death as it is mediated digitally or is digitally subjected seems to lead us into contemporary discourses about memory.

If we begin with collective memory, in turn, death also seems to be in the vicinity. As societies construct social, national, or public memories, traumatic and transformative events that become milestones for the collective memory of a national community, often involve loss of life, as for example, in terrorist attacks, school shootings, and natural disasters, which become important iconic events in a nation's history (Leavy 2007; Volkmer 2009; Sumiala 2013). This is also true in the case of the formation of transnational mediated memories, or what Anna Reading has called the *globital memory field*, in which a new logic is emerging for how events become 'memory'.[7] In this new media ecology and memory culture, death is also prevalent. One of Reading's examples is the death of the Iranian student Neda in June of 2009, whose dying moments were filmed and communicated through acts of mobile media witnessing, leading to the posting of her death on Facebook, and then picked up by news organisations and printed out as posters that were used within hours in protests in streets around the world (Reading 2011). As Reading argues, these features of the new memory ecology also underline the role of the

instantaneous in the era of absolute presence, yet this regime of memory seems challenged by fragmentation, evaporation, and loss.

I hold that the basic themes in existentialism are actualised in three tensions that arguably constitute contemporary digital memory cultures. Firstly, users' identities are shaped through increasingly *fragmented and versatile forms of individual and collective remembering*, and this constitutes a major challenge for the study of collective memories. This is due to the fact that digital media are pervaded by the combination of connectivity with instant, easy, and affordable publishing possibilities that create endless avenues for sharing, exposing, participating in shaping, selecting, editing, revising, and revaluing, individual and collective memories (Maj & Riha 2010). Digital memory cultures generate vernacular memories that are a matter of 'elective affinities' (Pinchevski 2011, 263). The second, and related, tension is that networked publics that group around memories of individual and collective trauma and grief for instance, contribute to an accelerated *evaporation of the public and the private.* This amounts to a widespread, unprecedented new sense of mediated publicness, offering possibilities for the public mediation of private experiences and memories, and for the emergence of new constellations of communities of memory – often on a global scale (Reading 2011; Conrad and Assmann 2010). Third, when our lives become increasingly digitised, this terrain may be haunted by the fear of *information loss*, since the speed at which we live and work compels us to practices of constantly updating ourselves constantly while 'keeping track, recording, retrieving, stock-piling, archiving, backing up and saving' (Garde- Hansen et al. 2009, 5). This constitutes *a fundamental tension in our contemporary existence between remembering and forgetting,* keeping and losing, saving and deleting (van Dijck 2007; Hoskins 2009a; Garde-Hansen et al. 2009). And yet, for media users these tendencies may also constitute an impetus for entering into existential terrains of connectivity.

The digital memory ecology

These versatile, vulnerable, and visceral digital memories are embedded in our existence. José van Dijck (2007) has launched a holistic and integrative framework for analysing mediated memories in the digital age. Moving away from a focus on memory as cultural and shared, she looks into what she calls our digital 'shoeboxes' and finds our private and personal memories preserved in digital archives equally valid for cultural analysis. Mediated memories in our digital age are always *embodied* and sensuously felt, *embedded* in social contexts, and *enabled* by technologies (van Dijck 2007). Media scholars belonging to such diverse theoretical traditions as phenomenology, cultural studies, audience studies, and social theory, have been fecund in conceptualising this situation: in *media life* (Deuze 2012), the media have become *ubiquitous* (Featherstone 2009), which implies that we are here facing a situation in which we must study *the mediation of everything* (Livingstone 2010), as we are today embedded in a diffuse and uncertain *media world* (Couldry 2012).

In order to tackle these all-encompassing digital environments, memory studies has re-engaged with the media (cf. Lagerkvist 2013a), and media studies, in turn, with the concept of *media ecology*. This latter approach to digital media shares a lineage with the main representatives and precursors of medium theory and of the media ecology paradigm, such as Marshall McLluhan, Walter Ong, and Neil Postman. Seeing the media or media technologies as environmental means to study complex communication systems as environments that encompass interactions between different realms. These include 'communication technologies and processes of human value, feeling and behaviour' (Strate 2004, 5). Moreover, according to Neil Postman (2000, 11), the concept of media ecology describes an interest in 'the ways in which the interaction between media and human beings give a culture its character and, one might say, help a culture to maintain symbolic balance'. The digital age seems to have revitalised this ontology of interacting realms and techno-social embeddedness. This means that in studying digital memory cultures we need to dispose of the thinking that long conceived of *the media* as a discrete unit, separated from the social, as well as from memory. The post-broadcasting age is, according to Andrew Hoskins, dominated by a new digital memory ecology in which the media or media technologies are ubiquitous and at once both accessible and fluid, revocable and diffused (Hoskins 2009a, 2011). In our contemporary situation new media technologies have proliferated

and have accompanied 'mediatised regimes of memory that effect a new texture of the past that is driven, maintained and replenished through its connections and aggregations' (Hoskins 2009b, 31). From this perspective we are no longer retrieving memory nor are we constructing pasts through representational practices in the present. Instead, memory is seen as 'embedded in and distributed through our socio-technical practices…' (Hoskins 2009a, 92). The dynamics of mediated memory makes memory 'created when needed, driven by the connectivities of digital technologies and media and inextricably forged through and constitutive of digital social networks: in other words, a new "network memory"' (ibid.). It must be stressed that an environmental focus on the existential terrains of connectivity will not, however, imply falling into the trap of assigning sovereign agency to the technological aspects of this network memory, neither in the means of achieving a balance in the culture, nor in failing to do so. Technologies are not conceived as deterministic, nor are they simply affording possibilities, but are somewhere in-between. They imply and inform new technologically-enforced life world situations, yet they do not determine how people use them. In other words, the approach does not preclude the force of human meaning making (and resistance), the role of human embodied experience, or the will to establish meaning.

Another highly relevant and interesting approach to the same phenomenon is proposed by Dorthe Refslund Christensen and Kjetil Sandvik (forthcoming 2014a, forthcoming 2014b), who develop a neo-materialist and broad media concept. Starting with Joshua Meyrowitz's 1973 media definition (media as conduits, language, and environment), Klaus Bruhn Jensen's recent media theorisation, in which media are of three orders, namely physical, mass-mediated, and virtual, and Richard Grusin's discussion on premediation, Refslund Christensen and Sandvik (2014a) put forward an approach whereby 'media to a great extent influence and inform the way we perceive the world and that, for example, the lines between physical, mediated and mediatized experiences of death become blurred as they are part of the same continuum...' In highlighting a continuum between the physical and the mediated, this perspective implies that in our new media ecologies neither death nor any other phenomenon is unaffected by the logics of the media/mediations, by mediatisation (cf. Hjarvard 2008) or by the technologisation of the life world. To an unprecedented extent information and communication technologies have entered into the production of events and into the fabric of daily and social life. For our present purposes we may add that these media are thoroughly integrated into practices of memory and rituals of dying and mourning. In relation to death the ecological approach implies moving away from emphasising how death is mediated, represented, and socially constructed *in* the media to a perspective that regards death and how we ritualise or make sense of it, as integrated into and imbricated with digital media or as embedded in the media ecology. According to Tim Hutchings, in a similar vein the digital has profoundly affected the social and cultural construction of death, as well as the environments in which dying occurs: 'online networks and digital media have been *integrated into contemporary processes of dying, grieving and memorialisation,* changing the social context in which dying takes place and establishing new electronic spaces for the communication of grief' (Hutchings 2012, 43, italics added). Our new media ecologies compel new attention to, and theorising about, the mediated and commemorative aspects of death and mourning. This will be dealt with in the next section.

Sharing and deferring death

Among a range of other functions and affordances, digital memory cultures contain new commemorative communities of grief and remembrance on social networking sites (for example, http://www.vsfb.se/Pratbubblan or memorialised profiles on Facebook). They also showcase and invite interaction at digital shrines and memorials, where guest books and candles are often found and where mourners may leave notes (http://varaminnessidor.se/; Tillminneav.se). Here digital memory cultures are involved in the fundamental existential relationship between the past, the present, and the future, as well as our relationship with those absent. According to Joanne Garde-Hansen, Anna Reading, and Andrew Hoskins (2009, 4), digital memories are also 'engaged in a series of the deferrals' – among others '*the deferral of death*'. Another important example of this is what I call *the management of the digital afterlife*. This entails services in which you can manage your own future memory ('If I die', on Facebook, for instance). Death can be 'deferred', or as Bauman (1992) would say, 'managed through a life

strategy', on I Memorial, which is a service that offers users the opportunity to manage and build their memory for posterity, through the following secured storage possibilities:

> My Memorial, where people can use text, audio, and video to tell the story of their lives and leave their testimonies. The result will become their I-Tomb and be posted on www.i-tomb.net, The World Virtual Cemetery, the day they depart. It will be preserved for generations and accessible worldwide from any internet connection.

> My Messages, where users can leave posthumous messages for family, friends, and colleagues. T After a person's passing these messages are made accessible after their passing only to those who are designated and can answer security questions. Personal messages can be sent at specific delivery times in the future, such as when a son turns 21, and can contain documents that one wishes to pass along securely.

> My Last Wishes, where users can leave instructions such as how and where they want to be buried or cremated, the music to be played at their funeral, and where important printed or digital documents such as insurance policies and investment dossiers are located, as well as where passwords to personal, financial, business, and social media accounts are stored. Last wishes are communicated to designated loved ones and associates immediately upon passing.

> In addition to the above, i-memorial.com offers a secure digital lockbox called Safe Box to store and conveniently retrieve important and confidential documents during one's lifetime. (www.Imemorial.com)

Here we may construct a self for the future to remember. In this language of managing how people will, should, or may remember you, or how you can assure the way in which you bid farewell to your loved ones, there is the feeling in which death or your memory, like everything else, is in your hands, thereby deferring a sense of absolute loss of control before one's own finitude. The example illustrates both the quest and the potential for existential security in the digital memory ecology.

John Durham Peters argues that the deferral of death in media culture at large is both cause and effect of the fact that that we are in effect *unable to mourn,* and modern media have a role in corroborating and suspending this deficiency: 'We lack the cultural and religious practices that would protect us from being lonely psychological agents. Our perfunctory grief bespeaks a disturbance in that most crucial of all relationships, our relation to the dead. Perhaps in a time of video- and tape recording, photoalbums and home movies, death seems less final.' (Durham Peters 1999, 147–48). This is clearly a pre-Web 2.0 position, and there are reasons to problematise some of these premises (see below). Yet Durham Peters's point seems confirmed by the all-pervasiveness of the digital ecology, leaving nothing outside its orbit. Today the deferral of death is to be found in the realm of virtual mourning, web cemeteries, and communities of grief and remembrance online. Beyond biological death the departed's social and digital self may be kept alive online (Moncur forthcoming). On the web memorial site Till Minneav.se ('In memory of') the memorials are often written like obituaries. There is also a blog function, and users may upload films/videos and light a candle. Mourning, which is literally in the hands of users through their mobile devices and screens, who may share in the grief – or keep someone socially 'alive' on memorialised profiles on Facebook – seems to be part of broader patterns of the networked self (Wellman 2001) in a quest for existential security.[8] Moreover, these movements occur in the absolute present. This has a bearing on the process in which death is both de-sequestered and deferred.

Most of the memorials are not very detailed in describing the departed; instead, they convey strong feelings of grief, emptiness, and loss. But most important, they communicate directly with the dead:

> In memory of my lovely Jonas, who passed away far too early.
>
> Your heart, big enough for the whole world, has now stopped beating. You are my first big love and my best friend. I have always envisioned a whole life by your side. You were probably too good for this world. You are needed somewhere else.
>
> Rest in peace, my heart, I will never forget You. One piece of my heart died with You, but one piece of my heart will always beat for You too.
>
> I will change the world – for You!
>
> Love and miss You….
>
> (www.tillminneav.se, accessed August 7, 2013)

Work in this field almost unanimously stresses the role of web memorials in creating existing *ties* both to the dead and the living, relationships, and feelings of community, despite the fact that sometimes they are designed with limited interactive possibilities. In bereavement studies web memorials have been suggested as an important addition to traditional bereavement practices (for an overview, see Krysinska & Andriessen 2010; see also Roberts 2004; Refslund Christensen & Sandvik, forthcoming 2014c). What is pivotal here is that the relationship does not end: it is simply transformed. As in grief work in general, bonds with the deceased are kept, while the relationship is both deconstructed and reconstructed:

> Grief work is the means through which such revision takes place. The psychosocial transition involves both deconstruction and reconstruction. Deconstruction requires accommodation of expectancies, beliefs, and goals linked with the attachment to the deceased, including the relinquishment of the attachment as it was, in line with the new life situation. Reconstruction involves the construction of a new meaningful life that can include a new relationship with the desceased based on the acceptance that the bond is an exclusively internal connection. (Field 2008, 117)

However, such a bond, as articulated online, seems to be exclusively internal, yet widely exhibited, often before an unknown throng of potential witnesses. In offering support by sharing similar experiences of loss, in web communities, and at online memorials, benevolent strangers are present for the bereaved in a spirit of unique comradeship – perhaps even in the spirit of *existential communitas* (see Lagerkvist 2013b). A community member at VIMIL is given advice, while perhaps also being indirectly and gently 'pushed' in the direction of moving into a phase of acceptance. In the interactions one may trace a sense in which members are finding a new meaningful relationship both with the deceased and with other bereaved:

> Lea:
> *How?*
> Soon three months will have passed. I am standing and walking, but sometimes, like tonight, it feels as if I'd prefer to crack. The hardest part is not being able to see a future. Earlier, when life

was as it should be, the feeling of an empty calendar was positive and exciting. Then it meant expectations and the chance of doing things with the person I loved the most and with whom I had constructed a meaning in life. Now the empty calendar is frightening. A big hole in something I'm not sure I can cope with. I don't understand how I can manage all this loneliness. I'm so scared of it. I never liked being alone, and now I'm forced into being this way. By cancer.

Selma responds:I recognise myself so much in what you are writing. Soon, it will be six months since my dear husband died suddenly. During the week things are pretty OK, but Friday nights are horrible, and now the first summer is approaching, and vacation and everything should be as usual for the kids and NOTHING is usual for me.... I've listened a lot to classical music; taking walks is also good. And you are not alone! We are here. Many hugs!

Lea:

THANK YOU! I feel warm inside to read all the comfort you want to convey. That you, who do not know me, are so honestly and compassionately sharing your experiences. Sometimes it's hard to believe that things will ever get better. But the fact that you, who know what mourning is all about, say that things will get better with time makes me want to embrace what you are saying. Strength and hugs to you too!

(www.vimil.se, accessed August 5, 2013)

The mediated publicness of these correspondences in which intimate experiences of grief are shared is worth further examination. In her seminal work on web cemeteries Pamela Roberts argued that a number of positive rewards come out of these communities: the bereaved may stay in touch with the dead person, bonds are strengthened with the living, and a new sense of community is created with others (Roberts 2004). Indeed, Roberts maintains that the rheingoldian utopian vision of the internet as a realisation of an ingrained human need and desire to create a working and gratifying community is fulfilled. She also stresses the sense in which web cemeteries demonstrate an awareness of the fact that the authors are members of a community. *You are not alone, we are here,* is the crucial message of consolation underlining this awareness. These interactions are examples of the evaporation of the public and the private, and they also demonstrate new types of virtual co-presence. Scholarship on digital memory cultures similarly stresses the idea of connectedness as a 'fundamental value that matter[s] in the process of global and virtual self-description' (Maj and Riha 2009, 29). Active participation and sharing is the key to thinking about digital memory practices, argue Joanne Garde-Hansen et al. (2009). Moreover, Walter et al. hold that Facebook defragments a dead person's social networks and allows mourning to re-emerge as a group experience, a communal activity. In sum:

Pre-modern societies tended to produce a bereaved community, modern societies tend to produce bereaved individuals, and post-modern mutual help groups (online or offline) produce a community of the bereaved, that is, connections with previously unknown others who have suffered the same category of loss—the death of a spouse, of a child, of a relative by suicide, etc.... SNSs such as Facebook, however, can produce what pre-modernity did: a bereaved *community.* (Walter et al. 2011/12, np)

Walter et al. thus identify a break with earlier technologies in terms of how death and grief are brought back and are being de-sequestered and reintroduced into the everyday. Through social networking death is made communal again. Here, I propose that we may discern a quest for deeper forms of community/communitas and for existential security. These

interactions may bring about meaning and cohesion, a cathartic uplift, a sense of healing or of the sacred, through moments of sincere or significant community (Lagerkvist 2013b).

Hence, today death seems far from the hidden supplement to culture as Bauman contends, or that death is even making a mediated return; rather death is ubiquitous in the digital age. It also seems that new virtual practices of mourning testify to a new situation, refuting Durham Peters's point that people are unable to mourn at all. On the contrary, a whole new range of public mourning practices seem to be proliferating (Walter 2008). According to the digital anthropologist Anna Haverinen (2011, forthcoming 2014), there is an abundance of virtual mourning practices and rituals, including memorialised profiles in social media, virtual chapels in online gaming environments, and virtual candle websites. What these types of mourning demonstrate, for example, is that the death of a co-player in a game world is a *real* crisis, both for the player and the character. Although the relationship may be virtual and the persons may never have met in physical life, this does not preclude strong feelings of grief. Haverinen concludes that: 'Online mourning and honouring answer to a larger need for communal support and ritualistic behaviour that the mere burial code does not offer' (forthcoming 2014).

As I have argued earlier, memory work in the digital age is taken up in the face of three challenges, which deal with the temporality of instantaneity, an all-pervasive networked individualism and concomitant technological capacities that subject memory to endless revision, and an accelerated blurring of the private and the public. This may lead to the conclusion that digital memory cultures are vulnerable – both in individuals and in society at large (see Maj & Riha 2009). Death, dying, grieving, and remembering are becoming communal, ubiquitous, and overflowing, and this may corroborate the sense in which there is a vanishing and ephemeral dimension to *all* digital culture, as it is situated in the absolute present. But paradoxically, in the teeming mediated publicness of death, new cultures of memory may also contribute to the paradoxical *solidification* of these existential terrains. It cannot be denied that from the vantage point of human experience, there appears to be a surprising steadiness, permanence, and unexpected rootedness in these aspects of web memorialisation. These may contradict the features of the new memory ecology discussed here, namely as being endlessly versatile, flexible, created when needed, fast, and short-sighted. Perhaps this poses a challenge to the burgeoning discourse on network memory, as *a priori* fragmented and interminably proliferating. Similarly, social networking allows us to transcend the sense in which there can be only a liminoid or temporary sense of community (Walter et al. 2011/12). New cultures of memory are also cultures of sharing stories, experiences of bereavement, and working communally through death and loss, offering at least some kind of continuity and stability. These cultures may be approached as echoing a quest for coming together and for sharing significant moments of 'ultimate meaning', corroborating that, as Johanna Sumiala (2013, 18) straightforwardly observes, 'communication connects'.

This new accessibility of stories and narratives of death and experiences of loss is, according to Charlton McIlwain (2005), an important shift, thanks to technological innovations that provide us with helpful knowledge previously lacking. But there are other implications within the existential terrain, less positive, and perhaps obtrusive for users in problematic ways. To acknowledge that communication also *dis*-connects is to pose questions about the extent to which cultures of connectivity contain disruptive and, for their members, sometimes downright disturbing aspects. For instance, Facebook, as Anna Haverinen (2013) points out in her auto-ethnographic approach to virtual mourning, may act in invasive ways and, for mourners and bereaved communities, in a distressing and offensive manner, by resurrecting threads and interactions and thereby interfering in memory work long after the bereft has put these matters to rest. The integrity of these private memories has been breached. When developments involve aspects that are hard to digest emotionally or address existentially, existential security may be compromised. One example is when bereaved persons who post their condolences in a guestbook on a web memorial page are tracked by the funeral home offering the service with commercial ads, thereby disrupting the sensitive, delicate, and for many people austere process of grief. More research is needed on whether these developments

disturb the dignity of keeping someone in loving memory and how this may obstruct the sense of existential security. We also need to hear more testimonies of how bereaved parents cope with being approached by individuals in the dispersed network who offer condolences several months after a child's death, which may disrupt the temporality and rituals of mourning, as well as the process of reorientation.

In conclusion

From a media and communication studies perspective the consequences and implications of the internet have often been polarised. This article has argued that an existential approach is needed to grasp fully the complexity of the developments in digitalisation. Approaching the internet as existential terrain *par excellence* will provide avenues for exploring the fundamental human condition of being faced with the contingency, absurdity, and simultaneous quest for profundity and meaning in our lives. If, in our time, we are encountering and exploring these larger issues of meaning and meaninglessness, loneliness and sociality, the finite and the infinite on the internet, then we need to study it from the vantage point of *being*, rather than reducing these phenomena to aspects of the political, cultural, or economic dimensions of mediated human communication. I have discussed the inherent tensions in digital memory cultures. These cultures 'suspend' death, while simultaneously affording unparalleled possibilities for exploring or working through the unknowable within the everyday, both individually and collectively. In the digital age it appears that the two key existential facts about digital media, to paraphrase John Durham Peters, are these: the deferral and even possible annihilation of death as people stay socially alive (in living and accruing memory) on the internet after they die biologically, and the overabundance of personal memories, narratives, images, and interactive affordances about death, dying, and bereavement that are instantly at our disposal, yet always in the hands of powerful corporations and their decisions. Both imply critical consequences for our digital existence, and the question is ultimately to what extent these facts may bring about or destroy any sense of existential security in the new digital memory ecology.

1. I am indebted to the anonymous reviewer for this point.
2. This article outlines the overarching theoretical approaches in my project Existential Terrains: Memory and Meaning in Cultures of Connectivity, which is conducted within the Wallenberg Academy Fellows-programme at the Department of Media Studies, Stockholm University (2014-2018), financed by the Knut and Alice Wallenberg Foundation. In addition, it shares a few examples from a pilot study in progress that is being carried out through both online ethnography and textual analyses in the autumn and winter of 2013/14.
3. Here I endeavour to bring some of the classical themes of existentialism into the debate on digitalisation. Retaining a focus on the lived experience of digitalisation, and moreover focusing on the intersections of lived experience, technological apparatuses/discourses and symbolic content, the approach launched here is thoroughly socio-technological and sociophenomenological (see Lagerkvist 2013c). I acknowledge, however, that there are other important strands in existential philosophy and phenomenological thinking that will be essential to relate to in exploring the existential terrains of connectivity, such as the philosophy of technology of Martin Heidegger (see the introduction to Dahlberg & Ruin eds. 2011) or Karl Jaspers (see Verbeek 2005). The existential terrain may also be discussed in relation to the moral or critical strands of the media ecology paradigm (see the outline in Postman 2000). In addition, recent approaches to mnemotechnics and teleologics in Bernard Stiegler's work or the work of N. Kathryn Hayles on post-humanism may also provide important trajectories for exploring the relationships between the digital and being.
4. Such a meaning-making system need not be completely cohesive or in all respects consistent, since spiritual identities are seldom one-dimensional, and as with all types of identity they are often in movement, fragmented, contradictory and constituted by multiplicity. I am indebted to Mia Lövheim for this point.

5. When thinking about the connections between death and new media/the internet, we may also ask the questions, what is new, what is different from before, and what is perhaps not so new, given that patterns representing death, rituals of mourning and commemorating may abide from the mass communication age or from even older traditions. How are the online and offline environments related, for example, in the case of gravestones, which today also contain a link to a digital shrine, QR codes, and corresponding links to online memorial sites (see http://www.chieftain.com/news/ 1694286-120/digital-codes-legacys-company)? And how do these rituals of mourning relate to 'the new public mourning' of celebrities or other people whom we have never met (Walter 2008)? How do the practices of mourning online resemble or affect new offline rituals, such as roadside memorials (Petersson 2012); new patterns of commemoration in material culture emerging on graves in cemeteries in physical space (Refslund Christensen & Sandvik eds., forthcoming 2014c) or memorials where people leave flowers, objects, and messages at sites of trauma, such as that of a school shooting (Sumiala 2013)?

6. These include funerary rituals. Today new patterns of screening funerals online and allowing for virtual presence at the funeral service are emerging; or a funeral home may display the deceased's Facebook site. See Walter et al. 2011/12.

7. Reading develops these six dynamics beginning with: (1) transmediality: memory as an assemblage of discursive formations across different media; (2) velocity: events are witnessed, archived, remembered, and communicated simultaneously; (3) extensity: global witnessing, deterritorialisation; (4) modality: memories are forged at once as organic, visual, aural, and captured as data; (5) valency: multiple bonds to other memory assemblages; (6) viscosity: memory as liquid modernity, endlessly fluid and changeable (Reading 2011).

8. This is also the case with digital storytelling about terminal illnesses, where one's illness or imminent death is worked through while being 'managed'.

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Thanatos

Mobile Death Videos in Protest Movements: Cases from Iran and Syria on Television: Balancing Privacy and Voyeurism

Mareike Meis

Abstract

In the Iranian and Syrian protest movements, the emergence of videos of dying protest participants recorded by mobile phones and disseminated via social platforms (esp. YouTube) have played a significant role in mobilizing and solidarizing the broader public for these movements. In this regard, several questions on the broader effects of such media phenomena in protest and conflict contexts arise; e.g., on how mobile videos recording death are perceived and construed in different media and public contexts, and which implications the prevalence of such videos brings about for the public perception and interpretation of the Iranian and Syrian protests and conflicts. The article presents an explorative study on two mobile death videos that appeared in course of the Iranian and Syrian protests and conflicts: the mobile video of Neda Agha-Soltan's death in Iran and the mobile video of a man filming his own death in Syria. Special emphasis is given to the discursive and media-aesthetical effects of these mobile death videos by focusing on their symbolic and representational impact, the affectivity of these recordings of death, and the discursive and aesthetical practices in bringing forward certain accounts on the protest and conflict reality in Iran and Syria.

Introduction

In recent years, protest movements in the Middle East and North Africa have given public visibility a significant new dimension. [1] Among these movements, the so-called Iranian Twitter Revolution in 2009 (Sreberny & Khiabany 2010, 174) and the Syrian YouTube Uprising starting in 2011 (Khamis, Gold, & Vaughn 2012) are well-known instances of a process juxtaposing a one-to-many communication of mass media with a many-to-many communication on social media. The growing use of social media, in which an asymmetrical communication is gradually replaced by a more symmetrical one, has participatory and emancipatory effects on both civic and political activism and on practices of reporting and documenting (ibid., 4; Shirky 2008, 107; Burkart 2007, 7, 167–68; Ali & Fahmy 2013, 57).

In this respect, mobile phones in general and mobile videos and images in particular have become instruments through which protest movements and civil society make their voices heard worldwide and put their (political) interests on the global agenda (Döring & Gundolf 2006, 256; Castells et al. 2004, 212; Castells 2012). Notably in Iran and Syria, videos of dying protest participants captured on mobile phones and disseminated via social platforms have played an outstanding role. As Starr observed:

> It was from Iran … that the world first saw the grainy phone camera images of pro-democracy activists being gunned down by state forces. But it was in Syria that mobile phone cameras gave illustration to an entire revolution. (2012, 55)

The proliferation of mobile phone images and videos from Iran and Syria raises several questions about the broader effects of such media phenomena in the context of protest and conflict, including how mobile videos recording death are perceived and construed in different media and public contexts, and what the implications of the prevalence of such videos are for the public perception and interpretation of the Iranian and Syrian conflicts. This article focuses on the integration of a discursive and media-aesthetic perspective in one approach to the analysis of mobile death videos in the protests and conflicts in Iran and Syria. Its aim is to point out the oft-neglected interdependency of discursive and media-aesthetic effects and to identify central points of reference for further research on the public perception and interpretation of the Iranian and Syrian situations.[2]

For this purpose, the article presents an exploration of two mobile death videos that appeared in the course of the Iranian and Syrian protests and conflicts: the mobile video of Neda Agha-Soltan's death in Iran and the mobile video of a man filming his own death in Syria. Despite their many similarities these videos were in fact selected because they differ in one central respect. Both emerged as manifestations of a conflict between a civil society and an authoritarian regime, and both were subject to a process of utilisation for different actors' purposes and (political) interests. By and large, both videos have the same plot—a protest participant is shot by a sniper—, but the incidents are shown from two very different perspectives: in the Iranian case, the mobile video was shot from an observer's perspective and provided an intense visual account of Neda's death, whereas in the Syrian case, the mobile video was shot from the cameraman's point of view and shows an unseen and uncertain, but nonetheless affecting death of an unknown person. Because of these distinct aesthetics and displays of death, these mobile videos meet the criteria for a study of the interdependency of discursive and media-aesthetic effects on public perception and interpretation of the Iranian and Syrian protests and conflicts. Given the exploratory nature of this article, the public reception of the videos is examined in different media contexts, namely news coverage, documentaries, and artistic performances, as a model for further study. The respective reports, sequences, and artistic pieces were selected by means of the snowball system to provide a first examination of and approach to the phenomenon of mobile death videos in these particular protests and conflicts.

The following sections first introduce the discursive and media-aesthetic perspectives as applied in this article and combine them into one research perspective for the study of the selected mobile death videos via the concept of agential realism. Second, the broader conflict situations in Iran and Syria and the appearance of the selected mobile videos are briefly outlined. Third, the mobile death videos are examined for their discursive and media-aesthetic effects on the perception and interpretation of the Iranian and Syrian protests and conflicts. Of particular interest are the symbolic and representational effects of the selected mobile death videos, the affective impacts of these recordings of death, and the discursive and aesthetic practices in making public certain accounts of the protest and conflict reality in Iran and Syria. Fourth, the wider consequences of the discursive-media-aesthetic effects of mobile death videos for the prevailing order of power are explored. Finally, the conclusion summarises the broader implications of mobile death videos for the public perception and interpretation of protests and conflicts and indicates points of reference for further research.

A Discursive-Media-Aesthetic Research Perspective on Mobile Death Videos

This article proceeds from the understanding that in today's digitalised world, discourse practices and the aesthetic materiality of the media are elements that both constitute and result from what is perceived as reality. The underlying

theoretical assumptions for this understanding derive from the merging of Foucauldian discourse theory, media aesthetics, and the concept of agential realism, which are sketched in the following paragraphs.

Examined from a Foucauldian perspective, discourses are not mere conglomerates of signs, but practices that systematically constitute the objects and subjects being talked about (Foucault 2008 [1969], 525). Discourse practices follow regulative formations, i.e. constitutive epistemological rules, which determine—or at least constrain—which statements are considered or recognised as meaningful within a particular discourse (Doll 2012, 52; Foucault 2008 [1969], 504; Foucault 2008 [1966], 28–29; Barad 2007, 63). Put differently, discourse practices are the conditions that circumscribe what is speakable or visible in public discourse and how reality—or a given protest or conflict situation—is perceived and interpreted (Maasen, Mayerhausen, & Renggli 2006, 13–14). The analytical attention of a Foucauldian discourse perspective is directed to the identification of struggles of interpretation in which discourse and counter-discourse are situated in conflict with each other and become the arena for negotiation processes between power and counter-power (Foucault 2008 [1976], 1104–05; Jäger 2001, 130). Hence, a discourse analysis concentrates on the relation between statements, the conditions of their validity regarding their discursive truths, and their circumstances of existence within a discourse (Doll 2012, 52; Foucault 2008 [1969], 504).

Usually, the Foucauldian discourse perspective is applied to texts, turning the research focus to what is speakable or unspeakable in discourse (Mayerhausen 2006, 78). However, Foucault (2008 [1969], 580–81) also took the materiality of a statement into account in identifying its discursive effect. Although he primarily considered the syntactic and semantic level of statements as well as their authorship in *the Archaeology of Knowledge* (2008 [1969]), the inquiry on the discursive effects of the materiality of statements should not be confined to the context and form of utterance, but also include an audio-visual and affective dimension of sensual experiences. In this respect, the media embeddedness of statements—e.g. in a mobile video—makes a difference in the discursive effect. With this in mind, one enters the field of media aesthetics.

As applied in this article, media aesthetics refers to questions on the perceptive effects that originate in the technical apparatus and in the particular form of media expression (cf. Schnell 2002, 208). The research objective of a media-aesthetic approach is therefore the exploration of media-specific potentialities and features in the sense of techniques and means for processing contents and objects (cf. ibid.). In accordance with Walter Benjamin's (1936) thinking, a media-aesthetic perspective focuses on technical mediation and the manner of reproduction. In his essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* Benjamin (ibid., 4–7) inquired into issues on the aesthetics of photographic and film representations, which are still debated today (e.g. questions on the here and now, cursoriness and repeatability, or authenticity and authorship). Consequently, the technical apparatus of media is a central aspect of the perception, constitution, and representation of reality (ibid., 13–14).

Thus, a media-aesthetic perspective is an important complement to the discourse-analytical study of media phenomena, as it goes beyond the often exclusive focus on verbal and visual statements in discourse-theoretical inquiries and overcomes the broad disregard of the material and aesthetic quality of media. Especially given Leschke's (2013, 21–22) explanation of the emergence of new media with cultural and social valency, which opens up new aesthetic forms of representation, reaches new recipient groups, and thereby challenges the traditional order of the so-called definatory power, the importance of merging a discourse-theoretical and media-aesthetic perspective in the study of mobile death videos in the context of the Iranian and Syrian protests and conflicts becomes apparent. Karen Barad's (2007, 26) concept of agential realism represents just such a unifying approach.

In general, the concept of agential realism endeavours to provide a new understanding of how discourse practices are related to the material world (ibid., 34). Barad (ibid., ix) understands the perceivable reality as a social-material practice that is equally constituted by discursive and material, human and non-human, natural and cultural factors. She defines the relation between these different factors as reciprocal *intra*-action and posits that being in the world is not an individual, but an entangled matter. Individuals or entities do not pre-exist an interaction, but only come into being in the course of and as part of their interrelated interactions (ibid., ix). Thus, following Barad (2007, 336), the media-aesthetic and discursive effects of the selected mobile death videos can be understood as reciprocally and equally involved in the intra-active constitution, perception, and interpretation of the conflict and protest reality in Iran and Syria.

Hence, the discursive and aesthetic dimensions of mobile death videos are analysed here as interdependent and intra-active aspects of the perception and interpretation of conflict reality in general, and of the Iranian and Syrian protests and conflicts in particular. Analytical questions on this basis are: (1) What are the struggles of interpretation that unfold in the context of the selected mobile death videos and whose views and voices are visible and audible in the public discourse? (2) What perceptions and interpretations derive from the media-aesthetic quality of the selected mobile death videos and how do they relate to the visibility and audibility in public discourse? (3) What order of power becomes apparent in the discursive-media-aesthetic practice in the context of the selected mobile death videos?

Building on the interdependency and intra-activity of discursive and media-aesthetic effects, I will not address these questions in a sequential manner, but rather will interweave them by focusing on different analytical themes. This method is guided by Barad's (2007, 30) approach, which is related to her concept of agential realism. Her methodology promotes a diffractive analysis,[3] in which insights provided by different theoretical approaches are not read against, but *through* one another to shed light on the making of differences as they occur. Following an outline of the broader protest and conflict contexts in Iran and Syria, I study the discursive and media-aesthetic effects of the selected mobile death videos on this basis.

The Iranian Green Movement 2009 and the Mobile Video of Neda's Death

The protest movement in Iran—better known as the *Iranian Green Movement* and often called *Iran's Twitter Revolution*—began in the context of the Iranian presidential election in June 2009. The Green Movement was constituted on the verge of the election by a grassroots mobilisation of the Iranian people, who supported the reformist campaign (Jafari 2010, 181; Sahimi 2010, 295; Emamzadeh 2011, 19). On June 12, the announcement of Ahmadinejad's two-thirds victory dashed the hopes of the reform-orientated population (Abrahamian 2010, 66). The reformists' supporters claimed election fraud, and shortly afterwards green waves of protest filled the streets of Tehran (Jafari 2010, 180, 186–88). After the first demonstrations, the Iranian government took drastic measures: it imposed a ban on demonstrations, threatened to execute everyone who had participated in or called for demonstrations, and unleashed thousands of revolutionary guards and Basij militia[4] on motorbikes armed with assault rifles, knives, and truncheons to put a stop to the protests (Abrahamian 2010, 68). Nevertheless, the street protests continued throughout the year (Hashemi & Postel 2010, xv).

One crucial reason for the persistence of the protests was their social-network character, the backbone of which was digital media such as the internet and mobile phones (Sahimi 2010, 304; Kurzman 2010, 7). Although the Iranian regime carried out a widespread „media crackdown" (Sabety 2010, 119) by blocking mobile communication and websites as well as by expelling foreign journalists and shutting down foreign broadcasting and oppositional newspapers (Alizadeh 2010, 4; Abrahamian 2010, 68), it did not succeed in stopping the stream of information flowing out of Iran. First and foremost, Twitter and mobile phones took centre stage once the protesters found ways to unblock websites and disseminate their reports and images of the conflict (Hashem & Najjar 2010, 128). Videos and photographs recorded by mobile phones became accessible to the international public via blogs, Facebook, and YouTube (Sabety 2010, 119; Sreberny & Khiabany

2010, 173; Emamzadeh 2011, 21). In the absence of other information sources, foreign news media soon came to rely on these amateur videos, photos, and reports in covering the events in Iran (Sabety 2010, 120; Emamzadeh 2011, 21).

One sad zenith of the mobile phone and social media usage was reached on 20 June 2009: Neda Agha-Soltan—a young, female Iranian student—was shot dead in the streets of Tehran. Her dying moments were captured on a mobile video and disseminated via YouTube for the whole world to be witnessed (Bashi 2010, 40; Emamzadeh 2011, 24; Sabety 2010, 121). Shortly after the video was released on the web, the opposition declared a Basji militiaman the perpetrator; the Iranian government on the other hand accused a protest participant. To this day, the real circumstances of Neda's death remain unclear (Bach Malek 2010, 287). However, her death played an important role for the Green Movement and the following protest actions.

The first mobile video of Neda's death was uploaded on YouTube on 20 June 2009—the very day the incident took place. The uploading user identifies himself in the description of the video as a doctor who was coincidently close to Neda when she was shot. He gives a detailed eyewitness account of the circumstances of her death, the location, and the perpetrator. He also identifies the maker of the mobile video as a friend of his who had accompanied him that day (FEELTHELIGHT 2009). As it happened, Neda's death was captured not once, but twice. On 21 June 2009, a second video was uploaded on YouTube, showing the 40-second footage of the first video followed by a 13-second footage of the incident filmed by another mobile phone user. The description of this video is less detailed; it notes only that the name *Neda* means *voice* in English, and comments on the world's witnessing and remembering her death (pmayer33 2009).

Almost instantly, the footage of Neda's death gained worldwide attention, not only via the internet, but also through international media coverage, e.g. by the BBC, CNN, Al-Jazeera, France24, and Euronews, which included single sequences of the footages in their reports (Afshar 2010, 242). Still images from the mobile videos were also reprinted in newspapers and news magazines and distributed via news websites (e.g. Heyer 2009; Putz 2009a; Wernicke 2009b; Jaschensky 2009a; von Rohr 2009; Abadi et al. 2009). Moreover, Neda's death gave rise to documentaries by the BBC and HBO (batracom 2009a-f; TheNedaOfIran 2010a-g) and inspired artists to compose songs and poems in her memory and in the cause of the Green Movement, accompanied by videos containing the filmed sequences (e.g. sepehrpro 2009; VideoHalls 2013; voetbalnu 2009; GregVguitarist 2009; IranBrave 2009). The impact of these media accounts of Neda's death and the mobile footage is elaborated on below following a brief introduction to the Syrian case.

The Syrian Uprising and the Mobile Video of a Man Filming His Own Death

The Syrian uprising occurred in the broader context of the Arab Spring. The starting point is usually referred to as 15 March 2011, the date when demonstrators were shot dead and hundreds were injured during demonstrations in Dara'a (Syria) in response to the arrest of school children who had written graffiti demanding the fall of the regime. In the following days, men, women, and children took to the streets in other Syrian cities and villages to express their solidarity and to demonstrate against police arbitrariness, the emergency legislation, corruption, and nepotism (bpb 2011; Wieland 2012, 18). To suppress the protests, the regime resorted to military force, deployed snipers, laid siege to cities, and conducted mass arrests and tortures. Nevertheless, the intensity and the reach of protests increased, and in response to the regime's violence, the protesters' demands changed: in July of 2011, more than one million Syrian people called for the resignation of President Bashar Al-Assad (Asseburg 2013, 12).[5]

International journalists and observers alike have depended on the social media for reporting and getting an idea of the events in Syria (Gerlach & Metzger 2013, 5). Foreign journalists are subject to an entry ban. The Syrian news media have been state controlled since 2001 and provide a biased perspective on events (Wimmen 2011; Pies & Madanat 2011, 4). In

this restricted environment, 'mobile phone videos became virtually the only way to report on protests' (Comninos 2011, 9), while YouTube emerged as the central platform for citizen video reportage—giving the protests the byname *YouTube Uprising* (Youmans & York 2012, 30).

At first, the Syrian regime intended to shut off the internet completely, but decided to allow access to Facebook, Blogspot, and YouTube to enhance its means of surveillance. Although this move demonstrates the potential use of the social media for state repression (ibid., 322), for the Syrian government the attempt to maintain control of the news agenda and insurgent behaviour backfired badly: After political activists transferred mobile phones, cameras, and laptops to Syria illegally, videos disseminated via mobile phones and uploaded to Facebook or YouTube provided the international public with images of unarmed demonstrators and protesters shot down or beaten down by regime forces (Axford 2011, 683; Youmans & York 2012, 230; Khamis, Gold, & Vaughn 2012, 9).

As the civil war in Syria turned more and more violent, the videos on YouTube likewise increased in their display of brutality. The short clips soon became part of the conflict, each side producing its own propaganda material or picking up existing material from the other side either to discredit or intimidate the enemy (Salloum 2013). One example of how video material became an instrument of war and conflict is the mobile video of a man recording his own death, which was uploaded to YouTube on 4 June 2011 (netspanner 2011).

The video is available on YouTube at least twice in its original form—once with an English heading and description, once with an Arabic heading and description.[6] The camera shoots the surrounding buildings in a poor quality and unstable pan; troubled Arabic voices and gunshots are heard. By chance, the camera catches for a few seconds a man in a green suit: he approaches the man doing the filming, aims a rifle at the cameraman, and then shoots him. The image breaks off; a rustling sound is heard. The image goes blank for more than thirty seconds while the Arabic voices seem more agitated and a groaning, human sound is audible. After one minute and 24 seconds, the video ends, leaving many questions: What happened to the man who was shot? Is he dead? Who is he? Who is the man with the gun? Why did the cameraman not hide or duck when the gun was pointed at him? And is the video real or fake?

In the English version, the video itself as well as the description offers little information about the broader circumstances of the incident. The caption simply says, 'Man films his own death while covering protests in Syria' (ibid.), and then proceeds to a translation of the Arabic dialogue in the video. In the translation the cameraman and one of his companions describe the situation as an unreasonable, armed attack on Syrians by military forces on 1 June 2011, then someone says that the cameraman was shot in the head. The last line quotes the companion as saying, 'What you were filming?!?!' (ibid.), thereby characterising the video as an (un)fortunate accident and creating an impression of authenticity. However, the authenticity of the footage has been highly disputed in the commentaries on YouTube (ibid.). The video also became the subject of news reports and artistic performances, which will be examined below.

Having introduced each case, as well as the theoretical and methodological approaches, I will now proceed to an analysis of the selected mobile death videos from Iran and Syria. The following paragraphs examine the discursive and media-aesthetic effects, firstly, by looking at the impact on the perception and interpretation of the protests and conflicts in terms of international mobilisation and solidarity with the movements and, secondly, by concentrating on their influence on the visibility and audibility of different stories on the conflicts and protests in public discourse.

The Mobilising and Solidarising Impact of the Mobile Death Videos

The mobile death videos have had a worldwide mobilising and solidarising effect. Particularly in the Iranian case, the videos

strengthened the ideological basis of the movement, as Neda's death became a public happening as the result of the worldwide dissemination of the video and the images of the incident. Three central features stand out in this respect: the function of the mobile death images as visual proof and symbols of state brutality and the asymmetric violence that persists in Iran and Syria; the recourse to religious and cultural myths in the accounts of Neda's death; and the impact of the images on the affectivity of human tragedy and death.[7]

Visual Proof and Symbols of State Brutality and Asymmetric Violence

One significant feature of the solidarising effect is the witness account produced by the videos and their intimate closeness. The grainy quality of the mobile videos resembles what Dovey has described as a 'low grade video image' (2000, 55) in the context of camcorder footage used in documentaries. According to Dovey, the low quality video image 'has become *the* privileged form of TV "truth telling", signifying authenticity and an indexical reproduction of the real world' (ibid.; italics in original). For this reason, the grainy video images imply that the recording shows what was before the camera. Features such as to-camera close-up, shaking camera movements, and an embodied intimacy of the technical process create a feeling of immediacy in regard to the presence and the filmmaking (ibid., 56–57).

Furthermore, considering not only the unsteady movement of the mobile camera towards Neda, who is lying on the ground, then the camera's closing in on her face and circling the persons surrounding her to get an unobstructed shot of her dying seconds, and also considering the moment of recording from the filmmaker's point of view, we come closer to an instant of disturbing immediacy. As Kurzman described it:

> Somebody at this demonstration saw a person get shot, and within a second or two, he took out his cell phone, turned on the video function, and filmed the victim. He didn't take a quick picture and run away from the sniper. Instead, he walked toward Neda. There is no zoom function on standard cell-phone cameras, but by the final frame of the video, Neda's face almost fills the frame. Thus, the cameraman must have held his phone out just a couple feet from this dying woman. There's something cruel in that, but also something very media savvy—knowing that the close-up will maximize the impact of the image. (Kurzman 2010, 13)

Considering Strangelove's statement that YouTube and its amateur videos are perceived as providing 'a more authentic experience' (2010, 65)—i.e. something more real than TV—, the participating and sympathetic impression of the mobile video of Neda's death becomes apparent. Complementing the sympathetic aesthetics of the mobile video, Neda and the circumstances of her death were framed in a way that made her symbolically useful on an international level in the cause of the Green Movement. For instance, news reports accentuated the violent aspect of Neda's death, while at the same time stating that Neda had fallen victim to a brutal militiaman of the regime (Wernicke 2009b).

In the Syrian case, the aesthetics of the mobile death video entail a comparable immediate and sympathetic appeal, especially given that the unstable panning of the camera appears to convey the anxiety of the man behind the camera who falls victim to the regime. However, a more important symbolic effect emanates from the two-fold shooting violence shown in the video. As Rabih Mroué (2012, 29) has already indicated in his artistic performance, the double shooting—one with a rifle and the other with a camera—signifies the two conflicting sides: the forces of the regime armed with automatic weapons and the protesters armed with mobile phones. In this regard, the video functions as visual proof of disproportionate violence and state cruelty against civilians, which is ongoing in Syria.

Thus, in both cases the mobile videos of protesters' deaths are strong visual symbols of the state brutality and asymmetric violence prevailing in Iran and Syria, which is having a justifying effect on the cause and stance of the protest movements. Together with the witnessing and sympathetic appeal of the videos' aesthetics, the solidarity and support for the protests is legitimised.

Female Victim or Martyr? Ambitious Representations of Neda and the Ideological Strengthening of the Green Movement

The exhibits of Neda's death in international reportage had an ambitious character. On the one hand, the media portrayed her as the innocent female victim of a male-dominated regime, a passive bystander who accidentally got caught up in the struggle against the powers that be (Afshar 2010, 243–46). On the other hand, an opposite characterisation of Neda prevailed: that of a female martyr and active fighter for a (morally) higher cause (i.e., the cause of the Green Movement).[8] In this regard, mainstream media described Neda's martyrdom as self-sacrifice in the struggle for freedom and democracy for the Iranian people (Jaschensky 2009b; Putz 2009a).

While the former portrayal accords with the symbolic effect of the mobile death video in terms of attesting to the presence of asymmetric violence in Iran, the martyr portrayal is closely linked to an identity-establishing effect for the supporters of the Green Movement. In light of the omnipresent phrase 'I am Neda' on social network sites and protest signs (Putz 2009a), Neda's death—or her sacrifice—offered potential for strengthening the collective identity and ideological foundation of the Green Movement. Furthermore, the title 'the Jeanne d'Arc of Iran' or Tehran bestowed on her in news reports (ibid.; Davis 2009) extended the symbolic effect of Neda's martyrdom to the international level. In the myth, Jeanne d'Arc's actions have been described as resistance to authority in the battle for law, justice, freedom, and peace (Heilig 2008, 20; Schäfer 2011; Rieger, Breithecker & Wodianka 2003, 152). The reference to Jeanne d'Arc attributes a similar aspiration to Neda and the Green Movement. Through recourse to this collective figure of Western culture, the cause of the Green Movement gained cross-cultural legitimacy.

Moreover, Jeanne d'Arc has been depicted as an emancipated fighter in the myth (Rieger, Breithecker, & Wodianka 2003, 152; Heilig 2008, 20). Invoked as a parallel to Neda's death, the analogy alludes first and foremost to the discrimination against women in Iran. The reference to the French martyr emphasises the emancipated role of women in the Iranian Green Movement, as well as their desire for more freedom. Neda, and in a symbolic sense Iranian women as a whole, take a stand for their ideals and for political change just as the historical model did. Considering the prevailing Western desire to liberate Muslim women (Kurzman 2010, 9), this portrayal in the mainstream media made Neda the iconic symbol of the century-long struggle of Iranian women for freedom and emancipation and thus increased international solidarity with the Green Movement.

The Affectivity of Human Tragedy and Death

In the mobile videos of Neda's death, the displayed patterns of 'revolutionary action and state brutalism appeal to wider audiences largely because they are touched primarily by the human [tragedy] being played out' (Axford 2011, 684). And although the effect of these scenes may be fleeting (ibid.), it is amplified by the frequent revisiting of the videos in other media context. The human tragedy of this event was evident in numerous reports that covered the grieving of Neda's family and friends, as well as the various ceremonies of mourning both in Iran and abroad (e.g. Putz 2009b; Jaschensky 2009b; von Rohr 2009; batracom 2009f). Furthermore, in Neda's case human loss was personified because her identity was revealed right from the start.[9]

The dramatic language in the news reports on Neda's death reinforced the impression of human tragedy and charged the coverage emotionally (Reimann 2009, Putz 2009b; Wernicke 2009b; Jaschensky 2009a). This emotion-laden representation

of Neda's death is a central aspect of the international mobilisation of the Green Movement. According to Castells (2012, 13–14), emotions are highly relevant for social movements on an individual level. Citing the theory of affective intelligence, Castells points to fear and enthusiasm as the most important emotions for social mobilisation and political action, and develops a logic of transformation from emotion to action that is 'rooted in outrage, propelled by enthusiasm and motivated by hope' (ibid., 15). This kind of logic may drive a social movement if a communication process enables the connection of emotional activation from one individual to another and thereby creates an empathic relationship and a sense of togetherness by sharing feelings attached to an emotional event (ibid., 14–15):

> If many individuals feel humiliated, exploited, ignored or misrepresented, they are ready to transform their anger into action, as soon as they overcome their fear. And they overcome their fear by the extreme expression of anger, in the form of outrage, when learning of an unbearable event suffered by someone with whom they identify. (ibid., 15)

Neda's death qualifies as the unbearable event with which supporters and sympathisers of the Green Movement could identify. As a young protester, she represented the part of Iranian society that was hit particularly hard by state repressions and that was depicted as the regime's principal antagonists during the protests. Thus, the recording of Neda's death functioned both as proof of the prevailing danger and violence in Iran against demonstrators who are fighting for their rights and as testimony of the willingness of the Iranian people to push against the Iranian regime for their rights. The combination produced a shared experience of outrage and enthusiasm necessary for a feeling of worldwide togetherness and solidarity with the Green Movement.

None of the above-described features is found in the mobile death video from Syria. Nevertheless, this video too conveys a moment of human tragedy in its aesthetic device, and it too taps into the affectivity of death. If this video is taken as a document of the last images the cameraman saw, then Mroué's (2012, 30) performance once again provides important points of reference. The scenes in the video give an impression of the cameraman's psychological and physical experience in the moments before his death. The shaky, unstable, fast-moving images, the unclear and unfocused view of the surroundings resemble his 'nervousness, stress, fear, and excitement' (ibid.) and seem to be the result of the trembling and shaking of his body. The effect continues after the gunshot, when the spectator stares at a blank screen that perhaps mirrors the vision of the mortally wounded man lying on the ground, gazing unfocused into the distance, while the spectator listens to his agonising groans and the bewildered voices around him. Thus, even though the person behind the camera remains unknown, the incident is not personified, and this death is unseen and uncertain, the video's aesthetic devices nonetheless convey an intense moment of death and the human tragedy of the protests, producing a solidarising effect in the cause of the Syrian protest movement. Hence, the moments of human tragedy and death contained in the mobile death videos from Iran and Syria have had an effect on the protests movements both on a discursive and a media-aesthetic level.

Telling One's Own Story: Visibility and Audibility in Public Discourse

The mobile death videos have played a significant role in the Iranian and Syrian protest movements by telling the protester's version of events and making their part of the narrative about the conflicts more visible and audible in public discourse. In this regard, two aspects are of particular importance: the symbolic function and the discursive deployment of Neda's face and voice, and the creation of discursive spaces of truth telling by relying on the question of authenticity and authorship as a regulative formation.

The Face and Voice of Neda and the Representational Power of Amateur Videos

Neda gave the Green Movement a face – literally (Kurzman 2010, 9). In the days following the incident, protest crowds carried signs displaying the young woman's portrait and images from the videos (batracom 2009e, 03:25–03:32). Neda's gravesite became a kind of sanctuary of resistance to the Iranian regime, when 'the opposition attracted hundreds, perhaps thousands of people to Neda's grave' (Kurzman 2010, 13–14) for the traditional Shiite mourning ceremony. During the ceremony, shrines were constructed using Neda's picture and stills from the mobile videos (batracom 2009f, 04:29-04:58). As Castells (2012, 55, 59–60) has observed in explaining the Egyptian Revolution, these public displays of the injustice and tragedy of Neda's death turned out to be a kind of occupational practice that transformed the streets of Tehran and other cities 'into the visible public space' (ibid.) for the protests. The mobile videos of Neda's death, as well as the mobile death video from Syria emerged as 'brief digital memorials' (Martin 2012, 20), which occupy both real and virtual space in their different material manifestations. In this respect, the public mourning and the condemnation of the protesters' deaths in real and virtual space were practices of protest and resistance, while the mobile death images became a tool for giving the protester's storyline higher visibility in the public discourse.

Moreover, Neda also gave the Green Movement a voice. On social networks, the sentence, 'They killed Neda, but not her voice', showed up repeatedly (Putz 2009a; Jaschensky 2009a). This phrase, in a variety of forms, became ubiquitous in different media contexts and gave rise to various creative works. One example is a song by the singer-songwriter Kawehi, which deals with the actions leading to Neda's death and the coping process from a personal perspective. In Kawehi's description of the video, the artist explains what motivated her to write the song by referring to the symbolism of the voice: 'Neda became the face of Iran's democracy movement – and the voice of women in Iran. ... There are more important voices that need to be heard – and this time, I choose for it to belong to one woman: Neda' (VideoHalls 2013). The lyrics also draw on this symbolism: 'They want you gone and silent / Declare you a martyr and let the streets run violent / ... / A voice should be heard / You showed me why and how'(ibid.). Neda may be physically gone, the song implies, but her voice —her message—stays alive.

The voice symbolism gains even more significance in relation to protest signs bearing the inscription 'Where Is My Vote?' pictured frequently in news reports (e.g. Abadi et al. 2009; Kolb 2009; Wernicke 2009a). Because 'vote' refers to one's political or electoral voice as well as to the human voice, the dissemination of the mobile video and the subsequent publicising of Neda's death had a liberating and empowering effect on the repressed Iranian people who were reclaiming their (political) voice and their public visibility and audibility.

The widespread and freely accessible mobile video of Neda's death is an example of amateur videography enabling people to (re-)gain 'an ancient form of representational power', as Strangelove puts it: 'the power to tell their own stories' (2010, 9), which transforms the hegemonic discursive order of 'who is saying what to whom' (ibid.).

Authenticity, Authorship, and Discursive Spaces of Truth Telling

Given the large number of videos showing violent incidents during the Syrian uprisings which have been instrumentalized for warfare and political purposes, it is hardly surprising that doubts have been expressed about the mobile death videos from Syria, despite their authentic and realistic resemblance to the grainy and shaky video images. Yet in the absence of international journalists in Syria, short videos captured by mobile phones or handheld cameras and uploaded to YouTube 'were important in showing both Syrians and the wider world that protests were actually taking place … around the country' (Starr 2012, 55). In this vein, news media such as *Al Jazeera*, *The Guardian*, and *Der Spiegel* picked up the mobile video of a man filming his own death despite its questionable authenticity and uncertain authorship (AlJazeeraEnglish 2011a; Black & Hassan 2011; Schröder 2011). Nevertheless, the problematic nature of the video gave rise to a strategy in which the

issue of authenticity and authorship turned out to be a discursive tool in creating a particular story of the ongoing events in Syria.

All three media channels gave essentially the same account of the mobile death video and the Syrian protests. They stated that the authenticity of the video could not be verified and that the identity of the cameraman was unknown, as there were no foreign journalists on the ground who could—and this is the underlying subtext of these lines—provide an impartial testimony of events (ibid.). It was explained that the footage apparently showed a scene in the city of Homs where a shooting took place on 1 July 2011—without reason and without any protests happening.[10] The targets were identified as Syrian citizens, the perpetrators referred to only as *someone*. The media called the gunman a Shabiha militiaman,[11] based on information provided in the video. The reports continued by referring to another video clip uploaded on YouTube covering a similar protest action in Homs, allegedly showing the same picture: unarmed demonstrators fleeing in panic from rifle fire with one protester falling dead on the street. In contrast to the first video, the identity of the person shot dead was revealed and confirmed by an eyewitness and expert account, namely Human Rights Watch (Black & Hassan 2011; Schröder 2011).

In these reports, the news media created a space of truth telling where the lack of certainty regarding the authenticity and authorship of the video was compensated for by other accounts that showed similar events and provided indicators that might prove the footage true. These accounts comply with a discursive practice of truth telling that refers to the authoritative power of eyewitness and expert reports.[12] In this context the question of authenticity and authorship is, in Foucault's (2008 [1969], 504) terms, a regulative formation as it is a conditional factor for the discursive validity of statements related to mobile videos occurring in the course of the Syrian conflict.

The question of authenticity and authorship also plays an important role in context of the mobile video of Neda's death. In light of its ambiguous circumstances, a similar interpretative struggle over the authenticity and authorship of the mobile videos between pro-regime and pro-movement actors prevailed in news reports (e.g. Babayigit 2009; Heyer 2009; Jaschensky 2009b; Shrivastava 2009), as well as in commentaries on YouTube (FEELTHELIGHT 2009) and emerged as a constitutive rule for the existence, validity, and relation of statements in discourse. The mobile death videos from Iran and Syria are, therefore, a case in point for the ongoing struggle on the prerogative of interpretation of the conflicts in Iran and Syria. This struggle is exemplified in the issue of authenticity and authorship, which functions as the epistemological condition allowing for the connection of different statements to one coherent discursive thread and provides these statements with validity in the discursive spaces of truth telling. However, given the above-mentioned authenticating effect of the aesthetic appearance of the recording of Neda's death, the importance of acknowledging both discursive and media-aesthetic aspects in the study of mobile death videos in protest and conflict contexts becomes apparent. The broader implications deriving from a discursive-media-aesthetic perspective on mobile death videos are explicated in the next section.

The Discursive-Media-Aesthetic Effect of Mobile Death Videos

The grainy quality of the images in the mobile videos of protesters by comparison with the high-quality images of the protests provided by state-owned media (e.g. AlJazeeraEnglish 2011b) makes the interplay of discursive and media-aesthetic effects in the struggle for the prerogative of interpretation and the establishment of reality-shaping truths apparent. As Mroué (2012, 20, 31) illustrates in his performance, the stable and clear images of state-owned media are achieved by using tripods, which provide stability not only in aiming a camera, but also in aiming automatic weapons. This gives rise to several associations: Firstly, the clear and stable images of the state media outlets are discursively connected to the armed and lethal violence of the Syrian regime. Secondly, the images become proof of the regime's intention to stay in power (Martin 2012, 20), its attempt to demonstrate 'the clarity of its vision and its purity' (Mroué 2012, 32) and thereby the veracity of its point

of view. However, if we stop to consider the preparation needed to produce these images (setting up the tripod, arranging and focusing the camera, and so on), their phoniness quickly becomes apparent (ibid.).

Thus, the unclear, shaky, and unstable images produced by the protesters seem in comparison more sincere as they try to give a genuine, uncensored account of the events in Syria 'in order to report to the world what they are going through' (ibid., 31). In this sense, the mobile death video from Syria—and this can also be said about the video of Neda's death—manifests an act of protest against and resistance to a repressive and violent regime by providing a divergent account of reality. This is achieved by relying on a different kind of narrative and a different kind of aesthetics. Similar to Martin's (2012, 20, 23) statement about the camera as a weapon of war and revolution, these mobile death videos are an aesthetic weapon of protest and resistance that is part of a counter-discourse setting out to undermine not only the hegemonic discursive order, but also the *aesthetic* order that is attempting to dominate the perceptions and interpretations of the Iranian and Syrian conflicts.

Not only are the mobile videos especially immediate and affecting documents of killings committed by brutal regimes, more important, they also *claim* to be true testimonies of death and irrefutable documents of the life-threatening situation for protesters in Iran and Syria. As recordings of death become increasingly subject to a process of constant revisiting, reframing, and contention in a discursive struggle of power and counter-power, the affective images of death become part of the constitutive process of conflict reality in today's digital media environment. What stands out in this context is that these visual representations of death are employed as discursive and aesthetic weapons of protest and resistance that challenge the hegemonic order of power. This process is linked to an altered surveillance landscape in which it is no longer a single eye— i.e. the all-seeing camera of the powers that be—scanning the surroundings, but many eyes equipped with mobile phones and handheld cameras, which take on an observing and documenting role and challenge the established discursive and aesthetic order. In contrast to Martin's (2012, 22) interpretation of this change in surveillance practice, this altered landscape builds on a constant and overt surveillance that is no longer cumulated in one, but rather in many observers who can publicise what is seen almost instantly in the moment of observation. Moreover, digital technologies allow for unlimited modifications and adaptations before re-entering the panoptic order. Thus, what ensues from Foucault's (2008 [1975], 900ff) concept of panoptism and Rheingold's (2002, xxi, xviii) references to the panoptic effect of today's networked society and grassroots activism in this context is a new kind of panoptic effect, all of whose facets are not yet understood.

Conclusions

This article has used an examination of two mobile death videos from Iran and Syria to draw attention to and provide a first understanding of the interdependent and intra-active relationship of discursive and media-aesthetic effects in the perception and interpretation of protests and conflicts in today's digitalised world. By exploring the solidarising and mobilising effects of selected mobile death videos from the Iranian and Syrian protest movements, as well as their impact on the visibility and audibility of deviating statements in public discourse, the analysis has shown that these recordings of deaths are affective discursive and aesthetic weapons in the struggle over the prerogative of interpretation and the shaping of what is perceived as reality. In this regard the issues of authenticity and authorship emerge as a pivotal regulative formation in the struggles over the interpretation of the Iranian and Syrian protests and conflicts, which operates on both the discursive and media-aesthetic level. Therefore, taking into account the research into the reality-shaping effect of mobile phone videos on the discursive and media-aesthetic levels yields significant insights into new ways of perceiving and representing conflict and protest incidents that have come about through the prevalence of social media. In the case of the Iranian and Syrian conflicts and protests, the increasing many-to-many communication via mobile videos and YouTube threatens the traditional asymmetric power relationship between a state and its citizens and potentially transforms the established panoptic order.

This article presents only a snapshot of the mobile death videos from the conflicts in Iran and Syria. More detailed and comprehensive studies are needed to analyse the effects of this kind of video as a discursive and aesthetic weapon in protest and conflict. For this purpose the central hypotheses that can be extracted from this article are: (1) mobile death videos are instances of omnipresent and permanent visibility and audibility introduced by the many-to-many communications of social media, signifying the entry into a new panoptic order; and (2) discursive and media-aesthetic effects are interrelated in the representation and interpretation of protests and conflicts, and they influence intra-actively what is perceived and recognised as protest and conflict reality. Moreover, given the explanations of the concept of agential realism and the intra-action of discursive and material factors, questions arise concerning the epistemological and ontological nature of conflict reality in the course of social media applications, which demand further research.

1. Castells defines protest movements in relation to social movements. Both arise from the 'suffering of people' (2012, 230), but unlike social movements, protest movements 'embody the fundamental project of transforming people into subjects of their own lives by affirming their autonomy vis-à-vis the institutions of society' (ibid.).

2. This paper draws on my ongoing PhD research into the significance of mobile phones and mobile death videos in the conflicts in Iran (2009) and Syria (2011–).

3. In physical terms, diffraction describes the behaviour of waves when they encounter an obstruction or interfere with each other. 'Unlike particles, waves can overlap at the same point in space' (Barad 2007, 76); the encounter produces either a larger or a smaller wave. Thus, in principle, the term diffraction refers to a phenomenon of difference in which disturbances signify an effect that constitutes a difference in the configuration of the world, which can interfere with other effects of disturbances (ibid., 72).

4. The Basij militia is a paramilitary organisation whose purpose is to defend Iran against the United States and internal enemies (Nordbjaerg Christensen 2010, 21–22).

5. Today the insurgents are demanding not only the fall of President Bashar Al-Assad, but also a basic re-definition of Syria's political constitution (Schumann & Jud 2013, 44).

6. The Arabic version is available at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q0pFYXHy9CY&feature=related.

7. This elaboration is based in part on a discourse analysis of the news coverage of two leading, opinion-forming German print media—Süddeutsche Zeitung and Der Spiegel—on mobile phone usage in the Iranian Green Movement, which I conducted in the course of research for my master's thesis (Meis 2012). The analysis was based on an examination of 68 news reports published from 12 June 2009 to 6 December 2009.

8. Martyrdom has a special relevance in Twelver Shia Islam, which prevails in Iran. According to Twelver Shia Islam, all Imams with the exception of the twelfth have died a violent death, suffered innocently, and are considered martyrs. To this day, the readiness for self-sacrifice in connection with grief for the fate of the Imams remains a characteristic feature of Twelver Shia Islam (Gronke 2009, 24, 107).

9. Owing to time pressures, the international news media at first mistakenly identified the woman in the video as Neda Soltani on the basis of messages and images circulating on Twitter and Facebook. This false information was later corrected. However, for the living Neda Soltani the mistake had serious consequences: she was pursued by the government and had to flee Iran (Emamzadeh 2011, 24).

10. The Guardian gave a more precise location of the incident as Karm al-Sham, a neighbourhood in Homs (Black & Hassan 2011).

11. Today the Shabiha is a kind of reserve army carrying out organised violence against civilians to protect the regime from the revolutionary threat (al-Haj Salih 2012, 2–4).

12. In her analysis of the practices of modern science, Haraway (1997, 23–39) points to the importance of having witnesses to establish credible facts; she elaborates on the interplay of objectivity, subjectivity, technology, materiality, and public

and collective witnessing in the agency of truth telling. As for experts, according to Foucault (2003 [1999], 10), the status of a person in society determines the weight attributed to his or her statement. Thus, expert accounts inspire a high degree of confidence in a statement that is on a subject related to the expert's knowledge and position in society (Balasak 2013, 19).

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Thanatos

Old Folks Never Die on TV: Representations of Corpses on American TV shows in the 21st Century

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Abstract

Every day during prime time, millions of viewers can view corpses and experience visually various body parts. This article examines different aesthetic techniques used to represent corpses on television in fictional American programmes in the twenty-first century. The empirical data consist of fifteen different television shows. In this paper two of the shows, a relatively little-known documentary, *Family Plots*, and a popular fictional series, *Six Feet Under*, are compared in order to demonstrate contrasting aesthetic styles of representing the deceased. The analytical method consists of a pictorial analysis arising from a structural-hermeneutic approach and based on three classic methods of image interpretation. The theoretical framework is primarily concerned with the discourse on corpse representations on television, in sociology, and in cultural science. The findings will show specific constraints on the presentation of dead bodies, including condition and position, which can be identified as manifestations of a new taboo. Despite these new representations, dead bodies connected with disorder, movement, or illness are largely absent. This paper argues that these constraints serve to protect from any harm the classical Western image of the dead as a silent sleeping beauty.

Only recently have cultural scientists described the dead body as invisible or as a subject that is taboo. (Bradbury 1999; Hallam, Hockey & Howarth 1999; Macho & Belting 2007) The purpose of this article is to examine the images of dead bodies on television and determine whether representational taboos exist and, if so, whether they can specifically be connected with death. At the dawn of the twenty-first century dead bodies proliferated in the context of a new series of American television shows. In these shows the deceased remained central to the plot and was shown at the crime scene and in a pathology lab or embalming area. Unlike action and horror movies, these prime-time television shows have no age restriction, and they attract audiences across the social spectrum worldwide.

This article will highlight the unique representation of corpses on contemporary American television by contrasting two programmes from different genres, each programme revolving around a family funeral business. The first and most popular, *Six Feet Under*, portrays a family and their work in the funeral business. In every episode someone dies at the beginning; the pilot episode begins with the death of the funeral director himself, Nathaniel Fisher, on Christmas Eve. From then on, Fisher's sons battle corporations that are competing for the family business. Fisher's widow and daughter have a different attitude to the presence of death and the daily problems. *Six Feet Under* was commissioned by HBO and produced from 2000 to 2005 by Alan Ball. In the five seasons there was a total of 63 episodes, each with a play length of approximately 60 minutes. The series contains elements of drama and black comedy. Numerous awards testify to its extremely high quality.

The second show, far less well known, is entitled *Family Plots*, available in two complete seasons on DVD. The series was created by A&E in 2005. Sixteen episodes with a play length of 30 minutes were produced. *Family Plots* is a little-known, but important documentary, because its subject matter serves as an analogy in documentary format to the highly dramatised *Six Feet Under*. *Family Plots* is about a family-run mortuary in San Diego, California, and the show concentrates on the employees' work and private lives. Occasionally, embalming, cosmetic preparation, or the dressing of the corpse may be shown. *Family Plots* is the first and so far, the only, TV programme about a funeral business to show real bodies of decedents. The corpses belong to elderly people.

Both programmes belong to a larger data set that consists of an additional thirteen American television shows, including *CSI Las Vegas, Crossing Jordan, Bones, Castle, NCIS, Dead Like Me, Pushing Daisies, Heroes, Dexter, Tru Calling, Dr. G, Autopsy, North Mission Road,* and *Quincy, M.E.* (a prototypical model), all of which were analysed for the research project 'Death and Dead Bodies: On the Change in Exposure to Death in Contemporary Society'. The material is comprised of approximately 5,000 screenshots representing death. The project was concerned with the tension between the displacement of death as a constitutive element of the modern age, on the one hand, and the increasing popularisation of the death in the recent decades, on the other. It focussed on the (clinical) autopsy and the dead body, which was treated as an object that generates tension between the removal of a taboo and the taboo of death. In most Western societies fewer and fewer people are prepared to assign their own or their relative's body to a clinical autopsy. The decrease in the clinical autopsy rate and its presumed acceptance stands in stark contrast to the publicity about dead bodies and their autopsies, as can be seen in the popularity of forensic autopsies on twenty-first century television shows. (Knoblauch 2009)

These fifteen programmes were selected because a corpse is a constant in every episode. *Six Feet Under* was chosen as the main example because it is representative of the entire data set in so far as this is possible. The documentary *Family Plots* was selected for its contrast to the fictional drama. The two programmes illustrate the specific constraints on the representation of dead bodies on fictional American TV shows in the twenty-first century, including the depiction of decline, dirt, and disorder. The television representations transform the image of a corpse from that of a peaceful sleeping body into that of a polluting and repulsive object. The profusion of corpses without these features shown on contemporary American television hardly conforms to the classical Western image of the silent sleeping beauty. What then do contemporary representations tell us about our collectively-held image of a socially acceptable portrayal of death?

Representation of Death on Television

The examination of representations of death in the media began in 1955 when Geoffrey Gorer argued in his article, 'Pornography of Death', that contemporary society was suppressing death as a taboo just as the Victorians had suppressed sexuality. According to Gorer, the subject of death has been a taboo and 'charged with pleasurable guilt or guilty pleasure' (Gorer 1965, 175). Among other sources Gorer referred to horror comics to demonstrate that a taboo topic does not simply disappear; instead, it is expressed in another form. In his view the taboo subject re-appears like pornography and charged with pleasurable guilt. Similarly, when death is a taboo subject in conversation, it shows up instead as a visual element in television culture. Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, images of dead bodies in pathology departments have found their way into television screens and thereby into public discourse. In prime time television, these images became ordinary experiential elements of television interaction. Does death then remain taboo?

Tony Walter (1991) thoroughly challenged Gorer's prominent thesis by analysing the ongoing debates as to whether or not a taboo really exists. Walter reviewed the strengths and weaknesses of the taboo thesis and presented six modifications. According to Walter, two highly influential institutions today – medicine and the media – have unusually strong anxieties

about death. These two institutions also have a great influence on society, providing us with schema on how to interpret death properly. Walter avers that media (and medicine):

> … to which our society has entrusted the interpretations and ritualisation of death … are, or have been, almost uniquely embarrassed by the subject. It is not, therefore, so much society as a whole, but these two key institutions, for whom death is, or was, a taboo. (Walter 1991, 303)

In 1999 Elizabeth Hallam et al. focused more precisely on the representation of dead bodies and their visibility, stating that the representation of the dead body 'functions to mask the material reality of embodied death and its destabilising effects' (Hallam, Hockey & Howarth 1999, 24). The portrayal covers up the disorder of the decaying body. The authors continued by asserting that historical studies on the diverse proliferation of death imagery prove that the dead body has been replaced by sophisticated systems of representation in order to maintain its social presence. (Hallam, Hockey & Howarth 1999, 22f)

In 2006 Hans Belting and Thomas Macho were arguing in *The New Visibility of Death* (Die Neue Sichtbarkeit des Todes) that death is now manifestly visible on television and that television images do not represent the dead, but instead, hide the dead behind substitutes and claims that humans have always masked those things they refuse to see. In 2008 Jacque Lynn Foltyn, in her article 'Dead famous and dead sexy: Popular culture, forensics, and the rise of the corpse', even branded the dead body on television as the new porn star, arguing in a manner recalling Gorer, that death is the new sex and the corpse is the new body, to be explored voyeuristically (Foltyn 2008).

On the other hand, Dolf Zillmann (2004) defines pornography as a pictorial representation of human sexual behaviour of every kind and in every connection. These definitions, of course, are based on the assumption that pornography is always what a society considers to be pornography at a certain time. This means that pornography is subject to temporal transformations of cultural norms. According to Herbert Selg, textual or graphic documents, which are classified as pornographic, illustrate the shift to a negative connotation because 'good pornography' is a contradiction in itself. (Selg 1997, 48) The categorisation 'pornography' contains the degradation primarily of female characters, thus defining what a specific society understands at a certain time as 'obscene'. The categorisation of the new media representation of corpses as pornography, even if portrayed as 'aesthetic pornography', describes the depreciation of these representations through the authors rather than the representation itself.

Here the circle closes. With the exception of Zillmann all of the aforementioned authors acknowledge the numerous examples of media representations of the dead, but still associate these representations with avoidance, denial, or negative connotations (i.e. pornography) ascribed to the phenomenon. This article will not follow this path, but instead will explore exactly what is taboo about representations of a dead body.

Features of Real Dead Bodies

The physical appearance of a body usually signifies the social appearance of a body. What does a dead body represent? Hallam et al. (1999) describe the specific characteristics and the potential threat of a real dead body, stressing the lack of control of bodily boundaries. The loss of control and the lack of boundaries between bodily interiority and exteriority are attached to shame and humiliation. The passage of organic matter out of the body or the failure to manage the movement of the limbs and facial muscles can create disturbing impressions.

… the body in decline through death or decay forms a potent reminder of frailty, vulnerability and mortality. The passage of time and the inevitability of physical transformation become powerfully evident. They provoke anxieties about the integrity of the body as it faces destruction. When emphasis is placed upon control and the regulation of the body as a prerequisite for the maintenance of self-identity, the dying body and the dead body acquire terrifying qualities. (Hallam, Hockey & Howarth 1999, 21)

This image can be associated with Mary Bradbury's (1999) elaboration on order, disorder, and dirt. Bradbury refers to Mary Douglas's ideas of pollution and taboo in 'Purity and Danger' (1966), and identifies the real dead body as 'matter out of place' (ibid. 1999, 119). The dead body is human in appearance, yet clearly not human. A dead body – grey, cold and unresponsive – challenges the survivor's senses. Bradbury states that decomposition might bewilder the observer because of the ambiguity of the presence of the corpse and its symbolic threat as a source of pollution.

Thus, many of the rituals of death and much of the symbolism about the dead are concerned with the corpse's transformation from the 'danger within' into an 'outside' object. (Bradbury 1999, 120)

Ideas about pollution are not only psychological fears, but also social expressions. Referring to nurses and doctors, Bradbury acknowledges that pollution is not so much caused by the physical contact with the dead body as a polluting object, but rather through the attribution of social roles. (Bradbury 1999, 120) While doctors and nurses engage in preserving life, the undertaker deals with their failure, the dead body. The undertaker endeavours to embalm the deceased in order to control the orifices of the dead body and thereby reduce not only the risk of infection, but also all other unpleasant side effects of the polluting decomposition process. (Bradbury 1999)

The act of embalming is not dissimilar to surgery or to a post-mortem. The embalmer works in a room that apes the appearance of a hospital theatre, and they make use of 'medical' tools and substances. Thus, in keeping with the dominant ideologies and beliefs of our time, embalming fits nicely into the domain of medical-type interventions. … Embalming can be viewed as a strategy whereby we attempt to attain some kind of mastery over death (Bradbury 1999, 128f).

Furthermore, Hallam Hockey & Howarth (1999) argue that Western societies are occupied with the body in life – its vital, beautiful, and healthy presence – and these social standards are transferred to the dead body. Christie Davies (1996) goes even further by claiming that foreign observers often see Americans as being obsessed with personal hygiene. The American predilection for embalming reveals a general pattern of cultural values and preferences. Just as Americans have spent their lives cultivating the body's appearance, the embalming of the body continues these efforts and ensures their perpetual preservation.

For Americans it is as important in life, as in embalmed death, to suppress all body smells and to achieve a sanitized odourlessness. The greater use of deodorants in America is an expression of the need to be clean, and is not in any sense a means for ensuring good health. … Health is important to Americans but the appearance of health and youth is just as important in its own right. (Davies 1996, 64f).

For all of these authors, the difference between a dead body and a sleeping body is the unmistakable appearance of decline, dirt, and disorder. Yet do contemporary television programmes present corpses onscreen in states of decay?

Analysis of the Representation of Dead Bodies on Television

Empirical Data

For an accurate analysis of audio-visual documents it is necessary to break them into single elements. These single elements are then analysed in order to capture important details about specific stylistic devices. The description and subsequent reconstruction of the meaning of these elements are essential before the elements are re-assembled as a whole and the audio-visual document interpreted. Yet one might object here, arguing that it is implausible to engage in such painstaking analysis, given that every film analysis requires countless film sequence protocols with descriptions, not to mention the respective subsequent protocols with reconstructions. This research, however, is concerned with dead bodies.

Representations of the dead, whether in a picture or on film, share certain characteristics. Compared to representations of the living, the sleeping, or even the comatose body, dead bodies do not move, respond, or interact. Passivity is this a stereotypical pattern that makes it possible to analyse the dead not as a person, but as an object. This is why screenshots were taken and analysed as stills: by looking carefully at a single picture, one can capture more detail than by looking at a sequence. At the same time, instead of only one television show, fifteen shows can be analysed, thus extending the depth and the scope of the study.

The selections of screenshots of dead bodies were limited to those showing the dead when they are most visible and in context-rich environments, i.e. those scenes that take place in a specific environment, such as the pathology room, the embalming room, the morgue, or the room in which the murder was carried out. *Six Feet Under* and *Family Plots* both focus on the life going on around the deceased. Every episode in *Six Feet Under* starts with someone's death. Most of the time, the bodies are seen in the embalming room. *Family Plots* depicts the daily routine of Poway Bernardo Mortuary in San Diego, while *Six Feet Under* presents a fictional funeral parlour in Los Angeles. The selected footage is representative of the study as a whole, as well as of each show.

Methodology: Pictorial Analysis

In addition to the statistical analysis of socio-structural aspects (e.g. age and gender) a novel social science method in the analysis of audio-visual representations is used, namely structural hermeneutic pictorial analysis. The method is unique in so far as the unusual object of the research is the representation of dead bodies on twenty-first century television programmes; the method itself is constructed to address this topic. Why is this method used and not another?

Stefan Mueller-Doohm (1993, 1997) connected hermeneutic and structural interpretation in order to combine an analysis of sense and meaning. He tested his analysis on text and pictorial messages, whereas this paper will introduce a pragmatic shortened pictorial analysis. Mueller-Doohm attempted to generate a cultural-image analysis and overcome the difference between the classical-hermeneutic and the structural-orientated interpretations. The result gave rise to three phases: a description of the analysis, a reconstruction of the analysis, and an interpretation of the analysis (see table 1.)

1. Description	2. Reconstruction	3. Interpretation
A. Analysis of pictorial elements: - Description of objects and people - Configuration of objects and people - Scenic relations and situations - Relations of action - Additional pictorial elements (logos or detail shots) B. Room/Space: - Pictorial format (also pictures within the picture) - General perspectives - Foreground / background, lines of flight, partial spatial perspectives, etc., planimetric conditions (lines, centrality, geometrical figures, faces, etc.) - Separate perspectives on arrangements C. Aesthetic elements: - Light and shade conditions - Styles: (e.g. natural, artificial, harmonious, disharmonious, static, moving, etc.) - Style contrasts/ breaks - Graphic / photographic practices (e.g. filtering, perspective, motion...) - Colours, contrasts, nuances D. Impression overall: - Overall impression in terms of 'mood impression'	A. Analysis of pictorial elements and connotation: - Of described objects and people - Configuration of objects and people - Scenic relations and situations - Relations of action - Additional pictorial elements (logos or detail shots) B. Room/Space: - Pictorial format (also pictures within the picture) - General perspectives: - Foreground / background, lines of flight, partial spatial perspectives, etc., planimetric conditions (lines, centrality, geometrical figures, faces, etc.) - Separate perspectives on arrangements C. Aesthetic elements - Light and shade conditions - Styles: (e.g. natural, artificial, harmonious, disharmonious, static, moving, etc.) - Style contrasts/ breaks - Graphic / photographic practices (e.g. filtering, perspective, motion ...) - Colours, contrasts, nuances	The interpretation starts with the synthesis of reconstructed meanings as cultural expressions of meanings. In this work I also want to compare the contemporary cultural expression of meanings to previous media representations in order to demonstrate how certain ideas of the dead can change in certain historical conditions.

Table 1. Description of analysis.

The first level, description, puts visual elements into words in a methodically controlled manner, which allows for an accurate and complete record of all pictorial elements and might stand as the constitutive elements of the symbolic pictorial message. With this method, a holistic data structure can be reconstructed and interpreted. The second level is reconstruction, an analysis of the elements already described for their symbolic meanings. Reconstruction is a tool for the development of these individual elements and their structures of meaning. The third level of analysis is socio-cultural interpretation. Here, the reconstructed symbolic meanings are attached to expressions of cultural patterns of meanings. According to Mueller-Doohm, this structure will generate a solid foundation for cultural interpretation, which is based on dense description and systematic reconstruction.

The analysis first aims to describe and then reconstruct the relations in which social phenomena are expressed. The hermeneutic-orientated approach includes inaccuracies in that one attributes isolated meanings to elements that are detached from their context. This failure can, however, be overcome in the structural-hermeneutic method by re-assembling the isolated elements into their former relations. Hence, a systematic hermeneutic-symbolic interpretation is based on a prior structural analysis of meaning. I have used the above methods in the analysis of the material, and below I will present the findings of this analysis.

Results

Death and Age

Not only are living characters unevenly distributed, but also the dead are unevenly shown. However, when it comes to the allocation of the age groups of the corpses, one feature stands out: the actors used to portray the stories in *Six Feet Under* are uniformly young. It is uncertain whether this is a general-level phenomenon (i.e. all television shows do not present equal proportions of the elderly and children) or whether the absence of the elderly in most episodes is better explained by the unease they might provoke in viewers about death.

The Elderly

Of the age groups depicted in *Six Feet Under*, those of mature and advanced ages are rarely seen, a circumstance made more unusual by the funeral parlour-context of the show. The series was produced in Los Angeles and was supposed to play there (the original run: 2001–2005). The death rates in Los Angeles, however, differ from the statistics suggested by the television series. According to the LA County Mortality Report from 2003, the highest death rates in Los Angeles are among the 75+ age group. Yet of 120 corpses shown either directly or covered on *Six Feet Under*, there was one infant, four children, one teenager, thirteen persons in their twenties, thirty-seven adults (30–50), thirty-five mature adults (50–70), and eighteen elderly adults (70+) died or were dead, and were covered or directly shown; eleven could not be identified. The elderly dead are not only underrepresented on the series, but are almost always completely covered with sheets or already dressed for burial. Although the elderly are underrepresented in *Family Plots*, their representation remains relatively constant: their bodies are consistently shown in the embalming room, either lying on a table, being treated, or ready for viewing.

There are occasional exceptions in *Six Feet Under*. In one episode an elderly woman was suffocated by her roommate with a sausage; in another an elderly man died with priapism in a nursing home. While the decedent with the priapism never appeared in the embalming room, the discovery and removal of the sausage from the throat of the elderly woman was by violent force to the head – a challenge to the peaceful depictions of elderly deaths.

Approximately thirty corpses are shown on *Family Plots*, and only twenty are not completely covered. By comparison with *Six Feet Under*, all twenty visible and recognisable decedents are elderly. The decedents are mainly white, with an equal balance between men and women. Most of the corpses were shown in Season 1 in the initial phase of the series. Another significant difference from *Six Feet Under* is that the documentary showed at least three elderly corpses with clear signs of old-age deterioration. Medium-range shots and close-up to medium-range shots of the hands of a decedent, for instance, showed age spots and decay, wrinkles and grey hair. Physical details such as these never appear in *Six Feet Under*, even if great importance is attached to certain treatments, such as sewing autopsy incisions. *Family Plots* differs from *Six Feet Under* in that it clearly represents decedents in older age groups. Because the family depicted in the documentary run a real funeral business, they cannot 'provide' younger decedents.

Representational restrictions in *Six Feet Under* apply not only to the depiction of the elderly, but also to their visual staging. In *Six Feet Under* Corpses of people who have reached old age are rarely seen, but if shown, they are modestly dressed or covered. Relative nudity is reserved for the young and beautiful. No signs of decay, old age, or other undesirable features such as loose skin are allowed. Furthermore, although people are living longer (Healey & Ross 2002), *Six Feet Under* does not reflect a realistic proportion of the population. Tim Healey and Karen Ross, referring to research conducted in the United States since the 1950s, focus on the discrepancy between the proportion of the population and their visibility across the television landscape. (Healey & Ross 2002) Similar to the conclusions of Hanley and Webster (2000), Healey and Ross conclude that elderly people are still less likely to be seen on television than in real life. Considering that *Six Feet Under*

portrays a funeral parlour, which, as the documentary showed, is in reality usually concerned with the elderly, a strong avoidance of the connection of 'death and old age', including typical signs of decay, is noticeable.

Children and Teenagers

As the child mortality rate declined sharply at the end of the nineteenth century, another concern related to the death of children permeated the social landscape, namely the emotional impact such deaths have on those who loved the child. (Bideau, Desjardins, Brignoli, & Hector 1997) Intensive and distinctive mourning for children became widespread and has been investigated in previous studies of parents (Avery & Reynolds 2000, Videka-Sherman 1987) and professionals (Timmermans 2006). *Six Feet Under* reflects the great emotional effect of a child's death. Of 120 corpses, only five under the age of sixteen are mentioned by the protagonists. Of these five, only an SIDS infant, a child, and a teenager are actually shown. The usual medium-close shot (of the head, neck, and chest) is not used to show the corpse of an infant or a child; only the extremities are shown, while the face stays covered. The explicit avoidance of the usual image when faced with a deceased infant conveys the powerful emotional effect of a child's death. Moreover, grief at the death of a child or infant is shared by relatives and professionals alike in the programmes, and even affects the professional embalmer, Rico, who usually handles decedents as if they were artworks. The intensity of Rico's emotional outburst is exceptional, revealing how emotionally affected is this otherwise case-hardened professional.

Six Feet Under also contradicts its standard practice by showing a teenager whose face is paralysed with laughter. This exceptional image signals an extraordinarily unusual position for the show by comparison with contemporary programmes. In the storyline a young teen, laughing about prank calls, fell off her bed while and broke her neck. In the funeral parlour the employees struggle to turn the stiff, bright, laughing mouth resembling a rictus into a closed smile by sewing the upper and lower jaws together. The staging is unique in that the teenage corpse depicts a head, but a head stiffened in gleeful laughter, subverting the ordinary picture that with death comes serenity.

In sum, two corpses of very young children are shown in *Six Feet Under* and an unusual teenage corpse. Young corpses are still underrepresented. In *Family Plots* only one infant death is mentioned, but is not shown. Nevertheless, the background to the infant death is portrayed with immense emotional sympathy through the actions of one of its characters.

Death and Disorder

During her field observation in a funeral parlour, Bradbury (1999) noted that the embalming room, tools, and substances found there resembled a hospital. She defined embalming as an attempt to control death, and she described the corpse as a potential source of pollution. This view is conveyed in the protective measures taken in dealing with the dead, such as the use of medical gloves in funeral parlours, and the same attitude is reflected in the characters in the television programmes under scrutiny. Medical gloves are used in both *Six Feet Under* and *Family Plots*, allegedly to prevent exposure to infectious matter. By contrast with the medical context, in the embalming environment the gloves only serve to protect the undertaker from disease by having contact with the dead body or body fluids. The use of medical gloves clearly indicates that the dead body is a polluting object, exposing the undertaker to risk of pollution. In order to confine the pollution, the dead body is treated with embalming chemicals, which keep the corpse in a sanitised condition and a controlled environment.

In *Six Feet Under*, all corpses in the embalming room are placed in a supine position on the embalming table. The only corpse showing any sign of disability is an ex-soldier; presumably, his disability could be shown because it was the result of an injury received in combat. Other excluded categories of matter include the discharge of excretions, mucosal secretions, or bodily fluids. Signs of age and decay are almost entirely absent. Blood is shown only occasionally, and usually appears detached

from the body from which it presumably originated. Most bodies are neatly covered and only touched appropriately with gloves. Thus, the classical image of the dead as bodies that are asleep is not challenged by any disturbance; the undertaker keeps the polluting object and its environment clean.

By contrast, in *Family Plots* the dead are shown throughout all stages of preparation for burial. However, no long shots of embalming procedures are taken. Sometimes faces of the decedents or certain body parts are covered by means of visual effects. No advanced, aesthetic media techniques such as those in *Six Feet Under* are used, which is why all the elderly decedents are seen with clear signs of age and decay. By contrast to *Six Feet Under*, a corpse is never shown without a cloth drape. The few deceased bodies that are exposed are shown without any body fluids. Still, two adult decedents are seen in diapers. The screenshot of one showed a dead person with his suit cut open to reveal a diaper, worn to prevent faecal pollution. The diaper was covered by using visual effects until just before the corpse was lifted. A 'glimpse of the polluting threat' is visible right at the end. The same efforts to impose order on the environment are noticeable on the corpse's table as well. The tables in *Six Feet Under* are always neat and clean. The camera almost never shows the embalming table covered with a mess like those seen at least four times in *Family Plots*. By contrast to *Six Feet Under* where blood or tools are rarely seen, in *Family Plots* the embalming table is sometimes covered with tools, paper, and bodily fluids. The table serves as a clean frame encapsulating the object of pollution. The body is often old and shows age spots, the corpse is not always clean, and sometimes the tables are messy. Yet even here, efforts to restore order and cleanliness are clearly manifest.

Death and Movement

Standing still and straight is only one of many complex bodily skills a person has to learn. The complexity of the necessary reflexes can be compared to a railway control system operating with 50 railways at the same time. (Todd 2003, 43) However, natural movement does not usually attract attention unless the movement appears clumsy, out of control, or is noticeably absent. Moving a dead body and revealing the full absence of will and body tension attracts attention because the movement of a lifeless body is seldom seen.

In *Six Feet Under* the undertaker transports the corpses either in body bags or coffins. Heads, arms, and hands are rarely moved during the cleaning and embalming. Only once was the leg of a male body lifted. The dressing or closing of the eyes or mouth is likewise never shown. The undertaker is never shown lifting corpses into the coffins, and once in the coffin, the dead person largely appears untouched. Here too, however, there is a notable exception, namely when the undertaker pulls a sausage out of the throat of a decedent, and the head of the corpse is tilted backwards at a bizarre angle. The most usual movement occurs when the undertakers sew up the autopsy incision. In almost every episode of *Six Feet Under* there are examples of how dead bodies are moved before arriving in the embalming rooms. Once in the embalming room, however, there will be no corpse motion: no uncovered corpse is lifted, turned, or made to sit with one exception. In Season 3, episode 6, a decidedly comic slant is added to the dramatic tension and played out in slapstick. The comedy develops when a funeral home employee discovers that, because a coffin has slipped, an overweight decedent has apparently fallen out of it. After the employee fails the attempts to return the body to the coffin, family members and a friend, on hand for the viewing of the body, are recruited to help. With the combined efforts of family and employees, whose faces are distorted by disgust and strain, the deceased is finally turned around on a gurney. Moving the body by the family members seems to be the punch line, as the efforts result in an incongruous situation that completely contradicts the natural repose and quiet of a normal viewing. Not least, in all the efforts to return the corpse to his coffin, the decedent's nose has ended up crooked.

Numerous theories about humour are found in many academic disciplines. Representations of the dead normally considered taboo can be avoided or weakened by means of humour. Martin A. Rod (2007) claims that the perception of incongruity plays a central role in humour and shows that taboos can be broken and represented humorously without being offensive. To

support the comedy of the scene in *Six Feet Under*, the rearrangement of the body on the gurney reveals the decedent's now-damaged and skewed nose, which had just been moulded by an embalmer. The entire sequence is absurd. What heightens the incongruity is the implicit reference to the usual conception of a decedent as a body-at-rest. Throughout all of the episodes in the series the deceased remain uniformly, static while the survivors act. In this scene, however, the survivors manoeuvre the deceased, which provides him once more with agency.

A breach of this particular paradigm reveals the representational taboo. The breach does not take place in the embalming room or pathology laboratory, but in the staged space devoted to the viewing. Indeed, it is here that all the behind-the-scenes efforts to socialise the dead body are meant to be on display. Humour is used to push the boundaries of convention. Social norms such as the peaceful repose of the dead are violated, but no one takes offence, since the scenes are indicated as belonging to comedy and are not meant to be taken seriously. *Six Feet Under* is always concerned with death, dying, and grieving for the deceased. A scene of comic relief provides some contrast to the omnipresent visual coverage of grief on these television programmes, which might be too exhausting for viewers.

While *Six Feet Under* avoided scenes in which corpses are lifted into their coffins, the documentary *Family Plots* shows the dead literally hanging in the air while being lifted into a coffin. The entire dead-body-in-motion can only be seen when the corpses are enclosed in body bags or, as described above, in comic scenes. In one shot, a body is attached to ropes, hovers in the air, and is lifted into the coffin. This daily routine, lifting the body into the coffin, would only be conceivable in *Six Feet Under* if the action were embedded in comedy. In another picture, visual effects obscure the face and identity of the decedent. The visual effects also conceal the stomach area in which the undertaker, Shonna (only whose hands are shown), is busy with embalming tools. She restrains one arm of a corpse to avoid agitating it. During this quick shot, however, the movements can be observed. In the documentary, the body's identity is not revealed and supposedly intolerable scenes are covered. Like the diaper scene in *Six Feet Under*, these movements are excluded from view. The urge to avoid too many confusing images is clearly recognisable in these scenes, which are partly obscured by means of visual effects.

Death and illness

The subsection on the connection between death and illness is short because the connection is nearly invisible on the television shows analysed here. Individuals can die from illness, accidents, homicide, suicide, or old age. Many are treated in hospitals or ambulances in order to save and prolong their lives. Yet, while accidents and homicide victims on the TV shows have clear signs of fatal wounds or the characteristic Y incision of an autopsy on their bodies, signs of illness, disabilities, or infections are to a large extent absent. Medical techniques or tools belonging to life-prolonging actions (e.g. CPR, First Aid, etc.), hospitals, or medical efforts are seldom seen in connection with the corpses. Of the scenes examined, hospital-coded armbands were shown in 2 out of 30 corpse representations in *Family Plots*, and surgical dressings appeared in 2 out of 210 corpses in *Six Feet Under*.

Discussion

Where can we see a corpse other than in the media? The possibilities are rare and often involve grief. For the public the only audio-visual resource is television. Representations of the dead in the audio-visual media are unlimited. These representations are shaped by censors and determined by censorship negotiations. Television, therefore, represents rather subjective perspectives on the dead. Television today also introduces viewers to areas of death to which they previously had no access. Perceptions shown in films provide foundations for everyday communication. Since the viewer can 'follow' the camera into the hospital, pathology laboratory, or funeral parlour, television has become the main source providing visual knowledge of the dead.

As one can see from *Six Feet Under*, a cleaned and appropriately covered body in a sanitised environment is the dominant mode of representing corpses on television. The all-too-visible signs of age and decay are obscured. The real decedents in the documentary *Family Plots* contrast starkly with these representations. In Erving Goffman's (1959) conception, the informal back stage (the embalming room) turns into a formal front stage (the viewing room). As the documenting camera follows the employees into every corner of the funeral parlour, the boundaries between the formerly separate front and back stages become blurred. An unusual backstage insight is given to the audience, where the illusion of a clean, sleeping body is being produced for the front stage, but only a few brief shots of corpses and the embalming process are shown. Nevertheless, even if quick and at times blurred, these shots contrast with usual representations of corpses. The documentary shows that, no matter what conditions the corpse had been in before its transfer to the embalming room, in the hands of the professional caretaker, the ultimate goal is to stop the process of decay and pollution and return the body to its former aesthetic appearance to be ready for viewing.

The fictional drama/black comedy *Six Feet Under* omits all representations of the embalming process connected with pollution and ambiguity. It focuses on the more scientific art of restoration. No detailed representations of embalming work were shown that did not portray the dead as sanitised. In the embalming room, neither the body nor its environment ever appears messy. Even if moving the body belongs to the essential procedures of an embalmer, *Six Feet Under* refrained from showing any uncovered body being moved. Death is often associated with sleep and silence. On these programmes the corpse is therefore hardly ever shown in motion, in disorder, or diseased. The only way a dead body is consistently depicted as in motion is through humour, which is clearly marked by the characters' responses to situations.

This article has introduced theories in the social and cultural sciences on taboos pertaining to how death is represented in the media. Representations of the dead in a documentary drama and in a drama/black comedy show were analysed. The findings were concerned with specific representational taboos of dead bodies. The analysis focused on the difference between non-fictional and fictional representations of corpses and found that the fictional television shows omit detailed depictions of the embalming processes that could be connected with disorder and ambiguity. No detailed and accurate representation of embalming work in fictional genres was seen. Most of the time the fictional television programme depicted corpses as neat, sanitised decedents at rest. By contrast to the documentary, the fictional corpse was seldom from an old age group and if this was the case then no age spots or signs of decay were visible. The dead body was mostly represented as a white, middle-aged clean body in a neat and sanitary environment. Yet the strictest constraint seemed to concern the movement of the body. While it appeared to be appropriate for the living sometimes to move the arms, legs, or even the head of the dead, the entire uncovered corpse was never moved visibly with one notable exception in a comic scene.

These restrictions concerning age, disorder, and motion can be seen as manifestations of new taboos. Death in Western culture has always been seen as restful, often with the dead depicted in a posture imitating a light sleep. The association of death with sleep is as old as Western culture itself. In classical Greece, the sons of the night were Hypnos, the god of sleep, and his twin, Thanatos, the god of death. This connection has continued down to the present. From the writings of Homer and Virgil to Saint Paul, death was described as a 'deep rest' and a 'deathly sleep' (Ruby 1995, 63). Disorder and motion disturb this peace. Is this strong classical image being violated by other television shows that regularly depict corpses? The answer is no. All of the other above-mentioned TV shows mostly provide images of the dead as covered up, clean and neat, white, middle-aged, and male, the corpse resting motionless on a neat and clean table in a neat and clean environment and surrounded by figures who seem to care about his appearance. *Family Plots* presented the real dead with fewer restrictions in the first season, while in the second season dead bodies were avoided almost entirely. Amongst other reasons, perhaps the violation of these taboos in the documentary drama led to its low popularity and cancellation.

On the other hand, *Six Feet Under* made it through the scheduled five seasons and won several awards. Their images of the dead were approved by the viewing audience and stayed in the public visual discourse. The representational taboo concerns the reality of death in modern American society: being old and dying of illness in a busy and crowded place like a hospital, nursing home, or emergency room cannot, in the majority of cases, provide autonomy for the dying or dignity for the dead. (Kellehear 2007) Despite all kinds of 'scandalous' depictions of dead bodies, it is hardly surprising that *Six Feet Under* does not reflect the diverse reality of death.

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Thanatos

Normal Death on Television: Balancing Privacy and Voyeurism

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Abstract

The television series *My Last Words* (*Viimeiset sanani*) is the first reality-based programme in Finland to concentrate on death and dying. The programme was broadcast by the Finnish Broadcasting Company (YLE) from April to June 2013. The topic raised a great deal of discussion of sensationalism, voyeurism, and the limits of television programming. However, the critical discussion largely took place before the broadcast; the viewing audience considered the series non-voyeuristic, tactful, and emotionally touching. In this article I will address the questions of voyeurism mainly at the level of television programme content, and I will analyse the narrative solutions that the series uses both to encourage and to discourage voyeuristic interpretations. An analysis of media coverage and audience reception of the show supports this analysis by providing the cultural context for the debate on the ways in which death and dying are socially acceptable subjects for television.

Introduction

The Finnish television series *My Last Words* (*Viimeiset sanani*) is a reality show that deals with real-life persons who are dying and with their families and friends, all of whom are trying to come to terms with the pending death. The prime-time miniseries was broadcast by the public Finnish Broadcasting Company (YLE) from April to June of 2013. The series is based on a Dutch television format and included five Finnish episodes and four Dutch episodes (*Mijn Laatste Woord*). All episodes follow the same basic idea in which a dying person is introduced who then shares his or her thoughts on their impending death. During the filming process the dying also record a video letter, which is revealed after their death. In these letters they leave their last words to their families, friends, or even to a general audience. Sari Isotalo (15 August 2013), the Finnish producer of the series, described the aim as being to present the normal death of ordinary people and thereby make death more visible in contemporary society.

Whenever a television series focuses on the emotional topic of dying, questions are immediately raised about the invasion of privacy. According to Mark Andrejevic (2004, 176), reality-based programming can be vulnerable to charges of an 'apparent excess of voyeurism', 'exploitation of emotional trauma', and 'television's moral decay'. In this article I will concentrate on questions of privacy and the public at the level of television programme content; to be more specific, I will analyse how the narration of *My Last Word*s encourages and/or discourages voyeuristic interpretations. The article focuses on the Finnish episodes in the series, although there will be some comparisons with the Dutch episodes. In addition the cultural context is taken into account with a short analysis of both the production and the reception of the series in Finland. I have interviewed producer Sari Isotalo and have analysed the media coverage and internet discussions about the series both before and after

its broadcast. The analysis of the cultural context addresses how death-related issues of voyeurism and privacy were debated.

The series and its topic generated lively public discussion in Finland. In 2008 when the programme idea was announced, the discussion was marked by fears that the privacy of the dying was being invaded and that the producers were taking advantage of human suffering for the sake of entertainment. However, five years later when the series was broadcast, the reception was largely positive. The programme was considered respectful and tactful and the topic itself worthy of television prime-time attention. Undoubtedly, the narrative solutions used in the series, which will be analysed in detail in this article, encouraged positive understandings of shared emotions instead of negative connotations of invasive voyeurism. Thus, the series succeeded in its aim of opening the subject of normal death to public discussion. This, I argue, is related not only to the increasingly visible role of death in contemporary Western societies (Staudt 2009; McIlwain 2005), but also to the emotionalisation of television programming. The emotionalisation process has prepared both the viewers and the real-life participants to show, interpret, and manage emotions, even negative emotions, and anxieties. Even controversial topics – such as the normal deaths of ordinary people – can be approached through reality-based programming (not only through news stories and fiction, which tend to concentrate on violent and unusual deaths) without charges of excessive voyeurism.

Emotional Television and Mediated Voyeurism

Since the late twentieth century the public and the media in Western societies have been charged with increasingly emphasising emotions (Pantti 2010, 168–169; Richards 2007, 30). Although emotionalisation has taken place in all media, television has been given special attention in media research, not least because of reality television and talk shows. John Ellis, for example, points out that in the beginning of television broadcasting, televised performances were often serious, both in fiction and on factual programmes, and the sincerity of a performance was not evaluated emotionally. This began to change when fictional television made emotions more familiar to viewers and recognisable by concentrating on the expressions of emotions, character development, and sincerity (Ellis 2009, 105–112).

In the wake of fictional programming, emotions became familiar material for factual programming. The cultural process of emotionalisation has affected all factual television programming, not only reality television. For example, Mervi Pantti's research on Finnish television journalists reveals that they justified increasing emotionalisation 1) by highlighting emotions as part of everyday life and thus, an aspect of the news; 2) by arguing that television is an emotional medium where emotions construct collective identities; 3) and by illustrating and making the news more interesting, understandable, and identifiable through emotions. However, although journalists considered emotions as part of their stories, they wanted to distance themselves from creating these effects and from accusations of using emotions excessively (Pantti 2010, 172–80). In other words, emotionalisation of factual television narration is acceptable, but the stigma of sensationalism is still feared, also in *My Last Words*.

The reality programming, in particular, addresses the traditional belief that a serious and high-quality documentary should follow the voice of reason and leave (sensational) emotions to entertainment (see also Murray 2009; Ellis 2009). Similar to the ways in which reality television has encouraged emotional expressions to become part of shared experiences, the Western cultural tendency to separate reason and emotion, information and entertainment, the public and the private is slowly changing. Previously, social rationalism overwhelmed theorisation of the public sphere, while emotions were considered part of the private sphere (Habermas 1992), yet the emergence of television and social media has widened the understanding of the nature of the public. For example, Jodi Dean (2001, 253) points out that internet discussion sites are not necessarily reasonable or rational, but 'at worst, a set of irrational and often demeaning rants'. Rational definitions of the public sphere have been forced to confront human nature with its emotional, embodied, and personal elements.

The new approach to the public sphere emphasises emotionality, which opens the public to personal issues and presence (Gripsrud 2007; Richards 2009). In other words, as Annette Hill (2007, 11–14) argues, emotionally-driven reality programmes that concentrate on ordinary people have become part of the public sphere, and these programmes can reveal changing cultural attitudes. Indeed, despite or maybe because of the entertainment-related stigma reality television can raise public discussion on social issues, moral values, and the limits of acceptable behaviour (Ellis 2009, 111). The debates do not only consider topics related to sexual or romantic relationships, the typical examples of reality programming, but also shared understandings of socially acceptable emotional reactions to normal death, dying, and mourning.

The recognition of the role of emotions on television and in society has been connected to the rise of a therapeutic culture in which emotional expression is part of a constant process of self-discovery and self-fulfillment. Barry Richards (2007, 30, 34), for example, observes that the Western cultural atmosphere favours 'reflecting on and seeking to manage emotions'. The need to manage emotions concerns both television viewers and actors, as Anita Biressi and Heather Nunn (2005, 101) recognise; they point out that for the viewer, emotional processing relates to social identification, while for the performer, emotions are part of self-monitoring and the creation of a public persona. This desire to reflect and manage emotions is emphasised in *My Last Words* wherein mediated encounters with the dying address the kinds of emotions that might be expected in facing death. In this television programme the shared emotions of real individuals construct a collective understanding of dying by creating a dialogue between mediated personal experiences and public interpretations of how to deal with death. However, because the emotional is still primarily connected to the personal and is only now emerging into the public realm, television's exposure of emotions is vulnerable to charges of voyeurism, such as whether it is socially acceptable to use intimate experiences in factual programming.

In this article the concept of voyeurism in (factual) television programming follows Clay Calvert's definition of mediated voyeurism, which 'refers to the consumption of revealing images of and information about others' apparently real and unguarded lives, often yet not always for purposes of entertainment but frequently at the expense of privacy and discourse, through the means of the mass media and Internet' (Calvert 2004, 2–3). Here the concept of mediated voyeurism is closer to social curiosity than to traditional psychiatric understanding of voyeurism as exaggerated erotic observing (Voyeurism 2008). Lemi Baruh (2010, 203–204) further emphasises this difference by arguing that in mediated voyeurism the interest lies in the intimacy of a situation rather than in its sexuality and furthermore that both viewers and actors are aware of the viewing process.

Indeed, reality television does not ride only on the viewer's voyeuristic pleasure, but also on the participants desire to make themselves visible, as Andrejevic (2004, 179–190) argues; he remarks that this pairing of voyeurism and exhibitionism is typical of contemporary consumer culture, which induces 'individuation and self-authentication' by making oneself seen. Consequently, the viewer is allowed to witness something that he or she would not otherwise have access to and can make social comparisons and evaluate not only the participants, but themselves as well (Baruh 2010, 206). In other words, despite the negative stigma of voyeurism as a psychiatric concept, mediated voyeurism is not necessarily a negative phenomenon in itself. Instead, it functions as part of the emotionalised therapeutic (television) culture where both viewers and participants desire to share and evaluate their emotions and experiences.

Although voyeurism can be seen as a viewer's personal trait (Bagdasarov et al. 2010, 303), in this article I will treat the questions of mediated voyeurism at the level of the programme content because the viewer's experiences are never disconnected from the broadcast text. A television programme can invite the viewer to read its texts in a certain way (including voyeuristically) by accentuating some preferred or dominating meanings (see also Ridell 1998). Because *My Last*

Words encountered extensive public debates on questions of voyeurism, it is important to examine the textual level of this series and determine whether it invites the viewers to read the text voyeuristically or whether the debate was primarily about negative prejudices towards reality television and social anxieties about death and dying.

Materials and Methods of the Study

I will look into the ways in which the narration of *My Last Words* encourages and/or discourages voyeuristic interpretations. The principal material for this article consists of the five Finnish episodes of *My Last Words*. For my purposes here, I approach the content of the episodes through narrative analysis, which concentrates on the constructiveness of narration – its semiotic and discursive level – in order to answer questions about how the story material is deliberately arranged and how it addresses the audience (see, for example, Bordwell 1985, xi–xiv; Prince 2008, 115–22). However, narratives are also cultural and discursive phenomena, which participate in cultural and historical processes, and as such they provide models for making sense of experiences, such as dying (see, for example, Bal 1999). In the analysis of *My Last Words*, special attention is given to the visual elements, but the discourse and sound are also studied to determine how voyeurism and privacy are mediated in the death-centred narration.

The format is based on the Dutch series *Mijn Laatste Woord* (2007) produced by the public broadcasting company Evangelical Broadcasting, which highlights a Christian view of life. Whereas the Dutch series emphasises the meaning of religion for comprehending death and life, the independently-produced Finnish series was filmed by the media production company Susamuru, which does not represent any specific religious view or philosophy. The company produces mostly reality television programming for the Finnish broadcasting companies, including, the public broadcasting company which bought the series.

The Finnish Broadcasting Company is part of European public service broadcasting. The programming focus is on news, current affairs, documentaries, and educational programmes, especially on the YLE1 channel where the series was located. Thus, the reputation of the channel encourages connotations of high-quality documentaries. Furthermore, although *My Last Words* is the first Finnish reality-based series to focus on the dying, before the series was broadcast, some documentaries were occasionally shown on the same channel. The journalist Tiina Merikanto had filmed several programmes dealing with the dying, such as *The Last Months of a Cancer Patient* (*Syöpäsairaan viimeiset kuukaudet – uusi elämä tuntemattoman edessä* 2000), *The Journey of the Death of a Mother with Cancer* (*Syöpäsairaan äidin matka kohti kuolemaa* 2008), *Katja Kotikangas Passed Away* (*Katja Kotikangas nukkui pois* 2009) and *Long Goodbyes* (*Pitkät jäähyväiset* 2010). In each of these shows death was approached through the experiences and emotions of real-life dying people, who were given a voice, while the professionals of death were left out or placed in supporting roles. The focus was on the emotional encounter with death instead of on scientific descriptions of the process of dying. *My Last Words* follows this tradition with a similar narrative point of view.

The series introduces five Finns and four Dutch persons as principals. It opens with Maria who has had a cancer for several years and refuses to be treated as sick or dying. The second episode concentrates on Manta, a religious woman with advanced diabetes. Episode three introduces the only Finnish male principal, Raimo, who has decided to remain positive to the end. Episode four introduces the oldest participant, Sirkka, who is living in a hospice. The last Finnish participant, Ilona, actually does not die during the filming process. When she signed up for the programme, she had cancer and a poor prognosis. Later, however, her cancer was cured. Instead of presenting her video letter, during the final section Ilona describes her feelings after the healing process. The Dutch episodes start with the carpenter Jan, who emphasises the meaning of community in his life. Then comes 23-year-old Naomé, who says her goodbyes to her family and a wide circle of friends. The third character, 70-year-old Hedwich, stays active until the end and volunteers at the hospice instead of signing in as a patient. The last episode tells the story of Grietje, who has accepted the fact that she is dying, while her family and

friends refuse to do so and seek help from God. Whereas the Finnish episodes centre on the family and occasionally bring in some close friends, the Dutch episodes are more communally orientated, and religion plays a more visible role.

As a television series, *My Last Words* reflects the general difficulty of categorising factual television programming where tendency to observe people's real lives has resulted in the contradictory, overlapping and wide range of genres, from documentaries to reality shows (Hill 2007, 1–5). *My Last Words* is a hybrid that shares elements of both (observational) documentary, which concentrates on the topical and the everyday in a casual style with the intention of commenting socially on human nature (Biressi & Nunn 2005, 63), and (documentary-style) reality television, which typically focuses on ordinary people in emotionally difficult situations (Hill 2007, 15). Susan Murray (2009, 67–68) points out that, with their interest in the personal, both formats are 'obsessed with the intimate'. As a consequence, both are often accused of taking voyeuristic approaches when they create a sense of looking in on the lives of other people (Andrejevic 2004; Baruh 2009; Baruh 2010; Bagdasarov et al. 2010; Biressi & Nunn 2005; Calvert 2004). Similarly, when the *My Last Words* was announced in Finland, the producers were accused of violating the intimacy of the emotional processes related to death and dying.

In order to acknowledge the public opinion about the series, I collected three additional materials for this study. Firstly, I interviewed the producer, Sari Isotalo, (on 15 August 2013) about the process of making the series and about its aims, and studied how the Finnish Broadcasting Company marketed the series. Secondly, I analysed the media coverage of *My Last Words* both before and after the series was aired. The coverage includes the major newspapers in Finland (*Helsingin Sanomat, Turun Sanomat*, and *Aamulehti*) and two major tabloid magazines (*Iltalehti* and *Iltasanomat*). And thirdly, I analysed online threads related to *My Last Words* both before and after the broadcasts. The following web-based discussion platforms were followed from January 2008 to May 2008, and from April 2013 to June 2013: viimeisetsanani.com, www.hs.fi, www.iltasanomat.fi, www.iltalehti.fi, www.suomi24.fi, www.vauva.fi, kaksplus.fi. The media coverage and the audience reception have been studied through content analysis in order to describe the public debates on *My Last Words* and draw conclusions about how voyeurism and privacy issues related to death and dying were understood. Before turning to the narrative analysis of the series itself, I will briefly discuss the changes in the public debates related to the programme.

The Production and Reception of *My Last Words*

The production team of *My Last Words*, including the producer Isotalo (15 August 2013) and the broadcasting company (*YLE TV1*, 15 April 2013), has emphasised that the series' cultural aim is to normalise death and mourning. Yet in the beginning public opinion was ready to chastise the show's concept as a violation of privacy and the kind of commercialisation that exploited the suffering of other human beings. In January of 2008, within a few days of a press release that sought participants for the programme, the major national media had eagerly commented on the topic. For example, the leading national newspaper, *Helsingin Sanomat*, published nine articles on the subject within the first week after the announcement. Most news stories openly avoided condemning the programme, but they did assert that the topic was controversial. The media discussion heated up when the tabloid magazines began to sensationalise the coming series. In one story, for example, a distinguished and highly respected Finnish physician, Dr. Risto Pelkonen, took a stand condemning the very idea of the programme as repulsive (*Iltasanomat*, 16 January 2008). In response, the Archbishop of Finland, Jukka Paarma, defended the programme by arguing that a tactful approach to death could ease anxieties related to the nature of death as a taboo subject (*Iltasanomat*, 21 January 2008).

The discussion was not limited to articles and the news, but continued on internet forums and discussion pages of the news media. Three main areas can be seen in these debates: programme content, the limits of television, and the cultural role of death. The most heated topic revolved around the programme, its concept, and its imagined implementation. Those who opposed the programme's idea claimed that the concept was exploiting, voyeuristic, awful, distressing, or offensive. One

anonymous commentator (on *Vauva.fi*, 16 January 2008), for example, wrote that the programme was 'the worst kind of social porn'; another (on *Kaksplus.fi*, 10 September 2009) stated that it was incomprehensible that a television programme would 'play with suffering people like this.'

Similar concerns have been raised elsewhere in discussions of the role of public broadcasting. For example, Kevin David Kendrick and John Costello have discussed voyeurism and morality in connection with the BBC's reality series *Nurse*. They argue that reality-based shows dealing with sickness exploit human vulnerability and force the viewer into a voyeuristic position. Even in the name of public access or demystifying anxiety related to illness and death, moral questions and compassion should be more important than giving viewers an opportunity to witness the intimate last moments of others (Kendrick & Costello 2000, 16–20). Still, in the Finnish discussions, some people admitted to being curious about human fate. These people wanted to know what others think as death approaches. However, these commenters also demanded of voluntary participation in the programme and a tactful approach. Monica (*Suomi24.fi*, 17 January 2008), for example, thought that it would be 'interesting to know what a dying person is thinking, as long as the broadcast is in good taste and respects the bereaved.'

The role of television programming, and especially the limits of reality television, was also discussed. The opposing comments argued that television is and should be an entertainment medium, and therefore difficult issues such as death should be avoided. By contrast, the favourable reactions saw the programme as a brave and novel opening in Finnish television and welcomed programmes addressing a taboo. Furthermore, there was some discussion of the role of death in contemporary society. For example, Leena (*Yle.fi*, 19 January 2008) observed that 'death is as natural part of life as birth. It can and should be discussed.' This was the attitude that the producers wanted to encourage, but too often this cultural discussion remained on the sidelines (Isotalo, 15 August 2013).

Interestingly, the same arguments were used both for and against the television show. Death was seen as a private issue in contemporary culture and depending on the viewpoint, this was either desirable or something that should be changed. In particular, the argument of naturalising death by means of a television series was seen as having both a negative as well as a positive result. Hintriika (*Suomi24.fi*, 17 January 2008), acknowledged these two aspects, writing that 'it is true that death has become a taboo because dying doesn't take place at home as it used to. Everything death-related is hidden until the funeral. Therefore, we should talk more about it – but not with sensationalism.'

The producer, Sari Isotalo, admitted that in the beginning, the heated debate annoyed her because the discussion concentrated on matters other than the programme idea itself. Still, bearing in mind that the programme was intended to heighten emotions, she believes that it has succeeded. She also observed in time the discussion began to concentrate on death as she had hoped it would do (Isotalo, 15 August 2013). Especially after the series was broadcast, the reception was positive and the response concentrated on the cultural role of death. Compared to the discussion that took place before, the discussion during and after the broadcast was modest both in quantity and in intensity. Opposing comments similar to those mentioned above were heard, but often they were framed with arguments indicating that the commentator had not watched the programme. As an anonymous visitor (*Viimeisetsanani.com*, 24 April 2013) wrote: 'I won't watch it, I don't understand programmes like this, they just make you feel bad. I know I'm mortal, and I do not want to feast on someone else's death.' Such comments repeat the same old prejudices and reveal the problematic role of death in contemporary (television) culture.

Those who watched the episodes were pleased with what they saw and often felt it necessary to assure others that the series was not voyeuristic. Instead, the programme was seen as realistic, true to the topic and to the sincere participants. Also the cultural importance of the topic was highlighted. An anonymous visitor (*Yle.fi*, 17 April 2013) wrote: 'Really good and

touching programme. I cried throughout the whole programme; it brimmed with wonderful warmth and love. This will help people deal with the idea of death, and I recommend it to all. The filming is respectful to the main character and her beloved. Subtle and respectful approach by the producers.' On the whole, the series was mostly seen as emotional and touching without being sensational. Thus, although the series had the potential for voyeurism, thanks to its intimate, emotional, and observing relationship with the dying, it avoided being understood as such. I argue that the reasons for this change in debate can be found in the narrative structure of the episodes.

Narrative of *My Last Words*

In *My Last Words*, each episode includes three different encounters. In the first section the dying person is introduced to the viewers. The viewer gets to know the person's background, illness, and attitude to death. In this opening section other participants, such as family members or friends, are also introduced. In the second section the dying and the family/friends are revisited. During this second meeting questions of impending death return and possible changes in attitude to death and dying are discussed. The last section takes place after the death of the principal, when the video letter is revealed to the family and friends. After the reading of the letter the camera recedes, leaving the family and friends in mourning.

As my analysis will show, in *My Last Words* the narrative choices serve both to encourage and to discourage voyeurism. For example, the participants are carefully chosen. The discursive power to define the death-related experiences is given to the dying persons. Secondary roles are given to the family and friends, who give a voice to mourning, loss, and grief. The narrative and emotional perspectives are intentionally kept on the level of ordinary people who are facing death. By contrast, the professionals, whose voices are most often heard in the public discussions of death and dying, are excluded. There are no doctors defining the illness or explaining the dying process, no funeral industry representatives to explicate the practicalities of bereavement or any religious authorities, who through transition rites hold a great deal of practical power over death. Occasionally, a nurse or some other caregiver may be introduced, but even they are either part of the background or they share their own emotional take on death. Through this careful selection of real people as the dramatis personae, the series emphasises not only the private over the public, but also the emotional over the professional. The use of participants who share a private and emotional take on death invokes questions of intimacy, yet the generous use of interviews emphasises the consent of each participant.

In *My Last Words* the narrative discourse both hints at and avoids voyeurism: some images observe intimate moments, while others were openly designed together with the participant. Below I will further address voyeurism by analysing five recognisable scene types in *My Last Words*: interviews with the characters, illustrations, characters in space, the transition to death, and video letters.

Interviewing the Participants

My Last Words' essential and dominant programme content is the interviews. In the Finnish episodes the audio consists mainly of interview material, with background voices or music used occasionally in transitions from one interview to another. In the Dutch episodes voice-overs tell the background of those who are dying. It is intriguing that the Finnish episodes chose not to follow this aspect of the format. Instead, almost as a reaction to the accusations that the series was taking advantage of the vulnerable, the Finnish narration proceeds almost entirely from the voices of the participants, who are given full definitional power over the discourse. In this way, the narration demonstrates that the dying and his or her family and friends have participated in their episode from their own starting points, aims, and desires.

In the series, it is customary for the dying to assert that they are not afraid of death. Instead, they want to see death as a natural part of life over which they have no control. The dying also emphasise their need to talk openly with others about

death. Many know the difficulties others had in dealing with the dying, and they have experienced social alienation. All the principal participants express a desire to be part of society as long as they have the strength to do so. In turn, family members and friends discuss their feelings of the impending death. They express fears of loss, and many of them stress that, even though they are aware that their loved one is dying, they could not prepare for the final loss. For example, Manta's daughter is saddened when she thinks about her mother's approaching death. 'I've mourned the loss of my mother many times, but so far it has never been final. It can only be final once. You can't practice it, death I mean, or prepare for it. The fact that someone has been ill for a long time doesn't make you ready for the actual loss.' Despite their fears, the family and friends also emphasise the importance of positivity, everyday tasks and need to concentrate on the living as long as they still have a chance to be together. Although both the dying and other participants express a need and a desire to talk about death, they do not want to be defined by death alone.

Although the interviews are deeply personal, they appear to concentrate on the messages chosen by the participants. The interviewer is not shown on camera, yet her questions are sometimes audible, and in this way the role of dialogue is made apparent. This indicates that the ongoing discussion is not a private confession, but rather that the dying are willingly taking the leading role in the interviews and sharing their views on death. In Baruh's (2009) empirical research on the types of content that are considered voyeuristic on reality television the revelation of personal information or exhibition of private emotions did not invite voyeuristic experience unless the experience was later gossiped about or happened behind someone's back. Thus, willingly given personal information is merely part of public confession, whereas voyeurism appears to connect with an observational invasion of intimacy.

In *My Last Words*, the willingness to share emotions is further emphasised at the level of image. The participants are sitting down. They are concentrating. They are facing the interviewer and the camera as well. These scenes with 'talking heads', which are typical of television's factual programming, emphasise that the participants knowingly and willing are taking part in a television show. Indeed, when the camera's presence is visible, a sense of interacting with the participants is more likely to occur than sense of voyeurism (Baruh 2009). Occasionally, the participants are even allowed to look at the camera. The direct address acknowledges the existence of an audience and creates a sense of intimate and interactive relationship with the viewer, usually allowed only to hosts of a television show (Fiske 2011, 54).

While the interviews highlight the consent of the participants, the images used are constructed to be emotionally involving. The participants are most often framed in close-up, medium close-up, or medium shots, which emphasise their gestures and facial expressions, tearful eyes in particular. Close-ups especially invite identification and emotionality. In visual theory the human face is recognised as having a huge impact on creating empathy in the viewer (Gaut 1999; Plantiga 1999). The power of facial expressions (and bodily postures) lies in the recognition of the emotions that a person is going through. Emotions are also transmitted through mirroring effects and imitation. Thus, through various means, visual images may influence a viewer's emotions, increase identification with the programme participants, and teach emotional responses to a given situation (Gaut 1999, 213; Plantiga 1999, 239–43). Similarly, the emotions addressed in *My Last Words* help to create a sense of public encounters with death and foster a shared understanding of socially acceptable emotional reactions to death.

By concentrating on the facial expressions of the interviewees, *My Last Words* emphasises the emotionality of the theme and encourages the viewer to empathise with the participants' situation and their emotions. The emotionality of these scenes could be interpreted as sensational, yet the highlighted presence of the camera mediates emotions as being a natural and normal part of encountering death. Similarly, the emotional reactions of the dying and their relatives and friends highlight the sincerity of the participants. By allowing viewers to witness their fears and grief, as well as their warmth and positive attitudes, the participants share how death and dying affect people emotionally. They invite the viewer to share their intimate

moments, and although this invasion of privacy is voyeuristic by definition, Baruh's (2009) study shows that when emotional reaction is distinguished by an invitation, the viewer rarely recognises it as a voyeuristic moment. In other words, the willingness to participate and the possibility of addressing the viewer directly create the sense of a tactful approach, even when the emotional revelations are overwhelming.

Illustrations

Although the narration concentrates on the interview material, visually the camera does not stay with the interviewees all the time. The editing of different images imposes a rhythm on the narration. In the Finnish episodes the tempo is considerably slower than in the Dutch episodes. In the Finnish episodes every image stays with the viewer longer, prolonging the moment before the cut to the next image. The slow pace creates a picture of the need to calm down before death, to look back and evaluate one's life. In the Dutch episodes the idea is reversed. The need to evaluate exists, but in terms of tempo, the desire to live full and fast until the end is emphasized over the need to slow down.

These two realizations of the same format also use different illustrations to control the pace of the narration. The Dutch episodes tend to concentrate on photographs. Thus, while interviewing or voice-over narration continues, photographs of the dying person's life are shown. By contrast, in the Finnish episodes photographs are not used to create life stories of the dying. Only one episode introduces a specific photograph, and it come from the graduation party for Ilona's son, shown as part of Ilona's life story. Otherwise, photographs are almost entirely lacking, although in Ilona's and Raimo's episodes, the viewer see photographs in the apartment of the dying participant. Yet the camera does not concentrate on any particular photo, nor is the narration dependent on their presence. Instead, in the Finnish series, other illustrations help to personalise each episode. The camera seeks out objects in the dying person's home that somehow characterise the participant. The inserted illustrations often obscure the production techniques and create a sense of peeking into someone's life.

With Maria, the personalised illustrations include images of roulette (Maria used to work on a cruise ship), images of a computer, as she searches for articles about medications for life support. Although all of the episodes were filmed in co-operation with the participants, only this first episode reveals this process to the viewer. Tending the garden with her mother, for instance, Maria mentions that the watering can should be positioned towards camera for better effect. When Maria visits the Institute of Forensic Medicine to discuss donating her corpse to medical science, images of autopsy tables and skeletons are shown. The other episodes refer less openly to the topic of death and especially avoid such strong allusions to death's bodily side while the dying participant is still in life; instead culturally-recognisable metaphors are preferred. In Maria's episode these include the repeated images of clocks referring metaphorically to time, which is running out whether she wants it to or not.

With Raimo and Manta personalised meanings are highlighted. The inserted illustrations include pictures of Raimo's daughters in his living room, images of a record player (Raimo is an eager listener to music), and moments in his workshop where he repairs second-hand items. With the 52-year-old Manta, the inserts include both religious artefacts (in reference to her religious background) and handiworks or paintings (illustrating her desire to do things with her hands and her need to leave something behind). With Sirkka and Ilona personalised items are not used as frequently, although there are some decorative images, such as china angels. With these two women especially, however, the use of a second type of inserted illustration – images of nature – is highlighted. All of the Finnish episodes show nature images in abundance: forests, trees, flowers, birds, plants, sea, rivers and snow create a gentle pace for the narration, with the images functioning as transitions between the interviews, the locations, and times. At the same time, these images naturalise death. Death becomes part of the circle of life, with human mortality tied to nature.

Image 1. and 2.: Inserted nature images dominate the transitions in the Finnish narration of *My Last Words*. (*Viimeiset sanani* 5/5 Ilona [*My Last Words*]). Broadcasted on Wednesday 22.5.2013, 19.55. Yle TV1. Produced by Susamuru OY, duration 27 minutes. Screen capture Outi Hakola May 28, 2013.)

Although the inserts function as visual repertoire and drive the tempo of the narrative, they are also given metaphorical dimensions in personalising and naturalising death. The personalised images often refer either to memories or to items with symbolic power, such as angel statues or candles, which are familiar from death rites. With nature images, the pictures are often stripped bare, as most of the material was filmed in winter when nature lies dormant. The pictures thus have the power to remind the viewer of death. Both types of images repeatedly depict shared and recognisable cultural references to death. Furthermore, by giving both human and natural meanings to death, the images create a bridge between culture and nature.

Dying Participants in Motion

Although interviews and inserted illustrations are largely static, each episode includes moments in which the dying participants are actively living out their lives. I call these images, in which the camera is allowed to follow the daily activities of the dying, 'characters in motion.' Such images clearly emphasise the voyeuristic position of the viewer: when compared to the emotional interviews, now the participants do not face the camera. Instead, the camera is hidden and observes from an apparently invisible position. Baruh's research shows that when the camera adopts a 'fly on the wall' perspective, which places the viewer in the position of a silent observer, the sense of voyeurism is heightened. The use of private spaces further highlight this voyeuristic appeal (Baruh 2009).

In *My Last Words*, a typical moment follows the dying person taking a walk outdoors or leaving to go from one place to another. The camera is positioned in the bushes, behind the trees, peeking through leaves and branches. In addition, often the camera is positioned at a distance, and the image does not concentrate on the emotional facial expressions, but on the participants' movements and their environment.

Image 3.: When Sirkka take a taxi to visit her daughter, the camera is positioned on the hill, behind the trees, and distanced from the situation. (*Viimeiset sanani* 4/5 Sirkka [*My Last Words*]. Broadcasted on Wednesday 15.5.2013, 19.55. Yle TV1. Produced by Susamuru OY, duration 28 minutes. Screen capture Outi Hakola May 17, 2013.)

Occasionally, distanced images are used when the dying meet others. For example, when Sirkka meets her daughters, the camera is now and then at a distance, showing the composition of the group. This could be interpreted as the camera hesitating to invade moments of personal interaction. Yet this positioning also highlights the camera's observational role as an outsider. Moreover, the camera is constantly being placed outside windows and doorways from where it looks in, stretching the limits between private and public space. Also, by being observed through reflected and detached images, the dying characters appear vulnerable from the outsiders' point of view.

Image 4.: The liminal spaces of *My Last Words*. The camera peeks in through the window of the workshop to observe Raimo. (*Viimeiset sanani* 3/5 Raimo [*My Last Words*]. Broadcasted on Wednesday 8.5.2013, 19.55. Yle TV1. Produced by Susamuru OY, duration 27 minutes. Screen capture Outi Hakola May 17, 2013.)

In *My Last Words* images in which a reflective surface, such as a window or a mirror, pictures the dying highlight questions of threshold, liminality, and transgression. A window represents the borderline between private and public, interior and exterior, and can function both as a symbol of detachment and as a meeting point (Kaplan 2002, 162–66; Bruhn, Gjelsvik & Thune 2011, 11–12). In the series, mirrors are used in a similar way. For example, when Ilona, lying in bed, is preparing her last words, the camera shows her reflection in a wall mirror; when Manta moves through her apartment in a wheelchair, the camera follows, again through her reflection, this time in a hall mirror.

In these scenes, a reflective image highlights the status of being between life and death and places the dying in a liminal state, the term that cultural anthropologist Victor Turner calls the time between a person's death and society's adjustment to this death (through burial, for example). Such a state threatens the social order, but by definition it is a limited period during which society adjusts to the loss (Turner 2008, 94–95). In contemporary Western societies dying is an increasingly drawn-out process, and the liminal state can begin during the dying process itself. Through this process the dying are slowly marginalised from the active members of society (Koski 2010). Although *My Last Words* endeavours to normalise death and give social visibility to the dying in order to prevent their premature exclusion from society, the hidden observational position of the camera and the use of windows and mirrors appear to conflict with this cultural aim. Instead, these scenes increase the sense of voyeurism whereby viewers are reminded of their position as outsiders.

Transitions to Death

During the latter parts of each episode, the passing away of the main participant is announced with a death notice that includes the person's name, birth date, and death date. Before the reading of the video letters there is a short transition scene, which includes the last images of the dying person. In the Finnish episodes the transition to the death notice is often a transition to light. The final images of Maria are taken with her family while they are enjoying a barbecue. The camera pans skyward and after light has filled the image, the death notice appears on the screen. A nearly identical scene takes place in

Manta's episode; she is making a painting when the camera pans to the light coming from the window. Sirkka is reading a poem with the words 'this memory can't be taken away from me' when the image focuses on the window and the light. Raimo is the only exception to the association of the death notice with light (as is Ilona, but she does not die during the series). Although Raimo is standing by a window listening to music, the camera does not focus on the light, but on an extremely close-up shot of his fingers, which are tapping in keeping with the rhythm.

The repeated use of light reminds the viewer that each participant has denied being afraid of death as such. Death may intrude into their lives, but death itself is not a bad thing; thus light and the sky are the images chosen rather than darkness. In addition to the theme of death and light, all of these transitions start from the participants' favourite everyday activities as these were introduced in each episode. This technique highlights the normality of death for ordinary people, placing emphasis on remembering persons as they were in life.

After the transition to the death notice, some death rituals are shown, depending on what the participant and the families have consented to. In the case of Maria, the transition rites are limited to an image of the grave and flowers. With Manta and Sirkka, images from the funeral are shown, although the camera is positioned at the back of the church so that only glimpses are given of mourning family members, with most of the images concentrated on candles, flowers, and the coffin. Once again Raimo's episode has a different solution. The viewer is allowed to see Raimo lying in his coffin with a white cloth placed over his face.

The camera witnesses all of these brief glimpses from afar. These images of transitions are not detailed, nor does the camera linger on them. Here the tempo of the cuts from one shot to the next is faster than elsewhere in the episodes. Although these techniques highlight the voyeuristic position of the viewer, the camera's invisibility to the mourners and the pace of the shots show consideration and empathy. The narration does not allow the viewer to intrude on the intimate moments of death rituals, at least, not for too long. In this way, despite the voyeuristic position, the sense of a tactful approach is created.

Video letters

Each episode of *My Last Words* ends with the reading of the video letters written by the dying and addressed primarily to family members and friends, who are invited to the showing. The parts of the letters shared with the viewers emphasise messages of love, pride, and the continuity of family traditions. Whereas the Finnish letters concentrate on personal messages to loved ones, the Dutch episodes are once again more community orientated: these letters may contain general messages on living and dying well and are directed to the television audiences as well as to loved ones.

Whereas the audio track focuses on the extracts from the letters, the images concentrate on the family members more than on the video letter. Thus, an important narrative task of the mourners is to provide emotional reactions to the letters. At this point the camera is facing those who have gathered in front of the television for the reading of the letter. The situation is reminiscent of the interviews because attention is drawn to the camera's presence. Here, the focus changes from the thoughts of the dying person to the mourners and their reactions.

Image 5.: Raimo's daughter reacts emotionally to her father's video letter. Her reaction captures both her grief and loving memories. (*Viimeiset sanani* 3/5 Raimo [*My Last Words*]. Broadcasted on Wednesday 8.5.2013, 19.55. Yle TV1. Produced by Susamuru OY, duration 27 minutes. Screen capture Outi Hakola May 17, 2013.)

Just as the dying wanted their dying process to be not only about sadness, but also about the continuation of life, so too the reactions to the video letters include both sorrow and happy memories. In this way, the series depicts a variety of emotional reactions to death, which affect not only the dying, but also their loved ones and, through the public eye of the camera, the society around them as well.

Conclusions

My Last Words mediates intimate moments and the emotions of those who are dying and mourning. It thus follows the definitions of mediated voyeurism in which intimacy is willingly and knowingly shared with a general audience. Although before the television series was broadcast, public opinion was doubtful and ambivalent about questions of privacy in relation to dying, the programme's actual reception was positive, with viewers judging the series as non-voyeuristic. Indeed, many of the programme's narrative solutions support an interpretation of a respectful approach to death: the interviews and the reading of the video letters of the dying stressed the sincerity and willingness of the participants, and the camera's reluctance to linger on death rites and funerals showed respect for privacy. From this perspective, the episodes refrained from prying more deeply into the participants' lives than was already freely shared with viewers. However, the illustrations, the dying in motion, and even the transitions to death tend to conceal the camera's presence and emphasise the viewer's role of peering in on the most intimate moments of other people's lives.

What the comparison of the narrative solutions with the audience reception indicates is that viewers tend to have a different understanding of voyeurism than do media researchers; voyeuristic content and voyeuristic interpretations are thus not necessarily the same thing. For viewers, the concept still appears to carry a negative stigma, invoked whenever they consider transgressing socially acceptable limits in observing the lives of others. Yet an open invitation to share even drastic emotional moments is not interpreted voyeuristically if the approach is tactfully executed and the viewer is not forced into an excessively voyeuristic position. Even when certain narrative techniques encourage a voyeuristic gaze, the audience tends to

overlook these moments and concentrate on the interaction with the programme's participants. Yet the same content can be interpreted as voyeuristic from the point of view of narrative analysis, because the series by definition shares the intimate emotions of individuals with a public audience. However, in television research, mediated voyeurism does not refer only to negative social phenomena. Instead, mediated voyeurism can be part of an emotional public sphere in which socially shared understandings of dying, death, and mourning are created, and voyeuristic content can prove to have (positive) social power.

When the differences in conceptualising processes are set aside, *My Last Words* and its reception reveal Finnish audiences' increasing familiarity with dealing with emotions, including anxieties about death, in television programming and viewing. The producer Sari Isotalo (15 August 2013) commented on this cultural change, saying that when the project began, normal deaths of ordinary people were almost entirely lacking on television; when the series was finally broadcast, openness to discussions of death in public had increased. Thus, the emotional topic of death shown in connection with ordinary people going about their daily lives does not necessarily or automatically equal sensationalism. Instead, observing privacy can be interpreted as a tactful and meaningful experience. In this view, despite the project's rocky start, *My Last Words* managed to focus viewers' attention on the series' main topic, death and dying, and succeeded in its aim to promote normalising and naturalising death as part of contemporary life.

1. All translations from Finnish to English (including show title, captions from the programme, Finnish media and internet discussions) are mine.

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On Death & Media: Interview with Tony Walter, Centre for Death & Society, University of Bath

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I Question: What is the significance of media and death in contemporary Western society?

Walter: In the small scale pre-industrial village, most relationships were face-to-face, so contact with the dying and news of their death spread by word of mouth. As society became more complex, with for example sailors and merchants dying far from home, not to mention chiefs and leaders not personally known by their subjects, so communication about dying became problematic. It was not until the development of writing and literacy that non-oral media began to play a role – news of a death might then arrive by letter and (from the early nineteenth century) by newspaper. Communication media (photography, telegraph, telephone, radio, television, internet) have expanded rapidly since the middle of the nineteenth century, so the ways in which we can be informed of a death, or communicate with dying or bereaved friends and family, have expanded accordingly. In terms of informing people of a death, the telegraph was perhaps the most revolutionary: news of the death of a seafarer the other side of the world that before might have taken 18 months to travel back to his family could now be communicated in a matter of hours or even minutes.

So the complexity and geographical spread of social relationships makes our communication needs (at death as at any other time of life) more complex, but communication technologies have expanded to meet those needs. At the same time, the medicalization of death and dying, the isolation of dying people within hospitals, and the historically unprecedented fact that most of us grow up through childhood without witnessing the death of a parent or sibling means that death is, in Ariès' term, unfamiliar. So when the end of life approaches, we do not know what to expect – so as well as communication needs, we have information needs. Information technology is therefore increasingly important: first print, and now the internet is the first port of call for dying people and/or their family carers. This is not instead of their calling the doctor, but to help them know what to ask the doctor and to interpret what the doctor has told them.

I have talked here about dying and news of death. What about how we know about, or relate to the dead? In pre-industrial times, stories about the dead were typically circulated orally (the main exceptions being the written accounts of the founders of world religions: Jesus, Mohammed, etc, but even these were passed on orally to illiterate congregations). Now we know about the dead through history books, posters of Che Guevara or Marilyn Monroe, the recorded music of John Lennon or Elvis Presley and the recorded speech of Martin Luther King or Winston Churchill. And we talk to the personally known dead on Facebook.

II Question: Given the amount of media coverage of death, how much is death a private matter as Ariès claimed?

Walter: Humans have always experienced loss intimately and subjectively, but perhaps never more so than in modern urban societies. Instead of the pre-industrial household mourning the death of a child and living within a village in which the family is known by everyone, now we typically mourn the death of an old person – but the mourners have long since grown up and left home and quite possibly left town, so mourners are geographically isolated from each other, surrounded by neighbours or work colleagues who may never have known the deceased. Grief becomes increasingly private. This of course is beginning to change with Facebook, which has the potential to bring together a person's disparate social networks, after death enabling mourners to read each others' posts – for better or for worse. The digital environment also enhances the possibilities of getting close to, and thus mourning, people whom has one not met face-to-face or whom one may only have known through their online identity.

At the same time that death is private and subjective, the news media are full of death. This creates a paradox: death is both intimately private, and all around us in the media – yet these media deaths are usually of those not personally known to us. When the news media cover the death of someone we do know, this can add to the mourner's distress: news media have their own values and conventions as to what makes a good story, and these may well not fit the story of the life/death that the mourner finds most comforting. Nor is the timing of news stories necessarily good for mourners. At their worst, journalists' information-gathering techniques may be intrusive or even illegal, as in 2002 with the hacking by journalists of murdered British teenager Milly Dowler's mobile phone voicemail (though in this case, the subsequent scandal closed the offending newspaper, the News of the World). Rarely does a mourning family find the resources to use and control the media.

III Question: What is the future of death and media?

Walter: Sociologists who predict the future usually get it wrong! But with information and communication technologies developing ever faster, the one thing we can predict is that it will be difficult to keep up. By the time a research study on death and media has been concluded, the media will have changed! Research that aims to make a practical difference, for example developing technology to help housebound or institutionalised old people at the end of their lives keep in touch with family and friends, risks investing in technologies that are almost immediately out of date. When commerce and youth are driving innovation, what hope for academic research or the elderly to keep up?! But it is precisely because media are evolving so fast that it is important that the social meanings, consequences and uses of new communication technologies are researched and documented, and theories of death and dying modified in the light of such research.

With digital communication, it is easier than ever for researchers to capture media text and images; it remains challenging to research their production and reception. Research in death and media continues to inform us about media representations of dying, death and loss, but we still know rather little about the production of representations and their meaning to those who receive them. Here there is scope for creative and innovative methodologies, including, for example, digital anthropology.

IV Question: What thanatological research interests would you recommend for media researchers?

Walter: 'Media' have traditionally meant 'the mass media', and often that has meant television and cinema, with an emphasis on the visual. Perhaps in a visually saturated world, researchers sometimes forget the importance of sound and other senses through which we relate to the dying and the dead. Obviously, new digital media will dominate research in the foreseeable future, not in separation but in conjunction with older media.

When we consider the media through which the living relate to the dead in the twenty first century, we need to think of media in quite diverse ways – obviously the work of spiritualist mediums (either privately or through televised shows), but also history curricula, gravestones, obituaries and eulogies, family genealogy, dark tourism, archaeology, etc, etc. A whole range of institutions and cultural practices can thus be researched as media through which the living relate to the dead. Digital communication technologies now saturate almost all these practices – pointing your phone at the QR code engraved

into a gravestone that brings up the deceased's memorialised Facebook page is but one of the more obvious examples. Linking the perspectives of media studies with these other fields, and also with bereavement research and the buregeoning field of memory studies, offers almost unlimited possibilities.

Walter has developed some of these ideas further in the following articles:

(with Michael Pickering & Jane Littlewood). 'Death in the News: the public invigilation of private emotion'. Sociology, (1995) 29(4), 579-596.

'Mediator Deathwork'. Death Studies, 2005, 29(5), 383-412.

'Dark Tourism: Mediating Between the Dead and the Living'. In R. Sharpley & P. R. Stone (Eds.), The Darker Side of Travel: the theory and practice of dark tourism (pp. 39-55). Bristol: Channel View, 2009.

(with Rachid Hourizi, Wendy Moncur & Stacey Pitsillides). 'Does the internet change how we die and mourn?' Omega, 2011-12, 64(4), 275-302.

'Communication media and the dead: from the stone age to Facebook'. Mortality, 2014 forthcoming.

Biographical note

Tony Walter is a professor of Death Studies, in Department of Social and Policy Sciences at the University of Bath, England. He was a freelance writer for many years, before becoming Lecturer, then Reader, in Sociology at the University of Reading 1994-2007. In the mid-1980s, he wrote three books on unemployment and social security, but over the past twenty years he has focused on researching, writing and lecturing on death in modern society, e.g. funerals, afterlife beliefs, personal bereavement and public mourning, human remains in museums, new discourses of spirituality, death in the news media and in online social media. Walter has helped to promote the interdisciplinary study of death and society, and collaborated with colleagues in, for example, religious studies, history, archaeology, linguistics, psychology, social work, geography, computer science, medicine, and gerontology.

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