

## DEAD CHATTY: THE RISE OF THE ARTICULATE UNDEAD IN POPULAR CULTURE

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### ABSTRACT:

This chapter offers a critical reading of a range of television narratives centred on diverse populations of the articulate dead, including grim reapers (*Dead Like Me*), sort-of-ghosts (*American Horror Story*), zombies (*iZombie*), what appear to be 'just regular dead people' (*The Good Place*, *Les Revenants*) and some other creepy and unusual manifestations of the undead (*Intruders*, *The Fades*). It suggests that the preponderance of the articulate dead on television is symptomatic of a broader cultural desire to talk both about death and with the dead. It also suggests that there are numerous opportunities to learn from fictional engagement with death and the dead, foregrounding the ways in which televisual narratives can operate to reiterate, critique and engage with social and cultural messages. The chapter takes a playful approach and seeks to distil some key 'self-help' aphorisms that the dead in these series might offer the living about how to approach life, death and everything in between, as they tell their audiences to 'look within' to identify the greatest threats to their selfhood, to persevere because 'it's never too late to change', and to 'never forget' the dead and what they might have scarified for the living.

### KEYWORDS:

1. Undead
2. Television
3. Self-help
4. Zombies
5. Resurrection
6. Popular culture

### Main Body:

The presence of the dead in popular culture, as zombies, ghosts, vampires and everything in-between has been a notable and much discussed feature of the contemporary *zeitgeist*. Žižek (1991, 22) has suggested that the last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century saw the return of the dead become the 'fundamental fantasy of contemporary mass culture'. Khapaeva (2017) has argued that the 1990s saw the emergence of a 'cult of death' far beyond screen culture, with death making a distinctive mark in fashion, tourism and academia. Davis drives the point home, emphasising the quotidian presence of the dead in contemporary culture and citing two prominent death related cinematic and televisual offerings from the 1990s:

when the child in *The Sixth Sense* tells Bruce Willis 'I see dead people', it is a stunning cinematic moment, but not a *surprise*. Through seven series, on a weekly basis *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* talked, fought and slept with the undead, and she herself died and returned from the dead. If the haunted child of *The Sixth Sense* had not seen dead people, it would evidently have been because he had not been to the cinema or seen much television recently (Davis 2007, 1, emphasis in original).

There appears to be critical consensus that, in popular culture at least, the dead are all around us.

Yet the current preponderance of the dead in popular culture can be understood as signalling the endurance, rather than the emergence, of a concern with the return of the dead. Their proliferation and location may be new but their presence in general is not. As Davis (2007, 1) acknowledges, 'ghosts, the dead and the undead walk among us', but only 'now as much as ever'. The dead have always walked and talked in literature. Arguments positioning the 20<sup>th</sup> century as characterised by death denial (Gorer 1965; Ariès 1976; Mellor and Shilling 1993) and those that position a refusal to accept mortality as central to the human psyche, such as Becker's *The Denial of Death* (1973), have contributed to the arguably still dominant notion across a range of popular discourses and academic disciplines that death is a societal taboo. Yet this is a notion that can be challenged from a range of co-ordinates. Dollimore (2001, 126), alluding to Becker's influential text, has explicitly stated that 'in philosophical and literary terms there has never been a denial of death'. Fuss (2013, 1) has pointed out that the dead could be easily located 'chattering away in poetry' in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, undermining 'modernity's premature proclamation of death's demise'. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century death and the dead appear to have become so commonplace that they 'are ever-present and far from being denied, repressed or a societal taboo' (Penfold-Mounce 2018, 4). Walter (2019) has argued that, in some ways, the dead can now be understood as 'pervasive'. Though some have argued that commonplace exposure to death via 21<sup>st</sup> century screen cultures has further facilitated the denial of 'real' death (Noys 2005; Bauman 2004), this chapter will argue that the presence of the dead in popular culture can offer opportunities for meaningful engagement with death and the dead. This is particularly so when the dead are articulate, and when the narratives that house them explicitly provoke practical, philosophical and existential questions about mortality. Louise Winter (2019), who described herself as one of a 'new breed' of funeral directors in the UK, has written that though 'death is often described as the last taboo', she finds that 'lots of people want to talk about it'. This chapter examines a range of televisual narratives that feature the talking dead. It suggests that these narratives are emblematic of a desire to talk about death and with the dead, and that in turn they also operate as prompts for doing so.

The televisual narratives under consideration in this chapter have received less critical attention than more dominant zombie and vampire narratives. The articulate dead within them are difficult to classify. They often play with established, though always permeable and contested, boundaries between ghosts, vampires and zombies, signalling existing academic and popular interest in mapping, delineating and exploring differences between the undead that can be seen in projects such as Williams and Schafer's (2013) taxonomy of ghosts and Thompson's (2014) *The Map of Zombies*. Divisions between the undead are arguably particularly fluid on television because of what Jowett and Abbott (2013, xiii) consider to be the 'inherently hybrid nature' of television as a medium. The blending of genres in television has meant that it has been necessary 'to rethink what we mean by horror within a televisual context' (Jowett and Abbott 2013, xiii) and has allowed for the subversion of tropes associated with representations of the undead. Halberstam (1995, 26) has shown how monsters, too, have always been 'mobile and open to multiple interpretations'. It is their inherent mobility and capacity to imply manifold meanings combined with television's own hybridity that means the debatably monstrous talking dead have appeared in perhaps unexpected televisual spaces, including suburban comedies (*The Santa Clarita Diet*) and children's shows (*Sesame Street*).

It is perhaps unsurprising and unremarkable that the talking dead are an important feature of contemporary popular culture. As Fisher (2009, 4) has pointed out, we are in a stage of capitalism that 'subsumes and consumes all of previous history'. Everything has been brought into the market, and not always for the first time. The reanimating of the (already reanimated) talking dead of 19<sup>th</sup> century literature has been a staple of film and television. There are countless adaptations of and homages to Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) and Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897). The talking dead are a commodity, and this alone might account for the proliferation of so many examples of them in popular culture narratives. However, many have argued that there is something greater at play in the current dearth of the dead in popular culture, with zombie narratives, in particular, often being positioned as symbolising or negotiating greater socio-cultural anxieties and concerns. The popularity of zombie narratives, in particular in film, has been related to population growth (Luckhurst 2015), positioned in relation to the terror attacks of September 11, 2001 (Birch-Bayley 2012; Bishop 2009) and considered emblematic of humanity's fears about its own capacity for self-destruction (Michael 2019). When the talking dead emerge on television they are also open to multiple readings, and a number of potential meanings can be derived from television's more marginal and less easily categorised chattering dead.

As Livingstone (1998, 1) has argued, television 'constitutes a domain in which people ordinarily share experiences of the same complex, "social "messages"'. As such, television is a place where both dominant and marginal ideas about death and the dead can be negotiated. Reed and Penfold-Mounce (2015, 136) have suggested that engagement with death and the dead through popular culture can be particularly meaningful, prompting reflection on and engagement with 'sweeping sociological themes'. They argue that the television series *The Walking Dead* can be understood as social-science fiction, inspiring 'the sociological imagination amongst its largely non-scholarly audience' (Reed and Penfold-Mounce 2015, 136). Where *The Walking Dead* franchise is predominantly focussed on the living, the narratives discussed in this chapter shift the focus from the living to the dead. According to Baldick (1990, 45), it was giving the creature in *Frankenstein* 'an articulate voice' that was 'Mary Shelley's most important subversion of the category of monstrosity'. The televisual narratives discussed here further this legacy by giving the dead, as Shelley did, a voice, an opportunity to speak and a central role in the narrative. In doing so, they offer a space in which to

engage with ideas about death, consider what day-to-day life might be like for the dead and to imagine what the dead might have to say.

In the spirit of this collection, this chapter takes a playful approach to structuring the analysis of the texts examined here. The discussion of a range of examples of televisual texts that feature an articulate dead is themed in a way that emphasises what we might learn from these chatty dead, or what ‘social “messages”’ (Livingstone 1998, 1) these narratives offer and negotiate. As evidence mounts that a shift away from the reiteration of the death denial thesis is occurring, these series are open to being read as offering self-help messages that centre on what we can learn from engagement with death and the dead. Self-help, self-care and self-improvement are all themselves popular elements of the contemporary *zeitgeist*, and the world of self-help and the undead collide in the *Zen of Zombies* book series, which includes *The Vampire Seduction Handbook: A Guide to the Ultimate Romantic Adventure* (2009) and *Z.E.O: A Zombie’s Guide to Getting A(Head) in Business* (2009). See also, for example, Buckley’s discussion of Zombie fitness apps in this volume. This chapter is structured into three aphorisms that encapsulate some of the central messages that the dead in these narratives can be understood to deliver. These are:

1. Look within (*American Horror Story: Murder House* and *Intruders*)
2. It’s never too late to change (*iZombie*, *Dead Like Me* and *The Good Place*)
3. Never forget (*Les Revenants* and *The Fades*)

Giroux (2009, 102) has argued that in recent decades ‘making the world a better place has given way to collective narratives about how to survive alone in a world whose destruction is just a matter of time’. As such, he suggests, ‘death, fear, and insecurity’ have come to take precedence over ‘crucial questions about what it means to apprehend the conditions to live a good life in common with others’ (Giroux 2009, 102). The narratives under discussion here can be read as working against this grain, offering messages from the dead that encourage self-awareness, perseverance and remembrance.

### **1. Look Within**

The imperative to look within as a means for self-improvement, to enhance self-awareness and to find happiness has roots in a range of religious, spiritualist, moralistic, psychoanalytic and, more recently, neoliberal discourses. In the Gothic tradition, where the dead have often been found to speak, ‘terror and horror have depended on things not being what they seem’ (Botting 1996, 170). This includes the self and is perhaps one reason why the Gothic has been so susceptible to psychoanalytic readings that emphasise the power of the unconscious. Halberstam (1995, 27) argues that as the Gothic became postmodern, attempts to ‘identify the monster and fix the terms of his/her deformity’ gave way to warnings to ‘be suspicious of monster hunters, monster makers, and above all, discourses invested in purity and innocence’, as a concern with the monstrosity of the other was overtaken by an interest in the ‘need to recognize and celebrate our own monstrosities’. The series discussed in this section can be easily described as examples of Gothic television, advancing a tradition of emphasising internal threats and the monster within. The first season of the highly successful television series *American Horror Story* and the only season of the far less popular series *Intruders* are also examples of recent narratives focussed on the return of an articulate dead suggesting that, in a cultural climate of high anxiety and frequent reminders of the requirement to be vigilant to external threats, we might also be prudent to focus our attention on the threat within.

The first season of *American Horror Story*, given the subtitle *Murder House* by fans, is populated by a diverse group of self-aware dead people. In the cartography of the dead they are closest to ghosts, though not easily categorised as such as they are corporeal and capable of most of what they were alive, including touch, sex, murder and procreation with the living. Unlike most zombies, they retain their personalities. Unlike most vampires, the dead in this particular series of *American Horror Story* are only ever emotionally dependent on the living. The dead are confined by an inability to leave the supernaturally powerful house in which they die. In this sense, they are ghostly. They are prevented from experiencing or partaking in life in the outside world, from ageing, sleeping, or from fully shuffling off their mortal coil. Their entire existence, as the murdered maid Moira O'Hara explains, 'is one long today' (*American Horror Story* 1: 12). Anyone who dies inside the house remains there forever. The season is focussed on the Harmons, whose lives have been marred by loss (in the form of the wife Vivien's late term miscarriage) and betrayal (in the form of the psychoanalyst husband Dr. Harmon's affair with a young student). They share their new Los Angeles home, where they hope to overcome their past traumas and find happiness, with a host of dead occupants dating back to 1920s, including a victim of the real Black Dahlia murders in 1940s Los Angeles (*American Horror Story* often blurs the boundaries between the historical and the imagined). Many of the dead mean the living no harm. Those who do are often shown to be violent as a consequence of nurture rather than nature, possessing complex psychological motivations they can articulate in therapy with Dr. Harmon. Psychology and psychoanalysis are central themes in the narrative, and the season has already been considered in relation to psychoanalytic concepts. Keetley (2013, 90) argues that it 'incarnates the death drive, and, as such, it is one of the most unrelentingly pessimistic cultural texts of the contemporary moment'. Yet compared to other seasons of *American Horror Story*, this one ends on what might be deemed a relatively hopeful note, at least for the Harmon family, who by the end of the season are all dead and reunited as a happy family with their new (dead) baby.

As Keetley (2013, 91) also points out, the series manifests 'almost every conceivable Gothic convention'. Characters display a compulsion to repeat, there are various incidences of uncanny returns and doubles and psychological rather than physical torments are emphasised in a domestic setting. Most of the dead characters are haunted by their past, having suffered or inflicted great pain. Often, their fears are revealed not to be the dead that surround them but the emergence or re-emergence of that which is already within them. One example of the season's apparent message to 'look within' can be seen in the character Violet. Violet is the unhappy teenager of the Harmon family who has discovered that her boyfriend Tate is dead. She fears he is trying to kill her. He leads her into the depths of the house, where she is shocked to discover that he has been hiding the utmost abject – her own rotting corpse (Kristeva 1982). Having intentionally overdosed two weeks earlier and woken as one of the house's dead occupants, Violet had allowed herself (and the audience) to believe that she had been saved by Tate and survived her own suicide attempt. Violet perceived the threat to her life to be external and embodied in the dead Tate. Focussed on an outside threat, she struggles to acknowledge that her own internal conflict and suffering has already brought an end to her life.

The series *Intruders* depicts a less explicit return of the articulate dead, though there is a similar emphasis on the threat within and on suicide. In this series, dead members of the elite secret society *Qui Reverti* (they who return) are able to achieve immortality by inhabiting the bodies of the living. Within each person there can be two potential selves, the currently living one and the

dormant dead one (or vice versa). *Qui Reverti* arrange for their own awakening inside of new bodies, the current occupants of which experience drastic personality changes as they are deposited by the dead within them. In this sense, the plot is not dissimilar to that of Jordan Peele's *Get Out*. *Intruders* depicts a world in which there can be dead others with us, literally inside of us, throughout our lives – a nod, perhaps, to the psychoanalytic concept of the unconscious 'discovered' by Freud (1915) and the idea that, as Kristeva has written, we are *Strangers to Ourselves* (1991). One character, who is made able to see both the dormant and awakened people living inside of bodies is driven to suicide when he sees that his infant child is not his infant child but someone else entirely, an old soul who has forced their way into his child's body. Throughout the series, the return of the dead remains a well-hidden conspiracy. There is no global apocalypse to contend with in either *Intruders* or in *Murder House*. Both series emphasise internal rather than external threats, play with boundaries between human and monster and urge their audiences to 'look within'. Certainly, a similar imperative can be identified in many other cultural texts premised on the return of the dead, articulate or otherwise, including some of the most popular post-apocalyptic narratives of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. *The Walking Dead*, for example, plays with this idea given the zombie virus in the franchise is 'already inside' of all humans, waiting to emerge after death regardless of how they die. What is more unique in *Murder House* is the message seemingly conveyed by the finally happy Harmons at the end of the season: being dead might actually solve your problems. In *Intruders*, where the opportunity to survive death is readily available to society's most elite, the central message might not be one about focussing on the individual self, but rather one prompting a deeper consideration of the broad ranging consequences of engrained structures of privilege as they prevail even in death.

## 2. It's never too late to change

The hope that you might yet change for what you perceive to be the better – physically, psychologically, emotionally, at work or in your home life – is the mainstay of self-help. In contemporary narratives of the articulate dead, even zombies are capable of change. Reed and Penfold-Mounce (2015, 129) have pointed out that 'rehumanized zombies' have become a 'growing theme' in recent years. They can be located in literature, film and television. *Shaun of the Dead* features at its conclusion footage of rehabilitated zombies and in the novel turned film *Warm Bodies*, love makes a zombie human again. The television series *In The Flesh* focusses on rehumanised zombies and explores themes of redemption, discrimination and self-acceptance as the dead come to terms with their new existence in the face of pressure to conform when the living encourage them to 'blend in' with make-up and contact lenses. In the narratives discussed in this section, the message that it is never too late to change tends to centre on the notion that just because you have died, it does not mean you cannot become a better person. The three examples examined here are *iZombie*, *Dead Like Me* and *The Good Place*. It is notable that all of these series have a young, slim, white and blonde woman as the central character. Though they are perhaps symptomatic of the pervasive lack of diversity in some areas of popular culture, they are perhaps also indicative of the tendency for so much transformational self-help to be aimed both at – and more problematically at becoming more *alike* – this particular demographic. Yet each series can also be read as critiquing and playing with the expectations placed upon young women, as none of the central characters succeeds in living up to, in life or in death, the ideals they seem to be measured against.

*iZombie*, a television adaptation of a comic book series, follows the undead life of a committed medical resident turned zombie who works with the police to solve murders. Crime solving dead people are well established in television, featured in the comedy *Pushing Daisies*, which centres on a character able to revive corpses momentarily in order to ask questions of the dead, and the 2000 remake and original of Dennis Spooner's 1969 British comedy-drama *Randall and Hopkirk (Deceased)*, in which a dead detective returns as a ghost to solve his own murder as well as other crimes. *iZombie* adds to this tradition but also plays into a range of ideas about transforming the self and 'having it all'. The central character Liv is an 'all work and no play'. She finally makes the time to attend a party and promptly gets scratched by a zombie. Zombie-ism in this series is the product of mixing a tainted batch of a synthetic drug named Utopium with an energy drink, making zombies well suited to the inexhaustible speed of 24-hour 21<sup>st</sup> century living. In order to disguise her deceased status Liv gains employment in a coroner's office where she is able to consume the brains of unidentified corpses (relatively) ethically, disguising her post-mortem pallor as a 'Goth' makeover. When consuming the brains of the dead she also consumes their memories, adopts their personality traits and is compelled to solve their murders. Liv gives a whole new meaning to Polhemus's (1998) notion of the postmodern 'supermarket of style' as she tries out the different personalities of different dead people and learns about herself along the way. Liv can be a different person every day, experimenting with being a party-girl, a dominatrix, a geek, a kleptomaniac, a pretentious artist and a sociopath among others, with relatively few consequences to speak of. Liv does not try out these many different selves by choice. Rather, she must experience them in order to retain her own self-hood and personality. If she fails to consume brains, she will deteriorate into the archetypal zombie known in the series as 'Romeros' in a nod to George A. Romero. Her adventures into different personalities imply both the ever-permeable nature of the monster and of the self. Liv's ultimate challenge is perhaps that seemingly thrust upon so many young women, as she struggles to stay 'true to herself', whatever that might mean, when faced with so many competing possibilities for who she might be.

*Dead Like Me* is focussed on a listless young woman who, having been exceptionally unmotivated in life, is given new opportunities in death to make friends, make amends and even have sex for the first time. The dead in this series are also put to use, this time as grim reapers. They appear physically different to their loved ones so cannot continue life in any 'normal' way. Rather, they are able to witness the suffering and loss experienced as a consequence of their own demise. The series has a reflective tone and offers an exploration of grief as well prompting audiences to question what they might do differently with a second chance at life. The central character, 18-year-old college dropout George is crushed to death by a toilet seat that falls to earth from a disorbiting space craft. She carries her generally apathetic attitude into death and her views are expressed in a voice-over commentary where she makes observations like: 'as childhood traumas go nothing beats the realisation that everything dies, including you' (s.1, e.1) and 'life sucks and then you die...and then it still sucks' (s.2, e.1). Throughout *Dead Like Me* George learns lessons she did not learn when was alive. She is mentored by a dead father figure, Rube, whose death took him away from his own daughter. All of the deceased in the series remain attached to and preoccupied by the same concerns that consumed their lives and tough in death they have even less control or capacity to affect change, they are able to reflect on the mistakes that, in hindsight, they feel they made. Dillman (2014, 85) has described such characters as George as women who are 'dead but not gone', who begin to exercise agency only after their death. Yet she also points out that George's dead

agency is limited to nostalgia and retrospection. The series expresses a particular concern with tensions between structure and agency, emphasising that an individual's capacity for change will only ever be minimal, limited by the chance nature of life and death, by others and by bureaucratic systems that dictate, in this instance, what happens to you after death – it was only by a combination of immovable bureaucracy and random chance that George ended up a grim reaper. In this series, it is never too late to change. However, though presented as ultimately worthwhile, any change is small, and any differences made are minimal, private and domestic. With its quiet focus on grief, *Dead Like Me* survived for only two seasons and a direct-to-DVD film.

The exceedingly more popular *The Good Place* imagines, rather than the world with dead people in it, an afterlife full of dead people. In this series, which explicitly plays with Sartre's most-ill-quoted aphorism 'hell is other people', the dead are in heaven/hell. What critic Andrew Street (2018) calls 'ratings gold' seem to have been 'found in a sitcom about the afterlife, with regular references to Immanuel Kant, David Hume and Aristotle'. The talkative dead in this series, in particular the central character Eleanor, have been terrible people in life. Eleanor is constantly compared to the 'other' Eleanor whose place it seems she has taken in heaven. The 'other' Eleanor was philanthropic, generous and kind. The real Eleanor is selfish, rude, dishonest, promiscuous and swears constantly. In this sense, *The Good Place* perhaps plays with ideas about what a 'good' woman is and is not. Yet self-improvement is still on the agenda, as Eleanor must be guided toward becoming a 'good' person. Like in *iZombie* and *Dead Like Me*, the dead are given the opportunity to learn about themselves and potentially change the course of their own futures. One of the playful twists in this series is that the character spouting the philosophy lessons and teaching Eleanor her new ways, Chidi, turns out to be just as awful as everyone else – he talks the talk but has failed to walk the walk of ethical living. In some ways these three series offer representations of agentic, unconventional and independent young women as central protagonists. As mentioned earlier, young women are often the traditional 'targets' of self-help and in these series, they do seem to be 'helping themselves', though often with explicit guidance from a man. Yet in the strikingly similar appearance of the central characters and in the focus of all three series on the 'transformation' of young women, each raises important questions about why, when they all imply that change is possible, mainstream popular culture continues to demonstrate a preoccupation with both narrow constructions of womanhood and with a woman's responsibility to improve herself, even when she is dead.

### **3. Never Forget**

The two aphorisms offered so far by the articulate dead of contemporary television are focussed on the self – on looking within, and on being committed to changing yourself. Yet a range of recent television series premised on the return of a relatively mundane dead seem to emphasise the importance of remembering as they explore the responsibility of the living toward the dead, shifting the focus from how the living might improve their lives to how the living might reconsider their treatment of the dead. The series discussed in this section are perhaps most easily read in terms of the critical practice of hauntology, the roots of which lie in Derrida's *Specters of Marx* (1994). Derrida (1994, xviii) writes, in a kind of self-help dictum of his own, that we must learn to 'live with ghosts' as a means to live, if not 'better', then 'more justly'. The series considered in this section imagine what it might look like to live with the dead were they to return and share a similar

emphasis as Derrida in their concern with responsibility and the need for inclusive, just, and critical remembrance.

*Les Revenants* is based on a 2004 French film of the same name. It has been released with subtitles by the BBC and adapted into the US series *The Returned*, which was released a year after the remarkably similar US series *Resurrection*, based on a novel also titled *The Returned* (2013) by Jason Mott. The Australian series *Glitch* also has an extremely similar premise and is perhaps indicative of a broad fascination with the notion of a sudden, un-apocalyptic return of the ordinary dead. Blanco and Peeren (2010, xiv) have suggested that one reason for the current preponderance of ghosts and the ghostly in popular culture might be that both offer apt metaphors for marginalised populations who 'haunt the everyday, living on the edge of visibility and inspiring a curious mix of fear and indifference'. Series that bring back the dead, often those marginalised in life, and posit them as marginalised populations can be seen to utilise them to negotiate similar concerns. *Les Revenants* is less obviously a social commentary on historical and contemporary marginalisation than *Resurrection* or *Glitch*, which deal more explicitly with American slavery and Australian colonialism respectively. Yet *Les Revenants* is also markedly different from more traditional zombie apocalypse narratives in that it has a 'brooding and meditative' tone which makes it clear it is 'less about gore than grief' (Mangan 2014). The series is full of gothic tropes – uncanny returns, doubles and dark, mountainous landscapes. Luckhurst (2015, 188) has commented that 'the breakout success' of *Les Revenants* serves to suggest that this kind of 'subtly disturbing narrative of the dead returning to their families and lovers as brute physical presences, markers of stalled mourning or melancholic denial, can twist away from the splatter-gore aesthetic that has predominated since Romero'. As Luckhurst (2015) implies, a Freudian reading can be easily applied here. Those who return seem to be those for whom someone living has been unable to mourn 'successfully' and who remains in a state of melancholia (Freud, 1915). The past coming back, the unreliability of memory, and the tendency to imagine people as you wanted them to be, rather than as they were, are all central to *Les Revenants*. The series can also be seen to challenge the dominance of self-help messages for the bereaved that emphasise the importance of 'moving on'. It seems to support instead the message delivered by Nora McInerny (2018) in her popular *TedTalk* about bereavement, which emphasises that it is possible to, rather than 'move on' from the dead, 'move forward' with them.

The British series *The Fades* focusses more on cultural than individual memory, engaging with ideas about the consequences of war and the living's responsibility toward the dead. In this series, the 'natural' process of dying has been disrupted by technological advances, modern warfare and the invention of concrete. Rather than 'ascending' to some other plane, some of the dead remain on earth, gradually decaying and unable to touch, feel or communicate with the living. This 'hell on earth' is indiscriminate, with those who remain chosen at random rather than because of anything they have done in life to deserve such a fate. As the character Neil explains (s.1, e.1), the unfairness of life is reflected in death: 'Life has famine, illness, shittiness...death is similarly crap'. The decaying dead find a way return to a corporeal state by consuming the living. The disruption of the 'natural' process of dying is positioned as having begun in 1943 during World War II, and in this sense the series seems to play in some ways into the notion of the 20<sup>th</sup> century as one of death denial. The mass casualties of the war are explained as having broken the ladder of ascension to another plane and the undead are positioned as victims of human atrocity. Whereas in *Les Revenants* the dead seem to return to those who focussed most on the act of remembering, the

dead in *The Fades* have existed for decades without regard, the living ignorant of their circumstance. When they do come back to corporeal form, they bring history lessons with them and remind the living of the consequences of the past. Unlike many common self-help aphorisms that encourage individuals to focus on the future and let go of the past, the message in these series seems to be that the power of memory should not be underestimated. It is the responsibility of the living to remember, but also to remember critically, and to remember that remembering itself is an inherently unstable, unreliable and political act.

### **Conclusion**

To some extent, the proliferation of the dead in 21<sup>st</sup> century popular culture is merely a consequence of the general proliferation of everything. Yet much recent engagement with the dead in popular culture might also be understood as timely. Will Self (2013) has pointed out that it is perhaps surprising that 'in our modern secular and avowedly inclusive society we have wilfully allowed the dead to be so gagged', or that 'in an era when every minority is, at least in theory, listened to, we have turned our backs on the great majority and rendered them silent'. Arguably, it is about time the dead were given more opportunity to talk. The presence of the dead in popular culture narratives may indicate both a broader desire to hear from the dead, and to engage with philosophical, practical and existential questions about mortality. Often the concerns of the dead in the series discussed here are also the concerns of the living, and the dead are utilised to explore a range of social and culture issues that are not explicitly death related, as the dead and their representation become vehicles for a wide range of potential meanings. Yet the popularity of television series about the dead, from explicitly philosophical comedies to irreverent ones and from melancholic and haunting dramas to gore filled horror, suggest some level of interest in imagining the lives of an articulate dead and on shifting the focus from the living to the dead. These series might be understood to offer opportunities for audiences to begin conversations about death and the dead and they might also be understood as a challenge to the much cited and repeated tenets of what has come to be known as the death denial thesis. Like all cultural texts, they are open to multiple interpretations. Many of the popular culture narratives explored in this chapter play with, subvert and blur the permeable and constructed boundaries between categories of the undead and between the humans and monsters. They can also be read as exploring loss, grief and memory, and as susceptible to psychoanalytic, feminist and other readings. As the articulate dead continue to make their voice in contemporary culture heard, they raise questions, suggest answers and prompt conversation – perhaps even offering a little self-help.

### **Interactions and sensoria:**

Watch *The Santa Clarita Diet* and *In the Flesh*. Read Ruth Penfold-Mounce's *Death, The Dead and Popular Culture* and Colin Davis's *Haunted Subjects: Deconstruction, Psychoanalysis and the Return of the Dead*. Listen to Nora McInerney, 'We don't 'move on' from grief, we move forward with it'.

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### **Film**

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*Shaun of the Dead*. dir. Edgar Wright. London: WT<sup>2</sup>. Viewed on DVD.

*Warm Bodies*. dir. Jonathan Levine. Burbank, CA: Mandeville Films. Viewed on DVD.

