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Death and the Screen: Editors' Introduction

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*Before delving in, please note that this issue deals with sensitive subject matter throughout. There are specific instances of suicide ideation discussed in Canning's essay *As Well As/Instead Of Orpheus: Making, teaching and living in grief*. We hope you find the issue meaningful and engaging.*

This special issue has been a long time in the making. It was conceived of in early February 2020, when we hosted an event on Death Studies at Falmouth University with *Revenant's* editor-in-chief, Dr Ruth Heholt. By the time the call for papers was out, haunting images associated with COVID-19 – daily death count statistics, healthcare workers wearing PPE from head to toe and memorials to the dead – were circulating globally, and footage of George Floyd's murder was drawing fresh international attention to longstanding systemic injustice. Beth had spent the earliest months of the pandemic anxiously searching black and white hospital screens for signs of life as pregnancy losses came to dominate her personal experiences of the first half of 2020. Renske was, like so many of us, physically far from family, experiencing the bittersweetness of relationships with loved ones mediated entirely by the screen.

As the submission deadline approached, an abundance of potential articles and creative responses – personal, critical, theoretical, broad in range and genre – began to emerge. They were engaged with *Revenant's* themes of the supernatural, the uncanny and the weird, but also responded to the journal's emphasis on the 'natural' as part of the supernatural. They questioned ideas about death, nature and the screen and troubled the divisions between these categories. We soon came to realise how much people could relate to the broad and evocative topic of *Death and the Screen*, engaging with literature from a host of different disciplines. As such, the submissions in this issue represent a starting point and interjection into the breadth and diversity of scholarly and creative work that involves death, dying, the dead, different interpretations of the screen, and how these topics differ and overlap.

The issue includes analyses of death in television series, films, videogames, and novels, as well as on social media. The creative work featured includes a reflection on a theatre piece performed on zoom, a comic, a personal and critical reflection on grief and film, and a narrative exploring social media and the mediatisation of loss. Work is featured from historians, film critics, media studies, death studies and literature scholars, cultural theorists, a creative writer, a cartoonist, and a filmmaker. What all the submissions have in common is their broad concern with relationships between death and the screen.

Death and the Screen

Whilst screens can depict multiple forms of death: ‘real’ deaths, imagined deaths, and imagined versions of ‘real’ deaths, media and popular cultural representations of death can attract criticism on several fronts. Research on death and dying focused on popular culture is sometimes accused of being ‘glossy’ (Penfold-Mounce 2022) and therefore not as ‘worthy’, worthwhile, or valuable as academic work that focuses on supposedly more heavy or serious topics. Yet, popular culture is arguably more powerful in depicting and shaping ideas around death and dying than many academic papers and books. Penfold-Mounce has suggested that popular culture can excel at producing morbid space, in which audiences and consumers are prompted to think about death and related issues. As she explains:

Morbid spaces vary to include death, the process of dying and disposal of the dead in different formats such as fantasy television shows, such as *Game of Thrones* and *The Walking Dead*, but also comic book artwork and even children’s television shows. These popular and globally consumed forms of death visualization ensure that death matters are a consistent component within entertainment consuming behaviors and enable both scholar and consumer to gaze upon death (Penfold-Mounce 2019, 271)

Texts that sit outside of the realm of popular culture can also prompt what Penfold-Mounce (2022) refers to as the thanatological imagination, provoking people’s morbid sensibilities, or their ‘willingness to deliberate death in the context of popular culture’ (Penfold-Mounce 2018, 66). However, efforts to bring death into public discourse via the screen are not consistently well received. In the 1970s sociologist Lyn H. Lofland wrote:

Media dying [...] increases the possibility that conflicts over style or over one or another dimension of style will emerge. I was told by an informant, for example, of an individual who was “kicked out of” his dying self-help group because he chose to allow a cinema verite film to be made of his dying passage and the group disapproved of media death (Lofland 2019 [1978], 39).

Lofland’s example is illustrative of an ill-defined but difficult to deny wariness often evident in the public imagination surrounding mediated death. Such unease is explicitly clear in what

was widely regarded as a moral panic surrounding ‘video nasties’ in Britain in the late twentieth-century (Petley 2012), and in concerns about ‘snuff’ films from the 1970s onwards (McKenna 2022). Mediated death will perhaps inevitably create conflict, tensions, and ethical questions surrounding what types of deaths and dying are appropriate and inappropriate to portray on screen. Should death appear on screen? How real should those portrayals be? Is it OK to watch a real death on screen, and in what context? What is a ‘real’ portrayal of death?

Since Lofland (2019 [1978]) wrote about the man ‘kicked out of’ his dying self-help group, a wealth of end-of-life documentaries have emerged – too many to name here, though one that is recent, readily available and critically acclaimed is Steven Eastwood’s *Island* (2017). Such end-of-life documentaries, which depict people dying up to and at times including the ‘moments of death’, raise many ethical questions. Hakola suggests that ‘documentary makers continue to struggle with whether cinematic technology can express death as an event and whether it should aspire to do so’ (Hakola 2021, 13). Yet it is also important to think about what is captured by these documentaries, and what is invariably left out. Crucially, as suggested by Malkowski (2017), whilst depicting very real stories about death and dying, the image of death is also absent in digital portrayals. Malkowski (2017, 7) suggests that:

The digital is unable to show death in “full detail”, as it remains beyond representation even amid image technologies that can record it more fully than ever. Failures to fully reveal it on the documentary screen affirm that death is enigmatic and internal, with limited external signs that the camera doggedly pursues. It refuses to appear as a transcendent, identifiable instant capable of video capture. Especially resistant to media visibility is the “moment of death,” a supposed point of transition from living being to corpse that has fixated image-makers and audiences, and that obscures the more frightening reality that dying is a durational process.

Malkowski notes that the ‘moment of death’ is typically absent in documentary films, as it is both extremely hard to capture, and because it raises ethical issues regarding whether it should be included. End-of-life documentaries, then, focus predominantly on the period before the death, and the aftermath of the death. The exact point of death, so often portrayed in fictional accounts of dying, is rarely seen in these ‘real’ depictions of very real people dying. However, as Malkowski (2017) suggests, the absence of the ‘moment of death’ might in some ways make them more ‘real’. Unlike fictional representations that often (though not always) position death as sudden and unexpected, these documentaries emphasise the often long and durational process of dying.

Death, dying and the aftermath of certain types of death are topics regularly featured in documentaries more broadly (Hakola 2021). At times these documentaries can be controversial, for example Eric Steel's *The Bridge*, which features footage of people dying by suicide from The Golden Gate Bridge (see Malkowski 2017 or Thomas, forthcoming, for a discussion of this film and the controversies surrounding it). At other times, several documentaries might emerge at once, indicating a growing societal concern with a particular issue – for example, student suicide in the UK (Calver and Michael-Fox 2021). In this issue, the focus has come to be not on documentary but on fictionalised and dramatised representations of death and dying. Malkowski (2017) suggests that it is precisely such depictions that are influencing general audiences and their expectations of what death and dying *should* look like. By working with actors, narrative (rather than documentary) filmmakers have greater power to create the 'moment of death' on screen. A common trope is to zoom in on the face of someone dying, which is something that is often impossible or undesirable when recording 'real death'. As 'real' deaths are rarely captured, audiences may predominantly base their experiences and expectations of death and dying on fictionalised accounts. As Laura Canning notes in her piece in this issue, entitled *As Well As/Instead Of Orpheus: Making, teaching and living in grief*, film plays an educative role in people's understandings of death and grief. Reflecting on the aftermath of a profound personal loss, Canning observes:

There is something about the extremity of a loss like this that makes others thrill with horror, with vicarious sensation. It is this extremity of loss that makes grief so cinematic, or cinema so like grief. *I can't begin to imagine*, they say. *But you can*, I think. *Cinema has taught you how.*

As Canning's powerfully emotive and lyrical essay suggests, the relationships between death and the screen include ones between grief and cinema, which seem to borrow from each other's languages to communicate the emotional landscapes of loss.

Gibson (2007, 16) writes that death can function as a 'narrative force and image system used to inform, shock and entertain'. Whilst it is certainly true that audiences will experience popular culture depictions of death as entertainment, it is clear they may also engage with them to seek to 'make sense' of situations that occur in their own life. Similarly, the impetus to tell others they are not alone is one often expressed by those producing

creative, cultural, and commercial engagements with death and its corresponding losses. In this issue, Gareth Schott's article entitled *After Life and the Uncanny nature of Grief* emphasises audience responses to Netflix Dramedy *After Life* as one that portrayed with detailed accuracy the experience of being widowed at a young age. Schott examines how the series functions to reflect on the transformed experience of spaces during mourning, and on how screens can contribute to what he positions as the uncanny nature of grief. As so many of the contributions to this issue show, the screen is powerful.

Part of the complex power of the screen is tied to the fact that it is never possible to fully anticipate how depictions ('real' or imagined) will impact the people watching. What kind of educative function, if any, screen portrayals might come to represent for a person watching is dependent on a host of contextual factors. As Racquel Gates (2018, 4) writes, 'representations do not do the work by themselves, and to take it a step further, they may not even do the work that we presume them to do'. Representations of death and its concomitant experiences raise questions about their intended, assumed, and actual impact and about how personal experiences shape our engagement with screens, informing how we interpret what we see. The educative function of screen representations of death might mislead as much as they support in terms of developing an understanding of death. Medical dramas, for example, give an authoritative sense that they portray medicalised dying as it really happens (at least to the non-medically trained eye). Chartand (2020), comparing her ethnographic research on dying in intensive care units with the on-screen portrayal of withdrawing life support in popular medical drama *Grey's Anatomy*, notes that on the one hand these fictional representations can help family members prepare for such events in real life. On the other hand, 'television sanitises these aspects of the dying in its aim to portray aesthetic deaths that will not discomfort viewers' (Chartand 2020, 1166). Consequently, when the way a patient dies contradicts fictional representations, it can become more distressing than 'the actual death itself' (Chartand 2020, 1166). This shows the complexity of the portrayal of fictionalised deaths on screen, which can be a source of comfort and distress simultaneously.

Unlike in documentary or narrative film or television, where audiences likely have some sense of what they are going to see, death on social media feeds can often come as a total surprise. As such, autoplay and 'live' features in apps can be critiqued for the ways they expose people to these images without warning. The 2019 mosque attack in Christchurch, New Zealand, which killed 51 people, is an example of this, as the perpetrator livestreamed

his attack on Facebook (Harju and Huhtamäki 2021). Malkowski (2017) has argued that when ‘real’ deaths are captured by mobile phones, they might fail to emotionally engage audiences as much as fictionalised portrayals of death do, though as Hanif Abdurraqib (2016) makes clear in his powerful poem ‘On the Filming of Black Death’, this is certainly not always the case, and strongly dependent on who the audience is and what type of death is captured. More quotidian experiences of encountering the risk of death whilst scrolling social media are explored in Dan O’Carroll’s creative piece in this issue, entitled *Hearing the Birds Pause*, in which he recalls browsing through Twitter on his phone:

three or four posts down [...] Joanne had ‘liked’ a message that read: ‘*People, help. Please. My infant son is back from surgery and it’s touch and go. I need your prayers. Every single one. Any one. Please.*’ Underneath the tweet was the usual panel with numbers of retweets and likes and comments. And it snagged something in me. Two things, really. First was the weirdness of it. The incongruence. Of this man’s face – a man I had never met and knew nothing about – appearing on a small flat screen barely bigger than my palm, and pleading, to me and to anyone else who might read it, people who he had never met and had no connection with, to think of him and to pray – pray! – for his infant son who was then, at that very moment, recovering from surgery. And who might, I realised as I expanded the thread, die very soon.

O’Carroll contrasts what it might be to sit at the bedside of someone in a life-threatening position with and without social media, raising uncomfortable questions about our complicated relationships with screens. Katie Barnett’s article, *Invisible Presences: The Elusive Twin and the Empty Screen in Personal Shopper*, is a nuanced analysis of a visual portrait of grief in the 2016 film *Personal Shopper*, reflecting on cultural expectations of closure, both in terms of narrative and in terms of bereavement. Barnett argues that ‘immersed in a contemporary technological landscape of screens,’ *Personal Shopper* ‘resists certainty’ — certainty about loss, relationships, haunting, love, and what technology can offer in experiences of grief. In the article’s conclusion, Barnett considers whether the film positions new technologies as alienating or as capable of creating connections between characters and audiences, reminding them that no matter how profound their experience of loss, they are not alone. Although it seems that moments of connection and care can emerge in technology saturated contexts, we may too, at times, need a break from the screen.

Questions about the role screens play in our lives and experiences of death and loss emerge throughout this issue. They are explored visually in *Terminal*, a comic inspired by the 1998 anime *Serial Experiments Lain*, and an accompanying reflection by the cartoonist and author Jane McBride. McBride aims to show the blurring line between life and death, and

how people can linger on screens long after their physical death. McBride does not want to make any judgment about what kind of bonds are ‘better’, but instead shows how screens and technologies transcend and develop relationships between the living and the dead. As Sumiala (2022, 23) and others have argued, the hypermediation of death has ‘profound consequences for the ways in which we maintain our social lives with the dead in society’.

Nina Barrett’s article, *Justice Online: TikTok, Platform Properties and the Fight for Familial Conviction*, offers a very different and highly compelling example of how screens can come to shape relationships between the living and the dead, and to bring about material changes. Her article is focused on video sharing application TikTok and its use in the quest for justice for missing person Alissa Turney by her sister Sarah Turney. Barrett explores how the social network and the self-produced social media content it features has been used in part as a space for grieving, but also as a space to demand justice. Her article stands to acknowledge the ways in which there is nothing ‘natural’ but rather something entirely eerie and uncanny about murder, screen media, and the ways that grief might need to be tailored and adapted to exploit the algorithms of new technologies in the service of justice. Whilst TikTok is often dismissed as frivolous in discourses about young people and social media, Barrett demonstrates how vital new screen technologies can be as a space for grief and justice.

Two papers in this issue focus on death in videogames. In videogames there is the expectation death is temporary, as one can always just start a game again. Perhaps this is also why we can consume deaths via or handheld devices, as these types of death seem far removed, impermanent and reversible. In the article *Saving Arthur Morgan: Red Dead Redemption 2 as a site of bereavement and grief-work*, Ruben Vandenplas shows how the game Red Dead Redemption 2 (RDR2) subverts ‘typical’ dying in videogames, as the narrative of RDR2 makes it inevitable that the games’ main character will die forever at the end of the game. No matter how players play the game, they will have to come to terms with the fact that the main hero, or antihero, will not survive. Merlin Seller’s article *Ugly Death: Rot, Desperation and the More-than-Human in The Last of Us Part II (2020)*, focuses on the videogame *The Last of Us Part II* (2020). In this game, as Seller shows, players ‘face an intense meditation on death, fungi and plants that polarised its critical reception’. Through the repeated, spectacular, and chillingly abrupt death animations of both player and non-player characters, TLOU2 ‘wallows’ in the ‘deathsetics’ trend of contemporary videogames.

In TLOU2 players need to fight off human and fungal parasites, signalling anthropocene anxieties, fears around climate change and extinction. Both Seller and Vandenplas show videogames can tackle important existential questions, leading to reflection (and perhaps even action) on bigger life events outside of the screen.

Coleclough is explicitly engaged with existential concerns and moral quandaries surrounding death in her article *It's a Question of Degrees: Morality, Justice, and Revenge in Telefantasy*. She argues that several examples of telefantasy around and since the turn of the 21st century have offered both a return to and extension of the ambiguity of the sympathetic 'Other'. Coleclough's philosophical and speculative article explores the ways that the 'Other' is treated in a range of popular telefantasy texts including *Supernatural* (2005-2020), *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003), *iZombie* (2015-2019), *In the Flesh* (2013-2014), *Lucifer* (2016-present) and *Z Nation* (2014-2018). She explores how morality is played out in the texts in terms of religion, science, 'good' and 'evil', and audiences' potential experiences of feeling themselves to be something 'other', suggesting that audiences might be drawn to depictions of 'outsiders' that they can relate to in series that negotiate the quandary of killing 'monsters'. Coleclough's article, like Michael-Fox's (2020) work elsewhere, makes clear that depictions of the dead can function to explore a range of contemporary social concerns, utilising death and the dead to explore a breadth of less obviously related topics.

Michele Aaron (2013) has suggested that death in visual culture is a muddy arena of engagement with mortality, loss, memory, grief and more. Aaron (2013, 3) points out that:

visual culture has provided an ever more dominating forum for society's depiction of and dealings with death but its various takes on mortality or memory or loss offer little stable meaning for "death," even as they confirm its enduring socio-political, aesthetic and philosophical resonance.

In many screen representations, it is difficult to carve out what is 'death', and what is something else. Death evades meaning. However, the 'socio-political, aesthetic and philosophical resonance' (Aaron 2013, 3) of death is evident in many of the submissions in this issue. Several articles explore death in relation to gender, and the patriarchal violence that is signalled by Barrett's article on TikTok (Alissa Turney's stepfather was indicted and charged with her murder in 2020) is explored in depth in several of the television series and films examined in this issue. In *'At Its Heart, a Haunted Town': Patriarchal Violence, Female Resistance, and Post-Trauma in Riverdale*, Raechel Dumas focuses on the drama *Riverdale*,

exploring both trauma within the narrative and that expressed through experimentation with Gothic trappings, generic conventions, aesthetic sensibilities, non-diegetic effects, and allusions to other narratives of patriarchal violence. Dumas argues that the series reflects contemporary demands amongst audiences ‘for media that acknowledges the impossibility of fully overturning entrenched power paradigms, as well as the difficulty of relating our emotional and embodied experiences of them in coherent terms’. Our own article – which can be read as a further introduction to literature about representations of death especially in terms of gender and the politics of representation – explores how another popular television series aimed at young adult audiences grapples with both complicity and critique when it comes to representations of young women and their deaths. In *Death for Young Adult Audiences: Complexity, Complicity and Critique in Pretty Little Liars* we argue that *Pretty Little Liars* (2010-2017) can be read as both reiterating and challenging problematic perceptions of girlhood, womanhood, glamour, and death, ultimately functioning to convey several complex and ambivalent meanings.

In *From Chudail to Devi: Analysing Death, Evil, and Monstrous Femininity in Bulbbul*, Devaleena Kundu and Benson Rajan analyse Anvita Dutta’s *Bulbbul* (2020), a film about women, death, violence, suffering and the mythological Indian figure of the chudail. The chudail, or demon-woman, is often represented as a woman with scruffy long hair and backwards-turned feet. Kundu and Rajan explore the development of the chudail in *Bulbbul* (2020), reading her in terms of the ‘monstrous-feminine’ (Creed 2007). In Dutta’s film, they argue, the chudail myth is both adapted for a contemporary audience and advanced to include the possibility of a ‘good’ chudail, who enacts revenge and stands against patriarchal oppression. They explore how death becomes the medium through which the oppressed woman in the context of modern-day India finds a way to regain her social agency. Like in Dumas’s work on *Riverdale* and our own paper on *Pretty Little Liars*, Kundu and Rajan’s paper emphasises the complex connections between gender, death and the screen, and the ways in which patriarchal violence is negotiated within fictional texts for popular audiences. However, their article also emphasises the power of myth and ideas from the past when it comes to negotiating death on screen.

Helen Frisby, in a recent episode of *The Death Studies Podcast*, noted that ‘Sin-eaters are perfect folklore, we know just enough about them’ (Frisby 2022). Frisby emphasises opportunities for the blending of fact and fiction in popular culture when portraying historic

figures. In her article *The Sin-Eater: Ritual and Representation*, Frisby delves deeper into the world of sin-eaters and argues that the sin-eater's sudden revival in novels, in film and on television since the 1980s is no coincidence. Frisby suggests it is their very historical obscurity which renders them an ideal vehicle for the creative expression and exploration of present-day anxieties. As less is known about the historic figure of the sin-eater, and as this figure lends itself brilliantly to people's imagination, creators arguably have more freedom in producing a narrative of death. Both Frisby and Kundu and Rajan's articles in this issue demonstrate how recent screen representations of death can engage with the past, but also develop new, politically charged ideas about inequality, history, and power.

Taryn Tavener-Smith's article, *Adapting representations of death from page to screen in Susan Hill's The Woman in Black (1983)*, compares literary and screen representations, exploring what can shift and be revealed in the depiction of death from page and on screen. Through their representations of trauma, death, and dying, both Hill's novella (1983) and Watkins' (2012) film adaptation capture the existence of societal inequalities based on gender. Both texts are littered with representations of trauma, death, and the experience of dying, predominantly by women and children, who functioned on the outskirts of Victorian society and whose existence remained largely confined to the margins. In focusing on death in adaptation, Tavener-Smith demonstrates how a move to the screen engenders a fresh and critical look at the past, as audiences are 'forced to look on as spectators, and indeed accomplices' to injustice, in particular in terms of gender. Frisby, Kundu and Rajan and Tavener-Smith all exemplify in their articles the ways in which contemporary screen texts can renegotiate the past. Both these articles and the texts they examine can be understood to demonstrate how, through the screen, attitudes to death can be critically reevaluated in different contexts.

How death and dying is portrayed on-screen and off-screen and in various forms of popular culture will also be influenced by local contexts. In *Soms deed je het vanwege Beek: Surveillance, subversion and the presence of death in Thomas Olde Heuvelt's HEX*, Madelon Hoedt examines a novel that explores the juxtaposition of medieval curses and modern technologies. Hoedt outlines how national attitudes towards death and dying inform written accounts of horror in a Dutch context. In the accompanying interview, which Hoedt conducted with author Thomas Olde Heuvelt, the author reflects on writing the novel, the Dutch context and why he had to change the location of the novel in the English translation.

Nuchterheid – or down-to-earthness – is considered a Dutch quality and this is suggested to be a reason for the absence of horror as a genre in the Dutch language both by Hoedt and Olde Heuvelt. Unlike the Netherlands, Britain is a society in which Gothic television and horror thrives. Schiltz paper *Ghosts in the Living Room: The Televisual Gothic on Britain's Screens* provides an examination of several British, Gothic televisual texts and offers an interjection into discourses of authority, nationality, and morality. Like our own article on *Pretty Little Liars*, Schiltz work builds on the seminal contributions of Helen Wheatley (2016) in theorising the televisual Gothic. In exploring mistrust in the institution of the BBC (British Broadcasting Company) and a proliferation of suicides associated with ITV reality programming, Schiltz emphasises the complex politics of death and the screen in a specific national context.

As we noted at the beginning, this issue has been in the making since early 2020, and much of it has been written during the COVID-19 pandemic. During this time, many of those in the creative industries had to find new ways to make and show their work. In this issue, in their submission entitled *Dr Tulp and the Theatre of Zoom: An Autopsy of Time and Presence*, Carina Westling (artistic producer) and Wendy Bevan-Mogg (writer) reflect on their creation of a contemporary response to Rembrandt's painting *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr Nicolaes Tulp*. They created a virtual play and used the pandemic as a way of exploring and experimenting with the process of creating live performances remotely. The authors point out that:

nearly 400 years after the creation of *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr Nicolaes Tulp*, it still resonates, provoking questions around death and embodiment, spectatorship and agency (...) Questions around embodiment, so fundamental to those about death, would necessarily have to be addressed via a platform that mediated it, and then quite poorly and under restrictive circumstances that limited agency to designed affordances (Westerling and Bevan-Mogg, this issue)

This creative piece is a pertinent example that shows our ongoing and constantly changing relationships with death, dying and the screen.

We hope you find the submissions included here rewarding, thought-provoking, and ultimately of use in developing your own ideas about death and the screen. We are confident that, whilst providing a space for a breadth of engagement with literature from different disciplines, the work in this issue also illustrates some of the range of media and texts that can generate morbid spaces, provoke people's morbid sensibilities, and enliven their

thanatological imaginations (Penfold-Mounce 2022). We certainly hope they provoke yours, encouraging you to explore questions about death, dying and loss, and about their myriad mediatisations.

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