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Death in Contemporary Popular Culture

Adriana Teodorescu and Michael Hviid Jacobsen (Editors)

London: Routledge, 2019.

ISBN: 9780367185855, 364pp. £120.

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Death in Contemporary Popular Culture is a diverse and interdisciplinary edited collection about ‘the ways in which death is being depicted, described, circumscribed, mediated, presented, analysed, framed, transfigured, and encountered through popular culture’ (ix). The book consists of twelve chapters and an introduction, with contributions from Britain, the US, Denmark, New Zealand, Germany, India and Romania. Coming in at £120, it is likely to be a book you source from a library or rent in electronic format from the publisher. The introduction is helpfully available as a sample on the Routledge website, and it includes useful chapter summaries so readers can establish which contributions they may wish to try to source should the whole book not be available to them.

The introduction takes a critical approach to both popular culture and to the place of death in popular culture. This alone will provide a meaningful resource for anyone researching death and the cultural imagination. The editors emphasise the importance of ‘moving beyond any discussion of good or bad’, recognising that ‘popular culture is both unavoidable and continuously fluctuating’ (5) and highlighting the importance of non-mass produced culture amongst the diversity of popular cultural engagement with death. They argue that popular culture representations can shape how people ‘think and feel about real, actual, and authentic death’ (x) as they navigate with nuance the tendency to position some popular cultural representations as trivialising and unrealistic whilst other cultural artefacts are often valorised as more complex in their engagement. The editors emphasise that just as there are many meanings to the idea of death, there are also many meanings to most popular cultural engagement with death.

The first chapter is by the book’s co-editor Michael Hviid Jacobsen and operates as an alternative introduction. Jacobsen draws on a range of death studies literature to reflect on the well traversed and continually contentious scholarly notions of ‘death denial’ and ‘death revival’, specifically in relation to the current ‘mediated visibility’ (15) of death and death’s commodification throughout and beyond popular culture. Jacobsen outlines in the chapter his

phase of ‘spectacular death’ (15), which builds on Ariès famous stages of death attitudes and which Jacobsen sets out in his seminal 2016 journal article on the same topic. In this chapter, he also proposes three new concepts: the trivialization, tivolization and re-domestication of death. Tivolization is perhaps the most intriguing, referring to the ways in which ‘the otherwise inconspicuous normality of certain events or themes is transformed or even exaggerated into a playful, carnivalesque, commercialized, entertainment-based, self-propelling, unserious and often rather superficial kind of spectacle’ (28). Jacobsen argues that the tivolization of death has four aspects: the new visibility of death, the new memorialization and ritualization of death and grief, the new carnival of grief, the new professionalization and specialization of death. The frameworks and concepts in this chapter provide productive ways for thinking about death and popular culture and offer a constructive starting point for anyone researching the area, as well as offering some interesting tools for reflecting on the book’s other contributions.

The collection includes a wide range of fascinating chapters. Chapter two and three were particular highlights for me. In chapter two Glenys Caswell writes about British soap opera, examining the cultural underpinnings of ideologically dominant beliefs around ‘good’ and ‘bad’ deaths and the often-perpetuated notion that an unaccompanied death is necessarily a ‘bad’ one. In chapter three, Ruth Penfold-Mounce explores celebrity deaths and the thanatological imagination. Considering high-profile celebrity deaths in particular in the UK and US, Penfold-Mounce puts forward the idea of the thanatological imagination, inspired by C. Wright Mills’s sociological imagination, and examines how dead celebrities continue to work after death. She explores how the useful notion of the thanatological imagination has been inspired within a range of non-thanatological professions and highlights its significance as a catalyst for consumers to engage with issues of mortality. Chapter four, by Ruth McManus, Denise Blake and David Johnston, offers a fascinating and moving exploration of the complex memorialisation of disasters at sea in New Zealand. In chapter five, Cristina Douglas examines ‘new visions of nature, healing, and staving off death in Romanian popular culture’ (84) in a thought-provoking chapter exploring themes of biomedicalised death, immortality and anti-ageing. Devaleena Kundu contributes chapter six, offering a fruitful discussion of how aesthetic distance helps to transform the corpse into an object of desire in the televisual examples of *Six Feet Under*, *Hannibal* and *The Fall*, offering insight into the ways in which ‘media-induced images of death, dying, and the corpse act as constant reminders of the ephemerality of life’ (114). In chapter seven Florina Codreanu discusses pop art, popular culture and in particular Andy Warhol and Banksy in an insightful consideration

of the relationships between these artists, their work and death. Chapter eight, by Martin Bartelmus, is focused on Quentin Tarantino's films. Arguing that there is a cultural theory of killing in Tarantino's oeuvre, this chapter will be of interest to both Tarantino fans and death scholars alike. Chapter nine is authored by E. Moore Quinn and discusses popular culture, 'rebel' songs and death in Irish memory, focusing on how these songs serve 'imagined communities of resistance' (169) and function to express and validate shared interpretations, offering valuable insight into the many dimensions of music and death. In chapter ten, Panagiotis Pentaris explores death in children's animated films in a chapter that will be useful to anyone examining this topic. Michael Hviid Jacobsen and Nicklas Runge co-author chapter eleven on Death in Don DeLillo's *White Noise* in a chapter that opens with an insightful and useful consideration of the antagonisms and sympathies between literature and sociology as academic disciplines. Chapter twelve, authored by the book's co-editor Adriana Teodorescu, focuses on death and immortality in the 'Islamic State' discourse on Twitter, emphasising that 'social media is never a neutral actor or instrument' (234) in a fascinating chapter that reveals much both about its area of focus and about the processes of researching sensitive topics and challenges of data collection.

The editors hope the book will inspire research into how popular culture and death relate and intersect in the current moment, as well as research that acknowledges from its starting point the 'inherent ambivalence of pop-death' and 'the role of popular culture in both shaping death and being simultaneously shaped by it' (7). It certainly will, offering either a provocative starting point for those new to the study of death and popular culture or a fruitful source of concepts, theories and ideas for those already well versed in both fields.

References

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