

- Excerpt from a Conference Paper -

Drop-Dead Gorgeous. Media Representations of Death in Contemporary Television

Introduction

This research is concerned with the representation of dead bodies in new TV shows of the 21st century. It focuses on daily primetime TV shows, because these shows have the biggest audience and therefore reflect a broad social preference. Before the 21st century, crime shows have most of the time shown the victims at the crime scene only. With the turn of the century and the rise of TV shows like *CSI* or *Six Feet Under*, the clearly visible dead body became a constant player in the plot, not only at the crime scene but also in the morgue, in the embalming room or in pathology. Before the turn of the century, there was only one show on TV (*Quincy, M.E.*) that presented a pathologist and an "invisible corpse". Throughout its run on TV, the show remained very guarded in its representation of the corpse. The massive proliferation of new representations of dead bodies in the 21st century however confronts the viewer with various aesthetic body representations that not only elicit anxiety but also fascination and curiosity.

Representations of the dead

Different TV shows refer to different techniques and by comparing a documentary, which aims at being the most authentic form of representation, to a popular TV crime show, I want to show how the popular TV show stages the corpse in an aesthetic way; beautified but provoking disgust at the same time. Therefore, I researched Michael Kriegsman's documentary *Autopsy: Through the Eyes of Death's Detectives* (2000), which presents a complete and uncensored autopsy. I will compare the documentary footage with a TV crime show sequence from *CSI Las Vegas: Down the Drain* (S5E2 -2006).

I will show that TV crime shows work extensively with media aesthetic techniques and, therefore, their corpse representation will be very different from the corpse representation in the documentary. I will also show that the display of the corpse in a TV crime show is not

only different, but omits what an authentic documentary displays regarding signs of age, impurity and the lack of self-control.

Which differences exist and what meanings regarding aestheticisation can be drawn from the different representations?

It seems as if the media aims to represent an aesthetic corpse, which can be embellished and disgusting at the same time. In the two examined genres, the aestheticisation takes place through different media aesthetic techniques. These are used on a visual level through certain filmic methods, such as camera, lighting, colours, staged objects, the storyline, and especially on the audio level through noises, atmosphere tones, music and artificial noises. I will now present the most evident differences:

1. First of all the **story line**. While the documentary showed every single step of the autopsy, the *CSI* TV show showed only approximately two minutes of the autopsy scene. They showed a cut through the skin and the aorta, as well as the removal of the chest plate and the heart. In comparison to the documentary, this representation was not only lacking the visualisation of any kind movement of the body, but also the cutting of the tissue from the skin, cracking the chest bones, the scooping out of blood and the examination of the heart, cutting it into slices. The FCC organisation, which controls TV show production scripts, checks for scenes, which are too graphic, and vetoes them before the program is aired. If one can actually measure crucial scenes, then the TV show representation lacks the more crucial graphic exposure of an autopsy procedure. Hence, the weighting of certain scenes reveals a selection process, i.e. exclusion from the aestheticisation process.

2. Secondly, the **figures**, such as the embellished corpse on the TV show suggest another aestheticisation effort. The documentary shows what hardly any TV show would represent in prime time, namely an elderly undressed and overweight woman. Menninghaus had called this image of woman "Vetula", pointing out that visualising a naked elderly woman was the height of disgust for most of the founding fathers of aesthetic theory. (Menninghaus, 2003, p. 7)ⁱ The dead woman lies horizontal on a wet silver table. She is naked, old, and overweight and her body gleams with moisture. Her face is covered by a towel, scalp skin or VFX. Her private area is also covered with a towel or VFX, however, her pubic hair can be seen. Not her entire breast, but her nipples are covered with VFX. Her hair is wet and ruffled. At the end of the procedure, she lies on the table with her upper body part and head open; all organs have been removed. This inconsistent covering of body parts shows the actual issues of how to

represent a corpse with piety. In contrast, the corpse on the TV show is the typical young athletic man placed horizontal on the clean dry silver table only covered by a sheet, which has been placed over his private parts. His skin appears to be blue. His tidy hair is dry and has a side parting. Within two minutes, the pathologist actor has cut and opened the upper body and removed chest ribs and the heart. The corpse displays deadly wounds and some injuries on the face, but no any signs of decay or untidiness. This autopsy sequence from *CSI* characteristically stands for the majority of all other autopsy scenes in this popular TV show. Hence, the cast of attractive young actors and actressesⁱⁱ is, therefore, just another example of aestheticisation efforts on the producers' part.ⁱⁱⁱ

3. Thirdly, the **setting** of the corpses, also differ in many ways in both genres. In the documentary, the room is filled with the lecture room seats, tools on the little table on the silver table, an x-ray illuminator, a TV screen, a room divider, tiled yellow walls and later some more people in the background. It seems busy and somewhat fraught with distracting details. In contrast, the background in the TV show only displays illuminating cupboards, a surgery lamp, medical tools and cool chambers with lights inside, which allow the shadows of corpses to be seen. These few objects never distract from the corpse or the person. Additional setting elements, such as the silver autopsy table, appear to be an emblematic object (Hüppauf & Weingart, 2009) of forensic science in the media, almost replacing the typical foot tag. The silver autopsy table in the documentary is a working desk and therefore wet, covered not only with the corpse but also with organs, blood and bloody towels, tools, tubes, a basin filled up with reddish water and organs. The silver autopsy table in the TV show is, however, always shiny, clean and dry. Here the dead body is always shown in a safe room, on clean tidy table and in a sober environment with scientific objects and scientists, where the silver autopsy table plays a major role in narrowing down any possible menace that might spread from the corpse. This clean and stylish silver shining frame of the autopsy table around the corpse suggests another aestheticisation effort.

4. Fourthly, the **visual effects** concerning light and colour imply different atmospheres. (Seer, 1992) According to Zettl, colour associations are culturally learned. Lighting and the use of certain colours generate moods and atmospheres, which are understood as characteristics of the scene, act or actor. They can also guide the viewer's attention to certain areas and actions. (Zettl, 1973, p. 97) The common three-point lighting technique is used in both genres, its brightness changes the colours in the scene. According to Zettl, the more introverted a scene,

the less colourful it becomes. In the documentary, we see luscious colours of yellow, red and white, because the documentary uses floodlighting, a hard, bright light. Everything in the scene can be clearly identified. In the TV show, the colours remain unsaturated because of the use of soft light (diffuse), a brightened, low-key style and a transparent blue filter that leaves hardly any possibility to recognise the other objects or create shadows in the room. Everything appears to be mysterious, vague and blurred. The blue filter enhances the artificiality of the scene. This low-key style is standard practice for dramatic or crime scenes or representations of mysterious actions and scenes fraught with tension. Low-key style is also preferably used for the illumination of dark rooms at night, to generate loneliness and a threateningly grim atmosphere. The cool colours of blue and grey are commonly used in media for the illustration of distance, rationality and discipline and also for calmness and inner contentedness and sometimes also for dreams, ecstasy and transcendence. This idiosyncratically staged secrecy of these pathology scenes is the most obvious and recognisable aestheticisation code of the TV Show.

5. Fifthly, on an **audio level**, the differences between the documentary and the TV show appear in all three items of communication, noises and sounds. The communication differs as far as the TV show installs information about the manner of death, as well as the emotional state of the protagonist, while the communication in the documentary revolves solely around the examination procedures and the cause of death. The emotions of the fledgling scientist protagonist are questioned by his seniors, who, as we find out in the episode, fear he will be overwhelmed by disgust, and vomit whilst attending his first autopsy. By staging "the first encounter with a corpse during an autopsy", the producer does not only set up the common visual components for some kind of dark secrecy but also allows the audience to understand, through the protagonists' communication, the disgust of this particular setting.

This staged stimulus joins the artificial cutting noises and removal noises. During the documentary, only few noises of water, drilling and breathing can be heard. None of them resemble the soundscape in the TV show, where the additional noises used appear especially loud and of course artificial, since no real body is used.^{iv} According to Zettl, television sound has three functions: "[...] to supply essential or additional information, to establish mood and aesthetic energy, and to supplement the rhythmic structure of the screen event" (Zettl, 1973, p. 330) The ethereal music in the TV show supports the generation of an exceptional atmosphere of surrealism and mystery. To summarise, most of the audio techniques used in the TV show

are normally used to evoke fascination and creepiness. The polishedness of the soundscape can, therefore, be clearly recognised as another aestheticisation effort.

Conclusion

In general it can be said that in contrast to the documentary the fictional TV show present predominantly actors or mannequins on tables in a supine position surrounded by the living. Typical biological processes such as excretions are not depicted. Contamination, exposure, or even the bare movement of the body is not seen. The efforts to hide these processes reveal the strong cultural need for civilising the human body of today's society even after death. The dead body meets subjectifying attributions through covering and clothing codes or "interactions" with the living. The dead body also serves as a projection screen, i.e. for the different ideas of afterlife or death anxieties. In the crime TV shows, the objectification of a dead body is carried out by the representation of the dead body as a body of information revealing crime clues and mediating anatomy knowledge. Depending on the narrative, the status or identity of the dead body oscillates between objectifying and subjectifying. However, especially crime and comedy TV shows present scenes containing violent actions against the dead. This violence against a dead is however justified by law.^v

As mentioned above, corpses in the new TV shows are usually represented by aesthetically pleasing actors and actresses lying supinely on tables. This, however, is only one facet of the new representation of corpses. The well-known motive of the prettified female dead (Bronfen, 1992)^{vi} is not only outnumbered now by the prettified male dead, but also accompanied by numerous depictions of corpses, which are mutilated, decomposed, bloated, chopped up, dissected, acid-burnt or only existent in pieces. The depictions of various autopsy scenes represent the corpses also as a disgusting body in an embellished, pristine and stylish environment. This particular staging turns the image as a whole into an aesthetic image. At this point, the question of what exactly "disgusting", "beautiful" or "aesthetic" mean in the context of media representation arises. According to Menninghaus (2003),^{vii} the corpse is already the emblem of disgust.^{viii} For the exploration of disgust he selects the following three fundamental features as a general pre-understanding of the term, which are:

"[...] (1) The violent repulsion vis-à-vis, (2) a physical presence or some other phenomenon in our proximity, (3) which at the same time in various degrees, can also exert a subconscious attraction or even an open fascination" (Menninghaus, 2003, p. 6).

All three features apply to the corpse; especially the third becoming evident when witnessing the success of horror, crime or action movies, which show representations of corpses, or at least the menace of death. Actors, however, who represent the corpses and mannequins, are also used. Therefore, the actual re-enactment should not stir up any feelings of anxiety, disgust or curiosity among the spectators. Yet, according to the success of these depictions, in this case, especially the depictions in new crime TV shows, they arouse a fascination, which might be connected with feelings of anxiety, disgust and curiosity. How do producers stage the corpses as disgusting objects in an aesthetic way, so that the audience does not turn away in disgust?

I showed that different TV shows generate specific representations of the corpse. Therefore, I undertook an examination of two autopsy scenes in different genres. The solitary documentary, which is based on an authentication request, served as the contrast to the popular TV show *CSI*, which represents during all their episodes a somewhat limited corpse representation. I demonstrated that in contrast to the documentary, the producer for the popular crime TV show made use of massive media aesthetic techniques on the visual and audio level. I explained that because of these media aestheticisation techniques, some characteristics of the corpse openly seen in the documentary, stay covered in the TV show crime, these namely being signs of age, impurity and lack of self-control. In fact, the aesthetically pleasing body is represented as:

"[...] elastic and slender contour without incursions of fat, flawless youthful firmness and unbroken skin without folds or openings, removal of bodily hair and plucked eyebrows forming a fine line, flat belly and 'trim' behind [...]"(Menninghaus, 2003, p. 7).

Except in one detail, the attractive corpse actor conforms to this description. The exception is the visible overly large bodily opening of the chest, which belongs to Menninghaus' list of disgusting characteristics:

"Folds, wrinkles, warts, 'excessive softness', visible or overly large bodily openings, discharge of bodily fluids (nasal, mucous, pus, blood), and old age are registered, on the criminal index of aesthetics, as 'disgusting'"(Menninghaus, 2003, p. 7).

Single characteristics of disgust now merge into the beautified image and turn the image as a whole into an aesthetic one, because as shown earlier the aesthetic image needs interruptions from beautification, otherwise aesthetic stimulation satiation leads to the opposite effect:

where everything is beautiful, nothing remains beautiful. However, while the bodily openings evoke rather blissful disgust, signs of age, impurity and the lack of the self-control as shown in the documentary, are still left out in primetime crime TV shows. This brings us back to the starting point. Welsch detected three meanings of aestheticisation and I have demonstrated that the second level, the media aestheticisation of material and social reality, which appears with the specific camera, light and audio settings used in the fictitious crime setting, is clearly recognisable in five categories. These categories are (1.) story line or plot, (2.) figures, (3.) setting, (4.) visual effects and (5.) audio effects. These substantial differences support the hypothesis that a massive aestheticisation effort for staging corpses has taken place in TV shows.

We witness the dead body's transformation. Especially since the 19th century, external bodily design turned into the design of the "social self" (Villa, 2008, p. 8). According to Villa, the urge to design the living body is never only a subjective, private and individual matter for free and self-confident persons. Against all media claims in this matter, she states that this work is highly normative, and that audio-visual media especially not only influences, but also produces attitudes towards the body. Media conveys body ideals and the feasibility of ideal bodies. Bodies have to appear healthy, young and fit to indicate willpower, discipline and control. Being obese, lack of personal hygiene and a beauty regimen, refer, on the contrary, to people with unhealthy, weak-minded and careless attitudes. (Also see Annette Geiger et al. 2000, Gabriele Klein 2001, Karola Weber 2006 and Sabine Merta 2008).

Norbert Elias described in "The Civilizing Process" (1968) the historical transformation of relations between structures and individuals concerning the control of emotions and appropriate behaviour in Western Europe up to the 19th century. He detected a long-term transformation of personalities due to the transformation of social structures. Over this time, a modern social structure developed, and alongside a society whose individuals were more connected and dependent upon one another. Based on these new interdependencies, Elias identified a greater sensitivity regarding our own and other individual's actions and reactions. The changes accelerated the advancement of thresholds of shame, embarrassment and repugnance especially regarding our own and other bodies (Elias, 1980, p. 397). The awareness of the body's appearance and bodily functions gradually increased over time, and turned from being external constraints into highly controlled and internalised self-constraints (Elias, 1980, p.366). The media produces and reflects the urge for

perfect bodies by presenting role models with the required characteristics. I proved that the drive for the standardisation and civilisation of body appearances and the bodily functions of living individuals "survives" death on television. The dead body continues to be a symbolic body eliciting shameful and embarrassing emotions by the living.

Presumably due to its invisibility in public, in the sociology of the body, the dead has never been considered to be a body as well. However, now that the dead body has gained a ubiquitous presence in every crime TV show during prime time, it is about time to recognize his existence and analyse our attitudes toward death by interpreting the codes of representation, especially since body images in the media have changed. The dead body in the media conforms to the new body images and therewith the image our society has of a dead person. Few of us have ever seen or would care to see a corpse in real life. For most, the real dead is thankfully still invisible. However, due to the strong influence of modern forensic-based television shows, almost everyone has an opinion of how the dead "should" look.
