

Sex and Death in Modern America:  
Media as a Haven for Taboo Transgression

M.A. Thesis

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## Abstract

This study examines popular media representations of sex and death using examples from television, film and the internet, and frames them using Bakhtin's theory of carnivalization and Foltyn's theory of corpse pornography. The goal is to show that taboos surrounding sexualized death still exist in contemporary society and are reinforced by popular media. It is argued that taboos continue to play a role in contemporary society and that popular media plays on its trademark illusory qualities to allow taboos to be broken in a safe venue, throwing into relief by contrast the consequences of transgression outside that space. This work increases the complexity of the understanding of how media work to reinforce social norms in contemporary society.

## Sex and Death in Modern America: Media as a Discursive Haven for Taboos

Let's not forget... that society can get vengeful when you spit on its rules. (Kipnis 2010)

### Introduction

Mary Roach, author of *Stiff: The Curious Lives of Human Cadavers*, states that “being dead is absurd. It is the silliest situation you’ll find yourself in. Your limbs are floppy and uncooperative. Your mouth hangs open. Being dead is unsightly and stinky and embarrassing, and there’s not a damn thing to be done about it” (2003:11). This excerpt represents a popular view of the state of death: it is often viewed as embarrassingly horrifying, and thus, something that is unspeakable. This is the trademark of a taboo. If death really is so disgusting, one would think that links between sex and death should not be easy to come by. On the contrary, death has become sexualized and spectacularized partially because of its taboo; in this way, entertainment media creates a space, a haven, for the taboos of death and sex to be broken, only to underline the existence of the taboo.

Because death is often seen as unspeakable and embarrassing, we tend to segregate the dead from the living in many western cultures. For example, when discussing death as taboo, Jean Baudrillard refers to cemeteries as ghettos: “the act of packing people into one homogeneous space” (1976: 77). A cemetery is a place to put those people who are not conforming to the standards of the living; a ghetto for the dead:

Little by little, the dead cease to exist. They are thrown out of the group's symbolic circulation. They are no longer beings with a full role to play, worthy partners in exchange, and we make this obvious by exiling them further and further away from the group of the living... to be dead is an unthinkable anomaly; nothing else is as offensive as this. Death is a delinquency, and an incurable deviancy (ibid: 126).

Michel Ragon adds that "as a sign of the times, the dead are hidden from view" (1983: 291), bolstering the idea that death is taboo.

Although some critics of Baudrillard, like Silverman (2003), refer to him as being a step removed from reality and state that the deceased do indeed continue to play a role in their loved-one's lives, there is a realistic basis for the claim that we banish the dead in many western societies, or at least keep them at a distance. For instance, most people do not leave corpses out in the open, let them watch television with us or have them over as dinner guests - Hannibal Lector aside. The bodies are either placed underground and out of sight (or above ground and out of sight), or they are burned and their ashes are placed in a sealed urn or scattered somewhere scenic (under local restrictions). The dead are often seen as non-contributing members of society, and so they must either be looked upon with disgust and discarded, or shunned. They are viewed as shells of who they once were, and as useless for anything other than compost; although, in reality, the gasses produced by a rotting corpse are not environmentally friendly. If, however, they are flash frozen, pulverized and buried in a shallow grave, according to researchers in Sweden, bodies can be quite beneficial for rose beds (Rowlatt 2007).

Another reason that death is considered horrifying is pointed out by Michel Foucault: it has historically been used as a form of power and control; “one of the characteristic privileges of a sovereign power was the right to decide life and death” (Foucault 1978: 135). He continues to state that “the ancient right to take life or let live was replaced by a power to foster life or disallow it to the point of death” (ibid: 138). However, in present western society, power's focus is life, and not death. Foucault states that “death is power's limit, the moment that escapes it; death becomes the most secret aspect of existence, the most ‘private’” (ibid). The fact that death is uncontrollable is often regarded as terrifying.

Despite this terrifying quality, death has become sexualized and sensationalized. Freud discusses the link between two driving instincts: “[we] have been led to distinguish two kinds of instincts: those the purpose of which is to guide life towards death and the others, the sexual instincts, which perpetually strive for, and bring about, the renewal of life” (Freud 1952: 655). He continues by stating that the “incidence of death [is] the necessary consequence of an inner law of being” (ibid), meaning that everything we do pushes us closer to death. The other, the sex instinct, is that which makes us want to procreate and live on, even vicariously. There is an inherent tension between the two instincts which entangles them; constructive and destructive instincts oppose one another yet work together: “the life process of an individual leads, from internal causes, to the equalizing of chemical tensions: ie. to death, while union with an individually different living substance increases these tensions” (ibid: 660). Foltyn reiterates this: “clearly we are ambivalent about the status of the corpse, displaying and hiding it, revering and defiling it, viewing it as useful and useless and a source of amusement and

sombreness. Attracted and repulsed by it, we have imbued the dead body with the tension of paradox” (Foltyn 2008a: 100).

Charlton McIlwain points out that “to wholly assert that death remains taboo ignores the manner in which public fascination, concern and contemplation of death and dying have continually increased over the past three to four decades” (McIlwain 2005: 18). I contend that this increase in death discourses actually poses a contradiction, playing on the tensions between sex and death: although the idea of death seems to be more accepted, the increase actually serves to reshape and reinforce the traditional taboo by making death something else, whether it is sexy, happy or treatable; in this way we avoid the horror of the subject altogether, reinforcing the untouchable quality that has long surrounded death.

By opening up a place for violation of the taboo in social discourse through media, western society is given an outlet for symbolic taboo violation; sex and death can be explored in entertainment media with virtually no consequences, compared to the consequences that one would face in real life. The argument can be made that media creates a haven for taboo exploration and violation, offering itself as an acceptable venue for this deviance, somewhere that the taboo can be broken without actually breaking it. For instance, having sex in a hearse or a funeral home’s viewing room would be considered a violation of social rules and be met with shock and horrified looks, but it is acceptable to see this on television: these rules are broken in the television series *Six Feet Under* (Ball 2001), when the characters are constantly exploring the links between sex and death.



Another example of this can be seen in the Canadian film *Kissed* (Stopkewich 1996) in which the main character is a necrophile, a person who has a sexual attraction to corpses (Rosman and Resnick 1989: 153), who works in a funeral home. She knows that she needs to hide her transgressions by sneaking into the morgue at night to have sex with the bodies, and her obsession with death is fully chronicled. Outside of the media, even the thought of having sexual contact with a corpse elicits feelings of discomfort, as does watching the film, which reinforces the idea of the taboo. There are, however, very few consequences in watching the film, perhaps only a feeling of discomfort and a strange look from peers, compared to ostracism, institutionalization, and medications that come with being labelled a necrophile in greater society.

The following study will outline two main theories in the study of death and sex taboos within entertainment media: in the first chapter, Bakhtin's theory of carnivalization will be used to show the absurdity surrounding the concept of death and how spectacularization serves to break social rules in acceptable spaces, such as during carnival. But at the same time, social rules are reinforced by the creation of that particular space, and by the constant reminder of the consequences associated with breaking the taboo outside that space. In the second chapter, the theoretical perspective is Foltyn's theory of corpse pornography, where the sexualization of death in the media becomes the safe haven for transgression, at the same time, eliciting awkward feelings to, again, illustrate the social consequences. While there are many examples found in popular culture, the present paper will mainly focus on television series such as Ball's *Six Feet Under* (2001), *Dead Like Me* (Masius 2003), and *CSI: NY* (Bailey 2006), as well as cinema like *Zombieland* (Fliesher 2009), *The Corpse Bride* (Burton 2005), and *Kissed* (Stopkewich 1996). Websites and comics, such as *Questionable Content* and *Least I*

*Could Do* are explored, as well. Examples found outside of media spaces are also considered, including Gunther von Hagen's Body Worlds exhibits and the death of Michael Jackson. Both of these chapters will illustrate how media works to simultaneously break and reinforce the taboos associated with the links between death and sex. Necrophilia in the media will then be used in the final chapter as a case study to illustrate the two theories at work.

## Overview of Important Literature

### Language and Taboos

*Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary* defines taboo as “a prohibition imposed by social custom or as a protective measure” (2008: Taboo); those social customs are created through the use of language: “language, which may be defined here as a system of vocal signs, is the most important sign system of human society... an understanding of language is thus essential for any understanding of the reality of everyday life” according to Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann when they discuss the social construction of reality and knowledge through language (1967: 37). They continue to state that language is constructed in, and always refers to, everyday life, and that language is context specific: “I must take into account prevailing standards of proper speech for various occasions” (ibid: 38).

Berger and Luckmann also discuss “relevance structures” (1967: 45): not everyone can know everything about their reality, but many people know similar bits of knowledge. The most significant themes of knowledge that seem to be the most relevant to the majority of people begin to be considered symbols over time (ibid: 38-46). Debray mentions the role played by “symbolic operations” (1992:56) as models for behaviour, thus reiterating the social construction of language and symbols in our society.

E.D. Hirsch Jr.’s idea of cultural literacy can be applied to these relevance structures: when defining cultural literacy, he refers to common knowledge in a particular group of people; or norms, mores and skills belonging to the members of the culture or

sub-culture (Hirsch 1987: xiii). A taboo can be considered an important socially constructed symbol, or a piece of cultural literacy:

Taboo is a proscription of behaviour that affects everyday life... Taboos arise out of social constraints on the individual's behaviour where it can cause discomfort, harm or injury... Infractions of taboos can lead to illness or death, as well as to the lesser penalties of corporal punishment, incarceration, social ostracism or mere disapproval (Allan and Burrige 2006: 1).

Allan and Burrige have found that the word "taboo" is derived from "tabu" which can be traced to early Polynesian languages; it means "to forbid" or "forbidden" and it is used the same way in the English language (ibid: 2). Freud adds to this definition, stating "to us it means, on the one hand, 'sacred', 'consecrated', and on the other 'uncanny', 'dangerous', 'forbidden', 'unclean'... thus 'taboo' has about it a sense of something unapproachable, and it is principally expressed in prohibitions and restrictions" (1950: 18).

Emile Durkheim discusses these prohibitions in his work on religion; mainly his work on the sacred and profane. He states that "the sacred thing *par excellence* is that which the profane should not touch, and cannot touch with impunity" (Durkheim 1976: 40; emphasis in original). When an object becomes sacred, it becomes untouchable, forbidden, taboo. In their discussion of Durkheim's work, Elizabeth Burns Coleman and Kevin White explain religion's social role, including the belief in the sacred:

it creates a social bond; it remakes social commitments through the 'effervescence'; it produces individuals who are versed in sacrifice and

asceticism, which result in altruism and social service; and in bringing the group together around collective ritual it maintains the collective memory of the group, thereby producing continuity over generations (Coleman and White 2006).

Reinforcing the social construction of taboos and the importance they play in controlling behaviour: Coleman and White continue by stating that “[if] the invocation of the term sacred always includes a normative force or taboo, then it always contains some kind of pragmatic force about the modulation of behaviour” (Coleman and White 2006). This behaviour modulation is an important aspect in common knowledge; if the proscribed behaviour associated with the taboo is not followed, it could incite any number of social consequences.

The idea of something being taboo entails a label of 'deviant' for the transgressor when that taboo is violated. According to Randle Nelsen, “each of us individually and collectively plays [a role] in creating the normative definitions and ideas ... of everyday interactions we learn to consider normal and take for granted” (1995: 94). Everyone in a culture helps to reinforce something that is forbidden: by abiding by the taboo or law, by breaking it and feeling guilt or other social repercussions, or by breaking the taboo when it is socially acceptable to do so and suffering no consequences.

Taboo transgression in contemporary society often leads to scandal. Laura Kipnis, in *How to Become a Scandal: Adventures in Bad Behaviour*, explains both roles that are played in a scandal:

Scandals aren't just fiascos other people get themselves embroiled in while the rest of us go innocently about our business; we all have crucial roles to play.

Here is the scandal psychodynamic in a nutshell: scandalizers screw things up in showy, provocative ways and the rest of us throw stones, luxuriating in the warm glow of imaginary imperviousness that other people's life-destroying stupidities invariably provide. In other words, we need them as much as they need us (2010: 5).

She maintains that the western culture needs scandal: "it's a necessary feature of the system, a social purification ritual, with the socially non-compliant branded and expelled, allowing the system to assert itself and its muscle. (What excellent public relations for toeing the line: get with those social norms ... or you're up next)" (ibid: 13-14). Scandal, which is usually in the form of taboo transgression, is therefore necessary to maintain social control. Kipnis also states that "the modern age hasn't entirely eliminated grisly spectacles of public punishment... Of course, these days we hurl punch lines in lieu of stones, inflict a social death instead of a physical one, thus propitiating the qualms of the modern conscious while still savouring the gore" (ibid: 113-114). While the consequences of taboo transgression are not as severe as death, as they were in past centuries, they are still fierce enough to warrant control over taboo transgression; many scandalizers lose their jobs and are severely, and publicly, mocked for their scandal.

The point should be made that "nothing is taboo for all people, under all circumstances for all time" (Allan and Burrige 2006: 9), although, as Hegarty explains, "the existence of taboos around the dead, if of varying types, perhaps is in itself universal" (Hegarty 2000: 108). Taboos can be violated and changed, or cease to be taboo all together. An example of a controlled setting where taboo breaking is condoned, or where the taboo does not exist, is found in Foucault; in speaking about incest, he

points out that developments in psychoanalysis allowed for “individuals to express their incestuous desire in discourse” (1978:129), to alleviate the anguish felt by the patient, reinforcing that taboos are not universal; there are some settings where they can be broken in a different register, or cease to exist. Entertainment media, such as film and fictional television, play this role in the present day. Media acts as a haven for taboo violation as there are few, if any, consequences to living out fantasies through social discourses; this gives an acceptable place to speak about the fantasies of sex and death, as well as necrophilia.

According to Freud, the taboo counters a desire to touch: “as in the case of taboo, the principal prohibition, the nucleus of the neurosis, is against touching; and thence it is sometimes known as ‘touching phobia’ or ‘*délire du toucher*” (1950: 27); an obsession with obeying the taboo can often lead to a voyeuristic obsession, also known as scopophilia. Bataille explains this phobia as involving conflicting emotions: “men are swayed by two simultaneous emotions: they are driven away by terror and drawn by an awed fascination. Taboo and transgression reflect these two contradictory urges. The taboo would forbid the transgression but the fascination compels it” (Bataille 1968: 68). Giving into the desire to touch, or “being able to violate a taboo has shock value and displays the semblance of power” (Allan and Burrige 2006: 27). Bataille further explains the situations for taboo violation: “when a negative emotion has the upper hand we must obey the taboo. When a positive emotion is in the ascendant, we violate it” (Bataille 1986: 64). This violation is considered a transgression. According to Hegarty, for Bataille, “death and eroticism remain charged with danger” (Hegarty 2000: 59) which is what makes them taboo. Bataille also points out that “the sacred aspect of the taboo is

what draws men towards it" (Bataille 1986: 68), which reinforces Freud's theory of scopophilia.

Contributing another view of taboos, for Bataille, the world of work is the world of rationality. When one becomes aware of his or her own mortality, and thus aware of a world of irrationality, death conflicts with work, productivity and the economy: "Death presented such a contrast between an unfamiliar region and the everyday world that the only mode of thought in tune with it was bound to conflict with the mode of thought governed by work" (Bataille 1986: 46). For Bataille, anything seen to be in conflict with the capitalist values of western society is deemed taboo. Because of this, when Bataille states that "the domain of eroticism is the domain of violence, of violation" (ibid: 16) he reinforces that the world of sex threatens "the individual...with their own dissolution, and this is what is meant by eroticism being about violation" (Hegarty 2000: 106).

Bataille also sees the taboo both as reducing our fear as well as maintaining it: "what is at stake, then, is more than simply breaking a rule – it is the replaying of having rules, and of there being an outside to them" (Hegarty 2000: 109). Bataille states that "for each man who regards it with awe, the corpse is the image of his own destiny. It bears witness to a violence which destroys not one man alone but all men in the end. The taboo which lays hold on the others at the sight of a corpse is the distance they put between themselves and violence, by which they cut themselves off from violence" (1986: 44).

With a different view, Foucault sees taboos as created through language and discourse to maintain control over society: "one had to speak of [sex] as of a thing to be not simply condemned or tolerated but managed, inserted into systems of utility,



regulated for the greater good of all, made to function according to an optimum... a policing of sex: that is, not the rigour of a taboo, but the necessity of regulating sex through useful and public discourses" (Foucault 1978: 24-5). For instance, by opening up discourse about the taboo of sex within a church youth group, and continuously conveying the taboo within that discourse, the taboo will serve to control the behaviour of the youth in regards to whether they have premarital sex or not; thus we see that taboos serve to create controls over the greater society.

### **Sex and Death**

Bataille states that "man is the only animal who stands abashed in front of death or sexual union. He may be more or less abashed, but in either case his reaction differs from that of other animals" (1986: 50). According to Brain, "bodily emissions ... are perceived as symbols of mortality" (1990: 189); because genitals are placed near waste exits and because the smell of faeces and death are comparable, this link to waste and immortality (as well as a link to immorality) is created, which in turn leads to a deviance label (ibid: 185). Mary Douglas discusses this in *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*: "dirt is essentially disorder... dirt offends against order" (1966: 2). Because of the link between sex, death and excrement and the taboo that is created, Douglas is able to apply the definition of pollution to the transgression of taboos: "physical crossing of the social barrier is treated as a dangerous pollution" (ibid 139). She reiterates the consequences of breaking social order with exposure to dirt and pollution: "pollution is a matter of aesthetics, hygiene or etiquette, which only becomes grave in so far as it may create social embarrassment. The sanctions are social sanctions, contempt, ostracism, gossip, perhaps even police action" (ibid: 73).

Although death and sex may not seem unmentionable with the many images of and about them in popular media, the taboos are in fact still in full force. “No matter how relaxed attitudes towards sex may be in particular societies, there will always be some area of anxiety, constraint, or embarrassment associated with the matter” (Brain 1990: 187). Allan and Burridge reiterate this: “sexual activity is tabooed as a topic for public display and severely constrained as a topic of discussion” (2006: 144), and so is death.

Death is so unmentionable that it has even been removed from the death industry: according to Jessica Mitford, those who work in the death trade have replaced many words associated with death, and avoid alluding to the sexuality of a client as if it were the plague. “Deathless words include: ‘service, not funeral; Mr., Mrs., Ms., Blank, not corpse or body; preparation room, not morgue; casket, not coffin; funeral director or mortician, not undertaker... deceased, not dead... coach, not hearse... cremains or cremated remains, not ashes” (Mitford 1998: 52). Getting the vocabulary of death out of the funeral industry opens up a new space for innovation and imagistic play, not to mention product and service development; because the language has been purified, and therefore, is (somewhat) safe from the horror of death, the death industry’s business ventures become more socially acceptable, and their services become more marketable. Because the funeral industry is outside of entertainment media, the purification of the language used is needed to side-step the taboo.

The funeral is not the only aspect about death that has become commodified: “there is a mass market for morbid images of the real and simulated dead” (Foltyn 2008: 169). The dead body has become the focus of people in need of transplants, surgeons, organ traffickers, and stem cell researchers (Lock 2002), as well as medical school

students for practice of their trade (Roach 2003). Face transplants are now available for burn victims and for other issues, like burn victims or dog attacks; this process beautifies the dead by making the corpse alive again (Foltyn 2008a). Cremains can even be turned into gemstones now (LifeGem 2005). There is also demand for use in plastination and education. "Real and fake corpses can now be bought on the internet" (Foltyn 2008a: 100); the real corpses for educational institutions, the fake for Halloween. Both types can be customized for specific needs; certain body parts can be visible, such as muscles and joints, and they can often be posed to fit your needs. One key characteristic is that the corpses turn a profit for the living; in the process, they become useful.

While most people avoid interaction with even the idea of death outside of western media space, there still remains a fascination with death when it comes to entertainment media. One reason may be because of the shock value and power that violating a taboo can bring. For example, there are often social constraints on speaking about sexual activities with older family members like grandparents, just like there are constraints on which conversations are appropriate at a funeral. According to Geoffrey Gorer, "in the 20th century... there seems to have been an unremarked shift in prudery; whereas copulation has become more and more 'mentionable,' particularly in the Anglo-Saxon societies, death has become more and more 'unmentionable' as a natural process" (1955: 50). Gorer also states that violent death has "played an ever growing part in the fantasies offered to mass audiences" (ibid: 51). Death becomes pornography when it is devoid of grief. This is how death replaces sex as pornography for Gorer: emotion is removed from death while death is glorified and commodified in private, just as sex had been pre-World War I. This is still the case half a century after "The Pornography of Death" was written; death devoid of emotion can be seen in television

shows such as *CSI*, *Criminal Minds*, and many other spy and war stories. Berridge comments on this: “the compulsion to witness death as spectacle has not diminished, and has become the basis of the fantasy of death that is so fundamental to our concepts of popular entertainment” (2001: 255). This reinforces the fascination with that which is forbidden, allowing the forbidden fantasies to enter the media and circulate, which in itself reinforces the existing taboos outside of the space of media. Tony Walter discusses a theory by Dumont and Foss: “they argue that any society must both deny and accept death. Society must deny death if it is to get on with its everyday business, yet it must accept it if its members are to retain contact with reality” (1991: 305). This may be a reason for the fascination with sex and death in entertainment media: we are curious about death, but prefer a glamorised model of it.

According to Philippe Aries, the reason to forbid death is because it opposes happiness: ““by showing the least sign of sadness, one sins against happiness, threatens it, and society then risks losing its *raison d’être* ... the interdiction of death [is] in order to preserve happiness” (Aries 1974: 94). Julie-Marie Strange states that “Aries’ texts highlighted four consecutive epochs that defined the Western culture of death: the tamed death, death of the self, death of the Other and, finally, the invisible death” (2005: 18). Aries comments on the change from tamed death to invisible death: “the old attitude in which death was both familiar and near, evoking no great fear or awe, offers too marked a contrast to ours, where death is so frightful that we dare no utter its name... today it has become wild” (Aries 1974: 13-14). This wild death leads to a tendency towards death being invisible, trademarked by solitary mourning: “shameful mourning is the only recourse, like a sort of masturbation” (ibid: 90). Here, he touches on the alignment with eroticism that death naturally takes and attributes it to a “break with social

order” (ibid: 105); the coupling causes tension (ibid 101) similar to Freud’s take on death and sex instincts: many of our cultures are horrified by death, and embarrassed by mourning, yet still we are fascinated with it. “Americans are very willing to transform death, to put makeup on it, to sublimate it, but they do not want to make it disappear” (ibid: 100).

An interesting deviance theory is that of Mikhail Bakhtin - the theory of carnivalization. Bakhtin maintains that the carnival freed people from the norms of society and shone a colourful outlook on events that were not always so jovial, turning them inside out (Bakhtin 1984:11). In the carnival world, anything that creates fear in ordinary life is turned into “amusing or ludicrous monstrosities” (ibid: 47) in the carnival space. The carnival serves to critique the values and morals of a society through entertainment, but also to “contain discontent” and deviation from those values and morals by creating a specific area for deviation (Langman 2008: 663). Roger Caillois states that carnivalistic mimicry is “the creation of a fictional world in desired contrast with ordinary life that is dominated by the conventional species and from which demons have been banished” (1961: 135). Renate Lachmann adds that “in the carnival, dogma, hegemony and authority are dispersed through ridicule and laughter” (1988: 130). Caillois is quick to comment that “circus life, strictly speaking, cannot be regarded as synonymous with play” (2001: 137) because for those who live a circus life, the carnival would not be play, it would be work. However, the carnival remains upside-down and contrary to ordinary life for anyone else. Both taboos of sex and death fit into this deviance frame, with media as the carnival, constituting a space for violation of the real-world taboos of sex and death and allowing fantasies to become part of public discourse, but also to critique those fantasies and reinforce the taboos. According to Goode,

deviance theories are “more central to the social life of this society than [they have] ever been” (2006: 554).

Another theory linking sex and death is that of corpse pornography. Jacquie Lynn Foltyn maintains that the corpse has become pop culture’s new porn star, and that:

Corpse porn has become a convention of television and popular film. Corpse porn and sex porn have much in common. Both exploit the nude, young, and beautiful, not the clothed, old, diseased, and ugly. Both rely on the close-up, the exploration of every nook and cranny of the body, which is prodded, poked, penetrated, and presented as an outrageous sight. Both luxuriate in body fluids. Socially appropriate emotion is absent from both. Love from sex porn. Grief, reflection, and discussion of the preciousness of life from corpse porn, which also divorces the dead body from spiritual or other moral lessons such as compassion (2008: 167).

According to Foltyn, the corpse has become linked with grotesque sexuality because we have been over exposed to the sex pornography body; it has been over explored, rendering its shock value lifeless. Adding another forbidden body, the corpse, creates the shock that is so often needed to sell and entertain (ibid: 169).

Often, death in entertainment media is a simulation; because it isn’t the real thing, it is socially appropriate to view. However, as Foltyn points out using examples of the extremely publicized deaths of Anna Nicole Smith and Princess Diana, corpse porn is not only seen in the simulated form (2008: 159). It can be seen in the obsession over the many just-after-death photographs of any newly dead celebrity. I maintain, though,

that it is because of this celebrity the people immersed in the spotlight maintain, because of this larger-than-life quality, that there is a fascination with their deaths. When they become engrossed in entertainment media, they take on an illusion of simulation, of surrealism, that the everyday person does not exhibit.

“Our constant diet of pretend death is at odds with our tendency to act in real life as if death does not exist” (Berridge 2001: 244). Because of this simulated space, taboos about sex and death are “challenged and then relaxed” (Foltyn 2006), allowing for socially accepted taboo violation. This seems to loosen the proscriptions on death and sex, making the discourses accessible to the public for acceptable taboo violation. This increased accessibility and exaggerated simulation work together to make the concept of death friendlier and more entertaining (McIlwain 2005: 62). According to McIlwain, the fascination that has begun to surround death is due to an aging population and “a new market [that] has emerged to examine the hidden experience of death” (Foltyn 2008: 169).

Debbie Nathan, in *Pornography*, describes censorship’s role in continuing taboos: “Meanness, violence, addiction, shock: it all makes porn sound frightening and dangerous. Warnings issue from church pulpits, school health classes and the news. But many people look at porn anyway. Many feel guilty and worried” (Nathan 2007: 10) as a result of these warnings. Further into her book, Nathan states that “we will not get rid of graphic, raunchy sexual imagery by making people ashamed of their passion for it. We won’t make a dent with censorship. As we have seen, these efforts only create passion and more porn” (Nathan 2007: 127). Associated guilt seems to reinforce the taboos, keeping them in place and causing internal struggles about transgression. The

censorship she speaks of here actually is working: while pornography creation may be increasing, this guilt aspect confines the taboo transgression in the media space and restricts it on the outside. I contend that this becomes the purpose of censorship in this example; allowing a safe space in order to exert increased control.

Another method for control over taboo transgression is to medicalize it; Martin P. Levine and Richard R. Troiden argue that “the concepts of sexual addiction and compulsion constitute an attempt to repathologize forms of erotic behaviour that became acceptable in the 1960s and 1970s” (1988: 349). They explain that medicalization and stigmatization of erotic behaviour reinforce the construction of the concept of sexual deviance. “There is nothing intrinsically pathological in the conduct that is presently labelled as sexual compulsive or addictive; these behaviours have assumed pathological status only because powerful groups are beginning to define them as such” (ibid: 360). Foucault states that power “produces reality; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth” (1977: 194). This is part of his “regime of truth, which Yang explains as “the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true” (2010: 2). Gagnon and Simon reinforce this, stating that “the significance of sexuality is exactly in proportion to its perceived significance” (1968: 122), meaning that what is deemed deviant by those with power will be seen and treated as deviant by the entire society. They also reinforce that sexual deviance applies to certain behaviours at certain times, and not to others, emphasizing the social creation of the discourse of deviance.



## **Necrophilia**

Mental illness, which includes the diagnosis of necrophilia, was first viewed as demonic possession, which, in a predominantly religious society, would be a foundation for isolation and fear. Although mental illnesses are now attributed to chemical imbalances in the body or an abnormal childhood, they are still seen as taboo. “The lay person lumps all [mental illnesses] together as insanity” (Allan and Burrige 2006: 213); suffering from insanity is a prominent fear in western society, thus the taboos surrounding it are continued in many of our societies. Because the causes of mental illness are not always known, “mental illness is viewed not so much as a disease but as a moral failure, and onlookers are more judgemental than they are with other illnesses” (ibid). Necrophilia fits snugly into this view: it is constructed as a mental illness, and it is often seen as a moral failure.

Necrophilia, from the Greek nekro-, meaning the dead, and -philia, meaning attraction, is defined as “sexual arousal stimulated by a dead body” (Hucker 2006: Necrophilia). It is hegemonically treated as a psychological disorder and is considered by many a “horrible kind of sexual indulgence [that] is so monstrous that the presumption of a psychopathic state is, under all circumstances, justified” (Krafft-Ebing 1892: 430). This judgement continues to be relevant today: the diagnosis falls under the section of paraphilia of the *American Psychological Association's Diagnostic Statistical Manual IV* (2000: 576). Paraphilia is a medical term referencing sexual impulse disorders, or forms of sexual deviance, which include sexual attractions such as pedophilia (an attraction to children) (ibid: 571), fetishism (an attraction to objects) (ibid: 569), voyeurism (an attraction to watching sexual activity) (ibid: 575), and necrophilia (ibid: 576). What is

considered necrophilia can vary from situation to situation; acts can range “from simply being in the presence of a corpse to kissing, fondling or performing sexual intercourse or [oral sex] on the body” (Hucker 2006: Necrophilia). An interesting point is made by film critic Roger Ebert about the nature of paraphilia:

Humans seem to be hard-wired at an early age into whatever sexuality they eventually profess. There is little choice in the matter. Most are lucky enough to fall within the mainstream, but for those who are attracted to obscure fetishes, it is a question of acknowledging their nature, or denying themselves sexual fulfillment. Of course, some compulsions are harmful to others, and society rightly outlaws them; but the convenience of necrophilia, as the joke goes, is that it only requires one consenting adult (Ebert 1997).

However, society does outlaw necrophilia; the Criminal Code of Canada states that indecencies committed against a corpse are subjected to a maximum of five years imprisonment (R.S., c. C-34, s. 178). The key point in the Ebert quote is that necrophilia is considered so horrible that it is treated with humour – only a joke can mediate the discussion of it.

Very little is known about necrophiles as there has been virtually no research done on the topic, mostly due to the social consequences of being caught; very few people would admit to being a necrophile and risk ostracism among other social penalties. The most reliable study to date is that of Rosman and Resnick in 1989. They had a sample of 122 necrophiliacs, mostly male, from past studies and previously unreported cases (Hucker 2006: Necrophilia). They theorized two situations that could be triggers to necrophilic acts based on these cases: first, the person has low self-

esteem, is afraid of rejection and desires a partner who cannot reject them; or, second, the person is afraid of death, changes their fear to desire and develops a fantasy of sex with a corpse. The latter theory is based on an idea of the fantasy as a defence mechanism (1989: 161). Of their sample, 68 percent of respondents were motivated by a desire for a partner who would not resist or reject them, but only 15 percent were motivated by an actual sexual attraction to corpses (ibid: 159). "The cases reported in the literature have actually involved males between the ages of 20 and 50 with occupations that provide ready access to corpses: gravediggers, mortuary attendants, orderlies, etc. Most individuals have been reported to be heterosexual" (Hucker 2006: Necrophilia). The Rosman and Resnick study shows that many of those who practice necrophilia are not attracted to corpses, but to the fantasy of a willing partner, and that most have immediate access to the bodies. It is possible that the necrophilia is due to convenience, but it is important to note that it is also possible that because of the taboo surrounding necrophilia, the respondents were simply unwilling to admit to their attraction. It can also be concluded that necrophilia is rarely reported in contemporary society, possibly because of the both the legal and social consequences that would be inflicted for confessing.

An earlier study by Walker reported that some ancient Eastern cultures have employed necrophilia as a funeral rite; some believe that the soul of a virgin girl cannot find peace while remaining a virgin after death. The ancient Egyptians, on the other hand, were known to leave young, beautiful corpses out for a few days to avoid necrophilia from the funerary workers (Walker 1978: 191-192).

Only a few other media studies deal with necrophilic representations; studying theatre, Karin Coddon focuses on body politics, arguing that “necrophilia in *The Revenger’s Tragedy* serves at once to parody and to interrogate contemporary, increasingly scientific notions of the body... Necrophilia yokes together science and seduction” (1994: 71). She contends that this play does not “simply eroticize ‘the idea of death’... rather the play theatricalises death in the specific, material dead body” (ibid: 72). Scott Dudley considers necrophilia to be nostalgic in studying seventeenth century theatre. He contends that necrophilia within theatre is a cultural obsession with recovering “a trace of the lost other in order to fill the cultural and institutional gaps created by new ideologies” (1999: 291). Lastly, in studying *Anatomy*, a film discussed in Chapter 3, Steffen Hantke contends that the plastinated bodies in the film are fetishized as commodities (2004: 119). Based on this argument, he states that the bodies are staged as a spectacular event, and has a reciprocal news media relationship with the von Hagens Body Worlds exhibits.

Although there is not much research done on necrophilia, there are a number of media that depict necrophilic acts. For example, there are scenes of the act of necrophilia in the films *Anatomy* (2000), *Autopsy: A Love Story* (2002), and *Kissed* (1996). There are also bands named Cannibal Corpse and The Murderdolls, while artists like Voltaire and Alice Cooper sing about corpse sex in songs such as “Zombie Prostitute” and “Cold Ethyl” respectively. Television also refers to necrophilia, but there seem to be more constraints on what is appropriate in this venue. *Criminal Minds*, *CSI: NY* and numerous internet sites have mentioned or implied necrophilia, often employing humour as a discursive filter.

## Methodologies and Analysis

The present study takes a discourse analysis approach using the overarching theme of taboos to depict how taboos are perceived as in decline, while actually being reinforced because of our culture's fascination with them. Since language and discourse play a large role in the creation of taboos, a discourse analysis is a necessary method to approach these concerns. According to Sara Shaw and Trisha Greenhalgh, discourse analysis is concerned with "how social problems and solutions get created in discourse" (2008: 2508). Norman Fairclough, one of the founders of the practice, describes it as:

systematically [exploring] often opaque relationships of causality and determination between (a) discursive practices, events and texts, and (b) wider social and cultural structures, relations and processes; [it aims] to investigate how such practices, events and texts arise out of and are ideologically shaped by relations of power and struggles over power (1995: 132).

Deirdre Kelly explains what is meant by discourse with a quotation from Griffith and Smith:

[discourse is] an organization of relations among people participating in a conversation mediated by written and printed materials... the term does not just refer to the "texts" of this conversation and their production alone, but also to the ways in which people organize their activities in relationship to them (as quoted in Kelly 1996: 423).

Kelly also adds that discourses are “the communicative frames in which speakers interact by exchanging speech acts” (ibid). James Gee helpfully adds:

Discourses, then, are ways of behaving, interacting, valuing, thinking, believing, speaking, and often reading and writing that are accepted as instantiations of particular roles (or ‘types of people’) by specific groups of people, whether families of a certain sort, lawyers of a certain sort, church members of a certain sort...discourses are... ways of being in the world; they are forms of life. They are, thus, always and everywhere social and products of social histories (1996: viii).

Discourse analysis looks at these factors, past description, into the historical context, systems of meanings, objects and subjects and other linkages, to show the construction of concepts and objects. Without knowledge of the construction of these social objects and problems, it is more difficult to change social definitions and behaviours, and so this form of research can be very valuable.

According to Foucault, the “surfaces of emergence” for discursive objects must be taken into account and analysed, which are the different ways in which the objects form, as well as the “authorities of delimitation” which are those powers constraining knowledge of what is deviant, for example, along with “grids of specification” or systems of classification in which they are embedded (Foucault 2002: 45-47). However, it is important to note that these objects are created by all of these aspects of a discourse, and did not exist prior to being named. The first chapter will discuss the carnival discourse surrounding representations of death in entertainment media, while the second chapter will discuss the sexualization and sensationalization of death. The intent

of my final chapter is to examine multiple entertainment media representations of necrophilia as a combined case study, including comics, television and film.

Hegemonically, necrophilia is regarded as a grotesque sexual act that is unspeakable and disrespectful to the dead. The goal is to analyze this view and, in doing so, provide an explanation of why necrophilia is taboo and what reinforces that taboo. What I am interested in is how it emerges in a variety of media, how it is constrained, filtered, and classified.

The present study examines cinema, and television, primarily from mainstream North America, as well as internet websites, to identify constructions of both sex and death, as well as constructions of necrophilia as an object of these discourses. According to Jane Brown, "as people attend to and interpret sexual media content, they also evaluate and may or may not incorporate what they are seeing in their own developing sense of sexuality. This is the step that we traditionally have thought of as media effects" (2002: 43). In this way, media encourage viewers to think about particular concepts in certain ways and not in others, reifying these concepts. For example, as stated previously, necrophilia is mainly thought of as grotesque and morbid. Things such as media shape our culture, and therefore our discourses, which is why it is important to examine them. The discursive and the extra-discursive are in this way linked.

An interpretive analysis will be undertaken, with some historical background, using the theme of taboos as well as theories of carnivalization and corpse pornography to illustrate how taboos continue to exist in many western societies. Also, many media examples will be described and analyzed for evidence of the reinforcement of the penalties of transgression.

It must be noted, however, that “analysis cannot be separated from interpretation” (Locke 2004: 12). The researcher should always take into account the social biases associated with their interpretations. “Conversations, viewed as a ‘close-order symbolic exchange’ are ‘the most basic substance of the social realm’ and it is in conversation that the social world is constituted via positioning and rhetorical redescription” (Locke 2004: 76); thus, the researcher’s position in the social realm must be taken into account. Because I have a background in both the studies of Sociology and Psychology, I have been taught to assume necrophilia is due to a mental disorder or an illness. However, this knowledge does not mean I am immune to social conventions of how to respond to an act of necrophilia, nor does it mean that I am better able to process death or grieving. I must take all of my experiences into account in order to contribute to the validity of my study.

This study is important to broaden our knowledge about the construction and effects of taboos in western society. Also, necrophilia, being one of the ultimate taboos of the western world, is rarely spoken of, and so there is virtually no social research on the subject; the present study should help to fill that gap. Lastly, it will be illustrated that the theories of taboos and the social construction of reality are still relevant in present times.

“Death should dazzle when you stare at it” (Quattrocchi & Harvolk 1987, as cited in Foltyn 2008: 153), as does sex, but only in the realm of media, as both remain taboo outside of that. The taboos of sex coupled with death have been shown to have many links, through filth, deviance, power and entertainment. I aim to show, through discourse analysis of movies, television and internet, that the taboos of sex and death are still



active in many western cultures, but that a haven for taboo violation has been created within the media.

## Chapter 1

### The Exhibition of Death: A Discussion of the Theory of Carnivalization

Death is caused by swallowing small amounts of saliva over a long period of time (George Carlin).

Media acts as a fun house mirror, reflecting ordinary life; twisting and stretching reality. Often, media resists the norms and customs of the greater society, avoiding the repercussions associated with violating those norms. According to Michael J. Clark, images, which construct entertainment media, are often deceptive and that it is necessary to interpret reality:

in that illusory state lie the roots of our ability to calibrate the underlying real world, to identify patterns or properties that are otherwise inaccessible to direct observation, and to reveal for our information and subsequent interpretation the nature of the warping that has been imposed by technology ...The media image becomes a model of the real-world environment, a symbolic model (Clark 1986: 65-70).

This is because while the norms are broken in the context of the media world, they are simultaneously reinforced for ordinary life situations by the shock they elicit. Media spaces are condoned as an arena for the taboos of ordinary life to be violated to avoid actual infringement within the greater society. The notion of the carnival can be used to show how media space acts as an outlet for players to reject and violate taboos with little or no repercussions; the carnival acts to reinforce the norms, however, by eliciting socially demanded shock and confusion at the breaking of taboos.

Lauren Langman, in "Punk, Porn and Resistance: Carnivalization and the Body in Popular Culture," explains how carnivals serve to critique the values and morals of a society through entertainment, but also to "contain discontent" and deviation from those values and morals by creating a specific area for deviation (Langman 2008: 663). Langman explains the origins of the carnival as a festival for the lower classes, as an "expression of cultural resistance to the lifestyles and values of the aristocracy" (ibid: 660). There was always a lot of singing, dancing, and laughter at the expense of the norms of the aristocracy on the part of the lower classes which acted as a critique, but at the same time, because the carnival is play, it acts to reinforce those norms.

Langman's theory is based on that of Mikhail Bakhtin. Bakhtin states that carnival is "the people's second life, organized on the basis of laughter" (1984: 8). The carnival freed people from the norms of society and shone a colourful outlook on events that were not always so jovial, turning them inside out:

All of the symbols of the carnival idiom are filled with this pathos of change and renewal, with the sense of the gay relativity of prevailing truths and authorities. We find here a characteristic logic, the peculiar logic of the "inside out" (à l'envers), of the "turnabout," of a continual shifting from top to bottom, from front to rear, of numerous parodies and travesties, humiliations, profanations, comic crowning and uncrownings. A second life, a second world of folk culture is thus constructed; it is to a certain extent a parody of the extracarnival life, a "world inside out." We must stress, however, that the carnival is far distant from the negative and formal parody of modern times. Folk humour denies, but it revives

and renews at the same time. Bare negation is completely alien to folk culture (Bakhtin 1984:11).

In the carnival world, anything fearsome from ordinary life is turned towards amusement (Bakhtin 1984:47). Likewise, Caillois states that carnivalistic mimicry creates a fictional world in contrast with ordinary life (2001: 135). According to Caillois, “play is a total activity. It involves a totality of human behaviour and interests” (2001: 175). In *Man, Play and Games*, he states that play is “isolated from the rest of life, and generally is engaged in with precise limits of time and place... in every case, the game’s domain is therefore a restricted, closed, protected universe: a pure space” (ibid: 6-7). It must also be voluntary and fun, and uncertain in outcome. It can be either governed by rules or it can be make-believe, but it must be unproductive, meaning the outcome of the play must not produce wealth or any new elements of any kind (ibid: 9-10). Caillois states “in a delimited time and space, the carnival results in disorder, violence, cynicism and unbridled instinct... but no one is deceived. This ultimate decadence of sacred mimicry is nothing but a game and possesses most of the characteristics of a game” (ibid: 131). Because of the strong element of play found in carnivals, “it belongs to the borderline between art and life. In reality, it is life itself, but shaped according to a certain pattern of play... Carnival is not a spectacle seen by the people; they live in it, and everyone participates” (Bakhtin 1984:7).

Entertainment media is traditionally considered a spectacle: merely a production for people to view, lacking the element of participation, and therefore, according to Bakhtin, cannot be carnivalesque. I, however, would like to suggest that entertainment media has become immersive and has moved past the barriers of spectacle, allowing for

media to create a safe space for taboo transgression as in a carnival culture. The very nature of contemporary entertainment media, such as films and television, is play; we take a break from work to immerse ourselves in the content. We are no longer spectators; we are now audiences. Baz Kershaw states that "gradually, 'audience' replaces 'spectator' as the most common appellation of the crowd. Through this, theatre attendees were encouraged to think of themselves as a collective paying attention to sound, particularly to words" (2003: 603). Audiences are more participatory in nature, immersed in the spectacle instead of passively viewing it; feelings are elicited, discourses are considered and discussions continue after the media has been consumed. This cannot be considered a completely passive activity. Patrice Pavis, in *Dictionary of the Theatre: Terms, Concepts and Analysis* states that "the borders between reality and spectacle are not easy to define" (1998: 347); I contend that we are participating in the carnival as we are consuming entertainment media, just as we are participating in reality. With this stance, with entertainment media as engrossing and participatory and thus able to surpass the blockade of spectacle, Bakhtin's theory of carnival remains relevant.

Langman adds to Bakhtin's theory by stating three forms of carnival culture:

1. Grotesque: A reversal of usual aesthetic standards, it celebrates what might be considered ugly, if not repulsive.
2. Ludic: Whatever else it might be, carnival is a time for play and not work.
3. Desublimated: Most societies place certain constraints upon human desires. Carnival is a time where the ordinary controls and repressions are released with abandon in frenzied celebrations. This can be seen in various ways: the release

of controls on the erotic (especially among women who are more reserved than men), the aggressive, and the scatological (especially among men who are fascinated with excrement and waste products) (2008: 662).

Taboos of death fit into this deviance frame, with media as the carnival, contributing a space for violation of the ordinary world's norms. This space allows for fantasies of death to become part of public discourse, but it also serves to critique those fantasies and reinforce the taboos. Bakhtin's and Langman's theories of carnivalization can be expanded to include depictions of carnivals themselves as critiques of how death is seen in ordinary life, and of the exhibition that the state of death and the afterlife have become. This can be seen throughout many different media portrayals, including television series like *Six Feet Under* (Ball 2001) and *Dead Like Me* (Masius 2003), and movies such as *Zombieland* (Fliesher 2009) and *The Corpse Bride* (Burton 2005). However, there are also examples of people, such as Gunther von Hagens, Rusty Vanden Biesen and Michael Jackson, who make exhibitions out of death in ordinary life; outside of the security blanket of the media, and in the process see both societal acceptance and rejection, only with a stronger backlash than when norms are broken in media.

### **A Grave Exhibition: *Six Feet Under***

The HBO series *Six Feet Under* (Ball 2001), which ran from 2001 to 2005, is a drama about a family that lives above and runs a funeral home. Ralph J. Poole introduces the series by explaining:

With its riotous black humour, the series particularly centers around the absurdities of American funeral rituals, inappropriately reappearing dead persons, and a disastrously disorderly family, namely the Fishers who own and live in a funeral home (2005: 77).

The pilot episode begins with the father - and owner of the business - being hit by a bus and dying on Christmas Eve, leaving the rest of the family to cope. The family gets into many different messes, all the while continuing to deal with the family business. Each episode begins with a death, introducing the audience to the newest client of Fisher and Sons Funeral Home.

In the opening credits, which are shown at the beginning of every episode, the visual depictions are those that are regularly associated with death: a tombstone, a raven, a hearse, a toe tag attached to a foot. The music, however, links a different mood with the images of death from what we are conditioned to expect: instead of soft and unobtrusive music - as we are accustomed to when dealing with death - the music here sounds intriguing at first, and then changes to a disjointed and carnival-like bridge. In a similar analysis of *Six Feet Under*, Charlton McIlwain states “music – this single stylistic element – accomplishes [dissonance], telling us not only what to see, but how to look at it. While all that our eyes see in this brief span of time is unquestionably familiar, the style of music that accompanies it is unfamiliar, questionable ... the music is the question mark” (2005: 73-4). Each of the three forms of carnival is encompassed in this minute long introductory sequence: the music is playful and celebratory while coupled with images associated closely with death, and also has an air of frenzy and loss of control in the bridge. These sequences set the stage for the carnivalesque throughout the series.

During the father's funeral in the pilot episode, we first see a glimpse of the afterlife as a party: in the background, the dead father attends his own funeral while perched on the roof of a hearse, wearing a Hawaiian shirt and sipping an exotically fruity drink. In season 3, the episode called "I'm Sorry, I'm Lost" is where the first full depiction of death as a carnival or a fair is seen. Claire walks through a cemetery looking for her father's grave, when she sees a small girl run by with a vibrantly red balloon. Her dad – or her fantasy of her father - walks up, and after a candid conversation, escorts her to his grave. The father sincerely states that the cemetery is "like this every day" when they come upon a fair ground in the middle of the road running through the necropolis: balloons floating, popcorn popping, and elephants trumpeting.



Figure 1: Claire and her father in the cemetery (Ball 2003).

Monkeys are milling around, there is carnival music in the background, and you glimpse people who have died in previous episodes roaming around the festival. In this scene, death acts as a mirror to life, but death seems to be the more vivacious of the two; encompassing the idea of the carnival as a celebration of broken norms. In fact, many of the representations of the father throughout the series show him smoking a cigar,



playing poker or just laughing. These festive or jovial depictions of the afterlife serve to calm our nerves about the unknown and the uncontrollable event that is death, but also to poke fun at the depressingly dark images of death that we find all around us.

The examples from *Six Feet Under* fall into all three of Langman's categories of carnivalization: first, the grotesque form of carnival is depicted as the characters are shown celebrating their own deaths where death is generally mourned. The images of the balloons and fair booths along the cemetery aisle with people laughing and celebrating are completely contrary to what we expect to see in a cemetery: quiet, morose people and stone markers that outlast the decomposing bodies below the surface. Second, the deceased are never shown to be working, capturing the ludic form of carnival; they are only at play, which is in contrast to life, where we are pushed to work to be considered a contributing member of society. After all, "to be dead is an unthinkable anomaly... death is a delinquency, and an incurable deviancy," and a corpse is useless as it is a shell, seen by society as unable to contribute (Baudrillard 1976: 126). Third, the portrayal of the dead serves to show release of control in what Langman calls "frenzied celebrations" (2008: 662) in the desublimated form of carnival. The music that is often paired with death in *Six Feet Under* is frenzied, but happy; allowing the audience to see a different side of the funeral business; one that "puts the fun into funeral" (Ball 2001). Here we see that through the use of colourful carnival imagery, ideas of death as mournful - as the denouement - are resisted.

### **An Afterlife of Absurdity: *Dead Like Me***

*Dead Like Me* (Masius 2003), a television series created for Showtime that ran in 2003 and 2004, is another prime example of the depiction of death as absurd. The show

follows a group of grim reapers who deal with violent deaths; people who have died but walk among the living. They appear to be alive but refer to themselves as undead. To fellow reapers, one's appearance remains the same as before death, but in the ordinary world, their faces are changed to avoid recognition. The reapers remove the souls of recent decedents to prevent the soul from feeling the pain of death and from rotting, all the while trying to fill their soul quota in order to cross over; the show chronicles the reapers' antics among the living. The mood is light and funny while people are dropping dead all around the characters. In the pilot, the main character George, short for Georgia, is killed by a toilet seat falling from the Russian space station, and replaces a grim reaper that has filled his quota.

The opening credit roll is important in this series just as it is in *Six Feet Under*, depicting the classic grim reaper with the hood and scythe in a multitude of normal activities, such as walking a dog, running on treadmills at the gym, punching time cards, doing paper work, photocopying their face, leering at a woman while standing at the water cooler, on the bus, playing basketball, and even doing laundry. The music paired with the mundane tasks of your everyday grim reaper is light and airy, jazzy and fun.

Again, the desublimated form of carnival can be seen here: a frenzied celebration in the form of jovial music surrounds the everyday tasks of the grim reapers. The opening credits also lean on the grotesque form of carnival as it celebrates the role of the grim reaper in everyday life.

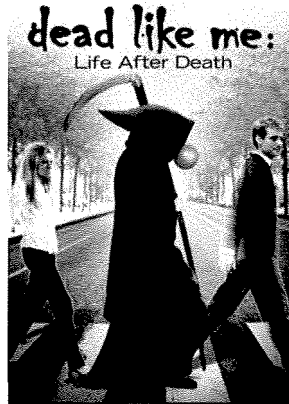


Figure 2: *Dead Like Me: Life After Death* cover art (Herek 2009).

Also in this series is a blatant depiction of a carnival: in the pilot, the first soul George takes is from a little girl who dies after a train crash. The series takes on the popular idea of seeing “the light” when crossing over: the decedents will see lights in different shapes; each shape depends on the person’s life. This connection between the lights and a peaceful, happy place is as close as the show gets to an idea of heaven. The lights that the first little girl walks into are in the shape of an amusement park, leaving a feeling of peace for her instead of horror at her untimely death. The explicit depiction of the carnival is significant here because the decedent is a small child, which is in direct conflict with the contemporary social norms associated with dying: most people associate death with older people, and are horrified at the notion of children dying before their parents.

In this series, the dead walk among the living, work with the living, and steal from the living, creating another reflection of life. George works in a placement agency under her fake living persona for income, while another character works for the parking authority. Each of the reapers squats in a home of a recent decedent and spends most of their time in a waffle house, constantly interacting with the living. This is an interesting

contradiction to the ludic form of carnival culture; the bureaucratic element works as a reflection and a parody of everyday life, and so does encompass some aspects of the carnival, but it rejects the notion of play. In the example of *Dead Like Me*, most of the reapers are contributing members of society. This contradicts the societal norm of distancing oneself from the dead because they are useless and disturbing. In fact, the idea of death in *Dead Like Me* is completely bureaucratic, as is life. There is a defined hierarchy: the targets are passed down to the supervisor by a shadowy figure and then the supervisor distributes the targets on Post-it Notes to the reapers.

The Post-it Notes that the show employs are a staple of the business world as we know it, although they have not always been the mascot of bureaucracy. In fact, Post-its as we know them are only about thirty years old. According to 3M's website, "a 1998 workplace study of more than 1,000 U.S. workers, conducted by the Gallup Organization and the Institute for the Future, showed that the average professional receives eleven Post-it Note messages each day" (3M Fun Facts 2009). The use of the hierarchical business model in the media, as well as the use of bureaucratic symbols such as the Post It note likens death, or the state of being undead, to life in any business; except that the character's jobs do not have a salary; they are actually unpaid. One episode is even devoted to updating and entering the supervisor's files into spreadsheets.



Figure 3: George's target. *Dead Like Me* (Masius 2004)

The emphasis on the Post It in *Dead Like Me* continues a long-standing connection between the afterlife and bureaucracy in the American and British cinemas (Genosko 2003), which is in direct conflict with Bataille's notion that death interferes with the rationality of the world of work. Here, bureaucracy is shown to continue after death.

Because of the violent, and sarcastically comedic, nature of the deaths in the show—for example a piano falling five stories to the sidewalk, a toilet seat hurdling to the earth, or slipping on a banana peel leading to getting a head caught in a revolving door—and the fear that these incidents provoke, the characters responsible for setting up the deaths must be somewhat alarming. Bakhtin states that “all that was frightening in ordinary life is turned into amusing or ludicrous monstrosities” (1984:47). The characters responsible are truly monstrosities: they are grey and black monsters with large dark eyes and spiked hair who do not speak, only growl.



Figure 4: Gravelings – *Dead Like Me* (Masius 2004)

These characters are created by rotting souls, or souls that have not been saved before they die. Although these monsters, called gravelings in the show, are daunting because of the violence and death they represent, the absurdity of the deaths they cause gives them a ludicrous and less frightening appearance. For these characters, death is not bureaucratic; they enjoy setting up comical and gruesome situations for minor characters' deaths, and so it can be classified as a ludic form of carnival. These characters are not, however, celebrated; in fact, the reapers are often displaying fear towards them. The gravelings serve to create a space which allows for the experience of violence and makes light of death, turning hegemonic ideals of death inside-out.

### **A World Inside Out: *Zombieland* and *Zombie Boy***

In the 2009 film *Zombieland*, four characters, who have mastered the art of survival in the middle of a “zombiepocalypse,” travel together to the opposite coast, fighting off zombies and trying to reach an area free of infected undead. The main characters devise creative ways of killing the zombies throughout the movie: shovel to the head, shootings, running them over with a vehicle multiple times and using baseball bats.



Figure 5: The main characters in *Zombieland* Kill a Zombie (Fliesher 2009).

The characters' destination is a deserted amusement park that has been rumoured to be zombie-free; a place of absurdity to remove themselves from the monstrosities of their world. When they reach the deserted park, two characters turn on all of the lights and rides, making them an easy target for death to find. As with all carnival imagery, there is an air of absurdity present here: a single man locks himself in a carnival booth and shoots more than one hundred zombies by himself; two girls escape by jumping on a carnival ride, but are dangled high in the air while their attackers climb the structure. Even the idea of zombies themselves is absurd: they are rotting, flesh-eating, bloodied, walking undead. The desublimated form of carnival can be seen here: the zombies, and the violence shown towards them, represent a release of social controls on aggression. The frenzy is apparent on both sides: with the zombies as they fight to eat the brains of their victims, as well as with the main characters in their absurd methods of zombie killing.

Coupled with the ludicrous portrayal of death with zombies in *Zombieland*, the creators use comedy and sarcastic dialogue to make fun of death, reject the world of

work with the ludic form of carnival, and celebrate violence in the grotesque form.

Because zombies are depicted as undead, animalistic and not quite human, there is a grey area that leaves open the option for creative violence against these beings. These characters allow for frenzied violent fantasies associated with Langman's desublimated form of carnival to be taken out on characters that resemble humans, but are not quite; this is similar to using videogames as outlets for violence. For example, in a study by Cheryl K. Olson, Lawrence A. Kutner and Dorothy E. Warner, it is explained that:

Many boys described using violent games to cope with feelings of anger or frustration. This type of play served as an outlet for emotional expression or as a form of distraction. For example: Getting wrapped up in a violent game, it's good. 'Cause if you mad, when you come home, you can take your anger out on the people in the game. (Boy 32) If I had a bad day at school, I'll play a violent video game and it just relieves all my stress. (Boy 12)... One boy described coping with a real-life conflict by role-playing it in the game: Say some kid wants to fight you, and he talks trash about you. When you go home and play, you're like, "This is the kid that I hate," and you beat him up and stuff. (Boy 39) (Olson et al. 2008: 64-5).

Instead of using violence in ordinary life, the boys in this study preferred to use videogames as an outlet to express or to redirect their anger, while others use different media, such as movies like *Zombieland*.

The word "zombie" derives from the voodoo religion of Haiti. "The zombie was said to be a recently dead corpse that had been reanimated by voodoo practitioners – not to wreak havoc on the local population, but for the rather more prosaic task of



providing cheap labour for plantation owners” (Flint 2009: 9). The idea of the zombie was westernized by William Seabrook with his book *Voodoo Island*, after a lengthy investigation on the island of Haiti. Upon closer inspection of the zombies labouring, “he realizes that the zombies are not supernatural beings, but simply brain-damaged individuals, forced to work as slave labour” (Flint 2009: 13). Here, the fear related to mental illness is rampant; misunderstanding a mental illness leads to a deviant label being placed on the individual, which leads to social fear and mistreatment of that person.

Currently, the accustomed media depiction of zombies is an undead individual who can no longer speak except in grunts; often the face is scarred or missing pieces, and they crave human flesh. This westernization of the zombie has brought us movies such as *Dawn of the Dead*, *The Invasion of the Body Snatchers* and now *Zombieland*. The depictions of zombies can either be comical or grotesque, or both, depending on the genre of the film. For example, while *Zombieland* is a comedic film, while *House of the Dead* is meant to be gruesomely horrifying.

Due to these influences, one man has gone so far as to tattoo himself to look like a zombie.

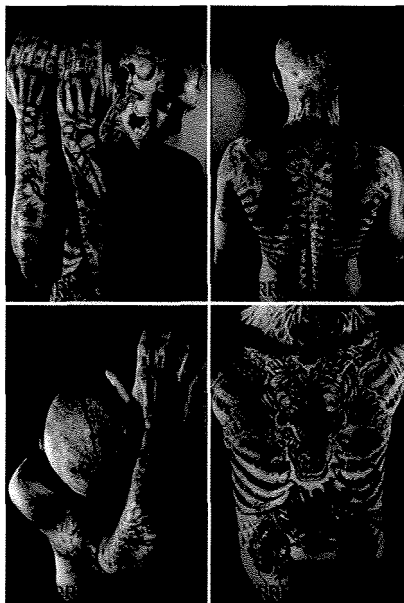


Figure 6: Zombie Boy shows off his tattoos (Elder 2008).

Zombie Boy, as he is known in the media, is covered in “the art of a rotting cadaver” (Murray 2008). His scalp is covered in brains and bugs, his chest and back in bones and organs; one ear has a spider web inside, and he contemplates removing the other entirely. In essence, he embodies the discourse of the undead. In taking on the appearance of a zombie, he personifies each of Langman’s three carnival forms. For the grotesque form, he celebrates the unattractive appearance of the undead, which is rotted flesh and organs; for the desublimated form, he represents a release of his original form, altering it with body modifications, creating a spectacularized version of himself. These modifications will limit his ability to work in a bureaucratic setting, rejecting work, which showcases the ludic form. In embodying this discourse, Zombie Boy has resisted societal pressure to continue through life with a particular appearance, one of being alive; he turns the hegemonic ideas of death, as well as his appearance, inside-out.

**Stiff Distinctions: *The Corpse Bride***

In Tim Burton's 2005 film *The Corpse Bride*, a young man practicing his vows in the woods accidentally commits himself to the wrong bride: she is a corpse, left to die by her previous fiancé. True to the carnivalesque idea of an upside-down world, *The Corpse Bride* paints the world of the living as drab and gloomy: black and white with little contrast mixed with quiet, depressing music. The characters "upstairs" are dull and grumpy, stiffly dressed, and fixated on money. They never smile and the concept of a wedding is a dreadful, instead of a festive, occasion. They are depicted as in mourning; missing life or energy, much like the hegemonic ideals of being ill or dead.

Diametrically opposed to the living world, the world of the dead, or the afterlife, is portrayed as an afterlife-long party, with vibrant colours, bubbly personalities and festive jazz music. Although the characters in the world of the dead are rotting, blue in the face, and many have weapons permanently lodged inside them, they are a good natured and happy group, willing to celebrate any occasion that comes to light.

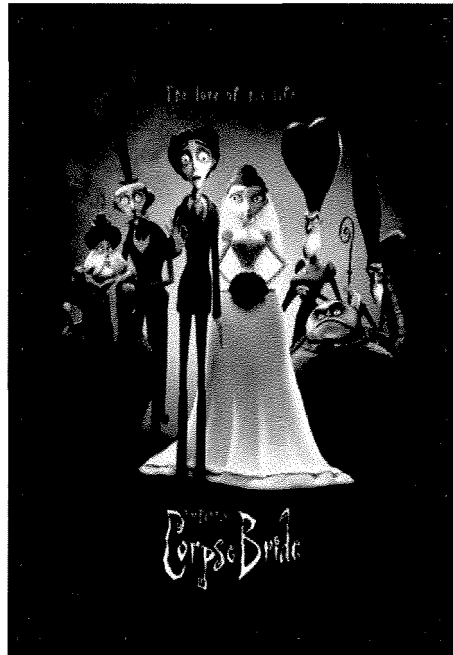


Figure 7: *The Corpse Bride* Poster – Life (2005)



Figure 8: *The Corpse Bride* Poster – Death (2005)

Within *The Corpse Bride*, we see a reversal of life and death: life is stiff, dark and gloomy while death is light, fun and festive; the topsy-turvy quality of the carnival is most obvious in this distinction, especially in the grotesque form, where death is celebrated. The ludic and desublimated are also emphasized, as the space of death rejects work and is all frenzied fun and games, with very few social controls. One control that remains in death, however, is the 'traffic' between the two worlds in the film. This concept realistically reflects ordinary life: there can be no to-and-fro movement between the two worlds. Once the groom is in the afterlife, it is very difficult for him and the corpse bride to return to the surface and the living world; it takes magic from the lively afterlife, a one-time only spell, for the pair to return to life, where any type of magic is apparently non-existent.

## **Carnival Depictions Outside of Media**

While these film and television examples can be classified with parts of the theory of carnivalization, and we can see that media acts as the outlet for a resistance to cultural norms of death, there are also examples of people who make a public display of resistance. These people are met with a much less forgiving societal reaction than their media counterparts. Body Worlds, LifeGems and Michael Jackson will be discussed in turn.

### **Dr. Death**

A real-life spectacle of death, in the form of an exhibit, is created by Dr. Gunther von Hagens, who is now known worldwide for his anatomical experimentation with art and science. As the founder of a process called plastination, von Hagens preserves corpses for art, and to educate the public about anatomy. The corpses are donated by either the decedent or their families. Body Worlds exhibitions are currently travelling the globe.

Von Hagens' website outlines his patented process of the plastination of a corpse as follows:

The first step of the process involves halting decay by pumping formalin into the body through the arteries. Formalin kills all bacteria and chemically stops the decay of tissue... In the second step, the body water and soluble fats are dissolved from the body by placing it into a solvent bath (e.g., an acetone bath)... the specimen is immersed in a polymer solution and placed in a vacuum

chamber. The vacuum removes the acetone from the specimen and helps the polymer to penetrate every last cell. After vacuum impregnation, the body is positioned as desired. In the final step, the specimen is hardened. Depending on the polymer used, this is done with gas, light, or heat. Dissection and Plastination of an entire body requires about 1,500 working hours and normally takes about one year to complete (Von Hagens 2009).

Once the bodies and other pieces have been perfected and posed, they are grouped into three types of exhibits: the first consists of separate organs and body parts, both examples of healthy and defective organs, in display cases. These include hearts, livers, bones, hands and feet and any other part of the body. The second type of exhibit is “separated from the others bearing the warning: ‘these exhibits may be offensive to the viewer’” (Hirschauer 2006: 30), and contains undeveloped fetuses. The final type of exhibit is made up of “[whole] figures sometimes placed in bizarre postures enabling a maximum of anatomical views from different angles” (ibid).



Figure 9: The Juxtaposed Couple – in the Toronto Body Worlds Exhibit (von Hagens 2010)

According to Stefan Hirschauer, there are three phases that the body goes through in becoming an exhibit:

In its daily existence, it is the bearer of individual life and personal identity. If before death it is declared a 'body donation', it can be transported post-mortem to a laboratory context (i.e. the Institute for Plastination in Heidelberg), which treats it primarily as a workpiece or an object to be modelled. After a series of technical and chemical transformations, it eventually becomes not only an object of demonstration used in medical training, but also a piece in an exhibition, which offers it to public perception together with legends, catalogues and background (2006: 27).

The exhibits, set up in large sections of museums around the globe, are surrounded in black curtains, and the "specimens" are housed in glass cases, save for the interactive pieces. The viewers walk through the maze of black and engage in discussion about the pieces, and can touch the interactive samples. Because of its interactive nature, this can be considered a carnivalesque exhibition in the grotesque form; the exhibition serves to celebrate death and the body.

The dissected pieces behind glass appear to be like a typical museum exhibit of inert objects, but there is an unsettling air around the full body specimens. It is as if people are being quiet and respectful around the full body specimens, acknowledging them as their prior form – a human – instead of their current one as an art object. Hirschauer notes the same phenomenon: "Many commentators have noted that, confronted with these exhibits, the visitors' behaviour becomes solemn and concerned... Maybe it is more difficult to share plastinates with others because of the 'indiscretion' of

one's own gaze and the possibility of subjective identification... Death becomes a topic in two ways: as the biographical past of the exhibits and as one's own biographical future" (ibid: 31-32). The discourses associated with the full body plastinates, along with the atmosphere of the room, are confused and dissonant; on one hand, death and the bodily form are being celebrated and fetishized as objects, while on the other, moral discourses dictate that we disassociate ourselves from the dead. These ideals conflict and seem to create dissonance in the cognition of the audience.

There has been much press about von Hagens' sculptures, both praise for his educational work, and controversy for the poses he chooses, not to mention his use of corpses. Returning to Langman's sense of carnivalization, von Hagens has managed to rework the common idea of respect for the dead by allowing the body to be useful after death; creating art with cadavers rather than relegating corpses either to medical science, the grave or the furnace. By giving the corpse a use, von Hagens manages to turn expectations of death inside-out, especially the hegemonic idea of the uselessness of the dead: the corpse, which is usually avoided because of the horror associated with it, is put on display for the audience to engage with. Von Hagens has managed to create an exhibition of death by both reversing the cultural standards of dealing with a dead body and by celebrating death in a new and educational fashion.

### **Diamonds are Forever: A New Meaning to "Family Jewels"**

Author Lisa Takeuchi Cullen explains a new technique of making death into a very expensive and shiny display in the chapter "Ashes to Ashes, Dust to Diamonds" in her book, *Remember Me* (2006: 62). LifeGem is a company that takes human cremains and turns them into diamonds. The business started when a man by the name of Rusty



Vanden Biesen was looking at a periodic table and realized that both living things and diamonds are made out of carbon: why not make diamonds out of the carbon we leave behind? Having a self-proclaimed death fetish since the age of five, Vanden Biesen said that it was a “relief that there is something, that I could be something other than buried or cremated and forgotten” (Vanden Biesen as quoted in Cullen 2006: 60).

The process consists of four steps. The first is to collect the cremains, which are the remnant ashes from a cremated body. A single human body produces between four to six pounds of cremains, but only eight ounces are needed to create upwards of ten diamonds of up to a carat each. The cremains are mailed from the funeral home to LifeGem; upon receiving them, they are placed into a metal tube, which is inscribed with a tracking number (Cullen 2006: 68). The second step is called purification. This is the stage where the carbon from the ashes is captured: the tube goes into an oven heated to over 3500°C for about a month. When it comes out of the oven, a chunk of pure graphite is left, which looks much like pencil lead. Once this has been done, the third step, growing the diamond, is commenced. The graphite is put into a press that places pressure on it from every angle at extremely high temperatures. The longer the graphite is in this press, the larger the diamond extracted will be. This process can take anywhere from three to seven weeks. The final process is cutting the diamond, which can take over a month to ensure there will not be any cracking (Ibid: 68-69). LifeGems come in a variety of colours: colourless, blue, red, green and yellow, although some cost more than others. They range in price anywhere from \$2500 to \$30,000 (LifeGem 2005).

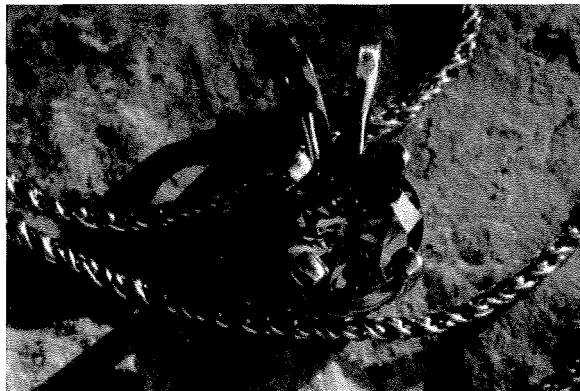


Figure 10: A blue LifeGem (LifeGem 2005)

Although there have been mixed reactions from people and news outlets about LifeGem, the majority of responses belong to the category of disbelief. This method of corpse disposal turns the death industry on its head, creating something new and valuable from something physically useless. It breaks the norms of society in that a body is to be either buried or cremated; LifeGem takes it one step further, creating something of value out of something that is considered sacred and enjoys symbolic status. A LifeGem continues to be a celebration of the person, and inadvertently, their death, subscribing to the grotesque form of carnival, and resists the idea of discarding the body. At the same time, this new use of cremains reinforces the notion that the deceased body is useless by creating a commodity out of it.

Play is not the emphasis of the carnivalization here; because a commodity is gained from creating a LifeGem, the ludic form of carnival cannot factor in. However, Bakhtin's idea of turning something fearsome into something ludicrous with Langman's grotesque form makes major contributions here. LifeGem turns death and cremation, which remain mysterious, and intimidating in ordinary life, into something that is a beautiful reminder to celebrate.

## **The Prince of Pop**

True to his larger-than-life nature while alive, Michael Jackson, who died June 25th, 2009, has made many headlines post-mortem, arguably making him one of the largest public displays of death and the exhibition that is associated with it. According to news media, Jackson died from cardiac arrest in his home (CTV 2009). Because Jackson was one of the most famous pop icons in the world, his family thought it fitting to hold a massive memorial service: "The Michael Jackson Public Memorial Service was held Tuesday, July 7, 2009, 1:00 PM EST/10:00 AM PST at the Staples Center in Los Angeles, California. Eleven thousand tickets were distributed via a lottery system" (Sony 2009), where people would put in their names online and names were drawn for sets of two free tickets. The family stated that they wanted as many Michael Jackson fans as possible to be able to attend, and felt that the lottery system was the fairest way to decide.

According to CNN, Jackson was buried in a bronze casket with "14-karat gold plate handles, a velvet-lined interior and a reported price tag upward of \$20,000" (Duke and Ahmed 2009). They estimate the cost for event security alone to be between \$2 and \$4 million. The cost skyrockets this funeral into a status exhibition of wealth and fame; making a spectacle of Jackson's death instead of the family mourning privately, as is expected. The public displays of wealth and fame, as well as the displays of celebration and mourning, are contrary to the norms of an American funeral. The emphasis on celebration surrounding Jackson's death falls into the grotesque form of carnivalization; fans were invited to participate in what would hegemonically be a service for only family, creating a sensationalized version of the American funeral. In addition to the lavish

casket and services, the sensationalized funeral became a participatory spectacle, breaking the norms of death services.



Figure 11: Michael Jackson's casket (Djansezian 2009)

There were rumours soon after Jackson's death that he was to be plastinated by Dr. Death himself, Gunther von Hagens. The Daily Mail (2009) in the United Kingdom stated that Michael Jackson's chimpanzee Bubbles was plastinated upon his death, and is currently on display in a Body Worlds exhibit at the O2 Center in London. The rumour was that Michael Jackson had signed a donation form for von Hagens so he could be reunited with his chimp. This was, of course, in the event that cryogenic procedures - chemical freezing of the body that must happen immediately after death - could not take place. It has recently been confirmed by CNN, however, that Bubbles is actually alive and well in a sanctuary in Florida, so it is likely that the rumours were intended to spark a new controversy from the pop star's death (Segal and Zarrella 2009). If the rumours were true, however, Jackson's wishes were not fulfilled, as he was not plastinated, but buried in a celebrity cemetery mausoleum in California. These false statements by the

media can be attributed to the desublimated form of carnival: they are a frenzied abandon of the truth in the wake of Jackson's death, in an effort to critique the way he lived his life and his breaking of societal norms.

Another rumour, this time confirmed, is that a hair-lock collector is having a piece of Michael Jackson's hair turned into a diamond by none other than LifeGem. John Reznikoff, who CNN proclaims is a "highly respected collector," purchased a portion of Jackson's hair that had been burned off in a Pepsi commercial fire. He is retaining a piece of the lock, while the rest is being made into diamonds; one for the family free of charge. CNN reported on the story, saying "it may sound like pure B.S. but that's what they do at LifeGem" (LifeGem 2009). This statement alone reinforces the backlash that is mostly avoided, or at least softened, by breaking norms within the fictional fields of media instead of breaking norms in ordinary life.

## **Conclusion**

Although death is unknown and is expected to be a sombre event, through the process of carnivalization, norms are broken, standards are reversed, and inhibitions are overcome in celebration to critique and resist the norms and values society has in place. According to Langman, "carnival is a time where the ordinary controls and repressions are released with abandon in frenzied celebrations" (2008: 662), and, I argue, so are many media representations of death. Film and televisual media are common outlets for this, as they are seen as a haven for taboo breaking and there is little backlash from the rest of society. This is because such transgression serves as a control: if the norm is broken in media, it will be reinforced by the shock value the resistance creates and therefore upheld in the larger society. Carnivalization in the media can be seen both

through images and music in the forms of grotesque, ludic and desublimated carnivals, as well as an explicit portrayal of a fair or festival. This was seen in the television series *Six Feet Under* and *Dead Like Me*, as well as the films *Zombieland* and *The Corpse Bride*.

It is important to note that the idea of the carnival's absurdity does not always reside in humorous avenues: while many of the examples outlined above use the carnival in comedic situations, and it is easier to recognize within humour as many carnivalesque representations are in fact celebratory, as *Dead Like Me* and *Zombieland* are, other media use the carnival in more subdued forms, such as in the music-image dissonant introduction, as well as in the rest of the series, of *Six Feet Under*. The real life examples used above are also devoid of humour; although some news media coverage poke fun at them, the taboo transgressions and the alternative representations of death are not intended to be humorous. It is also important to note that although media representations of death and sex often have an absurd air, this is by no means a universal depiction of death; absurdity is merely one form of media representation.

Multiple new ways of being disposed of that embrace the idea of death as absurd are coming to light, which is seen through the examples of von Hagens' plastination and LifeGem's diamonds created from human cremains. Michael Jackson is a prime example of the use of a frenzied celebration in which norms are abandoned; a high priced concert and memorial service, a high priced casket, and diamonds made from the singer's hair are just a few ways in which his death has been made into a norm-challenging celebration.

## Chapter 2

### Drop Dead Gorgeous: The Theory of Corpse Porn

There is no doubt that people view the dead out of curiosity. (W.P. Hohenschuh)

“There seem to be a number of parallels between the fantasies which titillate our curiosity about the mystery of sex, and those which titillate our curiosity about the mystery of death,” one main parallel being that “both types of fantasy are completely unrealistic, since they ignore all physical, social or legal limitations” (Gorer 1955: 51-52). This is why taboos of sex and death are becoming topics for mainstream culture; the shock content of deviant fantasies sells.

Jacque Lynn Foltyn notes that “erotic corpse imagery is nothing new... Artists have long made the dead look sexy (e.g., Greek flower myths, Michelangelo’s Dying Slave, Millais’ Ophelia, Pabst’s Lulu) and some of the attributes of beauty (stillness, calm, repose) are attributes of death” (2008: 165). This is the erotic corpse: mildly sexualized and beautified. When this mild form of sexualization moves into a more grotesque, pornographic depiction, it emphasizes “the body’s sexuality as well as its decomposition, corpse porn... transforms the dead body in theatrical ways, while titillating the audience with information about sexual sadism and inclinations such as autoerotic asphyxiation and foot fetishism” (ibid 166). Foltyn states that this is the result of “a growing conflation of the two once forbidden bodies, the sex porn body and the dead porn body” (ibid). This fusion of the two forbidden bodies leads to the corpse as entertainment media’s new “porn star” (ibid: 167). The trend of young beautiful female murder victims in mainstream popular culture who are often the victims of sex crimes reinforces the idea of corpse porn; there is an element of shock when the victim is

shown, as well as a feeling of still beauty, leading the viewer to be both fascinated and horrified at the same time (ibid: 165). This seems to loosen the proscriptions on death and sex, making the discourses accessible to the public for acceptable taboo violation; making the concept of death a purified simulation (McIlwain 2005: 62). However, it is the shock that reinforces the taboo, leaving the viewer feeling uncomfortable and acutely aware of social constraints around the coupling of sex and death.

It is interesting to note that the theories of carnivalization and corpse porn are not mutually exclusive, but not necessarily fully mutually inclusive, either; in many instances, the trademark inside-out-ness of the carnival culture within a media representation is due to the sexualization or sensualisation of the corpse. I maintain that representations of the corpse as porn star will always encompass the grotesque form of the carnival: sexualizing the dead body works to celebrate what is considered ugly or horrific, and in turn to reject the social norms surrounding treatment of it. However, there are instances where the carnival has no link to sexualization of a corpse.

The HBO television series *Six Feet Under* (Ball 2001), discussed in the first chapter, is a prime example of Foltyn's theory of corpse porn. First, the cover art for the first season of *Six Feet Under* is the bluish face of a corpse who is being made up by adding bright red lipstick:



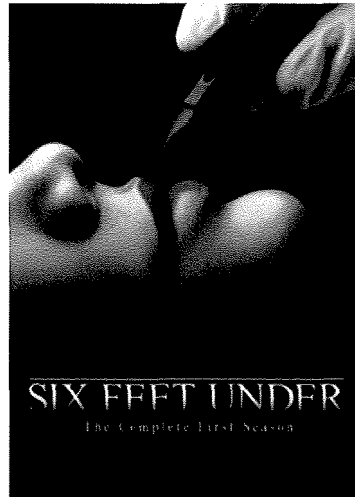


Figure 1: Cover Art for Season One of *Six Feet Under* (Ball 2001).

The cover art illustrates the cultural significance of the appearance of the dead: they need to be made up to look as they did when they were alive, or made more attractive. Makeup is applied, clothes are fashioned and corpses are posed, just so: “their faces ought to be angled at five to fifteen degrees so that they face you a little bit instead of being in profile,” so that they don’t have a “haughty appearance,” which happens when the nose is pointed at the ceiling (Takeuchi Cullen 2006: 185). Jessica Mitford describes the idea of the corpse as a piece of artwork: showing off the corpse in an open casket, embalming and painting them, “the goal was [and is] to outmanoeuvre the Grim Reaper for as long as possible” (1998: 142). Efrat Tseelon contends that “death is ornamented in a way which disguises its original ugliness or horror” (1995: 107).

In a similar vein, in a chapter about her grandfather’s Japanese funeral, Lisa Takeuchi Cullen states “I do not know why we feel compelled to compliment the appearance of the dead. I have noticed this behaviour at American funerals too: someone always needs to mention how good the body looks. Why? After all, the dead

absolutely and at last don't care" (2006: 200), but Strub and Frederick answer this: "a funeral service is a social function at which the deceased is the guest of honour and the center of attraction ... a poorly prepared body in a beautiful casket is just as incongruous as a young lady appearing at a party in a costly gown and with her hair in curlers" (as quoted in Mitford 1998: 54).

The funeral industry maintains that the emphasis on the life-like appearance of the dead is necessary to maintain the 'memory picture': "the last glimpse of the deceased in an open casket, done up with the latest in embalming techniques and finished off with a dusting of makeup" (Mitford 1998: 16). This makeup often includes lipstick and other chemicals to cover the discolouring of the skin that happens after death. Tseelon calls this the "beautification of death" (1995: 107) and appends that pretty hymns and flower arrangements are added to further hide the grotesque reality of death.

Lipstick was originally created because of the need for lip hydration. "The skin is covered by a thin corneal layer that contains little fatty tissue," (Emsley 2004: 3) and so lips dry out easily. If licking the lips cannot rehydrate them, then something needs to be used to prevent cracking and soreness. In death, lipstick continues to hydrate lips that can no longer hold moisture. Emsley outlines the requirements of a perfect lipstick as having even cover, being long lasting, having a neutral taste, being smooth but not easily breakable, and not being greasy. Because of these requirements, mixtures of oils and waxes are used in the manufacturing of lipstick; this way, it remains soft for application to the lips and rehydration, yet firm in the tube.

“Lipstick is the sexiest cosmetic, and soon after it was invented it became an indispensable item for most women, despite the many drawbacks of the early versions, which broke easily, were not indelible, and turned rancid. Today, it comes without these defects, and in a multitude of colours and textures” (Emsley 2004: 2). The use of lipstick goes as far back as the ancient Egyptians, who used plant dye to permanently colour their lips, but that stained everything it came into contact with. After the skin dying faded, the first lipsticks as we know them were “made in 1915 and were manufactured by Maurice Levy in the United States” (ibid: 3). Now, “American women spend almost \$700 million a year on lipstick, and world-wide the total spent is probably more than double this amount” (ibid). The importance of lipstick as a cosmetic, and the link to sex appeal that is associated with it, is why lipstick is often featured in media when discussing the discourse of death, and why it has such a prominent place in *Six Feet Under*'s cover art. It works to eroticize the corpse, symbolizing “everything that is desirable but forbidden, compelling and repulsive” (Tseelon 1995: 113).

The greatest examples of corpse porn in *Six Feet Under* are encompassed in the four mock commercials featured during the pilot episode, all of which are promoting products that are being used in subsequent scenes in the Fisher and Son's Funeral Home, the business highlighted in the series. Each of the commercials uses sex to sell their product, much like the commercials seen on regular broadcast television. They were originally aired right after the sponsor's commercial breaks to blend in and shock viewers. This is where Foltyn's corpse porn element surfaces: the coupling of the death industry with the idea of sexiness adds shock value, keeping the audience hooked, and simultaneously reinforcing the taboo surrounding sexy death.

## The Funeral Coach

The first commercial features a hearse; the narrator is female, speaking in a slow and seductive tone, mirroring a regular vehicle commercial. The narrator's description tells the audience that the hearse is "sleek, sophisticated, seductive. The new Millennium Edition Crown Royal Funeral Coach: because your loved one deserves the very best in style and comfort" (Ball 2001). A slender woman in a black evening dress runs her hand along the hearse. The advertisement is set on a white background, a stark contrast to the black hearse, giving an ambiance of a heavenly glow, while operatic music is playing in the background.



Figure 2: Screenshot from Funeral Coach commercial (Ball 2001)

The first hearses were horse drawn wagons: flat bed wagons, enclosed wagons, or windowed wagons for viewing the casket.

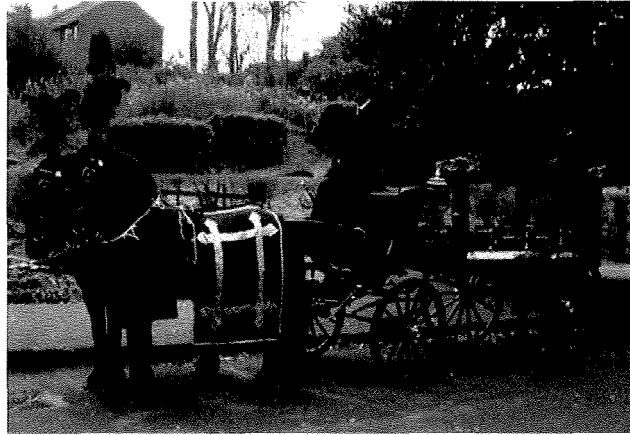


Figure 3: Horse Drawn Hearse (Caldecott & Sons Independent Funeral Directors 2008)

Motorized hearses only became popular in the 1920s, when automobiles became dignified enough for funeral services, however, the funeral industry knew of their value before this because of the efficiency factor; more funerals could be executed in less time. In 1938, the first Victoria Style hearse became available on the market, featuring S shaped iron decorations on the sides inspired by the irons used to lower the tops on horse drawn carriages. These S iron decorations are still used today and act as a signifier of a hearse.



Figure 4: Cadillac Heritage Hearse (Federal Coach 2009)

Hearses today are still handcrafted; there is not enough of a demand to have an automated factory for manufacturing. Five coaches are made a day by modifying an existing car. A Cadillac or a Lincoln is sawed in half just behind the front door, and a new fibreglass shell is added, sealed, sanded and painted. The electrical system is replaced by hand, and the interior is finished with a bed and rollers for easy casket removal.



Figure 5: Hearse Rear View (Federal Coach 2009)

The interior design of the hearse has not been changed in more than fifty years. A new coach costs approximately \$60,225 retail (Lampton 2009). The image associated with the hearse is one of class and sophistication, richness and extravagance, of Lincolns and Cadillacs. Because this is the first encounter with the mock commercials in the episode, this link between sex and death in the pairing of voluptuous wealth and carriage of the dead elicits a response of shock and confusion by the breaking of the norms of mourning and adding sex appeal to a vehicle that usually elicits thoughts of mortality and death.

### **Living Splendor: Embalming Fluid**

The second commercial advertisement highlighted in *Six Feet Under* features embalming fluid. In this spot, a deep seductive - and this time - male voice is paired with

sexy instrumental music while the camera pans up the body of a well built, boxer short-clad man lying on a lounge chair. The narrator here reads the line: “for a body that’s firm, but flexible. For skin that begs to be touched. For the velvety appearance of actual living tissue. Top morticians rely on Living Splendor; only real life is better.”



Figure 6: Screenshot from Living Splendor commercial (Ball 2001)

The use of this product, and the process of embalming, is thoroughly discussed by Mary Roach in her book *Stiff: The Curious Lives of Human Cadavers*. First, the body is cleaned and groomed, the mouth and eyes are disinfected using cotton swabs and rinsed with water. If male, they are very carefully shaved: they shave the deceased with shaving cream and disposable razors. Each razor is used only once; nicks in the skin will not heal and so the razor must be sharp. The nose hair is trimmed, and the nose is disinfected with cotton swabs as well. Once the body is cleaned, the facial features need to be set: cotton fills out the eye cavities with a small plastic lens on top. This lens has sharp spikes over the convex side to keep the eyelids closed. The mouth is also posed using a heavy duty needle and thread behind the teeth to keep the jaw closed. Once the body is prepared, a liquid preservative tinted with dye is pumped through the circulatory

system with a vacuum pump. This fluid is known as embalming fluid and is known to delay decay. It rehydrates tissues, fills out sunken skin, and recolours the face and body. The final step is to suture any orifices to prevent leaking of the preservative (Roach 2003: 74-81).

The use of embalming started in the American Civil war when the soldiers needed to be sent back for burial; the bodies would start to rot and smell on their journey home. Thomas Hobbes, the father of embalming, came up with a mix of chemicals to preserve the bodies of soldiers. He embalmed a heavily decorated soldier as well as Abe Lincoln; both of whom were paraded back to their home towns. These tours became “promotional tours” for embalming. “Holmes sold his patented embalming fluid, *Innominata*, to embalmers but distanced himself from the mortuary trade, but he kept trophies of his handiwork: he kept embalmed bodies in the closets and heads on tables” (Mitford 1998: 79). He spent his final days in and out of mental institutions and requested he not be embalmed when he died.

Now, embalming is strongly suggested to most customers of a funeral home, helping to preserve the memory picture. Because the fluid replaces blood in colouring the skin, it reinvigorates the deceased and creates the illusion of sleep. Regular embalming only lasts long enough for the funeral service, then decomposition sets in. Other places use extra fluid, which can preserve a cadaver for years but “they take on a kind of pickled horror-movie appearance” (Roach 2003: 81). Even if a cadaver is preserved for years, if they come in contact with water, the chemical processes that preserve the deceased will be reversed and decomposition will commence immediately.



In this second commercial, the deceased man on the lounge is being depicted as a sex object. This depiction, coupled with the heavenly atmosphere created by the slow moving cameras, music and stark white hazy background, creates a seductive image for the audience, luring us in until the full corpse is displayed and the comprehension of the product's nature sets in. Once again, because of the link embalming fluid has to the horror of mortality, the sexiness of the advertisement elicits shock once it is introduced, and the realization sets in that the handsome and inviting male figure is deceased; this kind of erotic fascination creates internal conflict for the viewer, playing on the social restriction on attraction to corpses.

### **Restorative Arts**

Another tool of the mortician, wound filler, a putty-like substance that is used to fill surface wounds, is featured in the third commercial. The music here is old fashioned and upbeat, reminiscent of the 1920s, as is the characters' clothing. A makeup artist is pictured working on a woman who is sitting in a salon chair. When the chair is turned, it is revealed that the woman is dead, but made up.



Figure 7: Screenshot of Wound Filler Commercial (Ball 2001)

Again, the seductive female voice is used to state: “she looked her best every day of her life. Don’t let one horribly disfiguring accident change that. Use new wound filler cosmetic moulding putty. Now faster setting and self-sealing to help make masking unsightly wounds a breeze.” At the end of this speech, the camera pans out to a tower of wound filler containers on a table.

There actually is a wound filler product that is used in mortuary science: it is called mortician’s wax, and it is moulded to fill imperfections on the corpse. It is most often used after fatal accidents and brutal deaths for reconstructive work. This acts as a type of “death mask” (Tseelon 1995: 114). Makeup is used to cover the waxes; often airbrushing is used as powder and liquid makeup cannot be absorbed into dead tissue. Mitford describes a system by Dinair that is popular in professional makeup. According to Mitford “a survey showed that 75% of mortuary customers are unhappy with the appearance of the deceased” (1998: 10), as they are seen as unattractive and lifeless. Dinair claims to help with this issue. On their website, they equate makeup with art, as Tseelon does: “death was transformed into an illusion of art. It began to hide under a mask of beauty” (1995: 105) Dinair also maintains that airbrushing can give more natural details, again aiding with the image left with mourners.

Here, the hegemonic obsession with the appearance of the dead is shown, promoting a product to stop the progress of decay and avoid the gruesome idea of death and rotting; creating an attractive façade for the final blemish-free memory picture. The taboo of death is reinforced once again: the decay is rejected in favour of a more attractive option.

## Shake Shake Shake

The fourth and final ad spot features an “earth dispenser” that resembles a salt shaker designed for the family to sprinkle dirt on the casket while avoiding getting their hands dirty. The commercial consists of six dancers, clad in khaki shorts, pants and skirts, with grey t-shirts and sneakers, each holding a dirt shaker.



Figure 8: Screenshot of Earth Dispenser commercial (Ball 2001)

The background music is “Shake Shake Shake” by KC and the Sunshine Band, and the dancers jump around shaking the dirt out of the container. The excited announcer says “Ashes to ashes and dust to dust is easy as pie with Franklin’s new leak-proof earth dispenser. Say goodbye to soiled fingers forever. Only from Franklin Funeral Supplies: We put the fun back into funeral.” Setting aside the excited dancers shaking dirt from dispensers, the last line is arguably the most eye-opening comment in this commercial. Putting fun into a funeral is the opposite of our social views of death and mourning and so this commercial, saved for last, is the most shocking of all; and it accomplishes this with a less-overt eroticism and a more specific turn of phrase, to the incongruous beat of a disco tune.

The earth dispenser idea in this commercial actually exists, according to Mitford. “The Gordon Earth Dispenser is of nickel-plated brass construction. It is not only ‘attractive to the eye and long wearing;’ it is also ‘one of the ‘tools’ for building better public relations’ if presented as ‘an appropriate non-commercial gift’ to the clergy. It is shaped something like a salt shaker” (Mitford 1998: 51). This only shows that the creators of *Six Feet Under* had read their Mitford.

The tradition of throwing of dirt or flowers onto the casket of a deceased loved one has a few common meanings; however, they are rarely documented. The beliefs are perhaps Biblical in origin: “for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return” (Genesis 3:19), with the throwing of dirt being symbolic of the return to the earth; to believing that it is closure for the grieving loved ones; it means the person is dead, and the survivors can come to terms with it and that the healing process can begin. There is even a belief that the burial with family present will help prevent the grave from being robbed (Silverman 2003 (b): Wake).

According to Alan D. Wolfelt, the dirt throwing tradition and other experiences associated with funerals are designed to create an escapist reality: taking them out of the mournful reality, creating a new reality through actions, and aiding in the healing process.

The escapist realm... immerses customers in a totally different reality ... Escapist experiences actively involve customers; people come to "do" in the escapist realm. The escapist realm would ask: What can bereaved families and friends "do" at the visitation or funeral to further immerse themselves in the experience? When you sit down with families and actively engage them in arranging the

funeral, you are creating an escapist experience. When family members and friends participate in the service by giving readings, playing music, sharing memories and lighting candles, they are in escapist realm territory. When funeral guests not only sign the guestbook but are asked to write down a specific memory of the person who died, they are venturing into the escapist realm. When people lay flowers or throw dirt atop the casket at the close of the committal service, they are in the escapist realm of experience. Anything you as a funeral director can do to present families with "escapist" options - never forcing them but encouraging them to take advantage of these healing activities - helps create an exceptional funeral Experience (2007).

There is an element of the carnival that can be seen here as well: the mourning period is turned on its head from a depressing, passive and solitary state to more upbeat, social and filled with actions, moulding to the grotesque form of carnival. Although it is not mocking the state of mourning, escaping the dreary mood of death aids in healing, as escaping the tyranny of social rules with carnivalistic inversion aids in coping with reality.

*Six Feet Under* also shows characters copulating in spaces that house death; places that are considered inappropriate for anything but death in and around the funeral home: Claire and her boyfriend are shown post-coitus in the back of her lime green hearse in episode 2 of the first season, and his mother walks in on Nate performing cunnilingus on Brenda in the Viewing Room of the funeral home in the fourth episode.

All of these depictions use corpses or materials that are linked with death and add an element of sex to them, whether it is in the sexiness of the announcer or the camera angles. When watching them, the commercials elicit an awkward feeling of

unease and inappropriateness. Because the coupling of death and sex is taboo, when confronted with these examples of corpse pornography, viewers are intrigued, but simultaneously recoil. Social sanctions state that any sexual attraction to death is morally wrong, and these forms of media work to reinforce the taboos by emphasizing the uncomfortable feelings that are associated with taboo breaking.

### **Undead Pornography**

*Six Feet Under* is not the only media to use the shock value of corpse porn. Author David Flint outlines a niche market of pornography for those that love the undead in *Zombie Holocaust: How the Living Dead Devoured Pop Culture*. He describes multiple titles that couple the grotesque with sex scenes that often do not end well for the living partner, including *Grub Girl* (Moorehead 2005), where a girl is killed by radioactive fallout and then is “quite literally fucked back to life by a couple of morgue attendants.” She then resumes her career as a prostitute and founds a brothel for “dead girls and their admirers” (Flint 2009: 192). Another title is *Porn of the Dead* (Rotten 2006), which is described by Flint as “a straight forward, if somewhat grungy, porn flick... only two scenes mix gore and sex – the opening, where a zombie blow-job ends with a graphic fellatio/castration scene that is outrageously tasteless, and the finale, which features a zombie disembowelling her partner after exploring a comprehensive gamut of sexual positions” (ibid: 193). A third pornography film described by Flint is *Night of the Giving Head* (Moore 2008), where a virgin college student is conned into drinking a glass of semen by her roommates, only to turn into a “sperm zombie”: instead of obsessing about brains like most zombies, she obsesses about penises (ibid:194).

A second type of corpse pornography film that Flint outlines encompasses strippers fighting zombies. In *Planet Terror* (Rodriguez 2007), an exotic dancer saves the survivors of an infection turning people into zombies (Flint 2009:200-201) while in *Zombies! Zombies! Zombies!* (Murphy 2008), strippers fight off local junkie prostitutes turned zombies from bad drugs (ibid: 205). There is also *Zombie Strippers* (Lee 2008), where a zombie bites the feature dancer in a club, and, “surprisingly, her undead state seems to excite the clientele and soon the other girls at the club are lining up to be zombified” (ibid: 204).

While it seems that the subject matter of these pornographic films is comical, not all representations are amusing; many are graphic and violent and appeal to viewers with both a morbid sense of humour and a general attraction to violence. These videos are meant for a niche market; one that is interested in breaking the taboo on morbid sexuality. These films transgress the taboo to provide an outlet: zombies do not exist outside of the media space, and they are characterized as gruesome and disgusting; personifying death. Sexual acts with these personifications transgress the taboo in a safe space and, in doing so, disgust viewers and reinforce the taboo’s existence. The zombie has made inroads into the mainstream, and has reached into a college demographic, infecting undergraduate reading lists and social rituals on campus and elsewhere.

### **What is Crossing the Line?**

There are multiple websites devoted to viewing death as art, such as Beautiful Agony, Attractive Corpse, and See Me Rot, as well as artists who dabble in death, like Gunther von Hagens, all of which are considered to be voyeurs of corpse pornography.

These sites, including von Hagens', garner much controversy in their transgressions of coupling death and sex, more so than popular cinema or television would, because they sit on the line between an accepted media space (an accessible medium, recognizable genre, circulating, archivable product) and the space outside of it. Once the transgressions move outside, or even close to the edge of the media space, the repercussions for transgression increase in severity.

### **Beautiful Agony**

The French word for orgasm is *la petite mort* which literally translates to “the little death.” This is so named for the look of agony that accompanies orgasm (Foltyn 2008: 165). One website, Beautiful Agony, uses this idea to showcase video files of people in the midst of orgasm, promoting voyeurism and pornography as art. Because the videos are user submitted, this can be considered a form of amateur pornography; the voyeuristic nature of watching a stranger’s face as they climax seems to be taboo in nature. Even the “About” section of the website states “make your ears blush by putting on your headphones and turning the sound to eleven” (BeautifulAgony.com 2011: About), reinforcing that viewing this type of video may be forbidden.

Orgasm is an automatic reflex beginning in the sacral nerve route along the spinal nerve (Roach 2009). This reflex can be triggered in beating heart cadavers, corpses kept alive by machines for organ harvesting, as long as the nerve is oxygenated; although, Roach points out that “it wouldn’t be as much fun for the person, but it’d still be an orgasm!” (ibid). In her TED Talk on orgasms, Roach generates awkward laughs from the audience with this comment; uncomfortable giggling about making a cadaver climax. However, the idea of sex with a corpse is not a new one:



according to Michel Ragon, “in the eighteenth century the macabre became erotic. Love stories between the living and the dead were an attraction, and Sade [even] went so far as to describe sexual intercourse with the dead” (1983: 142).

Beautiful Agony’s website is described as being “dedicated to the beauty of human orgasm” and features videos of users from the neck up in the throes of passion. Often, the faces made are ones of pain and agony, as orgasm often contorts the face. Once finished, however, the faces calm and most gather looks of contentment. This can be related to death: “the mask of pain is replaced by a mask of serenity. Eyes closed, hands joined, the corpse simulates sleep” (Ragon 1983:148). Here post-coital bliss is post-living repose. Beautiful Agony can be considered corpse porn because of the orgasm’s link to death; some people describe it as crossing over, and some, like Bataille, consider eroticism as close as one can come to death; “the individual must be threatened with their own dissolution” (Hegarty 2000: 106). Here, users are contributing to a space created expressly for voyeurs, allowing for strangers to watch them at their most vulnerable; a website that allows for peeping-Tom behaviour in the space it creates.

### **Leaving an Attractive Corpse**

“A well-considered suicide is not a sloppy, repellent affair, but a piece of performance art, a tribute to what was and what could have been,” according to AttractiveCorpse.com; a website devoted to helping “truly suicidal” clients leave an attractive corpse. Their mission statement is:

If you are seriously, sincerely suicidal and want to make a good impression on your way to a better place, Attractive Corpse can help make your final wish a reality. We offer our clients a full range of services -- from method, location, and fashion consultation to suicide note editing and final-state photography -- and guarantee that your suicide will be an event that nobody will easily forget (2010).

Their services include helping with location scouting, note editing and scheduling the client's suicide. They even offer low-income assistance and a 20% discount for double Romeo and Juliet-like suicides. Their contact information is only available through local suicide prevention hotlines because of previous experiences with hate mail and joke contacts, and they state that they are only contacted when the hotline representatives have thoroughly screened the caller. Almost 80% of "potential clients" do not make it through the in-house screening process (Attractivecorpse.com 2010: FAQ). One of their main contentions is that "you do not need to be beautiful in order to be a beautiful suicide. We will make you so," (ibid: Contact). With the emphasis on artistic flair and beauty of the act of suicide, they add an element of sexiness to death, although it would never be openly labelled as such.

The morbid voyeuristic nature of the business draws shock and feelings of disturbance from those who visit the site. The concept of staging a suicide to be attractive to people, as well as the emphasis on the beauty of death, is seen here as a transgression of the taboo in an inappropriate space: this event is set outside of the medium, although the transaction begins in it. We see the ramifications of this transgression in the backlash of hate mail and prank calls the business has garnered, as well as the disgust one feels when contemplating the subject.

## See (Them) Rot

SeeMeRot.com is a website that claims it is devoted to setting up and streaming live webcams in caskets called “corpse cams.” The image on the main page of the site shows the face and shoulders of what appears to be a woman in her early 40s, sleeping. The image is narrow and poorly lit, refreshes every tenth of a second, and is designed to show the decomposition of the body for the audience, who may be friends, family members or strangers, to watch live. The header line for the website is “being dead and buried doesn’t mean you can’t have friends over!” (Seemerot.com 2010).



Figure 9: Screenshot of Seemerot.com Coffin Cam (seemerot.com 2010)

The premise of the site is to allow friends and family to view their deceased loved one lying in their casket. However, the site is publicly accessible, and offers no members only area, so it is assumed that any cameras would be streamed through the main site.

Although the website was discovered in early 2009, the picture in the “live coffin cam” appears the same presently; a pretty brunette in a blue button-up shirt. We know from Roach and her introduction to embalming that the process does not last more than a week, and so this image cannot be of an actual corpse. It can be assumed from this that the site is a hoax. It is interesting to note that the ads that support the website

feature other pornographic websites, one featuring men and another featuring women, once again pairing sex and a fascination with viewing death.

There is, however, evidence of the backlash from, at the very least, the idea of a camera placed in a coffin. The text on the front page of the website references legal trouble in two different countries, as well as police seizure of the company's cameras. They also state that they have purchased land in the Philippines, securing rights to a burial ground to be able to set up their cameras. However, the location of this land is "undisclosed to protect the gravesite" (Seemerot.com 2010). It is not stated why the anonymity is necessary; one can only assume there would be contention from local authorities and citizens concerned about the peaceful sleep of their loved ones, as well as disrespect to the families involved, considering the lack of anonymity and the focus on voyeurism.

### **The Cycle of Life**

In another controversial exhibition, "The Cycle of Life" in Belgium, von Hagens, also discussed in the first chapter, has garnered much criticism for three exhibits: three plastinated couples posed in sex acts have been banned from the exhibit. The controversy is about the desecration of the subjects' bodies, who, according to von Hagens, gave permission to be posed in a sexual position.

These poses have their own cultural history of sorts. Alex Comfort's *The Joy of Sex: A Gourmet Guide to Lovemaking* outlines the poses chosen by von Hagens: the first is called Chinese Style with the woman sitting on top of her partner facing the opposite direction (1986: 174).

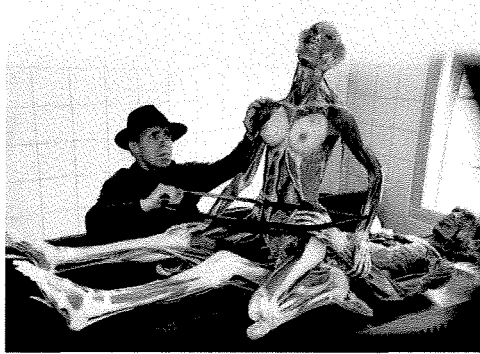


Figure 10: von Hagens dismantling an exhibit (von Hagens 2010)

The second is described as a standing position, with the male holding the female up, nuzzled together, him on her breast.



Figure 11: An Embrace (von Hagens 2010)

The third is called a full frontal position, with the woman lying on top of the male, kissing (ibid: 121).

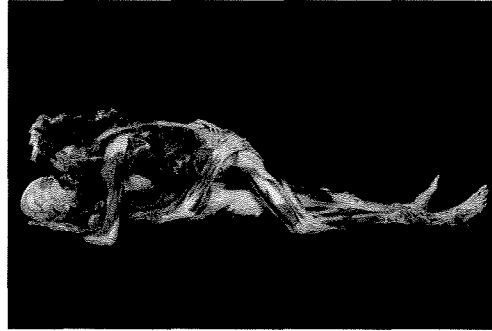


Figure 12: Full frontal position (DPA 2009)

It is interesting to note that the “Missionary Position,” where the male is on top of the female, is outlined by Comfort as one of the basic positions of sex, but was not chosen to be represented in the exhibit (ibid: 136). Because the exhibit has been deemed inappropriate, the third pose was shown in photograph format only at the exhibit, and the first was dismantled to show only the sex organs.

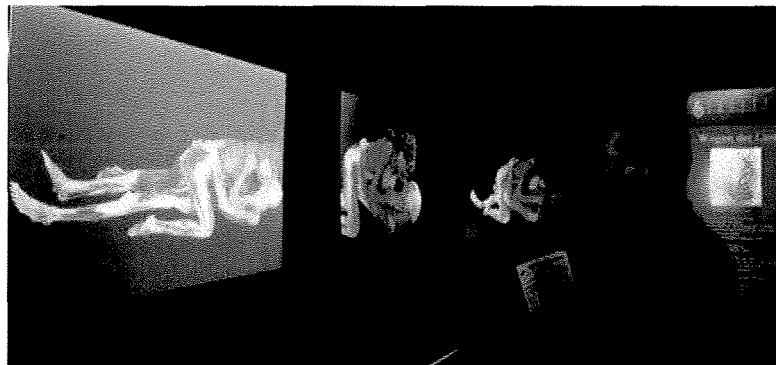


Figure 13: Slides of the full frontal position (DPA 2009)

The plastinates pictured in Figure 10 are being dismantled because a Berlin court deemed the display was inappropriate and offensive. Von Hagens stated that the facial expressions of the figures were what the court took issue with, and thus decided to

display only the functioning sexual organs in his exhibit. Der Spiegel Online International reports that:

The coupling of death with sex made sense from both a thematic and biological standpoint, Body Worlds founder Gunther von Hagens said. 'Death and sex are both taboo topics. I'm bringing them together. Death belongs to life, and without sex no life would exist!' ... The unorthodox anatomist rebuffed criticism that the risqué pose of the two new figures amounts to desecration of the corpses, telling the newspaper that two-thirds of the male donors and one-third of the female donors agreed to the use of their bodies for the representation of sexual acts (J.C.M. 2009).

In fact, Body Worlds states that all of the exhibitions are made from donated bodies from people who signed release forms while they were alive and "agreed to have their bodies used for the purposes of educating the public" (ibid). They state that although the two figures that were posed together did not know each other in life, both signed release forms and agreed to the use of their bodies for sexual posing. The Body Worlds spokespeople are adamant that "the display 'teaches the visitors more than any biology class, revolutionizing the study of anatomy. It has nothing to do with pornography and isn't intended to be sexually stimulating!'" (ibid).

However, Stefan Hirschauer counters in "Animated Corpses: Communicating with Post Mortals in an Anatomical Exhibition," stating that "plastinates are also marked by elements of popular culture. Here we have to do with corpses whose mode of appearance does not break the rules: plastinates know how to behave themselves. They are styled according to popular aesthetics of living bodies. They look 'younger than ever',

without wrinkled skin and without the fat that gets deposited with age, like after an extreme makeover” (Hirschauer 2006: 38). It is the people who are posing them that are at risk of breaking social norms.

With the emphasis that is placed on sexualizing corpses in popular culture, and because what is presented is exactly that, corpses posed as having intercourse, both the exhibitor and viewer are mutually implicated in the transgression: “The visitor’s curiosity at the morbid spectacle was recoded as the exhibitor’s necrophilia; the voyeur gaze of the one was blamed on the ‘exhibitionism’ of the other and so on” (Hirschauer 2006: 26). While the intentions of the exhibit may be scientific, the idea of a sexualized corpse remains taboo outside of media space and so the controversy garnered over an exhibit of this nature is significant.

## **Conclusion**

Jacque Lynn Foltyn argues that the corpse has become popular culture’s newest porn star; useless, lifeless bodies have become useful in selling crime and forensic dramas. Although the sight of corpses still elicits shock from viewers, death is portrayed with many of the same attributes as beauty, and so the dead have been portrayed as sexy for a long time (Foltyn 2008: 165). Death has become the centre of attention, and so the taboo of coupling death and sex is broken frequently, making the viewer conscious of the repercussions of transgression outside the media haven.

Sexualizing the corpse and focussing media attention on it creates a space where taboo violation may be explored, partially because of the simulation created; the spectacularization and sexualization of death emphasises the fantastical, or illusory,



quality of entertainment media. Repercussions loom when taboos are transgressed, however, both in the media space haven and outside of it. This is seen through media examples such as in the commercials and scenes throughout *Six Feet Under* (Ball 2001): because of the graphic nature of the series, it was only available on HBO with censor's warnings for explicit content shown after every commercial break. The series would have had to undergo massive editing to be aired on any other network because of its transgressive nature. Pornography focussed on the undead is also an example of sexualizing the corpse. Both of these examples create a space for the fantasy of taboo violation, creating both excitement and horror. It is the horror that keeps the taboo intact: the fear of social repercussions denies transgression outside of the media space.

Websites such as Beautiful Agony, AttractiveCorpse.com and SeeMeRot.com push the boundaries of the media haven; the owners of these websites have all been targets of hate mail and ostracism, acting as a warning to future transgressors. Lastly, von Hagens' controversial exhibits have made him a spectacle, a real-life example, of the consequences of taboo violation: the victim of social ridicule, libel and ostracism within the medical community.

## Chapter 3

### Necrophilia: A Case Study

Putting the rot in erotic (Sikipedia)

Hucker's definition of necrophilia, a sexual attraction to dead bodies, has been discussed previously (Hucker 2006: Necrophilia), along with Krafft-Ebing's label of it as a horrible mental disorder with social and legal consequences (1892: 430); it will now be considered as a case study of taboo transgression through the use of both the previously discussed theories of carnivalization and corpse pornography.

John Troyer examined necrophilia laws in the United States in "Abuse of a Corpse: A Brief History and Re-theorization of Necrophilia Laws in the USA," and found that:

Many US states have no laws that specifically outlaw necrophilia. Further, the state laws that do exist are sometimes extremely vague in their wording and can be easily circumvented by legal counsel. In addition, the states that actually possess necrophilia laws vary widely as to how sexual acts with dead bodies are defined and what kind of penalty should be administered for committing necrophilic acts (2008: 133-134).

Penalties range from a fine and less than one year in prison in Minnesota to life imprisonment in Nevada (ibid: 141). Troyer also states that four states define the word necrophilia in their statutes, while nine other states fail to address necrophilia completely (ibid: 135).

Troyer discusses how “the ambiguous juridical standing of the human corpse in necrophilia compounds the sexual monstrousness of the necrophiliac and of necrophilic acts” (2008: 134). But it is not only the necrophile that is labelled as a monster; the corpse that is violated is also exhibiting “legal defiance” (ibid: 146) because the dead body “exists outside the absolute control of human law... what little can be done involves turning the corpse into property, disposing of the corpse, and/or waiting for the legal problems to go away” (ibid). From our earlier discussion of Baudrillard’s idea of a dead ghetto, we know that many western cultures try to avoid death and remove it (1976: 126), and so the invoking of ambiguous laws that paint both parties in a monstrous light seems a logical step.

Under the Canadian Criminal Code, the desecration of a corpse is subject to no more than five years imprisonment. Necrophilia is left undefined in the Code and so labelling and enforcement of indiscretions is left up to law enforcement. These offences actually fall into the Nuisances section of the fifth part of the Criminal Code: Sexual Offences, Public Morals and Disorderly Conduct. It states that:

Everyone who:

(a) neglects, without lawful excuse, to perform any duty that is imposed on him by law or that he undertakes with reference to the burial of a dead human body or human remains, or

(b) Improperly or indecently interferes with or offers any indignity to a dead human body or human remains, whether buried or not,

Is guilty of an indictable offence and liable to imprisonment for a term not exceeding five years (R.S., c. C-34, s. 178).

The fact that the acts of indecency towards a corpse are not described or defined is telling in that there is common knowledge or a social proscription of how to appropriately interact with the dead. This statement is tucked into the back of the Code; the last schedule in Part Five, and is noted along with other common aggravations such as endangering the safety or health of others, or impeding others' rights. These are laws that are based on common knowledge; they seem to be at the end of the Code because it is assumed they are common sense rules; obvious and simple to follow, and have grave social consequences, which are often more extreme outside of the law, attached to transgression.

### **Necrophilia: The Taboo as an Absurdity**

Necrophilia is a prime example of how media are used as an outlet for people to experience taboo actions. This example also works to show how media reinforce the social consequences attached to transgression. The ultimate in corpse pornography, necrophilia is at the top of the taboo list, level pegging with incest. Although it seems as though there is not much media attention paid to necrophilia, or that it may only be available in particular niche markets, the references are actually distributed around many different media avenues. For example, necrophilia jokes can be found in any number of popular online comic strips, such as *Least I Could Do* by Ryan Sohmer and Lar DeSousa. This strip rationalizes necrophilia:



Figure 1: "Going (Six Feet) Down" (Sohmer and DeSousa 2009)

We see the two characters joking about it, but when Rayne begins digging, the other man baulks and is mortified, claiming not to have known what necrophilia was. Another instance is strip 772 of online comic *Questionable Content* by Jeph Jacques, where the desecration of corpses in a morgue is discussed in the dialogue, following along the same comedic line:

*Marten*: Gah! I can feel your hands through my hoodie! They're freezing! I've fucked corpses warmer than you!

*Dora*: Finally, the truth about why you were fired from the morgue comes out!

*Marten*: Actually, I was fired from the morgue for juggling heads. Specifically, for juggling heads badly and making a mess on the floor.

*Dora*: So do you prefer your ladies rigid and rigor-mortisy, or do you like 'em floppy and limp?

*Marten*: I'll pretty much take whatever I can get. And who said anything about LADIES?

*Dora*: I love a man who can take a good corpse-desecration joke and run with it.

*Marten*: It's a lot easier than taking a desecrated corpse and running with it. Those things are heavy!

Here, Jacques uses the grotesque to create laughs through a dialogue so absurd that most people would not consider it appropriate or even humorous (even though it obeys a typical joke structure with a punch line). Another example is from *Courting Disaster* by Brad Guiger:



Figure 2: *Courting Disaster* (Guiger 2008)

The comedy here is the allusion to necrophilia, as her boyfriend compares her to the corpses he copulates with. All of these examples elicit shock because the characters so flippantly discuss such a taboo topic; they break the silence surrounding necrophilia but continue to reinforce the taboo around the actions, implying that even the mere thought of transgressing it is absurd, disgusting and dangerous. When it comes to consuming the comic medium, it is more difficult to be considered a participant rather than an onlooker but in these examples, the humour aspect works to create a conspiracy around

transgression: the grotesque humour acts as an inside-joke, ultimately involving the reader in the transgression.

To explain the idea of the inside-joke, I call upon Freud: he states that for “smut” to be tolerated, it must become a joke (1960: 100). In order create a joke, it is necessary for there to be at least two participants: “we are compelled to tell our joke to someone else *because* we are unable to laugh at it ourselves” (ibid: 155) (emphasis in original). According to Freud’s *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, the first person involved in a joke is the creator; this person cannot laugh at it until they have reassurance that it is indeed funny. The second person is the subject of the joke, the punch line, although this can also be a personified object instead of a person. The third person, the listener, has the responsibility of deciding if the joke is appropriate to the situation or funny at all. This person gives the reassurance necessary to the joke teller. The first person and the third person are fundamental roles that work together for the creation of a joke from smut; the second person (or object) needs only be there when the joke is defamatory (ibid: 144). Freud states that “no one can be content with having made a joke for himself alone. An urge to tell the joke to someone is inextricably bound up with the joke-work; indeed, this urge is so strong that often enough it is carried through in disregard of serious misgivings” (ibid: 143), thus, jokes are highly social and participatory. This is where we see the element of conspiracy; the joke teller and the joke listener both ignore the possible consequences of transgression while engaging in this social activity, especially in the case of the defamatory joke: they both ignore the possible social rejection of the joke-teller as well as the possible offence to the joke-listener in anticipation of the pleasure of laughter. In rejecting the possible

consequences, the two participants enter into a form of conspiracy which is often secretive and exclusionary, as jokes often are; especially those inside-jokes.

Freud's joke theory can be applied to the comic examples listed above. The first person role is assumed by the writer of the comic strip, the creator of the joke. The second person role is taken by the act of necrophilia; this is the object of the joke. The third person role is assumed by the audience; the readers of the strip who ultimately decide the level of humour associated with the joke. Within each of the comic strips described above, the element of conspiracy between the audience and the writer of the strip can be found: it is a secretive knowledge, an inside-joke that only those who read the strip are privy to.

Freud states that "the repressive activity of civilization brings it about that primary possibilities of enjoyment, which have now, however, been repudiated by the censorship in us, are lost to us... we find that tendentious jokes provide a means of undoing the renunciation and retrieving what was lost" (1960: 101). In this way, jokes create a safe space for taboo transgression; by breaking the censor and opening up a safe space, where the listener is aware of the joking nature of the teller, we see the grotesque form of the carnival at work, celebrating what is normally considered ugly. We can also see the illusory quality that is so necessary in entertainment media: the realization that a statement is a joke points to a falsity of that statement, and thus allows for the transgression.

In a similar vein as the above comic strips, but with greater latitude, *Girls and Corpses Magazine*, which is currently edited by Robert Steven Rhine, is a comedic magazine that combines attractive women dressed in lingerie with grotesque corpses in



photographs and articles. They describe themselves as “sort of like *Maxim Magazine* meets *Dawn of the Dead*. There are pictures in each issue of beautiful, scantily clad young beauties posing with hideous, decaying, festering corpses. Also, we have interviews, comic book art, music and movie reviews and other mayhem. What could be better?” (Rhine 2010: About). The cover of issue 7 (pictured below), also known as the “Rot and Roll” issue, depicts two young women dressed in red crop tops, short skirts and fishnet stockings posing with guitars and a corpse dressed to resemble Slash, the Guns N’ Roses guitarist. This is a prime example of corpse porn; the shock value here is that the image of the sex object that the young ladies represent is being ‘coupled’ with the gruesome image of a rotting corpse; as I have shown above with von Hagens, this ‘coupling’ can take extremely literal forms. The magazine breaks the taboos of necrophilia by pairing such images with dark-comedy articles and horror movie reviews, creating a space where the gruesomely erotic can be enjoyed. The magazine embraces and plays with what is taboo, with many celebrity reviews posted on the home page: Jörg Buttgerit (director of *Nekromantik*, a German film about necrophilia) comments that “the corpses are naked and the girls have to wear bikinis! What’s wrong with you guys?” while Jimmy Kimmel states that the content is “pretty horrifying stuff,” and that Rhine “... [has] a sick mind” (ibid).

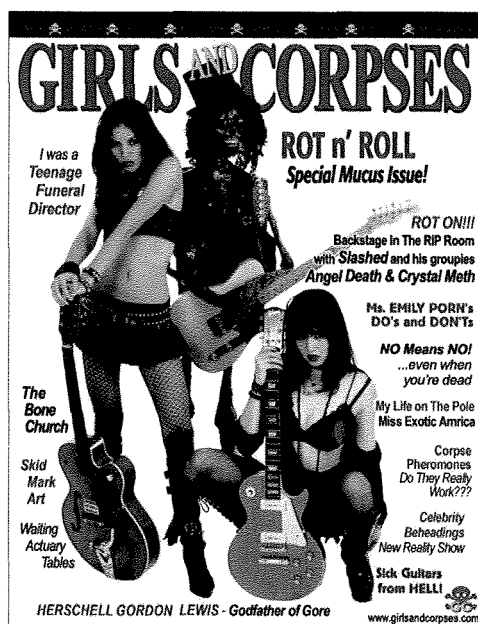


Figure 3: *Girls and Corpses Magazine* (Rhine 2010)

There seem to be different methods of displaying necrophilic relationships within humour, but representations of necrophilia tend toward a sexist view; the hegemonic idea of necrophilia is a male desecrating the body of a deceased woman, creating a dominantly heterosexual relationship. An example of this is in the *Least I Could Do* strip: the dialogue is between two men, with the proposed necrophile as a male, and his victim as a female. In the third strip, *Courting Disaster*, the dialogue is between two women, but again, the necrophile is a man with female victims. The second comic presented, however, breaks this normative role of the heterosexual male necrophile: in the *Questionable Content* strip, the dialogue is between a male and a female, and again, the necrophile is the male. However, this time either sex could be a victim. Here, the transgressiveness is two-fold: the character is not only practicing necrophilia, but he is rejecting normative sexist ideals by being open to victims of any gender. Even the *Girls and Corpses Magazine* cover, although the deceased is male while the women are alive, subscribes to a sexist version of necrophilia first by coupling a male with females, but

also in objectifying the women: they are clad in skimpy outfits to be ogled by male dominated audiences. Perhaps it is partially due to this sexism that allows the taboo transgression to take place in these comic strips: the element of sexism follows hegemonic ideals and works to limit the number of taboos being broken in one setting. For example, as homosexuality can still be considered taboo (we can see this in current issues around obtaining the right to same-sex marriage in North America), if coupled with necrophilia, the transgressions may over step the boundaries of the safe space. This safe space of entertainment media may have a limit to how many taboos can be transgressed before real-life consequences become applicable. This hegemonic heterosexual representation will continue to be seen throughout the examples of necrophilia throughout this chapter as well.

There are a number of websites devoted to jokes about necrophilia and other social deviances that also subscribe to sexist representations. For example, Sickipedia.com is a collection of user-submitted jokes about different topics ranging from celebrities to sex. There are numerous jokes in the Necrophilia category which include, but are not limited to: “Necrophilia: I dig it,” “My old man once said ‘without love, breath is just a clock ticking.’ Mind you he also said without breath, love is just Necrophilia,” “I prefer girls who are down to earth,” and “Knife then fork. That’s how Necrophilia is done.” There are also jokes posted that are used frequently in other media: “Necrophilia: cracking open a cold one,” “puts the fun into funeral!” and “what is the definition of disappointment? A necrophile finding someone buried alive.” When a member of an audience hears these jokes, many assume that the necrophile is a male, while the deceased is a female because of the gendered language used, assuming, also, that the necrophile’s relationship is heterosexual to avoid more taboo transgressions.

Television, as discussed earlier with *Six Feet Under* and *Dead Like Me*, also refers to necrophilia, although it is usually in passing. This applies even to shows in prime time slots. For instance, one *Two and a Half Men* episode is titled “Kinda Like Necrophilia,” and is about a woman who is unresponsive, or cold, in bed, which Charlie, the main character, likens to necrophilia (Wass 2007). *Criminal Minds*, a popular crime drama, had an episode devoted to catching a necrophile called “Cold Comfort.” The title plays on the popular joke of necrophilia as “cracking open a cold one,” which is, similarly, a line used in the episode (Foerster 2008). In *CSI: New York*, a detective and a coroner have this conversation:

*Dr. Sid Hammerback:* Sorry for the delay, QT and I were necking.

*Detective Stella Bonasera:* Come again?

*Dr. Sid Hammerback:* Necking... looking at his neck.

*Detective Stella Bonasera:* [makes sound of understanding and slight relief]

*Dr. Sid Hammerback:* You don't think I would kiss a corpse, do you?

*Detective Stella Bonasera:* No, no. Of course not.

*Dr. Sid Hammerback:* That's disgusting.

*Detective Stella Bonasera:* I agree.

*Dr. Sid Hammerback:* Long as we got that straight.

*Detective Stella Bonasera:* Sid, cause of death? (Bailey 2006).

After Dr. Hammerback realizes what he has said, he fumbles to explain himself, especially considering the nature of his career in a morgue and the common thought that many necrophiles have easy access to corpses. This is yet another example of humour being used to test a taboo: the jokes create an element of collusion between the

characters and the audience, while at the same time they make the audience recoil to reinforcement.

All of these comedic media use the grotesque to create comedy; infusing carnival culture with a cartoon medium. Although the carnival itself cannot be viewed, the trademark absurdity and the scoffing at societal laws fit in well with Bakhtin's descriptions of carnival culture: they poke fun at a society that denies death by sexualizing it in the space of the comic, while, at the same time, they reinforce the consequences of taboo transgression outside of entertainment media with the reactions elicited. Most comedic media also show, at least glimpses, of pornography; a voyeuristic approach to necrophilia that elicits awkward laughs and uncomfortable glances that work to keep the taboo in place. Here, again, the humour used in the different media involves the audience in the transgressive acts as a co-conspirator.

### **In The News**

There has been a recent instance of necrophilia in Thunder Bay; a man pleaded guilty to murdering his girlfriend, and having sex with her remains in January of 2010. According to local news sources, "Michael Shingabis, 31, pleaded guilty in Superior Court Friday morning to second-degree murder and indignity to a dead body. The charges were laid after the death of 37-year-old Sybil Stoney in January 2009" ("Shingabis pleads guilty," TBayNewsWatch 2010). The article explains Shingabis' actions:

The court heard that earlier in January of 2009, Shingabis and Stoney had argued. He began punching her in the head even though she told him to stop.

Stoney did not fight back. Shingabis then put a pillow over Stoney's face for more than 10 minutes like he remembered seeing someone do on a television program. For the next eight days Shingabis continued sleeping with Stoney's body, saying he would never leave her. Shingabis later performed sexual intercourse with the remains after visiting a website about the practice, the court heard (ibid).

He has since been sentenced to life in prison for the murder, and five years in prison for the indignity to human remains. He has been quoted as saying "I did something very bad," knowing that there would be serious social consequences to his actions (Labine 2010). The online-offline movement passes over the boundary of mediatic exploration into further criminal behaviour.

Some reactions from the public have been posted as comments to the articles, illustrating how the public actually views acts of necrophilia. For instance, one reader stated: "This disgusting pig needs to be sent away [and] never see the outside of a cell ever." Another shows shock with this statement: "[Oh my God], having intercourse with a corpse! ... This is a person in my opinion who should never see the light of day as a free man ever again." All of the readers tend to be more flabbergasted by the acts of necrophilia than by the murder itself, which is deemed to be the more serious crime in the Canadian Criminal Code. Another reader points this out: "You know it is rather sad that most of you appear more offended he had sex with the dead body rather than the murder of a young woman." Here, we see the taboo of necrophilia in full force, having more impact on social perceptions of the perpetrator than the charge of murder, and we experience the real consequences of breaking the taboo: ostracism, prison and appalled

reactions. This seems to be what Troyer was referring to when he states that “the law works to expel the necrophiliac monster since he or she exists within the living population and is potentially dangerous. Yet dangerous to whom, the question should be asked, since dead bodies will never be conscious of physical danger” (2008: 148).

A final comment speaks to the graphic nature of Shingabis' crime: “We don't need the graphic detail. The more people hear these things the more 'normalized' it becomes.” Reactions like this last comment depict how taboo the subject actually is and how readers of the report are committed to strongly upholding laws that punish it (“Shingabis pleads guilty,” TBayNewsWatch 2010: Comments Section). It is interesting to note here that while death can be sensationalized in entertainment media, it is frowned upon by audiences consuming news media. This news media space cannot be considered safe for transgression of the necrophilia taboo because it is based in reality; events that happen outside of the media do not have the obvious illusory quality to them that is so important for transgressive safe space, and are therefore judged for transgression.

### **From Monster to Mentally Unstable**

There seem to be three levels of representation of necrophiles in the media: one where the necrophile is a psychopath, another where they are either developmentally delayed or disturbed, and the last where they are slightly disturbed, but fully functioning. *Anatomy* (Ruzowitzky 2000) is an example of the psychopathic necrophile. In this horror film, the main character, Paula, is accepted to a prestigious anatomy program at a university in Germany, only to find upon her arrival that it is run by an anti-Hippocratic society of doctors who value research over human lives. The film is about her quest to

find the secret society and put an end to dissections of students and terminally ill patients. One student, Hein, who belongs to the society, is portrayed as a psychopath, killing his girlfriend in a jealous rage, along with the student she was with at the time. He also chases and tries to kill Paula. It is within this side story that the psychopathic depiction of necrophiles is focused.

Although Hein is always portrayed as strange, the moment defining him as a psychopath is when he finds his girlfriend, Gretchen, in the anatomy lab with another male student. He stabs the student and injects Gretchen with a chemical that plastinates the blood, similar to the process used by von Hagens (discussed in Chapter 1). When Gretchen is paralyzed, Hein runs his hands over her body and says “you beautiful, beautiful being. You see, from now on, you’ll be mine,” and follows it with a kiss. He proceeds to create an anatomical study out of Gretchen, exposing the muscles and arteries under her skin, and creating a mask out of her face. This depiction can be considered as a form of grotesque carnival, as Hein’s character celebrates the morbid murder of his former love interest, fetishizing the body. Paula finds this figure and is in hysterics while Hein discusses his experiment: “isn’t the human body fascinating? Such a clever design. Incredibly intelligent system, yet so breathtakingly beautiful. Isn’t that why you went into medicine? See how brilliant the colours are? And the flesh is fresh as if life were frozen in time.” He runs his hands seductively over Gretchen’s plastic body. When he pulls the face off the figure, and says “her face was meant for me. When I’m alone, I can put it on.” With this, Hein’s character is portrayed as unstable and “a psychopath running around with a knife,” which works to reinforce the hegemonic idea that all necrophiles are psychopaths and mentally unstable. This falls into the



desublimated form of the carnival, as well: the frenzied loss of control that Hein's character displays comes across as bizarre.

Early in the film, Paula is accused of being more interested in dead people than in live males by another student, setting the stage for what is to come with Hein's character. In this situation, she brushes off an advance by a male student, and he responds "maybe it's just that dead guys turn you on more than live ones do." Paula's reaction is one of disgust and hurt, as she storms away from her classmate. The scene then cuts to Paula telling the story to Gretchen, who inquires about the statement's validity. Paula's answer is immediate: "that's gross, shut up, no way." Here, again, necrophilia is shown as an extremely negative sexual attraction, dismissed as revolting and morally wrong. In this situation, sarcasm is used to display humour; a libellous jest directed at Paula suggests a foray into necrophilia that she does not take lightly. Freud states that "a whole class of obscene jokes allows one to infer the presence of a concealed inclination to exhibitionism" (Freud 1960: 143), which seems to be taking place here. This humour is used to reinforce the stigmas associated with necrophilia, and therefore, the taboo surrounding it.

The representation of the necrophile in *Anatomy* is that of a psychopath bent on destruction. Although the film is of the horror genre, we can see muted forms of carnival in the grotesque form, celebrating the beauty of the dead body, as well as the sexualization of the corpse as Hein's character fetishizes his plastinates. The idea of an attraction to a corpse is blatantly depicted as something that is horrific, as the necrophile's character is portrayed as a murderous monster. Here, although the entertainment media creates a safe space for the taboo to be transgressed because the

depictions are spectacularized and have an air of falsity, the real-life stigmas attached to the label of necrophile remain obvious in Paula's outburst as well as Hein's exaggerated break in sanity, described above.

*Autopsy: A Love Story* (Crawford: 2002) is an example of the necrophile being portrayed as developmentally delayed and disturbed. This horror film is a chronicle of Charlie's growing love for a corpse he named Jane; because she is an unclaimed body at the morgue he works in, and is considered a Jane Doe, the unimaginative name sticks. It is interesting to note that the name of the corpse does not change when Charlie meets her twin sister, Jill, although the sisters never refer to each other by name, only by "she" or "my sister". At the morgue, Charlie is responsible for buying corpses from crime scenes, cleaning the bodies up, packaging their organs for sale, and disposing of them. He picks Jane up from a motel where she drowned in the bathtub. She is beautiful, and Charlie is mesmerized by her; he creates a personality for her that is full of kindness, beauty and success.

To portray the delusional necrophile, Charlie is shown having one-sided conversations with the corpses he works with, especially Jane: "Jane, do you believe in fate? I never did 'til a couple of days ago. Then, I met you. You were floating there in the tub; your eyes were staring up at me. It was almost like we were meant to meet. Don't you think, Jane? Yeah, I believe in fate. I believe in fate." Charlie takes Jane everywhere with him in the morgue. He explains what he is doing with other bodies, and creates back stories for Jane's persona. He decides she is from the Midwest, and that she is probably a nurse. He even asks Jane if she has kids as he prepares a little girl's body. He answers himself, telling her that he knows she probably wants some later on. He also

explains some of his own background, acting as if these conversations are a series of dates. "I guess you could call me a loner. Well, I have plenty of friends, they don't move around a lot, but I help them out. I know it's a little one-sided, but I like it that way. I'm kind of like their last stop before heaven." He shows clarity in that he knows the corpses cannot respond; at the same time he believes they have some sort of consciousness. His kindness is coupled with a simplistic carnivalesque music piece, rife with dissonance, which gives a feeling of unease, exaggerating Charlie's mental instability.

Charlie takes Jane to meet his mother. He sets Jane up in a chair and wheels in a gurney covered in a sheet, with tea, sugar, milk and an urn on it. As he's bringing her in, he speaks to the urn containing his mother: "don't start with me Mom. Of course you'll like her, she's from the Midwest." He introduces the pair, and speaks to his mother as if she insulted him, telling her that he chose Jane's dress, and proceeds to apologize to Jane for his mother's behaviour. This scene can be likened to the Mad Hatter's tea parties: Charlie continues the absurd charade of introducing the two dead women in a one-sided conversation over tea, much like the Mad Hatter's nonsensical riddles and the Dormouse's story continuing on without sense in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (Carroll 1993).

The delusions become worse as time goes on. Jane begins to respond to Charlie; after a fall at a picnic, Jane's decomposing mouth will no longer stay shut, so Charlie is forced to sew it closed. Charlie stitches her mouth up from the outside, so she has large black thread holding her jaw in place. Jane, in Charlie's head, is self-conscious:

*Jane:* "Does it look bad?"

*Charlie:* "No. It looks good"

*Jane:* "Really?"

*Charlie:* "Really"

*Jane:* "How do I know unless you kiss me? Kiss me Charlie."

And so Charlie kisses her. This is the first, and the only, foray into physical contact with a corpse that is depicted on screen. Before this point, Charlie merely has an obvious attraction to Jane. He is hesitant, though, showing how stigmatized the act of necrophilia is, how it creates internal conflicts and the fear associated with transgression.

Once Charlie meets Jane's twin, Jill, Jane becomes furious and begins to berate Charlie: 'How many lives have you fucked over? How many other 'special friends' have you had down here?!?' alluding to more sexual contact than is shown on screen. Charlie seems to know that there should be consequences to his actions which come across in his delusions; in the final conversations with Jane, she mocks him: "you're not going to get away with this Charlie. I'm going to tell everyone about you. Do you hear me? Everybody's going to know Charlie. Everybody's going to know what you do here at night! Everybody's going to know you fuck over the dead!" She continues by asking him "how do you think they'll all feel when your dirty little secrets are out?!?" and singing "Charlie's got a secret! Charlie's got a secret!" to taunt him. This berating, even though it is self-inflicted, acts as a tool to reinforce that necrophilia is a taboo; that it is wrong and a guilty conscience and ostracism are consequences of transgression. It falls into the desublimated form of carnival as Charlie's delusions become frenzied; he loses his control on reality as his necrophilia progresses, again reinforcing both the medical and the taboo nature of the condition. This example is less of a celebration than a spiral

downward; because of the nature of the horror movie, there is an obvious tension on the idea of the carnival here, but the scene continues to underline the taboo.

Charlie is pushed around by everyone he comes into contact with; from his girlfriend, Mary, and his boss, Dale, to the police he bargains with for access to bodies. He is the victim of much verbal abuse, and throughout the film we see it has been a prominent pattern in his life. He is labelled as “slow” and “off,” inconsiderate and stupid. For instance, when Charlie suggests taking a vacation, Mary rages, reminding him of the pain she feels from a car accident in the past and how it is too difficult to sit in the car, calling him inconsiderate.

Dale is abusive as well, as he screams at Charlie multiple times: when Charlie comes back to the morgue with Jane, Dale is upset about how much Charlie paid for her. He rants about it and tells Charlie that “when I come back, she had better be in pieces! Do you understand me?!?” Each of the supporting characters treats Charlie as if he is stupid, and Charlie internalizes it. This internalization of his deficiency comes out in the conversations with the corpses; for instance, when speaking with his mother, he defensively tells her that he had picked out Jane’s dress, as if she were commenting on the choice negatively. Another example is at the end of the film when Jane is angry with him; she repeatedly calls him a loser, and chips away at his self-esteem, telling him he will never amount to anything. When Mary dies, he imagines that she sits up and tells him that “you can’t do anything right, you are such a loser.” Through these delusions, we see the character is damaged, profiled as a loner and as demented. These qualities are exaggerated, as if to underline the simulation of the film, which, at the same time, works

to reinforce the taboo surrounding necrophilia: the assumption is that if I take a foray into necrophilia, I must also be delusional.

At the end of the film, the ultimate act of corpse porn can be seen. Jill wants to be part of Charlie's life, even though he tells her he cannot relate to the living. The final scene is Jill lying on a gurney in the morgue, naked, eyes closed, covered with plastic. Charlie walks in, uncovers her face and gingerly places a hand on her hair. She jerks awake, and the viewer finds she is merely playing dead. This can be attributed to both the grotesque and the ludic forms of the carnival with the emphasis on sexualizing death in an act of foreplay. Along with this role play, another element of the carnival can be found in this film, mentioned earlier: the music that often accompanies Charlie's character is simplistic and quirky, like you would hear in a fun house or a house of mirrors on a midway. This gives the film an air of awkward absurdity, playing on Freud's theory of humour by including the audience as a co-conspirator with Charlie, privy to his secrets. This further works to reinforce that the act of necrophilia is taboo in society: it is absurd to even think about transgressing.

An even more mainstream example is available. In *Kissed*, a 1996 Canadian film directed by Lynne Stopkewich about the progression of a young girl's obsession with death, necrophilia is not portrayed as a gruesome act. Rather, the main character is portrayed as fully functioning, but slightly disturbed. She knows that her transgressions are not socially accepted, so keeps them secret; she is fully aware of the consequences. The film shows Sandra beginning to take an interest in death with ritualistic burials of dead animals behind her house; this interest eventually leads to working at a funeral home, studying embalming and taking her obsession to new heights of necrophilia.

However, as pointed out by film reviewer Damian Cannon, “the film imposes no moral code, leaving that choice to the audience; thus Sandra's desire is never seen in a negative light” (1997). Shlomo Schwartzberg states in his review that “Stopkewich has actually managed to render her most taboo subject as something safe” (Schwartzberg 1997). Brendan Kelly reiterates these observations in his review:

Stopkewich has managed the unlikely feat of making a film about necrophilia that is neither a black comedy nor a horror outing. Rather, she has crafted a poetic, provocative love story about sex, romance and death that is surprisingly endearing... The strength of *Kissed* is that Stopkewich makes Sandra's erotic passion for cold corpses seem like something more meaningful than a simple fetish, and the [film] subtly draws the viewer into this twisted universe (1996).

Although the viewer recognizes the subject of the film to be gruesome and uncomfortable, the film is actually presented with an air of acceptance for the eroticism. Roger Ebert states that “one would think there was no way to film this material without disgusting the audience--or, worse, making it laugh at the wrong times. Stopkewich does not disgust, and when there are laughs, she intends them. What is amazing, at the end, is that we feel some sympathy for Sandra, some understanding” (1997). He continues by acknowledging the fact that sexual fetishes are taboo, commenting on the acceptance of Sandra and her differences that we are made to feel by the film:

Sandra, played with a grave intensity by Molly Parker, does things that are depraved by normal standards, but in her mind she is performing something like a sacrament. The dead are so lonely. When she comforts them with a farewell touch from the living, the room fills with light, and an angelic choir sings in

orgasmic female voices... In the case of Sandra, her sexuality seems to be bound up with her spirituality. She feels pity for the dead bodies in her care. Stopkewich makes it clear that sex does take place, but like many women directors she is less interested in the mechanics than in the emotion; the movie is not explicit in its sexuality, although there is a scene about embalming techniques that is more detailed than most of the audience will require. In Sandra's mind, she is helping the dead to cross over in a flood of light to a happier place: Her bliss gives them the final push (ibid).

Although we seem to accept Sandra despite her necrophilia, the film continues to reinforce the taboo surrounding the transgression. We see this in every turn that Sandra's obsession takes.

The film begins with a bird in a hand; someone stroking its feathers. It is a young girl, around ten years old, who is petting a dead bird. The narrator states "I've always been fascinated by death: the feel of it, the smell of it, and the stillness." The girl keeps the dead bird in a little blue box with a flower on the lid under her bed. In her room that night, she takes the box out from under her bed and opens it. She shrouds it in cloth, whispering a chant with every movement she makes: "I shroud the body, shroud the body, shroud little spirit with broken wing... I lower the body, lower the body, lower the body... I enter the night, enter the night, enter the night..." as she climbs through her window and walks through the trees.

She lays the box on a rock, removes her robe, and twirls in a circle. She then removes her pyjamas, and while in her underwear, unwraps the bird and smells it. She whispers "the anointment" and begins to rub the bird all over her face, neck and body.



The screen flashes white with light. Even at a young age, Sandra's character sexualizes death; rubbing the bodies of dead animals on herself while in her underwear. These ritualistic burials subscribe to the grotesque form of carnival because they celebrate, and, at the same time sexualize, death. It is even more striking because the person performing the rituals is a small girl; it is not expected of a child to have a deep knowledge or understanding of death.

We meet Sandra's friend Carol, who claims she can see in the dark and talk to spirits. Sandra's cat brings her a dead mouse, so the pair decides to bury it. Sandra takes Carol to her burial place; as they walk, they chant "carry the body carry the body." Carol says Grace, and then the pair leaves. "All summer long we'd find dead animals, shroud their bodies, chant and bury them, all by day light. After dark, I'd go back and give them a proper burial." Sandra knows, even if it is subconscious, that her rituals may be seen as odd, and so does not show Carol right away.

During one of their outings, the pair finds a chipmunk and its babies dead in the bush, and they decide to hold a special ceremony. Carol puts on a cassette player and they twirl around in the woods. Sandra begins to strip down while dancing and giggling, so Carol follows suit. Sandra seems to fall into a trance-like state, grabbing the shrouded bodies and rubbing them on herself. Blood from the bodies drips down her neck. Carol, seeing the blood, stops the music. Sandra says "Oh no, I hurt it. I must have squeezed it too hard." Carol is scared and confused, and runs away as Sandra calls after her.

Sandra's mother tells her that Carol's mother has called, telling her that Sandra made Carol do a "witchcraft dance" in the woods, and that Sandra was to stay away from Carol. "I never played with Carol again. And for the first time, I saw myself the way

others might." Here, Sandra realizes the social consequences of her actions: if she is to tell people of her obsessions or rituals, she will continue to be an outcast, at best. This realization sends a message for viewers; even though this character may elicit sympathies because she is not portrayed as mentally unstable or evil, no person can escape estrangement when breaking taboos.

Sandra's actions are always secretive after the incident with Carol. For example, during her first week working at a funeral home, she has her first experience with a dead human body. Tony, the funeral director's assistant whom she replaced, has died on the job. She sees him in a casket in the funeral home, and spends a quiet moment comforting him because of the chill in his hands. Later, she drives a hearse through a car wash with Tony's casket in the back. She continuously looks back at the casket; deciding to take advantage of the solitude, Sandra climbs into the back of the hearse and opens the lid of the casket. In the dark of the car wash, she begins by holding his hands; she starts touching the body, face, and lips. She leans over to kiss him, gently but longingly, with an intense look of attraction on her face. The scene fades out to a bright blue light, what she describes later as "crossing over." Here, the dark interior of the car wash makes for a more private place for Sandra to dive deeper into her compulsions, which she states in her narration: "Crossing over was glorious. And overwhelming. It was absolutely addictive."

The only person Sandra tells about her necrophilia is Matt, a med student that she meets in a diner. He asks about her embalming textbook, and tries to make conversation, but ends up making Sandra feel awkward enough to leave.

*Matt:* "Are you a pathology student? I haven't seen you around before."

*Sandra:* "I work in a funeral home. I'm studying embalming."

*Matt:* "Really. You know, that's the only way to know a corpse. Don't you think?"

*Sandra:* "I don't know."

*Matt:* "Sure you do. I mean you see it all. Don't you."

*Sandra as Narrator:* "I couldn't stop thinking about what he'd said... it was like he knew; like he saw right through me."

She continues to think about Matt after she leaves the café, and decides to tell him the truth the next time she sees him.

*Matt:* "Why would you wanna be an embalmer?"

*Sandra ponders the question, seemingly to wonder if she should tell the truth:*

"Because of the bodies."

*Matt:* "What do you mean?"

*Sandra:* "I make love to them." This is said with a very sincere facial expression; very matter of fact.

Matt seems intrigued, if not a little baffled by the admission. He mulls it over; worried he may be ostracized by association. Here, we see the internal struggle that comes with facing a taboo: transgression is risky, as is direct association with a transgressor. Here, he becomes co-conspirator without the safety of humour to shield him, and, as third person, he must decide whether the risk of transgression by association is too great to take.

Another example of the secrecy of the conspiracy is after she visits with Matt. She watches him sleep and strokes his hair, but when he stirs, she decides to leave.

She sneaks into the empty funeral home through an open window in the middle of the night and moves the embalming equipment away from the body lying on the gurney in the middle of the room. She walks in obsessive circles around the gurney, staring, obviously aroused, and undresses. The corpse remains covered in the stark white sheet until she stops circling, and then it is slowly pulled down from the toes to reveal first the face, then the naked body of a young man. She twirls ritualistically, finishes undressing, climbs on the gurney and kisses the young man's chest. As she gyrates on top, she sees the bright blue light as she approaches orgasm. "That night, I knew I couldn't give it up. And I didn't think I would ever have to," especially if she continued in her secretive manner. The audience now feels like the third person, engaging with Sandra's secret, watching her transgressions, becoming a co-conspirator.

Matt's character is actually portrayed as more disturbed than Sandra. He becomes consumed with jealousy of the corpses and what Sandra shares with them; so much so that he grills her on details, refers to obituaries and keeps a journal of her transgressions. His obsession progresses to the point where he tries role play with Sandra, dressing up in a suit and laying down, pretending he is dead. Another time, when Sandra enters the apartment, Matt is putting on makeup to dull the colour of his face and combing his hair to look more like a corpse. In the end, it completely consumes him to the point of taking his own life to ensure Sandra will help him cross over and they will finally be as close as he wanted. His actions could be considered a warning of the effect transgressive actions can have on people around you. When Sandra calls the police, she tells viewers that she lies about exactly when Matt died: "they wouldn't understand and I couldn't explain it if I wanted to," shrouding her story and her life in secrecy, referring again to the ostracism that she would find if others knew she was

breaking the taboo. Matt's frenzied actions at the end of the film can be considered carnival in the desublimated form; again, control is lost over sexuality and reality.

Despite showing glaringly different representations of the necrophile, there are many similarities between the films. First, each film represents a necrophile with heterosexual attractions. Although one necrophile is a female, all three are involved with a corpse of the opposite sex. As discussed earlier, this seems to align with a hegemonic view of the necrophile. Secondly, each film opens up a space where necrophilia is sanctioned, where the taboo is approved for transgression, although they also work to reinforce the taboo outside of the media space. *Anatomy* shows the necrophile as a psychopath; someone with bloodlust who meets with dire consequences, while *Autopsy: A Love Story* shows the disturbed and mentally delayed persona of a necrophile, a person who has been verbally and emotionally abused into having delusional conversations with corpses. Lastly, *Kissed* depicts a fully functioning young woman who knows her necrophilia would not be understood by greater society and so chooses to keep it a secret.

Third, each of the films make use of carnival culture, using grotesque, ludic and desublimated representations, sexualizing the corpse at the same time; the carnival and corpse porn work together in all three films to make the falseness of the spectacle obvious to create a safe space for transgression. Fourth, each film has an element of Freud's approach to humour: each depiction is rife with sarcasm and exaggeration, creating a feeling of collusion with the audience, an air of having a transgressive secret. Further, all three films work to show what the consequences are for transgression: the psychopath is ostracized from his secret society and then killed; the delusional

necrophile is abused and fraught with guilt and shame; the functioning necrophile is estranged from her childhood friend and has to shroud her attraction in secrecy for fear of further persecution. These consequences function as a deterrent for transgression outside of the media space created for its exploration.

Necrophilia is arguably one of the most taboo subjects of our time; in the example of Michael Shingabis, readers were more outraged with the acts of necrophilia performed than the murder of a young woman. The subject is also more prevalent in the media than many would believe. This makes it a prime example to depict how the media breaks these taboos: it creates a space for the transgression of taboos to, in the end, reinforce the social implications of the transgression outside of the media space.

Necrophilia on film or TV is the ultimate corpse porn; sexualizing death in the media creates a haven for forbidden attraction, but this attraction elicits awkward and uncomfortable feelings, thus reinforcing the taboo in the space outside the media.

Similarly, through grotesque humour, the taboo, an act too disturbing to speak of, is given a face, while the reactions to this face work to reinforce the taboo. However, the use of humour here could be considered a pseudo-transgression compared to the actual depiction of necrophilic acts in film. The comics, magazines, websites, television and film that sexualize death in this way are subscribing to Bakhtin's carnival culture: turning to the grotesque to rebel against taboos and yet knowing that only in the carnivalistic media space is transgression acceptable. However, even in this 'safe' space, the characters are still subject to consequences for their indiscretions. Even sympathetic portrayals end up reinforcing the danger of the transgression.

## Conclusion

The goal of all life is death (Freud 1920).

The present study outlined two main theories in the study of death and sex taboos in the media: the first chapter, "The Exhibition of Death", discussed Bakhtin's theory of carnivalization; according to Langman, "carnival is a time where the ordinary controls and repressions are released with abandon" (2008: 662), and, I argue, so is death. Although death is associated with sombreness, through the process of carnivalization, the norms that bind death to solemnity are turned on their heads; critiqued and resisted in the carnival space. Media is often an outlet for this reversal and critique, receiving little backlash when, outside of this space, there would be much. Media serves as a control; norms broken in the media work to reinforce the norm and uphold it outside of media space, as the shock value created from resistance associated with carnivals plays into reinforcing the very taboos it aims to break.

Through examining cultural discourses such as the television series *Six Feet Under* (Ball 2001) and *Dead Like Me* (Masius 2003), as well as the films *Zombieland* (Fliasher 2009), and *The Corpse Bride* (Burton 2005), the use of carnival culture and exhibitions of spectacular death are highlighted to show how the depictions break the social norms surrounding death, critique them, and work to reinforce them all at once. In *Six Feet Under* and *Zombieland*, there are overt scenes of carnivals in graveyards, while *Dead Like Me* uses carnivalistic music and humour to highlight absurdity. *The Corpse Bride* takes Bakhtin's theory to heart: death is portrayed as light hearted and fun while life is gloomy and mundane; turning hegemonic ideas of death on their heads.

Other examples, on the edge of the media space, such as Zombie Boy, Gunther von Hagens, LifeGem and Michael Jackson's recent death, use death as a platform for their own exhibitions: Zombie Boy turned himself into a living zombie through the use of tattoos; von Hagens plastinates and poses corpses who have donated their bodies to science to create science exhibits that veer off in the direction of sex manual poses; LifeGem creates diamonds from cremains; Michael Jackson was displayed in a bronze casket in front of thousands at his funeral. Turning death into an exhibit has broken the norms of death, and thus a cultural taboo, and resulted in backlashes for each of these people. However, because of their lives in the spotlight, they have avoided many of the consequences of taboo breaking. Their actions, though, often elicit an awkward silence from the audience, acting as a warning; illustrating that although the media protects the viewers from (some) consequences, the taboo continues to exist.

The second chapter, "Drop Dead Gorgeous", outlined Foltyn's theory of corpse pornography, where Foltyn argues that the corpse has become pop culture's newest porn star. Death has become the centre of attention, and so the taboo of coupling death and sex is broken frequently, making the viewer conscious of the repercussions of transgression outside its media haven. Media create a space where taboo violation is welcomed by sexualizing the corpse and focussing attention on it. Transgressions in the media still remind viewers of the repercussions, however; uncomfortable feelings remind viewers of the consequences if the taboo is broken outside the 'safe' haven. This was illustrated through media examples such as the cover art for *Six Feet Under*, as well as in the commercials and scenes in the series premiere. Pornography of the undead was also used to illustrate the sexualization of the corpse. Both of these examples create a space for the fantasy of taboo violation, creating both excitement and horror. The horror



allows the taboo to remain intact: the fear of social repercussions forbids and denies transgression outside of the media space.

On the edge of the media safe-house, websites such as Beautiful Agony, AttractiveCorpse.com and SeeMeRot.com, push the boundaries of taboo violation; the owners of these websites have been victims of hate mail and ostracism; the mere mention of these events on the website act as a warning to future transgressors of the social consequences of taboo violation. Lastly, von Hagens' controversial exhibits have made him a real-life example of the consequences of taboo violation: the victim of social ridicule, slander and ostracism.

Again, we must remember that corpse pornography and carnivalization are not mutually exclusive in sensationalizing media representations of death; sexualization of the corpse becomes a participatory spectacle through the ludic form of carnivalization. This is by celebrating the dead: for example, the sexualization of dead bodies in the commercials within *Six Feet Under* works to turn social norms of death inside out. There are, however, representations of carnivalization that do not encompass the sexualization of a corpse; for instance, the small child's lights in *Dead Like Me*, or the carnival in the graveyard in *Six Feet Under*.

Both of these chapters illustrate how entertainment media simultaneously break and reinforce the taboos associated with the links between death and sex. These two chapters are explained further using a case study about representations of necrophilia in the final chapter, where the social definitions, law and taboos surrounding it are discussed. Necrophilia is arguably one of the most tabooed subjects of our time, but the subject is also discussed more often than many would believe. This makes necrophilia

an excellent example to illustrate the media breaking of taboos: it creates a space for the transgression of taboos to, in the end, reinforce the social implications of the transgression outside of the media space. Necrophilia was chosen for this case study because it is the ultimate corpse porn; sexualizing death in the media creates a haven for forbidden attraction, but this attraction elicits awkward and uncomfortable feelings, thus reinforcing the taboo in the space outside the media.

It is shown, through comics like *Questionable Content*, *Least I Could Do* and *Courting Disaster*; magazines like *Girls and Corpses*; websites such as *Sickipedia*; television such as *CSI:NY* (Bailey 2006), *Two and a Half Men* (Wass 2007), and *Criminal Minds* (Foerster 2008); and films such as *Anatomy* (Ruzowitzky 2000), *Autopsy: A Love Story* (Crawford 2002), and *Kissed* (Stopkewich 1996), that grotesque humour is used to reinforce the social consequences of transgression: every reaction of onlookers depicted in the media are of disgust or horror. These media are subscribing to Bakhtin's carnival culture: turning to the grotesque to rebel against taboos, while at the same time knowing that these actions are only acceptable in the carnival space. However, even in this space, this haven, transgressors are not immune from social consequences: one character is ostracized and then killed; another is abused emotionally and physically and fraught with guilt and shame; another is estranged from the living and shrouds her life in secrecy in fear of more severe consequences. These consequences function as a deterrent for transgression outside of the media space.

“A basic postulate of the emerging field known as the sociology of risk is that risk and its inverse, safety, are embedded in social structure” (Stallings 1990: 80). Cresswell explains that the "place of an act determines (as much as it is determined by) the

reactions to the act and the meanings accorded to it" (1996: 61). The media is able to create a safe space for taboo transgression, while still emphasizing the existence of the taboo, in two ways. The first is by creating a replica of society; a reflection of their desires in a space outside of, or on the margins of, reality. "Frames are characterized by Goffman as ways of organizing and interpreting the occurrences of everyday life in order to generate a meaningful way of understanding events, symbols, and interactions. Media outlets frame issues the same way individuals do, by assigning meaning to events, reporting on them, and situating them within a larger cultural context" (Adams 2009: 104). Media will, therefore, uphold the stance of the greater society because of the desire to gain and keep audiences: "they often rely on pre-existing understandings of ideas and simply reproduce symbolic meanings rather than overtly reinterpreting them... it is not always economically prudent for media organizations to aggressively challenge the status quo, resulting in framing techniques that often reinforce normative standards" (ibid). Watkins and Emerson postulate that "receivers of media are actively involved in the construction of meaning" (2000: 156) and so, recognizing the fictional nature of the depictions of sex and death within the media creates a space where transgression is not welcomed but accepted; entertainment media are able to create a space where fantasy can be fulfilled. The space becomes safe for taboo transgression because it is a reflection of society in a fun-house mirror; the reflections are exaggerated and spectacularized, a twisted, fictional form of reality. Transgressions are socially acceptable here because the space created by media is known to merely be a fictional replica, easily removed from reality.

The second method in which media creates a safe space for taboo transgression is through spectacularization of the subject matter. In Jeffery Goldstein's *Why We*

*Watch: The Attractions of Violent Entertainment*, the subject interested in viewing violence is described as curious about things that are forbidden, and they are given a chance to express emotions and to regulate their excitement and arousal for violence in a safe and familiar environment when immersed in media depictions (1998: 223). “The audience is disturbed and disgusted by scenes of violence but continues to watch it anyways... ‘Distancing’ oneself from the mayhem makes it more tolerable” (ibid: 215-216). He also touches on the fantasy that the media creates using “cues of unreality” in their music and editing, as well as in the setting. The story lines are “exaggerated and distorted” and “portray an engaging fantasy” (ibid: 223). Through sensationalizing subjects such as death and sex, the media creates a place of refuge by underlining the simulated reality and allowing us to distance ourselves from the actions taking place.

The reflective nature and spectacularization of media work together to create a safe haven for taboo transgression; for example, if the depictions of death and sex were not exaggerated or fictionalized in *Six Feet Under*, the series would have received much more scrutiny and controversial critical reception. Both Bakhtin’s theory of carnivalization and Foltyn’s theory of corpse porn make use of reflection and spectacularization of reality: the carnival is an outside space created for the critique of social norms by replicating society in an absurd and ludicrous manner. Burton’s *The Corpse Bride* depicts life and death as two dichotomous entities, just as they are outside the media realm. However, they depict life as gloomy and dark, while death is upbeat, colourful and jazzy. Here, when carnivalization is used to reflect, and sensationalize death, the fictional aspects of the content are noticeable because of the backward reflection of life and death, and the audience is provided a safe space in which to follow the story.

When media use corpse porn, they sexualize the corpse, sensationalizing it, and create a fictional representation of death. In zombie pornography, attractive exotic dancers are paired with grotesque undead characters in shocking plots and graphic detail. While the concept is reflective of the current generation's fascination with death the illusory quality of the entertainment media's content must be present for the transgressive haven to exist: there must be obvious exaggeration and spectacularization of events, emphasising the simulation of reality in order for taboo breaking to be without repercussions. If the element of artificiality is not present in the entertainment media, then transgressions become more real and consequences become daunting in the end, the transgressional safe space is created with fictional depictions of sex and death which are conceived through morphed reflections of society, and the spectacularization and sexualisation of corpses. This safe space is a haven for transgression of taboos without, or with very few, consequences, which works to emphasize the continuing existence of the taboo.

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