Marie-Therese Mäder and Sofia Sjö

Death, Loss and Mourning in Film and Media

Editorial

Today, death is marked by a paradoxical condition of absence and presence. People are hidden away in care homes or hospitals when they die. Professionals deal with death, making it invisible to non-professionals. At the same time, death is all around us via media images and popular cultural narratives. Whether in media reports from sites of war, televised royal funerals, gruesome murders in true-crime podcasts or fictional stories in films, death would seem to be everywhere. The pandemic also influenced our thinking about death.[1] While the dead and dying were often even more separated from the living during this time – with care homes closed off and funerals limited to only a few people – death was very present in news reports, and online spaces provided new ways of mourning and remembering.[2]

When death and mourning move online and become the topic of media, different modes of production, representation, distribution, and reception are applied. Death and mourning become commercialised, marketised or entertaining.[3] Still, media can offer different narratives about death and mourning. Online spaces allow for alternative and interactive ways to relate to loss and grief, although media and digital spaces can also uphold norms and strengthen traditional views on death. As in research on religion and media more broadly, studies of death and grief must take seriously the interplay between representation and practice, as well as the entanglement of online and offline contexts. Representations of death reflect prevailing conceptions and actively shape how death is understood. Media images

1 See, for example, Vähäkangas 2023; Papadopulus/Lazzarino/Wright/Logan/Koulouglioti 2021.

2 See, for example, Adams/Kopelman 2021; Myers/Donley 2024.

3 See, for example, Morse 2016.

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communicate and produce ideas and norms about death, while practices of death and mourning online are deeply interconnected with offline rituals and experiences. Additionally, these processes must be understood in relation to the aspect of the mediatisation of religion[4] that scrutinises changes in the field of media and religion.[5]

What, then, are the narratives the media and popular culture offer us about death? How can media, online spaces, influencers and popular culture be a part of loss and mourning? What notions of an afterlife do films and the online world provide? How are religious imaginaries about death reinvented in media representations? These are some of the questions we encouraged authors to ponder for the thematic section of this issue of the *Journal of Religion, Film and Media*. The response was much greater than we had anticipated – aspects of death, media and popular culture are clearly of interest to researchers today.

The articles in the section on death, loss and morning all present case studies focusing on several different films and film genres in addition to video games, Instagram posts and a TV series. Even though the case studies bring up many unique insights and findings, they also together highlight recurring themes and perspectives on which we wish to reflect. We begin by contemplating the connection between religion and death and what a focus on media brings to this topic. We then explore the gendering of death in everyday contexts and in media, a topic also touched upon in several contributions to this issue. Next, we turn to aspects of emotion and the way narratives about death, independent of media form, tie into, provoke and promote emotional responses. We conclude with a discussion of future directions in research on religion, death and media.

Death – Religion – Media

Traditionally, religion and death have been closely intertwined. Religious traditions have not only offered narratives about what happens after death, but also provided ritual specialists who guide the bereaved, regulate the handling of dead bodies, and shape the spaces in which death-related rituals take place. Given this accumulated knowledge and institutional expertise,

4 See, for example, Giaxoglou/Döveling 2018.

5 For an early overview of aspects of death and media rituals, see Sumiala 2012.

it is not surprising that religious traditions and institutions continue to play an important role in contexts of death and loss. At the same time, alternative beliefs and practices are becoming increasingly visible, giving rise to more diverse ways of relating to death.[6] They include media and popular culture, which not only continually report on death but also offer practices and ritualised forms through which individuals and communities can engage with and make sense of mortality. As Johanna Sumiala[7] and others argue, death is today often hypermediated and hybridised – it comes to us via many different platforms, and as individuals we can also, via social media, engage with others in the social communication between life and death and negotiate current notions of death, loss and mourning.

The influence of media on death practices and understandings cannot be denied, but at the same time media narratives and representations are varied and open for interpretation. The role of religion in these narratives is also complex and many-facetted.[8] This intricacy becomes evident in several of the contributions to the thematic section. As highlighted in Akif Tahiiev's article on Shiʿi martyrdom narratives on Instagram, religious themes and symbols have been actively used in Instagram posts celebrating recent "martyrs". However, social media also provides users with the opportunity to reinterpret notions of martyrdom and death. Religious imagery in the analysed posts is thus used in both traditional and new ways, presenting complex religious and political connotations. The article is a helpful contribution to the growing field of research in Islam and digital religion.[9]

Coming from a very different context, David Herbert and Patrycja Pankau's article examines the Norwegian comedy series Takk for alt (VGTV, NO 2023), in which mock funerals are staged for three celebrities. The article understands the Norwegian context as secular and post-Christian, but at the same time as rich with religious symbolism, particularly in relation to death. The holding of a funeral for someone not yet dead opens up a fictional and performative space in which protagonists can negotiate their own mortality within a mediatised framework and in a deliberately humorous way. This staged encounter with death not only allows for reflexive self-positioning, but also invites the audience to participate imagina-

6 Haimila/Muraja 2021; Smith/Halligan 2021.

7 Sumiala 2022, 4.

8 Mäder/Saviello/Scolari 2020, 11–29; Sjö/Lundmark 2025.

9 For an introduction see Abusharif 2024.

tively, projecting their own funerary fantasies and culturally shaped expectations onto the mediated scenario. By focussing on the comedic framing of mock funerals, the article connects to a growing body of scholarship that explores how comedy can help individuals and societies engage with, and cope with, death.

Gendering Death

Death, it is often said, is the great equaliser: it comes to us all, independent of who we are. Though this is true, how we relate to death, experience loss, and are treated in death is not uniform. David Field, Jenny Hockey and Neil Small have noted that "[a]ge, ethnicity, gender, social class and sexuality all profoundly affect the ways people experience death, dying and bereavement".[10] Both traditionally and in contemporary contexts, death work, such as caring for the dying, has been and remains clearly gendered, with women often the ones who look after the dying.[11] In addition, as Anna-Katharina Höpflinger points out, causes of death are also gendered: historically, women often died in childbirth, while men were more likely to die in wars. Death itself is gendered at a conceptual level, as "death has been represented as a man or a woman, without any relation to the grammatical gender of words for 'death'".[12] In both cases, personifications of death not only exert control over death but also construct, reflect and reproduce worldly gender norms. Gender, and more specifically gendered norms and practices surrounding death, is therefore a recurring theme in several contributions to this thematic issue, sometimes addressed explicitly and at other times more implicitly embedded in the discussion.

Mariya Sohail and Maliha Ameen explore maternal grief in Rabbit Hole (John Cameron Mitchell, US 2010) and Pieces of a Woman (Kornél Mundruczó, HU/CA 2020) from a post-feminist perspective. These films, they propose, challenge traditional and gendered notions of grief, breaking with both religious and secular norms regarding grief and allowing for female agency through owing grief and autonomy in emotional recovery. The central female characters are able to redefine motherhood beyond biological ties. As

10 Field/Hockey/Small 1997, 14.

11 See, for example, Utriainen 2006; Höpflinger 2015; Westendorp/Gould 2021.

12 Höpflinger 2015, 21.

viewers we are not allowed simple solutions to grief: matters are not set and ordered; the women do not fit into traditional frameworks; and we are encouraged to think differently about women, mourning and motherhood.

Women breaking norms in relation to dying, or rather killing, are also discussed by Brent Yergensen, in his article on culinary symbolism and Estherian themes in Halloween Ends (David Gordon Green, US 2022). The suffering female body in horror films has been explored in many previous studies.[13] While anyone can be the victim in horror fiction, narratives frequently focus on female victims and sometimes on female heroes – the so-called "final girl", the last person standing after the killer has finally been vanquished.[14] Laurie in the Halloween-films is a final girl, but Halloween Ends also brings a much more mature character into the role of victim/hero. Yergensen highlights how culinary items and traditional female expertise in cooking and caring become the weapons that end the killer's reign. In this analysis the biblical narrative of Esther is used as a poignant comparison, highlighting the powerful imagery in this narrative too and its ability to challenge gender norms relating to heroism and power.[15]

Death and Emotions in Media

The body, together with its affective and emotional responses, reacts to experiences of death, loss and grief. Losing someone they have loved can make the person "left behind" incapable of taking part in normal life. How to express mourning emotionally is culturally and personally shaped. At the same time, many rituals and narratives related to death, it might be argued, exist to control and direct these emotions. As Tim Hutchings and others have noted,[16] "communities turn to ritual and storytelling at times of bereavement to reassert their shared values and manage the danger posed by grief".[17] Building on Heidi Campbell's work,[18] Hutchings argues that we can "expect a considerable degree of continuity in these emotion manage-

13 For an overview of women in slasher films, see Wellman/Meitl/Kinkade 2021.
14 Clover 1992.
15 Mahat-Shamir/Kagan 2022; May/Schott 2023.
16 For an overview of religion and emotions, see Davies 2011.
17 Hutchings 2013, 220.
18 Campbell 2010.

ment systems as grief moves online".[19] Though people frequently respond emotionally to death, whether in real life or on screens, narratives about death are often about controlling these emotions in a socially accepted way and finding a means to handle this grief. However, depending on the medium and genre, such engagement can take very different forms, allowing for a wide range of emotional responses to death. Between laughter, tears, and indifference, diverse affective modes become possible. New media, in particular, can challenge established ways of relating to death and open up novel forms of interaction, as Hutchings also demonstrates.[20]

The emotional aspect of death and loss comes through in several of the contributions to the thematic section in this issue, as does the way media can direct and handle emotions. Herbert and Pankau's article brings humour into the discussion of death. Still, emotions are most directly addressed in Yergensen's discussion of the horror film Halloween Ends and Sohail and Ameen's discussion of post-feminist grief in Rabbit Hole and Pieces of a Woman, both films that focus on mothers losing children. In these articles, the authors reflect on narratives that transgress normative expectations of how women are supposed to grieve and respond to their fate. Across all three contributions, female protagonists adopt unexpected and autonomous strategies, explicitly rejecting the authority of those around them to define how they should deal with loss and grief. In one case, this resistance takes the form of violent revenge. In the other cases, it manifests as withdrawal from family and intimate relationships or the formation of new bonds, as a strategy of self-determined coping.

Mention Disney and we readily think of wholesome stories. However, studies have also highlighted the role of both violence and death in Disney narratives.[21] Research on death in Disney productions is a growing field, and Enni Salo and Terhi Utriainen's article in this issue makes a valuable contribution. Salo and Utriainen explore how enchantment is used in Disney films to, so to say, "Disneyfy" death, making it marketable, controlled and entertaining. Disney films about death are thus likely to inspire emotional responses. We may think here of our childhood memories of Bambi's mother dying. Disney narratives often aim to control death, and even make it entertaining, by deploying enchantment. Disney films thus form a contrast with

19 Hutchings 2013; 2020.

20 Hutchings 2013.

21 See, for example, Ackerman 2005; Lammon 2022.

social views and ideas about death that have no explicit religious references. In culture intended for children and families, enchantment can prevail.

Death is prevalent in video games; indeed video games have often been criticised for presenting violence and killing as entertainment.[22] In this issue, Stefan Piasecki problematises this simplistic view on death in games. While in many games death has a primarily mechanistic function, it can also, as Piasecki shows, have a more reflective role, sometimes in light of religious symbolism. As in other popular cultural forms such as films, in games too death can have emotional impact, in particular as players have an active role in game-play. For players, death can become an immersive experience in which they have narrative and even moral responsibility.

Future Directions

The articles in this issue all capture aspects of how death is expressed, understood, narrativised, controlled and explored in media and popular culture today. The response to our call for papers highlights that this topic is very much on the agenda and will surely be the subject of further research. Projects are already exploring media, religion and so-called digital death[23] as well as mourning with artificial intelligence as a business model.[24] Based on this thematic issue, we would highlight the need to take the specific context into account. Much media and popular culture today reaches international audiences, yet how these images, narratives and representations are understood and received can only be understood through a focus on and comprehension of the specific geographical and historical context. Tahieev makes this point in his exploration of Shiʿi martyrdom narratives on Instagram, and Herbert and Pankau present an insightful local reading of a TV series intended for a Norwegian audience. We clearly still need overviews of topics, such as death in videogames as illustrated by Piasecki, but we also need to dive deep to encounter the more challenging and unsettling voices that even Hollywood productions can offer, as Sohail and Ameen illustrate.

Alternative voices undoubtedly must be heard, but going back to genre films and getting to grips with their sometimes subtle developments and

22 See, for example, Gotterbarn 2010.

23 Christensen/Sumiala 2024.

24 Yang 2024.

creative uses of religious themes and symbols is also a thought-provoking exercise that can help challenge simplistic understandings of mediatised death. Both Salo and Utriainen, in their exploration of the enchantment of death in Disney films, and Yergensen, in his exploration of Estherian themes in a known slasher genre, offer compelling examples of how doing so can bring critical perspectives to the debate. What we also hope is that future research focuses additionally on questions of reception – what do audiences do with all these different tales of death, loss and mourning? How do these narratives shape contemporary perspectives? What are the possibilities of AI, and how might it challenge or support traditional viewpoints?

Although this issue focuses on death, it is also concerned with life – as stories of death often are.[25] The contributions all highlight that death, loss and mourning are fundamental aspects of being human, an insight often overlooked in contemporary cultures that tend to conceal death, which everyone must ultimately confront. Media and popular culture have a part to play in this encounter. But exactly what this role is – whether it provides comfort, disillusionment or perhaps more questions – varies according to social and cultural contexts as well as individual perceptions and preferences.

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25 Sjö 2019.

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